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Space race between Seoul, Pyongyang heats up with launches expected

S. Korea plans to launch second military satellite in early April

By Kim Hyun-bin
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The space race between South and North Korea is expected to heat up in April, with Seoul planning to launch its second military reconnaissance satellite soon amid reports suggesting Pyongyang's readiness for a similar effort.

The South is scheduled to launch its indigenous military spy satellite in early April after the first one was successfully placed after lift-off from a U.S. military base in California in early December, according to the Ministry of National Defense.

"We are in the final stages of negotiation with our cooperative partners," Jeon Ha-gyu, a defense ministry spokesperson, said Monday.

Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik emphasized the importance of these satellites during a recent press conference.

"Once all five reconnaissance satellites are secured, they will significantly enhance our ability to monitor and reconnoiter specific points

in North Korea every two hours," Shin said.

South Korean military authorities have also confirmed their intention to secure 30 to 60 small and micro reconnaissance satellites by 2030. The plan involves launching 10 to 20 small reconnaissance satellites and approximately 40 micro reconnaissance satellites after securing five large reconnaissance satellites by 2025.

The large reconnaissance satellite, weighing between 800 and 1,000 kilograms, will be launched aboard SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket, while the small reconnaissance satellites weighing less than 500 kilograms and the micro reconnaissance satellites weighing less than 100 kilograms will be launched aboard domestically developed solid-fuel space launch vehicles.

The launch windows for small reconnaissance satellites are reportedly between 2026 and 2028 and for micro reconnaissance satellites between 2028 and 2030.

Pyeongyang is reportedly gearing up for its satellite launch, and per-

sonnel and equipment movements have been detected at the Dongchang-ri satellite launch site in North Pyongyang Province.

While the reclusive regime has not officially announced the impending launch, speculation is rife given the recent activities observed at the launch site, though the uncertainty surrounding its intentions has led to cautious assessments regarding the timing of the launch.

The U.S.-based North Korea media outlet 38 North reported Monday that a blue covering resembling a tarpaulin had been seen covering the Dongchang-ri launch site until earlier this month, but it has since disappeared, citing satellite images released recently.

Its last satellite launch occurred in November.

"North Korea continues to prepare for reconnaissance satellite launches, but it is difficult to predict the timing of the launch," a Joint Chiefs of Staff official said.

Experts expect the North to launch the military reconnaissance satellite in the second week of April. They note that the April 10 general



This Korean Central News Agency footage shows North Korea's launch of a military reconnaissance satellite in North Pyongyang Province, Nov. 22, 2023. Yonhap

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elections in the South and the April 15 celebrations of the birth of Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea, will be key events determining the timing.

"In broad terms, technical readiness will be most important for North Korea. Because failure is not an option, the state of technical readiness will have the most significant impact," Park Wngon, a professor of North Korean studies at Ewha Womans University, said.

"If both are favorable, the significance of the launch will likely be assigned to a date of importance, such as April 15, which is Kim Il-sung's birthday," Park added.

"Another consideration is the satellite launch by the South, which is expected to be around April 9. North Korea might want to launch before that date."

Shin Jong-woo, a senior researcher at the Korea Defense and Security Forum, said, "North Korea has

stated it will launch three more times this year, and especially considering the recent activity in Dongchang-ri, it's likely that the next launch will occur in the second quarter."

However, uncertainties persist regarding the operational capabilities of the satellite, as Seoul's defense ministry said that there were no indications of the North's reconnaissance satellites being operational, and instead, they are merely orbiting without any apparent activity.

Experts see this as a crucial issue for the future.

"Every threat seems threatening, so in the past, because North Korea's reconnaissance capabilities were considerably lacking, we were somewhat relieved about these matters," Shin said. "However, in the future, if North Korea has operational satellites, it will be able to anticipate movements of South Korean and U.S. forces in advance."

He added, "If they use this mil-

itarily, then obviously, previously unknown information about North Korea's capabilities and our military's intentions could be exposed in advance."