The previous publication on the North Korean missile launches ended on the description of the events that took place on January 14, 2022. The missiles were fired after the North warned of a “stronger reaction” in response to newly imposed US sanctions on six North Korean citizens involved in weapons of mass destruction programs as well as one Russian national and a Russian firm involved in the development of North Korean WMDs and ballistic missiles.

As is often the case in the DPRK, however, the rapidly unfolding events are taking an interesting turn. On January 17, “a test-fire for evaluating tactical guided missiles was carried out according to the plan of the institutions concerned, including the Academy of Defense Science and the Second Economic Commission.” Photos published by the North Korean media allowed experts to determine that the DPRK fired KN-24 missiles, a North Korean version of the US army tactical missile system (ATACMS).

South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said that the latest tests were intended to boost North Korean military’s capability to launch several missiles in a row with high precision. The author, meanwhile, took note of a line in a KCNA report
saying that the test-fire was aimed “to selectively evaluate tactical guided missiles being produced and deployed and to verify the accuracy of the weapon system.” This means that North Korea test-fired not one-of-a-kind experimental weapons, but assets that are being massively deployed and fielded.

At first, the response to this development was generic. The US State Department condemned the launch saying that it violates multiple UN Security Council resolutions and poses a threat to neighboring countries and the international community. Nonetheless Washington is still committed to a diplomatic approach and calls on Pyongyang to engage in dialogue. National Security Council (NSC) under the President of South Korea expressed “deep concern” about the launch. NSC members pointed out the need to intensify efforts to resume dialogue with Pyongyang in order to prevent further escalation on the Korean peninsula. Main opposition presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol vowed to secure a preemptive strike capability, while conservative media lambasted Moon Jae-in for not calling the North’s actions a “provocation”.

Some Western experts believed that the DPRK “is doubling down on the country’s nuclear arms buildup, rather than seeking more concessions before re-engaging in nuclear negotiations,” while some think that it is just checking its missile capabilities as the DPRK will not take the first step towards dialogue and is waiting for the US to “abandon its hostile policies”. Moreover, the article said that “Biden is overwhelmed with domestic problems, the Ukraine and the Iran nuclear issue... There does not appear much interest at the moment for what is seen as high-risk, low-reward dealings with North Korea.”

On January 19, 2021, the United States, the UK, France, Ireland, Mexico and Albania called for a UN Security Council meeting to discuss North Korean missile launches, with the US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, openly saying that the purpose here is to push through a new UN Security Council sanctions resolution. This backlash was entirely different in nature, and it induced a swift response from Pyongyang. The same day saw a Politburo meeting of WPK Central Committee where an analytical report regarding the situation on the Korean peninsula was presented. During the meeting “further direction of response to the US” was discussed, which “had been wrongfully nibbling the lawful use by our state of our sovereign rights and making indiscreet moves.” It was also mentioned that as the DPRK adhered to the moratorium, the US was conducting hundreds of joint military exercises and strategic weapons tests, imported to South Korea state-of-the-art offensive weapons and “committed the rash act of adopting unilateral sanctions for over 20 times.” As a result, the Politburo pointed out that it was time to act and make “more thorough preparation for a long-term confrontation with the US imperialists”. “The Politburo meeting reconfirmed the tasks of defense policy to strengthen and develop without delay more powerful physical means to definitely overpower the daily intensifying hostile moves of the United States,” KCNA said.

Almost all experts arrived at the conclusion that the North referred to a self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests that Pyongyang upheld since late 2017. During the 2019 Hanoi summit North Korea seemingly proposed to put this verbal commitment on paper and convert it into a legally binding document, but since the meeting at the last moment went downhill, such an agreement was never reached. Therefore, if the North is accused of violating the moratorium, one should bear in mind that it being in place was a goodwill gesture from Pyongyang, and lambasting it as a violator of international law does not make any sense.

For now, three points are being discussed: when the North will start making concrete steps, why Pyongyang needs all this, and what repercussions will it face.

As far as the first point is concerned, a military parade to celebrate Kim Jong-il anniversary on February 16, 2022 is expected, with the preparations already underway. Many believe that during the parade the North will showcase new intermediate-range missiles and ICBMs, both soon to be test-fired.

The probable menu does not really change: a test launch featuring another hypersonic missile that can reach Guam or Alaska, a solid-propellant ICBM, a military satellite. All this would be scheduled either on Kim Jong Il’s birthday (February 16), or Kim Il Sung’s birthday (April 15) or the date of US-South Korea joint military exercises that will take place in March or April.

As for the second point, some anti-North “experts” have repeated familiar mantras saying something about North Koreans “begging for rice.” They claim that North Korean agricultural sector lies in tatters, and the issue of reforming it was even brought up during the last plenum as the country arguably stands on the brink of famine, a fact that induces the North to solicit attention in order to get humanitarian aid. The author would like to solely note that such explanations are shopworn, and he does not recall if such policies have ever been rewarded.
Harry Kazianis, senior director of Korean Studies at the Center for the National Interest, said that the North Korean leader realized that Washington did not care about Pyongyang as long as it does not pose a threat to the US mainland by deploying nuclear missiles. Unless North Korea begins testing them again, it will never rise to the status of something that Joe Biden will use political capital to tackle. However, if Kim does test an ICBM or nuclear weapon, that would violate Washington’s unofficial red line that such tests mean more pressure on the DPRK.

It is possible that the North got sick of waiting for Washington to finally drop its hostile policy and decided to either stir the US into action, hinting that the pause in the peninsula’s nuclear agenda would not last forever since “it takes two to tango,” after all.

Besides, Pyongyang now knows a thing or two about Washington’s and, especially, Seoul’s attitude, namely that they take notice of the North’s demands only when they hear it pounding the table for the second time. For instance, the problem with anti-North Korean leaflets was solved only after the DPRK had blown up the liaison office in Kaesong, and other moves that gave an impression that Pyongyang had enough of it.

It is quite possible that local engineers have come up with a lot of interesting and powerful devices that should be put to the test.

As for the third point, the question about China’s reaction to the termination of the moratorium now looms the largest. On the one hand, there are signs that railway communication between China and the DPRK has been reopened with a couple of freight trains making trips between the two countries. Moreover, an attempt to slap new sanctions failed. When Linda Thomas-Greenfield proposed to extend the US unilateral sanctions to the entire world, China and Russia vetoed the motion.

On the other hand, from February 6 to 20 China will host Olympics, an event of paramount importance for the country. The North does not send its delegation, but has voiced support for China. At the same time, the author recalls that one of the reasons behind the cooling in relations between the two countries in 2017 – 2018 was the DPRK’s decision to launch one of its “fireworks” on the eve of a CPC congress, a show of disrespect, as some Chinese pundits contended.

Besides, the breach of moratorium and certainly nuclear and missile tests on the eve of the presidential election in South Korea may influence its outcome, and strengthen the conservatives’ positions. This would lead to a drastic cooling of inter-Korea relations and reduce to nothing all that had been achieved during the “Olympic thaw.” Especially considering that Yoon Seok-yeo has already embraced tough rhetoric, saying that the above-mentioned North Korean missiles could be countered not by a ballistic missile defense system, but by a pre-emptive strike, and in a critical situation the South may think about returning the US nuclear weapons to the peninsula. Responding to the statement of Politburo of the WPC Central Committee, Yoon Seok-yeo said that the peace process had utterly failed since Moon’s submissive policy allowed Pyongyang to enhance its nuclear and missile capability.

At the same time, Lee Jae-myung, a member of the ruling Democratic party, expressed a deep concern and urged “the government to be clear and firm so that North Korea does not miscalculate the situation and make the wrong move... At the same time, make continued efforts for dialogue for the easing of tensions and denuclearization.” Lee described the recent series of missile tests as provocations, calling on the United States, North Korea and other concerned parties to immediately restart denuclearization talks and come up with practical and mutually acceptable solutions. The stance has definitely somewhat toughened up.

Of course, if the moratorium is done for, this would be unfortunate for the regional security and Russian interests since Moscow is committed to maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula. The end of the moratorium, political uncertainty in the run-up to South Korean 2022 presidential election, rising tensions between China and the US — all those are alarming signs, but the author would not like to make pessimistic projections, since it is easier to just follow the developments.

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