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THE SPUTNIK SHOCK AND SOUTH KOREA'S ROCKET FEVER 1958-1969

Abstract

The South Korea's first attempt to a space presence is linked to ballistic missile development that began in the late 1950s. During this period, the country had made an effort to redefine its national identity for long-lasting national pride through science and technology, while struggling with humiliation over past failures such as Korea's colonization and then war and division. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 directly affected space aspiration of the people in one of the poorest country at the time. It provided not only motivation for political leaders to develop guided weapons for national security but also inspiration for ordinary people to emerge from backwardness by tracing up-to-date technology. The rocket development team was established in the National Defense Scientific Research Institute (NDSRI) in 1956, and the team launched its first modern rocket successfully in 1958. Also as public interest in space science increased, some amateur rocket clubs and scholastic associations, such as the Korean Astronautical Society (KAS) and the Korean Student Space Science Society (KSSSS), boosted a boom of space science by promoting the idea that "we can do it." However, the revolution changed everything. Park Chung Hee, who seized the power through military coup in 1961, dismissed NDSRI in order to secure the U.S.'s approval and continued assistance by resonating Kennedy's changed foreign policy toward South Korea, which would provide for consumable military items rather than investing in up-to-date equipment. Consequently, neither any forays had been made toward national missile development, nor the public's high nationalistic aspirations provided substantive fruition for a massive social movement or lead the national space policy for a decade. This paper aims to rupture the South Korea's national frame in the rocket fever which flared up and fizzled out soon in the early 1960s. This will show how its political and social dynamics are closely intertwined with the global environment as working on nation-building.