DPRK's Fourth Short Range Missile Launch and the International Reaction

Early in the morning of August 6, North Korea conducted a new series of missile launches, the fourth incident over the last two weeks. Short-range missiles (presumably the same type as those that were launched on July 25) crossed the Korean peninsula from the west to the east and, after flying for about 450 km, fell to the Sea of Japan.

According to South Korean military and the US expert V. van Diepen, short range ballistic missiles were used, though this term did not appear directly in the message of the Korean Central News Agency. However, in its opinion, the new multiple rocket launchers have a range of 60 km more. All this can give North Korea “more flexibility in the choice between multiple rocket launchers and short range ballistic missiles, as well as complicate even more the missile defense challenges for the US and South Korea.”

The missiles are now capable of maneuvering in order to reach the target covered with the missile defense under various azimuths. The trajectory projection to the Earth surface is not a straight line, but a curve, which means that the high-precision missile maneuvers both in the horizontal and in the vertical plane.

Now let us discuss the reaction of the officials of the US and South Korea to the launches.

After the first launches, Washington urged North Korea to abandon further missile tests: the US Department of State Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said that Washington wanted the negotiations on the North Korean nuclear and missile programs to return to the proper course.

The South Korean Presidential Administration condemned the launches at once, making it clear that countermeasures may follow such actions. The representative of the South Korean Ministry of Defense Choi Hyunsoo also urged North Korea “to stop actions which do not promote efforts to decrease the military tension on the Korean peninsula.” The Ministry of Unification stated that the provocative actions of Pyongyang do not promote the decrease in the military tension in the region, which was practically repeated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Kyung-wha as well.

The opposition rigidly criticized the course of the present government of the South towards the reconciliation with the North. “After the conclusion of the inter-Korean military agreement on September 19, 2018 on the termination of threats against each other, North Korea carried out missile launches three times already. Taking into account this fact, we should abandon the agreement because of these actions of North Korea and take all measures for building forces for the response to the missile threat of the North,” the parliamentary floor leader of the Liberty Korea Party Na Kyung-won said.

Certainly, Donald Trump’s reaction was interesting to everybody, since experts remembered that, after the May launches, he took a more favorable position than his subordinates: “My people (including the Acting Minister of Defense Shanahan) think that it could be a violation... I see it differently”.

This time, the US President showed, according to the Chosun Ilbo newspaper, similar carelessness, saying that “short-range missiles and quite standard missiles.” The Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also considered them a common bargaining element.

The UN Secretary General António Guterres expressed concern about the launches and called for a prompt resumption of negotiations between the US and North Korea.
Germany, which is presiding in the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea, condemned the missile tests of Pyongyang as a violation of the UN resolutions. As Radio Free Asia reports, the representative of the German mission to the UN Catherine Deschauer said in her statement that the launches increased the doubts in the readiness of North Korea to carry out the dismantling of the nuclear programme and arsenal.

However, according to one of Moon Jae-in’s assistants, South Korea and the US will not try to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, as they did not violate the promise of North Korea to stop the nuclear weapon and long-range ballistic missile tests.

The majority of publications in the South Korea media, as well as experts, called the launches a response to the shipment of the cutting-edge weapons to South Korea and conducting the 19-2 Dong Maeng military exercise; they also paid attention to the use of the expression “power demonstration” by the North Korean party, considering the dialogue thus declines giving way to a new form of confrontation.

Many expressed the idea that North Korea is trying to hammer a wedge between the US and South Korea, criticizing Seoul, rather than Washington, and, as the professor Kim Dong-yop from the Institute for Far East Research of the Kangnam University pointed out, “instead of using the term missile, the North spoke of a tactical guided weapon.”

Some analysts, such as the former Assistant US Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific Ocean Daniel Russell, considered Trump’s reaction to the provocations of the North as a risk for the relations of Washington with its allies in Asia.

After the second stage of the launches, members of the South Korean National Security Council expressed a serious concern that the launches could have a negative impact on the peace-making efforts on the Korean peninsula. The participants of the meeting emphasized the need for continuing the diplomatic efforts for overcoming the deadlock in the negotiations on the denuclearization of North Korea.

At the same time, the Minister of Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo, speaking at the forum organized by the State Korean Institute for Defense Research said that the military are ready to resist a possible threat from the North. Jeong confirmed the strong alliance between South Korea and the US, noting that joint exercise between the two countries will take place in the regular fashion, despite its smaller scale. Moreover, if North Korea shows serious provocations again, it will be regarded as an enemy state again. He added that the South Korean military “have all means necessary for responding to this threat.”

On August 1, the opposition Liberty Korea Party presented a draft resolution condemning the missile tests and launches carried out by Pyongyang to the National Assembly. 16 people, including the parliamentary floor leader of the Liberty Korea Party Na Kyung-won, the member of the Parliamentary Committee for Defense Issues Pek Syn Ju and others signed the document. The draft resolution emphasizes that North Korea violated the UNSC resolutions. Besides, by carrying out the missile tests, Pyongyang seeks to increase its ballistic missile potential, which aggravates the situation in the region.

On August 1, the UNSC, following the request of the UK, France and Germany, held a closed meeting criticized by North Korea even despite the absence of final accusatory statements. “The Security Council is trying to call into question the launches with the use of ballistic equipment per se, rather than the range of the launched shell, it is equal to our refusing the right to self-defense completely. The thoughtless words and behavior of the UK, France and Germany will not contain the tension on the Korean peninsula, but, on the contrary, will work as a catalyst to make things worse,” the Kangnam University publication read.

However, John R. Bolton, National Security Advisor of the US, said in his interview with Fox Business that missile launch of North Korea was not a violation of the promises to observe the moratorium on ICBM launches. Such position differs from Bolton’s reaction to the launches which took place in May when he said that the North violated the UNSC resolutions.

Donald Trump also explained that North Korea had launched short-range missiles, which are standard weapons in the arsenal of many countries. “I think that this situation is entirely under control,” the president added and specified that launches did not violate his arrangements with Kim Jong-un.

In the morning of August 2, the South Korean Presidential Administration hosted an emergency meeting of the power block ministers under the chairmanship of Eun-Young Jeong, however the National Security Council did not convene this time.
By the third launches, the position of the US President began to change. Donald Trump recognized that tests could constitute a violation of the UN resolutions. “There can be a violation of the UN resolutions, but the chairman Kim would not want to disappoint me.” On the other hand, Trump once again emphasized that “there was no discussion of short-range missiles when we shook hands.”

The expert Stephan Haggard told NK News that, obviously following the instructions of the US President, his whole team is showing a reserved stance on the recent tests. Besides, he noted that the launches had a purely technical aspect as well. “The Iskander type missile is a sophisticated weapon and, as any new system, it has to be tested.”

As for the development in the situation, it is evident that Pyongyang is not going to remain inconspicuous and silent, while joint exercises are conducted. Demonstrations of power will continue until the exercises are over, but it does not mean that North Koreans are not interested in negotiations with the US any more. On the contrary, the choice of a short-range missile is a sign that Pyongyang is still ready to maintain the status quo.

Therefore, it is necessary to treat the recent messages about a confidential meeting between the US and North Korean officials in DMZ seriously. During this meeting, the North Korean representative allegedly told his American counterparts that the negotiations will soon resume at the operating level.

Of course, it will not happen while the joint exercises are held, but it will happen soon enough.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, Leading Research Fellow at the Centre for Korean Studies of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.