

NKorea rocket launch shows young leader as gambler

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In this Dec. 12, 2012 photo released by Korean Central News Agency, North Korea's Unha-3 rocket lifts off from the Sohae launch pad in Tongchang-ri, North Korea. The satellite that North Korea launched on board the long-range rocket is orbiting normally, South Korea said on Thursday. (AP Photo/KCNA)

(AP)—A triumphant North Korea staged a mass rally of soldiers and civilians Friday to glorify the country's young ruler, who took a big gamble this week in sending a satellite into orbit in defiance of international warnings.

Wednesday's [rocket launch](#) came just eight months after a similar attempt ended in an embarrassing public failure, and just under a year after Kim Jong Un inherited power following his father's death.

The surprising success of the launch may have earned Kim global

condemnation, but at home the gamble paid off, at least in the short term. To his people, it made the 20-something Kim appear powerful, capable and determined in the face of foreign adversaries.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans, packed into snowy Kim Il Sung Square, clenched their fists in a unified show of resolve as a military band tooted horns and pounded on drums.

Huge red banners positioned in the square called on North Koreans to defend Kim Jong Un with their lives. They also paid homage to Kim Jong Un's father, Kim Jong Il, and his grandfather, North Korean founder Kim Il Sung.

Pyongyang says the rocket put a crop and weather monitoring satellite into orbit. Much of the rest of the world sees it as a thinly disguised test of banned long-range missile technology. It could bring a fresh round of U.N. sanctions that would increase his country's international isolation. At the same time, the success of the launch could strengthen North Korea's military, the only entity that poses a potential threat to Kim's rule.

The launch's success, 14 years after North Korea's first attempt, shows more than a little of the gambling spirit in the third Kim to rule North Korea since it became a country in 1948.

"North Korean officials will long be touting Kim Jong Un as a gutsy leader" who commanded the rocket launch despite being new to the job and young, said Kim Byung-ro, a North Korea specialist at Seoul National University in South Korea.

The propaganda machinery churned into action early Friday, with state media detailing how Kim Jong Un issued the order to fire off the rocket just days after scientists fretted over technical issues, ignoring the chorus

of warnings from Washington to Moscow against a move likely to invite more sanctions.

Top officials followed Kim in shrugging off international condemnation.

Workers' Party Secretary Kim Ki Nam told the crowd, bundled up against a winter chill in the heart of the capital, that "hostile forces" had dubbed the launch a missile test. He rejected the claim and called on North Koreans to stand their ground against the "cunning" critics.

North Korea called the satellite a gift to Kim Jong Il, who is said to have set the lofty goal of getting a satellite into space and then tapped his son to see it into fruition. The satellite, which North Korean scientists say is designed to send back data about crops and weather, was named Kwangmyongsong, or "Lode Star"—the nickname legendarily given to the elder Kim at birth.

Kim Jong Il died on Dec. 17, 2011, so to North Koreans, the successful launch is a tribute. State TV have been replaying video of the launch to "Song of Gen. Kim Jong Il."

But it is the son who will bask in the glory, and face the international censure that may follow.

Even while he was being groomed to succeed his father, Kim Jong Un had been portrayed as championing science and technology as a way to lift North Korea out of decades of economic hardship.

"It makes me happy that our satellite is flying in space," Pyongyang citizen Jong Sun Hui said as Friday's ceremony came to a close and tens of thousands rushed into the streets, many linking arms as they went.

"The satellite launch demonstrated our strong power and the might of

our science and technology once again," she told The Associated Press. "And it also clearly testifies that a thriving nation is in our near future."

Aside from winning him support from the people, the success of the launch helps his image as he works to consolidate power over a government crammed with elderly, old-school lieutenants of his father and grandfather, foreign analysts said.

Experts say that what is unclear, however, is whether Kim will continue to smoothly solidify power, steering clear of friction with the powerful military while dealing with the strong possibility of more crushing sanctions. The United Nations says North Korea already has a serious hunger problem.

"Certainly in the short run, this is an enormous boost to his prestige," according to Marcus Noland, a North Korea analyst at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

Noland, however, also mentioned the "Machiavellian argument" that this could cause future problems for Kim by significantly boosting the power of the military—"the only real threat to his rule."

Successfully firing a rocket was so politically crucial for Kim at the onset of his rule that he allowed an April launch to go through even though it resulted in the collapse of a nascent food-aid-for-nuclear-freeze deal with the United States, said North Korea analyst Kim Yeon-su of Korea National Defense University in Seoul.

The launch success consolidates his image as heir to his father's legacy. But it could end up deepening North Korea's political and economic isolation, he said.

On Friday, the section at the rally reserved for foreign diplomats was

noticeably sparse. U.N. officials and some European envoys stayed away from the celebration, as they did in April after the last launch.

Despite the success, experts say North Korea is years from even having a shot at developing reliable missiles that could bombard the American mainland and other distant targets.

North Korea will need larger and more dependable missiles, and more advanced nuclear weapons, to threaten U.S. shores, though it already poses a shorter-range missile threat to its neighbors.

The next big question is how the outside world will punish Pyongyang—and try to steer North Korea from what could come next: a nuclear test. In 2009, the North conducted an atomic explosion just weeks after a rocket launch.

Scott Snyder, a Korea specialist for the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote recently that [North Korea](#)'s nuclear ambitions should inspire the U.S., China, South Korea and Japan to put aside their issues and focus on dealing with Pyongyang.

If there is a common threat that should galvanize regional cooperation, "it most certainly should be the prospect of a 30-year-old leader of a terrorized population with his finger on a nuclear trigger," Snyder said.

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