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N. Korea fails again in satellite launch but shows technical progress

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North Korea said, Thursday, that its second attempt to put a reconnaissance satellite into space failed, but the country immediately vowed to try again in two months, demonstrating its determination to push ahead with the project its leader Kim Jong-un labeled as a "top priority."

Citing the National Aerospace Development Administration, the North's official Korean Central News Agency reported that the first and second stages of the launch were successful, but an error in the "emergency blasting system" during the third-stage flight led to another failure.

The space agency said the problem was "not a big issue in terms of the reliability of cascade engines and the system."

That means North Korea has solved the key technical cause of the failure of the first launch and knows the area where improvements have to be made to achieve success, according to Chang Young-keun, a rocket scientist at the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy, a think tank.

"Given the success of the first stage, pairing and the second stage separations, it seems that North Korea found solutions for the problem that caused the first failure," he told The Korea Times. "What it referred to as the 'emergency blasting system'

was probably its flight termination system, which was believed to have exploded unintentionally due to technical errors. But the October launch announcement suggests that it is now certain that there is no major problem with rocket separation (mechanism) and a relaunch is possible immediately (without further checking)."

North Korea launched a military spy satellite, the Mallingyong-1, mounted on the Chollima-1 rocket, at around 3:50 a.m. from the Tongchang-ri area on its west coast.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said it detected the launch immediately and tracked the rocket flying above international waters off its west coast. The military also said aircraft and vessels were deployed in a search and retrieval operation for the wreckage.

At an emergency National Security Council meeting, President Yoon Suk Yeol condemned the launch as a "serious violation" of the U.N. Security Council's resolutions, saying the North Korean regime wastes a significant portion of its resources on "reckless provocations" when ordinary North Koreans are suffering and "dying from starvation."

Yoon also told his officials to share Seoul's analysis of the launch with Washington and Tokyo. Kim Gunn, South Korea's top nuclear negotiator, and his U.S. and Japanese counterparts — Sung Kim and Hiroyuki Namazu — criticized Pyongyang for the provocation during a trilateral call, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Under a trilateral pact signed by Yoon and his U.S. and Japanese counterparts, Joe Biden and Fumio Kishida last week, the three countries vowed to strengthen their partnership in responding to common threats in the Indo-Pacific region, such as North Korea's nuclear development.

The North's latest provocation comes as the South Korean and U.S.

militaries hold joint Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) training exercises. A JCS official said the military will continue to focus on the training as part of its efforts to build up "overwhelming force" against North Korea.

The launch failure means that North Korea will mark the Sept. 9 anniversary of its founding without anything new to boast about.

According to Oh Gyeong-seob, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, a South Korean think tank, the space project had

probably been expedited excessively to be used as propaganda touting the North Korean leader's achievement. After that failed, the political mood there must be tense, he added.

"In very aggressive terms, Kim recently rebuked his premier and other top officials in charge of food management. There would be a sweeping purge against many high-ranking officials, including those responsible for the space project," he said.

A spy satellite is among the high-tech weapons that Kim vowed to

develop, along with solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles and a nuclear-powered submarine.