

Amid high tensions, North Korea fires intermediate-range missile over Japan

Peter Symonds
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North Korea tested an intermediate range ballistic missile early this morning local time in a move that can only add to the high tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The launch followed the firing of three short-range missiles on Saturday and comes amid large-scale US-South Korean military exercises in the South.

The missile flew about 2,700 kilometres over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, reaching a height of about 550 kilometres before splashing down about 1,180 kilometres to the east of Japan. It was the first time since 2009 that a North Korean missile passed over Japan.

Yonhap news agency reported that the top military officers of the US and South Korea decided to make a strong response, including unspecified military measures. It said the chairmen of both Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed by phone “to take response measures at the earliest possible time that can demonstrate the alliance’s strong will, including military measures.”

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe denounced the “reckless act of firing a missile over our nation” as “an unprecedented, serious and significant threat.” He said Japan had already lodged “a firm protest against North Korea” and called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting to “further strengthen pressure against North Korea.”

Abe later said he spoke by phone to US President Donald Trump, who backed the call for a UN Security Council meeting. According to Abe, Trump said the United States was “100 percent with Japan” and showed his commitment to Japan’s defence.

Like Abe, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop condemned the launch as a “provocative, dangerous, destabilising and threatening act” and declared “we stand ready to support Japan at any time.” Opposition Labor spokeswoman Penny Wong joined the chorus of

condemnation, denouncing the missile firing as “provocative and unlawful.”

While North Korea’s missile test recklessly heightens the danger of conflict in North East Asia, the chief responsibility for the confrontation rests with the US and its allies. Earlier this month, in response to two long-range missile tests by Pyongyang, President Trump warned that the US would engulf North Korea in “fire and fury” if it threatened the United States in any way.

The US also refused to call off the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian war games involving tens of thousands of South Korean and American troops in what amounts to a rehearsal for war with North Korea. The Pyongyang regime has repeatedly condemned the annual drills and warned the US against any attack on its territory. A small number of Australian troops are participating in the exercises and Australia is host to US spy bases, as well as Marines, warships and military aircraft.

In a letter on Monday, North Korea’s ambassador to the UN, Ja Song Nam, called on the UN Security Council to urgently schedule a discussion on the US-South Korean military exercises. He likened the drills to adding “fuel to [an] open fire” and accused the US of staging “a provocative and aggressive joint military exercise at this critical moment of the Korean Peninsula, where the situation is just like a time bomb.”

At the same time, US and Japanese troops have just completed military exercises, dubbed Northern Viper (NV17), on Hokkaido. The August 10-28 drills involved about 2,000 US Marines and 1,500 Japanese ground troops along with F-16 fighters, MV-22 Osprey aircraft, military helicopters and first test-firing in Japan of the M142 High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System.

US Air Force Colonel R. Scott Robe pointed to the

tense conditions under which the war games were held. “Misawa [Air Base] is a hub for forward-deployed operations if a real-world scenario were to occur; it is vital for us to maintain security and enhance our combined abilities.” In other words, the NV17 was a drill for the most-obvious immediate “real-world scenario”—a war with North Korea.

By firing a missile over Japan, the Pyongyang regime has played directly into the hands of the right-wing Abe government, which has exploited the supposed threat from North Korea to advance its agenda of remilitarising Japan. Since coming to office in 2012, Abe has boosted the defence budget, loosened constitutional limits on the military, and is pushing to re-write the constitution to remove the remaining constraints.

Abe’s government used the missile launch to again fuel a climate of fear and panic. The official emergency information system sent out alerts within minutes with the message: “Missile launch. Missile launch. North Korea seems to have launched missile. Please evacuate into substantial buildings or basements.” The alert was called off within a quarter of an hour.

Japan and South Korea convened meetings of their respective national security councils this morning. While Abe played up the danger of the North Korean missile, the Japanese military quickly worked out it would pass safely overhead and made no attempt to shoot it down.

The Pentagon issued a brief statement this morning saying it was still assessing the missile launch, while the North American Aerospace Defence Command said the launch posed no threat to the United States.

As of posting, the Trump administration had issued no statement on the missile test. Following Trump’s “fire and fury” threat, the Pyongyang regime warned it might test-fire three intermediate range missiles into waters close to the American territory of Guam, host to two major US military bases.

After North Korea backed off, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson hinted last week that talks might be possible because North Korea “demonstrated some level of restraint” by not testing any missiles from early August. On Sunday, he played down North Korea’s firing of short-range missiles the day before and reiterated that the US was continuing its pressure campaign “with a view to begin a dialogue on a

different future for [the] Korean Peninsula and North Korea.”

However, Tillerson and other top Trump officials have made absolutely clear that the “military option” remains if North Korea refuses to capitulate to US demands that it denuclearise.



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