Korean Peninsula’s Missile Race Continues in Earnest

On September 1, 2021, the ROK tested (incidentally, earlier than North Korea) a ballistic missile from a submarine, and on September 12, North Korea launched a new cruise missile with a range of 1500 km, which has already stirred up the region.

Since South Korean missile news doesn’t usually make the front pages, everyone stigmatized North Korea first.

However, the real “missile feast” was September 15, on which BOTH sides made their mark. North Korea launched two ballistic missiles towards the Sea of Japan. Government sources at South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that the tested missiles appear to be an upgraded version of the KN-23 Iskander ballistic missile “Kimskander,” as the military detected a so-called pull-up maneuver during their flight. But if rumors are to be believed, Japan and South Korea have spent hours figuring out the apogee and coordinates of the DPRK’s missile landing point. This could mean that the new missile is better suited to countering ROK air defenses.

Moreover, when the Korean Central News Agency wrote in detail about the launch on September 16, it turned out that “Pak Jong Chon, member of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Workers’ Party of Korea, commanded the exercise of the railroad-mobile missile regiment”. Yes, the DPRK now has its own “atomic train” or, more appropriately called, rail-based ICBM.

According to the KCNA, the launch had the following objectives: “to confirm the practicality of a rail-based ICBM, adopted for the first time for combat; to suddenly test the combat readiness of the new regiment and its ability to carry out firing missions; to practice combat procedures.” All this was worked out successfully, after which Pak Jong
Chon discussed with the relevant personnel “how to accumulate the regiment’s combat experience in the near future and form a railroad-mobile missile brigade on its basis.” Photos published by North Korean media confirm that the missiles were indeed launched from a train and not from a vehicle-borne launcher. And it is worth explaining that the arrival of rail-based ICBM, especially at the brigade level, VERY seriously increases the country’s combat capabilities. First, instead of stationary launch points that can be identified and covered by a preemptive strike, an atomic train can fire a missile from any minimally prepared site on the tracks and hide in a tunnel before or after doing so. Second, the missile containers are no different than any other containers, making it difficult to detect signs of a missile launch from reconnaissance satellites. It does not, of course, completely guarantee an unobstructed launch, but neutralizing this threat requires much greater forces and resources.

The USA, familiar with the “atomic train” from its Soviet counterparts (which carried short-range missiles, not ICBMs), reacted quickly. US State Department spokesperson Ned Price pointed out that the ballistic missile test “violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions and poses a threat to DPRK’s neighbors and other members of the global community. ”Pyongyang remains unresponsive to US offers of talks, but the USA remains willing to engage with North Korea.”

In South Korea, a successful test of a new submarine ballistic missile was held at the test center in South Chungcheong Province on September 15 in the presence of President Moon Jae-in.

Thus, as the author has written, the ROK has become the seventh country in the world to possess SLBMs of its own production, after the US, Russia, the UK, France, India, and China. North Korea claims to have developed a domestic SLB, but the South Korean military believes North Korea launched ballistic missiles from a floating launching barge, not a submarine.

On the same day, September 15, the South Korean Agency for Defense Development unveiled a supersonic cruise missile to improve its maritime defense capabilities. “With improved speed, the new missile will make it very difficult for enemy warships to respond, leading to the missile’s higher survivability and destructive power.” The President was briefed on progress in developing two other strategic weapons, a supersonic cruise missile and a powerful ballistic missile with a significantly increased warhead mass. In addition, South Korea was able to conduct a long-range air-to-ground missile separation test for use with the next-generation KF-21 fighter, which it is developing using its own technology.

A day later, on September 16, the Ministry of Defense announced South Korea plans to develop and launch a domestic solid-propellant space missile by 2024: “the basic technology required for a solid-propellant space missile has been secured.”

According to Park Kyung-mee, the Blue House spokesperson, Moon Jae-in said following the test launch: “The successful testing of the SLBM and some other missiles on the day has demonstrated that South Korea has “sufficient deterrent” to cope at any time with North Korean provocation.”

The North responded to Moon’s remark immediately through Kim Yo-jong: “If a slip of the tongue reportedly made by the ‘president’ is true, it is too stupid one to be fit for the ‘president of a state’... We express very great regret over his thoughtless utterance of the word ‘provocation,’ which might be fitting for hack journalists.” “We are not aiming to make ‘provocation’ against somebody at a certain time as presumed by South Korea. What we did is part of normal and self-defensive action to carry out the key task for the first year of the five-year plan for the development of defense science and weapon system to implement the decisions made at our Party Congress. And if Seoul continues to pursue double standards, “it will naturally result in a corresponding action and then the North-South relations will end up in a total deadlock”.

However, Seoul pointed out that North Korean media targeting domestic audiences failed to publish this text. Previously, all statements critical of Seoul and Washington were invariably reprinted by all major North Korean publications and broadcast on radio and television.

What now? Conservatives continue the hysteria, linking missile launches and rumors of a reactivated Yongbyon nuclear complex. And what Seoul has done is not enough for them: “The Ministry of National Defense launched three types of missiles, including SLBMs, shortly after North Korea’s ballistic missile launch. But the public has serious doubts about the government’s ability to deal with threats from North Korea. We hope that the government will not disappoint the public once again when it comes to vital national security issues.”

The UN Security Council seems set to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the situation after the launch of North
Korean missiles at the request of France and Estonia. The meeting, however, will be “informal” and behind closed doors, so it is unclear whether there will be a formal condemnatory statement or a new resolution.

On the other hand, some international relations experts have started saying that this arms race was expected in the light of recent events. They said US President Joe Biden’s strategy on North Korea to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table has been ineffective. As Eric Gomez, Director of Defense Policy Studies, Cato Institute, noted, “The Biden administration’s approach seeking a middle path between the Trump administration’s dangerous maximum pressure campaign of 2017 and the subsequent summit pageantry is unlikely to stop North Korea’s programs. The longer the United States waits to get serious at the negotiating table, the more technical thresholds and limitations Kim Jong-un will breakthrough, leaving the United States in an ultimately worse-off position.”

The author would like to conclude with a comment of the Russian Foreign Ministry, hoping that this will be the case:

“We are closely following developments on the Korean peninsula. There is no reasonable alternative to the political and diplomatic way of resolving the region’s problems. In this context, we call on all partners to exercise restraint and to demonstrate in practice their willingness to resume dialogue in line with previous agreements and commitments. We will continue to encourage the countries involved to implement the Russia-China roadmap for a Korean settlement, as well as the provisions of the action plan drawn up by Russia and China in 2019.”

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