



Missile launch is North Korea's exit strategy, analysts say

By: Tracy Connor – April 12, 2013

Faced with annoyed allies and unblinking enemies, North Korea is likely to pull the plug on the current crisis by test-firing a missile or two and declaring victory ahead of a national celebration on Monday, analysts say.

After weeks of escalating tensions and threatening nuclear war, shooting off a missile that causes no damage will give Kim Jong Un the opportunity to save face with his people -- and appease his military -- without inviting serious retaliation, experts say. "It's all a kind of Kabuki theater," said Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, a libertarian Washington think tank.

Observers caution, however, that with so much unknown about the political situation inside the secretive rogue state, it's possible that North Korea could take more aggressive action that would goad a fed-up South Korea into a forceful reaction.

"That would be uncharted waters," said David Straub, associate director of Stanford's Korean studies program.

Gordon Chang, author of "Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes on the World," said Sunday is the most likely day for a missile launch.

Before that, Secretary of State John Kerry will be in Beijing and shooting off a medium-range missile during that visit would be seen as a slap in the face of China, which has chided North Korea for its bellicose stance.

By Sunday, Kerry will be in Japan.

"This is going to be a launch while Kerry is in Tokyo," Chang said. "Send a missile over the Ginza [Tokyo's shopping district], humiliate the U.S., please the Chinese, who will be chortling about it for weeks."

The next day, conveniently, is a day of enormous significance in North Korea -- the birth date of Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea and Kim Jong Un's grandfather.

Korea-watchers expect there would be a declaration of a victory unrecognized anywhere else in the world, dancing in the streets, and then quiet until the drama repeats itself at some point in the near future.

"We've been there, done that," Straub said of a possible missile launch. "Unless they lobbed these things onto Japan, there's not going to be some huge sanctions from it."

Experts agree, however, that because the leadership dynamics in Pyongyang are murky, it's impossible to know how far Kim, or whoever is running the country, will go.

Many believe Kim's incessant saber-rattling -- irritating even China and Russia -- is an effort to recompense North Korea's powerful military leaders and consolidate a weak power base.

North Korea has prepped two medium-range Musudan-1 missiles waiting on its east coast, but Chang said a bolder move would be firing longer-range missiles from deeper inside the North's territory.

Noting the hubbub in Washington over reports that North Korea may have miniaturized nuclear warheads, Chang said Kim would "roil the world" if he tested a warhead in the atmosphere.

"I think Kim Jong Un would get a lot of credit from the generals. They would just love that," he said.

Straub said his fear would be a repeat of 2010, when North Korea sank a South Korean ship without provocation, killing 46 people, and then shelled a South Korean island.

After the 2010 attacks, Seoul told Pyongyang it would not tolerate a similar act of aggression and North Korea has heeded that warning.

"But one worries that they might do that again or even something a little worse," Straub said.

Bandow said the danger of trying to predict North Korea's next move is the lack of intelligence about who holds the upper hand there: Is it the party or the military? Is it young Kim, his aunt and uncle, or the generals?

If the threats and even a test-fire are just "chest-beating" to shore up the support from the starving masses, Bandow and others aren't overly worried about the repercussions.

"The danger," he said, "is if there really is some kind of power struggle going on, if the military wants more."