

Japan Intelligence Satellite Launch Pushes the Boundaries of Self-defense: the North Korea Connection

Hisane MASAKI

Japan Intelligence Satellite Launch Pushes the Boundaries of Self-defense: the North Korea Connection

By Hisane MASAKI

Ostensibly for peaceful, non-military purposes, Japan has successfully launched its third intelligence-gathering satellite as part of recently revved-up efforts to boost its defense capabilities, either on its own or with its closest ally, the United States.

Monday's launch of the new satellite from Tanegashima Space Center in Kagoshima prefecture, southern Japan, came amid growing concern about the missile and nuclear programs of neighboring North Korea, which sparked an international uproar and heightened regional tensions about two months ago by test-firing a volley of ballistic missiles.

These concerns have recently been exacerbated by renewed reports that North Korea might be preparing to test an atomic bomb. Last year, Pyongyang declared itself to be a nuclear-weapons state but has not proved this by a successful test.



H-2A rocket

Shortly after North Korea's missile launches in July, Defense Agency chief Nukaga Fukushima said Japan should consider possessing capabilities to strike North Korea's missile sites. Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, in effect a prime minister-in-waiting, also said: "If we accept that there is no other option to prevent an attack...there is the view that attacking the launch base of the guided missiles is within the constitutional right of self-defense."

Still, it is one thing to talk about a strike at North Korean missile sites, and it is another to obtain the capabilities for doing so. One important element is an independent surveillance system. Another is an adequate anti-missile defense system. Japan is moving to augment both of these capabilities.

The latest satellite is the third in a series of four that would provide Japan all-weather capability to survey virtually any point in the world. The first two were launched in March 2003; the fourth and last is scheduled to take off next year. This month's launch was planned long before

North Korea's missile tests in July.

Two of the satellites, including the one launched this month, have optics that produce images of objects as small as 1 meter in diameter when photographed from outer space. The other two use radar imaging to penetrate cloud cover. The package will provide Japan all-weather, day-night surveillance capability. In 2009, an optical satellite with even greater resolution is expected to be launched into orbit.

Critics of the surveillance program claim that sending up the satellites runs afoul of a resolution adopted in the Diet in 1969 that restricts the use of space to peaceful purposes. That is why the authorities carefully avoid describing them as "spy satellites." The program is under the direct supervision of the cabinet, not the military, but it is obvious that its primary purpose is to keep close tabs on North Korea's military movements.

Some members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are strenuously trying to push through a bill to review the

1969 Diet resolution to allow the use of space for self-defense purposes.

Missile Defenses

A second part of its strategy is to deploy batteries of anti-missile defenses, in close cooperation with the United States. It is anticipated that Tokyo will spend about a trillion yen (U.S.\$10 billion) beginning next year on developing the necessary hardware, by importing missiles from the U.S. and then fabricating them under license.

The key element is the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 surface-to-air missile. PAC-3 missiles are designed to hit incoming missiles that have escaped Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) interceptors launched from Aegis-equipped destroyers at sea. They can intercept a missile at an altitude of up to 20 kilometers.



PAC-3 Interceptor Missile

The first batch of the PAC-3 missiles will be imported from the U.S. and deployed in the Tokyo metropolitan region. But the Defense Agency is planning to have domestic defense contractor Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. licensed to produce the rest. Although the cost of producing the missiles domestically is much higher than purchasing them from the U.S., the long-term costs, including maintenance, will reportedly be lower and Japan will also be able to boost its own missile production technologies.

Beyond that, the Japanese government decided last December to start joint development with the U.S. of a new sea-based interceptor missile as a main pillar of the U.S.-led missile defense system. The joint development cost of the new interceptor missile, an advanced version of the SM-3, is estimated to be as much as \$2.7 billion, with Japan shouldering up to \$1.2 billion and the U.S. paying for the rest.



SM-3 Interceptor Missile

Japan's share will be spread over nine years starting in fiscal 2006. The two allies plan to begin production of the next-generation interceptor missile in fiscal 2015, which will be deployed on Aegis-equipped destroyers. Japan and the U.S. have conducted joint technological research into the new missile since 1999, after North Korea's test firing of a Taepodong-1 missile over Japan in August 1998.

Joint missile development has required changes in Japan's decades-old ban on arms exports. In December 2004, when it adopted a National Defense Program Outline, Japan eased the export ban to enable the export of parts and components needed for the joint development and

production of the advanced system. This easing of the arms export ban paved the way for Japan to move into the development stage of a new interceptor missile.

In July last year, the Diet also revised the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) Law to allow the Defense Agency chief to order emergency missile intercepts without waiting for approval from the prime minister and the cabinet. Since North Korean missiles would reach Japanese territory in about 10 minutes, the defense chief could not afford to follow normal procedures for getting permission at a cabinet meeting to launch interceptor missiles.

Under the revised SDF Law, if there are no clear signs of a launch but conditions call for high alert and there is no time to seek consent, the agency chief can mobilize the SDF to stand by for any sudden attack and order an intercept under emergency guidelines approved in advance by the prime minister. Under the new law, the prime minister must report the results of any intercept to the Diet shortly after launch.

Additionally, in early May, Japan and the U.S. signed a final agreement on the realignment of U.S. bases and forces in Japan, which includes the movement of Japan's Air Defense Command to the U.S. Air Force's Yokota base in western Tokyo. There they will create a joint missile-defense command center in fiscal 2010. Creation of the center is aimed at strengthening Japan's ability to detect and deal with enemy missile launches.

Rush to Build Anti-Missile System

North Korea staged a series of missile tests, including a Taepodong-2, in the early hours of July 5, which was still July 4, Independence Day, in the US. The shorter-range missiles are believed to be Scuds or Rodongs.

With a range of up to 6,000 km, the Taepodong-2 is believed to have the capability of reaching Alaska and Hawaii. A Taepdong-1 missile, which flew over Japan in August 1998, has a shorter range of 2,000 km. Pyongyang claimed that what was launched in 1998 was a rocket intended to put a satellite into orbit. The

Scud is short-range and could target South Korea. The Rodong has a range of up to 1,300 km and could target almost all of Japanese territory. North Korea has deployed an estimated 200 or so Rodong missiles. It is anybody's guess outside of North Korea, however, whether North Korean warheads are advanced enough to deliver weapons of mass destruction on missiles.



Just hours after North Korea's provocative series of missile launches in July, Japan reacted angrily by banning the docking of the Mangyongbyon-92, a ferry that shuttles between Wonson in North Korea and Niigata in Japan, and which is the main direct link between the two countries. Japan also imposed tighter visa restrictions on North Koreans. After 10 days of raucous debate, the U.N. Security Council

also unanimously adopted a resolution condemning North Korea's missile tests and imposing weapons-related sanctions. Japan led the push for legally-binding sanctions.

But defiant North Korea has ignored the UN resolution. It has refused to return to six-nation talks on its nuclear ambitions. The nuclear talks -- involving the US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea -- have been suspended since last November. Recent news reports suggest that North Korea may be preparing for another round of missile tests or even an underground nuclear test.

North Korea's missile launches in July have prompted Japan to accelerate efforts to build its missile defense system.

The Defense Agency plans to deploy the first PAC-3 interceptor missiles in Saitama prefecture, next to Tokyo, by next March, as originally planned, and in three other prefectures adjacent to Tokyo, by the end of 2007, instead of the original March 2008 deadline. At the end of last month, the agency requested more than a 50 percent increase in its missile defense budget for

fiscal 2007, which starts next April.

The budget request of 219 billion yen (U.S.\$1.9 billion) is mainly to pay for accelerating the deployment of PAC-3 missiles. The agency's budget request, if approved by the cabinet and Diet, would advance some PAC-3 purchases from the U.S. originally planned for fiscal 2008 or later, resulting in an increase in the number of PAC-3 missiles to be deployed at SDF bases in the four prefectures surrounding Tokyo by the end of 2007.

Still, it will take five more years for the PAC-3 deployment program to cover not only the Tokyo metropolitan area but also other areas of the country. For this reason, the Defense Agency requested recently that the U.S. deploy a seaborne missile defense system around Japan as soon as possible.

The U.S. Navy had already deployed, as of late August, the USS Shiloh, a cruiser equipped with both the Aegis missile tracking and engaging system and SM-3 interceptor missiles, at the Yokosuka Naval Base near Tokyo. The Shiloh is one of three upgraded Aegis-equipped warships and is

the first to be deployed outside the U.S.



The USS Shiloh, the first missile defence capable ship to be deployed to Japan, arrives at U.S. naval base in Yokosuka on August 29, 2006.

According to the U.S. Navy, eight Aegis-equipped warships, including the Shiloh, are now stationed at Yokosuka Naval Base. Some of the warships started patrol duties in the Sea of Japan two years ago after they were equipped with capabilities to detect and track ballistic missiles. But among the eight Aegis-equipped warships, only the Shiloh can shoot down short- and medium-range missiles. The US Navy plans to mount SM-3 missiles on two of the seven other warships by the end of this year.

Meanwhile, U.S. forces have said they will also deploy PAC-3 interceptor missiles at Kadena Air Base on the southernmost

Japanese island of Okinawa in September and make them partly operational by the end of the year. The deployment of the PAC-3s at Kadena -- the largest US air base in the Asia-Pacific -- will be the first at a US facility in Japan.

Defense Agency director general Nukaga reportedly sent a letter to U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in late July requesting the provision of more PAC-3 missiles than currently planned. In response, the Pentagon told Japan that it is possible to provide an additional 80 missiles. Japan now plans to deploy the imports in fiscal 2008 and 2009 instead of the ones produced domestically under license as originally planned.

Meanwhile, the U.S. successfully conducted an anti-missile test in early September. The target missile launched from Alaska was successfully shot down by an interceptor sent up from California. The test immediately drew harsh criticism from Pyongyang, which accused the U.S. of threatening war. Despite the recent success, however, the U.S. system has a

mixed record, with only five successful tests out of nine, prompting critics to charge that the system, whose budget has reportedly grown to U.S.\$10 billion a year, is a waste of money.

Japan's post-World War II pacifist constitution bars the use of military force in settling international disputes and prohibits Japan from maintaining a military for warfare. Successive Japanese governments have interpreted that to mean that the country can have armed troops to protect itself, allowing the existence of its 240,000-strong SDF. But Japan has no cruise or ballistic missiles that can reach North Korea. Nor has it a fighter equipped with air-to-surface missiles with a range

long enough to make a sortie to North Korea and return safely.

Abe, a hawk and conservative, has expressed a strong desire to see the postwar constitution revised to expand the boundaries of Japan's military activities. The LDP presidential election that will determine whether Abe is the new Japanese prime minister is set for Sept. 20.

Hisane Masaki is a Tokyo-based journalist, commentator and scholar on international politics and economy. Masaki's e-mail address is yiou45535@nifty.com (<http://apjff.org/mailto:yiou45535@nifty.com>)

This is an expanded version of an article that originally appeared in Asia Times. Posted at Japan Focus on September 13, 2006.