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NKOREAN MISSILE THREAT A REPLAY OF 1998

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North Korea's reported plans to test a long-range missile have sparked fears of a replay of 1998 when the communist state fired a missile over Japan.

One missile flew over northern Japan on the afternoon of August 31, 1998, crashing into the Pacific Ocean, while another fell into the Sea of Japan (East Sea) between the two countries.

The missile launches shocked Japan and its allies, moving Tokyo closer to the United States but also creating momentum for new negotiations with the defiant regime.

North Korea tried to pass off the tests as a satellite launch and defended them as a matter of sovereignty.

But the Japanese parliament denounced the missile launch as "unforgivable" and vowed to take a firm stance.

"Sovereignty is not something you claim by aiming (a missile) at another country," then Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka said.

A year after the tests, North Korea unilaterally announced a moratorium on long-range launches. In 2002, it promised Japan not to conduct further tests as a condition to work toward normalized relations

The missile launch had led Japan, the United States and the European Union to suspend economic and food aid and postpone the signing of a cost-sharing agreement for two light-water nuclear reactors.

The reactors, which are designed for civilian energy use, had been promised in 1994 as part of a US-led package in exchange for the North giving up its military nuclear program.

The deal collapsed in 2002 when the administration of US President George W. Bush, who had labelled North Korea part of an "axis of evil," said the North had violated the agreement by secretly enriching uranium.

Since 1998, Tokyo and Washington have stepped up a joint program to develop a missile defense shield.

Despite a falling defense budget, Japan stepped up spending to 139.9 billion yen (1.2 billion dollars) in the current fiscal year for the research and has eased its official pacifism to allow exports of weapons parts to Washington as part of the project.

The current fears of a missile launch come amid a new stalemate with North Korea.

Pyongyang boasted last year it had nuclear weapons and agreed in principle to give up its program in exchange for aid and security guarantees.

But the North walked out of six-nation talks in November to protest US financial sanctions imposed over alleged money-laundering and counterfeiting.