

N. Korea fires ballistic missile as South gets ready for new president

SEOUL, May 4 (Reuters) – North Korea fired a ballistic missile toward the sea off its east coast on Wednesday, South Korea and Japan said, about a week after Pyongyang vowed to develop its nuclear forces “at the fastest possible speed”.

The North’s 14th known weapons test this year comes days before the South’s new president, Yoon Suk-yeol, takes office on May 10. North Korea’s last test, on April 16, involved a new tactical guided weapon aimed at boosting its nuclear capability.

South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said it detected the launch at about noon in the Sunan area of the North’s capital of Pyongyang, home to an international airport and the area from which the North said it had fired its largest intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the Hwasong-17, on March 24.

The missile flew about 470 km (292 miles) to a maximum altitude of 780 km (485 miles), the JCS said.

“A recent series of North Korea’s ballistic missile launches poses a grave threat to the peace and stability of not only the Korean peninsula but also the international community,” the JCS said in a statement, urging the North to immediately stop such actions.

The offices of both outgoing and incoming South Korean presidents strongly condemned the launch, with Yoon’s team vowing to strictly respond to such actions and devise “more fundamental deterrent measures”.

The United States also condemned the test and repeated calls on Pyongyang to return to dialogue over its nuclear and missile programmes.

“Like the DPRK’s recent tests of at least three intercontinental ballistic missiles, this launch is a clear violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions,” a State Department spokesperson said.

Referring to North Korea by the initials of its official name, it said the launch showed the threat the weapons programmes pose to the country’s neighbours and

the region.

The U.S. military urged Pyongyang to refrain from further destabilizing actions. "While we have assessed that this event does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel, territory, or that of our allies, we will continue to monitor the situation," it said in a statement.

In Seoul, officials and experts said it was too early to say if the latest test involved another ICBM.

Lee Jong-sup, Yoon's pick for defense minister, told his confirmation hearing it "might be an ICBM or something with a shorter range."

Japanese deputy defense minister Makoto Oniki put the missile's range at 500 km (311 miles) and its maximum altitude at 800 km (497 miles). He said the ministry was still analyzing the data to determine its type.

A North Korean flag flutters on top of a 160-metre tower in North Korea's propaganda village of Gijungdong, in this picture taken from the Tae Sung freedom village near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), in Paju

"North Korea's recent action, including frequent missile launches, cannot be tolerated, as it poses a threat to the security and safety of the region and international community," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters, adding that Japan had logged a protest against North Korea.

ANOTHER TEST OF SPY SATELLITE?

When he oversaw a huge military parade last week, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un pledged to hasten development of the country's nuclear arsenal amid stalled denuclearization talks with the United States.

In its March 24 test, the North's first full-capability launch since 2017, a missile flew 1,080 km (671 miles) to an altitude of 6,200 km (3,900 miles), with a flight time of 71 minutes, the JCS said.

Ankit Panda, a nuclear policy expert at the U.S.-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the launch possibly involved technology for satellite reconnaissance systems, which the North tested in February and March.

Cheong Seong-chang, a specialist on North Korea at the Sejong Institute think

tank in Seoul, agreed.

“Today’s range and maximum altitude was similar to those recorded in the two previous tests, but showed progress in its capability,” Cheong said.

Wednesday’s test came as South Korean and Japanese nuclear envoys held talks in Seoul, urging the North to stop escalating tensions and return to diplomacy, Seoul’s foreign ministry said.

China’s nuclear negotiator, Liu Xiaoming, also met Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun, who called for Beijing’s constructive role in stabilizing the situation, the ministry said.

Ahead of Yoon’s inauguration, he is mapping out a foreign policy agenda after signaling a tough line against Pyongyang, while leaving open the door for dialogue.

Lee, a retired former deputy chairman of JCS, told the hearing he would beef up South Korea’s deterrent capability to “sternly” respond to the North’s nuclear and missile threats.

After breaking its 2017 moratorium on long-range missile testing, North Korea may also soon resume nuclear tests, officials in Seoul and Washington say.

Asked at the hearing about a potential new nuclear test, Lee said preparations seemed to be under way, possibly for a smaller, tactical nuclear weapon.

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