

Smart Q&A
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What is North Korea's Strategic Calculation in Launching its Satellite?

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Interviewee

Jihwan Hwang

On March 16, 2012, North Korea announced that it would be launching a satellite into orbit only two weeks after reaching a deal with the United States in which it would be willing to pursue denuclearization and place a moratorium on further missile and nuclear tests. Professor Jihwan Hwang of the University of Seoul discussed on North Korea's motivations and the impact this will have on China, South Korea, and the United States. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from the interview.

Q1: Why is North Korea's seeking to launch a satellite now?

A1-1: "This is the only way for North Korea to publicize the successful achievement of "strong and prosperous country" ahead of the centenary of Kim Il Sung's birth."

- After the third round of high-level talks between the United States and North Korea at the end of February 2012, North Korea seemed to be taking steps toward denuclearization through what was referred to as the Leap Day Deal. This agreement also seemed to open up the possibility for restarting the Six-Party Talks. However, two weeks later Pyongyang announced that it would conduct a rocket launch to put its *Kwangmyongsong-3* satellite into orbit. Such actions bring back memories of April 2009 when North Korea launched a rocket to place a satellite into orbit and then responded to the subsequent international sanctions by conducting a nuclear test a month later. North Korea's actions were quite surprising back then as tensions on the Korean Peninsula had reduced somewhat towards the end of 2008, particularly with the election of President Obama who stated that he was willing to engage in direct talks with North Korea.
- North Korea's external behavior is a reflection of its internal politics. Pyongyang has clarified via several channels that dialogue with the United States and the launching of its rocket were the decisions of the late Kim Jong-il. Particularly with the centenary of Kim Il-sung's birth on April 15, 2012, the Kim Jong-un leadership needs to publicize that it has successfully achieved Kim Jong-il's vision of North Korea becoming a *kangsongdaekuk* or "strong and prosperous country."

This product presents a
policy-oriented summary
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A1-2: "North Korea is confident that in the end the United States will have to negotiate over its uranium enrichment program."

- There is a new sense of confidence in North Korea as its uranium enrichment program progresses further. Over the years, the plutonium facilities at Yongbyon have deteriorated to such an extent that they are considered to be more of a long-term threat. However, now with its uranium enrichment facilities coming online, North Korea has a nuclear program that is harder to trace and can produce nuclear weapons more easily. With this program, the international community including the United States now faces a greater challenge and a more urgent threat. North Korea therefore believes that in the long run Washington will have to engage in bilateral talks with Pyongyang despite the negative effects brought on by the satellite launch

A1-3: "As 2012 is an election year for most countries in the region, North Korea will likely discuss nuclear issues again after the second half of the year."

- 2012 will be characterized by political change. With the member states of the Six-Party Talks facing leadership changes, it will be difficult for these countries to make critical decisions. It would appear then that the North Korean leadership has decided to hold off on discussing denuclearization issues until 2013 when all the new leaders will be in place.

Q2. What will happen in the region after North Korea's satellite launch?

A2: "South Korea's policy toward North Korea will be the critical variable related to nuclear issues on Korean Peninsula."

- China continues to believe that stabilization of the North Korean regime will ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the wider Northeast Asia region. This was evident in the way that China swiftly recognized Kim Jong-un's leadership immediately after the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011. Accordingly, China will stick to its current position regarding how the nuclear crisis should be managed believing it can only be solved with a stable North Korean leadership. This would go some way toward explaining Beijing's unenthusiastic attitude toward Pyongyang's announcement of the rocket launch so soon after reaching an agreement with the United States.
- If President Obama is reelected then it is expected that U.S. policy toward North Korea will not change dramatically. The Obama administration will also likely continue to closely coordinate its policies with South Korea as well as support Seoul's position on inter-Korean issues as it has been doing.
- The most crucial variable that will affect the future of the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula will be the North Korea policy of the next administration in South Korea. Having experienced the benefits and failures of both the "sunshine policy" under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations and the "principled engagement policy" of the Lee Myung-bak administration, the next administration, regardless of which leadership comes to power, will have to choose a North Korea policy that exists between these two approaches.

Q3: What is the most important area for South Korea to focus on with its policy toward North Korea?

A3: "The next administration in South Korea should develop a domestic political consensus before embarking on bold policies toward North Korea."

- Every policy requires continuity for it to become effective. It would not be a wise move for the next administration in South Korea to completely discard the policies of its predecessors. Rather the next administration should consider both the approaches of the "sunshine policy" and the "principled engagement policy."
- Deliberating on policy corresponding to North Korea's decision to change is necessary, which has been overlooked in Seoul's policy toward Pyongyang. The Kim Jong-un regime has ensured stability by sticking with the system which Kim Jong-il established. Looking to the future though, Kim Jong-un will have to develop his own system if he is to ever distinguish his rule from his father. As part of this process, the North Korea leadership will actively engage in internal discussions about its future national strategy. This would be a critical moment for the South Korean government to fundamentally change North Korean issues.
- Given this situation, some advocate that the South Korean government should launch engagement policies designed to support reformists in North Korea. However, such a bold plan faces limitations since there is still no true consensus in South Korea on the direction of its North Korea policy. The next administration should consider policies that will be able to support North Korea if it makes a transformation from its current "military-first politics" to "economy-first politics."

About the Interviewee

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Jihwan Hwang is an assistant professor of the University of Seoul, Korea. Professor Hwang was an assistant professor of North Korean Studies at Myongji University, and a research fellow at the Institute for Unification Studies of Seoul National University. His research interests include East Asian international relations and security studies, focusing on the North Korean nuclear crisis.