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North Korea's 100th – Celebrations Gone Awry□□北朝鮮の１００周年―不首尾に終わった祝典

Gavan McCormack

North Korea's 100th - Celebrations Gone Awry

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This revised and updated version of the author's earlier "North Korea's 100th – To Celebrate or To Surrender?" was prepared for the Korean journal Changbi. Given strong interest in the issues, The Asia-Pacific Journal *is publishing the updated version.*

Spring always brings reminders of the abiding insecurity that stems from the continuing division and confrontation of two states and systems on the Korean peninsula. On the one side, South Korea and the United States conduct large-scale military exercises, involving land, sea and air forces, (Operations Key Resolve and Foal Eagle) designed to rehearse a reopening of war. North Korea inevitably raises its levels of alert and readiness and its tone of belligerence, and in such climate the Cheonan incident occurred in March 2010.



Eighth Army trains with its South Korean allies during Exercises Key Resolve and Foal Eagle.

In 2012, however, as the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises mobilized a massive multinational, joint service force of destroyers, submarines, fighter jets and hundreds of thousands of soldiers to carry out live shooting from islands within North Korean-claimed zones of the West Sea and to rehearse, among other things, landings behind North Korean lines, global attention focussed almost exclusively on the plan announced by North Korea on 16 March to launch an earth observation satellite, Kwangmyongsong 3.

The April launch, North Korea said, would 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

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160 kilometres to the southwest of South Korea's Byeonsan peninsula and the second into the Pacific about 140 kilometres east of Luzon in the Philippines.



Source: ROK Drop.com

Pyongyang's south-oriented trajectory (rather than the "easier" eastward direction it had previously used, across mainland Japan's skies) seems likely to have been borrowed from the south. If South Korea in 2009 and 2010 could employ a trajectory across Japanese (Okinawan), Philippine and eventually Australian skies towards orbit over the pole without causing any fuss, North Korean officials may well have reasoned that they could do likewise. Due notice of the impending launch was issued to the appropriate international maritime, aviation and telecommunication bodies (IMO, ICAO and ITU) and invitations were extended to scientific observers and journalists to observe and report the launch.

Meteorological earth observation satellites are multi-functional, but especially useful for weather forecasting. Theirs, North Korea made clear (KCNA, 26 March), was to be an "advanced geostationary meteorological satellite," meaning it would orbit the earth while remaining "stationary" with respect to it. Meteorological satellites in the words of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) 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 by the US, Russia, Japan, Europe, China and India. Japan conducts fairly regular launches from its Tanegashima space station site, and has launched several whose main mission is to spy on North Korea.

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Japan's Ibuki satellite, launched 2009

No sooner was its March announcement of the launch made than South Korea called it a "grave provocation." Together with the United States and Japan, it referred to North Korea's act as a ballistic missile test under the guise of satellite, and denounced it as a breach of Security Council resolutions. 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"). A senior official of the Obama administration travelled 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* (24 March) published the story under a headline suggestive of an imminent North Korean attack. The Japanese government rushed Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC3) missile-defense systems to Okinawa and its outlying islands and the Defense Minister ordered that any object that might penetrate into Japanese territory should be shot down.

Japan has long referred to the "North Korean threat" to justify closer military collaboration with the US and on this occasion it mounted an impressive display of mobilization, deploying missile defence systems that are unproved and almost certainly useless throughout the archipelago and sending large contingents of armed troops to outlying islands. It must also have hoped that the "threat" might serve to soften the Okinawan resistance to US base expansion. Creeping Japanese militarization may be the consequence of the too long unresolved "North Korea problem" that will be hardest to reverse. Those outlying islands throughout the Cold War were havens of peace and stability despite, or rather because of the fact that they were not militarized.

The US and its allies put together a mighty force –Aegis destroyers, submarines, surveillance aircraft, satellites, anti-missile batteries and radar systems to observe, and possibly to intercept and destroy whatever North Korea might launch. However, the events of 13 April were anti-climactic. About one and a half minutes after take-off, the vehicle exploded and fell into the sea. North Korea's performance was roughly on a par with that of attempted South Korean space vehicle launches in 2009 and 2010. In June 2010, the South's launch, using Russian technology on the first stage and Korean on the second, operated normally for just over two minutes before it, too, blew up. Bits of the 2009 failed launch are said to have been picked up in the vicinity of Darwin. Seoul undoubtedly breathed a sigh of relief at news of the North's failure, since a Northern success would have upstaged it.

Satellites 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, for scientific and economic reasons as well as pride and face. It became a signatory to the Outer Space treaty (of 1966) in 2009, and has protested since then that it alone of the

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world's nations cannot be denied (even by the Security Council) the universal right to the scientific exploration of space simply because of the convergence of civil and military technology.



PAC3 missile-defense system in Ishigaki, Okinawa

The allegation that North Korean civil and scientific purpose simply cloaked military, missile testing intent is not groundless since the rocketry of a ballistic missile is virtually the same as that of a satellite launcher; what differs is payload and trajectory. This, however, is true of all satellite-launching countries. If Pyongyang's launch is to be seen as a covert missile launch, then so must South Korea's and Japan's. North Korea touches a sensitive nerve in its criticism of the hypocrisy of the global system, since super-powers consistently defy their obligations to pursue nuclear disarmament in good faith and insist on maintaining their nuclear and missile club privileges. They thus maintain a virtual monopoly over the profitable nuclear power and space industries, both of which are spinoffs from their nuclear weapon and missile programs.

Although the satellite story broke in the global media only with Pyongyang's mid-March announcement, North Korea had told the United States of its plan by at least by 15 December 2011.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 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." Those three words – respect, sovereignty, equality – were scarcely mentioned in international media reports of the agreement, but to North Korea they were of the essence. 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 laboured 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. The US 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 the directly related parties agreed to "negotiate a permanent peace regime

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on the Korean peninsula" and to do so "in the spirit of "mutual respect and equality."

In fact, throughout the Six Party talks (beginning in 2003), these words, inserted at North Korean insistence, became a leitmotif. The most reluctant party, throughout the talks, was the US, described in 2005 by former Department of State 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, from the very next day the US launched financial sanctions designed to bring the Pyongyang regime down, plainly in breach of the agreement it had just signed.Despite the common belief that it is always North Korea that is tricky and perfidious, 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 at least as much to other parties as to North Korea.

There seems little doubt that the object attached to the April rocket was, as North Korea insisted, a communications satellite. In 2009, too, when its Kwangmyongsong No 2 soared around 3,800 kilometres, crossing Japanese skies, before its third stage booster failed sending the rocket into the Pacific, US intelligence concluded that the object was indeed probably a satellite, and South Korea's Defense Ministry agreed that the trajectory had been consistent with sending a satellite into orbit. As North Korea did, or tried to do exactly what it had said it would do, so it most likely did in 2012.



2012 Unha satellite launch

For a country supposedly irrationally aggressive, one that is "not a normal state but more a nation-scale exercise in organized crime" (as the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 27 March put it), North Korea has been remarkably consistent in the goals it pursues. 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. The moral goals of equality and respect are not less important than political or military objectives. If it takes the view that only high-level military preparedness is effective in attracting American attention, even earning a grudging respect, that is better seen not as recalcitrance, blackmail, or belligerence, but as a calculated, realist response to American (and Japanese) intimidation.

Although there is no doubt that North Korea is a highly unpleasant dictatorship,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 "porcupinestate," resisting

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foreign bodies by stiffening its quills, rather than an expanding or rampaging one. The US and South Korean military exercises taking place just off North Korean shores must have seemed to Pyongyang at least as much provocation as its April launch was to Japan and the US.

The merciless stare which the US and its allies fixes upon North Korea is not to be understood solely in rational terms. The country has come to be seen as a kind of ultimate "other" and thus is almost entirely lacking in international sympathy or solidarity. The United States and Japan expect other states to condemn North Korea, and virtually all are happy to oblige. Much easier to condemn North Korea than to try to identify and pursue the responsibility of global powers for aggression and abuse on the grand scale. Thus the Government of Australia, having in recent decades shown no 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, declared itself threatened by the North's imminent launch though it had paid no attention whatever to almost exactly the same project conducted by South Korea.

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 (and Japan) that are rational, globally responsible, and merely 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 of Japanese imperialism. It ignores what I refer to as the "US problem," the US's aggressive, militarist hegemonism and contempt for international law, and the "Japan problem," as a US "client state" unable to formulate any agenda for engagement in the construction of an Asian future. Although North Korea's state plainly runs roughshod over the rights of its citizens, it has not in the past 50 years launched any aggressive war, overthrown any democratically elected government, threatened any neighbour with nuclear weapons, torn up any treaty, or attempted to justify the practices of torture and assassination.

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 (and its major East Asian ally) 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" (beyond redemption), it 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.What is truly unique about North Korea is that it 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 it took the matter into its own hand.

Seen by much of the world purely as a nuclear and or missile threat, North Korea's self-perception is that of a small country constantly bullied and threatened by larger and more powerful ones. Its obsession with security is the product of its experience, and it is unlikely to yield its nuclear or missile cards unless and until it receives the guarantees of a formal peace settlement and diplomatic normalization.

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The focus on North Korea as object of fear and loathing distracts attention from other, profoundly serious threats in the region. Paradoxically, the greatest threat today to East Asia stems not from North Korea but from Japan, from the nuclear obsession evident in its civil nuclear program. The Fukushima Dai-ichi complex that broke down in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 has since then spread radiation on land, sea and air, and still threatens even greater catastrophe because of the concentrations of radioactive reactor wastes and extracted plutonium barely contained in semi-collapsed buildings that experts predict would be unlikely to withstand the shock of the quakes they predict. Yet the Seoul "Nuclear Summit" of March 2012 neglected the risk posed *by* Japan, Prime Minister Noda speaking only of the threats of nuclear sabotage or terrorism *to* Japan (and other countries). The Summit ended with a vague declaration about "shared goals of nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy," ignoring Japan's steadily accumulating mountain of plutonium (close to 50 tons of it, more than 2000 times North Korea's assumed 20 to 30 kgs) or the continuing "Fukushima threat" to the region. The Noda government's priorities today seem to be to revive its nuclear industry and to secure a fresh set of sanctions and a condemnatory resolution on North Korea from the Security Council.

The real North Korea problem is that rooted in the far too long continued state of "temporary" ceasefire on the peninsula, engendering a mentality of fear and hostility, blocking regional cooperation and deepening dependence on the US and regional military bloc confrontation. The more the "international community" (i.e., the US and its allies) concentrate on strangling North Korea to force it to submit, the more entrenched becomes the regime, claiming legitimacy by pointing to the powerful coalition threatening it. The attention focussed on stopping North Korea's errant attempts to launch an object into the sky that might broadcast its patriotic songs would better be turned to the task of normalizing 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 bringing this country in from the cold of international isolation. If relations were once normalized on the peninsula and between North Korea and Japan and the United States, North Korea would then have to legitimize itself by meeting the needs of its people. 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 regional cooperation and provide an internationally approved regional launch centre.

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