NKorea rocket a gift to leaders, warning to world

JEAN H. LEE - Associated Press - Associated Press

Why would North Korea launch a rocket into space now? The act invites additional sanctions for a country where the U.N. says millions are going hungry, and the bitter cold had only increased the risk of the launch becoming the latest of several embarrassing failures.

Some of Pyongyang's reasons are calendar-related: It's been 100 years since the birth of North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung; nearly a year since the death of his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, and the first year in power for young leader Kim Jong Un. It's also a period of political transition for four countries with especially high stakes in the North: South Korea, the United States, China and Japan.

North Korea insists it launched a satellite Wednesday for peaceful purposes, but the act fits perfectly with its history of using carefully timed provocations to show the world it has dangerous weapons and must be negotiated with. At home, the launch drums up North Korean unity and allows Pyongyang to cultivate an "us against them" mentality, part of the regime's survival strategy.

SENDING A MESSAGE

After lying low for several months, Pyongyang raised its "Remember me?" hand with an announcement about a December launch. It was issued just two days after South Korea aborted its own rocket launch, and four days after campaigning officially began in Seoul for the Dec. 19 elections that will usher in a new South Korean president.

The launch also sends a message to China, the U.S. and Japan, all focused on elections and assembling new governments, that they shouldn't keep North Korea, defiant even when it is needy, on the back burner for too long.

The launch is particularly complicated for China. Beijing remains North Korea's biggest ally and the linchpin to its economic survival, but Pyongyang has long shown it will do as it wishes.

North Korea announced the launch window just one day after Beijing sent an envoy to Pyongyang bearing a letter to Kim Jong Un from new leader Xi Jinping. "We are concerned," a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said after the announcement, without clarifying whether the issue came up for discussion in Pyongyang.

Japan holds elections on Dec. 16, and newly re-elected President Barack Obama will be inaugurated to a second term in a few weeks. With the South Korean president taking office in February, it could be months before the region is ready to rethink North Korea policy.

CELEBRATING A CENTENARY

North Korea also has domestic reasons for justifying a rocket launch before the year's end.

Nearly four years ago, the regime in Pyongyang set an ambitious goal for its people: to "open the gate to becoming a strong and prosperous nation in 2012" — the year that North Korea founder Kim Il Sung would have turned 100.

The economy, science and technology were pinpointed as three areas of focus after decades of lagging behind its fast-developing neighbors. Decrepit shops were torn down to make way for cavernous supermarkets stocked with flat-screen TVs and Coca-Cola. The State Academy of Sciences sent scholars abroad to study the latest agricultural techniques. Kim Jong Il sent HP and Dell computers to the nation's top universities.

Schoolchildren from Samjiyon in the far north to Kaesong near the border with South Korea began learning about North Korea's ambitious space and nuclear programs. Students painted satellites on classroom walls, and playgrounds were installed with miniature rockets instead of slides.

In April 2009, North Korean scientists tested a three-stage rocket from an east coast launch pad. This year, two days before Kim Il Sung's April 15 birthday, scientists attempted to launch a rocket from a new launch pad on the west coast, but it broke up just 90 seconds after liftoff.

North Koreans treated it as a celebration, anyway. Pyongyang residents were sanguine about the failure, noting that China and Russia struggled with their rockets, too, before reaching space. The failure and ensuing global condemnation did little to dampen festivities, and the city went ahead with a massive birthday fireworks show over the Taedong River.

MOURNING KIM JONG IL

If the April launch attempt was seen as a gift to Kim Il Sung, the December success may be an homage to Kim Jong Il.

Kim, who ruled for 17 years under a "military first" policy before his Dec. 17, 2011, death, made getting a satellite into space one of the last goals of his leadership. In his honor, North Korea's three satellites have been dubbed "Kwangmyongsong," or Lode Star, in honor of the bright star that legendarily appeared in the skies when Kim was born.

Two weeks before the first anniversary of his death, North Korea has already quieted down amid an unofficial state of mourning. State media are churning out odes to the late leader, honoring everything from his skill as a composer to the workaday parka he famously wore while making "on the spot" field trips by train.

A grand commemoration can be expected to mark Kim's death, and a rocket

mounted with at satellite named after the Dear Leader could end up being the biggest firework of them all.

ELEVATING KIM JONG UN

Outside observers consider Wednesday's liftoff North Korea's first successful satellite launch, and although North Korea had claimed the 2009 launch was also successful, this certainly boosts the standing of Kim Jong Un.

Though omnipresent now, he had been a mystery when he was revealed several years ago as the heir-apparent. One of Kim Jong Un's early tasks as successor-in-training was to oversee the launch of the April 2009 rocket, which he monitored from the command center.

Throughout his succession campaign and during this first year of leadership, the 29-year-old has been characterized by state propaganda as young, modern, tech-savvy and forward-thinking. He has been working to build a base of loyalty among North Koreans struggling with chronic economic hardship by promising them a higher standard of living and a better future. The rocket and satellite are portrayed by state media as a symbol of the nation's future.

SATELLITE OR MISSILE?

Washington, Seoul and other adversaries see a more sinister objective in the launch.

Experts note that sending a satellite into space uses a similar technology as firing a long-range missile capable of striking American soil. The U.N. Security Council warns that a North Korean rocket fired for civilian purposes or otherwise would violate a ban on developing its missile and nuclear programs. The Security Council, which has already passed two rounds of sanctions, was to meet behind closed doors Wednesday to discuss its response to the launch.

The North Koreans are not naive about the distinction between satellite launches and missiles. They see their nukes as a bulwark against U.S. military might in the region. The 2009 rocket launch was followed within weeks by another, more worrying test: a nuclear bomb.

With a successful rocket launch, the U.S. and other countries fear North Korea's next step will be to master miniaturization technology so their nukes are small enough to be loaded onto missiles.

Pyongyang's position to Washington: Sign a peace treaty and withdraw your troops from South Korea, and then maybe we'll get rid of our bombs.

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