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North Korea Unveils New Short-Range Ballistic Missile

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North Korea's new short-range ballistic missile: KCNA.

SEOUL, SINGAPORE—North Korea has revealed a new short-range ballistic missile that is similar to the Russian 9K720 Iskander and probably a solid-propellant supplement for derivatives of the cumbersome, liquid-propellant Scud.

Twelve missiles of the new design—or, conceivably, mockups—appeared in a military parade in Pyongyang on Feb. 8, mounted in pairs on eight-wheel launcher vehicles.

The new missile looked similar in shape and size to the Iskander, a single-stage weapon capable of hurling 700 kg (1,500 lb.) warheads over 400-500 km (250–310 mi.). The North Korean launchers looked shorter than the 9P78 (MAZ-79306) vehicles that carry Iskanders, also in pairs, but the length occupied by the missiles appeared to be about the same.

The North Korean weapon is unlikely to be larger than Iskander. In low-resolution images of the parade, the diameter of the missiles seemed to be about half as great as the heights of hatted soldiers standing alongside the launcher vehicles. The Iskander has a diameter of 92 cm (3 ft.).

For missions requiring 500-km ranges, North Korea has hitherto relied on the Hwasong 6, a local copy of the Soviet R-17, specifically a version designated Scud C by NATO. Hwasong 6 is estimated to carry a warhead of 700-770 kg, quite similar in mass to the Iskander's payload.

North Korea also deploys the Hwasong 5, a copy of the Scud C in the R-17 series with a range of 300 km while carrying about 1 metric ton.

Since North Korea has already deployed a solid-propellant missile in the form of the KN-02 Toksa, estimated to have a range 160 km, it is quite likely to have used the same kind of motor for the apparent Hwasong 6 successor. But photographs of the new missiles, which could have confirmed that point, were unavailable.

Use of solid propellant in the new North Korean missile would considerably improve mobility and reaction time. Liquid-propellant missiles are more fragile than those with solid propellants, and they need more time for preparation for launch.

So solid-propellant replacements for Hwasong 6 would be harder to find, track and destroy before launch: being more robust, they could be moved on rougher roads and therefore be hidden in more locations. If they are capable of being fired on very short notice, the prospects of hitting them while they are being made ready would be poor.

A range of 500 km would cover almost all of South Korea and Chinese territory near North Korea, but not main Japanese islands.

North Korea is likely to continue to build R-17 derivatives even while making the solid-propellant missile. In May 2017, North Korea said it had tested an R-17 derivative that could fly 450 km and had a 50% chance of landing within 7 m of the aim point.

The possibility cannot be excluded that what looked like new missiles in the parade were in fact mockups, intended to make the U.S. and South Korea think that North Korea's force of short-range ballistic missiles had become a more intractable problem.

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