

Mark Barry: North Korea's Missile Launch: What Does it Mean?

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North Korean soldiers guard the rocket that failed to launch successfully earlier this year. Photograph: Pedro Ugarte/AFP/Getty Images

North Korea's successful launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile on December 12, 2012 hit its target: strengthening Kim Jong Un's standing as a leader in the communist country and alarming the world.

According to Voice of America (VOA) on December 12th, the North Korean state media called the launch a "ground breaking; mission that met the "last instructions" of Pyongyang's late leader, Kim Jong Il. The VOA also reported "The second version of satellite Kwangmyongsong-3 successfully lifted off from the Seohae Space Center in Cholsan County, North Pyongyang Province by carrier rocket Unha-3 on December 12. The satellite entered its present orbit," the state media said.

Dr. Mark P. Barry, an independent Asian-affairs analysis who has followed U.S.-North Korean relations for 22 years, wrote to Unificationnews.com, "We have to see North Korea's missile launch last Wednesday, December 12th, as aimed at firming up Kim Jong Un's leadership as his father's successor nearly a year after Kim Jong Il passed away." Dr. Barry added, "It was 'proof' to the military and North Korean people that the young Kim, who turns 30 on January 8th, could deliver this technological accomplishment — that beat South Korea in placing its first satellite in orbit — and which thus raised North Korea's prestige among nations (as a country to be reckoned with). This launch had to happen before Dec. 17, 2012 the anniversary of Kim Jong Il's death, and a second failure, as occurred last April, could have been damaging to Kim."

Since 1998, North Korea tried to launch a long-range rocket several times. But this is the first time it successfully launched one. The launch shows North Korea has advanced its capabilities.

South Korea did not expect North Korea to launch a rocket this year according to *Seoul Daily Economics*, a Korean-language news site. The North Korea government reported that it had technical problems and would delay a rocket launch until December 29, 2012. But apparently North Korea's missile program was able to fix the technical problems faster and launched the rocket successfully. "Moreover, by launching when it did, it came before South Korea's presidential elections on December 19, 2012 and Japan's Diet elections on December 16, 2012, but we don't know if the launch will have much impact upon either election," observed Dr. Barry. "For China, ironically, although it was mildly critical of the launch, it

likely prefers the firming up of Kim Jong Un's leadership to uncertainty as to who is in charge."

David Fouse, an analyst with the Hawaii-based Asia-Pacific Center for Strategic Studies, said an interview with VOA, "I'm not sure whether there was an intelligence failure or if the North Koreans were just kind of playing games with the international community," Fouse added, "They might have wanted to catch people off-guard and I think they did surprise a lot of people with the timing of this launch."

For North Korea, successfully launching a long-range rocket was the big step. But according to South Korea's Defense Ministry's spokesman, Min Seok Kim, North Korea must still make a several major technological advances before the threat becomes a reality. "The satellite that North Korea launched weighs 100 kilograms (220 pounds). A nuclear warhead weighs about 650 kilograms (1455 pounds). [To have the full capability to launch an intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM] North Korea needs to concentrate on putting more effort into increasing weight on board of a rocket," Kim said.

North Korea welcomed the launch of the long-range rocket with thousands of civilians and soldiers gathered Friday, December 14, 2012, to celebrate the success of the mission. Standing in tightly organized ranks in Pyongyang's Kim Il Sung Square, the massive crowd cheered as top officials, including Vice Chief of the General Staff of the Army Ro Gwang Chol, praised Kim's "bravery and wisdom," according to VOA.

"Kim may have felt he had to go ahead with the launch in order to appease the military and appear to be a dutiful son, but in the long run, he knows that he must deliver economic improvements to raise the standard of living, otherwise there is no way he can count on remaining in power," wrote Dr. Barry. "Kim Jong Un may also be improving his stature and bargaining position to deal with the winner of the South's elections who will take office in February. For his future, Kim needs to balance the constant pressure from China with improved relations with the South; he cannot remain dependent solely on China over the long haul."

The missile launch was not welcomed by the United States, ., other countries and the U.N. "The U.S. has formally condemned the launch, but cannot yet formulate a better policy toward the North until its new national security team is in place for President Obama's second term," Dr. Barry wrote.

A flurry of diplomacy is under way among members of the U.N. Security Council seeking punitive action against North Korea. According to Korea Herald, "the council had condemned the communist country on Wednesday, December 12, 2012, tagging its action as a disguised test of an intercontinental ballistic missile and a violation of bans on nuclear activity. Furthermore, South Korea and the United States are spearheading discussions with an aim to add new, stronger sanctions to the council's existing blacklist. The 15-member council is expected to agree on an outline of its measures as early as next week.