

THE SITUATION IN NORTH KOREA

Introduction

On 6 January 2016, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (also known as DPRK or North Korea) conducted a nuclear test, announcing the results as its first successful test of a hydrogen bomb. On 9 March 2016, Kim Jong-un announced that North Korea was able to make nuclear warheads small enough to fit on ballistic missiles. This claim came as North Korea made a series of threats to carry out indiscriminate attacks against the United States and South Korea. Pyongyang, the capital, has announced that it intends to test an **inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM)** this year. If successful, DPRK will join China and Russia as the only countries with the ability to reach the US's West Coast with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles (Amanda Macias, Business Insider, 2017).

History

The DPRK was created in the wake of the Second World War, as the Soviets disarmed Japanese occupiers in the north of Korea (above the 38th parallel) and Americans disarmed Japanese occupiers in the south. The two Koreas formed temporary governments and formally declared statehood in 1948—the North (DPRK) under Kim Il-Sung and the South (the Republic of Korea, ROK) under Syngman Rhee. With the Soviet's blessing and Chinese communist support as well, in June 1950 the North Koreans launched an attack on South Korea, under the pretense of trying to unify the peninsula. DPRK quickly overran and occupied much of the southern half of the Peninsula. After the outbreak of violence, the United Nations adopted a series of resolutions, ultimately authorizing the use of force to assist the ROK. On 27 July 1953, the United Nations Command (represented by the United States, the North Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army) signed an **armistice** that established a ceasefire and a demilitarized zone across the peninsula at the 38th parallel but left many issues, such as a maritime border, unresolved.

Though tensions remained high, DPRK ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) on 12 December 1985, agreeing to pursue only peaceful uses of nuclear energy for the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament. The North Koreans put a research nuclear reactor into use in Yongbyon in 1986, and tested a medium-range Rodong **ballistic** missile in 1993. The North Koreans indicated a desire to exit the NPT, and signed an Agreed Framework with the United States in October 1994. Testing continued under the regime of Kim Jong-il after Kim Il-Sung's death in 1994, with the DPRK testing a multistage long-range missile in 1998. In 2003, the DPRK withdrew from its commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The state then launched a number of underground and above-ground missile tests between 2004 and 2011.

DPRK is also infamous for its human rights violations, another reason for many of the policies against the nation. The nation contains **gulags** called “kwanliso” where up to 120,000 men, women, and children are imprisoned

Current Importance

Kim Jong-il died of a heart attack in December 2011 and was succeeded as supreme leader by his youngest son, Kim Jong-un. Since Kim Jong-un’s ascension, the DPRK has continued to perform nuclear research and launch short and medium-range missiles despite United Nations Security Council mandates. To date, United Nations Security Council resolutions have been largely unsuccessful in preventing North Korea from advancing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, although the sanctions have slowed development in these areas. The 1718 Committee, established by Security Council Resolution 1718 in 2006, oversees implementation and enforcement of sanctions against North Korea.

Following the DPRK’s 6 January 2016 missile test, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2270, which calls for inspecting all cargo going in and out of the country, banning all weapons trade and expanding the list of individuals facing sanctions. This resolution contains the most stringent measures yet to undermine the North’s ability to raise money and secure technology and other resources for its nuclear weapons program. Despite the threat of more sanctions, the DPRK conducted another nuclear test on 9 September 2016. The Council has yet to respond in any formal way to the most recent actions of the DPRK.

Key terms to know

Inter-continental ballistic missile: A guided missile launched into the air that can travel long distances, primarily designed to carry nuclear weapons.

Armistice: An agreement made by opposing sides in a war to stop fighting for a certain time; also known as a truce.

Ballistic: Relating to projectiles or things that are launched through the air.

Gulags: Systems of political labor prison camps. The word stems from the camps maintained in the former Soviet Union from 1930 to 1955.

What to do now?

Whether or not DPRK will remain true to its word, it is undeniable that the country has been slowly building up the capacity to not only defend itself but also launch nuclear attacks on other States. Negotiating deals with DPRK has been difficult and ineffective in the past, not only with respect to nuclear proliferation but also regarding human rights. Some countries are uncertain as to whether it is even possible to reason with current leadership in DPRK, and suggest that Kim Jong-un be forcibly removed. Others suggest that States simply do not understand what the current administration wants. How can States resolve or at least manage this national security crisis?

Things to consider

1. How did this conflict begin? Is this a new conflict or a re-ignition of a previous conflict?
2. How have similar situations and conflicts been peacefully resolved?
3. What State and regional actors are involved in this conflict, and in what way?
4. Are there any non-State actors involved in this conflict? Are there any States supporting them, and which ones?
5. Should the UN also address human rights issues at this time? Or does this distract from the issue at hand?

For further research

- UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea:
<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/UN-Security-Council-Resolutions-on-North-Korea>
- BBC News: What did North Korea nuclear tests achieve?
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17823706>
- The full statement from North Korea about the nuclear test:
<http://www.cnbc.com/2016/09/09/heres-the-full-statement-from-north-korea-on-nuclear-test.html>
- The crimes of North Korea:
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/14/dispatches-crimes-north-korea>
- UN toughens sanctions on North Korea in response to its nuclear program:
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions.html?_r=0

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