

South Korea cancels satellite launch plan citing technical problem

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In this photo released by the Korea Aerospace Research Institute, the Nuri rocket sits on its launch pad at the Naro Space Center in Goheung, South Korea, Tuesday, May 23, 2023. South Korea was set to launch its first commercial-grade satellite, on Wednesday as rival North KoreaCredit: Korea Aerospace Research Institute via AP

South Korea canceled its planned launch Wednesday of its first commercial-grade satellite due to a technical issue, days after rival North Korea reaffirmed its push to place its first military spy satellite into orbit.

The cancellation was announced about two hours before South Korea's homegrown Nuri space launch vehicle carrying eight satellites—including the main, commercial-grade one—was scheduled to lift off from a southern launch facility.

Oh Tae-seok, the first vice-minister of science, told a televised news conference a communication anomaly between the launch control computer and the launch pad control computer was found during the launch preparation process. He said South Korea will consider rescheduling the launch as soon as Thursday, if authorities fix the technical problem early.

South Korea's [satellite](#) launch plan has been closely watched by outsiders. Last week, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reviewed a finished spy satellite and approved a future action plan on its launch. During his visit to the country's aerospace agency, Kim also mentioned the strategic significance of a spy satellite while vowing to defend against "confrontational moves" by South Korean and U.S. forces, according to [state media](#).

Animosities on the Korean Peninsula remain high.

Since the start of 2022, North Korea has test-launched more than 100 missiles—some of them nuclear-capable weapons designed to strike South Korea and the U.S.—in what it called efforts to respond to the expansion of military drills between the United States and South Korea. Analysts say the North's testing spree was likely meant to pressure its rivals to scale back their [military training](#) and relax economic sanctions

on the North.

Jung Chang Wook, head of the Korea Defense Study Forum think tank in Seoul, said the recent North Korean push for a spy satellite launch suggests it cares greatly about the South Korean satellite launch program.

South Korean officials say their [commercial-grade satellite launch](#) has no military purpose. But many experts say it will eventually help South Korea acquire technologies and knowhow required to operate military surveillance satellites and build more powerful missiles.

South Korea already has missiles that place all of North Korea within striking distance. But Jung said South Korea needs longer-range missiles to prepare for future security threats that can be posed by potential adversaries like China and Russia.



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Lee Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute, said that the use of the Nuri rocket as a missile isn't militarily meaningful as it uses a type of liquid fuel that requires much longer fueling time than solid fuel.

But he said there is "enough possibility" that the launch will support South Korea's efforts to build a space-based surveillance system, as its commercial-grade satellite is to be placed on a sun-synchronous orbit, which is typically used by reconnaissance satellites.

South Korea currently has no military reconnaissance satellites of its own and depends on U.S. spy satellites to monitor strategic facilities in North Korea. South Korea seeks to launch its own surveillance satellites soon.

Some experts say the North Korean spy satellite disclosed in its state media doesn't appear to be sophisticated enough to produce high-resolution imagery that can meaningfully boost the country's surveillance capacities.

But Lee said the North Korean satellite is still likely be capable of monitoring the deployment of incoming U.S. strategic assets like an [aircraft carrier](#) and the movements of South Korean warships and fighter

jets.

After its first spy satellite launch, Lee predicted North Korea will try to send several more satellites into space, likely more advanced ones. "With three to five satellites, North Korea can have an almost real-time monitoring on the Korean Peninsula," he said.

Lee said the North's first spy satellite launch could happen in June. Other experts say the launch will more likely happen in the latter half of this year.

Wednesday's canceled launch of South Korea's satellite would have been the third of its kind involving Nuri.

In its second launch last year, South Korea successfully put what it called a "performance verification satellite" into orbit, becoming the world's 10th nation to send a satellite into space with its own technology. The launch was mainly designed to examine the Nuri rocket's capabilities.

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