

Koreas

Bid to wrest concessions

NK missile test signals return to brinkmanship

SEOUL, Jan 18, (AP) — Grappling with pandemic difficulties and U.S.-led sanctions over his nuclear ambitions, North Korean leader **Kim Jong Un** could be reviving his 2017 playbook of nuclear and missile brinkmanship to wrest concessions from Washington and his neighbors.

North Korea's short-range missile launches on Monday were its fourth round of missile tests this month and signaled a refusal to be ignored by the Biden administration, which has focused more on confronting bigger adversaries such as China and Russia.

The tests could also reflect a growing urgency in its need for outside relief after its economy decayed further under the severe sanctions and two years of pandemic border closures, experts say.

The two missiles launched Monday near the capital, Pyongyang, followed a resumption of railroad freight traffic with China that had been suspended over pandemic concerns, in what is likely an attempt to revive the desperate economy.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Monday that trade between Dandong in China and Sinuiju in North Korea will be maintained while pandemic controls stay in place.

While North Korea is likely to continue showcasing its weapons in the coming weeks, it could keep things relatively quiet before the opening of the February Winter Olympics in China, its main ally and economic lifeline, launching known short-range missiles rather than more provocative systems.



Jong Un

Dramatically

But it could dramatically raise the ante once the Beijing Games end. Du Hyeon Cha, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said Kim could resume testing nuclear explosives and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Kim suspended nuclear and ICBM tests in 2018 while engaging in talks with former U.S. President Donald Trump. But the diplomacy remains derailed since their second summit in 2019, when the Americans rejected North Korea's demand for major sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of its nuclear capabilities.

North Korea in recent months has ramped up tests of short-range missiles designed to defeat missile defenses in the region.

Its leaders may think it needs to stage more provocative tests to move the needle with the Biden administration, which has offered open-ended talks but has shown no willingness to ease sanctions unless Kim takes real steps to abandon his nuclear weapons program.

It's unclear whether nuclear or ICBM tests would extract a compromise from Washington, which is more likely to respond with further sanctions and military pressure, possibly including a resumption of major military drills with South Korea, Cha said.

Nam Sung-wook, a North Korea expert at Seoul's Korea University, said a nuclear test is more likely than an ICBM test because it would send a greater level of shock. The North may use that test to claim it has acquired an ability to produce a nuclear warhead small enough to fit on its purported hypersonic missile, which it first tested in September.

Nam said North Korea would time the test to maximize its political effect, with South Korean presidential elections scheduled in March and President Joe Biden facing crucial midterm elections in November. North Korea conducted its sixth and last test of a nuclear explosive device in September 2017.

North Korea strengthened efforts to expand its weapons capabilities following Kim's 2021 announcement of a new five-year plan to develop his military forces, with an ambitious wish list that included hypersonic missiles, solid-fuel ICBMs, spy satellites and submarine-launched nuclear missiles.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (left) greets a member of staff, during a visit to Finchley Memorial Hospital, in North London, Tuesday, Jan. 18. (AP)

Britain

'Lockdown-flouting parties'

PM, his foes, await 'partygate' report

LONDON, Jan 18, (AP) — As he fights for his career, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has one constant refrain: Wait for Sue Gray.

Gray is a senior but previously obscure civil servant who may hold Johnson's political future in her hands. She has the job of investigating allegations that the prime minister and his staff attended lockdown - flouting parties on government property.

Gray is due to report by the end of the month on claims government staff held late-night soirees, "bring your own booze" parties and "wine time Fridays" while Britain was under coronavirus restrictions in 2020 and 2021. The allegations have spawned public anger, incredulity and mockery, and prompted some in the governing Conservative Party to call for Johnson's resignation.

The prime minister last week made a contrite, carefully worded apology in Parliament, but stopped short of admitting rule-breaking and urged everyone to wait for Gray's verdict.

But Alex Thomas, a program director at think-tank the Institute for Government, said those expecting the report to "either clear the prime minister or damn

him" would likely be disappointed.

"This is a huge political and wider public issue," he said. "The Gray report is an important part of finding out what happened. But in the end this is a judgment for Conservative Cabinet ministers and MPs about whether they want Boris Johnson to lead their party and therefore lead the country."

Gray is investigating close to a dozen alleged gatherings held between May 2020 and April 2021, most in the prime minister's Downing Street office-cum-residence. One party took place when people in Britain were banned from socializing or visiting sick relatives in hospitals. Another came on the eve of Prince Philip's socially distanced funeral, at which widowed Queen Elizabeth II was forced to sit alone in church.

Acknowledged

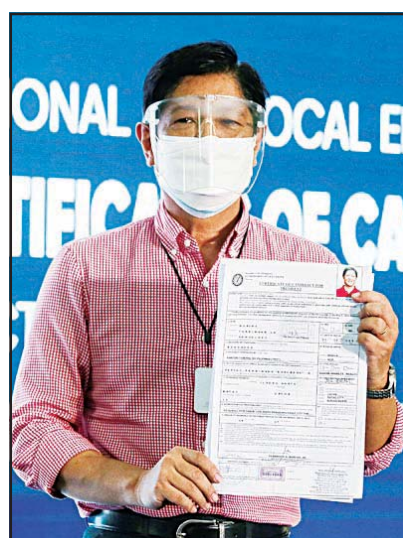
Johnson has acknowledged attending one event, a May 2020 garden party, but says he considered it a work event. But his former top aide Dominic Cummings, who is now a fierce critic of Johnson, said Monday that the prime minister had been warned the party broke the rules, and lied to Parliament by denying it.

Gray has access to "all relevant records" and power to interview officials, including Johnson, in her attempt to uncover the facts. The prime minister's office would not confirm whether Johnson has been quizzed by Gray, though Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said Johnson had "submitted himself" to investigation.

Gray can establish "whether individual disciplinary action is warranted" against officials, and London's Metropolitan Police force says it could open an investigation if she finds evidence of law-breaking.

Crucially, though, Gray has limited room to censure Johnson. Usually, civil service inquiries make recommendations to the prime minister. Here it's the prime minister who is being investigated, making Johnson the arbiter of his own punishment.

The inquiry is an unusually high-profile assignment for a woman used to exerting power behind the scenes. Gray has served both Labour and Conservative governments over several decades, according to a brief biography on the government website, with a gap in the 1980s when she ran a pub in Northern Ireland.



Former senator Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. poses after filing his certificate of candidacy for next year's presidential elections with the Commission on Elections at the Sofitel Harbor Garden Tent in Manila, Philippines, Wednesday, Oct 6, 2021. The son of former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos defeated on Monday, Jan 17, a bid to disqualify him from the May 9 presidential race but still faces other petitions from human rights victims. (AP)

Asia

Australia hospitals under stress: Australia reported a record high of COVID-19 deaths Tuesday, and its second-largest state declared an emergency in hospitals to cope with surging patient admissions and a staffing shortage due to the coronavirus.

The 74 deaths occurred in its three most populous states. New South Wales reported 36, Victoria reported 22 and Queensland 16. The previous daily record was 59 coronavirus-related deaths on Sept. 4, 2020.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt said there were signs that New South Wales' infec-

tion rate was peaking and Victoria was near a plateau. (AP)

Teen arrested in stabbing: Three people, including two students on their way to

take university entrance exams, were stabbed Saturday just outside of a test venue, and authorities arrested a 17-year-old student at the scene on suspicion of attempted murder, Tokyo police said.

The victims - two 18-year-old high school

students and a 72-year-old man - were all conscious and their injuries were not life-threatening when they were rushed to a hospital for treatment, police said. But the elderly victim was later in serious condition, local media reported. (AP)

Hybrid and Electric Vehicle workshop

ALSAYER Holding conducted a Hybrid and Electric Vehicle workshop for Teachers of Ministry of Education in cooperation with ENGIE Solutions, Kuwait



ALSAYER Holding Technical Training center recently conducted a Hybrid and Electric Vehicle workshop for Teachers of the Ministry of Education in partnership with ENGIE Solutions, an international leader in sustainable energy solutions at ALSAYER Multipurpose Hall in Ardiya. Experts from ENGIE Solutions demonstrated the technologies and capabilities behind EVBox, an advanced all-in-one EV charging platform that incorporates charging stations, software, and services all in one place.

The training involved 87 teachers to illustrate the latest technologies in hybrid and electric vehicles and their spread in the world soon to enable sustainable low-carbon growth for current and future generations & achieve the 2030 sustainable development goals in line with Kuwait National Development Plan 2035.

According to Mr. Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer, Executive Board Member & Sustainability Committee Chairman "we are pleased to conduct such technical workshops & share the latest

technologies in automotive field with MOE teachers. ALSAYER Holding ultimate goal is to drive positive changes in the lives of our stakeholders & convince for fuel efficient product variants and promote environment friendly innovative products like hybrid, electric with low emitting mobility solutions & enhance sustainability practices at all levels to face global challenges such as climate change & natural resource depletion and degradation."

The event was appreciated by Eng. Keefah Ibrahim Jamsheer, the General Director of Practical Studies MOE. She said "the role played by ALSAYER Holding to serve the community in the economic, social and cultural levels, and its keenness to cooperate with MOE in preparing and implementing training workshops for teachers of practical studies about Hybrid Cars and Electric Cars, to contribute to spreading environmental awareness among the segments of society by displaying the newest technologies, that will benefit the educational environment".

Mr. Yassine Lafhail, General Manager of ENGIE Solutions Kuwait, said: "At ENGIE, the transportation industry is a key area of development, as this sector is responsible for 23% of global CO2 emissions and is heavily dependent on oil. Today, the transformation to green mobility and carbon neutrality is quite essential, as more companies are incorporating these goals into their business operations. To meet this challenge, we are developing urban planning and advisory activities, as well as public transport solutions which include: electrification, signal system installations, service optimization and embedding alternative fuels such as hydrogen, electric mobility and natural gas. Other innovations include the development of smart and digital platforms that can also improve traffic fluidity."

"We are delighted to be part of this initiative and partner with one of the country's prominent automotive players, ALSAYER Holding, to bring forward this positive transformation," he concluded.