

Japanese and US leaders condemn North Korean missile test

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In a rather bizarre joint press conference yesterday with US President Donald Trump, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took centre stage to condemn North Korea's test launch of an intermediate range ballistic missile.

The press corps was gathered at short notice at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida after another briefing just an hour earlier at which Trump declared that he had got to know Abe "very, very well" during their round of golf, but ducked questions on the North Korean missile.

When the press pool reassembled after receiving an "URGENT" notice, Abe took the floor as Trump stood lamely in the background. The Japanese prime minister declared that the latest missile launch was "absolutely intolerable" and called on Pyongyang to comply with all UN Security Council resolutions banning North Korean nuclear and missile testing.

Trump stepped forward briefly to deliver one line: "I just want everyone to understand and fully know that the United States of America stands behind Japan, its great ally, 100 percent." He made no direct comment on the nuclear test, did not mention US ally South Korea and walked off without taking questions.

Few details of the missile test are available. According to the South Korean and US militaries, the missile was launched at 7.55 a.m. local time on Sunday and flew about 500 kilometres before landing in the Sea of Japan.

North Korea said it "successfully" tested a new type of "surface-to-surface medium-to-long-range ballistic missile" known as the Pukguksong-2. Its KNCA news agency said the missile was propelled by a solid-fuel engine and fired at a high trajectory to limit its range.

Article after article in the US press branded the missile launch as a provocation that, as the *Wall Street*

Journal put it, presents the "first challenge to President Donald Trump's policy toward Pyongyang since he took office." During the US presidential election campaign, Trump and his advisers were scathing of the Obama administration's failure to halt North Korean nuclear and missile tests, but they have yet to elaborate their own policy.

Trump's comments on North Korea veered wildly last year from denouncing its leader Kim Jong-un as a "bad dude" and "a maniac" to suggesting he would sit down for a talk with Kim in New York over a hamburger.

When Kim issued a New Year's Eve statement announcing that North Korea was preparing to test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), President-elect Trump shot out a tweet flatly declaring: "It won't happen." Less than an hour later, he sent out another tweet lambasting China for its "totally one-sided trade" with the US while failing to help to rein in North Korea.

At a joint press conference with Abe on Friday, Trump declared that defending against nuclear and missile threats from North Korea was a "very, very high priority." In their joint statement, the two leaders urged North Korea "to abandon its nuclear and missile programs and not to take any further provocative actions."

While yesterday's test was not of an ICBM, the missile launch does put pressure on the Trump administration to live up to its bluster. Trump's flat-footed performance only heightens the danger that he will embark on a reckless course of action that will heighten the risk of a confrontation on the Korean Peninsula.

According to the *Financial Times*, the Trump administration has begun a review of US policy toward

North Korea. The review coincides with a discussion in American foreign policy and military circles over the past year about the growing likelihood that North Korea will, during Trump's term of office, develop a nuclear-armed ballistic missile capable of reaching continental United States.

The Obama administration reportedly advised Trump that North Korea should be high on his list of foreign policy issues. Obama's policy of isolating and intensifying sanctions on Pyongyang and pressuring China to do likewise—dubbed “strategic patience”—has been heavily criticised as ineffective. Republican Senator Bob Corker, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told a hearing recently the “current approach is not working” and “policy alternatives” had to be explored.

The alternatives under consideration range from intensifying sanctions on North Korea and cajoling and bullying China into doing the same, to proposals for “regime change” in Pyongyang or military measures against its missile and nuclear facilities. As under the Obama administration, any proposal for restarting negotiations with North Korea appears to be ignored.

Richard Haass, president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, told CNN on Sunday that if Trump could not get China to help boost pressure on North Korea through sanctions, he would “face a truly fateful decision about whether we're prepared to live with that [a North Korean nuclear missile], a North Korea that has that capability against us, or we are going to use military force one way or another to destroy their nuclear missile capability.”

The Council on Foreign Relations last year convened a high-level task force on North Korea. Its report in September, entitled “A Sharper Choice on North Korea,” reached a similar conclusion. It gave short shrift to the possibility of a negotiated settlement and outlined a series of moves culminating in “more assertive diplomatic and military steps, including some that directly threaten the regime's nuclear and missile programs and, therefore, the regime itself.”

Given his belligerent approach to foreign policy, there is little doubt that Trump will be inclined to aggressive and militarist measures. The South Korean and US militaries are already preparing for their annual Key Resolve-Foal Eagle war games. They will be even larger than last year's record size, involving 300,000

South Korean troops and 17,000 US military personnel, backed by sophisticated armour and artillery, as well as air and sea power.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis was in South Korea and Japan just over a week ago to reassure them that Washington would back them militarily against North Korea. “Any attack on the United States, or our allies, will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons would be met with a response that would be effective and overwhelming,” he said at the South Korean defence ministry.

The Pentagon's stance toward North Korea, however, is not simply defensive. In 2015, the US and South Korean militaries adopted a new operational plan—OPLAN 5015—that included pre-emptive strikes on North Korea in the event of a war, as well as decapitation raids to assassinate its top leaders. Last year's joint military exercises were based for the first time on practising OPLAN 5015.

Any US attack on North Korea, even of a limited character, threatens to unleash a catastrophic conflict that would quickly engulf the Korean Peninsula and draw in other major powers, including China, North Korea's formal military ally.



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