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N. Korea's 3rd spy satellite launch attempt imminent

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North Korea is set to make a third attempt to launch a spy satellite as early as Wednesday in spite of warnings from Seoul that the move could result in the suspension of an inter-Korean military agreement.

According to Japan's coast guard on Tuesday, North Korea notified its plans to launch the reconnaissance satellite sometime between today and Dec. 1 — most likely the first day given the previous pattern shown in its first and second attempts.

In the notice, Pyongyang identified potential drop zones where debris from the rocket carrying the satellite might fall. Two are in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and China and the third in the

Philippine Sea — the exact same spots it had notified in its two previous launches that ended in failure.

That means North Korea will use the same engine it used previously and there are no major technical changes, according to Chang Young-keun, a rocket scientist at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

"Our military suspects that issues regarding the engine were the cause of the previous failure. But the expected drop zones suggest otherwise," Chang told The Korea Times. "This attempt also comes just three months after the second ... It would be unreasonable to see that there was any engine design change or any significant technical addition."

There have been concerns about Russia's technical support in that

project following the two countries' summit two months ago. Matthew Miller, a spokesman for the U.S. Department of State, also expressed concerns, Monday (local time), about Pyongyang's improving military ties with Moscow, saying their arms-for-rocket deal would be a violation of U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

But given the short period time for possible collaboration and the intricacy of the technologies involved, Chang believes any help the Kremlin could offer at this near-completion stage is very limited.

"That means Russia's technical support is not the most critical factor for success; rather, it is that the problems North Korea found after the two attempts were not significant ones

that would require structural changes," he said. "Russia may have provided support in managing ground operations among others, but it certainly isn't the game changer."

Whether North Korea's first reconnaissance satellite will successfully enter orbit this time is anyone's guess. For South Korea, a more obvious concern is that the upcoming launch will likely further destabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula, resulting in the potential termination or suspension of the 2018 inter-Korean military accord. The agreement, inked by the previous Moon Jae-in administration on Sept. 9 that year amid a thaw in cross-border relations, includes setting up no-fly zones near the border.

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"If that becomes reality, tensions will certainly rise on the Korean Peninsula," Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said in his analysis. "This may be met with a strong response, such as the launch of a solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile (from North Korea)."

The presidential office suggested that the inter-Korean agreement could be suspended if North Korea goes ahead with its planned space rocket launch.

"If you read carefully the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act, any discussion between the South and the North can be suspended in part or in whole in the event of a critical cause, including those related to national security,

an official at the presidential office told reporters in London where President Yoon Suk Yeol is on a four-day state visit.

"We can take action in line with that clause ... and because the type of provocation North Korea will engage in has yet to be decided, we will have to decide the scope and details of the necessary steps regarding the Sept. 19 agreement depending on the type and scale of provocation," he added.

During trilateral phone talks, senior officials in Seoul, Tokyo and Washington affirmed their cooperation to "strongly request" Pyongyang to terminate its launch plan, according to the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

Speaking to the media, an official at the Ministry of Unification also called on the regime to cancel the plan as it is a clear violation of UNSC resolutions.