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NK's satellite launch timing suggests Kim's impatience

Failure could lead to mass purges, nuclear weapons test: experts

By Jung Min-ho
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North Korea informed Japan, Tuesday, that it plans to launch a satellite in two weeks, less than three months after a failed attempt to send its first reconnaissance satellite into space.

According to Japanese media reports, Pyongyang is set to proceed with the plan between Aug. 24 and 31, prompting officials in both South Korea and Japan to issue warnings to ships passing through three potentially risky areas — Korea's West Sea, the East China Sea and waters east of the Philippines (Luzon Island).

Speaking to The Korea Times, experts said the North appears to have determined the timing of the next launch based on political

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needs, particularly ahead of the Day of the Foundation of the Republic, on Sept. 9, rather than the scientific readiness level. They believe a failure this time could result in mass purges or even a nuclear weapons test as Kim Jong-un might consider the failure as politically damaging.

"When I heard that North Korea's satellite launch rocket failed three months ago because of instability in the engine and fuel system, I thought it would take much more time for another attempt," Chang Young-keun, a rocket scientist at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, said.

"If similar errors occurred in a developed nation, scientists would examine and rectify not only fundamental risk factors, but also all other potential, indirect issues. From a scientific perspective, there has not been enough time for preparations."

But that does not mean that North Korea will fail again, he noted.

"If North Korea correctly identi-

fied and tackled the problem that caused the failure in the rocket engine's ignition, it might be able to put the satellite into orbit," he said.

After its rocket — carrying a spy satellite — plunged into the sea on May 31, the North said it held a meeting where officials in charge of the project were "bitterly criticized."

The report was surprising, given that, compared to his predecessors, the young North Korean leader has been quite lenient with scientific endeavors and errors, said Go Myong-hyun, a senior researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a think tank.

"There must be internal issues that have pushed him to hasten the process. For some reason, he seems to be on edge," Go said. "Despite scientific risks, North Korea has been expediting (the launch) possibly to achieve political objectives ... All these signs suggest that another failure could lead to mass purges."

Citing reports from intelligence officials last week, Rep. Yoo Sang-bum of the conservative ruling

People Power Party said that North Korea was stepping up efforts to improve the reliability of its rocket, while making technical adjustments after Kim told his officials to prioritize the project for this year.

Cheong Seong-chang, a senior analyst at the Sejong Institute, a think tank, warned that Kim could push for a nuclear weapons test if another failure embarrasses him.

"If it succeeds, North Korea will celebrate the founding anniversary in a festive mood," he said.

"If it fails, however, Kim may end up pushing for a nuclear test to save face. I think this is an alternative plan on his mind. Given the weather forecast, I believe the launch date would likely be either Aug. 25 or 26."

An official at the Ministry of Unification told reporters that the planned launch would be a clear violation of the U.N. Security Council's resolutions, calling on Pyongyang to cancel it.

"No matter what excuses North Korea may have, it cannot justify this illegal act," the official said.