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## NK feared to launch 2nd spy satellite ahead of elections

*S. Korea-US alliance will remain strong regardless of next US president: minister*

By Lee Myo-jin  
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North Korea could launch a second military spy satellite as early as March, according to Defense Minister Shin Won-sik, amid fears that Pyongyang might resort to provocations leading up to the April 10 general elections in South Korea.

"If (North Korea) can launch (the spy satellite) as early as this March," Shin said at a press conference, Monday afternoon.

A successful spy satellite launch will mark the latest in a series of provocations by Pyongyang aimed at escalating tensions in the region. Examples include live-fire drills near the maritime border in January and the launches of multiple cruise missiles. Analysts perceive these actions as an attempt to influence the upcoming South Korean parliamentary elections as well as to enhance its leverage ahead of the U.S. presidential election scheduled for November.

The defense minister said he expects Pyongyang to follow a similar procedure as it did with its first satellite launch last November, where North Korea notified the International Maritime Organization of its plans. This occurred when North Korea launched its first reconnaissance satellite, named Malligyong-1.

Regarding the capabilities of Malligyong-1, Shin said, "It is currently in orbit. But it is not showing any signs of performing tasks or engaging in reconnaissance activities."

He also suggested that North Korea might expedite its satellite launch plans, possibly in response to Seoul's intention to launch its second satellite in April, heightening

the space rivalry between the two Koreas.

Shin told reporters that the South Korean military plans to launch a synthetic aperture radar satellite from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida in the first week of April.

Meanwhile, Shin addressed concerns regarding the South Korea-U.S. alliance, assuring that it would remain robust regardless of the outcome of the U.S. presidential election. His comments came in response to worries about the potential return of former U.S. President Donald Trump and any perceived impact on the strength of the ties between the two nations.

"The defense ministry will uphold a robust combined defense posture while stably managing various issues regarding the South Korea-U.S. alliance, irrespective of domestic and international political situations," he said, when asked whether his ministry is preparing a "plan B" if Trump gets reelected.

Shin dismissed speculation suggesting that the recent signing of a framework document for the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), which entails a nuclear coordination agreement between Seoul and Washington, was prompted by concerns over the possibility of Trump's return to the White House.

Concerns have emerged here regarding Trump's skepticism about military alliances, which could potentially impede the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's emphasis on U.S. extended deterrence to address North Korea's threats.

Earlier this month, the defense ministries of South Korea and the United States signed the framework document, a development that some observers interpreted as an endeavor to expedite the comprehensive implementation of the NCG before the U.S. presidential elections.

But the defense minister rejected such assertions.

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"The signing is unrelated to the political situation in the U.S. and, moreover, does not constitute any preparation ahead of the U.S. presidential election," Shin said, adding that discussions on the framework documents had been underway since last year.

Shin also touched on the burgeoning military ties between North Korea and Russia, stating that Pyongyang has delivered approximately 6,700 containers of munitions to Moscow in the last few months. He speculated that this could include over 3 million rounds of 152-millimeter artillery shells

or over 1.2 million 122-millimeter shells.

"The munitions might be mixed, but in any case, the overall quantity is several million rounds at least," Shin said.

In return, Moscow has provided food and spy satellite technology to Pyongyang, the minister added, but the extent of further technological support from Russia to North Korea regarding its weapons program remains uncertain.

"North Korea appears to have expressed certain technological needs or deficiencies in aircraft and ground military equipment, but it is unclear how much support Russia will provide."