

MISSILE DEFENSE REVIEW

MDAA Spotlight Series on Drone and Missile Warfare

North Korea’s Naval Cruise-Missile Capability and Recent Kang Kon Destroyer Trials

Key Points

- **The capability demonstrated is not new — the platform milestone is.** North Korea first fired ship-launched Hwasal-series “strategic” cruise missiles from the lead Choe Hyon-class destroyer in April 2025, and it repeated the feat in March and April 2026. The 3 July trial extends this demonstrated capability to a second hull, the Kang Kon.^[1]
- **This was a combat-system shakedown, not a first-of-type debut.** The launch was bundled with naval gunnery, automatic-cannon fire, electronic-warfare checks, and target-detection and fire-control evaluations — all integration steps immediately preceding commissioning.^[2]
- **The “strategic” label signals nuclear intent.** Pyongyang reserves that term for nuclear-capable systems; the Hwasal-family land-attack cruise missile, with an assessed 1,500–2,000 km range, is reportedly able to carry a nuclear warhead, which would add a mobile sea-based platform to North Korea’s nuclear force.^[3]
- **Commissioning is weeks away; credible combat effectiveness is not.** Kim ordered the Kang Kon into active service within two months, and the lead ship Choe Hyon commissioned on 23 June 2026 — but unproven sensor integration, combat management, datalinks, crew training, reload, and propulsion reliability are all likely delay this capability achieving operational readiness.^[4]
- **The trajectory, not the single test, is this development’s real significance.** Pyongyang plans two 5,000-ton destroyers per year toward a roughly twelve-ship fleet by the early 2030s, plus 10,000-ton cruisers — an effort widely assessed as Russian-assisted and aimed at a dispersed, survivable nuclear-delivery architecture.^[5]

A Test-Firing Event

On 3 July 2026, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un observed the test-firing of a “strategic” cruise missile and a battery of combat-system evaluations aboard the Kang Kon, the second of the country’s new 5,000-ton Choe Hyon-class guided-missile destroyers. State media (KCNA) reported the trial on 5 July, describing checks of the warship’s target-detection and information-processing, integrated fire control, naval guns, automatic cannons, and electronic-warfare systems. South Korea’s military separately detected a cruise-missile launch toward the East Sea. After observing the tests from shore, Kim ordered officials to complete trials and commission the vessel within two months.^[1]

The event signifies an incremental milestone rather than a capability breakthrough. The lead ship of the class, Choe Hyon, first launched ship-based Hwasal-series land-attack cruise missiles in April 2025, and it repeated the demonstration through 2026 before commissioning on 23 June. The 3 July trial primarily validates that the second hull can perform the same integrated strike function ahead of its own entry into service. The strategic significance of this trial is less about the single launch event than the pace of a Russian-assisted naval build-out that is placing nuclear-capable cruise missiles on mobile, dispersible sea platforms. This brief summarizes the event, situates it in

the class’s testing history, characterizes the weapon, and assesses how novel the development is and how far it stands from full-scale deployment.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, second from left, watching a test of a new rocket engine at an undisclosed location in North Korea STR / AFP
- Getty Images

Background: The Choe Hyon Class and the Kang Kon

The Choe Hyon class is North Korea’s first true guided-missile destroyer, and its first ocean-going surface combatant, a category shift for a navy long built around submarines, missile boats, and coastal defense. Open-source measurements place the hull at roughly 140–145 meters, with a beam near 16 meters and a stated displacement of 5,000 tons. Reporting credits the design with a 127/130 mm main gun, a Russian Pantsir-ME close-in weapon system, AK-630 guns, a phased-array radar, a hull-mounted sonar, torpedo tubes, and a vertical launch system assessed at roughly 74 cells (some analyses count additional inclined and ready-round launchers). The larger cells are judged capable of holding cruise and short-range ballistic missiles — a concentration of potential missile firepower high for the hull’s size, though the class is not comparable in combat-system maturity to U.S., Japanese, or South Korean Aegis destroyers.^[6]

The Kang Kon (hull 52) has a troubled history: it capsized during a botched launch at Chongjin in mid-2025, drawing a public rebuke from Kim, and it was righted and repaired before resuming sea trials in June 2026. The lead ship Choe Hyon (hull 51) was launched in April 2025, underwent roughly fourteen months of trials and repeated weapon and sensor modifications; it was commissioned on 23 June 2026. At that ceremony, Kim outlined a five-year plan to build two Choe Hyon-class destroyers per year toward a fleet of about twelve warships by the early 2030s, alongside future 10,000-ton cruisers. South Korean officials and outside analysts assess the class was likely built with Russian assistance amid deepening Moscow–Pyongyang military ties.^[7]

The 3 July Trials

According to KCNA, the Friday event was an assessment of the newly built warship’s combat systems, which was intended to confirm its ability to employ various onboard weapons in

combat. Kim was briefed on the vessel’s weapons-evaluation program before watching the strategic cruise-missile launch and the other tests, which included the main gun, automatic cannons, electronic-warfare means, and target-detection and information-processing checks. Independent journalists were denied access, and all performance claims originate with North Korean state media and cannot be independently verified. South Korea’s Joint Chiefs confirmed detection of a cruise-missile launch toward the East Sea, and Seoul and Washington were reported to be analyzing its details. Kim also convened a consultative meeting on the warship-building industry, and he directed that the Kang Kon’s trials be completed responsibly and the ship commissioned within two months.^[2]



The North Korean Choe yon-class destroyer Kang Kon firing a missile during sea trials. (Image Credit: The Rodong Sinmun/X)

The Weapon: Hwasal-Series Strategic Cruise Missiles

Analysts assess the missile fired to be a Hwasal-series long-range land-attack cruise missile — the same family previously launched from the Choe Hyon and from the Amnok-class corvette. The Hwasal-1 and Hwasal-2 are subsonic, turbofan-powered missiles with an estimated range of 1,500–2,000 kms, low-altitude terrain-following flight profiles, and inertial-plus-terrain-contour guidance suited to penetrating radar coverage. Pyongyang’s “strategic” designation implies a nuclear-capable role, and North Korean statements pair the family with warhead-miniaturization claims, though no independent confirmation of an operational nuclear payload exists. Fired from a mobile ship, such a missile places the Korean Peninsula and much of Japan within reach while complicating early warning, since cruise missiles present lower, more variable signatures than ballistic systems.^[3]

The naval role fits a documented five-year program. North Korea’s Ninth Party Congress in February 2026 endorsed the “nuclear weaponization of naval surface and underwater forces,” and reporting since early 2025 shows the Choe Hyon’s vertical launch system (VLS) repeatedly reconfigured — including a shift away from short-range ballistic tubes toward more cruise-missile cells — suggesting the class is being optimized around Hwasal-type theater strike rather than shipboard ballistic missiles.^[8]

Assessment: Is This Development New?

Only incrementally. The core capability — launching a nuclear-capable strategic cruise missile from a surface warship — was first demonstrated by the lead ship in April 2025 and shown again in March and April 2026, when the Choe Hyon reportedly fired multiple Hwasal-class missiles and anti-ship rounds during integrated drills. The 3 July trial is therefore not a first-of-type event; it is the second hull rehearsing an established function as part of its pre-commissioning shakedown.

What is new is narrower in scope, but still meaningful: a second capital surface combatant is approaching operational status, the class’s combat systems are being exercised as an integrated whole rather than as isolated launch capabilities, and Kim has attached a concrete near-term commissioning deadline. These developments signify serial reproduction and consolidation of a capability, not its debut.^[9]

Assessment: Distance to Full-Scale Deployment?

The answer depends on what “deployment” means. As a commissioned platform, the Kang Kon is weeks away: Kim’s two-month order points to nominal entry into service around September 2026, following the lead ship’s June commissioning. As a credible, combat-effective system, this capability is considerably further off. A missile-heavy hull is only as capable as its sensors, combat-management system, datalinks, crew training, damage control, reload infrastructure, and propulsion reliability. No open source has verified that the Choe Hyon class can conduct simultaneous air, surface, and land-attack engagements. Tugboat activity after early tests and South Korean skepticism about readiness point to lingering immaturity. As a fleet-level capability, full-scale deployment is a multi-year proposition: the two-ships-per-year, twelve-hull ambition and the planned 10,000-ton fielding of cruisers extend into the early 2030s and depends on sustained industrial output and likely continued foreign assistance. In short, this capability is imminent as a platform, uncertain as an integrated warship, and years away as a fleet.^[10]

Implications for Missile Defense and US Warfighting

For missile-defense planners, the trend line matters more than any single launch. A mobile, sea-based launcher for long-range, low-flying, potentially nuclear-armed cruise missiles adds a dispersed and less predictable strike vector to a threat set already saturating early-warning systems from land and undersea. Cruise-missile defense stresses low-altitude detection, over-the-horizon sensing, and networked fire control — precisely the integrated air and missile defense attributes a layered coastal and maritime defense must provide.

The near-term operational relevance is concentrated in the Yellow Sea, the western approaches, and the Sea of Japan rather than open-ocean power projection, but the trendline revealed by this test indicates an — toward a survivable, mobile leg of Pyongyang’s nuclear-capable delivery system architecture — is the development worth tracking. A key information gap to close would be determining whether Pyongyang intends to outfit these strategic cruise missiles with nuclear weapons, the scale of such plans (all or some Hwasal cruise missiles), and whether North Korea plans to equip these so-called strategic missiles with conventional or nuclear warheads or both (dual-use). This gap has implications beyond missile defense plans. Information closing this gap would enable U.S. and Allied planners to develop an effective deterrence and defense posture countering this capability. It would also enable these planners to design credible and effective attack plans and escalation control strategies to manage this emerging potential maritime North Korean nuclear capability. ^[5]

By Mr. Alex Reed for MDAA- July 9, 2026

Footnotes

- [1] Reuters, “North Korea’s Kim observed naval destroyer cruise missile launch, weapons tests, state media says,” 5 July 2026, citing KCNA; Korea JoongAng Daily, 5 July 2026.
- [2] KCNA via Reuters and The Associated Press, 4–5 July 2026; Yonhap / South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff cruise-missile detection, reported via GlobalSecurity.org and Korea JoongAng Daily, 5 July 2026.
- [3] 38 North, “North Korea Tests New Theater Launch Platforms,” 15 April 2026; Army Recognition, Hwasal-1/-2 assessments, 2024–2025; Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance and TWZ range assessments.
- [4] Associated Press / ABC News, 4 July 2026 (two-month commissioning order); Naval News, “North Korea Commissions First Guided-Missile Destroyer, Plans Cruiser,” 25 June 2026; Army Recognition combat-system caveats, June 2026.
- [5] Reuters, 24 June 2026 (two-warships-per-year plan); The Defense News, June 2026 (twelve-ship fleet by early 2030s); analyst assessments of Russian assistance via South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- [6] Naval News, 25 June 2026; Army Recognition, “Choe Hyon Destroyer With 74 VLS Cells,” June 2026; Choe Hyon-class open-source compilation, 2026.
- [7] The Defense News, “North Korea Begins Sea Trials of Second Choe Hyon-Class Destroyer,” 6 June 2026; Naval News commissioning report, 25 June 2026; Choe Hyon-class OSINT compilation, 2026.
- [8] 38 North, “North Korea Tests New Theater Launch Platforms,” 15 April 2026 (VLS reconfiguration, Ninth Party Congress endorsement); 38 North five-year assessment, January–February 2026.
- [9] Naval News, “North Korea’s New Destroyer Sets Sail for the First Time, Tests Missile Systems,” March 2026; Army Recognition, 12 April 2026 live-fire reporting; KCNA via Reuters, April 2025.
- [10] Army Recognition combat-system limitations analysis, June 2026; The Defense News fleet-plan reporting, June 2026; South Korean official readiness assessments via Reuters/AP, 2026.