SKorea: Satellite working normally, sending data

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In this photo released by Korea Aerospace Research Institute, South Korea's rocket lifts off from its launch pad at the Naro Space Center in Goheung, South Korea, Wednesday, Jan. 30, 2013. South Korea says it has successfully launched a satellite into orbit from its own soil for the first time. Wednesday's high-stakes launch comes just weeks after archrival North Korea successfully launched its own satellite to the surprise of the world. (AP Photo/Korea Aerospace Research Institute)

The first satellite launched from South Korean soil is working normally,

officials said Thursday, a day after Seoul achieved its space milestone during a time of high tensions over archrival North Korea's recent threat to test a third nuclear device.

A South Korean rocket carrying the satellite blasted off from a launch pad Wednesday in the southwestern coastal village of Goheung. Science officials told cheering spectators minutes later that the rocket delivered an observational satellite into orbit. In a brief statement Thursday, the Science Ministry said the satellite was working normally and transmitting data on its orbit.

A crowd gathered around a TV at a train station in downtown Seoul to watch the afternoon launch. "I'm proud we have entered the ranks of satellite powers," office worker Hyun Day-sun said.

The launch is a culmination of years of efforts by South Korea—Asia's fourth-largest economy—to advance its space program and cement its standing as a technology powerhouse whose semiconductors, smartphones and automobiles command global demand. North Korea's long-range rocket program, in contrast, has generated international fears that it is getting closer to developing nuclear missiles capable of striking the U.S.

South Korea's success comes amid increased tension on the Korean Peninsula over North Korea's threat to explode its third nuclear device. Pyongyang is angry over tough new international sanctions over its Dec. 12 rocket launch that also put a satellite into space, and it has accused its rivals of applying double standards toward the two Koreas' space programs.

Washington and Seoul have called North Korea's rocket launch a cover for a test of Pyongyang's banned ballistic missile technology.

North Korea recently acknowledged that its long-range rockets have both scientific and military uses, and Kong Chang-duk, a professor of rocket science at South Korea's Chosun University, said the same argument could apply to the South.

Seoul may eventually be able "to build better missiles and scrutinize North Korea with a better satellite," Kong said. "... There are dual purposes in space technology."

South Koreans cheer as they watch a television broadcast of the country's first rocket launch at Seoul Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Jan. 30, 2013. South Korea has launched a rocket in its third attempt to place a satellite in space from its own soil. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the U.S. had observed the "successful" satellite launch.

She said there was no basis for comparing the South and the North's rocket programs. Unlike the North, the South has developed its technology responsibly and is an active participant in international nonproliferation agreements, showing its program has no military intent, she said.

"The North should not see it as a threat because they too can enjoy the same transparency with regard to the program that the rest of us have, which is a far cry from how the DPRK behaves," Nuland told reporters. DPRK stands for the formal name for North Korea.

Both Koreas see the development of space programs as crucial hallmarks of their scientific prowess and national pride, and both had high-profile failures before success. China, Japan and India have led the region in space exploration.

South Korean satellites were already in space, launched from countries including Japan, the United States and Russia. Seoul tried and failed to launch satellites on its own in 2009 and 2010; more recent launch attempts were aborted at the last minute.

U.S. experts have described the North's satellite as tumbling in space and said it does not appear to be functioning, though Pyongyang has said it is working.

Pyongyang's state television made no mention of the South Korean launch, but about an hour after liftoff it showed archive footage of North Koreans cheering the North's three-stage rocket from last month. Images from the launch frequently appear in North Korean propaganda.

The satellite launched by Seoul is designed to analyze weather data, measure radiation in space, gauge distances on earth and test how effectively South Korean-made devices installed on the satellite operate

in space. South Korean officials said it will help them develop more sophisticated satellites in the future.

South Korea did need outside help to launch the satellite: The rocket's first stage was designed and built by Russian experts. North Korea built its rocket almost entirely on its own, South Korean military experts said earlier this month after analyzing debris retrieved from the Yellow Sea in December.

Kim Seung-jo, South Korea's chief space official, told reporters that his country should be able to independently produce a rocket capable of putting a satellite into orbit by as early as 2018.

Spending on science and technology is expected to increase under South Korea's incoming President Park Geun-hye, who takes office next month. She pledged during her campaign to increase such spending to 5 percent of South Korea's GDP by the end of her five-year term.