

The Japanese Government Spreads Misinformation On North Korea's Rocket Launch

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Global Research, April 16, 2016

[The Asia Pacific Journal](#) 15 April 2016

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [NORTH KOREA](#)

The Illusion of Japan's "Missile Destruction Order"

The Japanese government has described the North Korean rocket launched on February 7 as "a long range ballistic missile disguised as a satellite launching vehicle." Even after it was confirmed that a satellite was in orbit it has kept that rhetoric. As the Japanese public, as well as journalists, generally lack knowledge of missiles, they are easily manipulated by government misinformation.

One example of recent Japanese psychological war was the deployment of the Patriot PAC3 (anti-missile missiles) to Miyako and Ishigaki islands, southwest of Okinawa. In response to North Korea's prior announcement of the satellite launch, the Japanese government issued a "ballistic missile destruction order" to the Self Defense Forces. Three Aegis destroyers were deployed in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Also land-based Patriot PAC-3 batteries were put on alert in the Tokyo metropolitan area and in Okinawa's main island. In addition, PAC-3 fire units were dispatched to two remote islands of Okinawa prefecture because the anticipated trajectory of the North Korean "missile" was close to those islands. But if the launch proceeded as planned, the altitude of the rocket would be more than 400 km above the islands. There is no legal basis for shooting down a rocket flying in outer space, which is outside of Japanese territorial air space. Furthermore, PAC-3 cannot reach such a target, as its maximum altitude is a mere 15 km.

Japan's Defense Ministry claimed that PAC-3 could hit the North Korean missile if it was falling into Japanese territory due to malfunction. However, in ballistic missile defense, interceptor missiles are launched toward the future position of the target which is flying at a speed of more than 20,000 km per hour. The trajectory of a malfunctioning rocket would be irregular and unpredictable, so its future position cannot be calculated and PAC-3 missiles cannot be launched.



Image: C-3 missile batteries in Tokyo

It would not be impossible to intercept debris such as rocket engines free-falling into the atmosphere. However, one cannot be certain whether breaking up such objects into multiple fragments would make the islands safer or more dangerous. In any case, the deployment of useless weapons to these islands appears to have taken place because there were plans to deploy surface-to-ship missiles and garrisons in the area. The incident was likely used to instigate fear among islanders and thereby gain their support for these plans.

In 2009, 2010, and 2013, South Korea launched satellites from the Naro Space Center facing the Tsushima Strait using Russian-made engines, succeeded on the third attempt. As the Naro Space Center's longitudinal position is approximately three degrees east of the North Korean launch site in Tongch'ang-ri, the satellites flew close to the Okinawan main island posing a slightly higher danger in case of malfunction. In 2010, the rocket exploded 132 seconds after launching and its remains fell approximately 350 kilometers north of Okinawa. A consistent policy to prepare for falling debris from malfunctions would have necessitated destruction orders in these instances as well.

Instigating Fear to Increase Defense Spending

On February 7, newspapers and television stations reported on "North Korea's missile launch." However the Joint Space Operations Center of the U.S. Strategic Command announced approximately two hours after the launch that two objects had been launched into orbit, one being a satellite and the other the remains of the third stage rocket. While at first the satellite continued to rotate and there was speculation that it was out of control, a U.S. defense official later told the press that the rotation had stopped but did not clarify whether or not radio signals were being emitted.



Image: Japanese Self-Defense Force Battleship Atago with Aegis Guided Missile Combat System

On December 12, 2012, too, North Korea had successfully launched a satellite into orbit, but radio signals were not emitted perhaps due to failed communications equipment. Before the recent launch, North Korea reported to the International Maritime Organization that debris from the rocket was projected to fall in the same areas as the 2012 launch. From this, one could infer that North Korea was planning to launch a satellite into orbit in a similar fashion. I answered to this effect when asked by the media. The Japanese Defense Ministry surely understood this as well.

After the previous satellite launch, the Japanese government and mass media made a great uproar while giving only minimal coverage to the successful launch of the satellite. As a result, people in the mass media were unaware of this latter fact. This time as well, almost all the major media parroted the government announcement of the "missile launch," a situation reminiscent of Imperial Headquarters announcements in the Second World War.

In reality, the Taepodong-2 rose to approximately 500 kilometers and its third-stage rocket accelerated horizontally to put the satellite into orbit. If the third-stage rocket also continued its ascent like a ballistic missile, it would follow a parabolic trajectory and fall on Australia. Japanese newspapers apparently found it difficult to change their stance and write about the North Korean "satellite." They instead opted for awkward terms like "object" or "cargo" in orbit. American media, on the other hand, continued to use the generic term "rocket" which could apply to both ballistic missiles and satellite launching vehicles before and after the launch—a more accurate and safer expression.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2087 of January 23, 2013, after the previous satellite launch, demanded that North Korea "not conduct any further launches that use ballistic missile technology, nuclear tests or any further provocation." As both the satellite launch and the hydrogen bomb test of January 6 clearly violated this resolution, the Japanese government and mass media did not need to fabricate a "missile launch" to

criticize North Korea. The loud emphasis was likely a technique for increased missile defense spending.

Japan has already spent 1.35 trillion yen on ballistic missile defense and is planning to replace the SM-3 Block 1 interceptor missiles (1.6 billion yen per missile), eight of which are estimated to be on board each Aegis ship, with the larger and higher performing Block 2 type whose unit cost is estimated to be more than double. The number of Aegis ships (200 billion yen per ship including missile system) will increase from six to eight. Some have raised doubts about the astronomical expenditures for these upgrades, as their purpose is not limited to the defense of Japan, but is also for intercepting higher-flying ballistic missiles aimed at targets such as Guam, Hawaii, and the US west coast. As it is necessary to have taxpayers fear ballistic missiles to quell such doubts, recognition of the “satellite” must have been an inconvenience for the government.

The Differentiation of Rocket Technology

It has become common for media to remark: “The technology for ballistic missiles and rockets for launching satellites is basically the same. The only difference is whether they carry warheads or satellites.” However, if we follow the same logic we can say: “The basic technology for fighter jets and passenger planes is the same.”

In the 1950s, when Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and satellites emerged, the Soviet Union succeeded in launching Sputnik-1, the world’s first satellite, using its ICBM SS6. Later, the U.S. also launched satellites using Atlas and Titan I ICBMs. However, these ICBMs at first required hours of preparation before launch including the loading of liquid fuel, making them vulnerable to first strikes and limiting their military value. After being abandoned for some years, they were reused for satellite launches. Satellite rockets did not evolve into ICBMs.

In the 1990s, Russia again used its ICBM SS25 to launch satellites. The objective was to earn foreign currency by using missiles decommissioned by the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks to launch foreign states’ satellites. Only small satellites could be launched by these missiles.

In the past fifty years rocket technology has progressed, resulting in the divergence of ballistic missiles and satellite rockets. With ballistic missiles, rapid launching capability is indispensable. They should also be compact and mobile to allow for deployment in silos, aboard submarines, or on vehicles to increase their survivability.



Image: North Korean missile Launch, 7 February 2016

On the other hand, satellite rockets do not need to be launched at a moment’s notice or be hidden from reconnaissance satellites. Their size continued to grow for the launching of large satellites from fixed launch pads. For example, the current US ICBM Minuteman III is 18 meters in length and weighs 35 tons. Japan’s H2A satellite launching rocket is 53 meters in length and weighs 445 tons. The Space Shuttle weighed more than 2,000 tons.

Satellite rockets normally use liquid fuel for their larger thrust. Missiles for military use tend to avoid liquid fuel because of the long preparation time required in favor of solid fuel, which allows for instant launch and is easy to maintain. Russia, China, and other states that fell behind in this technology have used cumbersome storable liquid fuel. However, they have

shifted to solid fuel in recent years.

The Taepodong-2 (30 meters in length, 90 tons in weight) that North Korea used for its recent launch was launched from a plainly visible launch pad on the coast after more than two weeks of assembly and loading of liquid fuel. If such a leisurely procedure was taken during wartime or in high-tension conditions, it could be easily destroyed by air attacks or other means. Similarly, Japan's H2 rocket that cannot be launched instantly cannot be used as a military missile.

The differentiation of North Korea's rocket technology has not progressed to the extent it has in the U.S. However, it is evident that the regime is developing a military missile of a different series. The Musudan (12 meters in length, 12 tons in weight), based on the SSN-6 missiles on the former Soviet Union's Yankee-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines and carried by 12-wheel mobile launchers, is believed to have the ability to emerge from tunnels and be launched in approximately ten minutes. As all Japan falls within its range of over 3,000 kilometers, this is a real threat. In the 2012 parade, a larger version of this missile, on a 16-wheel launcher and measuring 18 meters and weighing 40 tons, was displayed. The U.S. gave it the code name of "KN-08" and is concerned that it is an instantly launchable mobile missile with a range of 9,000 kilometers. If a test launch of this missile were to take place, it would be a true "firing of a long-range missile," but Japanese people have become so habituated to the government's cry wolf type announcements of "missile launches" that they may regard it simply as "another launch."

This is a revised version of an article that appeared in the Okinawa Times on February 24, 25, 26, 2016. Translation by Kenji Hasegawa.

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