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# KOREAN PENINSULA RISK ASSESSMENT, MARCH 2021



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# **KOREAN PENINSULA RISK ASSESSMENT, MARCH 2021**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Even though the “North Korea policy review” by the new Biden administration has reportedly yet to be concluded,<sup>1</sup> the month of March 2021 marked the first significant public articulation of positions and signalling by the United States (US) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) vis-à-vis each other. It has quickly become clear that mutual threat perceptions and diverging understandings of past agreements will continue to make it challenging for the two parties to advance in normalizing relations following the breakdown of talks in Hanoi in 2019.

From 8 to 18 March 2021, the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK) carried out joint military exercises in a downscaled form. Nevertheless, the DPRK issued statements reiterating its long standing view that the joint military exercises are threatening and illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> It also launched two cruise missiles and two ballistic missiles on 21 and 25 March 2021, respectively.

Both the US and the ROK have downplayed the significance of these activities by the DPRK. Nonetheless, the risk of further deterioration in relations and escalation of tensions remains substantial, particularly given the historically tenuous period following a change in US administration.<sup>3</sup> Both countries have yet to complete their (re)calibration of relevant key policies, further increasing the risk of misunderstandings as a result of over a year without substantive engagement<sup>4</sup>. This risk is further exacerbated by the DPRK’s recent showcasing of new ballistic missiles at a recent military parade on 14 January 2021, as well as the announcement of its intention to continuously bolster national defence capabilities and strengthen nuclear deterrence against the US.<sup>5</sup>

This report provides a risk assessment related to these developments in March 2021 and highlights key factors that could escalate tensions in the DPRK-US and DPRK-ROK relationships in the near term.

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<sup>1</sup> Humeyra Pamuk and Hyonhee Shin, *Blinken says U.S. weighs pressure, diplomacy on North Korea over denuclearisation and rights abuses*, Reuters, 18 March 2021; *Joint Statement of the 2021 Republic of Korea – United States Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”)*, U.S. Department of State, 18 March 2021

<sup>2</sup> Kim Dong-yeob, *한미 연합군사훈련과 북한의 인식* [Joint ROK-U.S. Military Drills and North Korean Response], *Review of North Korean Studies* [현대북한연구] 19(2): 83-112, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Victor Cha, *North Korean Provocations Likely Around U.S. Presidential Election*, CSIS Beyond Parallel, 23 September 2020

<sup>4</sup> Steve Holland, *White House says U.S. has reached out to North Korea, received no response*, Reuters, 15 March 2021

<sup>5</sup> Katsuhisa Furukawa, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea (1)*, Open Nuclear Network, 1 February 2021

## II. TIMELINE

<b>8-18 March</b>	US-ROK Joint Military Exercises, 2021-1 Combined Command Post Training
<b>12 March</b>	China, Russia, DPRK and other countries from the “Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations” seek support for a coalition to push back against the use or threat of force and unilateral sanctions
<b>16 March</b>	Kim Yo Jong statement criticizing the ongoing US-ROK military exercises
<b>16-17 March</b>	[Tokyo, Japan] US Secretary of State Blinken and US Secretary of Defense Austin attend the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (“2+2”) meeting hosted by Japan’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi and Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi
<b>17-18 March</b>	[Seoul, ROK] US Secretary Blinken and US Secretary Austin attend a US-ROK Foreign and Defense Ministerial (“2+2”) meeting hosted by ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and ROK Minister of Defense Suh Wook
<b>18 March</b>	Choe Son Hui statement criticizing “misguided US attempts” to engage without demonstrating intent to withdraw its “hostile policy”
<b>18-19 March</b>	[Anchorage, Alaska] US Secretary Blinken meets with People’s Republic of China (PRC) government officials
<b>19 March</b>	DPRK MFA statement criticizing Malaysia for “succumbing to US pressure” to extradite a DPRK national for sanctions-violating activities
<b>21 March</b>	DPRK cruise missile launches, announced by the media only on 23 March → US reaction: “normal activity”
<b>22 March</b>	EU imposes sanctions for human rights violations against a list of countries, including the DPRK
	Exchange of messages between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping by interlocutors at meeting in Beijing
<b>23 March</b>	UN Human Rights Council resolution on DPRK
	Statement by DPRK MFA criticising EU sanctions
<b>24-25 March</b>	[Seoul, ROK] Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meets ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong
<b>25 March</b>	DPRK short-range ballistic missile launches

	President Biden's press conference during which he confirms that the DPRK remains the top foreign policy issue for the US and, in reaction to SBRM launches says, "There will be responses if they choose to escalate. We will respond accordingly."
<b>26 March</b>	Mandate extended for UN Security Council (UNSC) Committee on DPRK Sanctions (Sanctions Committee)
	Meeting of Sanctions Committee to discuss the launches
<b>27 March</b>	Ri Pyong Chol statement criticizes US, describes the missile launches as "self-defense"
<b>29 March</b>	Jo Chol Su statement criticizes US and UN "double standards" on sanctions
<b>30 March</b>	Kim Yo Jong statement criticizes ROK "double standards" on defensive missile capabilities
	UN Security Council meeting on DPRK missile tests → no action taken
	US Department of State releases "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" on the DPRK and reaffirms that human rights will be an "indispensable" element of the Biden administration's policy
	Japan decides to extend its unilateral sanctions against the DPRK for two more years
<b>1 April</b>	[Japan] First Japan-ROK bilateral meeting since the new US administration at the level of MFA
<b>2 April</b>	US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan meeting with Japan's National Security Secretariat Secretary-General Shigeru Kitamura and ROK National Security Adviser Suh Hoon to discuss issues including the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula
<b>2-3 April</b>	ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong to visit China at the invitation of Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi
<b>9 April</b>	[Washington DC, USA] First leader-to-leader summit between Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and US President Joe Biden
<b>15 April</b>	Day of the Sun ( anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung)

### III. US-ROK JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES AND HIGH LEVEL CONSULTATIONS

The US and the ROK conducted their 2021-1 *Combined Command Post Training* joint military exercises from 8 to 18 March 2021. Government authorities emphasized that the exercises would be based solely on computer simulations and not feature outside troop manoeuvres. The official reason for downscaling the exercises was attributed primarily to complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the US and the ROK also referred to their intention not to foreclose opportunities related to the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of peace.”<sup>6</sup> Large-scale annual joint exercises have not been conducted since 2018 following an informal understanding between the US and the ROK that such exercises would be halted.

#### CHANGES IN US-ROK JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES SINCE SINGAPORE, 2019

During the June 2018 Singapore Summit between the US and the DPRK, then-President Donald Trump announced that the US would be suspending military exercises with the ROK as a concession to the DPRK as the two countries worked toward the “denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula. Following the Summit, the DPRK reiterated Trump’s statement by reporting: “Trump expressed his intention to halt the U.S.-south Korea joint military exercises, which the DPRK side regards as provocation, over a period of good-will dialogue between the DPRK and the U.S.”<sup>7</sup>

However, as US-DPRK efforts to achieve denuclearization stalemated, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated during an August 2018 press conference that, although larger military exercises had been suspended as a “good-faith measure” toward the DPRK, other exercises would continue as planned.<sup>8</sup> On 12 February 2019, two weeks before the US-DPRK talks broke down during the Hanoi Summit, Commander of US Forces-Korea General Robert Abrams informed the US Senate of ongoing efforts to innovate approaches to exercises by modifying “exercise design and conduct, size, scope, volume and timing” to allow for breathing room for diplomatic efforts.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the two large-scale exercises held in 2019 (19-1 Dong Maeng and 19-2 Dong Maeng) were scaled-down replacements of larger annual exercises such as Key Resolve and Foal Eagle. Although similar exercises were ultimately postponed in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the resumption of scaled-down exercises in 2021 was announced by ROK Defense Minister Suh Wook in January 2021.<sup>10</sup> During the March 2021 exercises, it was further announced that outdoor field drills would be conducted throughout the year as opposed to “intensively during specific times.”<sup>11</sup>

In the concluding days of the March 2021 exercises, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin also visited Seoul (17-18 March) for the first time for so-called “2 plus 2” meetings following a similar stop in Japan (16-17 March) and just before a meeting with Chinese officials (18 March). In a joint statement, the US and the ROK “emphasized that North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile issues are a priority for the Alliance” and that they remained “committed to maintain high-level consultations on the United States’ ongoing North Korea policy review.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> S. Korea, U.S. to kick off scaled-back combined exercise this week: JCS, Yonhap News Agency, 7 March 2020

<sup>7</sup> President Trump News Conference on U.S.-North Korea Summit, C-SPAN, 12 June 2018; *Historic First DPRK-U.S. Summit Meeting and Talks Held*, KCNA, 13 June 2018

<sup>8</sup> Defense Department Briefing, C-SPAN, 28 August 2018

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Military Operations in Asia and the Pacific, C-SPAN, 12 February 2019

<sup>10</sup> Oh Seok-min, S. Korea to hold springtime combined exercises with U.S. as planned: defense chief, Yonhap News Agency, 28 January 2021

<sup>11</sup> S. Korea, U.S. supposed to stage joint outdoor drills throughout year: defense ministry, Yonhap News Agency, 9 March 2021

<sup>12</sup> Joint Statement of the 2021 Republic of Korea – United States Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting (“2+2”), U.S. Department of State, 18 March 2021



Nevertheless, some subtle differences in priorities and language were discernible between the statements made by the US and ROK officials. For example, Blinken highlighted that the “authoritarian regime in North Korea continues to commit systemic and widespread abuse against its own people.”<sup>13</sup> As noted by many observers,<sup>14</sup> he also subtly differed with his ROK counterpart on terminology with regard to “denuclearization.” For example, in the joint US-ROK press conference on 18 March 2021, Blinken referred to the continued US objective of “denuclearization of North Korea,” which stands in contrast to the preferred formulation of “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” by the ROK, as clarified by Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong in the same press conference.<sup>15</sup> There was no reference to “denuclearization” as well as no reference to China or a peace regime process in the joint statement, which may suggest that the two parties did not find mutually agreeable language on these issues.

Neither US Secretary Blinken nor ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong responded directly to the statements issued by Kim Yo Jong and Choe Son Hui on 16 March and 18 March, respectively (see below), only commenting that they were aware of them and that they understood that the DPRK may also be reviewing its policy toward the US.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong Before Their Meeting, U.S. Department of State, 17 March 2021

<sup>14</sup> Josh Smith, *Analysis: Denuclearisation of what? U.S. switch on North Korea wording raises debate*, Reuters, 18 March 2021

<sup>15</sup> Secretary Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, and Republic of Korea Defense Minister Suh Wook at a Joint Press Availability, U.S. Department of State, 18 March 2021; the formulation of “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” has also more commonly been used in past UN Security Council resolutions and joint statements between relevant governments; for example: in UNSC Resolution 2375 (2017); the *Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit* from 2018; the *Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks* from 2005; the *Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula* from 1992 between the DPRK and the ROK

<sup>16</sup> Secretary Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, and Republic of Korea Defense Minister Suh Wook at a Joint Press Availability, U.S. Department of State, 18 March 2021

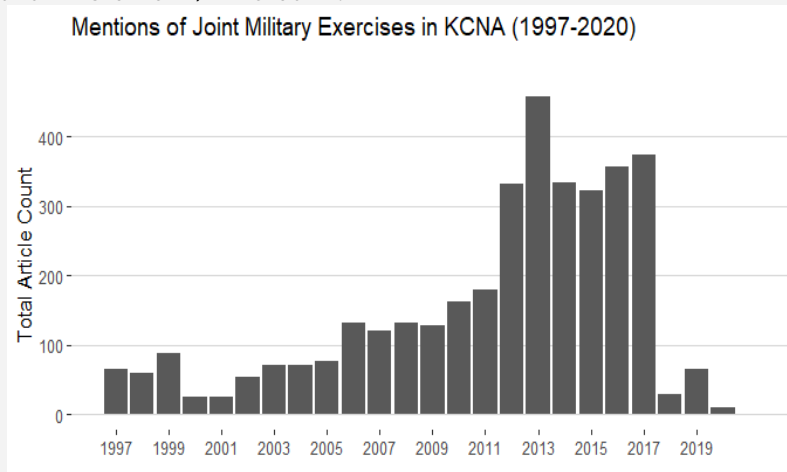
#### IV. DPRK PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON FOREIGN RELATIONS IN MARCH 2021

Starting on 16 March 2021, the DPRK released a series of high-profile official statements during and following the aforementioned events surrounding the joint military exercises and high level consultations. While a denunciation of the US-ROK joint military exercises featured in a number of those statements, a closer reading suggests that they included criticism of US and/or ROK activities beyond the exercises themselves. Although attributed to different officials, and addressed to different audiences, the statements well illustrate the potential difficulties ahead for DPRK-US and DPRK-ROK relations.

##### DPRK PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON US-ROK JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES IN CONTEXT

In general, public statements by the DPRK denouncing US-ROK joint military exercises are very common. In fact, there was a steady increase in the number of KCNA articles referring to and denouncing such exercises from the mid-2000s until a peak in 2013. In 2018, such references saw a sudden drop when relations improved and exercises were postponed, cancelled or adjusted (Figure 1). The number of mentions in 2019 saw a slight uptick again when exercises were conducted in a more usual manner, albeit at a reduced scale (19-1 Dong Maeng and 19-2 Dong Maeng exercises). These exercises were characterized by the DPRK as “undisguised acts of hostility” and “a flagrant violation of June 12 DPRK-U.S. Joint Statement, Panmunjom Declaration and September Pyongyang Joint Declaration.” The DPRK has since warned repeatedly that continuation of the joint military exercises would “block progress in the DPRK-U.S. relations and the inter-Korean relations and bring us into reconsideration of our earlier major steps.”<sup>17</sup>

Overall, the most frequently referenced exercises are the major exercises carried out in the autumn (*Key Resolve/Foal Eagle*) and the spring (*Ulchi Focus Lens/Ulchi Freedom Guardian/Ulchi Taeguk*). This suggests that, in general, media rhetoric has been targeted at the individual exercises that are most negatively perceived by the DPRK due to their scale and/or duration.



Exercises	Articles mentioning JMEs
Key Resolve/Foal Eagle	1195
Ulchi Focus Lens/Freedom Guardian/Taeguk	580
Foal Eagle/RSOI	204
Max Thunder	81
Vigilant Ace/Consolidated Combat Readiness Training	42
Dong Maeng/Combined Command Post Training	9
Outside of exercise windows	1554

<sup>17</sup> Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK Issues Press Statement, KCNA, 6 August 2019

Taken together, these statements can be viewed as:

- (1) A first response to US and US-allied conduct and the language used by the new US administration on DPRK-related issues; and
- (2) Implementation of Kim Jong Un's report during the 8<sup>th</sup> Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Congress on the activities of the WPK Central Committee which, among other things, included specific guiding principles for the WPK's external relations.

<b>16 March Statement</b>	<i>By Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of the WPK Central Committee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticizes the then-ongoing US-ROK joint military exercises and attempts by the US and the ROK to downplay them</li> <li>● Warns that without a change in "attitude and actions" corresponding measures would be taken</li> </ul>
<b>18 March Statement</b>	<i>By Choe Son Hui, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticizes US attempts to engage without demonstrating intent to withdraw "US hostile policy"</li> <li>● Reiterates that the DPRK will continue to disregard similar attempts as long as there is no change in intent and approach</li> </ul>
<b>19 March Statement</b>	<i>By the Ministry of Foreign Affairs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticizes Malaysia for succumbing to US pressure to extradite a DPRK national for sanctions-violating activities</li> <li>● Announces severance of diplomatic relations with Malaysia</li> </ul>
<b>23 March Statement</b>	<i>By the Ministry of Foreign Affairs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticizes human rights sanctions imposed by the EU</li> <li>● Underscores EU's dependence on the US and warns that if the EU is to continue the "anti-DPRK campaign" it will face "unimaginable and miserable consequence"</li> </ul>
<b>27 March Statement</b>	<i>By Ri Pyong Chol, Secretary of the WPK Central Committee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● States that the March 25 missile launch is a "right of a sovereign state for self-defense"</li> <li>● Reiterates that the ROK and the US constantly pose military threats to the Peninsula by conducting military exercises and introducing advanced weapons, thus provoking the DPRK</li> <li>● Declares that the DPRK will continue to increase its military capabilities</li> </ul>
<b>29 March Statement</b>	<i>By Jo Chol Su, Director-General of the Department of International Organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reiterates that the March 25 missile launch is an act of self-defense</li> <li>● Criticizes UNSC and US double standards in imposing sanctions, calls out US, UK and France for undermining global peace and stability by their military build-up and development of more advanced weapon systems</li> <li>● Warns that an "attempt to infringe upon our right to self-defense will inevitably prompt a countermeasure in kind"</li> </ul>
<b>30 March Statement</b>	<i>By Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of the WPK Central Committee</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Underscores the defensive nature of the March 25 launches</li> <li>● Criticizes the ROK double standards with regards to developing defensive missile capabilities</li> </ul>

The statements also highlighted key aspects which the DPRK has long deemed as manifestations of “US hostile policy”:

- Hostile military posture and exercises (16 March/Kim Yo Jong; 27 March/Ri Pyong Chol; 30 March/Kim Yo Jong);
- Insincere diplomacy and unilateral demands (18 March/Choe Son Hui; 30 March/Kim Yo Jong); and
- Development-hindering sanctions (19 March/MF; 23 March/MFA; 29 March/Jo Chol Su).

Beyond the longstanding demand for the US to withdraw its “hostile policy”<sup>18</sup>, the statements also provide further insight into what the DPRK currently considers as preconditions for the resumption of dialogue with the US and with the ROK, including:

- A change in “future attitude and actions” by the ROK and the understanding that a “war drill and hostility can never go with dialogue and cooperation;”<sup>19</sup>
- Listening to the “meaningful warning that [refraining from joint military exercises] might become the last chance for repairing the north-south relations”<sup>20,21</sup>
- Adjusting public statements to not express a “lunatic theory of “threat from north Korea” and groundless rhetoric about “complete denuclearization”<sup>22</sup>, likely referring to the inconsistency with which US officials have talked about the US objective on “denuclearization” during the first weeks of the Biden administration;<sup>23</sup>
- Creating an “atmosphere for both parties [US and DPRK] to exchange words on an equal basis;”<sup>24</sup>
- Refraining from using engagement channels only as a “means for gaining time and building up the public opinion;”<sup>25</sup>
- Acknowledgment by the US of a new status quo: “It will only be a waste of time to sit with the U.S. as it is not ready to feel and accept new change and new times.”<sup>26</sup>

These points have been consistently highlighted in the DPRK’s public statements since the breakdown of talks in the aftermath of the Hanoi Summit in 2019.<sup>27</sup> Their reiteration at this time, however, suggests that the DPRK has not completely ruled out a resumption of talks. This may also be inferred from the statement by First Vice Minister Choe Son Hui, in which she notes that the DPRK would “counter the U.S. on the principle of power for power and goodwill for

<sup>18</sup> For example, *DPRK Terms U.S. Hostile Policy Main Obstacle in Resolving Nuclear Issue*, KCNA, 31 August 2012

<sup>19</sup> *It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago*, KCNA, 16 March 2021

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> “They are going against the implementation of the north-south agreement on guarantee of peace and military stability in the Korean peninsula in disregard of our repeated warnings that they should stop imports of latest military hardware and joint military exercises with the U.S. (...) The report seriously warned the south Korean authorities that if they continue to label our action “provocation” with a double-dealing and biased mindset, we have no other choice but to deal with them in a different way.” (*Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK*, KCNA, 9 January 2021)

<sup>22</sup> *Statement of First Vice Foreign Minister of DPRK*, KCNA, 18 March 2021

<sup>23</sup> *Analysis: Denuclearisation of what? U.S. switch on North Korea wording raises debate*, Reuters, 18 March 2021

<sup>24</sup> *Statement of First Vice Foreign Minister of DPRK*, KCNA, 18 March 2021

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> For example, by then-Special Envoy Kim Myong Gil in a press statement following an early end to talks with then-Special Representative Stephen Biegun in Sweden, October 2019: “조선반도의 완전한 비핵화는 우리의 안전을 위협하고 발전을 저해하는 모든 장애물들이 깨끗하고 의심할 여지 없이 제거될 때에야 가능하다는 것입니다. 조선반도 핵 문제를 탄생시키고 그 해결을 어렵게 하고 있는 미국의 위협을 그대로 두고 우리가 먼저 핵 억제력을 포기해야 생존권과 발전권이 보장된다는 주장은 말 앞에 수레를 놓아야 한다는 소리와 마찬가지로입니다.” [“The complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is only possible when all measures that threaten our safety and impede our development are completely and undoubtedly withdrawn. The assertion that we must first give up our nuclear deterrence to guarantee our right to live and develop while the US threat—which has created the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula in the first place and has made it difficult to solve—remains intact, is the same as saying that we ought to put the cart before the horse”] (*北김명길 순회대사 북미 실무협상 결렬 성명* [DPRK’s Ambassador-at-large Kim Myong Gil’s statement on the breakdown of DPRK-US working-level talks], Yonhap News Agency, 6 October 2019)

goodwill.”<sup>28</sup> This is also in line with the guiding principles provided by Kim Jong Un in his report during the 8<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, there are three specific warnings worthy of further attention in the 18 March 2021 statement issued by Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong. She projects that, without an observable change in attitude and actions—as the “Party Central Committee has already clarified”<sup>30</sup>, the DPRK may move towards:

- Possible dissolution of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country, a North Korean state entity serving inter-Korean communication and coordination activities;
- Possible dissolution of the Kumgangsan International Tourism Bureau and similar inter-Korean cooperation and exchange organizations;
- Possible abrogation of the inter-Korean “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain” (the Comprehensive Military Agreement).<sup>31</sup>

Following through on these warnings may diminish prospects for a resumption of inter-Korean cooperation and confidence-building projects of recent years. Abrogating the Comprehensive Military Agreement, in particular, would be deemed by the ROK as a major setback in progress made since 2018 following the Panmunjom Declaration, because it is positioned as a key risk reducing achievement on the Korean Peninsula.

In the DPRK statements issued following the short-range ballistic missile launches on 25 March, the DPRK defended its missile related activities as being legitimate and necessary in order to counter the growing conventional military capability of the ROK. This reflects the DPRK’s concerns about the ROK’s ballistic missiles, as noted by Kim Jong Un in his report during the 8th WPK Congress.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Kim Yo Jong’s statement of 30 March 2021 criticized the ROK’s development of the Hyunmoo-4, which President Moon had lauded as having the world’s heaviest warhead.<sup>33</sup> Given that the ROK is engaged in a multi-year programme of military modernization and the acquisition of highly advanced assets, including a light aircraft carrier and possibly a nuclear-powered submarine,<sup>34</sup> the ROK and the DPRK are likely to continue to engage in mutual recriminations about the development of advanced conventional assets.

<sup>28</sup> *Statement of First Vice Foreign Minister of DPRK*, KCNA, 18 March 2021

<sup>29</sup> “[Kim Jong Un] clarified the stand of the WPK to approach the US on the principle of answering force with toughness and good faith in kind in the future, too, stating that a key to establishing a new relationship between the DPRK and the US lies in the US withdrawal of its hostile policy towards the DPRK.” (*Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK*, KCNA, 9 January 2021)

<sup>30</sup> *It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago*, KCNA, 16 March 2021; this is in reference to: “It analysed that the north-south relations may return to a new starting point of peace and prosperity in the near future, as desired by all compatriots, as they did in the spring three years ago, depending on the south Korean authorities’ attitude.” (*Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK*, KCNA, 9 January 2021)

<sup>31</sup> *Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain*, 19 September 2018

<sup>32</sup> Most explicitly when demanding that the ROK should give an “explanation for the chief executive’s personal remarks (...) that it had already developed ballistic missiles with the world’s heaviest warhead,” while at the same time allegedly calling the “development of various conventional weapons, which pertains entirely to our rights, a “provocation.” (*Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK*, KCNA, 9 January 2021)

<sup>33</sup> *Vice-Director of Information and Publicity Department of WPK Central Committee Kim Yo Jong Releases Statement*, KCNA, 30 March 2021; cf. *South Korea’s Hyunmoo-4 and Increasing Missile Capabilities Across Northeast Asia*, Jeffrey Glenn Lewis, Datayo.org, 3 June 2020

<sup>34</sup> *Military finalizes requirement plan for light aircraft carrier*, Yonhap News Agency, 30 December 2020; ‘21-’25 국방중기계획 수립 [Establishment of the 2021-2025 Mid-term Defense Plan], Ministry of National Defense, 10 August 2020; Lami Kim, *A Race for Nuclear-Powered Submarines on the Korean Peninsula?*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 31 March 2021

## V. DPRK MISSILE LAUNCHES IN MARCH 2021

The DPRK conducted two missile launches on two separate days following the US-ROK joint military exercises and the high-level US/ROK/Japan consultations. Although timed to take place just after joint exercises, the 21 March 2021 firing of the short-range cruise missiles was conducted with a low profile and without DPRK media coverage. The responses of the US and ROK Governments were also subdued, apparently to avoid heightening tensions. On the other hand, the response of the two governments to the 25 March 2021 launch of a short-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile was more openly critical in light of the significance of the event, in particular because it was a violation of UNSC resolutions and because such missiles are perceived as posing a security threat to the region.

### ***Cruise Missile Launches, 21 March 2021***

Two short-range cruise missiles were launched by the DPRK off its west coast from the Onchon area, South Pyongan Province, in the early morning of 21 March 2021. At the time of this writing, the DPRK has not reported on these launches and their occurrence was publicly announced only two days later in a *Washington Post* report and later confirmed by the US and the ROK.<sup>35</sup> Further information regarding the launches (e.g. type, range, altitude) are not publicly known and were not announced by the US, the ROK or Japan. Based on currently available information about North Korean cruise missiles, there are three possible candidates:



**Domestically produced variant of Soviet P-15 Termit/Chinese HY-2**  
Also referred to as: KN-SSC-1, AG-1, KN-01\*

- Considered the oldest anti-ship cruise missile in the DPRK's arsenal
- Can be launched from land-based platforms and possibly vessels
- Estimated maximum range of over 100 km

*Image source: KCNA*



**Domestically produced variant of Russian Kh-35**  
Also referred to as: Kumsong-3, KN-01,\* KN-19

- Can be launched from vessels and land-based platforms
- Estimated maximum range of around 200 km

*Image source: KCNA*



**Suspected new type of intermediate-range cruise missile**

- Displayed for the first time in a military parade in October 2020 and again in January 2021
- The presented system suggests this type to be a land attack cruise missile with a longer range than that of existing North Korean cruise missiles
- It may have been referred to in Kim Jong Un's report to the 8th WPK Congress as part of newly developed "ultra-modern tactical nuclear weapons including (...) intermediate-range cruise missiles whose conventional warheads are the most powerful in the world."

*Image source: KCNA*

\* The KN-01 designation has been widely used to refer to two very different missile systems in the open source literature.

<sup>35</sup> John Hudson and Ellen Nakashima, *North Korea fires short-range missiles in challenge to Biden administration*, The Washington Post, 23 March 2021

Since 2012, there have been a total of eight publicly known cruise missile launches by the DPRK. The most recent ones, on 14 April 2020 and 21 March 2021, coincided with the period around US-ROK joint military exercises, and the 6 July 2020 firing occurred two days after US Independence Day. None of these firings, however, were publicly reported by the DPRK. It has also been the ROK’s practice of not (at least immediately) announcing firings of non-ballistic projectiles, such as the cruise missile launch on 6 July 2020 and the most recent launches on 21 March 2021.

According to ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff officials, the decision not to publicly announce the 21 March 2021 firing was jointly made with the US on the understanding that the non-ballistic and short-range nature of the cruise missiles did not necessitate an immediate public reaction.<sup>36</sup>

Date	Missile Type	Location	Reported by	KJU Present	Corresponds with US-ROK JME
6 Feb 2015	Kh-35 variant	East Coast	DPRK, ROK	Yes	No
20 Feb 2015	P-15/HY-2 variant	West Coast	DPRK, ROK	Yes	No
9 May 2015	P-15/HY-2 variant or Kh-35 variant	Wonsan [East Coast]	ROK	Unknown	No
14 Jun 2015	Kh-35 variant	Wonsan [East Coast]	DPRK, ROK	Yes	No
8 Jun 2017	Kh-35 variant	Wonsan [East Coast]	DPRK, ROK	Yes	No
14 Apr 2020	P-15/HY-2 variant or Kh-35 variant	Munchon [East Coast]	ROK	Unknown	Consolidated Combat Readiness (20 Apr – 24 Apr 2020)
6 Jul 2020	P-15/HY-2 variant or Kh-35 variant	East Coast	ROK	Unknown	No
21 Mar 2021	See Table X	Onchon [West Coast]	ROK	Unknown	Combined Command Post (8 Mar – 18 Mar 2021)

Figure 2: Cruise missile tests conducted by the DPRK, 2012-2021

**Ballistic Missile Launches, 25 March 2021**

Two short-range ballistic missiles were launched into the sea near Japan’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from the area around the DPRK’s eastern town of Hamju, South Hamgyong Province, at 7:06 AM and 7:25 AM (GMT+9) on 25 March 2021. According to the DPRK’s official statement on the launches, the “two testfired new-type tactical guided missiles accurately hit the target set in the waters 600 km off the east coast of Korea.”<sup>37</sup> According to the ROK’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, the missiles flew approximately 450 km with an apogee of 60 km.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the Japanese Government assesses that the missiles flew approximately 450 km with an apogee of below 100 km, announcing that the missiles had landed outside of Japan’s EEZ.<sup>39</sup> If the missiles had flown for 600 km, as claimed by the DPRK, they would have breached Japan’s

<sup>36</sup> N. Korea fired two cruise missiles off west coast Sunday: JCS, Yonhap News Agency, 24 March 2021  
<sup>37</sup> Academy of Defence Science Test-fires New-type Tactical Guided Missiles, KCNA, 26 March 2021  
<sup>38</sup> N. Korea Fires 2 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles into East Sea: JCA, Yonhap News Agency, 25 March 2021  
<sup>39</sup> North Korea fires 2 ballistic missiles into Sea of Japan, Kyodo News, 25 March 2021



EEZ and could have achieved a range which can cover almost all territories of the ROK from the launch site.

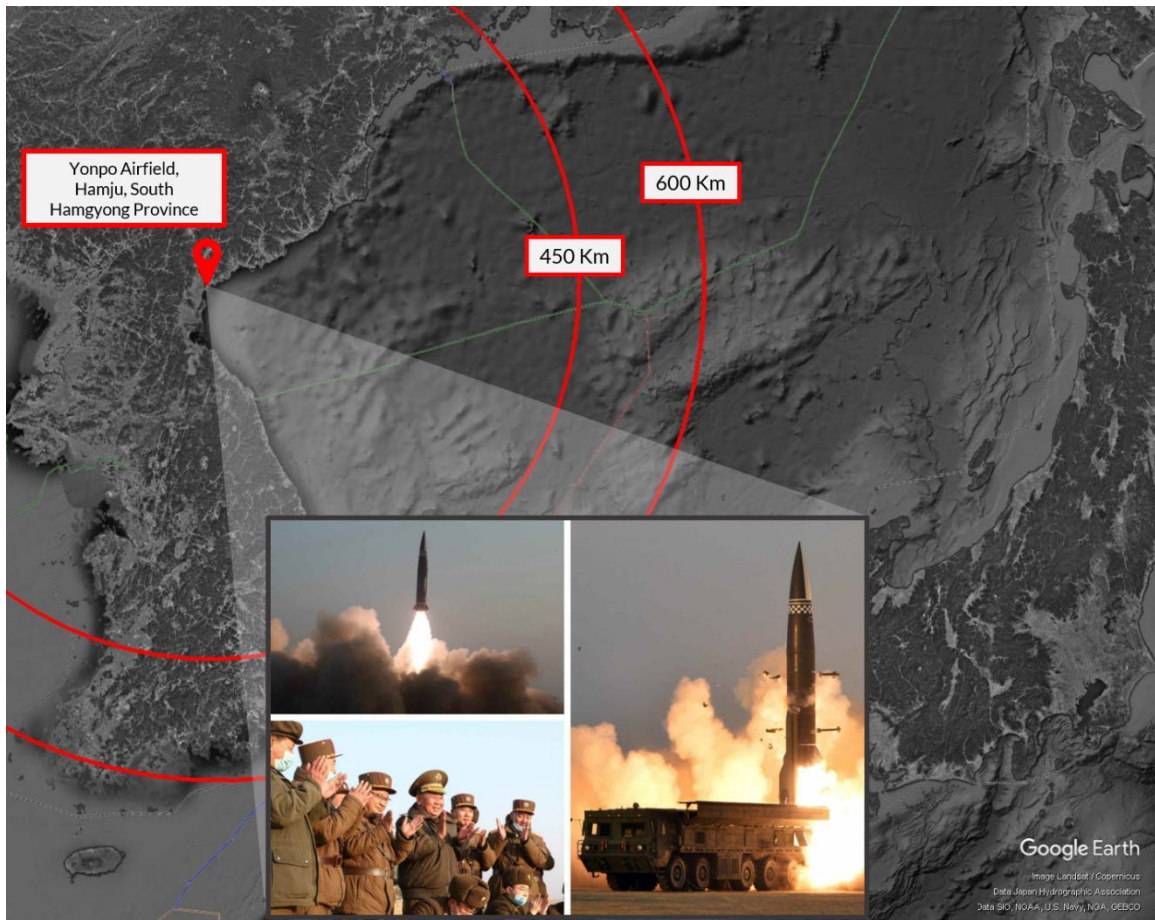


Figure 3: Official images of the launches suggest that they took place at Yonpo Airfield in Hamju County, which is also where Kim Jong Un oversaw a test of the large caliber KN-25 multiple rocket launcher system on 28 November 2019. EEZ borders are indicated with thin green and red lines.

Sources: Google Earth, Flanders Marine Institute, Rodong Simmun



Figure 4: Left to right: KN-23, KN-24 (both test fired in 2019), new missile test fired on 25 March 2021. While the new missile appears to be a lengthened variant of the KN-23, the nose cone section is more similar to that of a KN-24. Sources: KCNA, KCTV





**KN-23**

- Shares resemblance to the Russian Iskander ballistic missile. Has both truck and tracked launch vehicles
- Reportedly exhibited a maximum range of 600 km in a firing on 25 July 2019 with an apogee of 50 km
- In a firing on 6 August 2019, it flew 450 km with an apogee of 37 km

*Image source: KCNA*



**KN-24**

- Appears to be shorter and exhibit a shorter maximum range than the KN-23
- General shape similar to US ATACM missile
- Exhibited a range of around 400 km with an apogee of 50 km

*Image source: KCTV*



**New Short to Mid-Range Ballistic Missile**

- First displayed during a military parade on 14 January 2021
- Likely test fired for the first time on 25 March 2021
- Longer than the KN-23 and KN-24 as evidenced by the 5-axes truck in contrast to the 4-axes truck used for the KN-23. Presumably, similar flight characteristics

*Image source: KCNA*

The new missile is longer than the KN-23 and KN-24 missiles, but still appears to be based on those two systems. The three missiles appear to share similar guidance and control technology and flight profiles. In addition, the DPRK stated that the newly tested missile had the “irregular orbit features of low-altitude gliding leap type flight mode”. These so-called “pull-up manoeuvres” were conducted in previous KN-23 and KN-24 launches as also shown by the depicted flight profiles on screens used for monitoring the previous launches (see Figure 5 below).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> cf. United Nations, S/2020/151, annex 59



Figure 5: In official photos released for the KN-23 and KN-24 launches on 25 July 2019 and 10 August 2019, respectively, depressed trajectories with pull-up manoeuvres can be seen on monitoring screens.

Source: Rodong Sinmun, images enhanced by ONN

However, judging from the carrier truck the new missile has no apparent increase in diameter. The truck's width remains unchanged from that of the truck carrying the KN-23 and KN-24 and it can still accommodate two missiles in a very compact manner. It has yet to be ascertained whether the new missile can accommodate the large increase of the payload up to the 2.5 tons, as claimed by the DPRK.<sup>41</sup> The KN-23 is estimated to have a range of around 600 km with a warhead weighing only around 500 kg, while the KN-24 has a range of around 400 km with a similar warhead weighing only around 500 kg.<sup>42</sup>

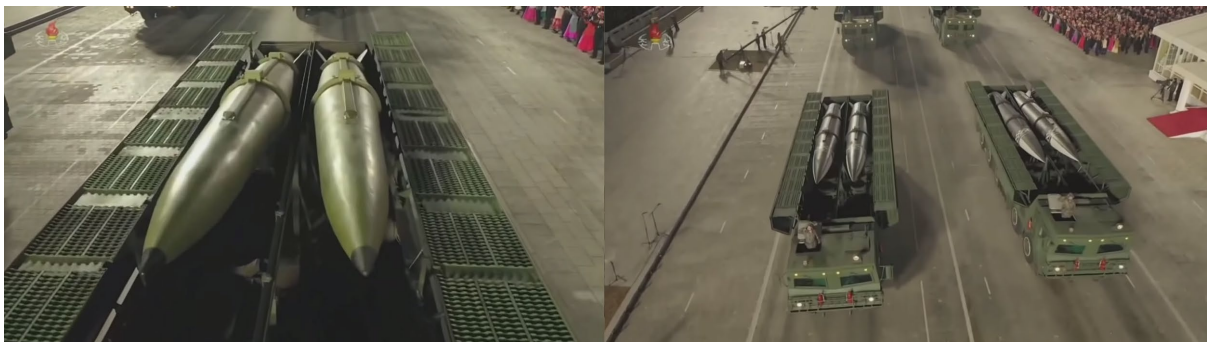


Figure 6: The KN-23 and new missile tested on 25 March 2021 shown in the same carrier truck during a military parade on 14 January 2021. Source: KCTV

<sup>41</sup> Academy of Defence Science Test-fires New-type Tactical Guided Missiles, KCNA, 26 March 2021

<sup>42</sup> The estimate for the KN-23's performance is largely based on that of the Iskander, as they share similar size, shape and flight profile. For example: Michael Elleman, North Korea's New Short-Range Missiles: A Technical Evaluation, 38 North, 9 October 2019

Assuming that the payload capacity of the recently launched missile is as claimed by the DPRK, this would suggest that it has a bunker busting penetration capability similar to that of its South Korean counterpart, the Hyunmoo-4 (provided that it has the same accuracy). While South Korean ballistic missiles have demonstrated high accuracy in footage released by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense,<sup>43</sup> there is no information available to confirm the accuracy of the DPRK's new missiles.

Regardless of whether the new missile is actually deployed as the DPRK's super bunker buster weapon, the new missile does offer a greater conventional capability than the previously tested KN-23 and KN-24. It also has the potential to become a mid-range missile if armed with a lighter, and possibly nuclear, warhead.<sup>44</sup> The flight test of this new missile, along with its improved solid motor, could contribute to a broader missile development programme that could eventually lead to a solid fuel ICBM.

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<sup>43</sup> [국방부] 국과연 신형 탄도미사일 시험 영상(ADD 제공) [[Ministry of National Defense] Demonstration Video of the Agency for Defense Development's New Ballistic Missiles (ADD Production)], ROK Ministry of National Defense, 29 July 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Edr8woqAyuY>

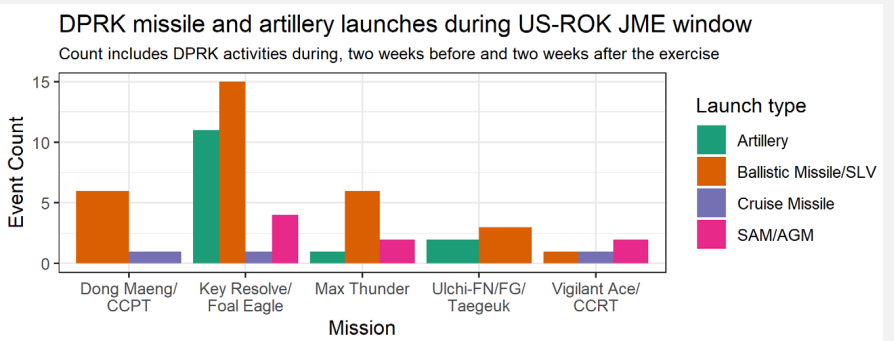
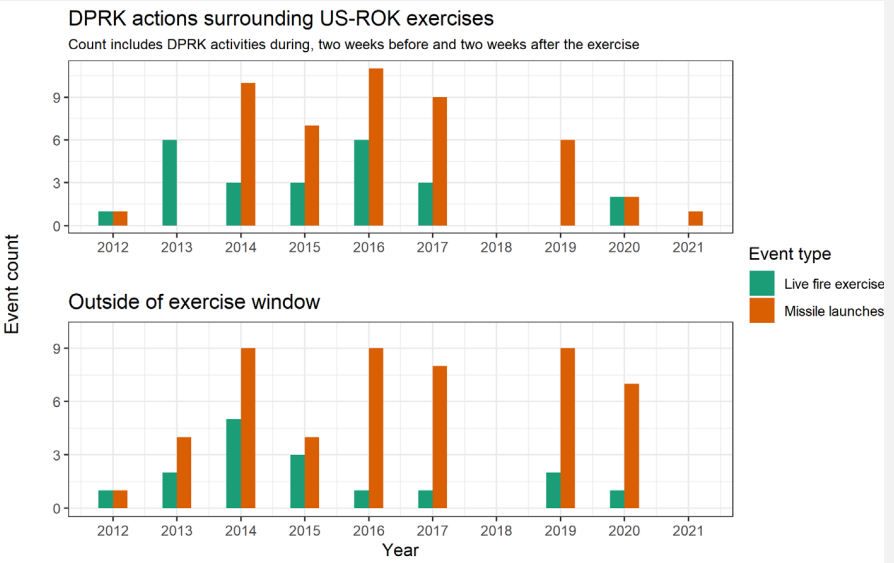
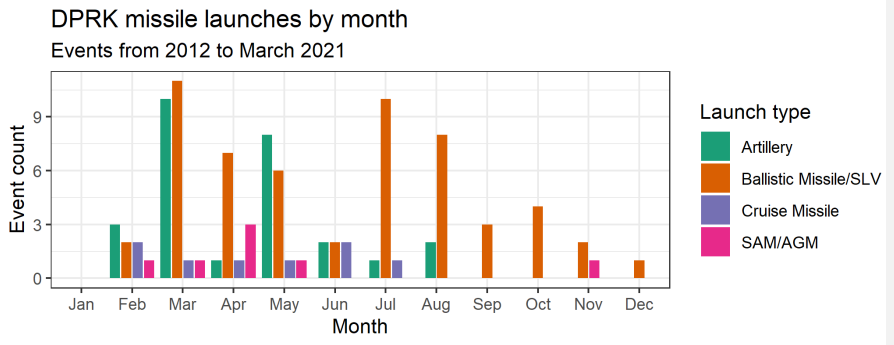
<sup>44</sup> The DPRK's continued objective to work on "smaller and lighter [nuclear warheads] for more tactical uses" was also reiterated by Kim Jong Un during the 8th WPK Congress in January 2021 (*Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK*, KCNA, 9 January 2021)

### DPRK'S MISSILE LAUNCHES IN CONTEXT

In general, the DPRK has been most active with missile launches in the spring months of March, April and May. Ballistic missiles (including space launch vehicles) have also frequently been launched in July and August.

Missile launches and live fire exercises have also frequently coincided with the timing of US-ROK exercises.<sup>45</sup> Between 2012 and 2017, there was a consistent level of such military activity around US-ROK joint exercises.<sup>46</sup> After a year of no major military activity in 2018, there has been a decrease in concentrated activity around joint exercises since 2019. This is likely due to the risk-reducing impact that high-level engagement between the US and the DPRK, and between the two Koreas, has had in the military realm. The decision by the US and the ROK to postpone, cancel or adjust their joint military exercises and the DPRK's *de facto* continued adherence to its self-imposed nuclear weapon and long-range missile test moratorium from April 2018<sup>47</sup>, could explain the overall drop in activity. All three parties have so far managed to refrain from conduct that would risk an immediate return to the tension levels present in 2017.

The concentration of missile launch activity surrounding exercises differs by the type of exercise. The figure below shows that it is most concentrated around the major Key Resolve/Foal Eagle exercises (held in the spring), but less so around the major Ulchi Taegeuk/Ulchi Freedom Guardian/Ulchi Focus Lens exercises (held in the autumn). The fact that many more missiles have been launched during the period surrounding the spring exercises than the autumn exercises may suggest that the missile launch activity is driven more by factors unrelated to US-ROK joint military exercises.



<sup>45</sup> Bernhardt and Sukin also found that US-ROK exercises have a statistically significant effect on the occurrence of military actions by the DPRK (Jordan Bernhardt and Lauren Sukin, *Joint Military Exercises and Crisis Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula*, Journal of Conflict Resolution: 1-34, 2020). Cha, Lee and Lim have found, however, that at least in the years of 2005-2016, US-ROK exercises did not impact diplomatic relations between the US and DPRK (Victor Cha, Na Young Lee and Andy Lim, *DPRK Provocations and US-ROK Military Exercises*, CSIS Beyond Parallel, 18 August 2016)

<sup>46</sup> Excluding the year of 2013, when no missile tests were conducted during, before or after joint exercises

<sup>47</sup> Third Plenary Meeting of Seventh C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un, KCNA, 21 April 2018

## VI. NEAR-TERM RISKS

### **Further missile or nuclear testing by the DPRK**

During the 8<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress, Kim Jong Un affirmed the DPRK's determination to continue to work on bolstering its military capabilities and its "goal of modernization of the nuclear force."<sup>48</sup>

**Excerpt from: *Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK, KCNA, 9 January 2021***

"(...) The report analyzed the fact that although our Party and the government of our Republic made well-meant efforts and displayed the greatest patience to prevent the aggravation of the regional tension out of sheer desire to ensure peace and security of the Korean peninsula and the rest of the world, the hostile nature of the American policy towards the DPRK has gone to extreme instead of becoming weakened.

Nothing is more foolish and dangerous than to idle our time away without steadily building up our strength while knowing well enough that the enemy's high-tech weapons aimed at our state are increasing in volume.

The reality shows that only when we bolster up our national defence capability without a moment's halt will we be able to contain the military threat from the US and achieve peace and prosperity of the Korean peninsula.

Stressing that the strong defence capability of the state never precludes diplomacy but serves as a powerful means to propel it along the right course and guarantee its success, the report gave the analytical conclusion that the reality in the prevailing situation proves once again that there can never be satisfaction in strengthening the military strength. (...)"

This was reiterated in the aforementioned series of official statements in March 2021. Most explicitly, Ri Pyong Chol stated on 27 March that the DPRK is "by no means developing weapons to draw someone's attention or influence his policy" and that it "will continue to increase [its] most thoroughgoing and overwhelming military power."<sup>49</sup> The DPRK's recent launches in March alone also suggest that research and development on short to longer range missile technology carried out under the Academy of Defence Science is active (though such technology would require considerable testing prior to deployment).

<sup>48</sup> *Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory - On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK, KCNA, 9 January 2021*; Katsuhisa Furukawa, *The 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (1)*, Open Nuclear Network, 1 February 2021

<sup>49</sup> *Ri Pyong Chol Expresses Deep Concern over U.S. President's Statement Faulting DPRK's Regular Testfire*, KCNA, 27 March 2021



### **Activities at Select Key Sites for Missile or Nuclear Testing**

According to a CNN report from 17 March 2021,<sup>50</sup> US intelligence is assessing possible signs of a first weapon test since the inauguration of US President Biden. The report also mentions that “US intelligence has been focusing on vehicle activities at a site near Sanum-dong, where ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles are believed to have been built in the past.”

Upon examining available satellite images of the suspected missile production-related hall near Sanum-dong, ONN was not able to detect any unusual vehicle activity over the past several months. Vehicle presence has been a regularity at the complex since at least 2016, suggesting this to be part of normal operations. Some construction work has taken place since late 2017 at the site, though the exact purpose of these activities could not be ascertained. Additionally, an L-shaped structure, or possibly piles of some indeterminate material, have been present in front of the main blue-roof hall at least since 10 November 2020. Further information is needed to determine the nature of this structure or material.

There have also been reports of ongoing activity at a suspected nuclear weapon-related site in Yongdoktong, near Kusan. Reportedly, the US intelligence community assesses that the Yongdoktong site was likely involved in high explosives testing previously and has been repurposed as a nuclear weapon storage site.<sup>51</sup> While ONN has yet to confirm this information, available satellite images confirm that two tunnel tubes leading into an area within the mountain were previously visible at this site, suggesting the presence of an underground facility. Since late 2020, the tunnel entrances have been concealed by a new structure over the entrances. Near or next to the tunnel entrances, multiple trucks and large vehicles have been observed, and excavation or construction activities appear ongoing. On 10 March 2021, a possible vehicle was present in front of the tunnel entrances. It is unclear whether these activities are related to preparations for a missile or nuclear test.

ONN has not observed any unusual signs of activity at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Starr, *US Has Assessed North Korea Could be Preparing to Carry out First Weapons Test Since Biden Took Office*, CNN, 17 March 2021

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Lewis, *New Construction at Yondoktong*, Armscontrolwonk.com, 2 March 2021; Zachary Cohen and Kylie Atwood, *New Satellite Images Reveal North Korea Took Recent Steps to Conceal Nuclear Weapons Site*, CNN, 2 March 2021; Ankit Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea*, Oxford University Press, 2020, chapter 9

### **Explosion of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office 2.0**

Prior to the demolition of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in 2020, Kim Yo Jong warned in a statement that closely resembles her more recent one on 18 March 2021 that a shut down of the Liaison Office might occur.

In March 2020, Kim Yo Jong strongly pushed back against the ROK's criticism of the DPRK's military exercises that had taken place some days before.<sup>52</sup> After a series of articles published under her name in which she harshly criticized the ROK's alleged inability to prevent activist leaflets from entering the DPRK via the land or maritime borders, she issued a statement on 4 June 2020 warning that: unless measures would be taken to prevent the scattering of leaflets, the DPRK might (1) completely withdraw from the Kaesong Industrial Park, (2) shut down the inter-Korean Liaison Office and/or (3) scrap the Comprehensive Military Agreement.<sup>53</sup> Twelve days later, on 16 June 2020, the Inter-Korean Liaison Office was indeed demolished.



*Figure 7: Explosion of the Kaesong Inter-Korean Liaison Office shown in a broadcast on the day of the incident, 16 June 2020. Source: KCTV*

Thus, it is possible that any or all of the following may occur:

- Dissolution of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country;
- Dissolution of the Kumgangsan International Tourism Bureau;
- Activities suggesting a complete abrogation of the Comprehensive Military Agreement

Of particular concern is that the scrapping of the Comprehensive Military Agreement has now been mentioned twice by her alone.

<sup>52</sup> Kim Yo Jong Blasts Chongwadae's Foolish Way of Thinking, KCNA, 3 March 2020

<sup>53</sup> Kim Yo Jong Rebukes S. Korean Authorities for Conniving at Anti-DPRK Hostile Act of "Defectors from North", KCNA, 4 June 2020

## VII. CONCLUSION

The DPRK has repeatedly expressed its intention to continuously advance its military capabilities that would require further testing. Its historical pattern of missile firings also suggests that further missile tests are possible. The risk that the DPRK might follow through with any or all of the three specific threats issued by Kim Yo Jong on 16 March 2021 should be taken seriously.

While recent public statements by both the DPRK and the US illustrate how far apart the two sides still are on core issues, they also suggest that there is a shared view that seeking dialogue under certain conditions could still be in their respective national interests. It remains to be seen whether the parties can find ways to build on this commonality, however small it may appear at present.



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