

Korean Land Mine

Background:

Another crisis in the extended protracted conflict between South Korea and North Korea began in early August 2015 with the explosion of a land mine on the southern side of the Military Demarcation line (MDL). The crisis ended on 25 August 2015.

PRE-CRISIS:

In the months leading up to the crisis, tension between North and South Korea began increasing due to military exercises conducted by both parties. In March 2015, North Korea conducted live-fire ballistic missile and surface-to-air missile exercises. At the same time, South Korea conducted annual joint military training exercises with the United States, to which Kim Jong-un called for “full combat readiness” in response. In April and May, North Korea conducted a number of military tests, including test-fires of anti-ship and air defense missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and live-fire artillery exercises near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), while South Korea conducted live-fire missile exercises in the Sea of Japan and a two-day coast guard defense drill. On 20 May, North Korea announced the ability to miniaturize nuclear weapons. Shortly afterward, the U.S. and South Korea participated in two combined anti-submarine warfare drills and a joint military logistics exercise. On 3 June, South Korea tested a 500km range ballistic missile, capable of striking anywhere in North Korean territory.

Tensions also spilled over into low-level confrontations between the two states. On 30 June, South Korea fired warning shots at a North Korean vessel that had crossed into international waters. On 11 July, approximately ten North Korean soldiers crossed the MDL, but returned north after South Korea fired warning shots.

Summary:

On 4 August 2015, three land mines detonated south of the MDL, seriously injuring two South Korean soldiers. South Korean officials did not initially blame North Korea for the blasts, instead indicating that recent heavy rains may have caused mines planted long ago to shift. The following day, South Korea launched a joint investigation with the U.S. and the U.S.-led United Nations Command in Korea into the incident. At some point over the next five days, the investigation discovered that North Korea was responsible for deliberately placing the mines and ruled out the possibility that the mines had drifted as a result of shifting soil due to storms. This triggered a crisis for South Korea.

On 10 August, the investigation published its findings and charged the North Korean army with purposely placing the mines with the intention of killing South Korean soldiers. The investigation concluded that the mines were likely planted sometime after 22 July, which was the last time that South Korean patrols had gone through the gate near where the incident occurred. That same day, South Korea resumed the broadcasting of anti-North Korean propaganda over loudspeakers at the border. This constituted South Korea’s major response to the crisis and in turn triggered a crisis for North Korea.

On 11 August, Seoul demanded that Pyongyang apologize for the land mine incident and punish those responsible. On 14 August, North Korea denied planting the mines, and the following day

threatened to use military strikes against the loudspeakers if the broadcasts were not stopped. On 17 August, North Korea resumed propaganda broadcasting across the border via loudspeaker as well, which constituted its major response to the crisis. That same day, South Korea and the U.S. began another round of joint military exercises.

On 20 August, there was an exchange of artillery fire between North and South Korea, after reports that North Korea had fired shells into the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). There was no damage, and no casualties were reported. North Korea denied claims that it had fired the shells and reiterated its threat of military operations if the South Korean broadcasts did not stop. At this point, North Korean troops were ordered to a semi-wartime alert, and South Korea ordered the evacuation of over 10,000 citizens living close to the DMZ.

On 22 August, North Korea deployed submarines and mobilized artillery units along the border. Despite this, North and South Korea agreed to emergency talks that same day, and the talks began later that evening. On 25 August, North and South Korea reached an agreement and released a joint statement wherein North Korea expressed regret over the soldiers injured by the mines and ended its state of semi-wartime alert, while South Korea ceased the anti-North Korean propaganda broadcasts. This terminated the crisis for both sides.

In addition to its role as part of the fact-finding mission, the U.S. released statements in support of South Korea and reiterating its commitment to South Korea's security and their alliance.

References:

BBC; CBS News; Diplomat; Guardian; International Crisis Group; Korea Times; NYT; Reuters; Stars and Stripes; United Nations Secretary General statements.