East Asia Is on the Razor's Edge After North Korea Missile Launches

A single miscalculation could plunge the Korean Peninsula into a conflagration with grave consequences for Japan, China, Russia—and the United States.

AFP Contributor

SEOUL—The defection on Thursday of a North Korean soldier weaving his way across the DMZ is the latest in an accumulation of incidents putting not only the Korean Peninsula but much of East Asia on the razor's edge of a crisis out of anyone's ability to control.

The soldier, spotted by thermal imaging as he made his way across the heavily mined demilitarized zone, presumably is providing testimony about the problems of morale and hunger afflicting tens of thousands of North Korean troops within 20 miles of the line.

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— Van Jackson, ‘On the Brink: Trump, Kim and the Threat of Nuclear War’

These are the facts about his country and especially the military that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un does not want known. And it’s to stave off simmering discontent exacerbated by sanctions and poor crops that Kim Jong Un is testing missiles and rocket systems—prime examples of threats that could send the region hurtling toward disaster, the United States along with it.

You may recall that President Donald Trump used to laud a supposed end to Pyongyang’s missile tests as a trumph for his weird personal diplomacy love-in with Kim. When new tests started, Trump declared the North Koreans “really haven’t tested missiles other than, you know, smaller ones.” When more tests happened last week, Trump said they were “short-range missiles, and many people have those missiles.” And Wednesday Kim sent some more of them aloft.

In fact, Kim has confirmed the tests are far from routine. The more they test, the more dangerous the standoff and no amount of happy talk can wish that away

Kim himself guided the latest test-firing of what Pyongyang’s Korean Central News Agency called “a newly developed large-caliber multiple launch guided rocket system.” That would suggest they have advanced their technical ability to strike anywhere in South Korea, notably the sprawling new American base, Camp Humphreys, 40 miles southeast of Seoul.

“The tactical data and technical characteristics of the new-type large-caliber guided ordnance rocket,” said KCNA in typically convoluted North Korean syntax, “reached the numerical values of its design, and verified the combat effectiveness of the overall system.”

Countering Trump’s dismissal of the importance of North Korean testing, Kim’s news agency continued in NorKspeak. It said the test-firing “would be an inescapable distress to the forces becoming a fat target of the weapon.”

Those comments coincided with the arrival in Bangkok of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and nuclear negotiator Stephen Biegun for an annual Asian regional

forum at which Pompeo hopes to see North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho on the sidelines, but North Korea has said pointedly that Ri won't be there.

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In any case, Pompeo does not have to talk to Ri to know the test-firing Wednesday was a warning: Do not stage even small-scale exercises in South Korea this month, Kim is telling Washington and Seoul. And please lift those sanctions—or we may not cooperate on talks that Pompeo says are seriously in the works.

In a game of dare and double-dare, North Korean tests show the fragility of the North-South diplomacy and the perils of wishful thinking: Trump's friend Kim isn't going to have these missiles armed with real warheads, primed to fire at live targets, is he? Can't we shrug off his latest shots as indeed "solemn warnings" against "war mongers" while the U.S. and South Korea gear up for small-scale, computer-driven military exercises?

Gingerly, South Korea's National Security Council, avoiding outright condemnation, expressed "strong concerns" about tests that would have "a negative impact." That was enough for South Korea's defense minister, Jeong Kyeong-doo, to include North Korea again "in the concept of an enemy," much though the South's leftist president, Moon Jae-in, objects to applying the E-word to his northern neighbor.

The latest North Korean salvo didn't go too far, about 150 miles off the North's east coast—shorter range than the two missiles fired a week ago but once again just fine for Camp Humphreys, the largest U.S. base on foreign soil, where 28,500 U.S. troops are stationed

"Recent missiles are guided short-range at a lower altitude," says Choi Jin-wook, former director of the Korea Institute of National Unification. They're "more accurate and hard to be intercepted"—even by PAC-3, the most advanced surface-to-air counter-missile system.

It's not just those upcoming war games that are upsetting the North Koreans. They also hate the prospect of the South Korean air force flying the latest F-35 stealth aircraft. With the South due to acquire 40 of them from the U.S. in the next two years, the North's state press agency says, "We have no other choice but to develop and test the special armaments to completely destroy the lethal

weapons reinforced in South Korea."

"What if a South Korean plane hit a Russian bomber with one of those warning shots?"

The North Korean strategy is basic. "I believe North Korea is getting very frustrated with the U.S. and wants to pressure Mr. Trump," says Choi. At the same time, considering Moon's eagerness for reconciliation with the North, "South Korea is an easy hostage" that can be used "to pressure Washington."

How better to intimidate the South Koreans? While "talking loudly about reconciliation and cooperation" the South Koreans go on "opening a gate to invading the north," declared the KCNA. In this combustible mix, experts see tensions worsening as North Korea presses Moon to compromise and the danger arises of an "accident" or unscripted incident.

In an uncertain atmosphere, who knows what spark might ignite a conflagration?

"As with the outbreak of World War I," writes Van Jackson in On the Brink: Trump, Kim and the Threat of Nuclear War, "it takes only one short-sighted or highly biased leader taking one needless gamble, or misconceiving just one action by the other side, to put the gears of war in motion."

Inexorably, those gears are grinding. Trump may try to soothe those who doubt Kim Jong Un's intentions, but one of the two shots fired last week was not exactly short-range as he contended. It soared more than 400 miles—plenty far enough to hit key targets in Japan—on a course that made it look like a model of a Russian Iskander which is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads.

Despite "the most optimistic of projections," writes Jackson, "policymakers and the public must remain attentive to the risks of nuclear war."

And nukes are not the only imminent menace. Before Kim pressed the button on those missiles last week, South Korean warplanes, F15s and F16s, fired flares and 300 warning shots at a Russian A50 early warning and control aircraft reconnoitering over South Korean waters also claimed by Japan.

That was the first time Seoul's forces have fired in the direction of a foreign plane, begging the question, what would it take for overflights and intrusions to turn into bloody shootouts?

The same day, two Chinese H6 bombers and two Russian TU 95 bombers flew in tandem around South Korea's KADIZ, Korean Air Defense Identification Zone, the much larger area in which planes are free to fly while transponders relay where they are to the South Koreans.

What were the Chinese and Russians trying to prove? Was the dual mission timed for National Security Adviser John Bolton's visit to Korea and Japan? Or were they out to show who's boss over South Korea, which is now torn between the need for its military commanders to hone their computer skills in war games with the Americans and the desire of Moon to appease a nuclear-armed North?

Maybe China's President Xi Jinping is still sore about Moon accepting THAAD, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense monster run by American soldiers way south of Seoul. The Russians don't like THAAD either. Could it be they sent those planes around the periphery of South Korea to make that point? They both think THAAD is capable of getting into their own computer systems even though the Americans say its only mission is to shoot down high-flying North Korean missiles in a real war.

The question assumes urgency as South Korean and U.S. officials say they'll definitely go ahead with those joint exercises. Missile tests, on top of Chinese and Russian overflights, raise the specter of a doomsday scenario even as South Korea tries to stay on friendly terms with China as well as Russia, not to mention North Korea in an era of rapprochement.

Then there's the great power to the east, Japan, with which Korea is in an ugly dispute over Japanese reluctance to pay still more compensation to workers forced to serve as slave labor in Japanese factories in World War II.

The Japanese often send planes in hot pursuit of Chinese aircraft, scaring them away from the Senkaku Islands, held by Japan but claimed by China, which calls them Diaoyu. And the Japanese are not sending warplanes over disputed Korean waters, not even around Dokdo, those enormous twin rocks that Japan calls Takeshima and which it claims. But those outcrops are potential flashpoints defended by 50 lonely South Korean policemen way out there in the Sea of Japan, known to Koreans as the East Sea.

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through a minefield."

What if, accidentally, a Japanese plane veered off course over Dokdo and got shot at? Koreans would undoubtedly cheer if the plane were hit, such is the heightened nationalist ire after Japan vindictively cut off export of essential chemicals needed for the semiconductors that are the backbone of the South Korean economy.

And what if a South Korean plane hit a Russian bomber with one of those warning shots? Or the Chinese got really mad about the Americans spying on them via THAAD and sent warplanes over South Korean territory?

And what about the new submarine Kim Jong Un was just inspecting? Defense officials say it's built to hold three submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Ok, he's not ordering the firing of anything bearing a warhead—yet—but what if?

Meanwhile, we are watching the steady deterioration of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. Most U.S. troops stay inside the high barbed-wire surrounding Camp Humphreys as policy-makers quake over provoking anti-American protests or otherwise upsetting the Moon government.

But what if an accident did happen and U.S. forces fanned into the countryside, not on war games but for real?

David Straub, a retired senior U.S. diplomat with years of experience in Seoul, sees "the much bigger concern" as "the continued undermining of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and de facto acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state." That result, he believes, "would not only be terrible in itself, it would likely contribute to much greater instability in regional and even global affairs."

"I'm not terribly worried about an accidental outbreak of major hostilities," says Straub. "None of the six countries concerned wants all-out conflict."

The North "has continued to engage in bloody provocations" since the Korean War, he says, but "it's hard to imagine what North Korea would have to do to prompt South Korea's Moon administration to retaliate." And, "although President Trump used to talk big about what he would do to Pyongyang, it has become evident that it was all bluff and bluster."

Let's hope. But it's those little things—an intrusion here, an accident there—that might upset the carefully wrought equilibrium.

Only weeks ago, the DMZ seemed a symbol of progress toward peace as Trump stepped across into North Korea with his buddy Kim Jong Un. Now we see a North Korean soldier coming the other way through a minefield.

We should make no mistake. We're at least as close to the razor's edge of war as to the brink of peace.

Source:
https://www.thedailybeast.com/after-north-korea-missile-launches-east-asia-is-on-the-razors-edge

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