

US condemns North Korea's planned satellite launch

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North Korea announced last Friday that it intends to launch a satellite between April 12 and 16. The US, Japan and South Korea immediately condemned the announcement, declaring the launch was simply a long-range missile test that would violate UN Security Council resolutions.

The Obama administration declared that the US would suspend promised food aid to North Korea if the test went ahead. The US State Department branded the planned launch as “highly provocative” and “a threat to regional security.”

The cutting off of food aid would effectively end a tentative agreement reached in late February between Washington and Pyongyang. North Korea agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment program as well as any further testing of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. In return, the US pledged to supply 240,000 tonnes of food over the next year.

The deal had set the stage for a revival of six-party talks, involving the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, over the North Korean nuclear program. The talks had broken down after an agreement brokered under the Bush administration in 2008 fell apart amid North Korean accusations that the US had failed to keep its side of the bargain. The Obama administration continued the same hard line as its predecessor, offering few tangible concessions to North Korea in return for renewed negotiations.

The agreement reached in February was no exception. North Korea was forced to abandon key aspects of its nuclear and missile program and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors back into

the country. In return, Pyongyang received desperately needed food aid—in the form of biscuits, not the preferred grains—under conditions where North Korea is facing severe food shortages and a worsening economic crisis.

The proposed satellite launch might reflect divisions within the North Korean regime. Former leader Kim Jong-il died in December and was succeeded by his 27-year-old son, Kim Jong-un. Washington has clearly been exploiting the uncertainty of the leadership transition to its own advantage, which might have provoked opposition, particularly in sections of the North Korean military.

It is also possible that Pyongyang is using the missile test as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from the US. The small economically impoverished country has little else with which to negotiate other than this type of brinkmanship. As far as the US is concerned, however, North Korea is simply a convenient pretext for keeping pressure on Pyongyang's ally, China, and maintaining a strong military presence in North East Asia.

President Barack Obama is due in South Korea for an international nuclear security summit on March 26–27 and will visit the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea on Sunday. He will undoubtedly use the trip as an opportunity not only to posture about the “dangers” of North Korea's nuclear programs, but to push China to rein in its ally.

The planned satellite launch is timed for just after South Korea's parliamentary election on April 11 and is likely to give a boost to the right-wing ruling party of President Lee Myung-bak. Since coming to power in

2008, Lee has taken a hard line toward North Korea, effectively ending the so-called Sunshine Policy of his immediate predecessors. His government quickly denounced last Friday's North Korean announcement as "a grave provocation."

The Japanese government, which is at rock-bottom in the opinion polls, also strongly denounced North Korea and threatened to use its anti-ballistic missile system to shoot down the rocket or any of its parts if it strayed toward Japan.

China is anxious to fend off US pressure and prevent an escalating confrontation in North East Asia. Chinese officials had met twice with their North Korean counterparts over the past week to express their concerns over the announced launch. Luo Zhaohui, director-general of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Department of Asian Affairs, declared that it was "urgent for relevant parties to remain calm and prevent the situation from escalating and going out of control."

Pyongyang has responded, however, by reiterating that the satellite launch is not a ballistic missile test and insisting on its sovereign right to proceed. North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho declared in Beijing that the US and its allies were practicing "double standards" because other nations launched around 100 spacecraft each year. At the same time, Pyongyang said it would proceed with the February agreement with the US. On Monday, it formally sent an invitation to the IAEA to return to the country.

Over the past two years, China has been pushing for the development of special economic zones with North Korea in order to exploit its cheap labour. Yet such projects are viable only if American sanctions on North Korea, dating back to the Korean War, are lifted. As a result, Beijing has consistently called for the resumption of the six-party talks, which it initiated. Beijing has publicly backed the new North Korean leader, hoping that he will implement pro-market reforms.

Sections of the North Korean regime, especially the military, remain deeply distrustful of any deal with the US, having had bitter experiences in the past. In 1994,

the Clinton administration reached an Agreed Framework with North Korea, which committed itself to shut down its nuclear program in return for two light water power reactors and fuel supplies and the eventual establishment of full diplomatic relations.

By the time Clinton left office in early 2001, no significant work on the reactors had begun. Then the incoming Bush administration sabotaged the Agreed Framework, ended fuel supplies and provocatively intensified the campaign against Pyongyang and its nuclear program. North Korea reacted by expelling IAEA inspectors and resuming its nuclear activities.

The escalating tensions eased only when China established the six-party talks, which were fraught with difficulties from the outset. The Bush administration repeatedly made clear that it had no intention of offering North Korea what it most wanted: a US security guarantee, full diplomatic relations and an end to the US economic blockade. Pyongyang responded by carrying out missile tests and detonating two crude nuclear devices in an effort to force the US to make concessions.

Over the past three years, the Obama administration has maintained the pressure on Pyongyang, supporting South Korea in its military standoffs with North Korea. Tensions escalated sharply after the Lee administration accused North Korea of sinking a South Korean naval vessel in early 2010, leading to an artillery exchange later in the year involving a South Korean island. The US used the confrontation to conduct massive joint military exercises with both South Korea and Japan.

The US administration's backing for South Korea and Japan is part of a broader strategy of strengthening strategic partnerships and alliances throughout Asia directed against China. Undoubtedly, Obama will exploit next week's international nuclear summit in South Korea to maintain the pressure on Beijing.



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