

Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Escalating Tensions

Introduction

In East Asia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has escalated its threats and nuclear strike capabilities towards Japan and the Republic of Korea. The threat has now extended beyond the Sea of Japan region as the DPRK alleges that their nuclear capabilities can reach the United States of America (USA).¹ The ongoing tensions on the Korean Peninsula between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea, have existed since the post World War II era. However, tensions culminated with the division of the two Member States along the 38th parallel following the Korean War; this is an area better known as the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).² On 23 April 2003, the DPRK announced their possession of nuclear capabilities.³ Furthermore in 2003, they resigned from the Treaty of on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).⁴ The DPRK has, since 2011, been ruled by Kim Jong-un, following the death of his father Kim Jong-il, and has escalated domestic and foreign tensions and a reorganization of its military and political rankings.⁵ Despite relative peace since the Korean War, the DMZ marks the focal point of regional tensions and the likely location of a resumption of hostilities between the two sides.

Current Situation

The escalating tensions have been caused by illegal ballistic missile tests, military exercises and threats of nuclear proliferation by the DPRK., The Republic of Korea and the United States of America (USA) have also engaged in their own military exercises, deemed to be threatening by the DPRK. To date, the failure of diplomatic negotiation efforts through the Six-Party Talks has resulted in zero compromise of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. The UN Security Council (SC) continues to condemn the DPRK's ongoing ballistic missile testing and holds emergency sessions to consider the escalating situation. Throughout 2016, the DPRK conducted many ballistic tests, and resumed operations of their main nuclear facility in Yongbyon.⁶ A gridlock has led to a lack of cooperation and has inadvertently contributed to the DPRK's ease in developing its nuclear arsenal. Despite this, the USA and the Republic of Korea continued with their yearly military exercise drills in August 2016.⁷ Due to the strains the military exercises put on the Korean Peninsula along the DMZ, the DPRK responded with similar tactics and warnings as it felt threatened by an oncoming invasion. The DPRK claims the maneuvers have become aggressive and escalated tensions in the region, which justify its actions to be considered as an act of self-defense. Following the military exercises, on 5 September 2016, the DPRK fired three ballistic missiles off its East coast, according to the Republic of Korea's military, in a show of force timed to coincide with the ongoing G20 economic summit in China.⁸

Following the response from the SC, the DPRK has continued domestic political purges, which has caused increased tensions within the political arena and leads to an unpredictable situation for the international community. The DPRK has always had unpredictable domestic issues which have led to widespread fear and instability. Since Kim Jong-un became supreme leader of the DPRK executions have occurred within the ranks of senior officials, which has led to an unpredictable political environment. The latest of the executions includes the agriculture minister and

¹ S/RES/2270. Adopted by the Security Council at its 7638th meeting, on 2 March 2016. UN Security Council, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2270.pdf

² "Demilitarized Zone," History, <http://www.history.com/topics/demilitarized-zone> (accessed September 23, 2017).

³ "Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron> (accessed September 23, 2017).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Kim Jong-un Biography," Biography, <http://www.biography.com/people/kim-jong-un-21125351> (accessed September 23, 2017).

⁶ "North Korea Yongbyon nuclear site 'in operation,'" BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34254634> (accessed September 23, 2017)

⁷ "US-South Korea military drills to proceed despite North Korea's warning," The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/30/us-south-korea-military-drills-north-korea-warning> (accessed September 23, 2017).

⁸ Ibid.

official at the education ministry in August.⁹ This was then followed by the disappearance and possible execution of the vice foreign minister, a veteran diplomat, together with other four high-ranking diplomats in charge of European affairs.¹⁰ There is also serious speculation that Kim Jong Un is behind the poisoning of his half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, in February 2017.¹¹

Actions Taken by Security Council

The SC has consistently taken actions through verbal condemnation and by sanctioning the DPRK for its nuclear proliferation efforts, however, the DPRK has mostly attempted to ignore the consequences and thereby, suffers with continued sanctions. Within the last ten years, the SC has taken five notable actions against the DPRK. In 2006, Resolution 1718 was adopted in response to the DPRK's nuclear test.¹² The resolution prohibited North Korea from conducting future nuclear tests or launching a ballistic missile. It also called for the Member State to completely abandon all efforts to create a nuclear weapon and included sanctions to discourage and stop the DPRK from continuing its program.¹³ Sanctions in this resolution included a travel ban on persons involved with the nuclear program within the Member State as well as exports to DPRK such as battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles or missile systems.¹⁴ These sanctions were designed to not only target the DPRK's nuclear program, but to disable the Member State from acting irrationally and aggressively towards its neighbors and other Member States it perceived as a threat. In addition, the resolution also created a committee composed of the then-15 SC members to serve as a monitoring body to review and adjust the sanctions as well as the violations of those sanctions.¹⁵

The next resolution, Resolution 1874, was unanimously adopted by the SC on 12 June 2009 and imposed more sanctions on the DPRK for failing to comply with the previous UN resolution and continuing their nuclear program. The resolution itself was passed in direct response to the Member State's underground nuclear test.¹⁶ In this resolution, the SC urged the DPRK to return to the negotiating table, mainly through the Six Party Talks with the Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, Japan, Russian Federation, and the USA. Along with these demands, the resolution also called on the DPRK to rejoin the NPT.¹⁷

On 22 January 2013, the SC once again unanimously adopted Resolution 2087 after the DPRK successfully launched a satellite on 12 December 2012. The launch was in clear violation of the two previous resolutions as it was considered to be a development of technology and was applicable to the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic weapons programs.¹⁸ The resolutions recalled previous sanctions against the development of weapons within the Member State and urged compliance as well as promised to take further action if the country refused to cooperate or acted aggressively once again. In addition, the resolution called for the DPRK to completely abandon its nuclear programs in irreversible ways in order to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹⁹ This resolution also called, once again, for the DPRK to rejoin the Six-Party Talks, as well as urged other Member States to "remain vigilant" with regards to monitoring any persons or entities associated with the regime.²⁰

⁹ "North Korea executes officials with anti-aircraft gun in new purge – report," The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/north-korea-reportedly-executes-officials-anti-aircraft-gun-purge> (accessed September 23, 2017).

¹⁰ "North Korea purges vice foreign minister after UK-based diplomat defects – reports," RT, <https://www.rt.com/uk/362526-north-korea-diplomat-purged/> (accessed September 23, 2017).

¹¹ "A gruesome North Korean murder plot: Trial sheds new light on assassination of Kim Jong Un's brother" https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/10/17/the-gruesome-nerve-agent-assassination-of-kim-jong-un-brother/?utm_term=.7811708d3848 (accessed October 18, 2017)

¹² "UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/UN-Security-Council-Resolutions-on-North-Korea> (accessed September 24, 2017).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

To no surprise, the SC was unanimous in their decision to adopt Resolution 2094 on 7 March 2013, in response to the DPRK's third nuclear test in February of the same year. In fact, the DPRK stated that their missile test was in direct response to the prior resolution, Resolution 2087.²¹ The resolution sought to increase the level of difficulty the DPRK would face when attempting to make further progress on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs by obstructing its access to hard cash and the kind of technological equipment needed to build weapons and pursue the enrichment of uranium.²² This resolution also called for states to detain and search any cargo or shipments to and from the DPRK if the shipments went through their territory. Additionally, it called upon the DPRK to completely abandon its nuclear programs and again prohibited the nation from conducting any further experiments or provocations.²³

A more recent SC resolution was issued on 2 March 2016. Resolution 2270 was a direct response to the DPRK's fourth nuclear test and satellite launch on 6 January 2016 and 7 February 2016, respectively.²⁴ The launches were in direct violation of all other aforementioned resolutions.²⁵ This resolution continued to place sanctions on Pyongyang, the DPRK's capital city. In echoing the sentiments of previous resolutions, Resolution 2270 urged the DPRK to halt its progress they were making within their nuclear and missile programs.²⁶ Unlike the other resolutions however, this resolution emphasized the failure of the DPRK regime in meeting the needs of the North Korean people, instead focusing on their nuclear programs.²⁷ Most recently, the SC adopted Resolution 2371 unanimously in response to recent Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) tests.²⁸ The resolution imposed sanctions once again, this time targeting coal, iron/iron ore, seafood, and lead/lead ore. Additionally, this resolution reaffirms the SC's support of the Six Party Talks. This resolution also prohibits joint ventures between North Korea and other nations, allows the SC to deny international port access to vessels found violating SC resolutions, and bans countries from taking in any more North Korean laborers.²⁹ Individual Member states such as the United States of America, Japan, and South Korea have placed sanctions on the DPRK as well, indicating that countries are willing to act on this matter outside the body of the United Nations.

The situation in the DPRK has come to a tense and possibly volatile standstill. While the leaders of the DPRK continue to test missiles and nuclear weapons, much to the chagrin of other Member States, the SC has continued to place sanctions on the DPRK and its leaders, while also loudly voicing concerns about the growing instability in the region. Despite the eight resolutions passed unanimously by the SC condemning and sanctioning the DPRK, there do not seem to be any signs of ending or reducing the weapons testing. Due to this, the SC may consider taking more drastic action in the future to prevent a war from breaking out between the DPRK and its adversaries.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.