

What is North Korea Signaling with its March Missile Tests?

blog.keia.org/2020/03/north-korea-signaling-march-missile-tests/

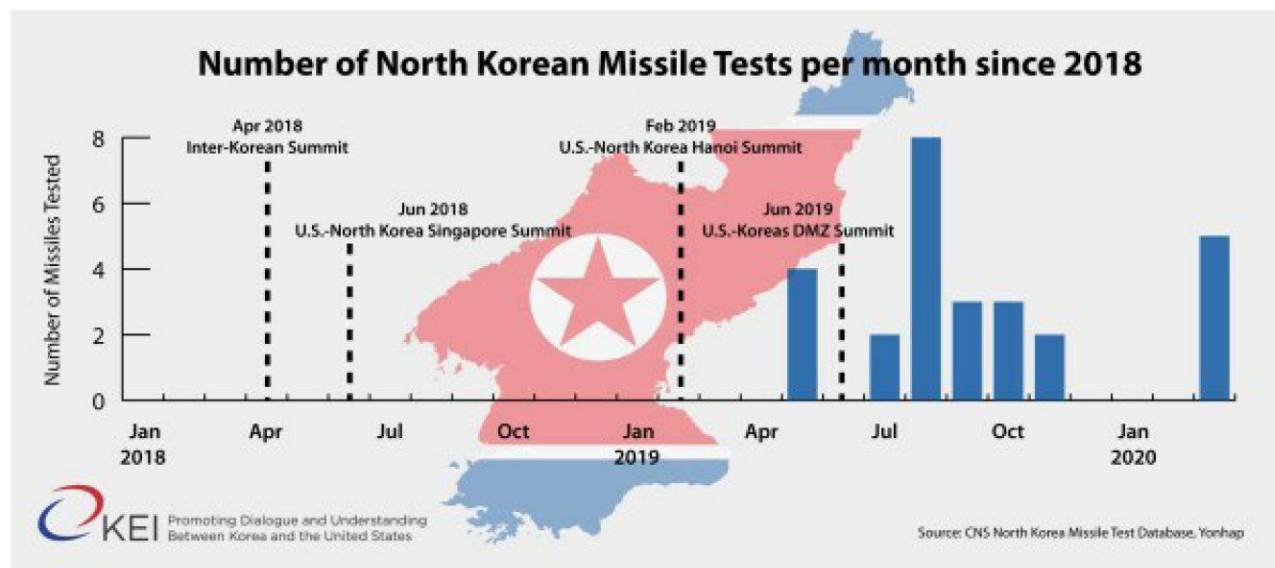
March 18,
2020



By Jun Kim

Shortly after sunrise on March 9th, 2020, North Korea launched three short-range missiles from its eastern coast, which flew approximately 200 kilometers (125 miles) before landing into the East Sea. The test was the second launch conducted by North Korea in a week following a test on March 2nd of two similar projectiles. The recent tests end North Korea's three-month long break from testing following a half-year period of monthly missile tests.

While recent testing is concerning, none of the missiles tested in 2019 and so far in 2020 have included intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). Previous ICBM tests conducted by North Korea in 2017 demonstrated the regime's capability of targeting American territory.



It is not clear whether North Korea uses its missile testing for political signaling or whether it's testing is for technical purposes. Caution should be used in reading between the lines of North Korea's behavior. However, the long break in missile testing from the end of 2017 to May 2019 may be related to Kim Jong-un's 2018 diplomatic initiatives and to the revival of inter-Korean peace talks. Kim's sudden willingness to engage in dialogue led to summit meetings with Moon Jae-in, Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin. Those meetings sparked hope of a potential breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and North Korea's denuclearization.

The resumption of short-range missile testing starting in 2019 and continuing into 2020 likely demonstrates the end of this “honeymoon” period in the peninsula peace process following the no-deal conclusion to the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019 and the breakdown in talks in the year since then. Despite a brief meeting between Trump, Moon, and Kim at the DMZ last June, North Korea has shifted back to its status quo of regular weapons testing, though with the notable absence of nuclear and ICBM testing. The recent missile tests may demonstrate that North Korea will continue its pattern of regular testing in 2020.

The timing of the two March missile tests is curious in light of the COVID-19 crisis currently gripping much of the world. While North Korean officials have denied that there are any cases in their country, [Daily NK](#) reported last week that there have been nearly 200 COVID-19 related deaths in North Korea with thousands of soldiers in quarantine, and U.S. Forces Korea commander Robert Abrams stated that the Pentagon is “[fairly certain](#)” that the country is grappling with the crisis. The missile tests could be a projection of national strength to counter reports of North Korea’s problems in containing the virus. North Korea state media [reported](#) that Kim Jong-un personally attended the latest missile launch, which may be a signal to both domestic and international audiences that the North Korean leader is still firmly in control of his country despite the virus’s outbreak.

Juni Kim is the Senior Manager for Operations and Technology at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). The views expressed here are the author’s alone. Graphics by Juni Kim.

Photo from Prachatai’s photostream on flickr Creative Commons.

© 2007-2011 Korea Economic Institute | All Rights Reserved.

Web Design by Blue Water Media