

Continuing US-led economic blockade provokes North Korean missile tests

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Since the beginning of 2022, North Korea has conducted seven, mostly short-range ballistic missile tests, with the latest taking place on January 30. The number of tests exceeds by one the total number in all of 2021. The most recent test involved an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), the most powerful North Korea's military has launched since 2017.

The tests are a desperate response by the North Korean regime to the crippling US-led sanctions that continue to block much of the country's trade and cut off prospects for foreign investment, as well as to rising geo-political tensions. All of this has created a worsening economic and political crisis within the Stalinist bureaucracy in Pyongyang, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.

Attempts to reach an agreement with the US have led nowhere, with Washington ignoring Pyongyang's concerns about giving up North Korea's nuclear and missile programs without security guarantees and an end to the sanctions.

Washington, while ratcheting up its provocations against Russia, responded to the latest tests by issuing a hypocritical and self-serving statement on February 4, calling on the UN Security Council to take action against Pyongyang. The statement was also signed by the UN representatives of eight other US allies, including Britain and Japan.

While accusing Pyongyang of destabilizing the region, the US declared it was willing to meet North Korea without preconditions but remained committed to "the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula consistent with relevant Security Council resolutions."

Despite its claims, Washington has not made any meaningful moves for talks. The US special representative for North Korea policy, Sung Kim,

currently serves in a part-time role while also being ambassador to Indonesia. At the same time, Biden has yet to appoint a formal ambassador to South Korea.

Pyongyang has therefore been left to languish. That suits Washington, which continues to maintain a stranglehold over the North Korean economy. In talks with US President Trump, North Korea ended its nuclear and long-range missile tests in return for very little—a moratorium on large-scale joint US military exercises with South Korea. This was never meant to be a long-term solution to the repeated crises on the Korean Peninsula.

China's UN ambassador Zhang Jun pointed to the little the US has done to negotiate with North Korea. On February 4, Zhang told reporters: "We have seen the suspension of the nuclear test, we have seen the suspension of the launch of intercontinental ballistic missiles. And then what has been done by the US?" He said the Biden administration should ask itself "in what way they can accommodate the concerns of DPRK [North Korea]... to really bring tension down and then to put things under control."

While Washington claims to be willing to hold talks, previous negotiations between the US and North Korea have gone nowhere or resulted in deals that the US subsequently sabotaged. Under the Trump administration, talks were used as a platform to bully Pyongyang into completely giving up its nuclear and missile programs as a starting point for any easing of sanctions.

North Korea's weapons programs are, in effect, the only bargaining chips it has in dealing with the US. North Korea has not conducted nuclear or long-range missile tests since 2017, when its leader Kim Jong-un met in Singapore with Trump. Pyongyang clearly expected an easing of the various sanctions imposed by

Washington, either unilaterally or through the UN. Pyongyang has also long requested a treaty to formally end the 1950–1953 Korean War, which only ceased with an armistice.

Washington's refusal to address any of Pyongyang's concerns led to the failure of the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in 2019 and the stagnation of talks, a situation that the Biden administration has maintained.

Since the onset of the global pandemic in 2020, the economic situation in North Korea has greatly worsened. The spread of COVID-19 forced Pyongyang to seal its borders to the outside world, including China, North Korea's largest and only significant trading partner. The decision by the US and nearly all other countries to embrace "herd immunity," only further isolated North Korea, which fears the spread of the virus could have a destabilizing impact.

John Delury, a history professor at Yonsei University in Seoul, told the *New York Times*: "This is a deeply isolated, autarkic economy. No amount of sanctions could create the pressures that COVID created in the last two years. Yet, do we see North Korea begging and saying, 'Take our weapons and give us some aid?' The North Koreans will eat grass."

In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the North Korean economy shrank 4.5 percent, the greatest decline since 1997. The economy was equally volatile last year, with a looming danger of food shortages. This is in part due to the shutting of the border, preventing North Korean farmers from accessing agricultural equipment and fertilizers.

Kim Jong-un spoke on the state of the economy at a plenary session of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) in December, saying the government would make it "an important task for making radical progress in solving the food, clothing and housing problem for the people."

North Korea has reopened its border with China on a limited scale. A North Korean freight train crossed into China from Sinŭiju on January 16, the first time the land border has been opened in two years. A South Korean government source told the *JoongAng Ilbo* that "due to the North's lack of domestic resources, and it appears the North Koreans are desperate for Chinese support and raw materials."

North Korea is moving closer to Beijing. With the opening of the Winter Olympics on Friday in Beijing,

Kim Jong-un sent a message to Chinese President Xi Jinping, calling for improved relations. The message praised the opening of the event despite the pandemic and declared he would work to develop the relations between the ruling parties and the two countries to "a new high stage."



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