

BULLETIN

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The Consequences of North Korea's Failed Unha-3 Rocket Launch

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North Korea's 13 April launch of a Unha-3 rocket was to be a test of military technology as well as a political show of force accompanying the formal consolidation of power by leader Kim Jong Un and celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung. The failure of the launch may prompt Pyongyang to conduct a nuclear test. The likelihood of influencing North Korea by tightening the sanctions regime remains low. Also, it is doubtful whether in an election year the United States would be willing to formulate another aid package offer for the DPRK.

North Korea's announcement in March that it was preparing to launch a space rocket, the Unha-3 (Galaxy-3), into orbit along with the Kwangmyongsong-3 meteorological satellite came as a surprise to the international community. Under the terms of an understanding reached between the U.S. and North Korean negotiators on 29 February (the so-called "Leap Day Agreement"), in return for the provision of 240,000 tons of food assistance, North Korea announced a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile tests and uranium enrichment. During the talks, U.S. representatives cautioned that any rocket launch under the pretext of the development of a civil space program would be treated as a breach of the agreement.

Technical-Military Dimension. The launch took place on 13 April from a station in the northwest of the country. A few minutes after launch, at an altitude of approximately 120 km, the rocket broke apart and the debris fell into the Yellow Sea. Previous attempts, also unsuccessful, to use Unha-type rockets for the country's space program took place in 2006 and 2009. The technologies and materials used in their production are mostly the same as the ones used for ballistic missiles. It is estimated that a "combat" version of a Unha-based three-stage missile could be capable of carrying payloads to a range of 6,000–9,000 kilometres. It is not certain, though, to what extent North Korea has mastered the technology to allow it to construct a workable nuclear warhead mated with the missile.

It is worth noting that in addition to developing Unha technology, North Korea has deployed medium-range Scud, Nodong and Musudan missiles, which can reach targets in the region. During the April 15 military parade in Pyongyang, a new type of long-range ballistic missile also was unveiled, possibly based on Musudan technology.

The launch of the Unha-3 missile was undoubtedly aimed at testing technologies and materials for military purposes. Three failed attempts to launch Unha-type rockets may indicate serious structural defects in the design or problems related to the quality of materials and the production process or launch preparations. However, even a failed attempt to launch a satellite can provide valuable information that could be used for the development of North Korea's missile arsenal. The collected data can also be made available to Iranian specialists, who have in the past cooperated with North Korea on missile technology.

Internal Politics. The preparations for the rocket's launch were accompanied by unprecedented propaganda efforts, including invitations to foreign media to tour the launch site. The rocket and the satellite were presented as significant achievements of North Korean science and industry, especially in the context of the celebrations of the 100th birthday anniversary of DPRK founder Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il's promise to achieve in 2012 the status of a "strong and prosperous" nation. Moreover, at the same time, the last phase of the formal consolidation of power into the hands of Kim Jong Un

was carried out, as he assumed the position of first secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and the key position as first chairman of the National Defence Commission. The unsuccessful launch then can be considered a major propaganda failure for the regime, especially as the authorities decided to inform the public about the fiasco. However, it is unlikely that this issue would substantially weaken the position of Kim Jong Un. The preparations for the Unha-3 began during his father's life and therefore the new leader cannot be held personally responsible for the decision to move forward with the launch. The situation can be even used by Kim Jong Un and his closest entourage to initiate a purge in leadership of the armed forces and the party.

International Factors. North Korea failed to achieve a show of force with the missile launch. Moreover, its interpretation of the launch of the Unha-3 as part of a peaceful space program (separate from military tests) was rejected by the members of the UN Security Council, including China and Russia. According to the 16 April UN SC Presidential Statement on the DPRK, the launch constituted a "serious violation" of Resolutions 1718 (2006) and 1874 (2009), and actions would be taken to widen the scope of existing sanctions against the North Korean regime. Separately, the United States confirmed the termination of plans to provide food aid to the DPRK.

The UN Security Council, the countries in the region, and the United States will for the time being, however, avoid taking more resolute actions that could induce the regime to take further provocative steps. Given this, reports about preparations for a third underground nuclear test (the previous two were conducted in 2006 and 2009) are particularly worrisome. A nuclear test could offset the political and propaganda losses North Korea suffered from the unsuccessful rocket launch. Also, it would further the country's nuclear weapons development program, especially if a miniaturised warhead for a ballistic missile or a design that uses highly enriched uranium could be tested. An underground nuclear test would significantly increase the credibility of North Korea's deterrent potential. Perhaps the North Korean leadership might assume that after the nuclear test it would be possible to return to the moratorium agreed in February with the United States and to re-open the six-party negotiations (involving the DPRK, South Korea, China, Japan, the U.S. and Russia).

In an election year in the U.S., the priority of the Obama administration in this area was to avoid an escalation of the North Korean crisis. That was an important reason for the February Leap Day Agreement, even though in retrospect it seems that both parties interpreted its scope differently. It seems unlikely the U.S. would decide to prepare a new offer of aid to North Korea in return for its abstention from a nuclear test or other provocative behaviour since it may expose President Obama in the election campaign to charges of "rewarding" DPRK adventurism. China, which could attempt to exert some pressure on North Korea through such measures as threatening to withhold economic support, does not seem to be interested in taking decisive action in this direction. During the current leadership change in Beijing, its ruling elites are not interested in coercing North Korea to change its policy, especially since a failure to pressure the young DPRK leader could seriously undermine the prestige of the larger country.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Despite the failed rocket launch, North Korea's missile potential and advances in its nuclear weapons program pose a threat to the region, and potentially also to more distant countries. The political and propaganda failure of the Unha-3 may convince the DPRK to conduct a nuclear test in order to regain credibility. Provocations through the use of conventional forces or asymmetric capabilities seem less likely. Given the limited ability of other countries to influence North Korea, a resumption of dialogue may only be possible after a nuclear test.

One cannot completely rule out a scenario in which North Korea offers to return to the moratorium of February 2012 without conducting a nuclear or long-range missile test, but probably would expect the provision of food aid in return. Such an agreement would be difficult for President Obama to accept at this time, though the U.S. remains the most important negotiating partner for the DPRK.

European countries and the European Union should review the implementation of sanctions against the regime, in particular the effectiveness of restrictions on the transfer of sensitive materials and missile technology to the country as well as luxury goods for the North Korean elite. Europe should also be ready to extend the scope of the sanctions. Taking into account its foreign policy priorities (especially negotiations with Iran), the EU should become involved in the preparation of an offer of aid to North Korea only if requested by the United States or other participants in the six-party talks.