

Muted US response to North Korean short-range missile launches

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North Korea fired three short-range missiles into the Sea of Japan on Saturday amid ongoing tensions and major US-South Korean military exercises known as Ulchi-Freedom Guardian that are due to continue until Thursday. The Pyongyang regime has condemned the joint war games as reckless and has in previous years responded with a show of force of its own.

The reaction of the US and its allies to the North Korean missile test has been decidedly muted, in contrast to the belligerent response of US President Trump earlier this month. Following the North Korean test of two long-range missiles in July, Trump warned that the US would engulf North Korea “in fire and fury like the world has never seen.”

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared yesterday on Fox News that the missile launches had been “provocative.” However, he added: “We are going to continue our peaceful pressure campaign ... working with allies, working with China as well, to see if we can bring the regime in Pyongyang to the negotiating table with a view to begin a dialogue on a different future for [the] Korean Peninsula and North Korea.”

Tillerson hinted last Tuesday that talks might be possible because North Korea had “demonstrated some level of restraint” by not testing any missiles since the imposition of the latest round of UN sanctions in early August. “Perhaps we are seeing some pathway to sometime in the near future having some dialogue,” he said.

President Trump reinforced the point at his rally in Phoenix, Arizona, saying that he believed that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un “is starting to respect us.” While qualified, he added: “Maybe, probably not, something positive will come out of it.”

Asked yesterday if his assessment last week had been

incorrect, Tillerson replied: “I don’t think that we are wrong ... I think it’s going to take some time to tell.” He added that he thought that the Pyongyang regime was clearly sending a message “that they are not prepared to completely back away from their position.”

The low-key response is in part due to the limited character of the North Korean launches. Three short-range missiles flew around 250 kilometres, and according to Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, posed no threat and did not land within Japan’s exclusive economic zone. South Korea’s National Security Council met but the government issued no statement and did not criticise North Korea.

In the wake of Trump’s reckless threats of war against North Korea, Tillerson and other senior White House officials have stressed that their preference is for a diplomatic solution, while still maintaining that the “military option” is still on the table. The unleashing of “fire and fury” against North Korea, that could include nuclear weapons, would lead to a war that could rapidly spiral out of control and involve major nuclear-armed powers including China and Russia.

While seeking the assistance of China and Russia in strong-arming North Korea, the US last week imposed unilateral sanctions on a number of Chinese and Russian companies and individuals for allegedly trading with Pyongyang. The Trump administration has also instituted a formal investigation over China’s alleged theft of intellectual property that could result in US trade penalties.

Japan has followed suit, announcing on Friday that it would impose its own unilateral sanctions on eight foreign firms and citizens, including four Chinese companies and a Chinese individual over their alleged dealings with North Korea. In all, Tokyo has now

sanctioned 72 entities and 81 individuals over their business relations with Pyongyang.

The latest US bans are a deliberate slap in the face to China and Russia which voted for the latest round of harsh sanctions in the UN Security Council against North Korea. The measures include a complete ban on the import of North Korean coal, iron ore, iron, lead and seafood that is estimated to slash North Korean exports by one third. China, which is by far North Korea's largest trading partner, has already acted to impose the UN sanctions.

While suggesting that negotiations with North Korea may be possible, Tillerson has made clear that the US will insist on nothing less than Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and existing arsenal. North Korea has repeatedly declared that it is now a nuclear power and will not give up weapons that it regards as essential to preventing a US attack.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula remains extremely tense, not least because the Trump administration has made absolutely clear that it will not tolerate a Pyongyang regime armed with a nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile able to reach continental America. A leaked assessment by the US Defence Intelligence Agency claimed that North Korea could reach that goal as early as next year.

The White House has also rejected calls by China and Russia for the US and South Korea to suspend major joint exercises in return for a halt by North Korea to its nuclear and missile tests. The Pentagon has proceeded with the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian military drills that involve tens of thousands of US and South Korean troops in rehearsing for a war with North Korea, including pre-emptive strikes on the Pyongyang regime.

Western journalists are not normally allowed into North Korea when US-South Korean war games are underway. But CNN correspondent Will Ripley was given entry and was told by a North Korean official: "This is the most tense I've ever seen [it]. The situation could escalate at any moment."

The potential for a wider war was underscored by a flight last week by Russian strategic bombers around the Korean Peninsula. The Tupolev-95MS bombers were accompanied by fighter jets and an early warning and control aircraft that is capable of intelligence

gathering.

While the Russian aircraft flew in international airspace, the mission was clearly aimed at underscoring Moscow's concerns about the dangerous US confrontation with North Korea. Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova criticised the US-South Korean military exercises and urged restraint on all sides.

"Given the arms build-up in the region, any rash move or even an unintended incident could spark a military conflict," Zakharova warned.



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