

# North Korea Seen Expanding Rocket Launch Facility It Once Promised To Dismantle



## Notes

Imagery shows new roads appearing at a key rocket and missile test site in North Korea. The roads (light brown) appear to have been built around mid-March.

Credit: Planet Labs Inc./MIIS

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North Korea appears to be expanding a key rocket launch facility it once pledged to dismantle, according to new satellite imagery shared exclusively with NPR.

The imagery, taken by commercial company Planet and shared via the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, shows new roads under construction at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station.

Sohae has been used in the past by North Korea to conduct satellite launches and test powerful engines for its long-range missiles. Parts of the facility were dismantled following a 2018 summit in Singapore between President Trump and North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un. Kim promised to fully dismantle the site in the presence of international inspectors if a deal could be reached.

Following a breakdown in diplomacy, key parts of Sohae were rebuilt, and last year, the site was used to conduct missile engine tests.

Now, satellite imagery shows new roads in a long-abandoned section of the site, according to Dave Schmerler, a senior research associate with the Middlebury Institute. “We’re seeing roadwork that would facilitate the possible addition of new structures,” he says. The exact nature of the expansion remains unclear, but Schmerler says any changes at Sohae are important. “It’s a site that hasn’t seen a lot of physical construction activity in a long time,” he says.

“The site was supposed to be shut down — apparently it’s not,” says Vipin

Narang, an arms control researcher at MIT who follows North Korea's program.

"It's hard to know what it is, but they're clearly reactivating it and preparing for personnel to be there, which suggests that they may want to start using it again," Narang says. "Maybe they want to test a satellite launch vehicle; maybe they want to test an ICBM; maybe they want to test an engine."

He says the news about changes at Sohae isn't surprising given that Trump and Kim never reached a deal and diplomacy between North Korea and the U.S. appears to be "in a coma."

Narang speculates that the decision to make changes to the site in the middle of the global coronavirus pandemic might not be a coincidence. With the world's attention elsewhere, "it's a good opportunity to do the stuff behind the scenes to expand and improve," he says.

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Source:

<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/27/822661018/north-korea-seen-expanding-rocket-launch-facility-it-once-promised-to-dismantle>

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