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North Korea's 100th – To Celebrate or To Surrender? Japanese translation available

Gavan McCormack

On 16 March 2012, North Korea announced that it would launch an earth observation satellite named Kwangmyongsong (Lodestar) 3, aboard an Unha carrier rocket sometime between the hours of 7 am and noon on a day between 12 and 16 April, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of its state founder, Kim Il Sung, and the attainment of "strong and prosperous" status by the country. The launch from a base in the north of the country close to the border with China would be pointed south, dropping off its first phase rocket into the Yellow Sea about 160 kms to the southwest of South Korea's Byeonsan peninsula and the second into the ocean about 140 kilometres east of Luzon in the Philippines. Due notice of the impending launch was issued to the appropriate international maritime, aviation and telecommunication bodies (IMO, ICAO and ITU) and, to mark the occasion, North Korea announced that it would welcome scientific observers and journalists. The 15 April date, in the 100th year according to the calendar of North Korea, has long been declared a landmark in the history of the state, and the launch seems designed to be its climactic event.

Meteorological earth observation satellites (multi-functional, but weather forecasting central) are either polar orbiting (Polar Orbiting Environmental Satellite or POES) or stationary. This one, North Korea later made clear (KCNA, 26 March), was to be an "advanced geostationary meteorological satellite data receiver."

Where polar orbiting satellites circle the globe 14.1 times each day on a north-south polar axis commonly at a height of around 800 kilometers, geostationary ones orbit it roughly every half-hour at a height of around 33,880 kilometres (thus requiring advanced rocketry capacity), and because of their height they remain stationary with respect to the orbiting earth. Both types are multi-functional and in the words of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) they are able to "collect global data on a daily basis for a variety of land, ocean, and atmospheric applications ... including weather analysis and forecasting, climate research and prediction, global sea-surface temperature measurements, atmospheric analysis of temperature and humidity, ocean dynamics research, volcanic eruption monitoring, forest fire detection, global vegetation analysis, search and rescue…" Many satellites, military and civil, are launched every year. The US has three of the stationary variety in operation. Russia, Japan, Europe, China and India also operate geostationary satellites, joined in July 2010 by South Korea. Japan conducts fairly regular launches from its Tanegashima space station site, and devotes some of its information gathering capacity to spying on North Korea.

Source: ROKDrop.com

(Note that this trajectory, traversing both China and Taiwan, would make any intervention by the US or Japan extremely difficult.)

Satellites, of whichever type, are a mark of advanced scientific status and economic development. As a country that especially in recent years has suffered from acute weather irregularities, presumed due to global warming, and is surrounded by satellite-operating states, North Korea has a strong interest in itself joining the select company, both for motives of pride and face as well as for scientific and economic reasons. A covert military purpose, development of intercontinental ballistic missile capacity, may be assumed, since the rocketry is virtually the same, only the load and the trajectory differ; but this is true of all satellite-launching countries. North Korea became a signatory to the Outer Space treaty (of 1966) in 2009, and now protests that it alone of the world's nations cannot be denied the universal right to the scientific exploration of space simply because of that convergence of civil and military technology.

However, no sooner was its March announcement of the launch made than much of the world exploded with indignation and demanded it immediately cancel it. South Korea called it a "grave provocation." The US State Department declared the launch would be a breach of North Korea's obligations under Security Council Resolutions 1718 of 2006 and 1874 of 2009 (both banning "missile-related activity" or launches "using ballistic missile technology"). The Secretary-General of the United Nations said much the same. The Japanese government took steps to rush PAC3 Patriot missile sets to Okinawa and its outlying islands to protect them and the Foreign Minister threatened to order the shooting down of any object that might penetrate into Japanese territory. A senior official of the Obama administration traveled to Australia to warn that the region "roughly between Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines" might be impacted, the Australian Foreign Minister declared "a real and credible threat to the security of the region and to Australia" and the Sydney Morning Herald published the story under a headline suggestive of an imminent North Korean attack.[1]

Although the satellite story broke in the global media only with the Pyongyang announcement, North Korea had given the United States considerable advance notice of its intention. It did so by at least 15 December 2011, just days before the death of the country's then leader, Kim Jong-il (presumed to have been 17 December).[2] However, for whatever reason, the US made no public statement or protest and instead, following a series of bilateral talks in Beijing, on 29 February 2012 it reached a fresh bilateral agreement: North Korea would implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities and agree to the return of IAEA inspectors to verify and monitor its observance. In return the US would grant "240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance, and it stated that it did not have any "hostile intent" and was prepared to take steps to improve the bilateral relationship in the "spirit of mutual respect for sovereignty and equality." [3] Those three words – respect, sovereignty, equality – were scarcely mentioned in media reports of the agreement, but to North Korea they were the essence, since the goal of its foreign policy for decades has been to accomplish "normalization" of relations with the US on such a basis, to secure the lifting of the sanctions under which it has labored for more than half a century and to transform the "temporary" 1953 ceasefire into a peace treaty.

In that 29 February Agreement, the US also reaffirmed its commitment to the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement. This apparently inconsequential sentence was profoundly significant, since that agreement addressed comprehensively the problems of the peninsula and mapped out a path to their resolution, by a graduated, step-by-step process leading to North Korean denuclearization in exchange for diplomatic and economic normalization.[4] In 2005, the US had declared it harboured no aggressive intent and all

parties (i.e., US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan) affirmed the principle of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, "respect" for the North Korean insistence on the right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy and agreement to discuss provision of a light water reactor to North Korea at an appropriate time. The agreement also included a Japanese commitment to take steps to normalize relations and of the directly related parties to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula" and to do so "in the spirit of "mutual respect and equality." [5] In fact, throughout the Six Party talks (beginning in 2003), these words, inserted at North Korean insistence, became a leitmotif. The most reluctant party, in 2005 and indeed throughout the talks, was the US, described by former Department of State's top North Korea expert Jack Pritchard as "a minority of one … isolated from its four other allies and friends," and facing an ultimatum from the Chinese chair of the conference to sign or else bear responsibility for their breakdown. After affixing its reluctant signature on 19 September, however, on 20 September the US launched financial sanctions designed to bring the Pyongyang regime down, plainly in breach of the agreement it had just signed. When the US in 2012 proclaimed its commitment to the 2005 principles, therefore, North Korea must have been inclined to accept the assurance with a grain of salt. Blame for the breakdown in the multilateral Beijing negotiations and the stalling of the 2005 (and later, 2007) Beijing agreements (to which now presumably the 2012 agreement will also have to be added) attaches to other parties at least as much as to North Korea.

North Korea Protests its Innocence (YouTube)

In 2009, when on 5 April North Korea launched an earlier version, Kwangmyongsong No 2, of the rocket now being assembled, there was also a huge fuss.[6] Hostile powers put together a mighty military force – up to 9 Aegis destroyers, plus submarines, surveillance aircraft, satellites and radar systems – but in the event no military intervention occurred, the third stage booster seems to have failed and the rocket travelled about 3,800 kilometres before crashing and sinking in the Western Pacific, although North Korea insisted that it went into orbit and has since been broadcasting the "Song of General Kim Il sung" and the "Song of General Kim Jong il." The Security Council denounced it, but the statement by its president, Claude Heller of Mexico, was remarkable for the fact that it did not specify by any noun what it was that North Korea had launched. The Council's peremptory language – "condemns," "demands," etc – was oddly out of kilter with its inability to decide what it was condemning. "Whatever it was you launched," said the Security Council in effect, "you should not have done and must not do it again." Shortly before the launch, however, US intelligence indicated that it thought the launch object was probably a satellite, not a missile, and shortly after it South Korea's Defense Ministry said the trajectory seemed to have been configured to thrust a satellite into orbit. So North Korea appears to have done what it said it would do, even though it failed to achieve its purpose. Only Japan, having used the ambiguous term "flying object" (*hishotai*) until the launch, shortly after it swung – government and media alike – into adoption of the word "missile."

For a country supposedly irrationally aggressive, one that is "no a normal state but more a nation-scale exercise in organized crime" (as the Sydney Morning Herald put it),[7] North Korea has been remarkably consistent in its pursuit of the moral goals of equality and respect. Its recent history shows that its interest in negotiations diminishes as other parties attempt to narrow the focus to its nuclear and missile programs and grows as the agenda incorporates comprehensive normalization, a treaty to end the Korean War, multilateral economic cooperation, and Japanese reparations for colonialism.[8] As Leon Sigal wrote in 2009, "Whenever the United States fails to keep its side of the bargain, North Korea is quick to retaliate – in 1998 Pyongyang sought the means to enrich uranium and test a long-range Taepodong missile; in 2003 its reignited its plutonium program; in 2006 it test-launched a Taepodong and conducted a nuclear test; and last August it suspended disablement of its Yongbyon facilities and threatened to resume plutonium production."[9] North Korea appears to have learned from experience that nothing is so effective in attracting American attention, even earning a grudging respect, as the maintenance of high-level military preparedness. Such tactics are better seen not as recalcitrance, blackmail, or belligerence, but as a calculated response to American (and Japanese) intimidation.

Although there is no doubt that North Korea is a highly unpleasant dictatorship),[10] there is little basis for the view that it poses a threat of regional aggression. Obsessed with security and the search for an absolute guarantee of immunity from attack by its enemies, it has become a kind of "porcupine state," resisting foreign bodies by stiffening its quills, rather than an expanding or rampaging one. While the world's attention focussed on whatever might be about to happen on the North Korean launch-pad, huge US and South Korean war games, rehearsals for war, were taking place just off North Korean shores.[11] To Pyongyang, that was provocation, just as to Japan and the US, its April launch was provocation.

As at time of writing (30 March 2012) there are several possibilities. Pyongyang might, although it seems unlikely, choose to buckle under the pressure and cancel the launch. Such display of weakness and repudiation of the legacy of the late leader would have unpredictable domestic consequences, and the act of submission would likely encourage the member states of the Beijing group to demand more. If, however, Pyongyang resists all pressures and proceeds with the launch, either the launch succeeds or it does not. If an "advanced geostationary meteorological satellite" duly takes its place in the skies, the world will face a *fait accompli*. Despite sanctions and irrespective of its poverty and isolation, North Korea's claim to a place in the ranks of advanced scientific and industrial powers would be reinforced and, sooner or later, the hostile powers would have to return to the agenda of September 2005: a comprehensive peninsular peace and normalization agenda. If on the other hand the launch is unsuccessful and/or the vehicle breaks up or enters a missile trajectory, North Korea would face considerable loss of face both domestically and heightened hostility internationally, making early resumption of the Six Party talks unlikely. Embattled, it might resume nuclear testing (as it did when the Security Council denounced the failed launch in 2009), the regime's hold would likely weaken and the "North Korea problem" might become just so much more difficult to resolve.

The merciless stare which almost the entire world fixes upon North Korea is not to be understood solely in rational terms. The stare is less fierce, it is true, in the case of Russia and China, but both on this occasion seem at least to be joining the coalition of the hostile in urging North Korea to cancel the launch and avoid "provocation." For much of the world, however, the country serves as a kind of ultimate "other." Over much of the past half century, and certainly since the end of the Cold War, no country has been so lacking in international sympathy or solidarity. The United States and Japan expect others to condemn North Korea, and it is easy to find cause to condemn and much less likely to cause offence in the global quarters that count than any serious attempt to identify and pursue global powers that are responsible for aggression and abuse on the grand scale. Thus for the Government of Australia, having shown no previous interest in peninsular matters and no understanding of the historic context or of the core of legitimacy that encapsulates North Korea's cry to the world, to declare itself threatened by the imminent launch and to demand it be cancelled is simply a cheap and empty gesture.

In so far as the "North Korean problem" is defined as the problem of quelling North Korea's nuclear or missile ambitions and its

innate violence and lack of reason, the focus is on the symptom rather than the cause. As I have written elsewhere,[12]

> The very term "the North Korea nuclear problem" … begs a major question. It assumes that it is North Korea that is irrational, aggressive, nuclear obsessed and dangerous, and the US that is rational, globally responsible, and reacting to North Korean excesses. To thus shrink the frame of the problem is to ignore the matrix of a century's history – colonialism, division, half a century of Korean War, Cold War as well as nuclear proliferation and intimidation. It is to assume that what it describes as "the North Korean nuclear weapons program" can be dealt with while ignoring the unfinished issues of the Korean War and the Cold War, and even of Japanese imperialism. What this formulation of the "North Korea problem" ignores is something that I have referred to as the "US problem," the US's aggressive, militarist hegemonism and contempt for international law.[13] Although North Korea is widely regarded as an "outlaw state" and held in contempt by much of the world, it has not in the past 50 years launched any aggressive war, overthrown any democratically elected government, threatened any neighbor with nuclear weapons, torn up any treaty, or attempted to justify the practices of torture and assassination. Its 2006 missile and nuclear weapons tests were both provocative and unwise, but neither breached any law, and both were carried out under extreme provocation. The North Korean state plainly runs roughshod over the rights of its citizens, but the extremely abnormal circumstances under which it has existed since the founding of the state in 1948, facing the concentrated efforts of the global superpower to isolate, impoverish, and overthrow it, have not been of its choosing. Frozen out of major global institutions and subject to financial and economic sanctions, denounced in fundamentalist terms as "evil" (and beyond redemption), North Korea could scarcely be anything but suspicious and fearful. Suspicion and fear, on the part of a state as well as of an individual, is likely to be expressed in belligerence. In particular, North Korea has faced the threat of nuclear annihilation for more than half a century. If anything is calculated to drive a people mad, and to generate in it an obsession with unity and survival, and with nuclear weapons as the sine qua non of national security, it must be such an experience. Its demand for relief from nuclear intimidation was unquestionably just and yet was ignored by the global community, till, eventually, as we know, it took the matter into its own hand.

The common association in the public mind outside North Korea is of that country as nuclear and or missile threat, whereas from inside the country the overwhelming consciousness is that of a small country constantly bullied and threatened by larger and more powerful ones, and in particular of facing nuclear intimidation far longer than any country on earth. That it has survived so long is in no small measure due to its focus on developing its "deterrent." It has an understandable obsession with security, and is unlikely to yield its nuclear or missile cards unless and until it receives the guarantees of a formal peace settlement and diplomatic normalization.

The real issue is the far too long continued state of "temporary" ceasefire on the peninsula. The task is to normalize relations between north and south and between North Korea and its former colonial master Japan and its bitter enemy of 62 years, the United States, and bring this country in from the "cold" of international isolation. The more the "international community (ie, the US and its allies) concentrate on strangling North Korea to force it to submit, the more entrenched becomes the regime, able to point convincingly to the powerful coalition threatening it. If relations were once normalized on the peninsula and between North Korea and Japan and the United States, it would have to legitimize itself by serving its people and meeting their needs. The country that can manage space and nuclear programs despite a half-century of sanctions and acute international isolation plainly has plenty of talent and potential. The answer to concerns over its nuclear weapon program is to negotiate a true international guarantee of its security and remove the US nuclear threat, and the answer to concerns over its space program is to deepen international cooperation and provide an internationally approved regional launch centre.

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Author

Gavan McCormack is an emeritus professor of the Australian National University and a coordinator of The Asia-Pacific Journal. He is author of many books and articles on modern and contemporary East Asia, and many of his articles are accessible on this site. *His Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the brink of Nuclear Catastrophe,* was published in 2004 and translated and published in Japanese and Korean. In 2008 and 2009 he contributed a monthly column to the Seoul daily *Kyunghyang shinmoon*. His discussion with John Dower of the prospects for 2012 was featured on NHK satellite television as its New Year program ("Kantogen 2012"). His most recent book, co-authored with Satoko Oka Norimatsu, is *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*, forthcoming, Rowman and Littlefield, July 2012.

Notes

[1] Peter Hartcher, "North Korea directs missiles towards Australia," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 March 2012.

[2] Kyoko Yamaguchi, "DPRK 'told US about plan on Dec 15'," Daily Yomiuri Online, 25 March 2012.

[3] US Department of State, Statement by Victoria Nuland, spokesperson, "State Department on US-North Korea Bilateral Talks," February 29, 2012.

[4] For details, see my "North Korea and the Birth Pangs of a New Northeast Asian Order," in Sonia Ryang, ed., *North Korea: Towards a Better Understanding*, Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, pp. 23-40 (also, slightly earlier version, at Japan Focus, 24 October 2007, found here).

[5] "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six Party Talks," Beijing, 19 September 2005.

[6] Following discussion draws upon my 2009 essay, "Security Council Condemnation of North Korean "UFO" Deepens Korean Crisis," *Kyunghyang shinmoon* (in Korean), 13 April 2009, and in English at Japan Focus, 15 April 2009, found here.

[7] Peter Hartcher, North Korea doing what it pleases – with a twist," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2012.

[8] See my *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe*, New York, Nation Books, 2004.

[9] Leon Sigal, "What Obama should offer North Korea," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 2009.

[10] I have written at some length on the nature of the regime in chapters 3 and 4 of *Target North Korea*.

[11] Operation Key Resolve, 27 February to 9 March, and Operation Foal Eagle, 1 March to 30 April.

[12] "North Korea and the Birth Pangs", op. cit.

[13] Gavan McCormack, "Criminal States: Soprano vs. baritone — North Korea and the United States," *Korea Observer*, Seoul, The Institute of Korean Studies, Vol. 37, No. 3, Autumn 2006, pp. 487-511, and (in Korean) as chapter 1 of *Beomjoegukga: Bukhan Geurigo Miguk*, Seoul, Icarus, 2006, p. 15-40.