

# Kim reaffirms arms buildup at party meet

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un doubled down on his arms buildup in the face of what he described as an aggravating security environment as he concluded a major political conference that came as the United States and South Korean officials say Pyongyang is pressing ahead with preparations for another nuclear test that could be imminent.

Kim's comments, published by North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Saturday, didn't include any direct criticism of the US or its southern neighbor amid a prolonged deadlock in nuclear diplomacy during the three days of discussions that wrapped up on Friday.

Kim defended his accelerating weapons development as a rightful exercise of sovereign rights to self-defense and set more "militant tasks" to be pursued by his armed forces and military scientists, according to the agency. But the report didn't mention any specific goal or plan on testing activity, including detonating a nuclear device.

The plenary meeting of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee also reviewed key state affairs, including efforts to slow a COVID-19 outbreak the North first acknowledged last month and progress in economic goals Kim is desperate to keep alive amid strengthened virus restrictions.

"[Kim] said the right to self-defense is an issue of defending sovereignty, clarifying once again the party's invariable fighting principle of power for power and head-on contest," the KCNA said.

The meeting came amid a provocative streak in missile demonstrations that jolts an old pattern of brinkmanship aimed at forcing the US to accept the idea of North Korea as a nuclear power and negotiating economic and security concessions from a position of strength.

North Korea has for years mastered the art of manufacturing diplomatic crises with weapons tests and threats before eventually offering negotiations aimed at extracting concessions.

In a move that may have future foreign-policy implications, Kim promoted during the meeting a veteran diplomat with deep experience in handling US affairs as his new foreign minister.

Choe Son Hui, who is among the North's most powerful women along with the leader's sister Kim Yo Jong, had a major role in preparing Jong Un for his meetings with then-US president Donald Trump in 2018 and 2019. Talks between Pyongyang and Washington derailed after the collapse of Jong Un's second meeting with Trump in February 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demands for a major release of US-led sanctions on the North in exchange for limited disarmament steps.

Choe replaces Ri Son Gwon, a hardliner with a military background who, during the meeting, was announced as Jong Un's new point person on South Korea.

Putting the pressure North Korea has a history of dialing up pressure on Seoul when it doesn't get what it wants from Washington. While the KCNA's report on the meeting didn't include any comment specifically referring to South Korea, it said the participants clarified "principles and strategic and tactical orientations to be maintained in the struggle against the enemy and in the field of foreign affairs."

North Korea has already set an annual record in ballistic launches through the first half of 2022, firing 31 missiles over 18 different launch events, including its first demonstrations of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in nearly five years.

Jong Un may up the ante soon as US and South Korean officials say North Korea has all but finished preparations to detonate a nuclear device at its testing ground in the northeastern town of Punggye-ri. The site had been inactive since hosting the North's sixth nuclear test in September 2017, when it said it detonated a thermonuclear bomb designed for its ICBMs.

The North's unusually fast pace in testing activity underscores its leader's dual intent to advance his arsenal and pressure the Biden administration over long-stalled nuclear diplomacy, experts say.

Jong Un's pressure campaign hasn't been slowed by a COVID-19 outbreak spreading across the largely unvaccinated autocracy of 26 million people.

During the meeting, North Korea maintained a dubious claim that its outbreak was easing, despite outside concerns of huge death rates, given the country's broken health care system.

North Korea has restricted the movement of people and supplies between regions, but large groups of workers have continued to gather at farms and industrial sites, being driven to shore up an economy decimated by decades of mismanagement, sanctions and pandemic border closures.

Jong Un said during the meeting the country's "maximum emergency" antiviral campaign of the past month has strengthened the economic sector's ability to cope with the coronavirus.

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