

US West Coast flights halted: North Korean missile threat, or coincidence?

Chris Shieff
12 January, 2022



The US FAA has released a brief statement confirming that on Jan 10, a ground stop was put in place at major airports on the West Coast due to **“precautionary measures.”**

Around the same time, North Korea carried out a missile test – the second in a week. The missile landed well off the coast of the Korean Peninsula, in the Sea of Japan.

It is now being widely speculated that **the two events were likely related**, however no authority has confirmed this as fact.



The FAA  
@FAANews

...

FAA statement on West Coast ground stop for some airports:



“As a matter of precaution, the FAA temporarily paused departures at some airports along the West Coast on Monday night. Full operations resumed in less than 15 minutes. The FAA regularly takes precautionary measures. We are reviewing the process around this ground stop as we do after all such events.” – **FAA**

6:36 am · 12 Jan 2022 · Twitter Web App

A brief statement issued by the FAA.

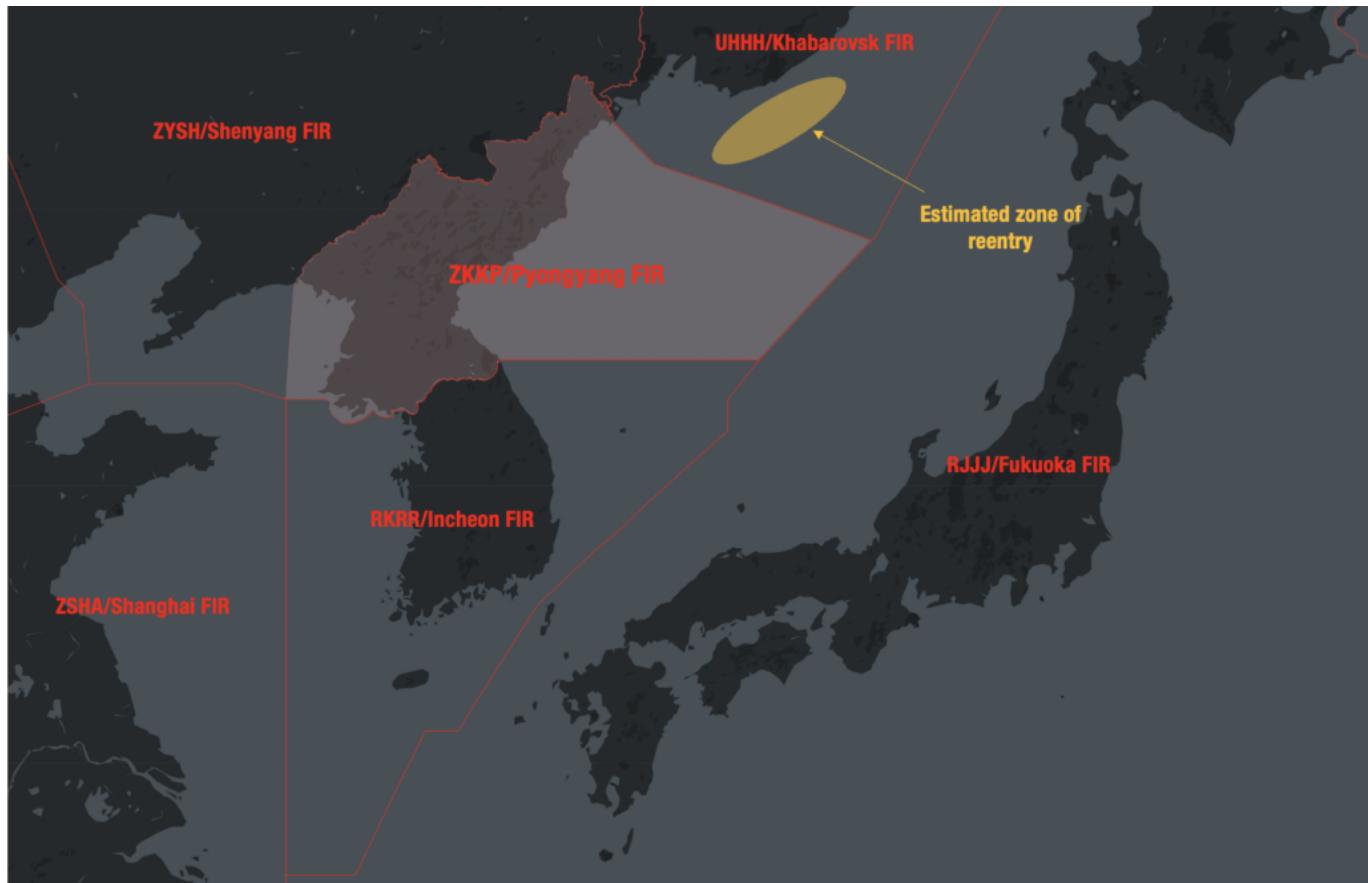
Here's what happened.

At approx. 14:30 PST (2230z) on January 10, a ground stop was ordered by the FAA at airports throughout the Western United States. There are also reports of airborne aircraft being directed to land.

The disruption was short lived (about twenty minutes), before operations went back to normal.

The speculation about why the ground stop came into effect arose for three reasons;

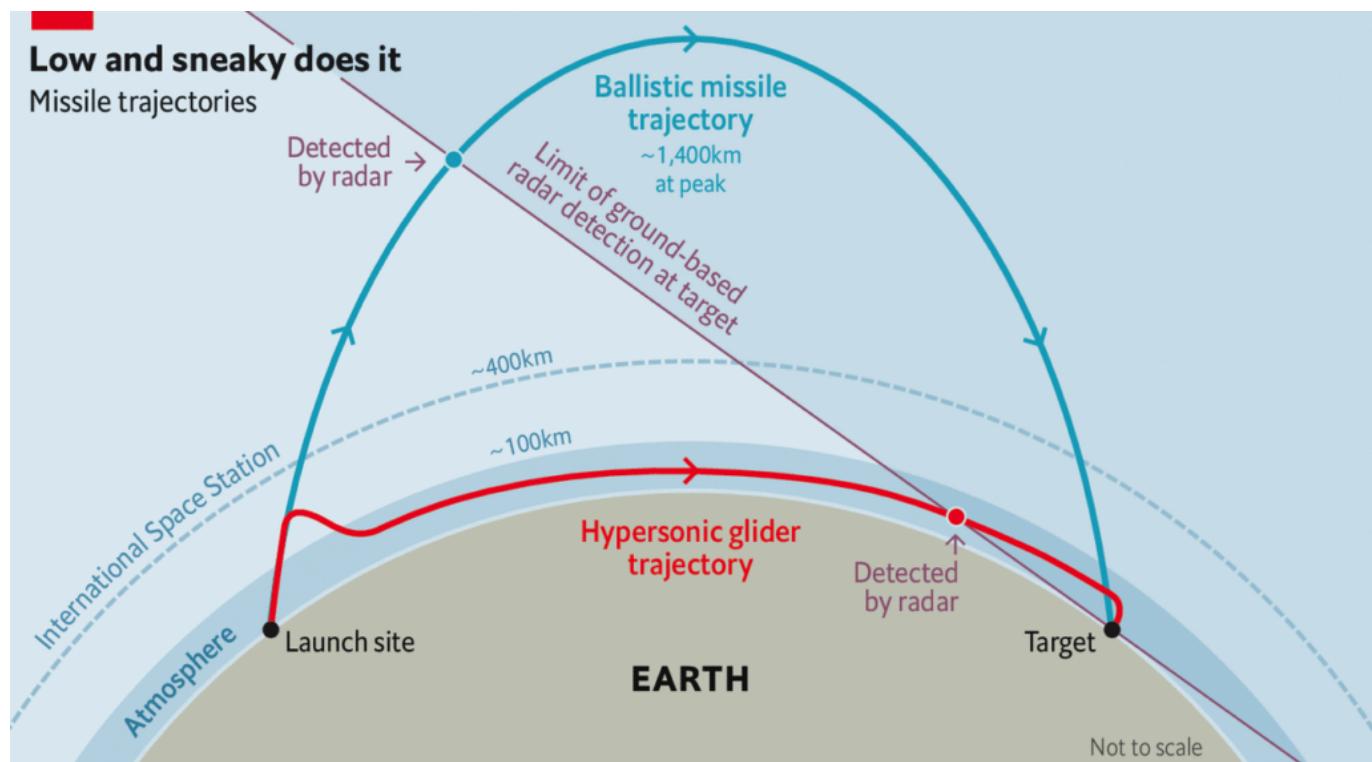
- **Information** on why a ground stop is in place is usually provided
- The air traffic control measure is generally used to slow or stops the flow of aircraft to a **particular airport**, due to weather or an operational hazard. This one impacted all west coast airports, and airborne aircraft
- An **unannounced test launch** of a missile took place in North Korea, landing approximately 400nm off the coast around the same time.



The missile landed over 400nm from the North Korean coastline.

Hypersonic missiles

North Korea state outlet KCNA has claimed these latest two tests were hypersonic missiles. Of course, North Korea is known for its own propaganda...



Source: The Economist

But hypersonic missiles are dangerous, for two main reasons:

- Unlike ballistic missiles, which have a fairly predictable trajectory, hypersonic missiles can fly much closer to the earth's surface and are **more difficult to intercept**.
- Hypersonic missiles can travel up to five times the speed of sound, meaning they can **hit a target in a much shorter flight time**.

Only a handful of countries are reported to be working on the development of hypersonic missiles: the US, Russia, India, and China, and North Korea.

What could explain it.

The launch in North Korea was **not announced beforehand**, and it is possible that it was detected as a threat leading to the activation of protocols that include notifying the FAA.

Although this looks likely, it's important to remember that **nothing official has been announced to confirm this yet**. The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) have since advised that it did not issue an official warning.

It did however *detect* the launch, which was assessed not to be a danger to the mainland US. It is also standard procedure for the FAA to be in constant contact with them and so the FAA may have been **compelled to act as a precaution**.



NORAD advise they didn't instruct the FAA to close airspace, but detected and were monitoring the launch.

The North Korean Missile Threat.

There have been several test launches carried out from North Korea in the past six months. These are typically intended to be a display of capability, rather than an intent to use them.

For aviation the threat is primarily based in the **oceanic portions of the ZKKP/Pyongyang FIR, and UHHH/Khabarovsk FIRs west of Japan**. As the launches have repeatedly been carried out with no advance warning, aircraft are exposed to **risk from falling debris from missile tests**. You can find more information on this in a previous article which you can read [here](#).

Outlook for 2022

Most experts seem to agree that North Korea faces some big challenges on the home front this year, including its economy and a worsening humanitarian crisis. Its missile program has continued and there has been no recent reassurance that it intends to work on bettering its relationship with the US, or South Korea, nor any intent to provide **advance warning of test launches**.

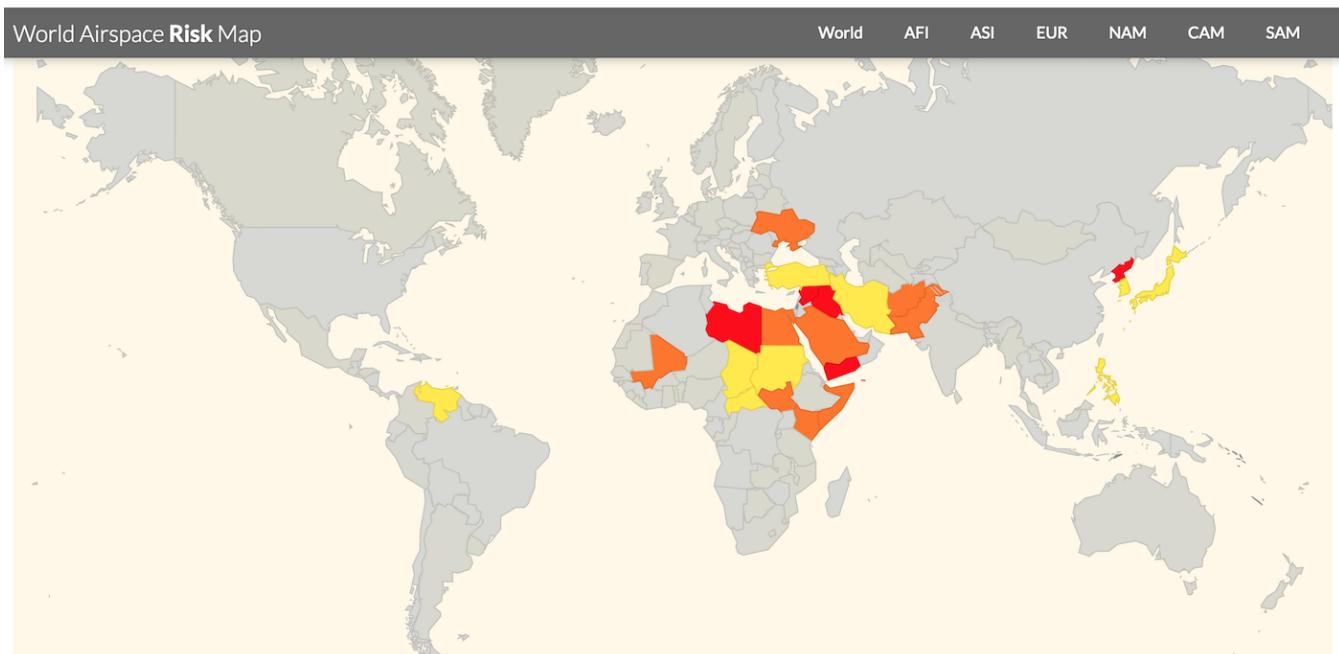
These events might not be related, but the speculation itself demonstrates an ongoing concern regarding North Korean actions. The events of January 10 also show how a **large impact on US airspace with little or no warning** can, and does occasionally occur, and is a reminder to all operators to have policies and preparations in place for dealing with such events.

Do you have more intel, or were you flying as it happened?

We'd love to hear from you. You can reach us at team@ops.group.

New Unsafe Airspace Summary and Map

Declan Selleck
12 January, 2022



March 20, 2018: One of our biggest missions in OPSGROUP is to share risk information and keep

operators aware of the current threat picture. The latest **Unsafe Airspace Summary** is now published, and available to members **here as a PDF download** (Unsafe Airspace Summary 20MAR2018, edition LIMA).

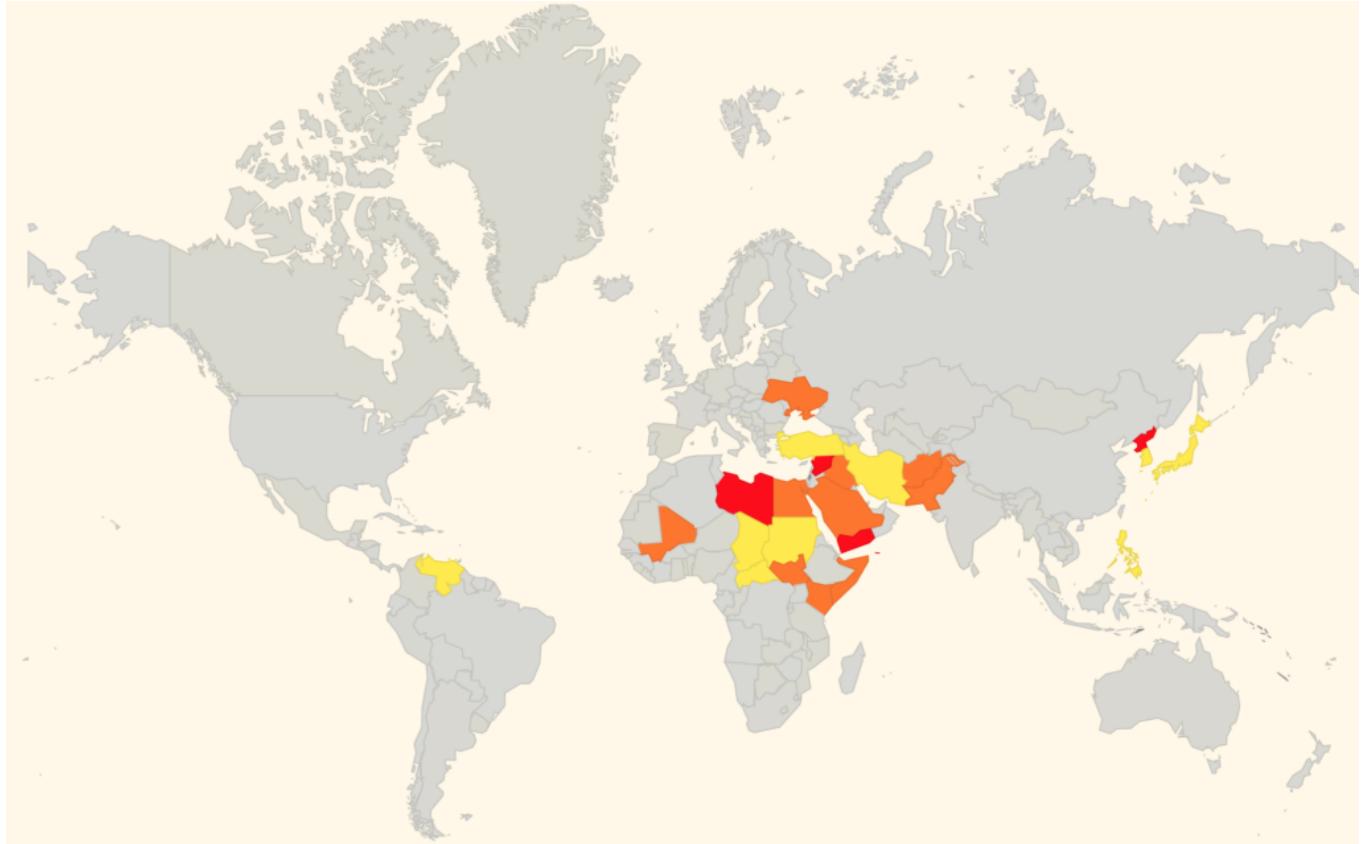


The **main changes** since the last summary are below. For a current risk map, refer to the Airspace Risk map in your member Dashboard.

The situation in **Afghanistan** remains similar. On March 13, Germany added wording to maintain FL330 or higher, still recommending against landings at Afghan airports.

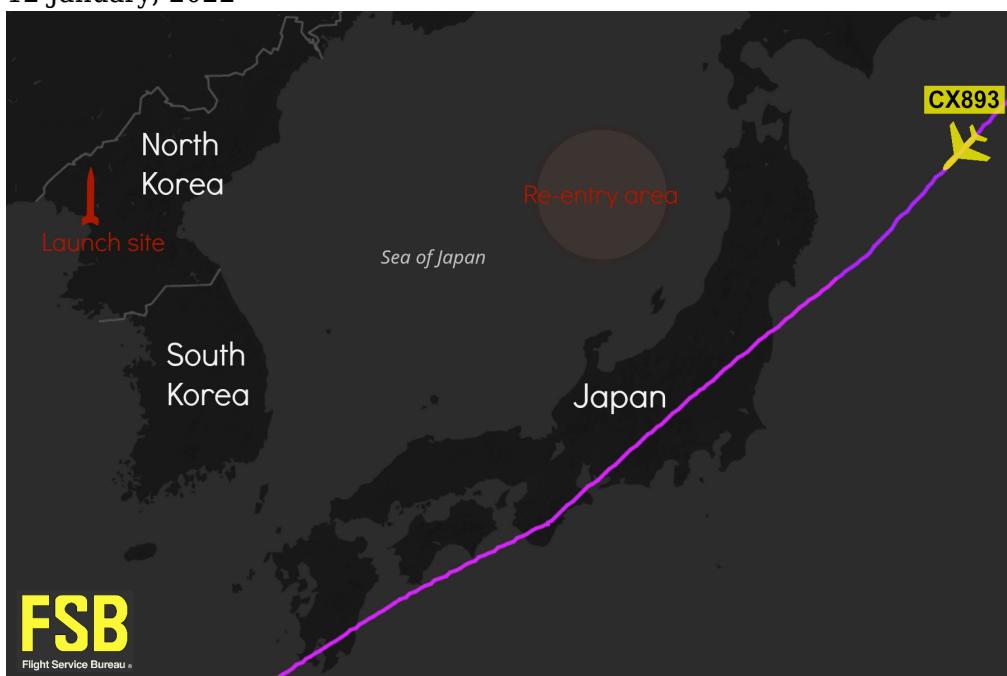
Germany also issued updated NOTAMs for **Mali**, **Iraq**, and **South Sudan**. All warnings remain as previous, unchanged from the prior NOTAMs.

- Full Airspace Risk Map
- Unsafe Airspace Summary 20MAR2018



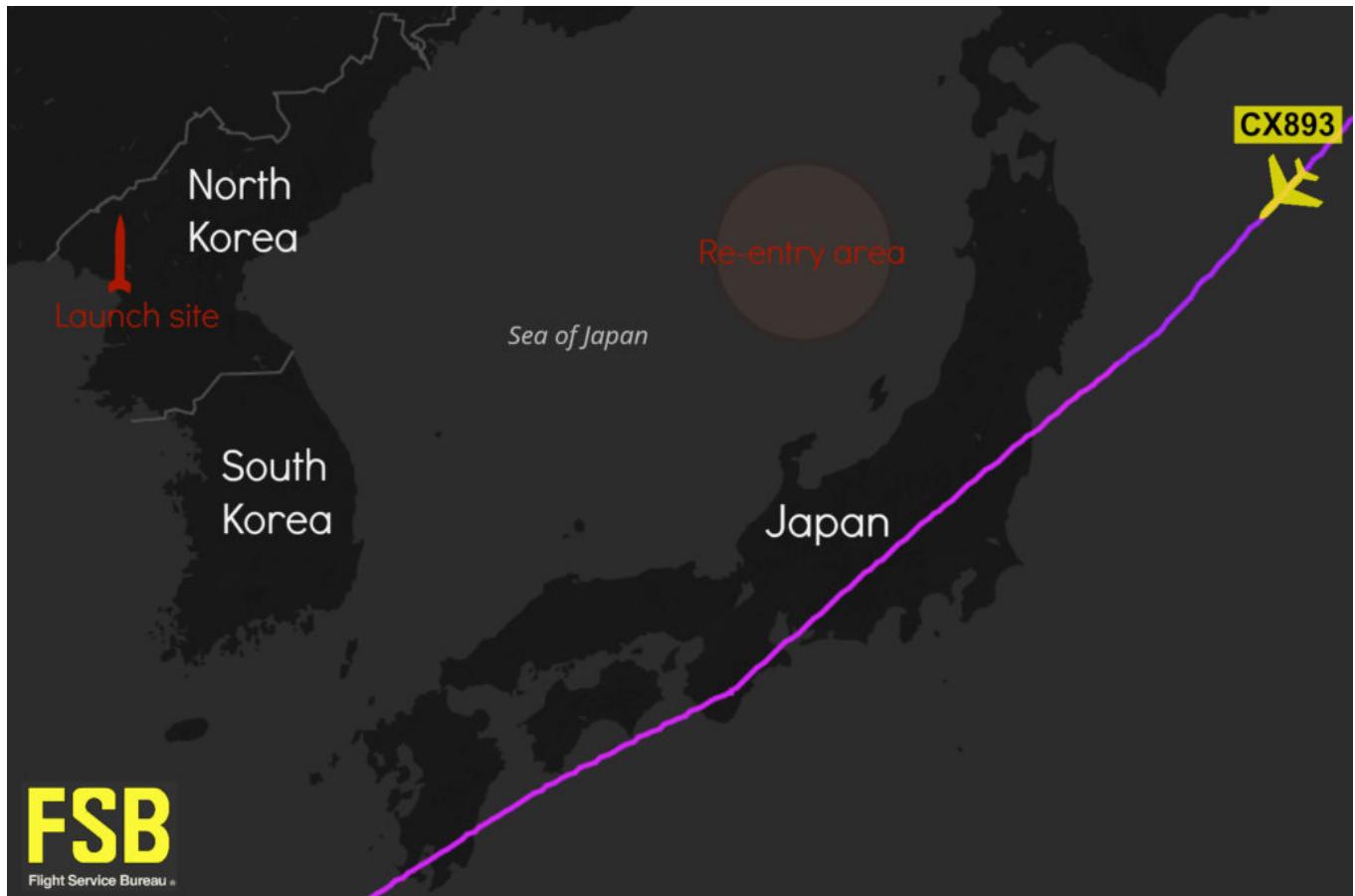
Cathay crew witness missile re-entry from North Korea

David Mumford
12 January, 2022



Crew onboard a Cathay Pacific flight witnessed the re-entry of North Korea's latest missile near their position late last week. The CX893 service from San Francisco to Hong Kong on Nov 29 was over Japan at the time when North Korea launched its missile.

The crew reported: **"Be advised, we witnessed the DPRK missile blow up and fall apart near our current location."**



Here's Cathay Pacific's full statement:

"On 29 November, the flight crew of CX893 reported a sighting of what is suspected to be the re-entry of the recent DPRK test missile. Though the flight was far from the event location, the crew advised Japan ATC according to procedures. Operation remained normal and was not affected. We have been in contact with relevant authorities and industry bodies as well as with other carriers. At the moment, no one is changing any routes or operating parameters. We remain alert and review the situation as it evolves."

North Korea's missiles are larger, and can fly further, than the other missiles we've previously seen. Over the past year, most of these missiles land in the Sea of Japan, well inside the Fukuoka Flight Information Region (Japanese airspace). But as we see with this latest test, there is clearly a danger of some of these missiles not re-entering the atmosphere intact – meaning that a debris field of missile fragments passes through the airspace, not just one complete missile. If you haven't done so already, make sure you read this: our article on why North Korean missiles are now a real threat to Civil Aviation.

This latest test is also significant because of its unprecedented altitude – 4500km (2800 miles). Experts seem to agree that if it had been fired on a standard trajectory, the missile would have been capable of traveling around 13000km (8100 miles), meaning it could have struck anywhere in the mainland US.

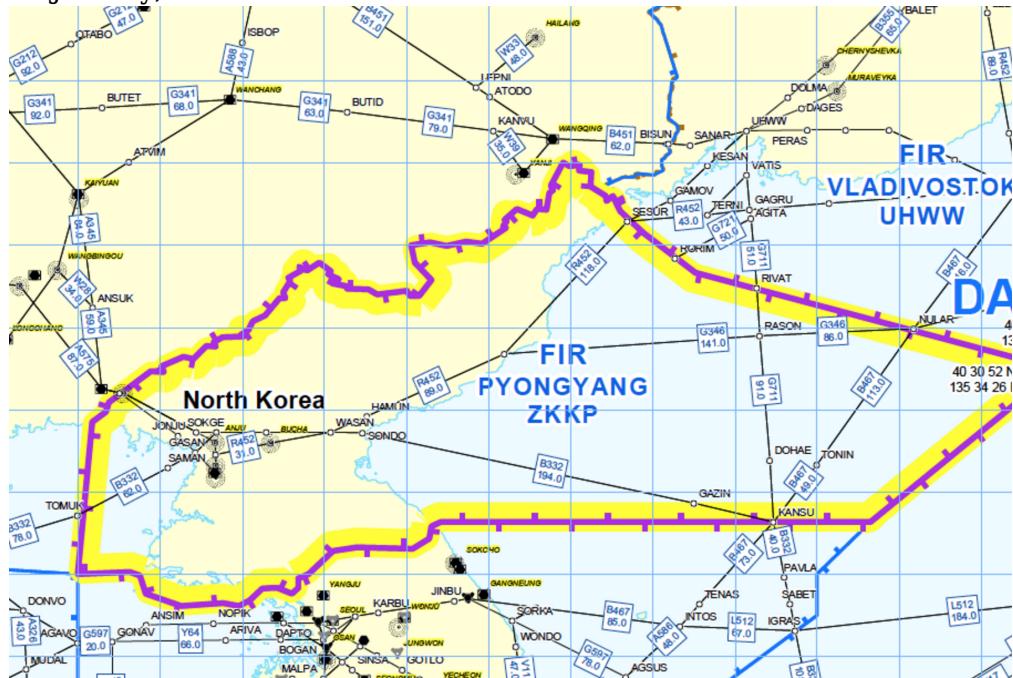
If you're operating in the region, we recommend avoiding the ZKKP/Pyongyang FIR entirely and avoiding

the affected areas over the Sea of Japan. For more info, check out [Safeairspace](#).

North Korea overflight getting riskier

Mark Zee

12 January, 2022



Update: FSB removed North Korea warnings on May 14, 2018

The annual posturing between the **DPRK (North Korea)**, and the US/South Korea, follows a fairly regular pattern each year. The cycle involves escalating threats (by both sides), a cooling off process, a long period of nothing, and then a resumption of threats. History tells us that there is nothing to fear, because this is always the way it works on this peninsula, but then a slightly less micro view also tells us that we don't always make the correct risk assessment.

Prior to MH17 (B777 shootdown, Ukraine), our view of missiles in the commercial aviation community was a little casual. Post-incident, the rule of 'overflights are safe' as a standing principle was removed, and suddenly a whole lot more interest was applied to what was going on underneath the airways, even if we were up at FL350.

In specific terms, **over the last fortnight**, North Korea has been launching short and medium range missiles like they are going out of style. Nobody in Pyongyang has any intention of aiming them at civil airliners, but the objective is not where the risk lies. Late last year when Russia fired 30+ missiles into Syria, at least 5 of them went off course (including way above where they should have flown).

This wayward tracking is the greater part of our concern, for all flights within the Pyongyang FIR (ZKKP). Most international overflights are using the North-South airways over water to the east of the landmass, and it's worth considering that the missiles launched in the last week have been directed out

over the sea in this direction (not coincidentally in the direction of Japan, who isn't on the DPRK Christmas card list either).

US Operators are in any case restricted by **SFAR79**, but everyone else should be keeping a close eye on their North Korean overflight plans. (If this hasn't put you off, **you can read the full North Korea overflight permit requirements**).

