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WORLDASIA

North Korean Missiles Push Japan to Improve Deterrence

Pyongyang's weakness in defense could be exploited by Tokyo as it seeks to bolster ability to fire back, lawmakers say

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TOKYO—Japan has had enough of just playing missile defense. Now it's looking to play offense too.

North Korea's latest missile flight over Japan showed how Pyongyang could threaten its neighbor with attack, but military specialists say it has low ability to stop missiles coming the other way. That weakness is at the heart of a shift in Tokyo's thinking likely to be enshrined in a new defense strategy in December.

"Since North Korea's missile defenses are limited, Japan's possession of counterstrike capabilities would be an effective deterrent," said Masahisa Sato, a former colonel in Japan's military who now heads the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's foreign-affairs committee.



A ballistic missile fired Tuesday by North Korea flew on a path above northern Japan before

splashing down in the Pacific Ocean. It was the first such test since 2017, disrupting morning routines in the region as people were jolted by cellphone alerts and trains briefly halted service.

In response, Tokyo government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno said that “all realistic options are on the table” including adopting counterstrike capability.

In a move to show the U.S. is prepared to hit back if necessary against North Korea, the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan plans to return to waters near the Korean Peninsula after exercises with South Korea and Japan there last week, Seoul’s military said on Wednesday. A spokeswoman for the U.S. 7th Fleet couldn’t be reached for comment.

The late former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was an advocate of Japan acquiring counterstrike ability—hitting back at an enemy’s territory, or pre-emptively attacking if it appears the enemy is about to launch an assault. Discussions have kicked into higher gear in recent months as a strategy to deter both North Korea and China.

In April, a ruling-party panel said Japan would be justified in aiming to destroy not only military facilities such as missile bases but also the enemy’s command-and-control capabilities.

On Friday, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida spoke at the first meeting of a panel of experts charged with coming up with proposals to increase Japan’s defense spending. The panel’s advice will be reflected in a new national security strategy and an outline for defense spending for the next five years, both of which are set to be released by the end of the year.

Looming over the planning are the dozens of North Korean missile launches this year, including Tuesday’s, as well as China’s firing of missiles near Japan in response to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August. Defense analysts say the new strategy will likely call for Tokyo to build counterstrike capabilities.

“Opinion polls show that more than 50% of Japanese back the introduction of counterstrike capabilities after the invasion of Ukraine. Yesterday’s missile launch will further encourage public support,” said Tetsuo Kotani, a senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, a think tank.

Polls by public broadcaster NHK found support for the counterstrike idea rose to 55% this May from 40% two years earlier.

Left-of-center lawmakers say allowing Japan's military to strike another country's territory would take it further away from a strict reading of its constitution, which renounces war. Ruling-party lawmakers say the move would be justified under the principle of self-defense.



Tokyo has some ability to shoot down ballistic missiles with its fleet of Aegis warships and land-based PAC-3 interceptors. It plans to add more Aegis ships. But this “deterrence by denial” isn't assured of working against North Korea's large and growing missile force. A burst of simultaneous missiles could overwhelm Japan's defenses, and North Korea has held drills for such attacks.

Another form of deterrence is the ability to hit back, known as deterrence by punishment. Under a postwar security treaty, Japan has long relied on the threat of American retaliation to serve this purpose, but U.S. leaders have also encouraged Japan to do more on its own.

In a phone call Tuesday, Mr. Kishida and President Biden agreed on the need to increase joint deterrence, according to the Japanese government.

Some lawmakers and defense analysts say a strategy of deterrence by punishment could be particularly effective toward North Korea. While Pyongyang's offensive missile program has developed rapidly since Kim Jong Un took power in late 2011, North Korea remains vulnerable to ballistic and cruise missile attacks, they say.

Last year, North Korea tested an anti-aircraft battery that appeared to have a similar design to Russia's S-400 system and might also be able to defend against some missiles, but most of Pyongyang's air defenses are antiquated, said Daniel Pinkston, a lecturer on international relations at Troy University who studies the North Korean military.

“I don’t think North Korea would be able to intercept incoming missiles, especially multiple salvos,” he said.

Japan’s Defense Ministry aims to extend the range of an antiship missile known as Type 12 as one counterstrike option and submitted a budget request this year. Development of the new missiles is targeted to be complete by the spring of 2026, a ministry official said.

Mr. Sato, the Liberal Democratic Party foreign-affairs head, said North Korea’s focus on developing missiles to threaten other countries had given Japan and its allies an opportunity. If Japan attacked North Korea’s missile sites, Mr. Sato said, “they’d have no way to defend themselves.”

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