



By Edward N. Johnson, U.S. Army.

North Korean soldiers look south across the DMZ.

North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

Over the last few decades, North Korea has signaled its intention to pursue a nuclear weapons program. North Korea's nuclear program stretches back to the years after the Korean War. At that time, North Korea signed a number of agreements with China and the Soviet Union to build its nuclear capacity, at least in part to help rebuild its devastated economy. North Korea's first nuclear reactor, built with Soviet help, became active in 1967. At the time, many countries around the world were experimenting with nuclear power as an alternative fuel source to supply electricity. It was only in the 1980s that observers became concerned that North Korea was using its nuclear capabilities not only to create nuclear power but also to create nuclear weapons.

How did the United States and its allies respond to the North Korean nuclear program in the 1990s?

In 1985, North Korea signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a treaty in which countries that do not have nuclear weapons agree not to acquire them. But in the late 1980s, U.S. satellites detected evidence that North Korea was increasing its nuclear capabilities in order to create nuclear weapons. International concern intensified in 1993 when North Korea banned inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from entering the country. That same year,

North Korea threatened to withdraw from the NPT.

The United States, led by President Bill Clinton, began to meet with North Korea. After difficult negotiations, in 1994 the United States and North Korea signed the “Agreed Framework.” North Korea agreed to suspend construction of reactors that could produce weapons-grade plutonium as a by-product. In exchange, the United States made a commitment to take the lead in construction by 2003 of a reactor that would meet North Korea’s energy needs without producing weapons-grade plutonium. (Japan and South Korea would be principle funders in the construction of this reactor.) It also agreed to provide energy and other forms of economic aid in the interim. In addition, the United States agreed to work towards normalization of political and economic relations between the two countries.

The 1994 Agreed Framework did not last. Many Republican representatives in the United States were distrustful of North Korea and did not believe the North Korean government would give up its nuclear program. North Korea was also suspicious of the United States and concerned that it would not keep its end of the bargain. With little Congressional support for the agreement, in 1999 the United States announced that the light water reactors would not be completed in 2003 as promised, but would be delayed until 2007 or 2008. North Korea threatened to resume its nuclear program if the 1994 agreement was not fulfilled.

In addition to nuclear weapons, many in the international community were also concerned about North Korea’s missile capabilities. In 1998, North Korea conducted a test, firing missiles over Japan and into the Pacific Ocean. Missile technology could give North Korea the capability to fire a nuclear weapon from within its borders (as opposed to dropping it by plane, as was done by the United States in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki).



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U.S. and South Korean soldiers monitor the DMZ, from the south looking north.

What did President Bush say about North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union Address?

The United States became less willing to negotiate with North Korea after the election of George W. Bush to the presidency. During President Bush’s first administration, the U.S. government refused to negotiate with North Korea until it took steps to dismantle its nuclear program.

Following September 11, 2001, the Bush administration began to confront regimes it considered a threat to U.S. security. North Korea fell into this category. In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President Bush condemned North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” (which also included Iran and Iraq). Bush criticized the North Korean government for starving its citizens while threatening the world with missiles and weapons of mass destruction. He warned that he would not allow North Korea to threaten the United States. He cancelled work on the light water reactors and suspended energy assistance. Tension between North Korea and the international community heated up once again.

How did tensions escalate in 2002?

In the fall of 2002, U.S. officials discovered that North Korea had developed a separate uranium-enrichment program, in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea

expelled weapons monitors from the IAEA, announced that it was beginning production of nuclear materials, and withdrew from the NPT. In response, the United States, Japan, and South Korea cut their supplies of oil to North Korea and halted construction on the two nuclear reactors.

Experts feared that if North Korea had nuclear weapons, it might sell weapons or nuclear technology to other countries or to terrorists. North Korea demanded direct negotiations with the United States, but refused to sit down to talks until the United States proclaimed that it would not attack North Korea with military force. (The United States had recently invaded Iraq.)

How did the international community deal with North Korea's nuclear program?

In August 2003, six countries—the United States, Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan—met in the first of a series of meetings to negotiate an end to North Korea's nuclear program. Delegates met frequently over the next few years in what became known as the “six-party talks.”

Despite the efforts of the international community, in February 2005 North Korea announced to the world that it had nuclear weapons. In July 2006 it conducted additional missile tests and in October 2006 conducted its first nuclear test. Because the blast from this underground test was small, many experts believed that it was not entirely successful. Within days, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution to impose significant economic and diplomatic sanctions on North Korea for its actions.

When the six-party talks resumed in February 2007, the delegates reached a tentative agreement. In exchange for fuel and other economic aid, North Korea began disabling its plutonium-producing reactor. It also handed over documentation of its past nuclear activities to the six-party delegates. Many believed that North Korea was on its way to renouncing its nuclear weapons program for good.

“This can be a moment of opportunity for North Korea. If North Korea continues to make the right choices, it can repair its relationship with the international community....”

—U.S. President Bush after North Korea provided documentation of its nuclear weapons program, June 2008

In late 2008, the United States removed North Korea from its list of countries that sponsor terrorism as part of an additional agreement. But North Korea's position on its nuclear program reversed yet again in 2009, when it conducted its second nuclear test.

How did North Korean missile tests affect international relations?

Relations on the Korean Peninsula took a turn for the worse in early 2009. South Korea's President Lee announced that South Korean aid would be tied to the ending of North Korea's nuclear program. Shortly after, North Korean officials announced that they would no longer abide by previous agreements to ease military tensions on the peninsula.

In April 2009, North Korea launched a rocket that it claimed was carrying a communications satellite. Many believed that, in fact, North Korea was conducting a long-range missile test. The UN Security Council condemned the launching. In response, North Korea quit the six-party talks and expelled UN observers. One month later, it conducted a second underground test of a nuclear device—this time more successfully.

“The Democratic People's Republic of Korea successfully conducted one more underground nuclear test on May 25 as part of the measures to bolster up its nuclear deterrent for self-defence.... The test will contribute to defending the sovereignty of the country and the nation and socialism and ensuring peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and the region around it.”

—From an announcement by North Korea's government-run media, May 25, 2009

Weeks later, North Korea conducted a variety of additional missile tests. North Korea's actions increased regional tension and drew widespread condemnation. South Korea announced that it would intercept North Korean ships suspected of carrying weapons of mass destruction.

Within weeks the Security Council agreed to impose additional sanctions on North Korea. On June 12, 2009 the Council unanimously passed a resolution authorizing UN members to inspect North Korean vessels that they suspect might be carrying banned materials or weapons. North Korea has stated that it will consider the interception of any of its ships as an act of war.

The North Korean government has continued to insist on bilateral talks with the United States. The Obama administration has made it clear that it plans to take a strong stance against North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

“North Korea is not only deepening its own isolation, it's also inviting stronger international pressure—that's evident overnight, as Russia and China, as well as our traditional allies of South Korea and Japan, have all come to the same conclusion: North Korea will not find security and respect through threats and illegal weapons.”

—U.S. President Obama, May 26, 2009

How have tensions increased in recent years?

The death of Kim Jong Il in 2011 and the assumption of power of his youngest son, twenty-seven-year-old Kim Jong Un has raised questions about both the intentions and the stability of the North Korean government. In addition, a series of serious military incidents heightened tensions in the region and put North Korea in the international spotlight.

In March 2010, a torpedo sank a South Korean naval vessel killing forty-six South Korean sailors. The torpedo was most likely from a North Korean submarine. North Ko-

rea denied responsibility for the sinking. In a second incident, in November 2010, North Korea showed a new and previously unknown facility for producing nuclear materials to a U.S. scientist. This discovery came as a shock and prompted calls for increased diplomacy and tightened sanctions on North Korea. The discovery of the nuclear facility was overshadowed later that month by North Korea's artillery attack that killed and injured South Korean civilians and soldiers. Although South Korea fired back, some in South Korea were dissatisfied with their government's response.

In February 2013, North Korea conducted a third and more powerful nuclear test than its first two. Leaders around the world resoundingly condemned North Korea's action.

“The danger posed by North Korea's threatening activities warrants further swift and credible action by the international community. The United States will also continue to take steps necessary to defend ourselves and our allies.”

—President Barack Obama,
February 12, 2013

U.S. President Obama has stated that North Korea's actions are a threat to international peace. Experts believe that North Korea has not yet developed the capacity to launch a nuclear weapon via missile, but long-range missile tests in 2012 increased fears that North Korea is closer to being able launch a nuclear weapon at another country. Analysts believe that North Korea has enough weapons-grade plutonium for six to eight nuclear weapons.

What is the U.S. position on North Korea?

The Obama administration argues that the international community negotiated with North Korea in the past because it believed that North Korea was willing to give up its nuclear program. Now, many believe that North Korea has no intention of giving up its nuclear capabilities. Obama's aides have stated that the president no longer wants to negotiate a gradual dismantling of North Korea's nuclear

program, but instead wants to secure a permanent, irreversible end.

The United States and the international community face critical policy decisions about North Korea and its nuclear weapons program. In the past, policy choices have been affected by what policy makers believe are the reasons behind North Korea's aggressive behavior and nuclear weapons program. Does North Korea want nuclear weapons to increase its international prestige? Does it believe it needs them to deter an attack by the United States? Is North Korea using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip to secure additional food, fuel, and security guarantees from the international community? Is North Korea's aggressive behavior related to the transfer of power from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un? Is Kim Jong Un pursuing nuclear weapons as a way to increase his own domestic power or is it a policy supported by all of North Korea's government? The answers to these questions have determined, in large part, the policy debate on this issue.