

US, South Korea emphasise alliance after North Korean missile test

By Ben McGrath
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The relationship between Washington and the new South Korean government of President Moon Jae-in has been put to an early test after North Korea launched a ballistic missile early Sunday morning, the same day as a Chinese-sponsored economic forum opened in Beijing. During Moon's campaign, and in the week since being elected, he and his Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) have held out the prospect of talks with Pyongyang, leading to speculation that Seoul's new strategy could cut across its alliance with the United States.

The North's test fire took place at 5:27 a.m., at a site approximately 100 kilometres north of Pyongyang. This was the same location as another experimental launch, on February 12, of a Pukguksong-2 intermediate-range ballistic missile. The latest missile, which Pyongyang claimed could be fitted with a nuclear warhead, flew 700 kilometres for about 30 minutes, before falling into the Sea of Japan. Japanese officials stated it reached an altitude of over 2,000 kilometres, and suggested it could be a new type of projectile.

Underscoring the recklessness of the North Korean regime's actions, US sources have claimed the missile landed barely 100 kilometres off the coast of the Russian city of Vladivostok. CNN reported that Russia had placed its missile defence and retaliation systems into "combat readiness."

Both Washington and Seoul were quick to denounce the launch. The White House called North Korea a "flagrant menace." It added: "Let this latest provocation serve as a call for all nations to implement far stronger sanctions against North Korea." The statement also stressed that the US was working closely with South Korea and Japan to "maintain our ironclad commitment to stand with our allies."

While the rhetoric is in line with previous statements from Washington, it is somewhat muted compared to last month's, when the Trump administration threatened

military strikes on the North should it carry out another nuclear or Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) test. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, told ABC's "This Week" program: "Having a missile test is not the way to sit down with the president, because he's absolutely not going to do it. Until he [North Korean leader Kim Jong-un] meets our conditions, we're not sitting down with him." She proceeded to threaten that the US would "tighten the screws" on Pyongyang.

While not naming Seoul, Haley again brushed aside the notion of talks with Pyongyang for the time being in a Twitter post: "There are no excuses that justify N. Korea's actions. This was close to home for Russia. China cant [sic] expect dialogue. This threat is real."

Both Trump and President Moon have held out the possibility of talks with the North, but only under the right conditions. The launch could be a response to recent so-called "Track 2" talks between former US officials and North Korean representatives in Norway. The Trump administration is demanding that North Korea first agrees to give up its nuclear and missile programs, before formal discussions—a price that Pyongyang appears to have indicated it considers too high.

During a session of Seoul's National Security Council, Moon said: "We keep our door open for dialogue with North Korea, but we must act decisively against North Korean provocations so that it will not miscalculate." He added, however: "We must show that dialogue is possible when the North changes its attitude." He and the ruling DPK have long viewed the development of closer relations with Pyongyang as the means of gaining access to cheap, North Korean labor, such as at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which was closed under former president Park Geun-hye.

The situation remains unstable and unpredictable. The Trump administration, facing intense pressure from the Democratic Party and the mass media over the firing of

FBI director James Comey and allegations of ties with Russia, could embark on a military adventure against North Korea to deflect from its domestic crises. A major provocation by the North, such as testing a nuclear device, could also trigger open conflict.

China's Foreign Ministry declared that it "opposes relevant launch activities by North Korea that are contrary to Security Council resolutions," but called on all sides to show restraint and avoid a further escalation of tensions in the region.

Beijing is justifiably concerned that Washington is using each bellicose action taken by North Korea to ramp up its military presence in the region, which has included the dispatching of naval strike groups, such as that led by the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson; and the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea. The purported threat from North Korea is also providing the rationale for the Abe government in Tokyo to accelerate the remilitarisation of Japanese imperialism.

Since Moon took office on May 10, he has emphasised the alliance with Washington as the "foundation" of South Korea's diplomatic and security policies. He spoke with Trump in his first phone call with a foreign leader after the election, declaring: "The South Korea-US alliance is more important than at any other time, given the growing uncertainties over the security situation of the Korean Peninsula." Both sides are dispatching envoys to pave the way for a summit, with Moon planning to meet Trump in Washington at an early date.

At the same time, Moon is attempting to mend ties with China over the placement of THAAD in South Korea, which angered Beijing and led to retaliatory economic actions. These have included the closure of South Korean-owned stores in China and a decline in sales for other South Korean-owned companies.

"I'm aware of China's interests (regarding THAAD), and we should work together to understand each other better," Moon reportedly told Chinese President Xi Jinping, the second foreign leader he spoke to by phone. "I hope you pay attention to our struggling companies in China. The THAAD issue would be more easily resolved only if North Korea does not stage additional provocations," he claimed, echoing Washington's demand that Beijing put more pressure on the North.

After Moon's election, the Chinese government invited a South Korean delegation to attend the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation being held Sunday and Monday. Seoul decided to send a group led by Park

Byeong-seok of the ruling DPK. The two sides are expected to discuss THAAD and North Korea on the sidelines of the event. Park also reportedly spoke briefly with Kim Yong-jae, the head of Pyongyang's delegation.

There are concerns in US ruling circles that either North Korea or China could drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul. Writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Jon Wolfsthal, a former senior National Security Council nonproliferation official, and Abraham Denmark, former deputy assistant secretary of defense, warned: "A key part of Moon's platform was to restart a policy of engagement toward North Korea" that "will immediately conflict with Washington's growing desire to squeeze and isolate North Korea like never before." They advised the Trump administration to continue with its coordinated strategy with Seoul, saying that, without it, putting "real pressure" on Pyongyang would not be possible.

In a further sign of Washington's militarist agenda, however, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) announced last Wednesday that it had established a Korea Mission Center, aimed at harnessing "the full resources, capabilities, and authorities of the Agency" against North Korea. Former CIA senior analyst John Nixon stated that he believed cooperation with the South's National Intelligence Service would "be very high."

US Forces Korea also recently established a new unit, the 524th Military Intelligence Battalion, aimed at gathering human intelligence on the North, supposedly through contacts, such as defectors and other high-level political figures from other countries, who have visited North Korea.

The CIA's announcement could also explain the reasons for the visit of its director, Mike Pompeo, to South Korea at the end of April. US imperialism is pushing for even more coordinated operations with the South Korean military and intelligence agencies, as it continues to prepare for the prospect of war with North Korea and, ultimately, with China.

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