Waiting for DPRK’s New Satellite

While January 2022 saw a record number of missile launches by the DPRK in a calendar month, late February and early March 2022 marked the beginning of a new series.

On February 27, the DPRK launched an unspecified ballistic missile from Sunan Airport near Pyongyang towards the Sea of Japan. According to a statement by the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, the DPRK-launched missile flew about 300 kilometers, with its highest flight altitude of about 620 kilometers. In January, two short-range ballistic missiles were launched from this area.

According to KCNA, the DPRK’s National Aerospace Development Administration and the Academy of National Defense Science have conducted important tests to develop an intelligence satellite. The tests included “vertical and oblique photography of a certain ground area with cameras that will be installed in the reconnaissance satellite. And they have confirmed the specificity and accuracy of the high-resolution photographic system, the data transmission system and the positioning control apparatus.”

A second launch of a similar type of missile took place on March 5, 2022. From the same launch site, the missile flew 270 km and reached a maximum flight altitude of 560 km. According to analysts, if the missile had been launched at a standard angle, it would have travelled between 1,000 and 1,200 km - a flight distance for a medium-range ballistic missile.

KCNA also reported that once again important tests on the satellite development plan had been conducted, and they “confirmed the reliability of data transmission and reception system of the satellite, its control command system and
various ground-based control systems.”

The launch and telemetry were monitored by the US Air Force RC-135S (61-2663) reconnaissance aircraft from the waters off the Sea of Japan.

The reaction to the launches is described by the word “expected”, and although each side has said the “buzzwords” that are customary on the political agenda, there has been no excessive excitement. Hence only “big news” was noted, not another expression of regret or a call to stop.

On February 28, the UN Security Council held a closed meeting, at the end of which representatives of 11 countries, including the ROK, the US, the UK and Japan, issued a joint statement condemning the missile launches. They called on all UN member states to condemn Pyongyang’s dangerous actions, stressing the importance of complying with anti-North Korean sanctions. The statement also said the DPRK should choose to strengthen international security and peace by working to ease tensions in the region. But what matters to the author is that the meeting itself did not end with a condemnatory official document.

A similar situation occurred on March 7 when discussing the next launch. 11 countries - the US, Albania, Australia, Brazil, the UK, France, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway and the ROK - condemned it in a statement noting that by launching 11 ballistic missiles since the beginning of this year, Pyongyang violated Security Council resolutions. “We condemn the ballistic missile launch while remaining committed to achieving the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” US Permanent Representative to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said, and recalled that the US and other countries have repeatedly offered Pyongyang dialogue without preconditions.

Yoon Seok-yeol, the Republic of Korea’s opposition presidential candidate, said that North Korea’s lifting of the moratorium on nuclear tests and long-range missile tests appears to be a matter of time: “Along with the nation, I strongly condemn North Korea’s provocation, which was a blatant violation of UN resolutions” that prohibit the North from using ballistic missile technology. Yoon reiterated his pledge to achieve peace by force, and criticized the government and ruling party presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung for failing to condemn the North’s provocations. South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook considered that with the launch Pyongyang had unveiled its policy principle of “power for power and good-will for good-will” in response to the South’s launch of a long-range surface-to-air missile (L-SAM) under development and to the global attention being focused on the armed conflict in Ukraine.

But back to the launch. As can be seen, the trajectory of North Korean missiles is becoming more and more elongated in altitude, leading the author to believe that the de facto moratorium has been broken. And if you recalculate these trajectories into typical combat missile trajectories, we are talking about a medium-range, instead of a short-range missile launch. The high trajectory in this context has a double meaning.

First, Pyongyang thus tries not to escalate the situation too much, so that missiles fall at a reasonable distance around the Korean peninsula without disturbing allies and neighbors. Second, this launch can honestly be called a space launch and this is the second time that North has published photos of the Earth taken from a satellite.

As early as the 8th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in January 2021, if not earlier, the DPRK unveiled an ambitious weapons program that included not only hypersonic missiles, but also the launch of a reconnaissance satellite. This is not surprising, since satellite surveillance is important not only for military purposes but also for tracking and dealing with typhoons, which periodically affect the North Korean coastline.

Not only the author, but other experts also believe that the next step by Pyongyang may be not so much an open ICBM launch or a nuclear test, but the launch of a satellite for formally peaceful purposes.

Military analyst Ankit Panda notes that the apparent preparations for a new reconnaissance satellite space launch should come as little surprise. What is surprising, however, is the nature of the launch itself. North Korea used an apparent ballistic missile to launch a suborbital payload specifically to test technology for a possible Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite.

Russian military expert Vladimir Khrustalev also points out that engineers are quietly tackling the task of developing and testing the hardware for their advanced reconnaissance satellite. The DPRK cannot easily buy a complete set of equipment on the world market for full-scale testing of the equipment in space conditions. But outer space begins above 100 km - the perfect laboratory overhead! This is why the equipment kits are launched by combat missiles for short periods of time to the same altitudes where the satellite is scheduled to operate, especially as it is not difficult or expensive - the DPRK has many medium-range liquid-fueled and obsolete missiles in storage. Their energy
capacity is more than enough to take a small load above 100 km.

In the past, Pyongyang has repeatedly claimed to have conducted satellite launches as part of “peaceful space exploration”, which have been perceived in other countries as long-range missile tests. The point here is that we are faced with self-contradiction: on the one hand every country has a right to the peaceful exploration of space, while on the other hand a UN resolution banning the launch of ballistic missiles deprives it of this right. This leaves the global community to choose a priority and the DPRK to check which trend prevails.

In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, the DPRK is discussed mainly on two fronts. There is speculation about how, while everyone else is busy, Pyongyang will decide not to miss out and launch something surreptitiously, whether making another step in the development of its missile program or conducting field training exercises. For example, the conservative JoongAng Ilbo notes that North Korea wants international recognition as a nuclear power under the power vacuum created by the China-US conflict: “North Korea will be tempted to build more pressure on America under such circumstances”.

Other authors add that the North may carry out a provocative act to mark Kim Il-sung’s 110th birthday on April 15, while the Japanese pro-North Korean newspaper Chosun Shinbo reported on March 7 that the DPRK would launch a satellite “at a time and place to be determined by the highest leadership.”

The second direction concerns the extent to which, amid the growing confrontation between the West on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, Moscow and Beijing will go for more systematic support for their ally. In this context, some predict a split in the UNSC (up to and including vetoing anti-North Korea resolutions), as well as overt and covert loosening of the sanctions regime. The extent to which this may be true will become clear within a year at least.

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