

U.S. Says North Korean Troops Ready for Ukraine Combat as Missile Raises Tensions

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North Korean soldiers. **Uwe Brodrecht (CC BY-SA 2.0)**

The United States said Thursday that up to 8,000 North Korean troops have reached Russia's border region with Ukraine ready for combat, after Pyongyang's firing of a long-range missile ramped up tensions days before the U.S. election.

Seeking advantage in his grinding invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin has brought in troops from North Korea, the first time Russia has invited foreign forces on its soil in more than a century.

Citing U.S. intelligence, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that some 8,000 of the 10,000 North Korean troops believed to be in Russia have made their way to the Kursk border region.

"We've not yet seen these troops deploy into combat against Ukrainian forces, but we would

expect that to happen in the coming days," Blinken told a news conference after four-way talks with the South Korean foreign and defense ministers.

Russia has been training North Korean troops in artillery, drones, basic artillery operations and trench clearing, "indicating that they fully intend to use these forces in frontline operations," Blinken said.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that North Korean troops were being supplied with Russian uniforms.

"Make no mistake, if these North Korean troops engage in combat or combat support operations against Ukraine, they would make themselves legitimate military targets," Austin said.

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Austin said the United States was also preparing a new package of military support to Ukraine in light of the North Korean troops' arrival.

Advance on missile technology

South Korea, which previously said that the North was preparing a missile or even nuclear test ahead of U.S. elections on Tuesday, said Pyongyang appeared to have fired a solid-propelled long-range ballistic missile on Thursday.

It flew 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) after being fired on a lofted trajectory — meaning up, not out, the South Korean military said.

Developing advanced solid-fuel missiles — which are quicker to launch and harder to detect and destroy in advance — has long been a goal for North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Kim called the sanctions-defying launch "an appropriate military action that fully meets the purpose of informing the rivals... of our counteraction will," according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

The test "updated the recent records of the strategic missile capability," of North Korea, the agency said, with Kim vowing his country "will never change its line of bolstering up its nuclear forces."

Japan said that the "ICBM-class" missile had flown for longer than any other one previously tested by the North, staying airborne for about 86 minutes and hitting altitudes of 7,000 kilometers.

Blinken and his South Korean and Japanese counterparts discussed the launch in a joint telephone call, issuing a statement afterward urging North Korea to end its "provocative and destabilizing actions."

The missile could in theory strike the mainland United States, although Washington said there was no immediate risk from the test-firing.

China, historically North Korea's closest ally, said it was "concerned about developments on the (Korean) peninsula" and urged a "political resolution" to the issue.

Ukraine outrage

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, speaking to South Korean media, denounced what he called inaction by his allies and said he was surprised by the "silence" of China on the North Korean troop deployment.

"I think that the reaction to this is nothing; it has been zero," Zelensky said.

South Korea has said it is reviewing whether to send weapons directly to Ukraine in response, an idea it has previously resisted due to longstanding domestic policy that prevents it from sending weaponry into active conflicts.

North Korea's missile launch "seems to have been carried out to divert attention from international criticism of its troop deployment," said Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul.

Seoul has warned that Russia may be providing new technology or expertise to Pyongyang in return for weapons and troops to help them fight Ukraine.

It is possible "Russia actually provided new technology for reentering the atmosphere," said Ahn Chan-il, a defector-turned-researcher who runs the World Institute for North Korea Studies.

But it is more likely that Thursday's test was a bid to distract from the troop deployment and get "the world's attention ahead of the U.S. presidential election," Ahn added.

Vice President Kamala Harris in a campaign rally Tuesday charged that Kim and Putin "are rooting" for her rival Donald Trump as he is "easy to manipulate with flattery and favor."

President Trump met three times with Kim, unusually personal diplomacy that reduced tensions but did not yield a lasting agreement.

North Korea has denied sending troops to Russia, but in the first comment in state media last week, its vice foreign minister said that if such a deployment were to happen, it would be in line with international law.

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