

N Korea missile failure as Pence visit affirms US commitment to region



US Vice-President Mike Pence visits the National Cemetery in Seoul.

[Rowan Callick](#), The Australian, 12:00AM April 17, 2017

North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un yesterday botched a fresh missile test, a day after staging a defiant giant military parade and hours before US Vice-President Mike Pence arrived in South Korea for talks on curbing Pyongyang's weapons programs.

The South Korean and US military said the latest launch of a medium-range missile, conducted as a US carrier strike group approached the Korean peninsula, was a failure. "The missile blew up almost immediately," the US Defence Department said of the 7.21am (AEST) launch from near Sinpo on the North's east coast, into the Sea of Japan. Earlier this month, a missile was launched successfully from the same region — timed for the start of the summit in Florida between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

More successfully in prestige terms, almost 60 missiles were driven in a military parade in Pyongyang on Saturday to celebrate the 105th birthday of the regime's founder, Kim Il-sung, the Day of the Sun.

The US had good intelligence both before and after the launch, said a White House foreign policy adviser travelling with Mr Pence, who arrived in Seoul yesterday afternoon to start a 10-day trip to Asia that will also include Japan and Australia. His visit is a sign, said his aides, of the US commitment to its allies in the region in the face of rising tension.

Mr Pence will arrive in Sydney on Saturday for his first official visit to Australia for talks with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Bill Shorten.

[Xi Jinping provides only way out](#)Rowan Callick

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said President Donald Trump had been briefed on the latest test but had “no further comment”.

No planned response is expected from the Trump administration because the official travelling with Mr Pence said there was no need for the US to reinforce the failure. The official said that had it been a nuclear test, “other actions would have been taken by the US”. Mr Pence last night said North Korea’s “provocation” was another reminder of the risks US and South Korean service members faced every day “in the defence of the freedom of the people of South Korea and the defence of America in this part of the world”.

US National Security Adviser HR McMaster has told British security chiefs and military commanders that America was confident that it had the intelligence to target the right North Korean nuclear weapons sites and the capability to destroy them. “They’ll do anything it takes,” a senior British source said.

Mr McMaster last night said: “I think there’s an international consensus now — including the Chinese and the Chinese leadership — that this is a situation that just can’t continue.”

North Korea has conducted five nuclear tests, including two last year. Recent satellite imagery suggests the country could conduct another underground nuclear test at any time.

The White House believes that yesterday’s test involved a medium-range ballistic missile that failed within four to five seconds after launch, and that it did not involve an intercontinental ballistic missile. The North regularly launches short-range missiles, but is also developing mid-range and long-range missiles meant to target US troops in Asia and, eventually, the US mainland.

South Korea’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement: “North Korea showing a variety of offensive missiles at (Saturday’s) military parade and daring to fire a ballistic missile today is a show of force that threatens the whole world”.

On his Asian tour, Mr Pence will be pressing allies to maintain maximum pressure on Pyongyang, although South Korea is massively distracted by its sudden presidential election campaign to replace the impeached Park Geun-hye, with voting on May 9.

A spokesman for the general staff of the (North) Korean People’s Army was quoted by the national newsagency KCNA as saying that Washington had chosen the path of “open threat and blackmail, and condemning the “serious military hysteria” in the Trump White House. “Our toughest counteraction against the US and its vassal forces will be taken in such a merciless manner so as not to allow the aggressors to survive ... The US has to come to its senses and make a proper option to resolve the problem,” he said.

Former British foreign secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind suggested the malfunctioning North Korean missile launch could have been caused by a US cyber attack. He told the BBC that the US had previous success in interrupting tests in Iran and he alluded to a similar result in North Korea's latest missile launch. "It could have failed because the system is not competent enough to make it work, but there is a very strong belief that the US — through cyber methods — has been successful on several occasions in interrupting these sorts of tests and making them fail. So if the Americans are able to do that that's probably very encouraging."

Last week, a US official said Mr Pence will reaffirm America's "enduring presence in the region" and "thank Australia for its partnership in addressing global issues".

But North Korea will be top of the agenda, against the backdrop of the escalating tension between Washington and Pyongyang.