

North Korea: A Challenge, the Response, and Resurrection of Talks

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October witnessed significant developments in the struggle to find a resolution to North Korea's nuclear program.

- On October 9, the DPRK tested a nuclear device.
- On October 14, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718 condemning the test and calling on UN members to block the supply of (i) major weapons systems; (ii) hardware and technology related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and (iii) luxury goods. Individual member nations moved to respond to the call.
- On October 31, China announced that, following tripartite talks among the DPRK, China, and the United States, the DPRK had agreed to return to the Six Party Talks.

The Challenge

On October 9, one week after promising to test a nuclear weapon, North Korea entered the nuclear age by detonating a plutonium device of less than 1 kiloton of TNT. U.S. intelligence sources privately estimated the force of the explosion as equaling 200 tons of TNT, which is considered small by nuclear standards. The atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki in August 1945 in contrast equaled 20 to 23 kilotons. However, analysts' speculation that the test amounted to a partial failure due to low yield did little to dampen North Korea's exultation or the negative reaction of the rest of the world. Kim Yong-nam, president of the presidium of the DPRK's Supreme People's Assembly, stated in an interview with Kyodo News Agency, "the issue of future nuclear tests is linked to U.S. policy towards our country." Kim added, "If the United States continues to take a hostile attitude and apply pressure on us in various forms, we will have no choice but to take physical steps to deal with that."

Analysts' explanations of North Korea's motives centered on the DPRK's brinkmanship or an attempt to force the United States to negotiate bilaterally with it. However, some opined that North Korea is now intent on following the Pakistani model of risking diplomatic condemnation and isolation in the short term, only to be recognized as a nuclear power in a few years time.

The Response: Nations Unite to Condemn Test and Impose Sanctions

The test provoked universal condemnation by other countries. Overcoming initial disagreements on how to respond, on October 14 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718. In contrast to earlier U.S. and Japanese drafts permitting the use of military force to enforce restrictions, the Resolution instead referenced Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which permits the use of diplomatic and economic sanctions, but not military ones, to enforce the Resolution's provisions. Unsurprisingly, the resolution condemns the nuclear test and demands that the DPRK not conduct any more nuclear or ballistic missile tests, return to compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and abandon all its nuclear programs. However, its teeth are to be found in the provisions calling upon all UN member states to prevent the sale and transfer to the DPRK of military equipment as well as materials, goods, technology, technical training or assistance that could be used in the North's nuclear, ballistic missile or other weapons of mass destruction-related programs. Luxury goods sold to the DPRK are also banned. Financial assets or economic resources abroad related to the DPRK nuclear, ballistic, or WMD programs may also be frozen. Any individuals whom the UN designates as involved in the relevant North Korean programs can be barred from travel outside of the DPRK. The resolution calls upon, but does not require, UN member states to take cooperative action, including via cargo inspections, to enforce the Resolution's measures, provided the measures accord with the country's policies and legislation. Each Member State will have thirty days to report to the Security Council what steps it has taken to implement the resolution.

U.S. and Japanese Response: The United States responded to the test by announcing the ultimate U.S. "redline." President Bush condemned North Korea's "provocative act" and stated that "(t)he transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action." Japanese officials announced sanctions that would ban the import of DPRK goods into Japan, bar North Korean ships from Japanese ports, and sharply limit North Korean visitors to Japan and Japanese visitors to North Korea. Whether annual remittances by ethnic Koreans to North Korea would be suspended was unknown at press time. While Prime Minister Abe stated that the test put the island nation in the "gravest danger," he denied speculation that Japan would build a nuclear bomb of its own.

China's Response: PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao stated that "the nuclear test will undoubtedly exert a negative impact on our relations." He added that the test was done "flagrantly, and in disregard of the international community shared opposition." Ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya said that "there has to be some punitive actions, but these actions have to be appropriate." While opposing the imposition of sanctions under Article 42, as sought by Japan and the United States, China supported the less stringent final version and appears to be taking some steps to follow through on the resolution.

Analysts noted that China's trade statistics showed no export of oil to North Korea in September, i.e., even before the actual test. Anecdotal reports suggest increased vigilance of inspections of North Korean trucks entering China and the continued construction of a wall along part of the 880 mile border between the DPRK and PRC in the days after the test. These reports along with rumors that North Korean workers in Dandong were not receiving work permit renewals and that Chinese banks in Dandong and Shenyang were slowing or stopping payments and remittances to and from the DPRK could not be confirmed, but imply some efforts by the Chinese to honor the UN sanctions regime. October ended with wire reports declaring that the leading Chinese state-owned banks (Bank of China, the Industrial & Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and the Agricultural Bank of China) as well as British lender HSBC had ceased financial transactions with North Korea, according to Bank employees in Beijing and Shenyang. The Chinese banks' spokespersons refused to confirm the stoppage.

South Korea's Response: At a press conference with new Japanese leader Abe on October 9, ROK President Roh Moo-hyun denounced the test, saying "North Korea says the reason it is pursuing nuclear [weapons] is for its security, but the security threat North Korea speaks of either does not exist in reality, or is very exaggerated." President Roh also cautioned that the future of South Korean engagement projects with North Korea should be reviewed in a careful and calm manner and not "be decided in a couple of days or a couple of months." President Roh's cautious comments on the South's Kaesong and Kumgang (Diamond) Mountain economic projects contrasted with Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill's comments, in advance of Secretary Rice's trip to the region, that "the [Kaesong complex] is designed to make a long-term investment in human capital, and the [Mount Kumgang] seems to be designed to give money to the North Korean authorities. So I have my view that they are two very different types of projects." Although Hill qualified his remarks as "personal," many analysts interpreted them as a hint that the U.S. government may push South Korea to scale back engagement policies and to participate in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative.

On October 18, Song Min-soon, Presidential Secretary for Security Affairs, said, "(w)e'll heed the demands from the international community in seeking to change operational methods for the Kumgang and Kaesong projects. But the government has never expressed an intention to scrap the projects." Possible changes to operational methods include cutting Unification of Ministry subsidies for tour groups to Kumgang Mountain and setting up a bank in Kaesong to allow North Korean workers to be paid directly. In 2002, the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund supplied 21.5 billion won in 2002 for package tours to Kumgang and 7.9 billion won in subsidies for teacher and student field trips there in 2004 and 2005.

The Resurrection: DPRK Agrees to Return to Six Party Talks

In mid-October China dispatched State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan to Pyongyang to speak with the DPRK leadership to impart international concerns related to the test. Kim reportedly told Tang that North Korea did not intend to conduct a second test, provided that the United States did not further pressure it. At the same time, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to Japan, China, Russia, and the Republic of Korea to discuss follow-up to the UN Resolution and, undoubtedly, to discuss how best to move forward to resolve the issue. Assistant Secretary Hill remained in the region following Secretary Rice's return to the United States, holding bilateral talks inter alia with Chinese officials.

At the end of the month, Mr. Hill met quietly with counterparts from the DPRK and China. On October 31, Chinese authorities announced that the three parties had agreed to resume the Six Party Talks "at the earliest convenient time." Mr. Hill indicated at a press conference that such a time would be "in November or possibly December."