

North Korea announces satellite launch

Ben McGrath
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North Korea announced on Tuesday that it intends to launch an observation satellite between February 8 and 25. The announcement drew immediate condemnations from the US and its allies, as well as expressions of concern from Beijing. The proposed launch has already further raised tensions following Pyongyang's nuclear test on January 6 and, if conducted, will undoubtedly be seized upon by Washington to justify its continuing military buildup in the region.

The proposed trajectory of the rocket will take it from the Sohae Satellite Launching Station, located on northwestern coast of the country, south across the Yellow Sea. Pyongyang said the satellite will be used to collect weather information and other data. A previous launch in 2012 used a three-stage rocket to place into orbit a satellite that is reportedly not operating

The US issued a sharp rebuke, demanding new and tougher sanctions against North Korea if it carries out the launch, which Washington claims is a disguised ballistic missile test. State Department spokesman John Kirby stated: "This latest announcement further underscores the need for the international community to send the North Koreans a swift, firm message that its disregard for UN Security Council resolutions will not be tolerated."

Japan is using the foreshadowed launch as the pretext to flex its military might in the region. It deployed Aegis destroyers at sea equipped with SM-3 missiles and has Patriot PAC-3 missiles standing by on land. On Wednesday, Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani instructed the military to shoot down any part of the missile should it come into Japanese territory.

Citing anonymous government sources, Japan's NHK public broadcaster claimed on Thursday that North Korea was preparing for a separate ballistic missile test from a mobile launch pad on its east coast.

South Korea also issued a statement saying its

military would shoot down any rocket parts that entered its territory, while also threatening Pyongyang with "searing consequences." In another statement, the presidential office declared: "We strongly warn that the North will pay a severe price ... if it goes ahead with the long-range missile launch plan."

These statements point to the danger that the launch could be used to stage a provocation by shooting down the rocket, supposedly in self-defense. Such an action would enormously intensify the already acute tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

The US military is also on high alert. "We will, as we always do, watch carefully if there's a launch, [and] have our missile defense assets positioned and ready," US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said. A US navy spokesman confirmed to Reuters that the missile tracking ship USNS Howard O. Lorenzen arrived in Japan this week.

Washington is already exploiting North Korea's announcement to intensify the pressure on Beijing to take tougher action to rein in Pyongyang following last month's nuclear test. President Barack Obama spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday "to emphasize the importance of a strong and united international response to North Korea's provocations"—in other words, insisting that China accept the US demands to move against North Korea.

Last week in Beijing, US Secretary of State John Kerry reportedly pressed Chinese officials on "what China on a unilateral basis, as North Korea's lifeline, as North Korea's patron, will choose to do." The US is demanding that China block North Korea's only access to oil and other supplies, as well as its already limited access to the international financial system—moves that could provoke a severe economic and political crisis in Pyongyang.

The sharp differences between Washington and Beijing were evident in Kerry's joint press conference

with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. While condemning North Korea's nuclear test, Wang declared that "sanctions are not an end in themselves" and urged a return to "the path of negotiation and consultation. Beijing is fearful that a collapse in Pyongyang will be exploited by Washington to install a pro-US regime on China's northern borders.

As a result, China also expressed concern over the upcoming satellite launch and called for restraint from all sides. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang stated: "North Korea of course has rights to use space, but it is currently under sanctions of the UN Security Council." After a senior Beijing envoy visited Pyongyang this week, Foreign Minister Wang said China had told North Korea it did not want anything to happen that would further raise tension.

Like its fourth nuclear test last month, there is nothing progressive about Pyongyang's proposed rocket launch. It is designed as an occasion for nationalist grandstanding and to deflect mounting political tensions within the regime. Far from preventing an imperialist intervention, the nuclear tests and rocket launches simply provide the US and its allies with a pretext for accelerating their military build-up against China as part of Washington's "pivot to Asia."

Following the fourth nuclear test, Washington immediately stepped up its push for a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery to be stationed in South Korea. As a Center for Strategic and International Studies report released last month made clear, the stationing of THAAD and other anti-missile systems in the region is ultimately aimed at China.

According to a *Wall Street Journal* article on January 28, the US and South Korea are nearing agreement on the system. "Behind the scenes it looks like THAAD is close to a done deal," stated a former US official who has been in talks with senior South Korean officials. THAAD consists not only of missiles to shoot down an incoming ballistic missile but also a radar system known as the AN/TPY-2 X-band.

China is concerned that the AN/TPY-2 radar will be used to monitor Chinese territory. The purpose of such an anti-ballistic missile system is not defensive, as the US argues. It is an integral component of the Pentagon's war plans, involving a nuclear first strike on China. Whatever missiles Beijing could launch in a

counterattack could be knocked out by THAAD or other systems.



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