

# Trump officials privately bracing for North Korea's next move

*Washington (CNN)* The Trump administration is privately discussing how to respond should North Korea decide to conduct a satellite launch as talks between Washington and Pyongyang appear to be at another impasse, CNN has learned.

Rhetoric between the two countries has become more heated and provocative in recent weeks following President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un's no-deal summit in Hanoi but a North Korean satellite launch would pose a new, high-stakes dilemma for the administration.

Such a launch by the North Koreans would force Trump to make a tough choice: Take a hard line against Pyongyang knowing it could jeopardize already fragile negotiations or implement a more nuanced approach in hopes of preserving the possibility of a diplomatic resolution.

US officials have said that the administration is constantly monitoring activity at various sites via satellites, radars and electronic intelligence.

Administration officials say there is no intelligence at this time that indicates exactly what move the North Koreans might make next but they do acknowledge that a satellite launch could be on the horizon which is why they are having these internal conversations about how the US might react.

Those warnings have taken on added urgency as satellite images picked up activity at the Sohae satellite launch facility around the time of the summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, officials said.

A tepid response to a potential North Korean satellite launch — which is being advocated by officials in the administration — is sure to draw criticisms of double standards given Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's harsh rhetoric aimed at Iran over similar activities earlier this year.

However, some officials believe that may be a risk worth taking as a harsh response could derail the diplomatic process.

A US official told CNN that the North Koreans also know how provocative any launch would be and the impact it would have on negotiations, noting that the intelligence community believes Pyongyang sees continued diplomacy with the Washington as in their best interest.

Recently observed activity at several launch sites coupled with North Korea's rhetoric following the summit could be part of a coordinated posturing effort to gain leverage in talks with the US, the official added.

But those developments have prompted an internal debate among US officials over whether the administration should hold North Korea to the same standard as

other countries when it comes to satellite launches, like Iran, or issue a more muted response.

A satellite launch could be cast by the US as less incendiary than a missile or nuclear test, because it is not a direct link to North Korea's nuclear program.

But it is not unrelated — experts have long maintained that North Korea's attempts to shoot satellites into space could help them develop viable long-range ballistic missiles.

Pompeo issued a stark warning to Iran over its own space launch attempts earlier this year, calling out Tehran for its "flagrant" actions that he claimed were in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

"The Iranian regime fired off a space launch vehicle today," Pompeo said in January. "Such vehicles incorporate technologies that are virtually identical and interchangeable with those used in ballistic missiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles."

## **Satellite launch vs. missile test**

Even with ramped down language, Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton have made it clear that a nuclear or missile test could be suicidal for US-North Korean diplomacy.

But the administration has not said what the US will do if Pyongyang launches a satellite.

"Well, the President himself said he would be very, very disappointed — his phrase — if North Korea were to resume missile testing or nuclear testing," Bolton said on Fox Business Tuesday.

"This was a commitment that Kim Jong Un has made several times to him now. So, if in fact they decided to start testing again, it would have a real impact on the President," he said.

North Korea's missile program made strides in 2017, with Pyongyang saying it successfully test-fired three intercontinental ballistic missiles. Experts say the Hwasong-15, which was launched in late November, could likely hit much of the United States.

And while it has been more than three years since North Korea launched a satellite into orbit, experts have said the technologies are extremely similar.

As he left Hanoi, Pompeo said the ball was in North Korea's court when it comes to continuing diplomatic talks. On Monday, Pompeo reiterated that the US sticking to that claim.

"There's deep distrust. There's distrust between both parties. We need to see Chairman Kim actually deliver," he said Monday in response to a question about sanctions evasion.

Pompeo noted that Kim "is a leader who has made a promise" on

denuclearization. He has also responded similarly to questions regarding Kim's threat to possibly resume testing, emphasizing that Kim promised he would not do so during the Hanoi summit.

Trump, who has said the US will be happy as long as the "testing" moratorium stands, has steered clear of specifics on how he feels about a satellite launch specifically.

"I'm not in a rush. I don't want to rush anybody," Trump said, ahead of the Hanoi summit. "I just don't want testing. As long as there's no testing, we're happy."

But a US intelligence official told CNN that the analytical line on North Korea has not changed after the summit.

The US intelligence community still believes that North Korea maintains its nuclear weapons capability, is unlikely to dismantle its nuclear or missile programs and could very easily go back into testing despite its months-long moratorium, the official said.

## **A risk worth taking?**

Without being told what the repercussions of a satellite launch would be mean, the North Koreans see an open door, explains David Maxwell of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. They are likely in the midst of measuring how such a test could benefit them.

"It gives them options," Maxwell said, of the fact that Pompeo and Bolton haven't bluntly warned against launching a satellite. "North Korea would interpret that as, OK we can do a satellite launch. But it would also depend on the conditions inside or North Korea. If Kim Jong Un feels he has to prove himself to the military and give off the appearance he is strong, it may help him. Because by Trump walking out, Kim appeared weak."

Those who know the regime well, expect that North Korea will do something to puff its chest, given that Kim walked away from Hanoi without any tangible win.

Gen. Vincent Brooks, a recently retired US Army general who commanded United States Forces Korea, explained that North Korea will likely make a "face saving move" because Kim "didn't come back with what he wanted" from Hanoi. Brooks, speaking at Stanford University, predicted Kim will attempt to "equalize" the situation.

## **Last minute decision**

Gaming out a response to a potential North Korean satellite launch has been further complicated by the fact that experts say the US will not be able to assess the payload of a rocket until the last minute.

"We may not know until it's on the stand," according to Vipin Narang, an

associate professor of political science at MIT, focusing on nuclear proliferation and strategy, who told CNN that it entirely depends on the type of engine and the payload it is carrying.

A US intelligence official also told CNN that any assessment related to Pyongyang's intentions would largely depend on the payload of any potential launch.

The stakes of that potential decision are only heightened by the already delicate nature of diplomatic talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

Pompeo has made it clear that he is done chasing North Korea, given the disproportionate amount of outreach that came from the Trump administration to the Kim regime in the last year.

And while both the White House and the State Department claim that conversations are continuing, Special Representative Steve Biegun does not have another round of talks on the calendar with his North Korean counterpart.

For now, the administration appears to be taking a wait-and-see approach when it comes to North Korea, but how the US responds to a potential escalation could prove to be pivotal in determining whether a diplomatic resolution is possible.

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