

Trump's North Korea diplomacy looks troubled. It may not mean war

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President Donald Trump says he's not happy about North Korea's recent military tests. This comes at the same time says the U.S. sent an aircraft carrier group to the Persian Gulf because the Iranians "were threatening." (May 9)

AP, AP

President Donald Trump's attempt to make a "great deal" with North Korea over its nuclear program appears increasingly in peril as Kim Jong Un has ordered new missile tests and directed his country's military "to cope with any emergency."

"Nobody's happy," Trump said Thursday after North Korea launched short-range missiles for the second time in less than a week. On Friday, Kim told his forces to be on high alert after the U.S. seized a [large cargo ship](#) that was attempting to smuggle coal out of North Korea in violation of United Nations Security Council sanctions.

"(Kim) stressed the need to further increase the capability of the defense units in the forefront area and on the western front to carry out combat tasks and keep full combat posture," the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), a state media outlet that rarely quotes Pyongyang's leader directly, reported. KCNA said Kim "set forth important tasks for further increasing the strike ability" of North Korea's weapon systems.

Diplomacy?: [North Korea launches second projectile in less than a week](#)

Analysts said the implications for Trump's diplomatic efforts at denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula were not entirely clear, and that while North Korea's escalating rhetoric and military preparedness did not signal war, it showed how far apart the two nations were after two historic summits between Trump and North Korea's leader.

"These new developments show that neither country is able to sustain any kind of negotiation beyond the summits," said Waheguru Pal Singh, a defense and foreign policy expert at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, who has also consulted for the United Nations on international peace and security issues.

"For me, the key marker will be if the U.S. resumes joint military exercises with South Korea, and how the North reacts," he said, referring to longstanding annual large-scale Washington-Seoul military drills Trump ended in March to reduce tensions.

About 28,000 U.S. troops plus thousands more family members and Department of Defense employees are stationed in South Korea, and their presence, and the joint military exercises, have for years been a source of North Korean anger.

The projectiles North Korea launched Saturday, and then Thursday, were the first since Pyongyang paused missile launches in late 2017. All splash-landed in the Pacific.

Trump has refused to yield to North Korean demands to lift economic sanctions.

Sanctions no-no: [U.S. seizes North Korea cargo ship linked to exporting tons of coal](#)



A photo released by the official North Korean Central News Agency shows missiles being fired during a drill at an undisclosed location in North Korea, on May 9, 2019.

KCNA, EPA-EFE

South Korea and U.S. intelligence analysts are still examining the missiles, but Michael Elleman, a missile defense expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank with offices in London and Washington, said they [resemble the Russian-designed Iskander](#), which has a range of about 200 miles and can fit a warhead.

"Iskander can exploit gaps in South Korean and American missile-defense coverage," Elleman wrote in a blog post on 38 North, a Koreas-focused website.

There was further evidence that North Korea may be ramping up its military capabilities even as the Trump administration has insisted the president has maintained a good relationship with Kim despite summits in Singapore and Vietnam that ended with no tangible denuclearization steps for Pyongyang.

On Thursday night, Beyond Parallel, a program affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a global affairs think tank, published [new satellite](#)

[images](#) that appeared to show that North Korea has been secretly operating a missile base that it has never previously disclosed.

In its analysis of the images, Beyond Parallel said that, though unconfirmed, the "Yusang-ni" base may house intercontinental ballistic missiles with a "first strike" capability against targets located throughout East Asia, the Pacific and the U.S.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has previously said that any missile tests by North Korea involving long-range or intercontinental missiles would be a diplomatic red line.

"It is evident that Trump's diplomatic strategy has reached an impasse," said Richard Caplan, a professor of international relations at Oxford University, England. "And trade frictions with China mean that he can't count on Beijing to rein Kim in," he added, referring to [fraught trade negotiations](#) between the U.S. and China.

North Korea relies on China for aid, fuel and other imports. Beijing has acted as a buffer between Pyongyang, a close ally, and Washington. Beijing's escalating trade war with Washington may make it feel less inclined to act as a referee.

Trade war: [U.S., China break off latest trade talks without announcing deal](#)

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is embroiled in another front: Iran.

The White House has increasingly appeared to risk military confrontation with Tehran following U.S. and Israeli intelligence warnings that Iran or its proxies could be planning attacks on U.S. troops and facilities in the Middle East.

On Friday, the [Pentagon](#) said it was adding a missile defense system and warship to the aircraft carrier strike group and B-52 bombers it has already sent to the Persian Gulf to meet any Iranian threats. "It's important that Iran understand that an attack on Americans or our interests would be met with an appropriate response," said Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan. He said the threats were credible.

Yet the vast majority of Iran-watchers and experts have accused the Trump administration, in particular [Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton](#), of potentially inflating the intelligence because of an almost obsessive dislike for Iran.

"Trump is treating North Korea as if it has no nuclear weapons, and Iran as if it does," said Singh, the defense expert at New York University, referring to what he said was the president's apparent willingness to take Kim at his word that he wants to denuclearize while ignoring repeated verifications from the United Nations' nuclear watchdog that Tehran has been complying with the 2015 nuclear accord Trump withdrew the U.S. from. "It's a very unorthodox approach," he said.