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Tension is rising again on the Korean Peninsula after North Korea successfully tested an intercontinental missile on Tuesday that experts said is capable of reaching Alaska. In response, the U.S. and South Korea carried out a joint ballistic missile drill in the Sea of Japan. Earlier this year, the United States carried out massive military exercises in the Korean Peninsula and deployed an anti-missile system known as THAAD to South Korea, despite protests by South Koreans. We speak with Christine Ahn, the founder and international coordinator of Women Cross DMZ, a global movement of women mobilizing for peace in Korea.

AMY GOODMAN: The United States and South Korea have carried out a joint ballistic missile drill in the Sea of Japan, after North Korea successfully tested an intercontinental missile that experts believe would be capable of reaching Alaska. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, said the missile test was a Fourth of July "gift" to President Trump. The Pentagon has also released video of a U.S. long-range interceptor missile colliding with an intercontinental-range missile, as an apparent warning to North Korea.

Tensions have been rising in recent months between the United States and North Korea. Earlier this year, the U.S. carried out massive military exercises in the Korean Peninsula and deployed an anti-missile system known as THAAD to South Korea despite protests by South Koreans. The new South Korean president is also opposed to the THAAD missile system and last month ordered an investigation after learning that four more missile launchers had been brought into South Korea. After the North Korean missile launch, President Trump tweeted, quote, "Perhaps China will put a heavy move on North Korea and end this nonsense once and for all!" unquote.

We're joined now by Christine Ahn. She's founder and international coordinator of Women Cross DMZ, a global movement of women mobilizing for peace in Korea.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*, Christine. Thanks so much for joining us. Can you talk about this latest escalation?

CHRISTINE AHN: Well, as we know, North Korea tends to conduct these missile test times in a kind of poetic way, and, as you mentioned, they said it was a "gift" to the Trump administration. It also happened to coincide a few days after the end of the Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump summit, in which, you know, unfortunately, President Moon, who had come into office and has about an 80 percent popularity rating, in many ways toed the line of the Trump administration about maximum pressure and agreeing with the U.S. policy on North Korea, which has slightly departed from his pro-engagement line and, obviously, the sentiments of the South Korean people. Eight out of 10 South Koreans, according to a new survey, have said they wanted inter-Korean dialogue. And so, I think, in many ways, it was a response to that. It also happened to coincide with President Obama's visit to Seoul, and we know that the North Koreans were not very pleased with the Obama administration's "strategic patience" policy, which the Trump administration is basically replicating.

So, you know, I think, again, North Korea tests these missiles as a way to advance their capability to defend in the case of any kind of preemptive strike from the United States. And, you know, we don't know if they could put a nuclear warhead on one of these that could reach the United States, but that's the point, is they want to put the pressure on the United States, on the Trump administration, to say, "We need to negotiate some kind of peace settlement," because they feel threatened.

And so, right now, the most viable proposal that is on the table, that has now—as you mentioned earlier, is backed by both China and Russia, but it originally came from the North Koreans in 2015, was to halt the U.S. and South Korean military exercises in exchange for freezing North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile program. Now, that is the deal that should be seriously considered, but the Trump administration is not accepting it. And, in fact, you know, I think by virtue of not accepting it and not seriously considering it, the only way that Americans can interpret that is to say that we value the exercises more than we value freezing North Korea's nuclear program. And so I think that this is North Korea's message to the United States: "We want to negotiate, and we're going to do what we can to defend our sovereignty and our country from any kind of preemptive strike from the Trump administration."

AMY GOODMAN: So, earlier this morning, President Trump tweeted "Trade between China and North Korea grew almost 40% in the first quarter. So much for China working with us—but we had to give it a try!" That was Trump's tweet earlier today. And as we reported earlier, the president of China, Xi Jinping, visited Russia and met with Vladimir Putin for a two-day summit that ended yesterday. They called for both the U.S. and South Korea to cease their massive joint military exercises and for the U.S. to immediately cancel the deployment of the THAAD

missile system. Interestingly, the South Korean president had criticized the U.S. in June, saying that he wasn't even told that they had brought in more launchers—while he was president—that the U.S. brought in more launchers to add to the THAAD system.

CHRISTINE AHN: Well, that's true. And, unfortunately, because of the enormous pressure that the United States places on South Korea economically, politically and also militarily—I mean, the U.S. has wartime operational control over South Korea—unfortunately, Moon Jae-in, even though South Korea is the 10th largest military in the world and the 11th largest economy in the world, it still has to play this clientelistic relationship with the United States. And so, he has to toe this very gentle line, even though he has enormous backing from the Korean people and has an 80 percent popularity rating. He, unfortunately, has—you know, he has stalled it, but I'm not sure if they have the courage to basically reject it.

And, you know, recently, we just had a Korea Peace Network conference in Washington, D.C., and we had former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, you know, and he was asked a question about the THAAD missile defense system. And he basically said, you know, "That won't do anything to protect the South Koreans." Also, the missile defense system is questionable in itself. But, you know, it definitely won't protect South Korea. It's definitely there to protect U.S., you know, bases in the region. And if the South Koreans want to remove it, by all means, they should have that right to do so. But, unfortunately, I don't think that is the sentiment of the Trump administration. We know that they are a bully administration around the world. And my hope was that South Korea would stand up, just the way that Germany and France and Australia and other historic allies of the United States, to say, "You know, this is not benefiting the people of South Korea and our security. We have the right to defend the country in a way that we think would advance peace on the Korean Peninsula."

And they want inter-Korean engagement. And so, perhaps that's one win that came out of the Moon Jae-in and Trump summit, was that, you know, President Moon did walk away from the summit with a somewhat approval, stamp of approval, from the Trump administration. And it's so crazy that it's 2017, and South Korea has to basically ask for that. But that's what he left with. He left with an approval from the Trump administration to pursue inter-Korean dialogue. And, you know, hopefully they will succeed in doing so. But by basically toeing the Trump administration line on North Korea, they're not going to get very far.

AMY GOODMAN: Your concerns about North Korea launching this intercontinental ballistic missile, this ICBM, Christine Ahn?

CHRISTINE AHN: Well, of course. I mean, we don't want—we don't want any ICBM to strike the United States. But I don't have—I have never seen any indication that North Korea would use it proactively or preemptively. They would only do so in reaction to any kind of first strike from the United States.

And what is so disheartening is that, you know, again, going back to Bill Perry and him reminding us that in the late 1990s—like 1998, at the end of the Clinton administration—sorry, 1999, 2000, we were this close to basically stalling North Korea's nuclear—well, he had already frozen North Korea's nuclear program but had worked to basically stall their missile program. And they had—all North Korea wanted was some kind of nonaggression pact, not even a peace treaty. And they had come this close. The number two under Kim Jong-il had come to the White House, met with Bill Clinton. Clinton was supposed to go to North Korea, but, unfortunately, because of the Florida—the Bush-Al Gore presidential election, you know, he was not able to do so. And, you know, when the Bush administration came into office, we have to remember, it was the preemptive doctrine that really set off for North Koreans, you know, seeing what happened in Iraq, seeing what happened in Afghanistan, and Libya, subsequently, that they had to do what they had to do to defend their country. And, unfortunately, pursuing nuclear weapons and now having some kind of delivery capability, through this long-range missile, to strike the United States is one way to get the United States to come to some kind of negotiating table. And that is an unfortunate reality, but that is where we're at.

And every major, I think, serious Korea expert, from military officials to former diplomats—we saw now a bipartisan letter from former Secretary of State Shultz to—who else was there? Bill Perry signed the letter. I mean, it went to Donald Trump, and it said diplomacy and negotiation is the only way forward with the North Koreans. And so, before they really do have the capability to strike the United States, we need to negotiate some kind of deal.

AMY GOODMAN: Christine Ahn, we want to thank you for being with us, founder and international coordinator of Women Cross DMZ, a global movement of women mobilizing for peace in Korea, North and South.