



North Korea's Rocket Launch Implications of a Fiasco

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North Korea defied warnings from the international community and launched a rocket on 13 April 2012. The Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite was fired from the Sohae Satellite Launching Station in Tongchang-ri at 7.38 AM but failed to reach orbit. The failure to launch the rocket came as an embarrassment for the Communist regime, which was seeking to reinforce the legitimacy of the new leader, 28-year old Kim Jong-un, who took over from his father Kim Jong-il in December 2011. North Korea insisted that the aim of the so-called civilian launch was to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung. But it is suspected that the launch was to test banned long-range missile technology.

Though the rocket suffered a catastrophic structural failure about a minute after launch and plummeted into the Yellow Sea, it threatened to cause a further deterioration in the relationship between the reclusive state and its neighbour. The failure demonstrated that North Korea has not mastered the technology that needed to control multi-stage rockets – a key capability if the North is to threaten the US with intercontinental ballistic missiles. Launching failures are not uncommon even for rich and technologically advanced nations. But in the myth-filled world of the Kim dynasty, there is little room for failure. Post-launch, the regime decided to announce its failure, mainly because so many foreign reporters were present and cell phone/internet penetration could not be controlled.

According to Naoki Tanaka, Japan's Defense Minister, the three-stage rocket "was airborne for more than a minute before it broke apart." Debris

started falling from an altitude of about 151 km above Baekneyong Island (in northwest South Korea) and was scattered across the sea roughly 100 to 150 km off Pyeongtak and Gunsan. Pyongyang's state media acknowledged that the satellite failed to enter orbit. The North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado identified the projectile as a Taepodong-2 missile, which it said was under US monitoring during its short flight southward above the Yellow Sea.

Pyongyang ignored repeated calls from various nations to cancel the launch. It claimed that it was an attempt to place a weather observation satellite into orbit. The US, Japan and South Korea, as well as the global community, considered the North's 'satellite' launch a façade for another illegal long-range missile test. The breakup of the Unha 3 rocket is seen as an overall failed investment worth more than USD1 billion. The regime had previously touted the launch as proof of North Korea's technological advancement and had timed it with Kim Il-sung's 100th birth anniversary.

Though the rocket ultimately did not pose a threat to any part of either Japanese or South Korean territory, both countries' state-of-the-art-missile defense systems (kept on alert_ were not called upon to intercept any debris. Japan did not take any chance and put its radar systems to closely monitor the situation. In view of the failure, neither ground-based Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missiles deployed around Okinawa Prefecture nor Standard Missile-3 interceptors aboard Maritime Self-Defense Forces destroyers in the East China Sea were activated.

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According to South Korean government estimates, the North built the new site near the western border with China at a cost of USD400 million. The rocket itself cost another USD450 million. If the lost US food aid estimated to be worth USD200 million is added, the effective cost of the test was above USD1 billion. This is too much money wasted for a country that cannot feed its own people and asks for food from other countries. South Korea's foreign minister lost no time in jabbing the North's hurt pride by saying that the North was spending enormous resources on developing nuclear and missile capabilities while ignoring the urgent welfare issue of its people.

I REACTIONS

The launch drew swift international condemnation. Past condemnation over similar tests has proved toothless and this time is not going to be any different. There are few sanctions left that have not already been attempted and any stronger action will only push the North to conduct a nuclear test. The fact that hours after the fiasco, Jong-un was installed as the new head of the National Defense Commission (NDC), the country's highest state agency, indicates that he wants to consolidate power without losing much time.

The UN Security Council 'deplored' the failed bid to launch a long-range rocket. The Group of Eight foreign ministers issued an emergency statement after their annual summit in Washington, condemning the North's act, and urged it to refrain from further provocations. A statement issued by the G-8 opposed the launch as "a violation of UN Security Council resolutions." The foreign ministers of the G-8 - made up of the US, Canada, Japan, Russia, the UK, Germany, France and Italy - raised the possibility of action by the UN. "We, the G-8 Foreign Ministers, condemn the launch by the Democratic People's

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Republic of Korea (DPRK), which is a violation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1695, 1718, and 1874," the statement said.

Japan was slow to issue a response and the Japanese people were not happy about this. In contrast, the US and South Korea issued official announcements swiftly after blastoff. It was typical Japanese bungling demonstrating a particular obsession with verifying and confirming data received from the US warning system. Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura probably learnt a lesson from Japanese reactions to the previous North Korean rocket launch in 2009 which had stemmed from bureaucratic misfires. It sent out false alarms that prompted widespread panic. Therefore, the government decided to adopt a double-checking policy this time. Even the defense ministry justified a delayed response on the grounds that "necessary issues needed to be taken care of." Though Fujimura termed North Korea's act as 'a grave act of provocation' and lodged a complaint through diplomatic routes, Japan did not want to impose additional sanctions unilaterally without discussing it with the international community.

Japan has urged China and Russia, allies of North Korea, to support whatever effort is made at the UNSC. Not only does the possibility of the resumption of the Six-Party Talks appear bleak, the chances of Japan holding direct talks with the hermit state over the abduction issue are now even slimmer. China, North Korea's closest ally, called for calm in the Korean peninsula. Foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said that the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in Northeastern Asia is a common responsibility and in the best interests of all sides. China also said that Japan was using the launch as a pretext to reinvent its armed forces as more proactive than defensive. The US and its allies will 'take additional steps' if there are more 'provocative actions'.

Though South Korea and Japan favour a strong punishment of the North, there is also a palpable worry that the mercurial and isolated state could respond to new UN punishments with a third atomic blast. The Council's response is therefore tempered. The UN Secretary General characterized North Korea's rocket firing as 'deplorable'. The Obama administration also condemned the attempt as illegal and dangerous, leaving North Korea even more cut off from the world. A statement released by the White House observed: "Despite the failure of its attempted missile launch, North Korea's

provocative action threatens regional security, violates international law and contravenes its own recent commitments.”

II IMPLICATIONS

The failed missile launch could trigger a major internal dispute and political instability in North Korea. According to analysts, the North Korean leader could escalate diplomatic tactics by conducting a nuclear test to make up for the humiliation suffered. Japan's options seem limited. According to Professor Shunji Hiraiwa at Kwansai Gakuin University in Hyogo Prefecture, North Korea is not interested in Japan, which limits Japan's role. Therefore, trilateral negotiations among the US, China and North Korea could be the key in preventing Pyongyang from trying to test a nuclear bomb.

The last time North Korea launched a missile in April 2009, it conducted a nuclear test a month later. Pyongyang may follow the same pattern this time. In February 2012, there were some signs of hope when North Korea agreed to suspend uranium enrichment at the Yongbyon complex and to a moratorium on further nuclear and long-range missile tests, in exchange for 240,000 metric tons of nutritional aid from the US. The deal for a brief period raised hopes that a moribund multinational process aimed at North Korea's permanent denuclearization could be reinvigorated. That optimism was punctured when Pyongyang in mid-March declared its intention to fire a rocket into space in apparent contravention of the terms of the agreement with Washington.

Thus, Pyongyang broke the trust. And, as the US has decided not to send aid following the missile launch, Pyongyang would see this as a break in promise. The fact that the North promised to suspend some nuclear work for food and then quickly reneged the pledge to suspend long-range missile tests, suggests that a power struggle could be under way.

Pyongyang will have no choice but to strengthen its defensive capabilities by conducting a nuclear experiment. According to Kim Tae-woo, a defence analyst and president of the Korea Institute for National Unification, North Korea is committed to developing missiles and nuclear weapons partly to prove the power of Kim Jong-un, who is thought to be under the control of a clique of generals and relatives. The crash has fuelled fears that North Korea may conduct its third underground nuclear test in the near future.

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Therefore it is extremely likely that Pyongyang would launch either another missile or conduct a nuclear test after a severe power struggle takes place among the various factions.

This is because the regime is made up of various groups, ranging from moderates to militaristic hardliners. It is likely that a large-scale purge would take place with people being blamed for disgracing the leader, Kim Jong-un. How the young leader reacts to the humiliation is anybody's guess, and how the regime's guiding principle of *juche* or self-reliance, in defiance of the world, is taken to its logical conclusion, is going to remain one of many unknowns. Marcus Noland, a North Korea expert, observes: "Some of the scientists and engineers associated with the launch are likely facing death or the gulag as scapegoats for this embarrassment."

Though there was immediate condemnation from various countries, the bigger question was not the fate of aging rocket technology, but the future of a young dictator. At a time when the young leader is trying to consolidate power, the failure of the rocket launch injects new uncertainty at an already uncertain time. To re-establish his credibility, staging a nuclear test is a possibility, for which preparations have been evident on satellite photographs for several weeks.

The US can take solace in the possibility that the North's ability to launch intercontinental ballistic missile that would reach the West Coast will take longer than expected. The technology to launch a small satellite into orbit is virtually identical to the missile technology to launch a warhead, so the rocket failure suggests problems with the missile programme.

The decision to rocket test signals one of two things: defy China, which warned against the test, or Jong-un being overruled in the internal power structure. The first is more worrisome than

the second, as China's influence would have considerably waned and therefore its sobering counsel would have been rendered irrelevant. The second could suggest a struggle for influence, if not actual leadership. It is believed that Kim Jong-un's aunt Kim Kyong-hui is the one wielding the real power. Kim Kyong-hui is Il-sung's daughter, which gives legitimacy to her status, and her experience in governance is apparently making up for Kim Jong-un's lack of it.

The young leader does not seem to be making decisions by himself on important matters, and consults his aunt Kim Kyong-hui or his uncle Jang Song-taek. Jong-un was tapped to succeed his father in January 2009 and made his first official appearance in September 2010. Kim Jong-il died less than three years after Jong-un began training for the top job and ended up succeeding him without gaining full control of the military and government. North Korea watchers say this leaves Kim junior no choice but to lean on his aunt and uncle for advice. In an opaque country that is fiercely armed and is believed to have a half-dozen or more nuclear weapons or the equivalent amount of plutonium to produce them, the idea of a power struggle makes an uneasy scenario. Under the circumstance, an unstable Kim Jong-un would be preferable to a free-for-all situation in which no one knows who controls the arsenal.

North Korea is a socialist country steeped in the traditions of a Confucian dynasty and it is paramount for the country's new leader to embellish his rise to power with events meant to show loyalty to his forefathers, while demonstrating his own abilities to lead. This launch was supposed to represent that moment. Both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il chose to have a nuclear deterrent capability with functioning missiles fitted with weapons as they were fearful of an attack by the US. The junior Kim was following his forefather's chosen path and thereby demonstrating his obeisance to them. After the rocket fiasco, his future course of action remains in the realm of the unknown for some time and this is a hugely dangerous scenario.

III ASSESSMENT

The failed nuclear launch can have two aspects:

technical and political. The technical issue is easy to deal with. This event was a big loss of face for Pyongyang. A successful launch would have reminded the world that the North Korean 'problem' is not going to go away, and the world will have to deal with it. However, the failed launch evoked the ire of the international community and put North Korea firmly back in the doghouse. It also demonstrated its creaky and poor technology, which is why there are few customers to buy its weapons.

The political meaning is harder to work out. The pattern of good behaviour-bad behaviour that was followed under Jong-il looks set to continue. It is unclear if the elite group guiding this has any crafty strategic sense of the late Kim. He at least proved adept at choosing his moment and getting North Korea back on the agendas of the key powers. But the young leader's rocket launch decision now limits North's diplomatic options.

There are signs that the decision-making structures have fallen apart, and the senior leaders might use this opportunity either to help Kim Jong-un to strengthen his hands or to spread their own influence in the decision-making apparatus. Either of the two could be a possibility and neither could also be true. North Korea has violated a UN resolution at a time when its people are going hungry, its political system is grinding to a halt, its leadership has limited domestic credibility, and its international position has never been more isolated. China, its one sole diplomatic friend, is distracted by a internal leadership transition.

The world knows North Korea from the provocation-punishment-defiance angle. This must end. The international community cannot afford to abandon the approach of dialogue and cannot expect initiative to be taken by Pyongyang. The Six-Party-Talks must be restarted. Pyongyang invited foreign journalists to watch the launch to prove that it was not testing a long-range missile as alleged by the US and South Korea. This act itself is a huge change towards transparency. The international community should encourage the North Korea to continue the path of gradually opening up.