

US warns of “consequences” over North Korean rocket launch

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North Korea’s successful launch yesterday of its Unha-3 three-stage rocket led to immediate condemnations by the US and its allies, and demands for tougher UN sanctions against Pyongyang. For the Obama administration, the rocket test provides a convenient pretext for stepping up the US strategic “pivot” to Asia aimed against China, North Korea’s ally.

The launch was watched closely by the American, South Korean and Japanese militaries, which all tracked the flight over the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea—as notified by North Korean authorities. The successive booster stages fell safely into international waters. The launch was unexpected, as Pyongyang announced earlier this week that it would be delayed due to technical difficulties.

Yesterday’s flight followed a series of failures, most recently in April when a rocket of the same model failed some 90 seconds after take-off. That outcome was clearly a blow to North Korea’s newly installed leader Kim Jong-un, who had timed the event to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the birth of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, the first leader of the North Korean Stalinist regime.

Kim Jong-un, who was anointed as leader following the death of his father Kim Jong-il last December, will undoubtedly use the successful launch to consolidate his position. In July, Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho was unexpectedly removed as head of the General Staff in what some analysts interpreted as a move by Kim Jong-un to tighten his grip over the country’s military. December 17 marks one year since the death of his father.

US National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor condemned the launch as “a highly provocative act that threatens regional security,” claiming it was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions that banned North Korean nuclear and missile tests. Pyongyang has insisted that it was not testing a missile but using the rocket to launch a scientific satellite. The US military acknowledged that North Korea had “deployed an object that appeared to achieve orbit”—that is, a satellite.

White House spokesman Jay Carney warned North Korea that there would be “consequences” but did not spell out US actions. The US backed Japan’s call for action by the UN Security Council, which met in emergency session yesterday and formally condemned North Korea’s actions, saying it would consider “an appropriate response.” After the failed launch in April, the US suspended the provision of food aid to North Korea.

China expressed “regret” over the rocket launch, but urged restraint in response. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: “The UN Security Council reaction should be prudent and moderate and conducive to maintaining stability and avoiding escalation of the situation.” China had sent a high-level delegation to North Korea in recent weeks.

Beijing is well aware that the Obama administration has exploited North Korea as one of the justifications for the US military build-up throughout the Asia Pacific region and the strengthening of American military alliances. The Pentagon maintains large military forces in both Japan and South Korea, its

North East Asian allies. Before the North Korean launch, the US navy mobilised four warships—three guided missile destroyers and a guided missile cruiser, the USS Shiloh—to “reassure allies in the region.”

Obama’s so-called pivot to Asia is a diplomatic and strategic offensive aimed at maintaining US dominance and undermining its potential rival, China, throughout the region. Washington’s campaign has encouraged its allies to take a tougher stance against China, heightened regional tensions and inflamed various maritime disputes.

The rocket launch produced a chorus of criticism by US allies. British Foreign Secretary William Hague “strongly condemned the satellite launch.” Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Foreign Minister Bob Carr jointly branded it a “provocative and irresponsible act” that violated UN sanctions.

In Japan, where parliamentary elections will take place on Sunday, opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader Shinzo Abe seized on the launch to demand the government take tough action against North Korea. He called for Japan to press for a UN resolution of strong condemnation. “The rocket launch was outrageous. The international community needs to impose harsh sanctions,” he said.

During the election campaign, Abe, who is known for his right-wing nationalism, has been pressing for constitutional change to transform Japan’s self-defence forces into a regular military, not restrained by the constitution’s so-called pacifist clause. The LDP, which lost office in a landslide in 2009, is likely to return to office amid deep popular disaffection with the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

All the major parties in Japan are deliberately stirring up nationalism and militarism to divert attention from the country’s deepening social divide and the austerity agenda that will be intensified after the election, whichever party wins. Not to be outdone by the opposition,

Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura declared that the North Korean launch threatened “the peace and stability of the region” and was “extremely regrettable

and can’t be tolerated.”

In South Korea, elections are also underway—for the presidency on December 19. President Lee Myung-bak from the right-wing Saenuri Party convened an emergency security meeting, deliberately heightening the atmosphere of tension. The South Korean navy had positioned three Aegis warships to track the rocket’s flight. Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan said South Korea “strongly condemns North Korea pushing ahead with this provocation.”

Opposition Democrat presidential candidate Moon Jae-in attempted to outflank his Saenuri Party opponent, Park Geun-hye, by attacking President Lee for “national security incompetence” over the launch. Park’s spokesman then responded by accusing Moon of failing to support the concerns of the “international community” against North Korea’s rocket test.

Like Lee, Park, the daughter of former South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee, has taken a tough stance against North Korea, insisting that any aid or resumption of dialogue with Pyongyang would be conditional on halting its nuclear programs. Moon, however, continues to advocate the so-called Sunshine Policy of previous Democrat presidents, seeking to end hostilities between the two Koreas and open up North Korea as a cheap labour platform for South Korean corporations. Lee effectively ended the Sunshine Policy when he came to office in 2008 and forged closer relations with Washington.

The chief responsibility for the tense situation on the Korean Peninsula lies with the Obama administration, which, following on from the Bush administration, effectively scuttled international talks sponsored by China aimed at negotiating a deal on North Korea’s nuclear programs. The further sanctions being pushed by the US and its allies following the rocket launch will exacerbate the danger of conflict.



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