January 2022 has been rather busy in terms of missile launches by the DPRK, and following the meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea held on January 20, the month became even more eventful after they had hinted at the possible discontinuation of the unilateral moratorium.

On January 25, the DPRK National Defense Academy “conducted a test launch of long-range cruise missiles in order to update their system.” Note that cruise missile launches do not violate UN Security Council resolutions. It is claimed that the missile flew for more than 2 hours (9,137 seconds) and covered about 1,800 km along complex trajectories, that it has a slightly different control and guidance system (including on the final flight section), and this type of missile was shown at the Self-Defense 2021 exhibition.

On January 27, a “test launch of tactical guided surface-to-ground missiles took place to confirm the power of their warhead explosion. Two launched tactical guided missiles hit their island target with high accuracy, as a result of which it was confirmed that the power of a conventional warhead meets the design requirements.”

According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Korea, the missiles flew about 190 km, thereby reaching a maximum height of 20 km. Standard KN-23s were fired, but an unusual launcher with the number “332” was used for this missile. This five-axle vehicle had already been exhibited at the January 2021 parade, and then at the March 2021 tests of a larger and heavier missile.

On January 30, a control and verification launch of a medium- and long-range ground-to-ground Hwasong-12 ballistic missile took place. The launch site is Chagando Province, where hypersonic missiles were launched on January 5 and...
The flight range was only 800 km, but the altitude reached 2,000. Such a hinged trajectory is used “taking into account the safety of surrounding countries” so that the missile does not fall into foreign waters and if it is launched using not a hinged but a usual trajectory, then it covers 3,700-4,500 km, which means medium range. These characteristics are comparable to the parameters of the missile launched by the DPRK in May 2017 (range 787 km, altitude 2,000 km), which suggests to experts that the missile was equipped with a new solid-fuel power plant, and the launch is an intermediate stage on the way to creating a solid-fuel ICBM.

KCNA reported that the launch “was aimed at a selective assessment of the missile being produced and deployed and checking the overall accuracy of the weapon system”, and this point is very important. Again, they are not talking about an experimental sample but about a missile in service and “randomly taken from a warehouse.” This, we note, is the majority of the annual launches of ICBMs in Russia and the United States.

The reaction to the first launches was foreseeable, although the launch of a medium-range ballistic missile can be responded to in two ways. One can either quote (like the author of this article) what the DPRK itself said about the type of missile, or recalculate the distance based on the normal trajectory (and then use this as an excuse for a new round of pressure or compromise), or state that the medium range starts from 1,000 km, and since the missile only covered 800 km, then there has been no violation.

ROK President Moon Jae-in choose the second option and stated that North Korea has only “inched closer to scrapping its self-imposed moratorium on testing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).” Moon said the latest launch was “a challenge to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, and diplomatic efforts by the international community, as well as an act that violates the UN Security Council resolution” and called on North Korea to stop creating tension and respond to international calls for dialogue.

The US Indo-Pacific Command condemned the launch and called on the North to refrain from “further destabilizing actions”. An anonymous representative of the US State Department declared that “like the DPRK’s recent series of ballistic missile tests, this launch is a clear violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, and demonstrates the threat the DPRK’s unlawful weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs pose to the DPRK’s neighbors and the region as a whole.”

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that in light of North Korea’s recent missile launches, the United States is ready to sit down at the negotiating table with Pyongyang without preconditions, while simultaneously building up its military potential in the region to protect itself and its allies.

Thus, “Kim did what he had promised,” and the author believes that the moratorium period is over. Although Kim Jong-un announced in December 2019 that the DPRK no longer considers itself bound by its unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests and ICBM launches, the January decision of the Politburo brought this statement to the stage of practical implementation. But still, why now?

Military expert Vladimir Khrustalev wonders what is the purpose of a unilateral refusal to develop one’s combat potential if opponents do not refrain from developing their offensive and defensive systems. From this point of view, the moratorium would have ended sooner or later, especially after the failure to transform it into a legally binding document at the Hanoi summit. In addition, without raising the stakes and in the absence of the contact that Trump and Kim have developed, negotiations “anywhere and at any time” cannot go beyond the requirement “first disarm, and then we will think about it.” Until the US offers the North something really valuable, the pause will continue.

On the website asiarisk.org, they believe that the strategic pause suits the United States more than the DPRK, since sanctions and self-isolation due to the coronavirus are crippling the North Korean economy, and Washington has the opportunity to take care of matters that the United States considers more important. That is why Pyongyang first waited for Biden to define his policy towards the DPRK, and then drew conclusions that it was time to raise the stakes.

Russian Korean scholar Aleksandr Zhebin draws attention to another issue. If, until recently, the Biden administration only extended the sanctions imposed by its predecessors, at the end of 2021 it made for the first time public its own sanctions against a number of legal entities and individuals of the DPRK, and imposed secondary sanctions against companies and organizations of several countries that allegedly cooperated with Pyongyang, including entities from Russia. Moreover, at the end of 2021, the United States vetoed a Russian-Chinese UN Security Council resolution providing for the partial lifting or easing of sanctions that negatively affect the living conditions and standard of living of the DPRK population (a ban on Pyongyang’s export of statues, seafood and
textiles, as well as restrictions on the import of petroleum products), and on January 9, 2022, Washington tried to push through a decision in the UN Security Council extending its own unilateral measures to the entire international community. China and Russia rejected the initiative.

The author would add that on January 26 and 27, access to North Korean Internet resources, such as the sites of KCNA, Nodong Sinmun, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other structures, was actually blocked. It is assumed that this resulted from a large-scale DDoS attack on the DPRK Internet segment and networks but it has not been officially confirmed. On January 30 and 31, the attack resumed but was less efficient.

Pyongyang has however always stated that it will respond toughly to tough measures and show kindness in exchange to kind deeds.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.