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**SPECIAL ANALYSIS** | Center for American Security

# **BIDEN'S NEGLIGENCE CAUSES NORTH KOREA THREAT TO SURGE**

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## **TOPLINE POINTS**

- The Biden Administration's negligent North Korea policy, coupled with the Administration's other foreign policy failures, appear to have led to a surge in North Korean ballistic missile tests and signs that Pyongyang is preparing to conduct a seventh underground nuclear test.
- There is little to President Biden's North Korea policy other than renouncing President Trump's personal diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Moreover, the current administration has unnecessarily antagonized the North Korean government by refusing to engage it with senior officials and naming a part-time envoy who concurrently serves as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia.
- The estimated 49 North Korean missiles test-launched as of October 20, 2022 is the largest number conducted by the North in a single year. These launches came after North Korea tested other advanced missiles in 2021, including cruise missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and a possible hypersonic missile.
- The timing of the surge in North Korean missile tests—after the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021—suggests Pyongyang saw that event as a sign of U.S. weakness and an opportunity to use its WMD programs to blackmail the United States and its allies to win economic concessions and relief from U.S. and U.N. sanctions.
- Satellite images indicate North Korea began excavation at a former underground nuclear test site in March 2022. South Korean officials believe North Korea has completed this excavation and could conduct a nuclear test at this site between October 16 and November 7, 2022.



## Special Analysis: Biden's Negligence Causes North Korea Threat to Surge



**North Korean leader Kim Jong Un struts before a North Korean ICBM test-launched on March 23, 2022.** This was the first North Korean ICBM launch since 2017. (North Korea TV via KCNA Watch.)

We had a good relationship with Hitler before he, in fact, invaded the rest of Europe. The reason [Kim] wouldn't meet with President Obama is because [Obama] said we're going to talk about denuclearization.

- Joe Biden, at the October 22, 2020 presidential debate, on President Donald Trump's diplomacy with North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un.

Similar to the Biden Administration's approach to Iran's nuclear program, its approach to North Korea's nuclear effort has been an even worse version of the Obama Administration's. Like the Obama presidency, the Biden Administration has devoted most of its diplomatic efforts to issues other than North Korea—most notably climate change, which was the focus of its recently released National Security Strategy. Biden officials also have been obsessed with negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran and have shown little interest in similar negotiations with North Korea. The primary theme of President Biden's approach to North Korea's nuclear efforts has been to repudiate the policies of his predecessor.

The main difference between the Obama and Biden approaches to North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons is that the Biden approach has been even weaker. The current administration's neglect of North Korea and record of foreign policy failures in 2021 appears to have precipitated a resurgence of North Korean belligerence and provocations in 2022, including a large number of missile tests, threats to attack South Korea with nuclear weapons, apparent preparations to conduct an underground nuclear test, and Pyongyang's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## REJECTING PRESIDENT TRUMP'S NORTH KOREA POLICY

Much of Joe Biden's presidential campaign and presidency have been premised on completely rejecting the Trump presidency and its initiatives and policies. President Biden dramatically demonstrated this when he signed 17 executive orders on the day of his inauguration, reversing President Trump's policies and initiatives. President Biden also vowed to reverse what he claimed was President Trump's unsuccessful and counterproductive North Korea policy.

Given President Biden's long tenure in Washington, it was not a surprise that he strongly disagreed with President Trump's anti-establishment attempts to address the threat from North Korea's missile and nuclear programs through a "Maximum Pressure" campaign and personal diplomacy with Kim Jong Un. During the campaign, President Biden repeated the criticism of many Democrats and establishment foreign policy experts about President Trump's approach to North Korea. Most of this criticism was that President Trump's summits with Kim legitimized a brutal dictator and undermined American credibility while getting nothing in return. President Biden also attacked President Trump's North Korea policy as a unilateral approach that ignored and alienated America's allies.

President Biden was especially critical of some unusual aspects of President Trump's North Korea policy. President Biden mocked the friendly letters exchanged between President Trump and Kim. President Biden also was critical of the insults and threats exchanged between President Trump and Kim in 2017.

Then-candidate Biden claimed in the final presidential debate in October 2020 that President Trump's personal diplomacy with Kim Jong Un, which included three one-on-one meetings, accomplished nothing and left North Korea a more dangerous threat. Biden also said during the debate that the Trump Administration made no progress in convincing North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and asserted that "they have much more capable missiles, able to reach U.S. territory much more easily than ever before."

During the presidential campaign, Biden said he would work to counter North Korea's nuclear missile programs by working closely with the nations of the Asia-Pacific region, falsely asserting that the Trump Administration did not work with these nations on North Korea. Biden also claimed he would seek China's assistance because it had leverage with the Kim regime.

When Biden was asked during the October 2020 presidential debate if he would meet with Kim under any circumstances as president, he responded:

On the condition that he would agree that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity. The Korean peninsula should be a nuclear-free zone.



## A VERY DIFFERENT NORTH KOREA SITUATION

The North Korea situation in January 2021 that President Biden inherited as president was very different than the one handed to President Trump in January 2017. Tensions between the U.S. and North Korea were high when President Trump entered office. President Obama told President Trump on his inauguration day that North Korea was one of the most serious threats he would face as president. North Korea tested at least 76 missiles during the Obama presidency and conducted five underground nuclear tests. The North's missile program made significant gains in 2017 and conducted 20 test launches.

By contrast, the North Korean situation was stable and fairly calm when Biden assumed the presidency in January 2021. Although North Korean leaders were unhappy that the Trump Administration did not give them concessions to advance nuclear talks and occasionally made threats against the United States over the previous two years, there was no imminent risk of an escalation in tensions or the resumption of long-range missile or nuclear tests.

While President Trump's approach to North Korea did not succeed in denuclearizing North Korea, it did lead to lowered tensions, halted nuclear tests, and halted tests of long-range missiles. North Korea did not test any missiles between December 2017 and mid-2019. When the North resumed missile tests in 2019, it limited them to short-range missiles. However, it was believed that North Korea continued to develop its nuclear and missile programs despite President Trump's diplomatic efforts.

President Biden inherited U.S.-North Korea relations that effectively had been frozen since President Trump's last meeting with Kim Jong Un at the Korean DMZ in June 2019. There appeared to be several reasons for this. First, North Korea never agreed to cooperate in working-level meetings to build on the meetings between President Trump and Kim to reach a denuclearization agreement. Second, North Korean officials probably decided by the spring of 2020 to hold off any serious talks with the United States until after the November 2020 presidential election.

The third reason probably had the most significant effect on freezing U.S.-North Korea relations: the COVID-19 pandemic. This deadly global catastrophe shut down international travel and greatly inhibited diplomacy in 2020 and early 2021. North Korea, which turned down foreign offers of COVID-19 vaccines, was hit very hard by the virus. The pandemic, coupled with the 2020 U.S. presidential election, distracted the Trump and Kim governments and likely is why there was no progress in nuclear talks during the final year of the Trump presidency. At the same time, violations of sanctions against North Korea grew in 2020 with little pushback from the U.S.

Although the situation between the U.S. and North Korea was stable at the end of the Trump presidency, North Korea made some moves to influence the next U.S. presidential administration. After halting military parades displaying its ballistic missiles since February 2018, North Korea resumed these parades on October 10, 2020, and displayed one of its newest ICBMs, the Hwasong-16 (KN-27). This missile probably has a range of over 8,000 miles.



North Korea also held a military parade displaying missiles on January 15, 2021. This parade displayed included what appeared to be a new two-stage submarine-launched ballistic missile, the Pukguksong-5. The KN-23, 24, and 25 short-range ballistic missiles also were displayed.

North Korea harshly criticized Biden during the 2020 presidential campaign in response to Biden's criticisms. This included calling Biden a "rabid dog" who "must be beaten to death with a stick."

## **PRESIDENT BIDEN BRINGS BACK FAMILIAR FACES TO LEAD HIS NORTH KOREA DIPLOMACY**

President Biden brought back several officials who worked on North Korea and denuclearization diplomacy for previous Democrat presidents. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman worked on North Korea diplomacy for the Clinton Administration and headed the Iran nuclear talks for the Obama Administration. Jake Sullivan, President Biden's national security advisor, served as deputy national security advisor in the Obama Administration and was involved in nuclear talks with Iran. Kurt Campbell, named President Biden's national security council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, is a longtime Democrat national security expert who served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) in the Obama Administration and held positions working on Asian issues for the Clinton Administration in the National Security Council and Defense Department.

Most surprising was President Biden's decision to bring in veteran North Korea expert and career State Department officer Sung Kim. Kim served as the acting Assistant Secretary for the State EAP Bureau from January 20, 2021 until June 4, 2021. In May 2021, Kim was named the U.S. special envoy for North Korea. Kim was closely involved in the Trump Administration's diplomacy with North Korea, especially his role in helping arrange the 2018 Singapore Summit. However, Kim, who also worked on North Korea issues for the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations, was widely liked and considered nonpartisan. Despite President Biden's determination to undo President Trump's policies and fire all of his appointees, his decision to appoint Sung Kim was a wise exception.

Undermining the significance of Kim being named the North Korea special envoy is the fact that he is part-time—he retained his post as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia. North Korea probably interpreted this as a slight after the high-level engagement it received from the Trump Administration. Interestingly, during its first year in office, the Obama Administration also named a part-time North Korea special envoy, Stephen Bosworth, a move that indicated North Korea was not a priority for President Obama.

## **NORTH KOREA SHOWS NO INTEREST IN DIPLOMACY**

According to The New York Times, weeks after President Biden took office, North Korea turned on key parts of its Yongbyon nuclear fuel production facility to send a message to the Biden Administration. North Korea reportedly knew thermal images of this facility being activated



would be picked up by U.S. spy satellites and reported to President Biden by the U.S. Intelligence Community in the Presidential Daily Brief.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, in a speech to a January 5, 2021 party Congress, Kim Jong Un read a long list of his country's latest advanced weapons, including the Hwasong-17 ICBM, the Pukguksong submarine-launched ballistic missile, and progress in miniaturizing nuclear weapons to make them "standardized, tactical and weaponized," according to a 38 North article.<sup>2</sup> Kim also announced the development of "super-large hydrogen bombs," mid-and long-range cruise missiles, anti-aircraft rocket systems, heavy tanks, howitzers, multiple-warhead missiles, new types of ballistic missiles, "hypersonic gliding flight warheads," electronic weapons, unmanned aerial vehicles and military reconnaissance satellites.

The message of these gestures was clear: to ensure President Biden paid attention to North Korea and to signal that Kim did not intend to give up his nuclear weapons.

North Korea proceeded in 2021 and 2022 to repeatedly ignore and rebuff efforts by the Biden Administration to convince it to meet with Special Envoy Kim. This likely was due to a lack of serious interest by the Biden Administration in engaging North Korea, its attempts to engage it at a lower level instead of using cabinet-level officials, and its distraction by other foreign policy issues.

After White House Press Spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on March 15, 2021 that North Korea had not responded to U.S. efforts to restart talks on the North's nuclear program, North Korea made its first statement about the Biden Administration the next day with a warning from Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un:

We take this opportunity to warn the new U.S. administration trying hard to give off a powder smell in our land. If it wants to sleep in peace for the coming four years, it had better refrain from causing a stink at its first step.

This comment was probably in response to the Biden Administration's decision to hold joint military exercises with South Korea in April 2022 and a trip to South Korea and Japan that Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin took that month.

After North Korea rebuffed U.S. efforts to resume dialogue, Biden officials said they would work with other regional states to influence Pyongyang. The Biden Administration in March 2021 hoped to recruit China to use its influence to restart talks to address North Korea's nuclear program and planned to make this the focus of a meeting that National Security Adviser Sullivan and Secretary of State Blinken were to hold with their counterparts in Anchorage, Alaska on March 18 and 19, 2021.

The Anchorage talks were a disaster. During perfunctory two-minute statements by the U.S. and Chinese delegations to the press before the talks began, Blinken and Sullivan criticized Chinese activities against the Uighurs, in Hong Kong, and against Taiwan, as well as cyber-attacks on the



U.S. and economic coercion of U.S. allies. Blinken said China's behavior "threatens the rules-based order that maintains global stability." Sullivan added, "China has undertaken an "assault on basic values."

Chinese Communist Party Foreign Affairs Chief Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi angrily responded with long diatribes against the United States, including accusing the U.S. of human rights and freedom of the press violations. The Chinese officials also accused Blinken and Sullivan of being condescending and staging the Alaska meeting to embarrass China on U.S. territory.

The failed Anchorage meeting marked the beginning of the deterioration of U.S. relations with Beijing. It also probably played a role in China's refusal to support several attempts by the Biden Administration to take action against North Korea's missile program in the U.N. Security Council.

## **BIDEN ADMINISTRATION FINISHES NORTH KOREA POLICY REVIEW**

White House Press Spokeswoman Psaki said on April 30, 2021 that the Biden Administration finished its review of North Korea policy and decided its approach would be somewhere between the Strategic Patience policy of the Obama Administration and the Trump Administration approach, which she described as trying to achieve "a grand bargain." According to Psaki,

Our goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. With a clear understanding that the efforts of the past four administrations have not achieved this objective, our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience.

Our policy calls for a calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with the DPRK, and to make practical progress that increases the security of the United States, our allies, and deployed forces.

We have and will continue to consult with the Republic of Korea, Japan, and other allies and partners at every step along the way.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these goals, the Biden Administration decided not to discard the Singapore Agreement from the June 2018 Singapore Summit. This move reportedly was a concession to South Korean President Moon, who asked for this during a May 2021 White House visit as part of a U.S./South Korea initiative to restart talks with North Korea.

During a joint press White House press conference with President Moon, President Biden stressed the importance of boosting security in the Asia-Pacific and other issues such as climate change, China, and COVID-19 while downplaying North Korea. This indicated that despite the new Biden North Korea policy and the concession to Moon, North Korea was still not a priority for President Biden.



## U.S. and North Korea Trade Criticism

The Biden Administration's new North Korea policy appeared to spark a new war of words between the U.S. and North Korea.

During a military parade in Pyongyang on April 26, 2021, North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un threatened to expand the country's nuclear arsenal "at the fastest possible speed" and threatened to use it. Although Kim said North Korea's nuclear weapons were intended to be a deterrent, he made a vague threat that he could use these weapons under other circumstances, stating, "if any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission."<sup>4</sup>

President Biden, during an April 28, 2021 address to a joint session of Congress, called North Korea's nuclear weapons program a "serious threat to America's security and world security." Previewing his new North Korea policy, President Biden said, "We will be working closely with our allies to address the threats posed by both of these countries through diplomacy and stern deterrence."

Also on April 28, 2021, State Department Press Spokesman Ned Price said "we stand with the millions of North Koreans who continue to have their dignity and human rights violated by one of the most repressive and totalitarian states in the world, including the more than 100,000 individuals who suffer unspeakable abuses in the regime's political prison camps.

During a May 21, 2021 joint press conference at the White House with South Korean President Moon, President Biden made a confusing statement that did not rule out meeting with Kim Jong Un until he made a commitment to denuclearize while calling into question the North Korean leader's legitimacy.

If he made any commitment, then I would meet with him. And if there was a commitment on which we met—and the commitment has to be that there's discussion about his nuclear arsenal, and if it's merely an—a means by which how do we de-escalate what they're doing.

And so, if that was the case, I would not meet unless there was some outline made that my Secretary of State and others would have negotiated as to how we would proceed. But what I would not do is I would not do what had been done in the recent past. I would not give him all that he's looking for is: national—international recognition as legitimate and—and say—and give them what allowed him to move in the direction of appearing to be more—how can I say it?—more serious about what he wasn't at all serious about.<sup>5</sup>

North Korea made its usual bad-tempered responses to this criticism and the Biden Administration's new North Korea policy. It responded to President Biden's comment by saying he had made a "big blunder" by calling the country a security threat and that North Korea "will be compelled to press for corresponding measures, and with time the U.S. will find itself in a very grave situation."<sup>6</sup>





A North Korean statement reacting to Price said, “We will be forced to take corresponding measures. We have already made it clear that we will counter in the strongest terms whoever encroaches upon the dignity of our supreme leadership, which is more valuable than our lives.”<sup>7</sup>

Kim Jong Un responded to the new Biden Administration policy on June 17 when he said North Korea will prepare for “both dialogue and confrontation” with the United States” and “especially to get fully prepared for confrontation.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Deadlock Continues After Policy Review**

Biden officials said on many occasions in 2021 and 2022 that U.S. officials below the level of President Biden were prepared to meet with North Korea anytime, anywhere, and without preconditions. Kim Jong Un’s reference to the word “dialogue” in his June 17, 2021 statement raised hopes by South Korean and American officials that it might be possible to resume negotiations. As of October 2022, this had not happened.

U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim met several times in 2021 and 2022 with South Korean officials and officials from Japan and Russia to discuss how to get the North Korea talks back on track. He also met with or held phone consultations with officials from other nations, including China. National Security Council Policy Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on May 10, 2022 that the United States was prepared for any kind of diplomacy or engagement with North Korea and that Biden officials tried to reach out to the North on “numerous occasions.”

The Biden Administration did not impose its first sanctions on North Korea until December 2021 when it sanctioned several North Korean entities and individuals for human rights violations. A Voice of America report said these sanctions were “a largely symbolic move that will have little impact on the regime’s human rights practices or its nuclear weapons and missile programs.”<sup>9</sup>

The Biden Administration imposed its first weapons-related sanctions on North Korea on January 13, 2022 when it sanctioned six North Koreans, one Russian, and one Russian firm in response to North Korea’s missile tests. More U.S. sanctions were imposed in response to North Korean missile tests on March 26, May 27, and October 7, 2022.

South Korean officials have made several attempts to reopen North/South talks and North Korean talks with the United States since January 2021. The Moon government, in mid-2021 tried to use the idea of a declaration ending the Korean War as an incentive to convince Pyongyang to resume negotiations. In 2022, U.S., Asian and other world leaders implored North Korea to halt its surging missile program and join talks with the United States and South Korea.

South Korea’s new President Yoon began his own effort to address the North Korean nuclear arsenal in August 2022 when he proposed an “audacious” plan for economic incentives to North Korea in exchange for concrete steps for denuclearization. Yoon said he was prepared to offer a large-scale food program, assistance for power generation, transmission and distribution



infrastructure, projects to modernize ports and airports for international trade, technical support programs to enhance agricultural productivity, the modernization of hospitals and medical infrastructure, and assistance helping Pyongyang attract international investment and financial support.<sup>10</sup>

North Korea quickly rejected Yoon's offer, calling it "trash" and criticized the South Korean president for his "idiot's strange behavior." This harsh reaction probably reflected the North Korean government's intense dislike of Yoon and its refusal to agree to an arrangement that could make the country economically dependent on South Korea.

North Korean officials have been unresponsive to calls to resume negotiations since 2021. Instead, starting in the fall of 2021, they significantly increased ballistic missile test launches. In March 2022, there were indications that the North was preparing to conduct a seventh underground nuclear test.

## **PRESIDENT BIDEN SAYS LITTLE ABOUT NORTH KOREA IN UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPEECHES, NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

In his first speech to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2021, President Trump strongly condemned Pyongyang for a sharp increase in missile launches and its ongoing nuclear program. President Trump also threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea if it threatened the U.S. or its allies. By contrast, President Biden included only brief references to North Korea in his General Assembly addresses in 2021 and 2022, reflecting his lack of interest in this subject.

President Biden's first General Assembly speech in September 2021 included just two brief references:

Similarly, we seek serious and sustained diplomacy to pursue the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

We seek concrete progress toward an available plan with tangible commitments that would increase stability on the Peninsula and in the region, as well as improve the lives of the people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In his September 2022 General Assembly speech, President Biden said even less about North Korea, ignoring the surge in North Korean missiles tests since January and its preparations to conduct a seventh nuclear test:

Despite our efforts to begin serious and sustained diplomacy, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continues to blatantly violate U.N. sanctions.

President Biden's 2022 General Assembly speech was a missed opportunity at a time of rising global instability. While the president devoted about half of the speech to the war in Ukraine and condemning Russian President Putin, the rest of his remarks were mostly about climate change. President Biden had little to say about other global crises and challenges.



The Biden Administration’s long-delayed National Security Strategy issued in October 2022 also had little to say about North Korea and had no references to the surge in North Korean missile tests or reports that North Korea could conduct a seventh nuclear test by mid-November 2022. North Korea only appeared in the Strategy in this sentence:

We will seek sustained diplomacy with North Korea to make tangible progress toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, while strengthening extended deterrence in the face of North Korean weapons of mass destruction and missile threats.<sup>11</sup>

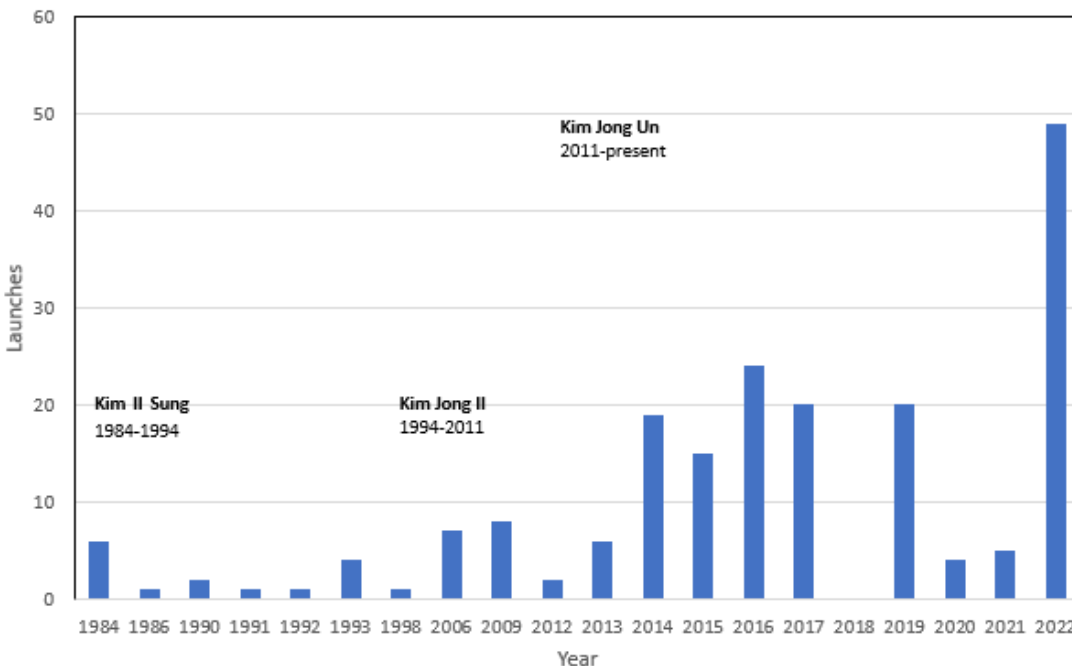
By contrast, North Korea and threats from its missile and nuclear programs were an important focus of President Trump’s 2017 National Security Strategy. North Korea was mentioned in the Trump Administration’s National Security Strategy 16 times.

### NORTH KOREA EXPANDS WMD PROGRAMS

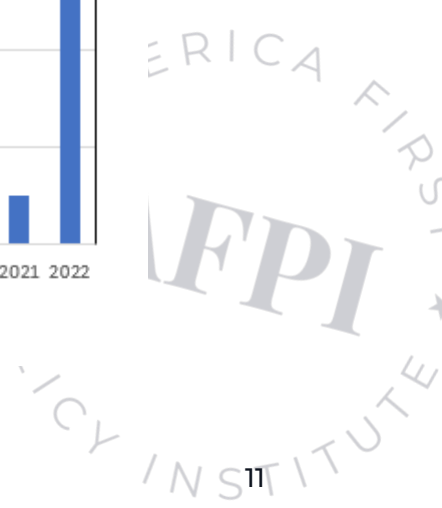
Starting in the fall of 2021, North Korea appeared to end self-imposed limits on its missile program.

North Korea suspended all missile tests from December 2017 to May 2019. It suspended nuclear tests after a September 2017 test. For the remainder of the Trump Administration and until the fall of 2021 in the Biden Administration, North Korea conducted test launches of small numbers of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs). Thirty were launched between May 2019 and January 2021; five in 2021.

Figure 1: Estimated Number of North Korean Missiles Tested, 1984-October 2022



Figures reflect the estimated number of missiles launched, not launch dates



There was a significant increase in missile tests in the fall of 2021 when North Korea tested three SRBMs, a submarine-launched ballistic missile, a long-range cruise missile, and a possible hypersonic missile. The number of North Korean missile tests exploded in 2022, with launches of approximately 49 missiles as of October 20, 2022. About 37 were SRBMs. Also tested were ICBMs, IRBMs, a possible cruise missile, a possible hypersonic missile, and a possible medium-range ballistic missile. Figure 1 compares North Korean missile tests from 1984 through October 20, 2022.

### **Significant Escalation of Tensions in Fall 2022**

Tensions with North Korea surged in the fall of 2022, with a new round of missile tests, more threats to use its nuclear weapons, and a vow to never give up its nuclear arsenal.

North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament passed a law on September 9, 2022 that raised new concerns about the country's nuclear doctrine and appeared to reverse Kim Jong Un's commitments to President Trump to end his nuclear weapons program. The new law declares North Korea a nuclear weapons state. In an address to the parliament, Kim said that the law stipulates this is "irreversible" and that there will be no more negotiations on denuclearization. The law also said North Korea could use nuclear weapons preemptively, in response to a non-nuclear attack, and in response to any attempt to remove Kim Jong Un from power.<sup>12</sup>

North Korea also resumed missile tests on September 9. Except for two cruise missile tests in August, these were the first missile tests since June 2022. Short-range missile tests on September 24 and 29 and October 1 appeared to be a response to U.S. joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan. The September 29 missile test probably also was in response to Vice President Kamala Harris' meeting with South Korean President Yoon during her visit to Seoul. In addition, North Korea test-launched two short-range missiles on October 5, apparently to protest a U.N. Security Council meeting on its missile and nuclear programs.

On October 9, North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan. North Korean officials said these launches were practice tests for "tactical nuclear strikes" on South Korea to "hit and wipe out" enemies. North Korea's state-controlled media claimed that one of these missiles was fired from an underwater missile silo and that North Korean soldiers simulated the loading of tactical nuclear warheads at this silo, located under a reservoir.

Underwater missile silos would make it hard for other nations to monitor and interdict North Korean missile launches. Because of the enormous technical challenges of building such silos, experts discounted this claim and suggested North Korea may have instead fired a missile from an underwater barge.<sup>13</sup>

The most provocative recent North Korean missile test occurred on October 4, 2022 when the North fired an IRBM over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. The missile flew about 4,600 km, the longest flight ever for a North Korean missile.



Since this missile flew over Japanese territory and was the first North Korean missile to do so since 2017, it was considered a significant provocation. Air raid sirens sounded in Japan and the government issued a shelter warning.

### **Ukraine War May be Factor in Surge in Missile Tests**

North Korea's recent provocations may represent the North allying itself closer to Moscow and away from Washington. North Korea was one of only four countries to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine and blames U.S. meddling for the Ukraine conflict. Earlier this year, Pyongyang followed Moscow's lead and recognized the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent nations. On October 4, 2022, North Korea recognized Moscow's annexation of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions into Russia.<sup>14</sup>

On September 5, 2022, Biden Administration officials told the press that newly declassified intelligence indicated Russia was buying millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea to support its invasion of Ukraine. This move reflected the desperate situation of Russian forces in Ukraine, which suffered major losses over the previous month and the Russian government's inability to buy weapons and ammunition abroad due to global sanctions. Russia turned to North Korea and Iran for weapons after China and other states refused to violate export controls and sell it arms. North Korea has denied reports it has sold weapons to Russia.<sup>15</sup>

### **OVERVIEW OF 2021-2022 NORTH KOREAN MISSILE TESTS**

Below is an assessment based on news reports of missiles North Korea is believed to have test-launched from January 2021 to October 2022. Some missiles and/or their types launched during this period have not been identified. Some reports of these tests may not be accurate.

**SRBM tests.** Most ballistic missiles tested during the Biden Administration through October 2022 were KN-23 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), believed to be more accurate, maneuverable-in-flight missiles with an estimated range of 410 km. The KN-23s fired since March 2021 may have been an improved variant with a range of 600 km.<sup>16</sup> North Korea fired about four of these missiles in 2021 and as many as 33 between January and October 2022. North Korea reportedly also tested-launched two KN-24s in January 2022. The KN-24 is believed to be a low-flying, maneuverable-in-flight missile with an estimated range of 410 km. At least two of the KN-23 launches, including on September 15, 2021 and January 14, 2022, were from railcar launchers, a launch method that makes these missiles more mobile and easier to hide. The large number of KN-23s tests suggest this missile is the new workhorse of the North's missile arsenal and has replaced older, less accurate missiles such as the Nodong.

**IRBM Tests.** North Korea resumed long-range missile testing on January 29, 2022 when it conducted a test-launch of three Hwasong-12 (KN-17), a liquid-fueled intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) with an estimated range of 4,500 km. North Korea is believed to also have fired a Hwasong-12 IRBM over Japanese territory on October 3, 2022.<sup>17</sup> Prior to 2022, this missile was last tested in September 2017 when it was fired over Japan. Apparently to limit international criticism of this test, the January 2022 launch did not fly over Japan but was fired



on a high, steep trajectory, reaching an estimated altitude of 2,000 km and traveling only 800 km into the Sea of Japan.



**Test Launch of KN-23 SLBM from a railcar launcher, January 14, 2022. (North Korea TV via KCNA Watch.)**

**ICBM Tests.** Another controversial development in North Korea’s missile program during this period was the resumption of intercontinental ballistic missile tests (ICBMs). The North conducted its first ICBM missile test since 2017 on March 24, 2022 when it launched what it claimed was the Hwasong-17 ICBM, estimated to have a range of 15,000 km. This would have been the first test-launch of this missile. South Korea claimed this was a Hwasong-15, last tested in 2017 with an estimated range of 13,000 km. Both missiles could strike the entire continental United States. North Korea also reportedly tested a second Hwasong-17 on May 25, 2022. According to the CSIS Missile Defense Project, North Korea also conducted four “ICBM development tests” in 2022—launches that test parts of a complete ICBM system.<sup>18</sup> North Korea claimed that one of these tests, on February 27, 2022, tested cameras that it plans to place in orbit on a reconnaissance satellite.

**Cruise Missile Tests.** The first North Korean missiles test-launched during the Biden presidency were two unidentified short-range cruise missiles fired on March 21, 2021. Previous North Korean short-range cruise missiles had estimated ranges between 160 and 249 km. President Biden did not treat this missile launch as a provocation and referred to it as “business as usual” for North Korea. Of more concern were two new long-range cruise missiles test-launched on September 13, 2021. With an estimated range of up to 1,500 km, this missile could strike most of Japan. The U.S. State Department condemned these launches as violations of U.N. Security

Council resolutions and a threat to North Korea's neighbors and the international community. North Korea also fired unidentified cruise missiles into the Sea of Japan on January 25 and August 17, 2022.

**SLBM tests.** North Korea is believed to have conducted its first submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test from a submerged submarine on October 19, 2021. This missile reportedly was a "navalized" version of the KN-23 SRBM with an estimated range of 690 km. North Korea test-launched an SLBM on May 7, 2022, probably to protest the inauguration of new North Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was sworn in on May 10. This missile may also have been a navalized KN-23.<sup>19</sup> An unidentified missile that North Korea claims was fired from an underwater silo on October 9, 2022 may have been a navalized KN-23 fired from an underwater barge.

**Alleged Hypersonic Missile Tests.** North Korea claimed to test hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) mounted on ballistic missiles in 2021 and 2022. Such weapons would be a significant threat since they are maneuverable and travel to their targets at very high speeds and low altitudes, making them almost impossible to track and thus capable of evading missile defenses. North Korea claimed to test-launch three hypersonic missiles on September 29, 2021, January 4, 2022, and January 11, 2022. However, there are questions as to whether Pyongyang can produce the advanced materials needed to construct HGVs so they can survive the extreme heat and pressure generated by their high speeds. Some experts therefore believe North Korea's alleged HGVs were actually maneuverable reentry vehicles, a type of ballistic missile warhead capable of shifting targets in flight. If this were the case, this missile would still be a significant advance for North Korea's missile program.

North Korea displayed the above missiles and others during a large military parade on April 26, 2022. This included its largest ICBM, the Hwasong-17; supposed hypersonic glide missiles; the KN-23, a new SLBM, a new type of medium-range ballistic missile with a maneuverable re-entry vehicle, and a new solid-fueled MRBM, the Pukguksong-6.<sup>20</sup>

## NUCLEAR WEAPON PROGRAM DEVELOPMENTS

A lull in North Korea's nuclear weapons program began in late 2017 due to President Trump's Maximum Pressure policy and personal diplomacy. Although experts did not believe the North ended work on its nuclear program due to President Trump's efforts, the work appeared to have slowed. After conducting two nuclear tests in 2016 and a huge 250-kiloton test in September 2017, the North suspended these tests. It also shut down its five-megawatt reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear facility in December 2018.

An August 2021 IAEA report revealed signs that North Korea ended the slowdown in its nuclear weapons program. According to the report, the Yongbyon nuclear reactor appeared to resume operation in July 2021. Even more disturbing, the IAEA reported indications that a radiochemical laboratory at the Yongbyon facility was used from mid-February 2021 to early July 2021 to reprocess used fuel rods from the Yongbyon reactor to produce plutonium.<sup>21</sup>



North Korea has periodically shut down the Yongbyon reactor to extract plutonium from its fuel rods to use as nuclear weapons fuel. Unlike other shutdowns of this reactor, the 2018 shutdown was not followed up a few months later with this procedure. Instead, Kim Jong Un offered at the Vietnam Summit in February 2019 to close the entire Yongbyon facility. President Trump did not accept this offer because it did not include the North's other nuclear facilities. North Korea probably did not resume operations at the Yongbyon reactor or reprocess its fuel rods during the remainder of the Trump presidency because it wanted to leave the door open to diplomacy and feared how President Trump would react.

The Biden Administration did nothing in response to the IAEA's revelation in August 2021 of the restart of the Yongbyon reactor and the reprocessing of its fuel rods because it was distracted by the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that month, a crisis that consumed the administration's attention and energies through the fall. As of October 2022, the Biden Administration still has not sought U.N. Security Council action on the restart of the Yongbyon reactor or the reprocessing of its fuel rods.

There were more indications that North Korea was ramping up its nuclear weapons program when satellite imagery spotted indications of excavation to regain access to North Korea's Punggye-ri underground nuclear test site. Pyongyang claimed to blow up Punggye-ri in May 2018. However, experts were skeptical at the time as to whether the North actually destroyed this facility. It now appears that North Korea only blew up its entrance tunnels.

According to a June 15, 2022 CSIS report, satellite imagery showed ongoing work at Punggye-ri entrance Tunnel Number 3 and new construction at another tunnel, Number 4. The report said work on Tunnel Number 3 appeared complete "and ready for an oft-speculated seventh nuclear test."<sup>22</sup>

Reuters reported on September 28, 2022 that South Korean intelligence assessed North Korea completed its work at the Punggye-ri site and could conduct an underground nuclear test between October 16 and November 7, 2022.<sup>23</sup>

## STALEMATE IN THE U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL

The Biden Administration has been unable to convince the U.N. Security Council to pass resolutions or statements on North Korea's expanded missile tests and possible preparations to conduct a seventh nuclear test. The Biden Administration tried several times to hold emergency U.N. Security Council meetings in response to the surge in North Korean missile tests. Two were attempted in October 2021. Several more were attempted between January and May 2022. China and Russia blocked these meetings not just from passing resolutions but also from approving non-binding statements. China and Russia instead promoted resolutions lifting sanctions from North Korea, specifically seafood and textile exports, allowing North Korean workers to be sent abroad and allowing energy imports.

After Russia and China blocked U.S. efforts to pass resolutions or statements in the Security Council on North Korea's missile tests, the U.S. Mission to the U.N. turned to a new tactic of





issuing joint statements with Council members and non-members who supported the U.S. position. The statements condemned North Korean missile tests and lamented the failure of the Security Council to take action.

This was a strange strategy that did not represent competent U.S. foreign policy. Since U.N. Security Council statements are toothless and usually ignored, the U.S.-led statements issued in place of them were even less consequential.

What made the U.S.-led statements even more strange was who was part of them—and who was not. Most of the statements issued in 2022 included Council members Albania, Brazil, Ireland, Norway, France, the U.K., the UAE, and non-Council members such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. A few included non-Council members New Zealand, Italy, and Canada.

Some of these statements, like one approved on March 25, 2022 after North Korea tested an ICBM, were joined by all of the above states. A few were only co-sponsored by South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

Several Security Council members did not join any U.S.-led statements in 2022: Gabon, India, Kenya, and Mexico, in addition to China and Russia. The refusal of these states to join the statements demonstrated a significant lack of support for U.S. positions on North Korea's missile tests. It also probably reflected concerns by some members that the United States was using Security Council statements to get around Chinese and Russian veto power in the Council.

After trying for months to convince China and Russia to support a Security Council resolution or statement criticizing the surge in North Korea's missile tests, the Biden Administration put a resolution to a vote on May 26, 2022 that would have increased U.N. sanctions. China and Russia vetoed the resolution.

This was the first resolution on North Korea to be vetoed since 1983. The Council adopted twenty resolutions on North Korea since North Korea was subjected to U.N. sanctions after its first nuclear test in 2006, including six Security Council resolutions passed during the Trump Administration. Previous Republican and Democrat administrations realized that because of the bad optics of a Security Council resolution on North Korea's missile and nuclear programs being defeated, no resolution on North Korea was better than a failed resolution.

Biden Administration officials did not understand this. They knew China and Russia planned to veto their resolution. But in this instance, China and Russia finally offered to support a non-binding Security Council presidential statement. The Biden Administration refused to agree to this, setting up the first veto of a Security Council resolution on North Korea in 39 years and a major embarrassment for the United States.

The U.S. and Japan returned to the Security Council on October 5, 2022 in response to North Korea firing an IRBM over Japanese territory on October 3. The United States and Japan raised their concerns about the IRBM test, the surge in North Korean missile tests in 2022, and possible preparations by the North to conduct a seventh nuclear test. However, the Council became



deadlocked when Russia and China blamed recent U.S.-South Korea-Japan military exercises for provoking North Korea. As a result, the Council session took no action and ended with a vague call to hold more discussions on this matter.<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although this report is an assessment of the Biden Administration's policy on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs through early October 2022, it is possible to draw several conclusions about this policy.

First, President Biden's approach to North Korea is a policy of neglect, disregard, and incompetence. It is very clear that Biden Administration officials regard North Korea as a low-priority security threat. Given its interaction with President Trump and Secretary Pompeo during the Trump Administration, Pyongyang probably considered the Biden Administration's efforts to engage it with a lower-level part-time official as a significant slight.

President Biden's approach to North Korea differed from President Obama's in that the Biden Administration was much more cynical about the chances of negotiating a nuclear agreement with Pyongyang. This probably was because several Biden Administration officials, notably Kurt Campbell, Wendy Sherman, Jake Sullivan, and the President, were part of the Obama Administration and knew from personal experience how North Korea repeatedly ignored their outreach efforts. They would not repeat the naivete of Obama's first year in office when Obama officials thought they could charm or persuade North Korea into a nuclear agreement with a new Democratic administration. This cynicism caused U.S.-North Korea relations to worsen.

As a result, Russia has exploited President Biden's lack of interest in North Korea by building a stronger relationship with Pyongyang at a time when Moscow is desperate for allies. Pyongyang sees Russia as far more reliable and supportive than the United States. While North Korea faces indifference and lectures from the Biden Administration, Russia eagerly wants closer relations and does not care about North Korea's abysmal human rights record and belligerent foreign policy. Moscow also is prepared to violate U.N. sanctions to buy North Korean arms. Moreover, Russia's desperation for an arms supplier puts North Korea in a strong bargaining position.

Second, the Biden Administration's decision to make North Korea a lower-priority national security issue was compounded by President Biden's poor foreign policy record and other global crises, such as the fiasco of withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan, tensions with China over Taiwan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, inflation, and soaring U.S. gasoline prices. Amid these crises, Biden officials promoted climate change as the most the serious threat to U.S. national security. Moreover, like the Obama Administration's efforts to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, Biden officials viewed negotiating their own nuclear deal with Iran as a higher priority than dealing with North Korea.

Third, like much of his foreign and domestic policies, President Biden sought to repudiate anything his predecessor President Trump had done. President Biden and his senior officials regularly ridiculed President Trump's personal diplomacy with Kim Jong Un and criticized his



North Korea policy as a failure that legitimized Kim and alienated America's allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Biden Administration officials promised a return to traditional diplomacy, working with America's allies in the region and engaging North Korea at a lower level. If this worked and North Korean officials agreed to denuclearize, President Biden said he would consider a one-on-one meeting with Kim Jong Un. By ignoring the significant achievements of Trump's North Korea policy and snubbing the North Korean leadership, Biden Administration officials set back prospects for U.S.-North Korea negotiations to reach a nuclear agreement.

Some interesting questions: Why, after being snubbed by the Biden Administration, did North Korea wait until the fall of 2021 to begin the surge in its missile program? Why did the number of missile tests explode in 2022? Why did North Korea restart the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and extract plutonium from its fuel rods in 2022?

The timing is interesting because North Korea has a record of engaging in provocations at the beginning of U.S. presidential administrations. For example, during the first year of the Obama Administration, North Korea, in April 2009, launched a space-launch rocket, announced it was rebuilding the Yongbyon reactor, and began reprocessing this reactor's spent fuel rods. In May 2009, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test.

There are several possible reasons why North Korea may have delayed staging provocations until nine months into the Biden Administration. It could be that North wanted to keep the door open to diplomacy. It may have been waiting for an offer to hold high-level talks. The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit North Korea hard, could have been a factor.

The most likely reason was President Biden's poor foreign policy record—well known by September 2021—and a growing perception of American weakness and indecisiveness. This perception probably emboldened Russia to invade Ukraine in February 2022 and caused China to increase its threats to Taiwan. The Biden Administration's perceived weakness also likely caused Iran to drag its feet and demand greater concessions in the Vienna talks on its nuclear program to revive the JCPOA.

I believe North Korean leaders shared this perception by the fall of 2021, leading them to ramp up their missile and nuclear programs in the hope of extracting major concessions from a weak and desperate U.S. administration. This situation appeared to move in another troubling direction over the last few months as the Biden Administration's mishandling of North Korea drove North Korea and Russia closer together.

Unless the Biden Administration names strong senior interlocutors to implement a strong and serious policy on North Korea, its nuclear and missile programs will likely continue to surge and become a more severe threat to regional and international security.

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