

Kim Jong Un says North Korean missile test sends warning to US

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S Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters Tuesday while en route to Tokyo that the allies were “still abiding” by the adjustments made after Trump and Kim’s historic first meeting in Singapore last year.(AFP)

Kim Jong Un said North Korea’s latest missile tests were intended as a warning against ongoing US-South Korea military exercises, while President Donald Trump’s new defense chief defended the training as necessary to maintain readiness.

North Korean state media said Wednesday that Kim personally oversaw what allied military officials said was a pair of short-range ballistic missile launches a day earlier — the fourth such volley in two weeks. “The demonstration fire clearly verified the reliability, security and actual war capacity of the new-type tactical guided weapon system,” the official Korean Central News Agency said.

North Korea has taken escalating steps in recent weeks to show its frustration with the US's refusal to meet its demands in nuclear talks. The regime also has specifically accused Trump of breaking a pledge during a June 30 meeting to suspend all joint drills — the latest of which started Monday.

“Kim Jong Un noted that the said military action would be an occasion to send an adequate warning to the joint military drill now underway by the U.S. and South Korean authorities,” KCNA reported.

The so-called Alliance 19-2 exercises were instituted after Trump unilaterally agreed to Kim's request last year to suspend larger, live-fire Ulchi Freedom Guardian drills that North Korea long denounced as an effort to prepare for an invasion. Trump administration officials say the current “command post” exercises are largely computer-driven and don't constitute a breach of the president's commitments to Kim.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters Tuesday while en route to Tokyo that the allies were “still abiding” by the adjustments made after Trump and Kim's historic first meeting in Singapore last year. “At the same time, we need to maintain our readiness and making sure that we're prepared,” said Esper.

Weapons experts have said all of the tests in the past two weeks were of the same solid-fuel, ballistic missile known as the KN-23, which is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and has a range to strike all of South Korea and perhaps parts of Japan.

North Korea Warns U.S. Talks at Risk After Latest Missile Tests

Kim Dong-yub, a North Korea expert at Kyungnam University's Institute for Far Eastern Studies, said the regime appeared to be trying to balance foreign and domestic pressures. “Externally, it's trying not to break the platform of dialogue,” he said, adding that Kim must also shield “himself from criticism from the North Korean people who feel insecure over national security concerns.”

Esper said he would also press allies Japan and South Korea to keep their escalating trade feud from affecting cooperation. Seoul has warned that the dispute, rooted in disagreements over Japan's 1910-45 colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula, could cause it to reconsider an intelligence-sharing pact with Tokyo.

“My message to — in both Seoul and Tokyo — will likely be, look, we have really big challenges in the near term, threats, challenges if you will in North Korea in the longer term, bigger one of China, we should focus on those two things,” said Esper, who will also visit South Korea. “So, I’d ask them to both resolve this issue quickly, and let’s really focus on North Korea and China.”

That may prove easier said than done. Japan followed through with a plan to remove South Korea from a list of trusted export destinations Friday, despite a personal appeal for restraint by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo.

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