North Korea’s Failed Rocket Launch
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There is a dispute over whether the launch of the ‘Kwnagmyongsong-3’ was a ballistic missile test or a satellite experiment. What is your view?

The technology used for a missile or a satellite launch are quite similar. But many experts point out that North Korea’s primitive and mock-up scale satellite (100kg) was not believed to be appropriate for its alleged purpose: weather prediction and earth observation. According to cost-benefit studies by scientists, the launching cost per kilogram must be no higher than $40,000 for the launch to be financially viable. A rough calculations about the ‘Kwangmyong-3’ showed that the launch would cost $3 million per kilogram. The conclusion is that this launch is scientifically nonsense and it cannot be understood without paying heed to the political purposes Pyongyang had in mind.

What sort of political goal does North Korea want to achieve through this provocative action that may bring about further sanctions from the international community?

The launch was designed and executed as a part of the celebration ceremony for “the Day of the Sun” (Kim Il Sung’s 100th birthday, April 15). It is fair to say that this event had been planned well before Kim Jong Il’s death and the rise of his youngest son Kim Jong Un. North Korea had already proclaimed that the North Korean founding leader’s centenary would the moment when North Korea would enter a new era called “kangsŏngtaekook” (strong and prosperous nation). The ‘kangsŏngtaekook’ project, which has been begun since the late 1990s, is a national strategy to show off the grandeur of their nation. The project consists of three pillars: an economically, ideologically, and militarily strong and prosperous nation. Since the regime is far from achieving the first two goals, it has attempted to show off its enhanced missile technology, pretending to be a militarily strong and prosperous nation. This is the last trump card they can play in order to camouflage their failed attempt to accomplish economic prosperity and to consolidate ideological indoctrination. In this sense, it is expected that the failure of the launch and the quick admission of this fiasco by the state media could bring a significant blow for the new North Korean leadership.

Do you see differences between this launch and the past similar attempts?

The North Korean authority made an unprecedented invitation to foreign journalists to see the launch preparation process and to even closely observe the satellite itself. After the rocket burst into pieces less than one minute after launch, North Korean media quickly
admitted the failure in approximately in 4 hours, which was a departure from the past practices, and quite surprising. With similar launch projects in the past, the North Korean regime had insisted their satellite successfully entered orbit even though the international scientists and other governments monitoring those launches had conclusive evidence that they had failed to place the satellite into orbit.

How do you expect the United States and the international community to react to this provocative launch?

The United States will move multilateral and bilateral fronts. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 banned North Korea from conducting ‘any launch using ballistic missile technology’. Whether this launch is for a satellite or a missile, the United States and the major players in the UN (including Russia) already reaffirmed the launch in itself constituted a violation of the resolution. But China, which has been reluctant to take excessively coercive actions toward North Korea, remains cautious so far. As for the likelihood of another UNSC resolution, at least at this point, the United States seems less enthusiastic about rallying further sanctions in the UN. A UNSC presidential statement with an escalated tone of criticism against North Korea is another option, as are Iran-style bilateral financial sanctions. However, the key to effective multilateral sanctions remains in China’s hands, and it is not clear how enthusiastically China would endorse or implement any measures against North Korea. Bilateral U.S. countermeasures have already been implemented. The United States made it clear before and after the launch that they would not provide North Korea with the 240,000 tons nutrition assistance promised in February 2012, since the launch is a grave violation of that agreement. However, Pyongyang has been determined to act according to its own policy logic and self-defined interests. This launch and their expected subsequent actions will be no exception. North Korea is arguing that the purpose of this launch is absolutely peaceful and threatening to conduct even another nuclear test and more in the event that the United States nullifies the February 29 agreement.

Is it probable that North Korea might conduct another nuclear test in the wake of this rocket failure?

It is hard to predict how new leader Kim Jong Un might deal with the embarrassment of the rocket failure. But it is worth noting the past pattern of nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. In 2006, the rocket launch of ‘Taepodong-2’ (July) preceded the first nuclear test (October), and the second nuclear test was conducted just a month after the ‘Kwangmyongson-2’ launch in 2009. Pyongyang took advantage of the economic sanctions as an excuse for taking even more provocative actions. An even more worrying signal comes from satellite images indicating the North is silently preparing the third nuclear test, which were unveiled by South Korea’s intelligence agency. What makes the matters worse, if the third test is fuelled by highly enriched uranium rather than plutonium used in the past two tests, it will be a signal indicating a great escalation of the crisis.

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