

LIVE Chat: Ask NBC's Space Expert in North Korea questions (04/12/2012)  
Thursday April 12, 2012 9:50

Thursday April 12, 2012 9:50 Chat Moderator

Hi -- James Oberg, NBC's space expert will start answering questions at 10a.m.ET. But please start sending your questions in so he can hit the ground running. Thanks

9:56

[Comment From James Oberg James Oberg : ]

Good morning, everyone, looking forward to answering your questions live about North Korea.”

Thursday April 12, 2012 9:56 James Oberg

9:57

[Comment From Andrew B Andrew B : ]

Did North Korea work with any other Nations or received technological assistance in developing their rockets program? Or have there technologies been developed completely independantly?

Thursday April 12, 2012 9:57 Andrew B  
10:00

James Oberg:

The head of their mission control admitted he'd had several international space education programs -- but I didn't see any other obviously foreign contributions.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:00 James Oberg

10:00

[Comment From Sweetie Sweetie : ]

What do you mean that they are 98% to getting this rocket weaponized.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:00 Sweetie  
10:01

James Oberg:

The rocket still lacks some crucial parts to be a weapon -- mainly a heat shield reentry vehicle.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:01 James Oberg

10:01

James Oberg:

But they wouldn't be TOO hard to add.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:01 James Oberg

10:02

[Comment From Kathe Kathe : ]

If the rocket tails and crashes on land somewhere is there any danger from radiologic materials on board or might there be any other dangers?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:02 Kathe

10:02

James Oberg:

No, the only hazard would be toxic chemicals -- and they SAY they've added 'destruct charges'. But judging when to fire those charges based on radar tracking is always tricky.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:02 James Oberg

10:03

[Comment From Mark Mark : ]

Once the rocket is launched, will there be a deployed satellite? If so, will its orbit be confirmed?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:03 Mark

10:04

James Oberg:

The plan they told us about involved a satellite -- the one they said they showed us. It will take a while to confirm the orbit because they have no worldwide tracking system, so they may depend on amateur radio listeners to get the first proof of success.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:04 James Oberg

10:04

[Comment From bjsmi bjsmi : ]

Does the guidance required for orbiting require a lot more work to make it accurate enough for a weapon?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:04 bjsmi

10:05

James Oberg:

Good question. Orbital insertion at a low altitude -- 120 miles or so -- must be extremely precise or you run into the atmosphere on the first orbit. Velocity cutoff accuracy is less stringent, you just go into a higher orbit, in the end they're probably equally hard.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:05 James Oberg

10:05

[Comment From ktwolf ktwolf : ]

Will you get to see the rocket launch in person, or by video?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:05 ktwolf

10:07

James Oberg:

We wonder too. Since it's a five hour train ride to the launch site, it's unlikely they'll let us go back. Probably -- sigh! -- we'll see it on a screen here in Pyongyang. The big question here is -- how much, if any, tape delay will they impose?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:07 James Oberg

10:07

[Comment From Tony Tony : ]

Does NKorea really have the technology to make a launch?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:07 Tony

10:08

James Oberg:

I'm really beginning to have serious doubts -- and have a story being posted today with full explanation.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:08 James Oberg  
10:08

[Comment From Chris Chris : ]

Did North Korea offer any explanation as to why the supposed satellite displayed during the press conference only accounts for 25% of the rocket's estimated orbital payload; and if not, is there any speculation on what other package may or may not be launched along with the satellite?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:08 Chris

10:10

James Oberg:

The \$64 million question. It seems they may need a lot of that excess performance to make a small plane change in third stage. But they have really failed to be transparent about what's under the nose cone -- they have promised to release pictures when i directly confronted the mission control director, but so far, nada.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:10 James Oberg  
10:10

[Comment From Chuck Chuck : ]

Mr. Oberg the azimuth heading, virtually straight south, is very narrow. If it diverges from it's planned path what are the chances someone else (South Korea or Japan) could actually shot it down?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:10 Chuck

10:11

James Oberg:

Early in ascent the chance of a wobble is pretty high. But having some hair-trigger anti-missiles along the path is dangerous in itself. I'll be glad to see it clear Okinawa.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:11 James Oberg  
10:11

[Comment From Don Renquist Don Renquist : ]

Once the satellite is in orbit and it starts transmitting, what frequency are they using for their "broadcast"?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:11 Don Renquist

10:12

James Oberg:

They've said 470 MHz but no further details on modulation. The plan, i was told, is to transmit data while near NKorea, and the music everywhere else. I hope people start listening immediately safter launch, and repport -- to us!! -- what they hear.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:12 James Oberg

10:13

[Comment From William William : ]

Thanks Jim for hosting this ... if the 3rd stages crashes into the sea again (as per 2009) how do you think the N Koreans will "sell" the story of the launch to you guys?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:13 William

10:13

James Oberg:

You are predicting the theme of my current column, now undergoing final editing. Please give us a few more hours. You'll get a kick out of it.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:13 James Oberg

10:14

[Comment From NamVetMike NamVetMike : ]

What odds would you give this launch as being successful

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:14 NamVetMike

10:14

James Oberg:

Jeeez, I'm reluctant -- but less than 50:50, maybe a lot less.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:14 James Oberg

10:14

[Comment From Kathe Kathe : ]

Not really a space question-but what if some country does shoot down this missile? Have they said anything about retaliation if that happens?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:14 Kathe

10:15

James Oberg:

attacking another nation's satellite is tacky but not casus belli -- an act of war. It's considered more like attacking some other country's deep sea buoy. No people involved, no blood so no foul.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:15 James Oberg

10:16

[Comment From Georgia Georgia : ]

In the past, two of the three stages worked. What is so tricky about the third stage? Steering and guidance? Or propulsion issues?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:16 Georgia

10:17

James Oberg:

We don't know and the worse part is that apparently they don't know -- or want to know -- either. That's no way to improve the reliability of a space program.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:17 James Oberg

10:17

[Comment From Guest Guest : ]

Is this a serious threat or is the media overhyping this?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:17 Guest

10:17

James Oberg:

[pauses to think]

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:17 James Oberg

10:19

James Oberg:

The rocket is not a weapon, but could lead to a weapon. The reason for building the kind of satellite they did is believable, if bizarre in its 'self-reliance'. The people they want to sell such technology to are not our friends, either. So the worry is fair, I think -- but not the panic.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:19 James Oberg

10:19

[Comment From John Smithers John Smithers : ]

If this "satellite" will monitor NK, wont it also have the ability to spy on anyone else within its orbit?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:19 John Smithers

10:19

James Oberg:

They could have gotten this stuff by cooperating, or buying services. They took longer to do it themselves. See 'juche'.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:19 James Oberg

10:21

James Oberg:

Re monitor -- the answer is probably 'n', there's no indication they have a store-dump capability, they only get observations over areas they have direct line-of-sight comm with the bird from. Japan, maybe. SoKorea, certainly. Lots of nearby China. But not us.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:21 James Oberg

10:21

[Comment From June June : ]

What is the intended function of the satellite according to the N Koreans?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:21 June

10:22

James Oberg:

To observe environmental damage, following severe flooding in the 1990s. It took so long because they had no money to buy the services from commercial vendors. And the 100-meter resolution really sucks.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:22 James Oberg

10:22

James Oberg:

some weather obs, too...

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:22 James Oberg

10:23

[Comment From Andrew B Andrew B : ]

I read some criticism over the 'satelite' and it's unorthodox design, as well as the absence of a 'clean room' prior to installation.. In your opinion is it a plausible design? What are the greatest differences between this and our satellites?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:23 Andrew B

10:23

James Oberg:

The thing is, it's a small cuntry and they could a lot of such data from aircraft.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:23 James Oberg

10:24

James Oberg:

The lack of a clean room certainly startled me, and others, but the design is not as unorthodox as I first thought. I am still baffled why a supposedly 3-axis stable payload has wraparound solar panels. It might be a translation problem.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:24 James Oberg

10:24

[Comment From Roger Roger : ]

Mr. Oberg - thanks for being there and giving us some insight. I'm quite amazed at the access. Did they comment on any lessons learned from previous launches? What new technology have they incorporated into UNHA-3?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:24 Roger

10:25

James Oberg:

they might unfold in flight and the host didn't know how to say -- or translate it. They have declined to release in-flight drawings.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:25 James Oberg

10:26

James Oberg:



The new tech is described in several websites that we both have equal access to -- we didn't see any comparative info. What we DID see was a gantry that was substantially BIGGER than the one used for ?Unha-2.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:26 James Oberg

10:26

[Comment From Guest Guest : ]

In your opinion, what is weakest component of their rocket technology?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:26 Guest

10:27

James Oberg:

Good question, gimme a few seconds...

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:27 James Oberg

10:28

James Oberg:

They have to make a big leap to orbital operations with NO foreign comm stations -- they can lose a lot of birds too easily this way, but there's no way around it.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:28 James Oberg

10:29

James Oberg:

They didn't seem very familiar with foreign operations methods either.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:29 James Oberg

10:29

[Comment From William William : ]

Jim ... I'm a journo myself from The Straits Times in Singapore. Pained that I missed the trip. What do you say - do you think the N Koreans need the foreign media/ experts more than the media/ experts need N Korea? I think the former.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:29 William

10:31

James Oberg:

I think this was a bold gamble to break an impasse, but it's going to fail in the end because they stopped short of the promised full transparency -- they never allowed insight, access, or even

photographs of what's under the nose cone. My hunch is it's the satellite, maybe even ONLY the satellite. But they didn't prove But I can't prove it and we shouldn't be expected to take it on faith, oh no, not there.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:31 James Oberg

10:32

[Comment From Rick Rick : ]

Greetings. Has the countdown begun? When is this thing supposed to launch? Thanks.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:32 Rick

10:33

James Oberg:

Three more launch windows, and probably more if needed. I suspect the fuel is good for several days before requiring a scrub. I only hope the launch team has the courage to react to a real problem with a decision to ?WAIT instead of taking a leap of faith in the great leader.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:33 James Oberg

10:33

[Comment From The Don The Don : ]

While there is no way to totally discredit them saying the purpose of the launch is to put a satellite into space, it does still violate sanctions against that country. Is anyone going to step in before they push the launch button?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:33 The Don

10:34

James Oberg:

In my experience diplomats write treaties deliberately to be ambiguous and 'flexible'. Our side is just whining this time because we got that trick turned back onto us. But the North Koreans also are playing tricks by saying a peaceful satellite absolves all weapons sins of the rocket.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:34 James Oberg

10:35

[Comment From Chris Chris : ]

Given that two of their closest historical allies (Russia and China) both have vastly superior rocketry that they are more than willing to sell, why is North Korea wasting such an enormous amount of capital developing an independent space program? Is their national philosophy of Juche really so ingrained that they would potentially cripple their own economy for another decade on a technological wild goose chase?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:35 Chris  
10:35

James Oberg:

When Nork propaganda poseters show their missiles smashing into the Capitol dome, a little US anxiety is justifiable -- by the way.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:35 James Oberg

10:37

James Oberg:

In such a society everyone's true beliefs are carefully concealed, but regarding *juche*, it has a deep historical resonance. and sadly, in such societies, the make-believe isn't all a gimmick. Your face grows to fit the mask if you wear it too long.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:37 James Oberg  
10:37

[Comment From Cooky Cooky : ]

Is this rocket real sensitive to weather conditions for launch, like the Shuttle, or is it somewhat heartier like the Russian rockets? What are the parameters for launch, or don't we know?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:37 Cooky

10:38

James Oberg:

We haven't been told, but I'd guess the clear weather is needed for range safety -- hitting the destruct button merely on the word of a radar screen is really hard.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:38 James Oberg  
10:38

[Comment From MrTrout MrTrout : ]

Jim, Where is the launch site? Looking for it on Google Earth.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:38 MrTrout

10:39

James Oberg:

Right up hard against the Chinese border, on a peninsula. We have the lat/long somewhere on record.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:39 James Oberg  
10:39

[Comment From Jim Jim : ]

What is the No. Korean govt telling its people about the launch? What benefits are being touted?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:39 Jim

10:39

James Oberg:

look at the data blocks on google images posted on recent websites.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:39 James Oberg  
10:40

James Oberg:

It's part of their national strength. Nothing else seems to work -- they've barely begun wide use of bicycles -- but having rockets seems to strike a chord.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:40 James Oberg

10:41

[Comment From Henry Henry : ]

From what you've seen of it, what's your assesment of the technology within the rocket's command center? The news report last night stated that there weren't many engineers present.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:41 Henry  
10:41

James Oberg:

It's not a complicated rocket.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:41 James Oberg

10:41

[Comment From Bella Bella : ]

does the satellite look like it would survive the trip and function in space?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:41 Bella  
10:41

James Oberg:

The center looked credible to me. Unlike on my visits to moscow TsUP, I didn't see anyone playing 'tetrids'.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:41 James Oberg

10:42

James Oberg:  
teris

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:42 James Oberg  
10:42

James Oberg:  
TETRIS !!!!

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:42 James Oberg

10:42

[Comment From Mark Taylor Mark Taylor : ]

I'm reminded of the abitious and foolhardy mistakes of US rocket program in the 1950's and Soviet disasters. Launch pad explosions. etc. Could this happen? Do they have a range officer prepared to detonate the rocket? Or is that a decision only the great leader can make?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:42 Mark Taylor  
10:42

James Oberg:  
The satellite looks very iffy physically, in terms of mounting on a third stage and then being pyro-bolt deployed.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:42 James Oberg

10:44

James Oberg:  
They say they have a range safety officer. They seem to practice a lot. But you need an experience base to 'believe' the practice and they fly so rarely, I doubt they'd react adequately in real emergencies. We wouldn't have either, but for lots of real repetitions.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:44 James Oberg  
10:44

[Comment From Kameron Kameron : ]  
how much money does it cost to build on of these things?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:44 Kameron

10:45

James Oberg:

They don't spend money, they spend manpower, and that's cheap.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:45 James Oberg

10:45

[Comment From Norris Norris : ]

Have you heard what frequencies the satellite will transmit on? As an amateur radio operator, I'd like to take a crack at listening for it, should it make orbit and transmit.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:45 Norris

10:46

James Oberg:

479 MHz, they've said. I've asked for more re modulation etc and gotten nothing but promises.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:46 James Oberg

10:46

James Oberg:

470 oops

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:46 James Oberg

10:46

[Comment From Guest Guest : ]

what fate will befall the scientists should this rocket be a complete washout ?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:46 Guest

10:47

James Oberg:

It didn't seem to hurt anyone last time. Probably they just told the boss it worked and how as he tyo know any different. THIS time the world will be paying morer severe attention.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:47 James Oberg

10:47

James Oberg:  
how was he to know...

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:47 James Oberg  
10:48

[Comment From Chris Chris : ]  
How would you say this launch compares to the launches of the early United States space program?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:48 Chris

10:48

James Oberg:  
Funning out?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:48 James Oberg  
10:48

James Oberg:  
the booster went over great,\.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:48 James Oberg

10:48

James Oberg:  
Running out, I meant to say. This rocket is about half the size of an Atlas, a bit bigger than a Thor.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:48 James Oberg  
10:49

James Oberg:  
My MODEL of their booster was very popular... meant to say.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:49 James Oberg

10:49

[Comment From aziz aziz : ]  
How long they can keep the rocket fueled without launching?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:49 aziz  
10:49

James Oberg:

Two of my space journalism buddies, Yuri Karash and Christian Lardier, are also here .. a number of new friends.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:49 James Oberg

10:50

James Oberg:

With hyperglycs, a long time -- days maybe a week. The russians have kept 'Satan' ICBMs fuelled for twenty YEARS in enviro-controlled canisters.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:50 James Oberg

10:50

[Comment From Mark Mark : ]

James, would any observation/confirmations from the ISS be available? (if the ISS is even nearby) I suppose the US has enough orbiting satellites with HD cams to see this from launch to any satellite deployments made in orbit? Thanks for your reports and doing this chat.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:50 Mark

10:52

James Oberg:

The launch opportunity is during nomonal crew sleep on ISS. I got them up last November to look for the Phobos-Grunt insertion burn that failed -- they saw nothing -- so I don't think it's yet time for another such suggestion from me.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:52 James Oberg

10:52

[Comment From Guest Guest : ]

Will this rocket launch effect airplanes in the area? What measures is the FAA taking to ensure no planes will be hit?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:52 Guest

10:52

James Oberg:

Thank YOU all for enthusiastic support of this trip.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:52 James Oberg

10:53

James Oberg:



They issued NOTAMS for the booster drop zones, it's normal ops that everybody does.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:53 James Oberg

10:53

Chat Moderator:

Just a few more questions. James has to go back to reporting and preparing for the launch.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:53 Chat Moderator

10:53

James Oberg:

There may be a rush to the first stage drop zone to pick up pieces.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:53 James Oberg

10:54

James Oberg:

I have several theme stories in prepa and of course we'll react fast to breaking news.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:54 James Oberg

10:54

[Comment From Sean Sean : ]

They say that the satellite will pass directly over Perth. Would i be able to see it with the naked eye?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:54 Sean

10:55

James Oberg:

It's almost midnight here in Pyongyang, and it's REALLY dark outside.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:55 James Oberg

10:55

James Oberg:

Perth will be in daylight.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:55 James Oberg

10:55

[Comment From bjsmi bjsmi : ]

Are you being censored as we speak by NK or network?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:55 bjsmi  
10:55

James Oberg:

This is a small bird and a difficult obs target but look at [www.satobs.org](http://www.satobs.org) for help.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:55 James Oberg

10:56

James Oberg:

That's a good excuse for my typos.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:56 James Oberg  
10:56

James Oberg:

We are assuming that all comm is monitored, all conversations, and all computer media.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:56 James Oberg

10:56

James Oberg:

We mostly miss our mobile phones.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:56 James Oberg  
10:57

[Comment From Bella Bella : ]

what is a worst case scenario if there is a problem? the animated projected launch path appears to be mainly over water as long as it doesn't deviate too far, but something catastrophic at the launch pad or quite soon after launch?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:57 Bella

10:57

James Oberg:

That's my story for later today....

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:57 James Oberg  
10:58

James Oberg:  
Those are just about all the answers I have...

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:58 James Oberg

10:58

[Comment From Andy Andy : ]  
Non-Space related questions: What's North Korea like for a foreign journalist; can you leave your hotel and go for a stroll? Do you have a government official with you at all times? If there's one there now, just ;)

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:58 Andy  
10:58

James Oberg:  
But y'all are the end-users and I do read the comments -- just can't seem to log in from here to reply.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:58 James Oberg

10:58

[Comment From Roger Roger : ]  
For those of google earth persuasion: 39.39.49N 124.42.13E

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:58 Roger  
10:59

James Oberg:  
Let me get into details once I've got this place in my rear-view mirror.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:59 James Oberg

10:59

[Comment From chris from Baltimore chris from Baltimore : ]  
will this lead to any deployment of the United States Military ?

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:59 chris from Baltimore  
10:59

James Oberg:  
You see a lot more news stories than ?I can access from here.

Thursday April 12, 2012 10:59 James Oberg

11:00

[Comment From Matt Matt : ]

Is there any way to watch the rocket launch live online that you are aware of?

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:00 Matt

11:01

James Oberg:

No. I'm not even sure WE will. We'll ask about tape delay, but it's impossible to verify the truth of the answers.

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:01 James Oberg

11:01

Chat Moderator:

Thanks so much for all of your terrific questions! Please tune into NBC's Nightly News, the Today Show, MSNBC cable and here at msnbc.com for more of James Oberg's great insight on the North Koreans launch. Thanks!

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:01 Chat Moderator

11:01

James Oberg:

I wonder if some news org is off the NorKor coast observbing with binoculars -- that would be nice.

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:01 James Oberg

11:02

James Oberg:

As usual, folks, picking up a few dozen phrases in the language you're visiting goes a LONG way to smoothing human contacts. It's also good manners. I try it whenever needed.

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:02 James Oberg

11:02

James Oberg:

Good night.

Thursday April 12, 2012 11:02 James Oberg

11:03

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Writer: Chat Moderator

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