

# N. Korea signals it's preparing for a nuclear test

NORTH Korea looks set to detonate its first nuclear bomb in more than four years, as the US's sanctions disputes with Russia and China make further United Nations penalties against the country unlikely.

Workers have been observed digging a new passageway at the Punggye-ri site where North Korea conducted all six of its previous nuclear tests, South Korean media including the *Donga Ilbo* newspaper reported. A test could come as soon as next month, when Kim Jong Un is preparing to mark the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of his grandfather, state founder Kim Il Sung, the paper said, citing a security official it didn't identify.

The reports came as Mr. Kim delivered a fresh warning to the US that he planned to develop more "powerful striking capabilities," the official Korean Central News Agency reported Monday. The weapons would make North Korea more secure and "control all threats and blackmail by the imperialists," it reported him as saying.

While Mr. Kim has been signaling plans to resume major weapons tests

for more than two years, the US's campaign to punish Russia over its invasion of Ukraine has reduced the risk of getting with sanctions for such provocations. Any additional measures from the UN Security Council would require support from Russia, as well as China, which has led the criticism of Washington's efforts to squeeze Moscow economically.

Their reluctance was clear during a Security Council meeting Friday to discuss North Korea's first launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile since November 2017. Russia's representative, Anna Evstigneeva, rejected US calls for what she described as "turning the sanctions screw" against North Korea and advocated for a resolution drafted with China that would prioritize negotiations.

"North Korea almost certainly views the rifts between the US and Russia, and the US and China, as a golden opportunity to conduct longer-range missile — and probably even nuclear — tests," said Rachel Minyoung Lee, a non-resident fellow with the 38 North Program at the Stimson Center.

The response to the ICBM test shows how much the geopolitical landscape has shifted since 2017, when former US President Donald Trump threatened to unleash "fire and fury" against North Korea and secured China and Russia's support for tough UN sanctions against the regime. Mr. Trump subsequently launched a trade war against China and opened direct talks with Mr. Kim, prompting President Xi Jinping in Beijing to repair ties with Pyongyang, as well.

## FIRING LINE

The war in Ukraine has complicated things further, as President Joseph R. Biden's administration frames his showdown with Russia's Vladimir Putin as part of a global battle between democracy and autocracy. At the same time, the conflict has underscored the value of nuclear weapons in deterring direct military action by the US and its allies.

North Korea was one of five UN member states last month to vote against a resolution condemning the invasion. Pyongyang issued a statement defending the attack,

saying the blame "totally lies in the hegemonic policy of the US and the West which indulge themselves in high-handedness and arbitrariness towards other countries."

Although North Korea still languishes under a range of UN sanctions, it has continued to roll out an array of new missiles that would require smaller, more advanced warheads to pose a credible deterrent to the US. Such weapons could increase Mr. Kim's leverage if he decides to return to nuclear disarmament talks and ease the sanctions choking the economy.

In the closing days of Mr. Trump's term, Mr. Kim laid out a five-year road map for his nuclear program that included making warheads smaller and lighter, as well as more powerful. Weapons mentioned in that speech, such as hypersonic missiles that are designed to evade US-operated missile shields and hit American bases in South Korea and Japan, have been among the those tested in recent months.

The recent work at the Punggye-ri site appears designed to reverse Mr. Kim's efforts to dismantle the

site before his first landmark summit with Mr. Trump in June 2018. That demolition was intended to demonstrate North Korea's commitment to a self-imposed testing freeze that Mr. Kim later declared null-and-void after talks with Mr. Trump fell apart.

Observers will be watching where in the site's various tunnels any bomb is detonated for clues about Kim's aims, said Lee Choon-geun, a senior research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute. South Korea's military has detected signs of work at tunnel No. 3, the *Donga* newspaper said.

"If North Korea conducts its next nuclear test in the third tunnel, then it is testing its nuclear-warhead-miniaturization technology for tactical nuclear weapons," Lee Choon-geun said. A fourth tunnel was believed to be reserved for testing thermonuclear devices, he said.

Top military officials from Japan, South Korea and the US are set to meet this week in Hawaii to discuss issues including the recent ICBM launch,

Yonhap News Agency reported Tuesday, citing an unnamed source.

On Friday, North Korea claimed it fired off a Hwasong-17, which weapons experts believe is the largest road-mobile missile of its kind and designed to overwhelm US defenses with multiple warheads. That launch and the slick, highly produced video North Korea released to promote it shows that Mr. Kim is using such tests to build national unity.

But Mr. Kim might have launched another, less-advanced ICBM after an earlier attempt to fire the bigger missile ended in failure, the Yonhap News Agency reported, citing a senior official in Seoul. The video was then potentially edited to make it look like the more advanced missile was launched successfully, according to an analysis by NK News.

"Kim regime is using these tests to unify the domestic public, give the people a sense of pride, and even justify their economic difficulties in the name of strengthening the country's military capabilities," Rachel Minyoung Lee said. — **Bloomberg**

## World's longest passenger flight plans to avoid Russian skies

CATHAY PACIFIC Airways Ltd. plans to reroute its New York-Hong Kong service to avoid Russian airspace, in what would be the world's longest commercial passenger flight by distance. It will take about 17 hours.

The airline plans to fly from John F. Kennedy International Airport over the Atlantic Ocean, the UK, southern Europe and central Asia, according to a memo to Cathay flight staff seen by Bloomberg News. The distance of 16,618 kilometers (10,326 miles) would surpass Singapore Airlines Ltd.'s New York service, which takes about 17-and-a-half hours to cover 15,349 kilometers, FlightRadar24 data show.

A spokeswoman for Cathay said Airbus SE's A350-1000 is capable of operating the route, which would typically fly over the Arctic and through Russian airspace. Many Asian airlines are avoiding Russia due to the conflict in Ukraine.

"We are always running contingency routings for potential events or scenarios," the spokeswoman said. "The Transatlantic option relies on the facilitation of strong seasonal tailwinds at this time of the year in order for the flight time to be between 16 and 17 hours, thereby making it more favorable than the Transpacific route."

The airline said it is monitoring tailwinds every day, and that their benefits are diminishing. Jet streams tend to be stronger in the winter months.

Cathay is seeking overflight permits to operate the service, which it said was normal for a new route. Before the pandemic, which has severely reduced its schedule, the carrier operated up to three

round-trips between Hong Kong and JFK daily.

Cathay's most recent New York-Hong Kong flight stopped in Los Angeles before continuing over the Pacific and into the Asian financial hub without entering Russian airspace. The new, extended route would remove the need for a stopover, making it more cost-effective and competitive.

Several airlines have plotted routes to avoid Russia, mostly between Asia and Europe. Japan Airlines Co Ltd. rerouted its service from Tokyo's Haneda airport to London's Heathrow via Alaska and Canada rather than flying over Siberia. That added four-and-a-half hours to the 11-hour 55-minute journey.

Such flight changes are likely to only be temporary given the costs carriers face from high oil prices, as well as uncertainty over the accessibility of Russian airspace.

Qantas Airways Ltd.'s 20-hour trips connecting Sydney with London and New York using an ultra-long range Airbus widebody jet are still being planned after the pandemic delayed their launch. The airline did a test of the so-called Project Sunrise service in 2019, flying New York to Sydney with 40 passengers.

Air New Zealand Ltd. last week unveiled a new ultra-long service from Auckland to New York JFK, while Qantas announced a Melbourne-Dallas route on Monday, both of which are due to start later this year. Qatar Airways QSCS and Emirates Airline flights to Auckland were among the world's longest until they were suspended due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). — **Bloomberg**

## Biden's Putin power remark raises questions about United States' long-term Russia strategy

WASHINGTON — US President Joseph R. Biden, his aides and Western allies are scrambling to explain his remark that Russian leader Vladimir Putin could not remain in power because they do not want to escalate conflict between Washington and Moscow, officials said.

The nine-word line, at the end of a 27-minute speech in Warsaw on Saturday, has distracted from what some observers regard as the best piece of rhetoric of Mr. Biden's presidency. It made foreign allies uneasy at the end of an otherwise successful trip aimed at uniting allies against Russia, and has raised fresh questions about the United States' long-term strategy for its former Cold War foe.

"For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power," Mr. Biden said in the Polish capital after condemning Mr. Putin's month-long war in Ukraine at length.

A White House official told Reuters the comment about Mr. Putin was not in the scripted speech. Asked whether the sentiment reflected Mr. Biden's true feelings, the official didn't answer directly but noted that the US president has not shied away from calling his Russian counterpart a "butcher" and "war criminal."

In his political career, Mr. Biden has made some notable verbal missteps during freewheeling sessions with reporters or other spontaneous events. On his recent European trip, Mr. Biden said the United States would respond "in kind" if Russia used chemical weapons in Ukraine and suggested that US troops would go to the frontlines, neither of which represent US policy.

But Saturday's remark wasn't one of those situations — he was speaking to an audience from a teleprompter. In the minutes before he called for Mr. Putin's departure from power, the crowd of roughly 1,000 people was clearly feeding off Mr. Biden's remarks, clapping, waving flags and even starting a chant.

Mr. Biden's emotional declaration gave voice to the frustration that many Western countries — and many US voters — feel about the invasion of Ukraine, one ally to the Democratic president said.

It came, officials explained, after a day that included Biden meeting with Ukrainian refugees uprooted by war and government officials in Ukraine trying to respond to Russian bombing campaigns that have ravaged cities and, according to the United Nations human rights office, killed at least 1,119 civilians.

Nonetheless, the remark echoes longstanding accusations from Russia and other nations that the United States seeks an imperialistic role in world conflicts, and escalates tensions as the West tries to manage an increasingly unpredictable Mr. Putin.

The clean-up effort was swift and widespread, reflecting a strong desire inside the administration to avoid escalation with Russia, even if it dinged Mr. Biden's reputation.

The US secretary of state, White House press office, US ambassador to NATO, and German chancellor all shot the idea of regime change down within a day, capped by Mr. Biden himself who bluntly said "No," when asked by reporters in Washington if he is calling for regime change.

On Monday, Mr. Biden explained to reporters at the White House that his remark reflected his own "moral outrage" about Mr. Putin's actions, rather than any policy change. Still he added, if the Russian leader "continues on the course that he's on, he's going to become a pariah worldwide and who knows what he becomes at home in terms of support."

Officials in the Biden administration have said in recent weeks that they have grown increasingly concerned about Mr. Putin's decision-making and his country's more casual invocation of the threat of nuclear weapons, a posture that made Mr. Biden's statement even more surprising.

## WHAT IS THE END GAME?

In recent weeks, the Biden administration has distanced itself from suggestions, including by US Senator Lindsey Graham, that the solution to the crisis in Ukraine is Mr. Putin's forcible removal.

But it has described actions against Russian companies, banks, government officials and oligarchs as directly aimed at Mr. Putin, an attempt to alienate him from supporters domestically and on the foreign stage.

Mr. Putin is now more "isolated from the world than he has ever been," Mr. Biden said during his State of the Union address to Congress on March 1; a week later he announced plans to "squeeze" Mr. Putin further.

Despite engaging directly with Mr. Putin, Mr. Biden was unsuccessful in coaxing him into not invading Ukraine in the first place. Since the invasion began on Feb. 24, Mr. Biden has attempted to speak directly to the Russians instead. "You, the Russian people, are not our enemy," the US president said in Warsaw.

Biden officials have not answered questions about what "end game" scenarios the White House envisions around the Ukraine invasion, or how they think Mr. Putin might deescalate the conflict.

Last week, one of Mr. Putin's closest allies, Dmitry Medvedev, warned the United States that the Russian president's departure from power could create an unstable leadership in Moscow "with a maximum number of nuclear weapons aimed at targets in the United States and Europe."

Asked about Mr. Biden's comment in Warsaw, which received little coverage on Russian state television, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "This is a statement that is certainly alarming."

Andrew Lohsen, an expert on the conflict and a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank, warned: "This is going to be part and parcel of Russian disinformation campaigns to malign the motivations of the United States." — **Reuters**

## Fuel prices,

from S1/1

Philippine Interisland Shipping Association Executive Director Pedro G. Aguilar said during a recent House committee hearing on the fuel crisis that the shipping companies need a "substantial" reduction in the fees and charges imposed by the regulatory agencies such as the PPA.

## AIRPORTS

Fitch Solutions Country Risk & Industry Research on Tuesday said the Philippines is still among the leading markets in the region in terms of airport development projects.

"Asia hosts over \$220 billion worth of airport infrastructure projects," the think tank said, citing its Infrastructure Key Projects Data. "South Korea accounts for the largest share in Asia, with \$46.1 billion worth of airport infrastructure projects, ahead of the Philippines at \$33.9 billion and Vietnam at \$23.3 billion."

"We note that this is also a notable shift from the top three largest markets from what our data captured just over a year ago — which were the Philippines, South Korea and China respectively," it added.

Fitch Solutions noted that there are medium- to long-term opportunities in the region because majority of the airport projects are "currently at the pre-construction phase."

However, it cited near-term uncertainties arising from the pandemic and "the possibility of re-assessing business cases for some airport infrastructure developments due to disruptions in air travel."

In the Philippines, Mr. Tugade said the construction of San Miguel Corp.'s airport project in Bulacan is "ongoing." He added that the Tuguegarao Airport Development Project will also be completed soon.

"To date, the physical accomplishment of the project now stands at 98%, and is targeted to be finished within the last 94 days of the Duterte Administration," the DoTr said in a statement. — **Arjay L. Balinbin**

## COVID-19,

from S1/1

Among the 17 regions, Calabarzon had the highest number of deaths due to COVID-19 with 21,165. This was followed by the National Capital Region with 20,924 deaths and Central Luzon with 18,828.

On the other hand, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao recorded the lowest number of COVID-19 deaths with 162.

In terms of cities and municipalities, Quezon City had the most deaths due to COVID-19 with 4,660, accounting for 22.3% of the total. It was followed by City of Manila (2,976) and Pasig City (2,075).

According to the PSA, figures on COVID-19 deaths were based on the descriptions written on the medical certificate portion of all death certificates received and certified by local health officers of the concerned local government units.

This differs from the figures released by the Department of Health (DoH), which collects data through a surveillance system and only includes confirmed cases.

As of March 28, the DoH data showed there were 59,030 total deaths from COVID-19. Active COVID-19 cases stood at 41,846, while total infections reached 3.68 million. — **Abigail Marie P. Yraola**

## BPOs,

from S1/1

PEZA had pushed for the extension of the WFH setup amid soaring fuel prices and the continued threat of COVID-19.


However, the FIRB earlier this month rejected the agency's appeal, saying the WFH arrangement was a "time-bound temporary measure" that was adopted to allow companies to continue operations amid the COVID-19 surge.

Finance Secretary Carlos G. Dominguez III earlier said IT-BPO companies, which operate within ecozones, can choose to implement WFH arrangements but any tax incentives will be revoked.

"Given the significant reduction in COVID-19 cases and the general economic recovery strategy to enjoin all businesses to do more on-site operations to encourage the revival of the other sectors, particularly the micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises around offices, there has been a decision not to extend the 90-10 WFH arrangement," Trade Secretary Ramon M. Lopez said in a statement on Monday.

He noted firms that operate outside ecozones "have more flexibility as to the degree of WFH arrangements that is suitable to their operations."

The Alliance of Call Center Workers (ACW) previously said the implementation of a hybrid work arrangement is the only "healthy" compromise for IT-BPO workers. ACW claimed that a significant number of workers would be willing to resign due to the hard transition from a WFH arrangement to on-site work.



**PHILIPPINE PORTS AUTHORITY**

### NOTICE OF PUBLIC AUCTION OF UNSERVICEABLE PROPERTIES

The Philippine Ports Authority is inviting offers for the public auction by way of sealed bids on the following unserviceable properties for disposal on 'AS IS WHERE IS' basis:

Lot No.	Item Description	Location	Minimum Floor Price (+12% VAT)
1	Ten (10) units Unserviceable Motor Vehicles	Motorpool Bldg. South Harbor, Port Area, Manila	Php 1,665,748.00

The significant times and deadlines of public auction activities are shown below:

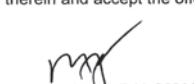
ACTIVITY	DATES	VENUE
1. Posting of Notice of Public Auction of Unserviceable Property	March 28 – 30, 2022	Business World, PPA Websites and Bulletin Boards at PPA Head Office Building, PMA NCR South, PMA NCR North
2. Availability of Bid Form	March 28 – April 01, 2022	Mezzanine Flr., PPA Bldg.
3. Pre-Auction Conference	April 04, 2022 10:00am	Function Room, PPA Bldg.
4. Submission of Sealed Bids	April 05, 2022 09:00am	Function Room, PPA Bldg.
5. Opening of Bids	April 05, 2022 10:00am	Function Room, PPA Bldg.

**Bid Bond in the form of Manager's/Cashier's Check equivalent to not less than 10% of the floor price shall be submitted together with the proposal.**

Additional information, request for inspection and bid forms may be secured at the Property Management Division, Administrative Services Department, Mezzanine flr., PPA Bldg, Bonifacio Drive, Port Area, Manila or call 527-4852 or 527-8356 local 204.

Awardee(s) in previous public auction who failed to settle final payments and/or withdrew subject item(s) shall no longer be allowed to participate in this activity.

The Philippine Ports Authority reserves the right to reject any or all bids, waive any defects therein and accept the offer most advantageous to the Authority.

  
**MARK J. PALOMAR**  
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 Head Office Disposal Committee

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