

North Korea plans to launch long-range rocket

March 16 2012



In this April 5, 2009 image made from KRT video, a rocket is lifted off from its launch pad in Musudan-ri, North Korea. North Korea announced Friday, March 16, 2012, it plans to launch a long-range rocket mounted with a satellite next month, a surprise move that comes weeks after it agreed to nuclear concessions including a moratorium on long-range missile tests. The launch plan comes as North Korea prepares to celebrate the April 15 centenary of the birth of its founder, Kim Il Sung. (AP Photo/KRT TV, File) NORTH KOREA OUT, TV OUT

(AP) -- North Korea announced plans Friday to blast a satellite into space on the back of a long-range rocket, a provocative move that could jeopardize a weeks-old agreement with the U.S. exchanging food aid for nuclear concessions.

The North agreed to a moratorium on long-range launches as part of the deal with Washington, but it argues that its satellite launches are part of a peaceful space program that is exempt from any international disarmament agreements. The U.S., South Korea and other critics say the rocket technology overlaps with belligerent uses and condemn the satellite program as a disguised way of testing military missiles in defiance of a U.N. ban.

The [launch](#) is to take place three years after a similar launch in April 2009 drew widespread censure.

The U.S. had no immediate reaction to the latest announcement. But Japan urged Pyongyang to abandon the launch, calling it a violation of a U.N. resolution restricting the North's use of [ballistic missile](#) technology, and South Korea's Foreign Ministry called the plans a "grave provocation."

The liftoff is slated for between April 12 and 16 from a west coast [launch pad](#) in North Phyongan province to test [satellite technology](#), a spokesman for the Korean Committee for Space Technology said in a statement carried by state media.

The plan comes as North Korea prepares to celebrate the April 15 centenary of the birth of its founder, Kim Il Sung. Kim's grandson, Kim Jong Un, has led the nation of 24 million since his father, Kim Jong Il, died in December.

"The window for the launch is important in terms of the domestic politics of the North," said Daniel Pinkston, an expert on North Korea's weapons programs at the International Crisis Group. He said the launch serves to underline North Korea's military capabilities and reinforce Kim's fledgling rule.

Kim Jong Il had been grooming the son to take over as leader since suffering a stroke in 2008. Footage aired Friday on state-run TV showed Kim Jong Un observing the 2009 rocket launch.

Such a launch aims to reinforce unity at home by provoking new tensions that will allow its leadership to portray the country as beset by hostile forces. A third nuclear test could be next, Pinkston said.

The launch also jeopardizes the recent food aid deal with the U.S., he said.

"I can't see how the U.S. is going to deliver this food aid," he said. "I think this is going to kill it."

North Korea agreed last month to suspend uranium enrichment, place a moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests, and to allow back U.N. weapons inspectors in exchange for much-needed food aid. Uranium enrichment is one way to make atomic bombs. In the past North Korea has also weaponized plutonium for nuclear devices.

North Korea called the April 2009 launch a bid to send a communications satellite into space, but it was widely viewed in the West as a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions prohibiting North Korea from engaging in nuclear and ballistic missile activity.

Shortly after the 2009 launch from an east coast station, Pyongyang declared that it would abandon six-nation negotiations on offering the North aid and concessions in exchange for nuclear disarmament. And weeks later, North Korea tested a nuclear device, the second in three years - earning the regime tightened U.N. sanctions.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura told a news conference Friday that Japan has set up a crisis management taskforce to

monitor the situation and is cooperating with the U.S. and South Korea.

"We believe a launch would be a move to interfere with our effort toward a dialogue, and we strongly urge North Korea not to carry out a satellite launch," he said.

Japan is part of the now-stalled six-party disarmament talks aimed at ridding North Korea of its nuclear weapons program. The U.S., South Korea, China and Russia also are parties to the talks.

North Korea is proud of its nuclear and missile programs, which it claims are necessary to protect itself against the United States, which stations more than 28,000 troops in South Korea and has thousands more troops as well as nuclear-powered warships in Asia-Pacific region.

North Korea and the United States fought on opposite sides of the three-year Korean War, which ended in a truce in 1953. They have never signed a peace treaty.

North Korea is believed to have enough weaponized plutonium for four to eight "primitive" atomic bombs, according to scientist Siegfried Hecker of the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University.

Pyongyang also announced in 2009 that it would begin enriching uranium, and revealed the facility to Hecker and North Korea expert Robert Carlin during a November 2010 visit to the Yongbyon nuclear complex.

The North Korean space committee spokesman said a Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite designed to orbit the earth will be mounted on an Unha-3 rocket from the Sohae station in Cholsan County. He called it a "working" satellite that was an improvement over two previous

"experimental" satellites.

The spokesman said North Korea would abide by international regulations governing the launch of satellites for "peaceful" scientific purposes and that an orbit was chosen to avoid showering debris on neighboring nations.

North Korea provided similar notice in 2009, but launched the rocket over Japan despite warnings from world leaders that it would set the nation on a path of isolation.

In 2009, North Korea said an experimental communications satellite mounted on a three-stage Unha-2 rocket was sent into space playing "Song of Gen. Kim Il Sung" and "Song of Gen. Kim Jong Il."

The U.S. North American Aerospace Defense Command and South Korea's Defense Ministry said no satellite made it into orbit.

South Korea is due to host the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in two weeks, and North Korea's nuclear program was expected to be discussed on the sidelines of the gathering of world leaders.

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Citation: North Korea plans to launch long-range rocket (2012, March 16) retrieved 5 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-north-korea-long-range-rocket.html>

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