

# US exploits North Korea's missile test to flex military muscle

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Amid increasing US provocations in East Asia, North Korea test fired an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on Saturday. The launch was in response to upcoming US-South Korea joint war games and was quickly seized on by Washington to flex its military might around the Korean Peninsula as it prepares for war with China.

Pyongyang stated on Sunday that it had launched a Hwasong-15 ICBM the previous day. The missile was fired as part of a “sudden” launching drill, with the purpose of ensuring the North’s ability to deter attack from the US.

The missile reportedly flew at a lofted angle and traveled for 989 kilometers before landing in international waters in the Sea of Japan. Tokyo claimed the missile landed within its exclusive economic zone, some 200 kilometers off the coast of Oshima Island, a part of Hokkaido.

The North’s Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported, “The drill was suddenly organized without previous notice under an emergency firepower combat standby order given at dawn of February 18.” The test firing comes ahead of joint, large-scale military exercises between the US and South Korea in the coming weeks, which Pyongyang stated could not be “overlooked.”

On Monday, Pyongyang fired two additional short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan.

The US and South Korea responded to the ICBM launch with provocative joint air drills that involved at least two B-1B bombers, capable of carrying the largest payload of conventional weapons in the US Air Force, or up to 57 tons each. While the bomber supposedly is no longer capable of carrying nuclear armaments, Washington has made clear that it is ready to deploy nuclear weapons against North Korea, an impoverished

country of 26 million people.

The drills involved at least ten aircraft including US F-16 fighter jets and South Korean F-35A and F-15K jets. The planes engaged in maneuvers over the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea as well as in the southern regions of the Korean peninsula.

Seoul’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement, “The training this time demonstrated the South Korea-US combined defense capabilities and posture featuring the alliance’s overwhelming forces, *through the timely and immediate deployment of the US’s extended deterrence assets* to the Korean Peninsula [emphasis added].”

“Extended deterrence” refers to the US’s so-called nuclear umbrella, which includes South Korea. While couched in defensive language, Washington and Seoul are goading North Korea and seizing on Pyongyang’s response to ratchet up military preparations. The scale of destructive capabilities deployed to the Korean Peninsula indicates that China rather than North Korea, is the real target.

In the past several weeks, Washington has stoked tensions with Beijing over a Chinese balloon that drifted off course and floated over the United States before being shot down by the US Air Force on February 4. The entire political and media establishment whipped up an hysterical campaign with unsubstantiated claims that the US was under threat from a Chinese spy balloon.

North Korea’s ICBM launch will almost certainly be used to ramp up pressure on China, with the US accusing Beijing of enabling Pyongyang.

Last November, Washington and Seoul also announced that the US would deploy “strategic assets to the level equivalent to constant deployment,” in the words of South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jong-

seop. “Strategic assets” refer to warplanes, warships or submarines capable of launching nuclear weapons and will now be de facto permanently stationed in South Korea for the first time since 1991.

Furthermore, the right-wing administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol has pushed for Seoul’s increased involvement in US nuclear planning. Last month, Yoon raised the possibility of US-South Korea nuclear sharing as well as Seoul potentially developing its own nuclear weapons. While Yoon walked back this latter statement, he reiterated that the two sides were planning increased cooperation over US-nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. Yoon is further integrating Seoul into the US planning for war with Beijing.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was also in South Korea at the end of January for meetings with Yoon and Defense Minister Lee to deepen this cooperation and prepare for the upcoming joint military drills in the coming weeks, that will only exacerbate tensions.

These drills include a tabletop exercise this week at the Pentagon in Washington and the massive Freedom Shield war games that will be conducted in South Korea in mid-March. The Freedom Shield drills involve computer-based simulations running alongside field drills for 11 days. While exact details have not been made public, the drills typically involve tens of thousands of troops from both sides.

While large-scale joint exercises were put on hold following the summit between then-US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in June 2018, the biannual drills were fully resumed last August. This breached the tacit agreement reached in 2018 to halt the joint US-South Korean exercises in exchange for a moratorium on North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile tests.

While the US never fully halted the drills with Seoul, it had scaled them back. The resumption of the drills last year coupled with inflammatory rhetoric from President Yoon, who took office last May, served to antagonize Pyongyang, leading to a spate of North Korean missile launches at the end of last year.

Significantly, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry, the March exercises will not only be conducted in response to threats from North Korea but will also be based on lessons learned from the US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine. In other

words, the war is providing the US and its allies with a testing ground for future conflicts.

On Saturday, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin, speaking alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, declared that “North Korea could conduct another nuclear test at any time.” He provided no evidence, but then added: “In that case, it would be a game changer in terms of North Korea’s development and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.”

How exactly a North Korean nuclear test would be a “game changer” was not made clear. But what is clear is that the US and its allies are looking for any excuse to ramp up military preparations, including plans for nuclear war.



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