

North Korea Nuclear V

Background:

Another crisis in the protracted conflict over North Korea's nuclear program occurred from 12 February until 14 August 2013. The first crisis in this protracted conflict occurred in 1993 and ended with North Korea and the United States signing an agreement under which the former promised to freeze its nuclear program (see case #408). Almost a decade passed until the next North Korean nuclear crisis occurred in 2002, when it was definitively concluded that North Korea had begun a secret enrichment program (see case #441). Since then North Korea has ramped up its nuclear production and testing, and crises in this protracted conflict have become much more frequent, with one occurring every three or four years (see cases #450 and #459).

Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States were the crisis actors in this fifth North Korean Nuclear crisis. These were the same four actors as in the previous crisis in this protracted conflict, which occurred in 2009 (case #459) and centered on the launch of a satellite and a nuclear test by North Korea. Separate from the issue of North Korea's nuclear program, North Korea and South Korea had also experienced two crises in 2010 related to the sinking of the Cheonan vessel (case #461) and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (case #462).

North Korea underwent a significant political change on 17 December 2011 when Kim Jong-il suddenly died. His son, Kim Jong-un, took over the North Korean Supreme Leader office shortly thereafter, on 24 December. Relations with the US and South Korea remained strained as the new North Korean leader went ahead with a series of long-range rocket tests in April and continued the same harsh rhetoric used by his father.

PRE-CRISIS:

In October 2012, North Korea announced that it had developed a missile capable of reaching the mainland US. In December, North Korea fired a long-range rocket to test space capabilities, drawing condemnation from the international community. In January 2013, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted to adopt Resolution 2087, which increased sanctions on the North Korean regime for its missile tests. In response, North Korea announced that it would conduct another nuclear test and promised to continue the development of its long-range missile program.

Summary:

On 12 February 2013 North Korea conducted a nuclear test, triggering a crisis for South Korea, the United States, and Japan. On that day, Japan called an emergency meeting of its security council and issued its major response, which consisted of public threats to impose a fresh round of unilateral sanctions on North Korea, and most importantly, the sending of planes to monitor radiation levels. Japan was particularly concerned with the nuclear issue and the related potential for an accident, having endured the Fukushima Power Plant nuclear disaster almost two years prior and having its airspace and nearby international waters repeatedly targeted by North Korean missile tests in recent times. Also on that day, the US was reportedly in close consultation with South Korea about security issues.

On 13 February, South Korea implemented the most important part of its major response to the crisis trigger by staging large-scale joint military drills with the United States. Some of these drills were regularly scheduled but others were conducted specifically in response to the crisis trigger. US participation in these drills involved troops it had already stationed in South Korea. The following day, South Korea conducted the remainder of its major response: it unveiled a new cruise missile which was capable of striking anywhere in North Korea, deployed destroyers and submarines off its eastern coast, and officially condemned the nuclear test via a parliamentary resolution and a statement from the defense minister.

Shortly after the crisis began, discussions about further UNSC sanctions against North Korea commenced. The US and China took the lead in engineering these sanctions. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe voiced his support for UN sanctions when he met with US President Obama on 22 February. South Korea also pushed for UN sanctions. On 7 March, with unanimous support of all members, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2094, ordering more sanctions against North Korea. This triggered a crisis for North Korea. Voting to adopt these sanctions was the most important part of the American major response to the crisis trigger. The day after the sanctions were ordered, North and South Korea exchanged the highest level of “hostile warnings” that they had in years.

On 11 March, North Korea verbally nullified the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement between itself and South Korea. This move was North Korea’s major response to its crisis trigger. On 15 March, the US bolstered its ballistic missile protection system on the Pacific Coast. On 27 March, North Korea shut down lines of communication with South Korea. The next day, the US and South Korea flew bombers over the Korean peninsula in a yearly military exercise that had been regularly scheduled but that had been expanded into a much larger exercise in the aftermath of the nuclear test. On 2 April, North Korea threatened to restart the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. That same day, the US sent a missile defense system to Guam. On 5 April, North Korea advised countries to evacuate their embassies in Pyongyang.

On 8 April, in what would become a major focus of the crisis, North Korea pulled its workers out of factories in the southern Kaesong Industrial Region, shutting the factories down. This was notable because the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) is a joint venture between North and South Korea and one of the only mechanisms via which the two countries have cooperated during the 2000s. It also marked a turning point in the crisis, as the primary issue soon shifted from the nuclear test to economic concerns between the two Koreas related to the KIC and its operation. The following day, North Korea warned that it was on the brink of war.

After this escalation, South Korea called for talks to defuse tensions on 11 April, but North Korea refused to participate. On 25 April, South Korea proposed talks once more and threatened to take a “grave measure” with regard to the KIC if North Korea did not agree to hold talks. The following day, North Korea rejected the proposal to hold talks again, and South Korea announced that it was pulling its remaining workers from the KIC. On 3 May, the final South Korean workers left the KIC, effectively closing the KIC (albeit unofficially) for the first time since it opened in 2003. On 18 May, North Korea launched a missile, raising tensions further.

On 25 May, China pressured North Korea to return to talks and cease escalation of the situation. On 6 June, North Korea announced that it would return to talks, and the following day it restored communications with South Korea. These initial plans to hold talks collapsed due to a disagreement between the two sides over the rank of negotiators. South Korea and North Korea eventually met on 7 July and came to an agreement on the principles of reopening the KIC. Negotiations continued, and on 28 July, South Korea pledged \$7.3 million in humanitarian aid for North Korea and called for “one last round” of make-or-break talks. North Korea continued to drag its feet in these negotiations.

On 7 August, the South Korean government began the process of reviewing insurance claims to South Korean businesses that lost revenue due to the closing of the KIC, which was seen as the first step toward officially closing the KIC. Within 90 minutes of South Korea announcing that it was conducting this review, North Korea declared that it was committed to reopening Kaesong and proposed another round of talks on the matter. North Korea was hurting economically from the closure of the KIC, to a much greater degree than South Korea, as well as from UN sanctions. Talks re-commenced soon thereafter and resulted in an agreement on the reopening of the KIC, signed by North and South Korea on 14 August. This marked an end to the heightened level of tensions and terminated the crisis for all parties. As part of this agreement North Korea agreed to allow foreign investors into the KIC and adhere to “international business standards” that included allowing Internet and mobile phone access for South Korean factory managers. The two sides also agreed to no more unilateral closures of the KIC and the setting up of a joint panel to discuss compensating South Korean companies for losses incurred due to the closure of the KIC. The nuclear issue remained unresolved. Nevertheless, South Korea, the US, and Japan were satisfied to have relations between the two Koreas return to the status quo.

The UN was involved in the crisis through the Security Council’s imposition of sanctions on North Korea. The sanctions initially escalated tensions between the actors but ultimately contributed somewhat to bringing North Korea to the table. Russia was minimally involved in the crisis: it condemned North Korea while also warning South Korea, the US, and Japan to not get involved.

On 7 April 2013, Switzerland indicated that it had recently been in contact with North Korean authorities and made an offer to mediate. However, mediation did not occur.

References:

BBC; CNN; Guardian; New York Times; Reuters; Voice of America; Yonhap News Agency.