

# South Korea to conduct satellite launch as North Korea pushes to fire its 1st military spy satellite

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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 was set to launch its first commercial-grade satellite Wednesday as rival North Korea pushed plans forward to place its first military spy satellite into orbit.

The South Korean [satellite](#) will be launched by a domestically made rocket under the country's space development program. Seoul officials say its 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.

The Nuri space launch vehicle was scheduled to lift off early Wednesday evening from a launch facility on a southern South Korean island, if no unexpected weather or other problems occur at the last minute, according to the Science Ministry.

Aboard the rocket are the main satellite, called "Next Generation Small Satellite 2," and seven other smaller, cube-shaped satellites. The main one is tasked with verifying imaging radar technology and observing cosmic radiation in near-Earth orbit, a ministry statement said.

Wednesday's launch is the third of its kind involving [Nuri, South Korea's first homegrown rocket](#).

In its first launch in 2021, the rocket's dummy payload reached the desired altitude but failed to enter orbit. In its second attempt last year, South Korea successfully put what it called a "performance verification satellite" into orbit in a launch mainly designed to examine the Nuri rocket. South Korea became the world's 10th nation to send a satellite into space with its own technology.

The latest launch comes amid heightened military tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

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.

On May 16, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reviewed a finished military spy satellite at the country's aerospace center and approved an unspecified future action plan on its launch.

During the visit, Kim cited the strategic significance of a spy satellite while vowing to bolster the country's defense as "U.S. imperialists and (South) Korean puppet villains escalate their confrontational moves," according to state media.

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 Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute, 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.

"It would be much better to have such a satellite than not having one," Lee said.

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.

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.

Unlike South Korean and other countries' satellite launches, North Korea's satellite liftoff would be a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, which ban the country from engaging in any form of ballistic launches. The U.N. viewed the North's past launches of Earth observation satellites as a disguised test of its long-range missile technology because ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles often share similar bodies, engines and other components.

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.

Jung said while the South Korean satellite to be launched Wednesday wasn't primarily developed for military purposes, its launch will still give it technologies related to the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and military spy satellites.

"It's just a matter of how we (publicly) describe a launch. There is no reason to provoke our neighbors unnecessarily," Jung said.

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.

Lee said 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.

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