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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **North Korea's Rocket Launch: Opportunity for Regional Cooperation?**

By Sarah Teo

### **Synopsis**

*North Korea's rocket launch could be an opportunity for regional cooperation in Northeast Asia despite ongoing territorial disputes. However will the opportunity be lost amid the leadership transitions in China, Japan and South Korea?*

### **Commentary**

ON 12 DEC 2012, North Korea successfully launched a rocket to put a working satellite in orbit. According to Pyongyang, the launch is "an important occasion of putting the country's technology for the use of space for peaceful purposes on a new, higher stage". The United States and its Northeast Asian allies, however, see the launch as a cover for a ballistic missile test in violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

Domestically, a successful launch would shore up North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un's legitimacy and placate a potentially restive military following a speculated reshuffling of its top ranks. Externally, the launch may influence the ongoing leadership changes in North Korea's neighbouring states. Importantly, Pyongyang's move may be perceived as a sign that the Kim regime is unlikely to back away from its missile and nuclear programmes.

### **Opportunity for regional cooperation**

Notwithstanding the recent tensions in the region over maritime territorial and historical disputes, the insecurities generated by the North Korean rocket launch and its larger nuclear ambition may be an opportunity for the Northeast Asian states to engage in regional cooperation.

The latest successful launch is an opportunity to turn public attention away from intractable disagreements over territory and history among China, Japan and South Korea, and focus it on the positives – that they all have a stake in safeguarding regional security on which, despite differences, there can be common ground. At the very least, South Korea, Japan and China can be seen to have agreed on one thing – that regional peace and stability has to be managed by all stakeholders.

This is not to say that North Korea should exist as the perennial 'bogeyman' to be invoked to forge closer regional cooperation, at the expense of efforts to bring the hermit state into the international fold. However,

Pyongyang's rocket launch has indeed spurred dialogue and engagement among its neighbours as seen in the reported close consultations on the situation involving Seoul, Beijing and Tokyo.

International goodwill generated by any perceived success in managing this episode may positively influence the public discourse on their territorial disputes which are currently aggravated by nationalistic sentiments. It is thus important that news about regional coordination in response to the North Korean rocket launch is not overshadowed or hijacked by any political mishap given the ongoing leadership transitions in Northeast Asia.

### **A lost opportunity?**

Prior to the launch, the issue was used by politicians in Japan and South Korea to show up their opponents' weakness.

In Japan, where a general election is due on 16 December, the topic has been caught in the campaign crossfire between Japan's ruling party and the opposition. Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda justified his government's "coolheaded and practical" policy towards North Korea, while opposition leader Shinzo Abe slammed the ruling party for agreeing to restart talks with Pyongyang. Abe also called for the dismissal of Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura after the latter told reporters that he hoped North Korea would launch the rocket "quickly".

In South Korea, the ruling Saenuri Party and opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) have blamed each other for the launch. DUP said the launch indicated "President Lee [Myung-bak] and Saenuri party's failure to deal with the North", and alleged that the ruling party was making use of the North Korea issue to gain an advantage in the presidential election on 19 December.

In response, the Saenuri Party commented sarcastically that North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes "made great progress" during former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun's administrations. Such rhetoric can unfavourably influence perceptions towards regional cooperation on North Korea.

Japan and South Korea aside, Beijing's record on North Korea does not seem to suggest any impending rupture with the incoming Xi Jinping administration. Despite engaging with Seoul and Tokyo, China and North Korea remain allies – a relationship described by former Chinese leader Mao Zedong as being like "lips and teeth". While publicly calling for North Korea to comply with UNSC resolutions, Beijing looks unlikely to abandon its long-time ally.

Furthermore, China has on several occasions been accused of violating UNSC sanctions imposed on North Korea. This time, Washington, Seoul and Tokyo have agreed to seek stronger sanctions by the UN against Pyongyang. It is unclear if Beijing would object to more sanctions, but this issue, coupled with a possible Chinese refusal to deal harshly with North Korea, could potentially drive a wedge between China and its two neighbours.

### **Business as usual?**

Ultimately, it could be business as usual for Northeast Asia. Consultations among North Korea's neighbours also occurred during the regime's previous attempt at a rocket launch in April 2012, but this did not translate into substantial regional cooperation. Instead, it was followed by months of hostile relations arising from the nationalist and maritime territorial issues. A military information-sharing agreement between South Korea and Japan, allowing the two countries to exchange intelligence on North Korea, was also called off in June after South Korean politicians criticised their government for striking a deal with the country's former coloniser.

In the longer term, however, there remains a possibility for regional cooperation once the new leaderships in China, Japan and South Korea are installed and in a more stable mode, when electoral posturings decrease and nationalistic sentiments subside. For now, China, Japan and South Korea should ensure that North Korea's rocket launch does not become politicised as they undergo their respective leadership transitions.

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