



NORTH KOREA'S FOURTH SATELLITE LAUNCH ATTEMPT

David Mulrooney

North Korea has announced that it will attempt another satellite launch between December 10 and 22. As North Korea has an active nuclear weapons program and launching a satellite is technologically quite similar to test-firing a long-range ballistic missile, this is of obvious concern to the international community. This policy brief examines the motivations that may be driving the decision to attempt a satellite launch now, assesses the prospects of the launch, and makes recommendations as to how this issue should be handled in the future.

The official announcement that North Korea is planning a satellite launch was made by the North Korean news agency KCNA on December 1, confirming what had been evident for some weeks to analysts looking at satellite imagery of the launch site. This will be North Korea's fourth attempt to launch a satellite (the others were in 1998, 2009 and April of this year). The satellite is described as a 'polar-orbiting earth observation satellite,' and is to be launched from the Sohae (West Sea) Satellite Launching Station between December 10 and 22.

The controversy about North Korea's plans to launch a satellite arises from the fact that the multi-stage rockets used to lift a satellite out of the earth's atmosphere and place it in orbit can, with minor adjustments of configuration, also be used to propel a missile into a sub-orbital trajectory before it re-enters the earth's atmosphere and delivers a nuclear payload to a target thousands of kilometers away. The range of North Korea's missiles is estimated to be such as to place Alaska and Hawaii, as well as South Korea, Japan and Guam, within reach. Even though North Korea's nuclear program is not yet thought to have reached the level of sophistication needed to miniaturize a nuclear device to be carried as the payload of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, any step towards developing ICBMs in the context of an active nuclear weapons program is troubling, which is why several UN Security Council Resolutions have been passed requiring North Korea to cease its long-range missile development activities (UNSCR 1695, 1718 and 1874).

'True to the Behests of Kim Jong Il'

The question of why North Korea has decided to launch a satellite now probably has more to do with its own internal dynamics than with the outside world. 2012 is the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung and was supposed to be the year when North Korea 'opened the door to a strong and prosperous nation.' A successful satellite launch would demonstrate North Korea's 'greatness' to its population at a time when food shortages and other harsh realities suggest otherwise. The significance of the satellite program to North Korea's image of itself can be seen in the rockets and other space-related technology that feature in its internal propaganda.

The satellite launch is being presented as one of the legacies of Kim Jong Il, whose one-year memorial anniversary falls at the end of the launch window, on December 17. The glory that would reflect on Kim Jong Un from a successful launch would be helpful in bolstering his position at a time when there are indications that the leadership transition may not be going altogether smoothly.

The launch window also coincides with the presidential election in South Korea on December 19. Although there have been suggestions that North Korea is trying to interfere with the elections there, it is not clear that this is in fact the case, or that this would even be in North Korea's interests. From Pyongyang's point of view, a victory by Moon Jae-in of the liberal Democratic United Party, who has advocated a return to some of the aspects of the Sunshine Policy in engaging the north, is to be preferred to a win



by Park Geun-hye, the candidate of the ruling conservative Saenuri party, which under the leadership of President Lee Myung-bak has taken a hardline policy towards North Korea. If the satellite launch has any effect on the election (and so far it seems not to have had any great impact), it would surely boost Park's chances, as she is seen as stronger on national security.

Other developments in South Korea may also be factors. In early October, following negotiations with the United States, South Korea revised its ballistic missile guidelines to extend their range from 300km to 800km, placing any point in North Korea within range; this may have increased the need for North Korea to demonstrate its own missile deterrent. South Korea was preparing a satellite launch of its own for November 29, but has had to postpone its plans until next year. It is a sore point for North Korea that satellite launches by other countries pass without comment from the international community while it faces sanctions for its program.

Prospects for the launch

Foreign journalists who were invited to North Korea in April to view the launch preparations came away far from convinced that what they were shown was a satellite, or even that what they were shown was ultimately placed on the rocket. While there is not a great deal of evidence to go by, the most likely scenario—given the enormous expense involved in attempting a launch, which is wasted if there is no actual satellite involved—would seem to be that the payload is in fact a basic, but functional, satellite.

It is difficult to assess the prospects for the success or failure of the launch, but it seems likely that the timing of this attempt is based more on political than on technical considerations. Only seven months have passed since the unsuccessful launch in April, which is not a great deal of time to correct the problems observed then. In the context of an extremely hierarchical political culture and under time pressure, it will be difficult for any of the engineers working on the project to speak up if they detect problems in any of the systems on which a successful launch depends. Although these factors point to the likelihood of another launch failure, it is by no means impossible that this time North Korea will succeed in placing the satellite into orbit. North Korea surprised the world in April by admitting

the failure of its launch attempt then. In 1998 and 2009, Pyongyang claimed, against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that its satellites had been launched into orbit successfully. A second failure this year would be embarrassing and raise the possibility that the leadership might feel the need to take another action to compensate, such as conducting a third nuclear test in the near future.

North Korea's neighbors, including China and Russia, have expressed their opposition to this satellite launch. It is very unlikely, however, that any efforts to dissuade North Korea from proceeding with its plans will succeed. From the perspective of Pyongyang, international pressure on this issue is an intolerable attempt to intervene in its internal affairs, and yielding to it is not an option. No doubt there will be angry pushback from North Korea at the statements of condemnation from the international community that are likely to follow the launch.

Implications of the launch

Unless the rocket goes off course and has to be intercepted by a neighboring country, it does not pose a threat to anyone. And although it is worrying to see North Korea take another step towards developing an ICBM capability, the history of its missile program suggests that it is a long way from developing long-range ballistic missiles that can be deployed militarily with any confidence. It is hard to see that imposing additional sanctions on North Korea would be useful, as the sanctions regime it faces is already so extensive that the feeling in Pyongyang is that they have 'nothing more to lose.'

There may, however, be some useful steps that could be taken. The North Koreans insist that the only motivation for their satellite launches is to gain access to earth imaging capabilities for purposes such as weather forecasting and environmental monitoring. As there are easier and cheaper ways to gain access to satellite technology than building and launching a satellite of one's own, this is not a terribly credible explanation. But if a friendly state such as China or Russia could launch a satellite on the North Koreans' behalf,¹ then this would at a minimum have the benefit of

¹ During an informal conversation in Pyongyang earlier this year, a senior North Korean diplomat indicated to the author that this arrangement would be acceptable to North Korea as a temporary measure.



eliminating the excuse of needing to launch a satellite for earth observation purposes as a cover for long-range missile tests. Another possibility would be to give the North Koreans access to existing satellite resources.

Ultimately, the issue of the satellite launch should be seen in the larger context of the international efforts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program. The six-party talks have not been convened since North Korea withdrew in protest at the UN Security Council Presidential Statement condemning its 2009 satellite launch. The ongoing lower-level efforts to get back to the negotiating table since then have been unsuccessful, in spite of a brief period earlier this year when it appeared that a breakthrough had been made in the form of the 'Leap Day Agreement' between the US and North Korea, which fell apart after the announcement of the April satellite launch plans. It is expected that a new window of opportunity for engagement with North Korea will open up after the presidential election in the South. A moratorium on satellite launches is one of the requirements that should be demanded of North Korea in any agreement then.

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