



Key Updates

- 1) North Korea's launch of the ICBM Hwasongpho-18 on July 12th, with an unprecedented 74-minute flight time, drew condemnation from the US, South Korea, and Japan, as discussions were ongoing at a NATO summit.
- 2) North Korea marked its 70th War Victory Day with a grand ceremony attended by Chinese and Russian officials, including a military parade showcasing their armed forces and strategic weapons, such as the ICBM Hwasongpho-18.

North Korea Launches Longest Ever Flight of ICBM

North Korea carried out the firing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) Hwasongpho-18 from its eastern coast on July 12th, sparking condemnation from the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The incident occurred amid discussions at a NATO summit, where leaders of South Korea and Japan expressed their concerns (MOFA 2023a). The missile's flight trajectory extended over a remarkable 74-minute duration, attaining an altitude of 6,000 km and covering a distance of 1,000 km. According to Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Hirokazu Matsuno, this represents the lengthiest observed flight time for a North Korean missile (PMOJ 2023). This launch comes in the wake of a series of recent grievances raised by North Korea. Among these is the allegation of U.S. reconnaissance planes violating their designated economic zone, expressing discontent over the presence of an American nuclear-powered cruise missile submarine in South Korea, and making a commitment to take responsive measures (KCNA 2023a; 2023b).

Following the event, on July 14th, in a trilateral foreign ministers' meeting attended by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Japan's Foreign Minister, and South Korea's Foreign Minister, the leaders have jointly condemned the launch of an ICBM by North Korea (DOS 2023a; MOFA 2023b; MOFA Japan 2023a). The three countries reaffirmed their commitment to collaborate with the UN and the global

community, aiming to ensure the comprehensive implementation of sanctions as outlined in UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea. Moreover, they expressed their determination to heighten efforts to prevent North Korea from generating illicit revenue through activities such as overseas labor and cyber operations, which fund its banned weapons programs. The United States underscored its resolute dedication to safeguarding South Korea and Japan using a full range of capabilities, including nuclear capabilities. To bolster security measures, the three countries will further enhance their trilateral cooperation by actively sharing real-time missile warning data, conducting defense exercises, engaging in anti-submarine activities, and participating in maritime interdiction exercises, all designed to effectively counter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. The G7 foreign ministers and the European Union also released a joint statement strongly criticizing the recent ICBM launch by North Korea, along with the earlier launches on May 31 and June 15, 2023 (DOS 2023b).

Moreover, on July 20th, a trilateral meeting involving the United States, South Korea, and Japan regarding North Korea-related matters took place in Karuizawa, Nagano Prefecture, Japan (DOS 2023c; 2023d). U.S. Special Representative for the DPRK, Ambassador Sung Kim, joined Japanese MOFA's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau Director General, Funakoshi Takehiro, and South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, Kim Gunn, in attendance. During the meeting, the officials engaged in discussions on how to address mutual concerns and shared interests with North Korea. They also deliberated on strategies aimed at enhancing trilateral security cooperation and emphasized the escalating risks associated with North Korea's cyber activities.

However, on 19th and 24th, North Korea subsequently launched ballistic missiles into the East Sea during the early morning hours, prompting the Japanese Prime Minister to issue directives (PMOJ 2023b; 2023c). During a press statement concerning the 2023 Preparatory Committee Meeting (PrepCom) convened in Vienna alongside other NPT States Parties, Matthew Miller, spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, emphasized North Korea as a representative country presenting a significant nuclear threat, along with Russia and China. Miller noted North Korea's active development of its nuclear arsenal and the use of intimidating rhetoric regarding its potential deployment (DOS 2023e).

North Korea's 70th War Victory Day Celebrations and China and Russia's Visit

North Korea annually commemorates July 27, 1953, the date of the armistice that ended the Korean War, as "the victory day in the Fatherland Liberation War." This year, North Korea celebrated its 70th anniversary with a massive and fervent ceremony, inviting senior officials from China and Russia to Pyongyang. On July 25th, Kim Jong Un visited the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs Cemetery, accompanied by Minister Kang Sun Nam and prominent officers from the DPRK Ministry of National Defense, as well as service commanders and commanding officers of significant combined units within the Korean People's Army (KCNA 2023c). A grand military parade was held in Pyongyang, showcasing the achievements of North Korea's armed forces and commemorating the historic victory (KCNA 2023d). The parade featured various units representing different phases of the war, including infantry, tank divisions, naval and air forces, and missile units. The display included strategic weapons that underscored the country's readiness to respond to nuclear threats and confrontations. A highlight was the appearance of the ICBM Hwasongpho-18, symbolizing "the might of the strategic force of North Korea."

During the meeting held to mark this occasion, Sergei Shoigu, Defense Minister of the Russian Federation, and Li Hongzhong, vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China participated (KCNA 2023e). At the meeting, Shoigu delivered a congratulatory speech on behalf of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, the President of Russia. In his letter, Putin articulated that North Korea's "firm support to the special military operation against Ukraine" showcased their "common interests and determination to counter the policy of the Western group which hinders the establishment of the truly multipolarized and just world" (KCNA 2023f). Even before this visit, during a Russian Foreign Ministry briefing on the 26th, spokesperson Maria Zakharova characterized this meeting, commemorating the "70th anniversary of signing the Korean Armistice Agreement" as an opportunity to strengthen "military ties" and enhance cooperation between the two countries (MOFA Russia 2023). The North Korea-Russia bilateral talks between Defense Ministers also centered around fostering cooperative relationships between their respective armed forces, aligned with this objective (KCNA 2023g).

A Chinese party and military delegation, led by Li, also engaged in a meeting with Choe Ryong Hae, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly. However, the specifics of the meeting were not disclosed to the public. In contrast to the talk with Russia, there were no ministerial-level North Korean officials (KCNA 2023h). On the other hand, during a Chinese press conference, spokesperson Mao Ning addressed queries concerning Li's visit. Reports indicated that Li's visit encompassed the conveyance of a personal letter from Chinese President Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, any details for the visit were not revealed during the press conference (MOFA China 2023). Additionally, during the same conference, Mao addressed concerns about China's stance on UN sanctions, considering that Chinese delegations participated in a parade in Pyongyang, where weaponry banned by UN sanctions was displayed. Mao reiterated China's steadfast position on the Korean Peninsula, stating, "On implementing UN Security Council's resolutions, China always fulfills its due international obligations."

Conclusion

After the launch of North Korea's ICBM Hwasongpho-18, it is becoming increasingly evident that the confrontational divide between the U.S.-South Korea-Japan partnership and the Russia-North Korea-China coalition has further solidified. Both sides are emphasizing military cooperation, indicating that military tensions on the Korean Peninsula are likely to persist for some time. Meanwhile, the distinctive approaches of North Korea's relationships with Russia and China are particularly notable during the War Victory Day Celebrations. Russia's explicit recognition of North Korea's involvement in the Russia-Ukrainian war places North Korea in a precarious position, potentially exposing it to increased international isolation as a state sponsor of warfare. On the other hand, China assumes a more passive stance, abstaining from sending a ministerial-level delegation to Pyongyang. Despite attending the ceremony, which included the display of an ICBM, China reiterates its commitment to international responsibilities as outlined by the UNSC Resolutions. Consequently, the regional security landscape might undergo significant shifts, contingent upon China's diplomatic relationships and roles. As the South Korean government contemplates China's potential proactive role in tackling these challenges, it is imperative to articulate shared concerns and security risks that transcend the confines of the two opposing camps. ■

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■ **Minah Kang** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University.

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Typeset by: Jisoo Park

For inquiries:

Jisoo Park, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 208)

jspark@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
Sajik-dong 261, Jongro-gu,
Seoul 03028, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr