

A Perfect Recipe for the Next Escalation on the Korean Peninsula

by Lorenzo Mariani and Manuel Herrera

North Korea has been conducting regular missile tests as part of its weapons development programme over the past year. Put bluntly, this reflects the complete stalemate in denuclearisation talks following Biden's election in the US and a stark reminder of the meagre results of the conciliatory strategy carried out by the former South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Hypersonic as well as short-range, intermediate-range and long-range ballistic missiles have all been part of this latest series of tests. On 24 March, North Korea claimed to have successfully launched a new modern intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), denominated Hwasong-17. While the entity of the vector has yet to be confirmed, if this allegation is proven true it would mark the first time an ICBM has been fired since 2017, breaking Pyongyang's self-imposed moratorium on such tests. The volley of tests has fuelled speculations that North Korea is gearing up for the launch of a

larger weapon theoretically capable of reaching the US mainland.

These events serve as a reminder that the security conundrum on the Korean Peninsula must not be ignored even as the world's attention is focused on the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, recent developments – particularly the hesitant approach adopted by the Biden administration and the election of a new hard-line president in South Korea – seem poised to produce even further escalations and a potential new arms race in the absence of concerted action by interested parties on the Peninsula, in China, the US and Europe.

A revived brinkmanship strategy

The missile tested in March reportedly flew 1,090 km to a maximum altitude of 6,248.5 km. Flight data from the South Korean and Japanese militaries indicated the missile flew higher and for a longer time than any of North Korea's previous tests before crashing into

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the sea west of Japan.¹ Estimated to be about 25 meters long, the Hwasong-17 is North Korea's longest-range weapon and, by some estimates, the world's biggest road-mobile ballistic missile.²

Some international observers have cast doubts about the entity of the missile, arguing that the vector fired was a modified version of the Hwasong-15 with an enhanced engine thrust and modified warhead weight in order to extend its apogee and range.³ Nonetheless, the event marked yet another success for Pyongyang since the vector represents the largest liquid-fuelled missile ever launched from a road-mobile launcher.

The North Korean regime has yet to demonstrate that it can deliver a nuclear weapon over long distances. This is still far from being achieved as the country has not shown that it has developed re-entry capabilities able to carry multiple warheads successfully through the earth's atmosphere. Moreover, it has not proven that the re-entry vehicle can survive an intercontinental flight.

Kim Jong-un recently stated that North Korea would continue to develop a "nuclear war deterrent" while preparing

for a "long-standing confrontation" with the US.⁴ In this regard, in August 2021, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that North Korea had again started producing fissile material at the Yongbyon reactor complex.⁵ Workers have been observed digging a new passageway at the Punggye-ri site where North Korea conducted all six of its previous nuclear tests,⁶ particularly tunnel No. 3.⁷ This led to speculation that North Korea is preparing to detonate its first nuclear bomb in more than four years.

These set of events point towards the potential resumption of North Korea's brinkmanship strategy, which reflects a determination to cement Pyongyang's status as a nuclear power in North East Asia while attracting badly needed economic concessions from Washington and others from a position of strength.

The steady pace of improvements in North Korea's nuclear arsenal paints

¹ Justin McCurry, "North Korea Confirms Test of Its Largest Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Yet", in *The Guardian*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/y5d5h>.

² Associated Press, "North Korea Says It Test-Fired Biggest ICBM, U.S. Adds Sanctions", in *The Asahi Shimbun*, 25 March 2002, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14581808>.

³ Michelle Ye He Lee, "North Korea's Latest Missile Test May Not Have Been What It Claimed", in *The Washington Post*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/28/north-korea-missile-hwasong>.

⁴ Justin McCurry, "North Korea Confirms Test of Its Largest Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Yet", cit.

⁵ Ankit Panda, "What the Restarting of North Korea's Yongbyon Reactor Means", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 2 September 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/85260>.

⁶ "North Korea: Construction Spotted at Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site", in *BBC News*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60598235>.

⁷ Josh Smith, "South Korea Says It Detects Activity to Restore Some Tunnels at North Korea Nuclear Test Site", in *Reuters*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-says-it-detects-activity-restore-some-tunnels-nkorea-nuclear-test-site-2022-03-11>. If North Korea conducts its next nuclear test in the third tunnel, then it is testing its nuclear warhead-miniaturisation technology for tactical nuclear weapons.

a very worrying picture about where things are headed. It is estimated that North Korea could currently have between twenty and sixty assembled nuclear weapons, while having enough fissile material to service sixty-five more weapons. If not addressed, by 2027, North Korea could have around two hundred nuclear weapons and hundreds of ballistic missiles stockpiled.⁸ It would thus be a mistake to think that the North Korean nuclear threat can be ignored while the world grapples with the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Actually, Pyongyang has used this crisis to make technological advances while international attention focussed elsewhere.

For the time being, both the US and South Korea announced further actions at the UN Security Council (UNSC). However, securing a tough international response to North Korea's latest ICBM launch will be harder due to the current international environment. From North Korea's perspective, the US and EU's campaign to punish Russia over its invasion of Ukraine has reduced the risk that world powers may agree on further sanctions in the UNSC. Any additional measures would require support from Russia, as well as China, which has led criticism of Washington's efforts to squeeze Moscow economically.⁹

⁸ Bruce W. Bennett et al., *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons*, Santa Monica, RAND, April 2021, p. 36-38, <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE-A1015-1>.

⁹ Choe Sang-Hun, "With U.S. Focus on Ukraine, North Korea Launches a Powerful New ICBM", in *The New York Times*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/world/asia/north-korea-missile-icbm.html>.

North Korea almost certainly views the rifts between the US and Russia and the US and China as a golden opportunity to advance its ambitions, possibly including a new nuclear test. Proof of this risk can also be found in Seoul's statement underlining that South Korea was ready to execute preventive strikes on missile launch sites, command and support facilities and other targets in North Korea if necessary.¹⁰

A difficult stalemate, an uncertain future

Talks for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula have been stalled since 2019, with no prospects of resumption. Thanks to the mediation of former South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the Trump administration made some initial progress, but negotiations broke down after the US refused to grant sanctions relief in exchange for Pyongyang's dismantling of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

The Biden administration has so far made little effort to break the stalemate. Its approach has been limited to largely symbolic sanctions on North Korea combined with nebulous offers of open-ended talks.¹¹ The main issue behind Biden's passive approach – which in many ways resembles Obama's rather

¹⁰ Josh Smith and Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Says Tested New ICBM, Prepared for Long Confrontation with U.S.", in *Reuters*, 26 March 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-fired-identified-projectile-off-east-coast-skorea-military-2022-03-24>.

¹¹ Kim Tong-Hyung and Mari Yamaguchi, "Dialing Up Pressure, North Korea Tests Long-Range Missile", in *AP News*, 24 March 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/fdb416abc13beb76fb719d3452f97828>.

ineffective policy of strategic patience – is due to the fact that Washington’s strategy for the Asia-Pacific is centred on a single goal: countering China.

The lack of a strategic plan for dealing with North Korea, paired with the growing tension between the US and China, will ultimately have severe repercussions on the Korean peninsula: first, it will make it less likely for Beijing to step in and help de-escalate the crisis; second, since Biden’s strategy is based on reinforcing regional alliances against Beijing, this will further stir the relationship between China and other key players in the Asia-Pacific.

Further complicating the scenario is the return of the conservative party in South Korea, following elections held on 9 March. During the electoral campaign President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol promised to adopt a tougher policy toward his country’s “main enemy” in the North.¹² This marks a significant shift from the positions of the previous administration.

While promising not to overturn every aspect of Moon Jae-in’s strategy – leaving the door open for humanitarian support and cultural exchanges – the new government has pledged to bolster missile defences and secure pre-emptive strike capabilities against any potential attack. The aggressive deterrence posture of the new administration in Seoul leaves little space for a diplomatic opening, as Yoon announced that South Korea will

no longer act as a facilitator between Washington and Pyongyang.

The relationship with China is also posed to suffer under the new administration in Seoul. President Yoon stressed multiple times his willingness to strengthen the military alliance with the US by invigorating joint military drills and even flouting the possibility of joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).¹³

The possibility of renewed nuclear tests by North Korea, the lack of a clear strategy in Washington and a new conservative president in South Korea mean that all conditions are present for a tit-for-tat chain reaction of escalatory steps. Moreover, since all actors involved seem more interested in deterrence rather than diplomacy, peaceful de-escalation remains unlikely.

This latter point is further aggravated by the unsettling status of the international system. Things have changed considerably in five years with regards to EU and US relations with Russia and China, which previously joined other UN Security Council members in passing resolutions sanctioning Pyongyang for its nuclear and missile tests. Considering this environment, there is no way Russia is going to cooperate at the UN Security Council on new tough sanctions against North Korea, and China is similarly unlikely to comply.

¹² Julian Ryall, “New South Korean President to Try a Different Tack with North Korea”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 14 March 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/48RfT>.

¹³ Mitch Shin, “What to Expect from Yoon Suk-yeol’s Policy on North Korea”, in *The Diplomat*, 13 April 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/what-to-expect-from-yoon-suk-yeols-policy-on-north-korea>.

As a consequence, there is not much the United States and South Korea can do to change Pyongyang's calculus. If Washington and Seoul scale up their joint military exercises, as seems likely also in cooperation with Japan, North Korea will view it as a hostile act and a pretext to escalate tensions further. Conversely, the Biden administration is not in a position to make significant concessions on sanctions or talks with North Korea as such action could easily expose the Democrats to further criticism, in turn compromising their standing in the midterm elections this November.

Against this backdrop, it appears probable that future months will be characterised by a renewed vicious cycle of tit-for-tat escalations that will further harden negotiating stances and broaden the conflicting approaches of the various actors involved.

That said, there may be room for creative diplomacy to avoid such a scenario. Pyongyang is currently dealing with a major Covid-19 outbreak, with significant implications for the country. In this regard, the EU is taking the initiative to establish an ad hoc instrument similar to the rather unsuccessful Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) – created in 2019 to facilitate transactions with Iran while avoiding breaking US sanctions – to send medicines and vaccines to North Korea.

Details are scarce, but it is plausible that such a mechanism would not be exposed to the same problems that impacted INSTEX as it will focus specifically on helping humanitarian

NGOs to overcome the obstacles posed by sanctions and perhaps also enjoy tacit approval by Washington. In this regard, the instrument should address three major issues: (i) diminish the resource burden required by aid-providers to appeal for humanitarian exemptions; (ii) reassure donors and suppliers about the feasibility of humanitarian projects in North Korea by endorsing this kind of activities; (iii) ease the procedure for the dispatch of special medical equipment such as health kits, heaters, refrigerators or ambulance parts, all of which have been banned due to the export ban of machinery and parts.¹⁴

The European Commission and the European External Action Service hope to use this instrument as a window for dialogue to discuss crucial issues with the regime, including the question of the missile arsenal and non-proliferation. If this initiative succeeds, a new, albeit no doubt momentary, window of opportunity will be created to address the issue of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal through diplomatic means, an objective that should be pursued and supported also by the United States and South Korea as well as hopefully China and Russia.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings, "The Impact of Sanctions against North Korea on Humanitarian Aid", in *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2020), p. 44-52, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JHA.033>.

¹⁵ Interview with Dr. Vicente Garrido, director of the International Affairs and Foreign Policy Institute (INCIPE).

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