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Characteristics and Implications of North Korea's Diplomatic and Security Discourses Following the Military Spy Satellite Launch

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Since launching a military spy satellite known as ‘Malligyong-1’ on the night of November 21, North Korea has been sending various messages to the outside world. Since the US–North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019 fell apart, North Korea has been consistently pursuing the enhancement of its nuclear capabilities, defying sanctions imposed by not only South Korea and the US but also the international community. North Korea’s spy satellite development, coupled with mass production of nuclear warheads and diversification of the delivery system, is expected to accelerate the advancement of its nuclear capabilities and serve as a deterrent to preemptive nuclear attacks by hostile forces. This paper aims to analyze North Korea’s diplomatic and security discourses in the two weeks following the launch of the spy satellite and ponder upon the characteristics and implications.

Expectations for a Dual Nuclear Effect

North Korea claims that the reconnaissance satellite was successfully launched, is operating normally, and that the “official reconnaissance mission has begun” since December 2. North Korean state-run media including *Korean Central News Agency* and *Rodong Sinmun* reported that the reconnaissance satellite ‘Malligyong-1’ is

performing well, taking aerial and satellite images covering major US military bases such as Andersen Air Force Base in Guam in the Pacific region, Apra Harbor, Naval Station Pearl Harbor Base in Hawaii, Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, Naval Station Norfolk and Newport News Shipyard in Virginia, 4 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, key target areas in South Korea including Mokpo, Gunsan, Pyeongtaek, Osan, Busan and Seoul, as well as the White House and the Pentagon in Washington.

Following the launch of the spy satellite, North Korea engaged in a propaganda campaign led by key figures and organizations including Kim, Jong-un to showcase the legitimacy and significance of the satellite launch. Kim, Jong-un generated the highest media exposure, followed by the Deputy Director of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Kim, Yo-jong, Vice Foreign Minister Kim, Seon-gyeong in charge of international organizations, and Vice Director of the Military Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of National Defense. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, and National Aerospace Technology Administration, the agency responsible for launching the satellite, also condemned the US and asserted the legitimacy of the satellite launch.

After supervision at the spy satellite launch facility on November 21, Kim, Jong-un demonstrated a keen interest in the satellite launch and operation by continuously visiting the Pyongyang General Control Center on 22, 24, and 25, and even taking commemorative photographs with officials from National Aerospace Technology Administration and members of the Satellite Launch Preparation Committee. Kim, Jong-un's enthusiasm for the satellite launch is driven by his high expectations for the aforementioned dual nuclear effect. According to Kim, Jong-un, a reconnaissance satellite "should provide abundant valuable real-time information about the enemy and further enhance response readiness." What's unusual is that the newly established Reconnaissance Missile Operations Office in the National Aerospace Development Administration at the Pyongyang General Control Center is an independent military intelligence unit. This organization is known to "report informations acquired to the relevant execution departments of the Central Military Commission of the WPK and then provide them to important military units and the Military's Reconnaissance General Bureau as instructed" (Korean Central News Agency, December 3, 2023).

Since the launch of the military spy satellite, the messages North Korea has been

sending internally were of praise for the leadership of Kim, Jong-un and the Workers' Party, and self-adulation for the capabilities of related institutions. On November 23, Kim, Jong-un said that "the possession of a reconnaissance satellite" is beneficial for "actively suppressing and controlling various dangerous and provocative actions of hostile forces," and that it is "a legitimate exercise of the right to self-defense, which cannot be compromised or stopped at any moment."

Creation of Intentional Tension

While North Korea asserts legitimacy of the satellite launch from a diplomatic and security perspective, it is also criticizing the US's double standards and making inter-Korean confrontation and military buildup a factual reality.

North Korea's messages about the Peninsula are worth noting. First, North Korea is intentionally creating tension by announcing its intention to scrap the September 19 inter-Korean military pact immediately after the spy satellite launch. This was exemplified by a statement released by the Ministry of National Defense on November 23. The statement outlined three main positions: North Korean military will not be bound by the September 19 South-North military accord; all military measures that were suspended in accordance with the South-North military accord will be immediately reinstated; and in the event of an irreversible conflict between South and North Korea, South Korea will be solely responsible for it. Regarding the second position in particular, the statement by the Ministry of National Defense warned that it would "withdraw military measures taken to prevent military tensions and conflicts in all spaces including land, sea and air, and deploy more powerful forces and new military equipment in the areas near the military demarcation line," creating tension. Subsequently, the North Korean military reinstalled surveillance posts and opened coastal artillery positions.

Second, North Korea indicated that it will continue to foster the atmosphere of military buildup and confrontation while criticizing the South Korean government after the launch of the spy satellite. In the above statement by the Ministry of National Defense, North Korea disparagingly referred to South Korea as the "ROK thing." North Korean state-run media claimed that US arms sales to South Korea have the effect of "killing

two birds with one stone, feeding themselves while obtaining a ‘loyal dog’ that will guard their ‘security’” (Korean Central News Agency, November 25, 2023). In addition, North Korea argued that US exports of advanced weapons to South Korea and Japan are “criminal acts of war exports” through a statement by Spokesperson for Ministry of National Defense (November 16) and by Vice Director of the Military Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of National Defense (November 20), and added that it will “further accelerate efforts to build war deterrence.”

The day after the launch of the spy satellite, North Korea criticized the partial suspension of September 19 South–North military accord announced by South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense as “foolishness of pulling out the last safety pin with their own hands,” (Korean Central News Agency, November 30) and argued that “ROK things shall never be able to escape the responsibility of breaking the North–South military accord” (Rodong Sinmun, December 3, 2023). Particularly noteworthy is the logic presented in the commentary of *Rodong Sinmun* on December 3. The commentary argued that South Korea has been violating the military accord in various ways for a long time, listing a number of examples. It concluded, saying “the buffer zone along the military demarcation line, which has been maintained over the past five years, has completely disappeared and the atmosphere of unpredictable war is prevalent.” The commentary then notes that there is no mention of reconnaissance satellite launches in the military accord and that South Korea’s announcement of partial suspension of the accord is an indication that “the military will forcefully carry out a comprehensive psychological warfare against North Korea on behalf of civilian organizations using unmanned drones from now on.” This suggests that North Korea will escalate tensions along the military demarcation line. It will be necessary to avoid accidental conflict and prepare against deliberate crisis escalation.

Use of ‘Sovereignty’ and ‘Double Standards’ Logic in the Spy Satellite Propaganda

North Korea is conveying two main messages to the international community. One is the argument that the spy satellite launch is a legal and legitimate exercise of the right to self-defense. This viewpoint is well-reflected in the statement by Vice Foreign

Minister Kim, Seon-gyeong in charge of international organizations announced through *Korean Central New Agency* on November 27. It highlighted that there is no international law prohibiting space launches, and North Korea's space launches serve defensive purposes and thus, it is "extreme bias and double standards" for Western countries including the US to condemn North Korea's measures.

North Korea's second message to the outside world is confrontation first, dialogue second. The Biden administration has so far maintained that the door is open for dialogue with North Korea. Through a statement on November 29, the Deputy Director Kim, Yo-jong characterized the US as the "malicious force destroying peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula with its extreme bias and double standards," but did not entirely dismissed the possibility of a dialogue. She said "If the US prefers 'peace through strength', we must be prepared for both dialogue and confrontation, especially being more thoroughly prepared for confrontation. This is our consistent stance towards the US." The statement by Spokesperson for Ministry of National Defense on December 2 criticized the US and even mentioned a 'declaration of war.' In the statement, North Korean military asserted that US reconnaissance satellites monitoring military targets in North Korea should be considered "priority targets for destruction." Since the spy satellite launch, North Korea criticized the condemnation and additional sanctions movements by Western countries and announced its own sanctions policy. On December 3, the Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs said "in accordance with the Countermeasures Act of the Republic, we declare that countermeasures will be applied against the individuals, institutions and organizations of the US and its followers for their involvement in formulating and executing sanctions policies against North Korea." This warrants close monitoring so as to determine whether North Korean sanctions are a result of newfound confidence following the 'success' of the military spy satellite.

Cold Peace

According to the announcement by North Korea, the first successful military spy satellite was launched on November 22, and North Korea itself declared its intention for additional satellite launches. Kim, Jong-un reportedly approved the 'Aeorspace

Reconnaissance Capability Development Plan’ that National Aerospace Technology Administration will be proposing to the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party in late December. On November 23, he also “urged scientists and technicians of the National Aerospace Technology Administration to continue their efforts toward the ‘immediate and future goals of developing aerospace reconnaissance capability.’ North Korea is signalling its intention to intensify military buildup even in space. In the process, the political stature of military elites involved in reconnaissance satellite operations, such as of the National Aerospace Technology Administration, is expected to be elevated.

Kim, Jong-un regime is likely to attempt additional launches of military reconnaissance satellites and, in the process, attribute resulting tensions to South Korea and the US. While criticizing both South Korea and the US, North Korea may try to convey the message of ‘dialogue for dialogue, confrontation for confrontation,’ possibly employing a tactic of division. North Korea’s drive for military buildup and attempts to strain the ROK-US alliance could add to South Korea’s security dilemmas. The task at hand is to maintain cold peace through a firm security posture and efforts to reduce tensions.

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