

Security Council Update

Nuclear Weapons and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Current Situation

As of 11 January 2003, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) withdrew itself from being party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).¹ For decades, the DPRK declared its interests in developing a nuclear weapons program and possessing a stockpile of relatively simple nuclear weapons. It has been speculated that DPRK, or North Korea, may also have a chemical and/or biological weapons capability.

On 9 October 2006, the DPRK announced it had completed its first nuclear weapons test, becoming the eighth Member State of the United Nations (UN) to proclaim that it has joined the club of nuclear armed states.² Though the test was a small scale explosion, it was enough to gain the attention of the UN and win an undisputed route of resolutions that imposed new economic sanctions. Since then, the DPRK performed a second nuclear test on 25 May 2009 and a third nuclear test on 12 February 2013.³ The DPRK has also launched a series of missiles and rocket tests. This direct defiance of UN policies has resulted in a slew of enhanced sanctions that call upon UN Member States to inspect cargo vessels and airplanes suspected of carrying military material into or out of the DPRK.⁴ Though not all the tests have proven an overwhelming success, DPRK felt these were personal strides.

On 7 March 2013, the UN Security Council (UNSC) ordered new economic sanctions against the DPRK for its third nuclear test through resolution S/RES/2094 (2013), placing agonizing new constraints on the DPRK's banking, travel, and trade.⁵ Primarily negotiated between the United States of America (USA) and China, the resolution stresses the need for Member States to examine suspicious North Korean freight, while enforcing new language lacking from prior procedures.⁶ The requirements were in some ways less significant than China's partaking in writing them, proposing that China has lost patience with the neighbor it has supported since the Korean War. China has been in a strenuous position as it has always taken the stance of a neutral neighbor to the DPRK. China has had a longstanding position that dialogue and negotiations, not sanctions, is the best way to persuade Pyongyang, capital of DPRK, to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Though China supports the measures taken by the UNSC, there have been no concrete signs that China plans to take any action beyond the UN sanctions.⁷

The largest component of China's trade with the DPRK is the export of oil that keeps the Korean People's Army in action and permits the lethargic economy to carry on. Chinese companies buy DPRK's coal and iron ore, a trade that the Chinese government has invigorated and that helps the DPRK by spawning hard currency. Those importations are unlikely to be restricted. The provision of the sanctions at the UN is a fine balancing act by China. China supported the new sanctions with the hope that they would be enough to encourage Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table to deliberate nuclear disarmament.

¹ Fact Sheet on DPRK Nuclear Safeguards, International Atomic Energy Agency, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/dprk/fact-sheet-on-dprk-nuclear-safeguards> (accessed February 23, 2016).

² David Sanger, "North Koreans Say They Tested Nuclear Device," The New York Times, 9 October, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/09/world/asia/09korea.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

³ Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Claims to Conduct 2nd Nuclear Test," The New York Times, 24 May 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/25/world/asia/25nuke.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

⁴ Choe Sang-Hun, "New Leader Sees Gains From Test," The New York Times, 12 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/world/asia/test-seen-as-push-by-kim-for-credibility.html?ref=world> (accessed February 22, 2016).

⁵ United Nations Press "Security Council Strengthens Sanctions on Democratic People's Republic of Korea, in Response to 12 February Nuclear Test," 7 March 2013, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc10934.doc.htm> (accessed February 22, 2016).

⁶ Rick Gladstone & David E. Sanger, "New Sanctions on North Korea Pass in Unified U.N. Vote," The New York Times, 13 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/08/world/asia/north-korea-warns-of-pre-emptive-nuclear-attack.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed February 22, 2016).

⁷ Neil MacFarQuhar & Jane Prelez, "China Looms Over Response to Nuclear Test by North Korea," The New York Times 12 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-test.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

With Member States demanding for heightened sanctions, the DPRK affirmed that it would no longer stand by the 1953 armistice that ceased the Korean War amidst co-operative military drills piloted by the USA and the Republic of Korea (ROK).⁸ There were also rumored extortions of the DPRK confronting the USA with “lighter and smaller nukes.”⁹ Shortly after, the USA said it will position supplemental ballistic-missile interceptors along the Pacific Coast by 2017, in reaction to the DPRK’s experiments of nuclear technology and long-range missiles.¹⁰ This deployment amplified the quantity of ground-based interceptors to 44 from the 30 that were already based in California and Alaska.¹¹ On 28 March 2013, the American military launched a rare long-range mission over the Korean Peninsula, sending two nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers on a rehearsal raid over the ROK, emphasizing the USA’s vow to secure its partner amidst mounting pressures with the DPRK.¹² In reaction to the USA’s operation, North Korean state media declared that Kim Jong-un ordered his missile units to remain prepared to attack the USA and the ROK.¹³

The likelihood of negotiating any further deliberations has been a tumultuous series of ups and downs. China and the Russian Federation have advised the DPRK to partake in these dialogues but no fundamental advances have been made. The most recent claims on 6 January 2016 by North Korean state media, of a fourth nuclear detonation by testing a hydrogen bomb, added more pressure on China from the USA to “end all business as usual” with the DPRK. An unnamed spokesman of the DPRK’s Foreign Ministry called the purported hydrogen bomb test a justifiable move to ensure its existence against outlying threats stating, “In response to the U.S. continuously invading our sovereignty and making threatening provocations, we will acquire ourselves with all possible nuclear attack and nuclear retaliation abilities, but will not thoughtlessly use our nuclear weapons.”¹⁴

The spokesman also called the South’s decision to resume anti-Pyongyang propaganda broadcasts along their tense border an “odd” provocation. The North is particularly sensitive to external criticism of the dictatorial control of Kim Jong-un and has been reacting to Seoul’s loudspeaker campaigns by flying thousands of propaganda leaflets across the border. Days earlier, South Korean troops fired 20 machine gun caution shots after a North Korean drone temporarily overlapped the border. The North’s H-bomb assertions have been met with prevalent disapproval and mistrust, but moreover inquiries on how to halt the State’s budding nuclear threat.¹⁵ The Korean Peninsula rests theoretically at war because the 1950-1953 conflict terminated in an armistice, not a peace treaty. North Korea has called the annual USA-South Korean military drills a provision for an incursion, though the allies have recurrently said that the war games are defensive in nature.

⁸ Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Declares 1953 War Truce Nullified,” The New York Times, 11 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/12/world/asia/north-korea-says-it-has-nullified-1953-korean-war-armistice.html?ref=world> (accessed February 22, 2016).

⁹ Rick Gladstone, “Threats Sow Concerns Over Korean Armistice,” The New York Times, 9 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/world/asia/threats-sow-concerns-over-korean-armistice.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹⁰ Thom Shanker, David E. Sanger & Martin Fackler, “U.S. Is Bolstering Missile Defense to Deter North Korea,” The New York Times, 15 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/world/asia/us-to-bolster-missile-defense-against-north-korea.html?ref=global-home> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹¹ Thom Shanker, David E. Sanger & Martin Fackler, “U.S. Is Bolstering Missile Defense to Deter North Korea,” The New York Times, 15 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/world/asia/us-to-bolster-missile-defense-against-north-korea.html?ref=global-home> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹² Thom Shanker & Choe Sang-Hun, “U.S. Runs Practice Sortie in South Korea,” The New York Times, 28 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/29/world/asia/us-begins-stealth-bombing-runs-over-south-korea.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹³ Choe Sang-Hun, “Global Powers Cast Wary Eye as Korean Tension Escalates” The New York Times,” (March 29, 2013) <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/30/world/asia/kim-jong-un-of-north-korea-orders-missile-readiness.html?ref=world&mtref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=5B59C5E72B844EC58160E8F848F44B07&gwt=pay> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹⁴ Tong-Hyung Kim, “North Korea says it could stop nuclear tests in exchange for the U.S. scrapping joint military drills with South Korea, while also calling for a peace treaty with the U.S. in an echo of demands that Washington had rejected in the past,” Associated Press, 15 January 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-01-15/n-korea-demands-peace-treaty-for-stopping-nuke-tests> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹⁵ The Telegraph, “North Korea offers to stop nuclear tests in exchange for peace treaty,” Associated Press, 16 January 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/12102995/North-Korea-offers-to-stop-nuclear-tests-in-exchange-for-peace-treaty.html> (accessed February 22, 2016).

Pyongyang has said it would consider halting nuclear tests in exchange for the USA suspending joint military drills with the ROK, while also calling for a peace treaty with the USA in a reverberation of demands that were vetoed by its capital in the past. The USA has formerly called the linking of military drills with North Korean nuclear tests "an implicit threat" and demanded that the DPRK first demonstrate its sincerity to nuclear disarmament.

Implications

Both USA and South Korean military forces along the Demilitarized Zone have been raised to high levels of alert along the entire border. It has been reported by USA officials that the seismic activity produced by the test were not consistent with a detonation of a large hydrogen weapon. In fact, the blast was estimated to be smaller than both atomic weapons used on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Japan). The ROK is not planning on slowing down the propaganda blast from the border. Leaders from the surrounding Member States have been congregating to discuss the behavior of the North Korean government. The USA Department of Defense continues to review options with South Korean officials to respond to DPRK's nuclear test, reiterating that the USA's commitment to the ROK's security is ironclad.

Ultimately, the continued advancement of DPRK's nuclear capabilities portrays a repeat in history of the Korean War. Various new sources reported the DPRK's warning to the USA, cautioning American casualties with another war on the Korean Peninsula. The recent claims of H-Bomb testing have left the global community ready to increase sanction pressures. Previous UN actions encompassed arms, nonproliferation and luxury good embargoes, a suspension on overseas financial assets, and a travel prohibition, none of which have so far clogged the DPRK from enduring its nuclear program.¹⁶

Meanwhile, USA President Barack Obama has been speaking to the leaders of South Korea and Japan, who both joined them in condemning the act.¹⁷ Obama reiterated the USA defense pledges to both of its provincial allies. South Korean President Park Geun-hye's headquarters added that the two leaders approved that "there should be an equivalent cost for this nuclear test."¹⁸ An outbreak of tantalizing gestures from North Korea could set the region into all out pandemonium. This scenario would put USA, South Korea, and Japan in the North Korean cross fires. Leaving Member States to wonder who will come to the aid of North Korea.

¹⁶ Greg Botelho & Euan McKirdy, "U.N. poised to act against North Korea after latest nuclear test," CNN, 7 January 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/06/asia/north-korea-hydrogen-bomb-test/> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹⁷ Thom Shanker, David E. Sanger & Martin Fackler, "U.S. Is Bolstering Missile Defense to Deter North Korea," The New York Times, 15 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/world/asia/us-to-bolster-missile-defense-against-north-korea.html?ref=global-home> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹⁸ Tong-Hyung Kim, "North Korea says it could stop nuclear tests in exchange for the U.S. scrapping joint military drills with South Korea, while also calling for a peace treaty with the U.S. in an echo of demands that Washington had rejected in the past," Associated Press, 15 January 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-01-15/n-korea-demands-peace-treaty-for-stopping-nuke-tests> (accessed February 22, 2016).