

# North Korea missile launch: regime says new rocket can hit anywhere in US

Pyongyang has conducted its first ballistic test launch in two months, reigniting tensions in the region

**Justin McCurry in Tokyo and Julian Borger in Washington**

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North Korea has claimed that the rocket it test-fired on Wednesday morning is a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile that can strike anywhere on the US mainland, as it declared itself a “complete” nuclear state.

In a special announcement broadcast on state TV, the regime said it had successfully tested a Hwasong-15, which appears to be an advanced version of ICBMs it launched in July.

A government statement, read out by the TV presenter Ri Chun-hee, quoted the country’s leader, Kim Jong-un, as saying: “Now we have finally realised the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force, the cause of building a rocket power.”

Kim oversaw the launch in the suburbs of Pyongyang. The official KCNA news agency said the missile was more sophisticated than any previously tested and was capable of carrying a “super-large heavy (nuclear) warhead”.

The regime’s claims have not been independently verified, but experts had been expecting North Korea to demonstrate that it now has all of the US in range – a development that significantly strengthens its position in any negotiations with Washington over its nuclear weapons programme.

Pyongyang has not, however, proved it has the capability to marry a miniaturised nuclear warhead with a long-range missile and send it at a trajectory that would put US cities in its sights.

South Korea and Japan led condemnation of North Korea’s launch of the missile, which landed off Japan’s coast.

The launch, which triggered a South Korean test-launch in response, reignited tensions in the region after a lull of more than two months.

It was North Korea’s 20th launch of a ballistic missile this year, and possibly its third successful test of an ICBM following two launches in July.

Moon Jae-in, the South Korean president, voiced concern that North Korea’s perfection of an ICBM would send regional security “spiralling out of control” and lead the US to consider launching a pre-emptive strike.

Wednesday morning's launch adds to fears that North Korea will soon have a military arsenal that can viably target the US mainland.

Japan's prime minister, Shinzo Abe, condemned the missile launch as "intolerable" and called for an emergency meeting of the UN security council. Within hours of the test, Abe and Donald Trump agreed to strengthen their defence capability and to urge China – North Korea's main ally – to apply more pressure on Pyongyang over its weapons programme.

China expressed "grave concern" at the test, while calling for all sides to act cautiously.

The missile was reported to have flown for 50 minutes on a very high trajectory, reaching 2,796 miles (4,500km) above the earth (more than 10 times higher than the orbit of Nasa's International Space Station) before coming down nearly 621 miles from the launch site off the west coast of Japan.

This would make it the most powerful of the three ICBMs North Korea has tested so far.

David Wright, a physicist and missile expert at the Union of Concerned Scientists, calculated that on a normal trajectory, rather than a high lofted trajectory, the missile would have a range of 8,078 miles, enough to reach Washington, the rest of the US west coast, Europe or Australia.

Furthermore, the mobile night launch appeared aimed at testing new capabilities and demonstrating that Pyongyang would be able to strike back after any attempt at a preventative strike against the regime.

"It went higher, frankly, than any previous shot they've taken," James Mattis, the US defence secretary, told reporters. "It's a research and development effort on their part to continue building ballistic missiles that can threaten anywhere in the world."

President Trump, who had insisted that North Korean development of an ICBM would not happen during his presidency, said: "We will take care of it ... it is a situation that we will handle."

Within minutes of the launch, the South Korean joint chiefs of staff announced Seoul had carried out an exercise involving the launch of a "precision strike" missile, signalling that it was primed to respond immediately to any attack from North Korea.

Rex Tillerson, the US secretary of state, condemned the launch and added: "Diplomatic options remain viable and open, for now. The United States remains committed to finding a peaceful path to denuclearisation and to ending belligerent actions by North Korea."

It was the first North Korean ballistic missile test since 15 September and followed a warning earlier this month from Trump that North Korean threats to strike the US and its allies would be a "fatal miscalculation".

The launch also marked a rebuff to Russia, which had claimed the previous day that the pause in missile launches suggested that Pyongyang was ready to defuse tensions in line with a proposal from Moscow and Beijing that North Korea could freeze missile and nuclear tests in exchange for a scaling down of US and allied military exercises.

"I think North Korea's restraint for the past two months is within the simultaneous freeze road

map,” said Igor Morgulov, the deputy Russian foreign minister, speaking to reporters in Seoul on Monday.

North Korean state media said the regime’s missiles “would not pose any threat to any country and region as long as the interests of [North Korea] are not infringed upon. This is our solemn declaration.”

Melissa Hanham, a senior research associate with the East Asia Nonproliferation Programme of the Middlebury Institute, said the statement could be an opportunity for Pyongyang and Washington to lower the diplomatic temperature.

“Perhaps this is an out,” Hanham wrote on Twitter. “A way to say they’ve achieved what they want, as long as we treat them the way they want to be treated.

“Diplomacy is worth the risk of failure, because to not engage them just gives them time to scale up.”

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