

North Korea Launches Satellite into Orbit

By [Stuart Smallwood](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

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North Korean state media announced it successfully launched a satellite into orbit this morning, surprising the international community after it had previously claimed just days earlier that technical difficulties would delay the event until late December.

Japanese and South Korean officials confirmed the launch took place around 10 a.m. and that all three stages of the launch fell as predicted, without harming any neighboring countries.

The launch was widely condemned by the international community, and the US was particularly indignant. The American government and its regional allies suggest the launch was a cover for testing technology that will eventually allow North Korea to mount a nuclear warhead onto ballistic missiles. They also condemned North Korea for wasting money on expensive weapons test while ignoring the plight of their own people (a good point, except it conveniently omits America's own unconditional [financial backing](#) of the Israeli [brutalization](#) of Palestinians, to use but one example).

The apparently successful launch comes after a previous attempt this year, which North Korea aborted just two minutes into the process. There were three other failures in 1998, 2006 and 2009.

How will the international community respond?

In the short term, Japanese and South Korean security officials have opened "emergency" meetings to discuss the launch, and no doubt the United States and China will be doing something similar. Which begs the question, "What emergency?"

"A successful test would raise as a top-line national security issue for the Obama administration the specter of a direct North Korean threat to the U.S. homeland," analysts Victor D. Cha and Ellen Kim [wrote](#) for the Center For Strategic and International Studies.

However, what the test itself indicates for the near future in terms of North Korean capabilities is very much unclear and there is reason to doubt it means anything serious at all. Certainly the citizens in Seoul sitting at coffee shops and idly chatting or playing on their cell phones don't seem particularly concerned.

This may be for good reason. In [a much-quoted report](#) exposing the North Korean regime for using [fake missiles in an infamous military parade](#) in Pyongyang on national founder Kim Il-sung's birthday earlier this year, nuclear proliferation analysts Markus Schiller and Robert H. Schmucker suggested North Korea would never be able to produce a true Intercontinental Ballistic Missile program (what the US says they are testing here), because the project is simply too expensive for the poor, isolated country.

“After [first launch] it will take many years and many, many flights to arrive at a deployable and operational ICBM force, since the development of a modern ICBM is extremely demanding. To put things into perspective: The development of the Soviet/Russian Topol-M ICBM is said to have cost 142.8 billion Rubles (in 1992 prices - at that time, the Ruble exchange rate was around one US Dollar).”

While the successful launch is certainly not a cause for celebration in the international community it isn't a source for serious concern either. What is clear is that it will put the North Korean nuclear program back on the agenda in 2013 even if it's a problem every country in the region (including the United States) was hoping to put off indefinitely.

Why now?

The missile launch occurred out of the typical season for such activity, prompting many analysts to assume the event was a means to commemorate the death of former leader Kim Jong-il, who died on December 17 last year. This was also supposed to be a momentous year for North Korea because it was the centenary of founding dictator Kim Il-sung's birth.

But there are likely more nuanced reasons for the launch, though the importance of this kind of public relations for a regime that depends on propagating national greatness and a cult of leadership should not be underestimated. That said, any analysis on what is going on in the North and why is purely speculative.

Still, one can surmise that because the country depends on external aid and is constantly seeking a means to diversify its dependency beyond its most stable patron, China, this may be another attempt by the regime to get itself back onto the international agenda.

With that in mind, Benjamin Habib, a lecturer in politics and international relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia [wrote](#) that the regime is yet again trying to attract attention with the missile launch. Habib notes that every significant country involved in the de-nuclearization effort on the Korean Peninsula except for Russia—South Korea, China, Japan and China—has been busy with domestic leadership transitions or elections for the last few months. This has virtually ended any discussion about Pyongyang and its nukes.

“While North Korea appears to have no intention of relinquishing its nuclear or missile capabilities, its habitual tactic of engineering crises to leverage aid from the international community in exchange for de-escalation or proliferation freeze agreements is predicated on negotiations actually taking place,” Habib wrote.

North Korea's long-term strategy has been interpreted as an attempt to attract the United States into bilateral negotiations with the goal of addressing its own security concern that the US intends regime change in the northern half of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea recognized the development of nuclear weapons as a means of doing this and has used this strategy quite consistently since the first nuclear crisis in 1994. Its main objectives are to achieve normalized relations with Washington by establishing a peace treaty and receiving economic aid and energy security agreements. This test may be just another stage of that strategy, though contrary to Habib, it is unclear whether North Korea would be willing to give up its nukes or not because America has never honestly tried a grand bargain agreement, opting instead for pre-conditional demands of nuclear disarmament before any negotiations take place ([go here](#) for more on America's failed policy leading to North Korea's nuke development).

The launch also comes as a South Korean official [said recently](#) that the succession of Kim Jong-un isn't going as smoothly as planned, prompting speculation that the regime is trying to display to its people that its concept of strength through military superiority is still working.

Habib also notes Kim Jong-un's '6.28 policy' of agriculture sector reforms may require a bolstering of personal legitimacy for the new leader. The economic reforms, if truly enacted, could lead to short-term instability as the country adjusts, even if they are successful.

One-upping Seoul?

Another reason for the launch may be related to recent military developments in South Korea.

In October, just two days after the South [was given permission](#) by the United States to extend its cruise missile range to a capacity beyond North Korean territory, North Korea announced they could reach the continental United States with their own ballistic missiles. The announcement wasn't, and still shouldn't be, taken seriously but in the context of this event it is possible the North is trying to do one better than the South with this launch.

Indeed, the [Globe and Mail reports](#) that the US tried to stop North Korea from this recent launch and North Korea responded by mentioning South Korea's new missile range in this context.

"In a statement in October, North Korea's National Defence Commission said that when 'mid-ranking policymakers from the U.S. National Security Council and CIA recently met with us in official and unofficial settings,' they tried to assure the North Koreans that Washington had no 'hostile' intent against Pyongyang.

"But the reality clearly showed that the messages we received from the United States were lies,' it said, citing the United States' agreement to let South Korea nearly triple the reach of its ballistic missiles, putting all of the North within their range."

The fact is there is no way to know for sure why North Korea launched a rocket at this particular time. There are likely a myriad of factors involved, but given that the whole world is talking about the "hermit kingdom" again it is safe to say the satellite launch was a success in more than a literal sense.

It is now a question of whether the United States will admit it is time to try a positive and consistent policy of engagement, minus preconditions, or whether they actually have no interest in negotiating at all, but using North Korea as a straw-man for their ongoing military presence in Northeast Asia.

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