

North Korea Nuclear VI

Background:

A sixth crisis related to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons occurred from 6 January until early December 2016. For the third crisis in a row related to this issue, the set of crisis actors consisted of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and North Korea (see cases # 408, 441, 450, 459, and 469 for the five previous North Korean nuclear crises). Since its first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea has tested a nuclear-capable device two more times, once in 2009 and again in 2013.

Throughout the advancement of its nuclear program, the US has generally met each new development with sanctions, both unilaterally and by pushing through resolutions within the UN Security Council (UNSC). During his term as president, Barack Obama was able to get some concessions from North Korea. In February 2012, the North Korean regime agreed to halt its nuclear and long-range missile tests. However, North Korea continued to develop and test satellite launches that replicated the launch of long-range missiles. The US continued to push international sanctions as punishment and called upon the few remaining North Korean allies, namely China, to help put enough pressure on the Kim regime to stop any further developments.

Tensions also remained high on the Korean peninsula. In 2004, the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) was created as a means to foster cooperation between North Korea and South Korea. Textile, fabric, car-part, and semiconductor industries operate within the complex, among other businesses. Since its inception, the facility has been used as a diplomatic tool to express displeasure. During the fifth North Korean nuclear crisis in 2013, the KIC was shut down for four months, but it was eventually re-opened in August of that year as a result of a bilateral agreement between the two Koreas. Nevertheless, persistent missile and nuclear tests have prompted strong reactions from the South Korean government, which has usually met the tests with shows of force or by undertaking joint military exercises with the United States.

PRE-CRISIS:

On 12 December 2015, North Korea announced that they had developed hydrogen bombs. This claim was met with some skepticism around the world.

Summary:

On 6 January 2016, North Korea announced that it had successfully conducted its fourth underground nuclear weapons test, triggering a crisis for the US, Japan, and South Korea. The UNSC called an emergency session the same day and strongly condemned the test as a threat to international peace and security.

The following day, the three crisis actors issued statements condemning the weapons test as a violation of North Korea's international agreements and pledged to work together to forge a united response to the test. Japan's prime minister also called on the UN to impose sanctions against North Korea, joining the United States and South Korea's calls for new sanctions. Both Russia and China condemned the tests but cautioned that further sanctions against North Korea could lead Pyongyang's already fragile economy to collapse.

Pledging to work together with the US and Japan constituted the first part of South Korea's major response to the crisis on 7 January. The second part occurred on 8 January, when it resumed broadcasting anti-regime propaganda and pop music on loudspeakers at the border with North Korea. On 10 January, the US flew a nuclear-capable B-52 long distance bomber over South Korea to the Osan Air Base in Seoul to carry out training missions with the US and South Korean militaries. The following day, Seoul said that it would restrict the access of its nationals to the KIC in North Korea out of concern for the safety of its citizens.

On 7 February, North Korea launched another long-range ballistic missile. This drew strong condemnation from the international community and prompted US-ROK talks about possible deployment of a joint missile defense system. Three days later, Japan issued restrictions on movement of people to and from North Korea.

On 2 March, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2270 condemning North Korea's test and expanding the existing sanctions against North Korea. Participation in these sanctions constituted the major responses by the US and Japan to the crisis. (Japan was a rotating member of the UNSC in 2016.) The sanctions triggered a crisis for North Korea. Kim Jong Un reacted the next day, 3 March, by announcing that the military was on standby to deploy the country's nuclear warheads.

In addition to the UN sanctions, the Obama administration implemented its own, unilateral sanctions against Pyongyang on 16 March. The sanctions froze North Korean property in the US and banned US exports and investment in North Korea.

On 15 April, North Korea test launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile. Although the test failed, the UN called it a violation of existing Security Council resolutions. From April through October, North Korea conducted a series of other weapons tests, all of which were perceived as escalatory and threatening maneuvers by the other crisis actors.

The US, Japan, and South Korea performed joint anti-ballistic missile tests on 27 June as a part of the US's Rim of the Pacific exercises (RIMPAC) off of the Hawaiian coast. On 8 July, the US and South Korea announced plans to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), which could intercept short and medium-range missiles. China strongly opposed the missile system that it said could be used to spy on its military activities and could increase tensions between itself and North Korea. In August, the US and South Korea held joint military exercises south of the demilitarized zone despite North Korean threats that it would escalate the conflict.

South Korea's crisis ended on 29 October, when mass protests erupted over a corruption scandal enveloping President Park Geun-hye. The incident drew public attention in South Korea away from the nuclear issue. Nevertheless, South Korea remained involved in the crisis after this date, despite no longer perceiving a crisis itself. This included signing a military intelligence sharing agreement with Japan on 22 November, in order to help defend against North Korean threats.

The UNSC issued another round of sanctions against North Korea on 30 November. The sanctions spurred a fading of the crisis for North Korea, because Pyongyang perceived them as a sign that the US and UN would not further escalate the crisis. The other contributing factor to the termination of the crisis was the quickly approaching change in US administration, indicating that the outgoing Obama administration would be unlikely to further escalate its military activities towards Pyongyang.

North Korea's response to the new round of sanctions was tepid, suggesting it would not further escalate the conflict. The crisis for the US and Japan faded in early December.

China and Russia played minor roles in the crisis. China perceived a political threat over the US and South Korean decision to deploy THAAD, and Russia slowed the adoption of UN sanctions against North Korea to ensure that they could maintain its coal trade with Pyongyang.

The UN contributed marginally to the crisis abatement. The European Union (EU) was the most involved regional organization. On 5 and 31 March, the European Council transposed UNSC resolution 2270 into EU law and on 27 May, the European Council adopted additional sanctions against North Korea. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's and the International Atomic Energy Agency's involvement in the crisis was limited to statements condemning the weapons test.

Sources:

Arms Control Today; Associated Press; BBC; CNBC; CNN; Council of the EU; The Korea Times; New York Times; Nuclear Threat Initiative; PBS: Frontline; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet; Reuters; Stars and Stripes; US Department of the Treasury; Voice of Vietnam