

North Korean Missile Delivers a Message: There's Little Japan Can Do

By Motoko Rich

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TOKYO — The North Korean missile that landed in Japanese waters on Wednesday offered another stark reminder of the threat posed to Japan by the kinds of short-range weapons that the North has been testing in recent months.

Yet there are clear limits to what Japan can do about it. The launch reinforced how deeply Japan has been sidelined as President Trump tries to get nuclear talks with North Korea back on track, brushing off Pyongyang's string of missile tests in the process.

The ballistic missile launched early Wednesday was the first to splash down in Japan's exclusive economic zone, which extends 200 miles off its coast, in nearly two years.

North Korea's official news agency said Thursday that a submarine had fired the missile, corroborating the suspicions of South Korea's military, which said the missile had been launched from the sea.

[After this article was published, the Defense Department in Washington said it also had concluded that the missile was launched from the sea.]

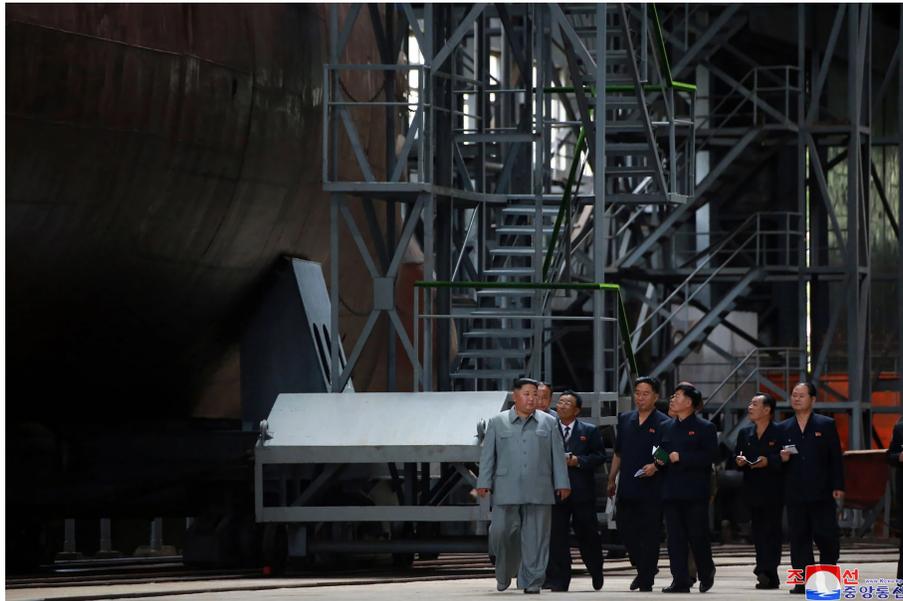
It has been three years since North Korea last tested submarine-delivered missiles, which pose a particularly serious challenge because they are harder to detect and extend the range of the North's arsenal.

The launch recalled another, more provocative test in 2017 in which North Korea fired a missile over Japan's northernmost main island, prompting the government to send out alarms on cellphones and interrupt television programs to urge residents to take cover.

The latest launch prompted no such warnings. But the test, coming just hours after North Korea announced that it was resuming long-stalled negotiations with the United States, was a clear escalation designed to show both the North's technical advances and the tough stance it will take in the talks, analysts said.

"They have made clear in the past that they want to see some substantive deal by the end of the year 'or else,'" said Alexandra Bell, senior policy director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. "They have not described what that 'or else' is, but I would see this launch as a preview of what could happen if they don't see something in the way of sanctions relief or an interim agreement."

Japan has said it will install a land-based system, known as Aegis Ashore, that can intercept missiles. But on the diplomatic front, the country has mostly been an afterthought as the United States has engaged with North Korea.



A photograph released by North Korea's state news agency in July purporting to show Kim Jong-un, the North's leader, inspecting a newly built submarine.
Korean Central News Agency

Japanese leaders must walk a fine line as Mr. Trump seeks with Pyongyang the sort of major foreign policy victory that has eluded him so far. Japan has little negotiating leverage with North Korea on its own, and is mostly relying on assiduous courting of Mr. Trump by its prime minister, Shinzo Abe.

The limitations to that approach have been apparent as Mr. Trump has been unmoved by Mr. Abe's repeated declarations that Pyongyang's launching of short- and intermediate-range missiles violates United Nations Security Council resolutions.

"Japan has to consider the complex dynamics that are going on between the U.S. and North Korea right now," said Kristi Govella, an assistant professor of Asian studies at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

"President Trump," she added, "has clearly stated that he does not find these short-range missiles to be troubling, so if Prime Minister Abe chooses to press that very assertively, then he could also end up being blamed for scuttling talks between the U.S. and North Korea or otherwise interfering with U.S. strategy or policy in the region."

As Mr. Trump has held summits with North Korea over the past two years, Japan has feared that he might rush to an impulsive victory under which the North would abandon its development of missiles capable of reaching the continental United States while retaining its arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles that could reach Japan.

"The message since 2018 is that Japan was kind of the punching bag," said Ankit Panda, an adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, based in Washington.

Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader, has made the rounds of world leaders, meeting with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and President Xi Jinping of China multiple times, as well as with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and the leaders of Singapore and Vietnam. But he has pointedly ignored outreach from Mr. Abe.

Earlier this year, Mr. Abe said he would be willing to meet with Mr. Kim without any preconditions. It was a departure from his previous stance that North Korea must first make some progress toward resolving a decades-long dispute over Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and '80s. So far, Mr. Kim has not responded.

Analysts in Japan said that North Korea may be putting pressure on Tokyo because Japanese leaders have insisted on maintaining international sanctions on the North.

"Japan has been very active on cracking down" on violations of those sanctions, said Narushige Michishita, director of the Security and International Studies Program at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.

Mr. Michishita said that North Korea could also be taking advantage of Japan's hosting of the Summer Olympics next year.



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan and President Trump at the Group of 7 summit in Biarritz, France, in August. The two leaders have been at odds over North Korea's missile launches. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

“Between now and the time of the Olympic Games would be the best time for North Korea to negotiate with Japan,” Mr. Michishita said. “Japan would be in a relatively weak or vulnerable position, because if North Korea makes a fuss before the Olympic Games, that would put Japan in a very difficult position.”

On social media in Japan, some people expressed fears that the government was not doing enough to counter the missile threats or that the public had grown blasé.

“Everyone has become accustomed to the missile launches and only thinks ‘oh that again,’” one person wrote on Twitter, in response to an announcement of the test by the prime minister’s cabinet office. “I’m afraid of that. Please respond more properly. Don’t just say ‘it’s very regrettable’ every time.”

But even as it became clear that Japan was still in the North’s line of fire, reaction in the country was mostly muted.

“It’s interesting how North Korea has managed to normalize extreme behavior in a way,” said Ms. Govella, the Asian studies professor in Hawaii.

The missile launch also highlighted Japan’s deteriorating relationship with South Korea, as tensions between the two countries have been mounting for months over longstanding historical disputes. In August, South Korea said it planned to abandon a military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, although the two countries appeared to trade information about the missile launch on Wednesday.

Some commentators in Japan expressed concern that Mr. Moon’s friendlier approach to North Korea could lead to military collaboration between the two countries that might imperil Japan.

Outside Japan, analysts said North Korea was far more focused on the United States, including the escalating impeachment fight between the Democrats and Mr. Trump.

“The North Koreans see a U.S. administration in a weakened position due to the impeachment effort and Trump’s sagging polling numbers,” said Suzanne Dimaggio, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The North's leaders "likely sense Trump's desperation for a win," Ms. Dimaggio said, after his efforts to broker a peace agreement in Afghanistan fell apart at the last minute and a meeting with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran did not happen during the United Nations General Assembly.

"They are well positioned to exploit his vulnerabilities," she said.

Follow Motoko Rich on Twitter: @MotokoRich.

Reporting was contributed by Makiko Inoue and Eimi Yamamitsu from Tokyo, Choe Sang-hun from Seoul, South Korea, and Helene Cooper from Washington.

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