



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 48/2024

12 November 2024

Key Takeaways from North Korea's Latest ICBM Test

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Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-01/north-korea-releases-hwasong19-missile-launch-images/104551852>



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Keywords: North Korea, Hwasong-19, ICBM, the US

The year 2024 has been an eventful one for the Korean Peninsula. The relations between North and South Korea hit rock bottom; North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, categorically stated that "he would no longer seek reconciliation and reunification with South Korea."¹ North Korea also tested its ballistic missiles of various categories at least 12 times. The latest test, which occurred² on October 30, 2024, has now revealed North Korea's increasing capabilities in the domain of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM).

What was the Test about?

On October 30, 2024, it was reported that North Korea had launched a new ICBM. Officials in South Korea and Japan confirmed the test. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was present during the test. The official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that "The test-fire is an appropriate military action that fully meets the purpose of informing the rivals, who have intentionally escalated the regional situation and posed a threat to the security of our Republic recently, of our counteraction will, and it also constitutes an indispensable process in the course of constantly developing our state's strategic attack forces."³ This, however, was not the first ICBM test conducted by North Korea, but a close analysis reveals something new about this test regarding its flight time and data on the re-entry capabilities of a long-range warhead.

According to Japan's Defence Minister, the North Korean missile, which went down about 300km west of Japan's Okushiri Island, had the longest flying time of 86 minutes. The missile covered approximately 1,000 km with a maximum altitude of more than 7,000 km. In comparison, the previous ICBM test, a solid-fueled Hwasong-18 missile conducted by North Korea in July 2023, recorded a flight time of 74 minutes.⁴ A longer fly time in a "lofted trajectory" would help North Korea gather data on challenges a long-range warhead faces when it re-enters the Earth's atmosphere. When an ICBM re-enters the Earth's atmosphere, it experiences intense heat, requiring structural material to overcome the thermal challenge, particularly when receiving signals for communications and targeting. This brings us to the question of what new missile North Korea tested on October 30, 2024. According to the KCNA, this was the first-ever test of Hwasong-19 ICBM.⁵

The following table illustrates North Korea's current ICBM capabilities:

Missile Name	Basing	Range	Payload Capacity	Year Entered in Service
Hwasong-13	Road-mobile/ Underground Based	12000 km	Unknown	In Development
Hwasong-14	Road-mobile/ Underground Based	10,000 km	Unknown	In Development
Hwasong-15	Road-mobile	12000 km (at least)	1000 kg	In Development
Hwasong-17	Road-mobile	10,000 km (at least)	2000 kg (at least)	2020
Hwasong-18	Road-mobile	5000 km (at least)	Unknown	2023

The table has been created by the author based on data from <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/>. Accessed on November 1, 2024.

The Hwasong-19 will be a road-mobile, and according to one report, the missile will be deployed alongside the Hwasong-18.⁶

Why the Test?

The test has multiple underlying reasons, both political and strategic. North Korea is building a more resilient land and sea-based deterrent capability. In 2021, Kim Jong-un referred to vital strategic goals for enhancing North Korea's nuclear weapon programme. Accordingly, Kim stated several goals, which included:

1. Producing super-sized nuclear warheads
2. Producing smaller and lighter nuclear weapons for tactical uses
3. Improving precision strike and range capabilities
4. Introducing hypersonic gliding flight warheads
5. Developing solid-fuel engine-propelled intercontinental, underwater, and ground ballistic rockets
6. Introducing a nuclear-powered submarine and an underwater-launch nuclear strategic weapon.⁷

The Hwasong-19 test is a direct outcome of Kim's 2021 speech and mainly fulfills the agenda of having more than one solid-fuel engine-propelled ICBM. More importantly, as Ankit Panda has explained, the "missile continues to underwrite the growing credibility of North Korea's strategic deterrent capabilities."⁸

On the political front, it was conducted right before the November 5, 2024, US presidential election. It seems that North Korea wanted to test the most critical weapon systems before the new administration took over in the US. While it may or may not influence how the new President of the United States deals with North Korea, the test might provide a political edge for North Korea if and when dialogue with the US restarts. Other reasons might pertain to deflecting attention from a statement by South Korea's military agency, which said, "North Korea has likely completed preparations for its seventh nuclear test."⁹ The political motivations might also involve North Korea's dispatch of troops to Russia to participate in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the potential for backlash from the West.¹⁰

The 2022 Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces also reflects why North Korea is building such huge ICBMs. According to the 2022 Policy Number 9, the DPRK "shall constantly assess outside nuclear threats and the change in the posture of international nuclear forces and correspondingly upgrade and beef up its nuclear forces in a qualitative and quantitative way in response to it."¹¹ North Korea has been taking stock of what is happening in the name of extended deterrence commitment between the US and South Korea. The third meeting of the 'Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)'¹² and the fifth meeting of the 'Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG)'¹³ have been referred to by North Korea as a "dangerous war scenario."¹⁴ In response to the worsening situation, South Korea has also taken measures such as the "Kill Chain" plan, which seeks to pursue a strategy of conventional counterforce "focused on assertive strikes... removing the North's senior leadership."¹⁵

Conclusion

The Hwasong-19 test points to the worsening situation in the Korean Peninsula. However, North Korea would require more tests of its newest ICBM to ascertain that it can safely carry nuclear warheads as the missile re-enters Earth's atmosphere. More importantly, a solid-fueled road-mobile missile would help Pyongyang disperse the missile system quickly and complicate adversary strikes. As North Korea seeks to test and eventually deploy ballistic missiles of all categories, a growing risk of escalation requires all the parties involved to start an unconditional dialogue, paving the way for more concrete mutual trust-building measures in the near future.

NOTES:

¹ "Kim Jong Un tells army to 'annihilate' South Korea, US if provoked," *Al Jazeera*, January 1, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/1/kim-jong-un-tells-army-to-annihilate-south-korea-us-if-provoked>. Accessed on November 2, 2024.

² "North Korea confirms launch of ICBM in longest-ever ballistic missile test," *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/30/north-korea-launches-ballistic-missile-towards-the-sea-south-korea-says>. Accessed on November 2, 2024.

³ "ICBM test-fire conducted in DPRK," *KCNA Watch*, October 31, 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1730365407-293744672/icbm-test-fire-conducted-in-dprk/>. Accessed on November 2, 2024.

⁴ Jesse Johnson, "North Korea fires off ICBM-class missile ahead of Kishida-Yoon meeting," *The Japan Times*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/07/12/national/north-korea-missile-launch-july-12/>. Accessed on November 2, 2024.

⁵ "Press Statement of Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry," *KCNA Watch*, November 2, 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1730547119-360845338/press-statement-of-spokesperson-for-dprk-foreign-ministry/>. Accessed on November 3, 2024.

⁶ "North Korea releases images of Hwasong-19 missile launch," *ABC News*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-01/north-korea-releases-hwasong19-missile-launch-images/104551852>. Accessed on November 3, 2024.

⁷ "On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK," *KCNA Watch*, January 9, 2021, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1610155111-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk/>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

⁸ "North Korea releases images of Hwasong-19 missile launch," *ABC News*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-01/north-korea-releases-hwasong19-missile-launch-images/104551852>. Accessed on November 3, 2024.

⁹ Kim Tong-Hyung, "South Korean military says the North appears poised to conduct nuclear and ICBM tests," *ABC News*, October 30, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/south-korean-military-north-appears-poised-conduct-nuclear-115294020>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹⁰ "North Korea confirms launch of ICBM in longest-ever ballistic missile test," *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/30/north-korea-launches-ballistic-missile-towards-the-sea-south-korea-says>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹¹ "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated," *KCNA Watch*, September 9, 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated/>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹² The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) was established in 2023 to implement the Washington Declaration of 2023 between the US and South Korea. The NCG primarily seek to strengthen extended deterrence, discuss nuclear and strategic planning, and manage threats posed by the DPRK. For more details see - US Department of Defence, "Joint Press Statement on the 3rd Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) Meeting," June 10, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3801107/joint-press-statement-on-the-3rd-nuclear-consultative-group-ncg-meeting/>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹³ The EDSCG is a key annual forum for the US-South Korea Alliance to discuss and coordinate security strategy and policy issues affecting the Korean Peninsula and broader Indo-Pacific. In the meeting, participants shared assessments of the DPRK's dangerous and irresponsible behaviour, including its ongoing missile launches and continued pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programmes in violation of the relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. For more details see - US Department of Defence, "United States of America-Republic of Korea Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group," September 4, 2024,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/3894971/united-states-of-america-republic-of-korea-extended-deterrence-strategy-and-con/>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹⁴ "Press Statement of Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry," *KCNA Watch*, November 2, 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1730547119-360845338/press-statement-of-spokesperson-for-dprk-foreign-ministry/>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

¹⁵ Park Chan-Kyong, "South Korea's risky 'Kill Chain' plans to counter North Korea nuclear threat may raise eyebrows in China," *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3186746/south-koreas-risky-kill-chain-plans-counter-north-korea-nuclear>. Accessed on November 4, 2024.

