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Analysis: North Korean Media Campaign Signals Possible Near-Term Launch

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North Korea has resumed laying the groundwork for a demonstration of its satellite- and missile-related capabilities, renewing efforts to portray its space program as peaceful and within international norms. Pyongyang might time a possible launch to coincide with ongoing events, such as the upcoming opening of a new North Korean legislative session, likely to be held in April, or with annual US-South Korea spring military exercises. Pyongyang's ultimate decision whether to launch will likely reflect its views on relations with the United States.

During the past several months, Pyongyang has stepped up its media campaign asserting North Korea's "right" to pursue space research and development -- an endeavor specifically including launching "satellites."

- Most recently, a 7 February [party daily signed commentary](#) portrayed space research and development as a "legitimate right," saying that North Korea's "peaceful advance into space is ... justifiable in compliance with the development of the times."[\[1\]](#) At the same time, the commentary avoided any mention of the rumors of the North's preparations for a long-range missile launch widely reported in world media since 3 February.[\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#)
- This builds on three other signed commentaries in the party daily since October 2008 -- each by a different senior commentator -- that were all similar in structure and wording.[\[6\]](#) [\[7\]](#) [\[8\]](#) In a likely attempt to preempt international condemnation in the event of a launch, the commentaries emphasized the "equal right of every country" to pursue space research and development as an "asset of humanity in common."
- Having party daily commentators address the North's "space" policy allows Pyongyang to make its case for a satellite-related event without making a formal government commitment.

Although the "right" to space is not a new theme in North Korean media, the current emphasis -- both in terms of the nature of the discussion and its frequency -- is rare.

- Dating back to at least 2005, there have been only two other signed commentaries in the party daily claiming this "right."[\[9\]](#) [\[10\]](#)
- In the uptick in reporting prior to the early July 2006 missile launches -- as well as in a similar spike in reporting last summer -- the campaign was limited to third-party reports on space-related developments in other countries that were framed either peacefully or as attempts to "militarize" space.[\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

Only Indirect Acknowledgement

As was the case in the lead-up to its only two previous long-range missile launches in August 1998 and July 2006, there have been no authoritative North Korean pronouncements confirming or denying rumored launch plans. Pyongyang has, however, used unofficial channels to indirectly acknowledge a possible upcoming launch attempt.

- Most prominently, [Choso'n Sinbo](#) -- a pro-North Korean newspaper in Japan that apparently has editorial ties to the regime -- addressed on 5 February the recent rumors on North Korean launch preparations without specifically denying them.^[14] The article indirectly linked missile research with North Korean "military countermeasures" that were being undertaken in response to "hostile relations" with the United States.
- Notably, this was also the case in the run-up to the early July 2006 launch attempts. In late June 2006, an article in the [Choso'n Sinbo](#) claimed that a "launch of an artificial earth satellite" could be "carried out at any time in the future ... a month later or a year later."^[15] The article further stated that the "launch itself" would only become a "security issue" where there are "mutually hostile relations."

The only other recent signal -- not authoritative but likely vetted -- is the message reportedly given to a senior non-governmental US delegation during a 2-7 February visit to Pyongyang. According to wire services, upon his return, former US Ambassador to South Korea Bosworth told reporters that in regard to possible launch preparations, "they said we should all wait and see."^[16] ^[17]

Timing

If Pyongyang decides to conduct a launch it would likely time the move to coincide with ongoing events, such as the upcoming opening of a new North Korean legislative session, likely to be held in April, or with annual US-South Korea spring military exercises. Pyongyang could frame such an event as either the "peaceful use of space" or as a "necessary military countermeasure."

- North Korea has scheduled elections on 8 March for the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), which would [likely open in early April.](#)^[18] A launch would fit the regime's current focus on science and technology innovation, building on the December 2008 lighting of the "torch of Kangso'n" and a major policy emphasis on "opening up the gate to a powerful state in 2012" based on advances in science and technology as contained in this year's authoritative [New Year's Joint Editorial.](#)^[19] ^[20] The August 1998 launch attempt coincided with the opening of its 11th SPA and was portrayed as a major technological achievement.
- The recent [Choso'n Sinbo](#) article highlighted combined US-South Korea military exercises that are conducted "around March every year" as a "provocation" that could result in "more hard-line countermeasures."

Diplomatic Wild Card

The ultimate decision on whether to launch will likely reflect Pyongyang's views on relations with the United States.

- Almost certainly aware that a launch would be seen by the international community as provocative, Pyongyang appears to be deliberately raising the stakes, possibly the result of a calculus that envisions making headway in bilateral negotiations if it could present itself as an equal partner. If Pyongyang proceeds with a launch, it could indicate a judgment on its part that the United States is not currently ready to move forward bilaterally.
- A launch would represent a change in Pyongyang's current approach to Washington as suggested by North Korea's positive media portrayals of President Obama and signals emphasizing the importance of improving the bilateral relationship. Dating back to its treatment of the election in November 2008, North Korean media have portrayed cautious optimism regarding the Obama administration. In an authoritative and fairly direct signal, Pyongyang for the first time in seven years failed to level any criticism against the United States in its New Year's policy pronouncement.^[21] In addition, Pyongyang has portrayed President Obama as a break with the past and

a potentially transformational figure. [\[22\]](#) [\[23\]](#) [\[24\]](#) [\[25\]](#) [\[26\]](#) [\[27\]](#) [\[28\]](#) [\[29\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20090207029001](#) | 7 February 2009 | | DPRK PARTY ORGAN COMMENTARY: 'RIGHT FOR PEACEFUL USE OF SPACE LIES WITH ANYONE' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (Electronic Edition) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on the Korean Press Media (KPM) website run by the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan; URL: <http://dprkmedia.com>]

[\[2\]](#) [OSC | | [JPP20090202465001](#) | 3 February 2009 | | JAPAN SOURCES: US SATELLITES 'CONFIRM' DPRK READYING LAUNCH OF 'IMPROVED' MISSILE | | (U) | (U) | Tokyo Sankei Shimbun Online in Japanese -- Website of daily published by Fuji Sankei Communications Group; URL: <http://www.sankei.co.jp>]

[\[3\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20090202971118](#) | 2 February 2009 | | ROK'S YONHAP CITES INTELLIGENCE SOURCE SAYING DPRK MOVING TO TEST-FIRE LONG-RANGE MISSILE | | U | U | Seoul Yonhap in English -- Semiofficial news agency of the ROK. URL: <http://www.yonhapnews.net/Engservices/3000000000.html>]

[\[4\]](#) [OSC | | [JPP20090203969003](#) | 3 February 2009 | | AFP Cites Report: DPRK May Be Set for Long-Range Missile Launch | | U | U | Hong Kong AFP in English -- Hong Kong service of the independent French press agency Agence France-Presse]

[\[5\]](#) [OSC | | [JPP20090203969017](#) | 3 February 2009 | | Kyodo: LEAD: N. Korea Moving To Launch Long-Range Missile, Yonhap Reports | | U | U |]

[\[6\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20090126051001](#) | 26 January 2009 | | DPRK PARTY ORGAN ON 'INTERNATIONAL TREND' OF ADVANCING INTO SPACE, KEEPING STEP | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (Electronic Edition) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on the Korean Press Media (KPM) website run by the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan; URL: <http://dprkmedia.com>]

[\[7\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20081107029002](#) | 7 November 2008 | | DPRK PARTY ORGAN ON FOREIGN COUNTRIES' SPACE DEVELOPMENT, MENTIONS DPRK'S RIGHT | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (via Uriminjokkiri Internet) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on Uriminjokkiri, external website targeting overseas Koreans; technically administered out of Shenyang, China but reportedly run by the Workers Party of Korea United Front Department. URL: <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com>]

[\[8\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20081013029002](#) | 13 October 2008 | | DPRK Party Organ Stresses DPRK's 'Peaceful' Development of Space | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (via KPM Internet) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on the Korean Press Media (KPM) website run by the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. URL: <http://dprkmedia.com>]

[\[9\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20080304049003](#) | 4 March 2008 | | DPRK PARTY PAPER CRITICIZES US SATELLITE SHOOTDOWN AS 'SIGNAL' OF SPACE ARMS RACE | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (via KPM Internet) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on the Korean Press Media (KPM) website run by the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. URL: <http://dprkmedia.com>]

[\[10\]](#) [OSC | | [KPP20080225037001](#) | 25 February 2008 | | DPRK Party Organ Decries US for Opposing 'Space Demilitarization Treaty' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun (via KPM Internet) in Korean -- Daily (formerly transliterated as Nodong Sinmun) of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; posted on the Korean Press

Media (KPM) website run by the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. URL: <http://dprkmedia.com>]

[11] [OSC | | [KPF20080829433001](#) | 28 August 2008 | | OSC ANALYSIS: DPRK LAYS GROUNDWORK FOR DEMONSTRATION OF SATELLITE, MISSILE CAPABILITY | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[12] [OSC | | [KPF20060621356001](#) | 21 June 2006 | | OSC Analysis 21 Jun: DPRK Builds Case for Missile Launch | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[13] [OSC | | [KPP20060519356001](#) | Source Lan | | OSC REPORT 19 MAY: COMPARING 1998 PRE-LAUNCH DPRK MEDIA BEHAVIOR TO CURRENT SILENCE | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[14] [OSC | | [KPP20090205051001](#) | 5 February 2009 | | PRO-DPRK ORGAN VIEWS DPRK PRONOUNCEMENTS, WARNS OF ARMY'S 'MORE HARDLINE' MEASURES | | (U) | (U) | Tokyo Choso'n Sinbo Online in Korean -- Website of the official organ of the pro-DPRK General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (formerly transliterated as Choson Sinbo); URL: <http://www.korea-np.co.jp>]

[15] [OSC | | [KPP20060621025002](#) | 21 June 2006 | | PRO-DPRK ORGAN VIEWS NORTH KOREA'S POSITION ON REPORTS OF MISSILE LAUNCH PREPARATIONS | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) | Tokyo Choso'n Sinbo (Internet Version-WWW) in Korean -- Internet-based version of Choso'n Sinbo (formerly transliterated as Choson Sinbo), the official organ of the pro-DPRK General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. URL: <http://www.korea-np.co.jp>]

[16] [OSC | | [KPP20090207971035](#) | 7 February 2009 | | ROK's Yonhap: US Expert Says DPRK Wants To Continue Denuclearization Talks | | (U) | (U) | Seoul Yonhap in English -- Semiofficial news agency of the ROK. URL: <http://www.yonhapnews.net/Engservices/3000000000.html>]

[17] [OSC | | [JPP20090207969017](#) | 7 February 2009 | | DPRK Tells Former US Envoy Bosworth 'Wait and See' About Missile Launch | | (U) | (U) | Tokyo Kyodo World Service in English -- English service of Japan's largest domestic and international news agency, owned by nonprofit cooperative of 63 newspaper companies and NHK]

[18] [OSC | | [KPP20090115435001](#) | 15 January 2009 | | OSC Report: North Korea -- New Supreme People's Assembly Likely To Open in Apr | | U | U |]

[19] [OSC | | [KPP20081231051001](#) | 1 January 2009 | | Full Text of DPRK's 2009 New Year's Joint Editorial | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) | Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station in Korean -- DPRK-owned central radio network]

[20] [OSC | | [KPF20090109433001](#) | 9 January 2009 | | OSC-INR ANALYSIS: DPRK -- NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE DE-EMPHASIZES REFORM, SIGNALS CHANGE | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[21] [OSC | | [KPP20081231051001](#) | 1 January 2009 | | Full Text of DPRK's 2009 New Year's Joint Editorial | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) | Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station in Korean -- DPRK-owned central radio network]

[22] [OSC | | [KPF20090129433001](#) | 28 January 2009 | | OSC Analysis: DPRK Restrained on PRC, 6PT, Signals Preference for US Relations | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[23] [OSC | | [KPF20090123433001](#) | 23 January 2009 | | OSC ANALYSIS: DPRK POSITIVE ON US INAUGURATION, SOLIDIFIES NEGOTIATING POSITIONS | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[24] [OSC | | [KPF20090114433001](#) | 14 January 2009 | | OSC Analysis: DPRK -- Overview of Denuclearization for Next US Administration | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[25] [OSC | | [KPF20090109433001](#) | 9 January 2009 | | OSC-INR ANALYSIS: DPRK -- NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE DE-EMPHASIZES REFORM, SIGNALS CHANGE | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[26] [OSC | | [KPF20090101356001](#) | 1 January 2009 | | OSC-INR ANALYSIS 1 JAN: NORTH KOREA -- NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE UPBEAT ON US, TOUGH ON SOUTH | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[27] [OSC | | [KPF20081219433001](#) | 19 December 2008 | | OSC ANALYSIS: DPRK -- RARE SSD STATEMENT SUGGESTS PROLONGED INTER-KOREAN TENSION | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[28] [OSC | | [KPF20081213429001](#) | 13 December 2008 | | OSC ANALYSIS: DPRK REACTION TO TALKS SUGGESTS OVERTURE TO NEW US ADMINISTRATION | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

[29] [OSC | | [KPF20081108433001](#) | 7 November 2008 | | OSC Analysis: North Korea Cautiously Optimistic on US Election Results | | (U//FOUO) | (U//FOUO) |]

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