II. North Korea’s nuclear programme

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On 12 February 2013 the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) announced that it had successfully carried out a third underground nuclear test explosion in a tunnel at the Punggye-ri test site in North Hamgyong province in the north-east of the country. The announcement described the test as having ‘diversified’ North Korea’s nuclear deterrent by using a smaller and lighter nuclear device with greater explosive force than those used in the test explosions conducted in 2006 and 2009. North Korea’s claim to have tested a miniaturized nuclear device could not be independently verified. It was also not possible to determine, based on samples of radioactive gas collected after the test, whether the nuclear device used highly enriched uranium (HEU) as the fissile material or plutonium, which North Korea was believed to have used in the two previous tests.

According to North Korea’s official news agency, the test had been carried out to ‘defend the country’s security and sovereignty’ against the ‘ferocious hostile act of the U.S. which wantonly violated [North Korea’s] legitimate right to launch satellite[s] for peaceful purposes’. This referred to the United States-sponsored United Nations Security Council Resolution 2087, adopted on 22 January 2013, which condemned North Korea’s launch the previous month of a long-range rocket that had placed a satellite into orbit. North Korea reiterated its right under international law to use outer space for peaceful purposes and dismissed the resolution as the ‘height of double-standards’ for framing the launch of a scientific satellite as a long-range ballistic missile test. On 24 January North Korea’s National Defence

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4 Korean Central News Agency (note 1).


6 Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), ‘DPRK FM refutes UNSC’s “resolution” pulling up DPRK over its satellite launch’, 23 Jan. 2013. UN Security Council resolutions have prohibited North Korea
Commission warned that, in response to the ‘illegal resolutions’, the country would launch a ‘variety of satellites and long-range rockets’ as well as carry out a ‘higher level’ nuclear test, although it did not give a date for doing so.\(^7\) In 2006 and 2009 North Korea had responded to the UN Security Council’s condemnations of its long-range rocket launches with similar rhetoric, culminating in nuclear tests.

**Reactions to the North Korean nuclear test and its aftermath**

Although the third North Korean nuclear test explosion was not unexpected, its announcement drew sharp international condemnation. This included a protest from China, North Korea’s most important ally, which called on North Korea to ‘stop any rhetoric or acts that could worsen situations and return to the right course of dialogue and consultation as soon as possible’.\(^8\)

After protracted discussions, on 7 March 2013 the UN Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 2094, which demanded that North Korea ‘abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programmes, in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner’, refrain from conducting further nuclear or ballistic missile tests, and rejoin the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state party.\(^9\) The new resolution was the fifth by the Security Council imposing sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes (see table 7.2). It set out further measures to block financial transactions and bulk cash transfers in support of illicit North Korean activity. It also strengthened states’ authority to inspect suspicious cargo and to deny port and overflight access to North Korea-linked shipments.

North Korea rejected Resolution 2094 as another ‘cooked up’ measure in which the Security Council had been ‘abused for the implementation of the hostile policy of the U.S.’, aimed at undermining North Korea and its political system.\(^10\) On 8 March a statement carried by the state news agency from such launches because the technology required for a satellite launch is directly applicable to ballistic missile development.


announced a series of counter-steps by North Korea, including a declaration by the army’s Supreme Command that the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement and all non-aggression pacts with South Korea were ‘totally invalid’.

The North Korean statement also said that the military hotline, the last such link between the two countries, would be disconnected immediately.

North Korea’s announcement of the retaliatory measures was issued against the background of escalating tensions as the USA and the Republic

12 Korean Central News Agency (note 11).
of Korea (South Korea) began their annual joint military exercises. On 29 March 2013, following reports of US strategic bomber sorties over South Korea, North Korean state media reported that the country’s leader, Kim Jong Un, had approved a plan to prepare missiles to be ready for firing at US targets, including the US mainland and military bases in the Pacific and in South Korea. While military analysts dismissed North Korea’s ability to strike the US mainland with a ballistic missile, they did not rule out possible attacks on nearby targets. In response, the USA strengthened its missile defence capabilities in the region by deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) mobile missile interceptor system to Guam. Earlier in March, the US administration had announced plans to deploy by 2017 additional ground-based missile interceptors at two bases in Alaska and California. US officials said the decision was in part a political message intended to reassure allies in North East Asia that the USA was willing to commit significant defence resources to deter North Korea ‘from acting irrationally’.

Increased role for North Korea’s nuclear weapons

On 2 April North Korea’s General Department of Atomic Energy announced that it would be ‘readjusting and restarting all the nuclear facilities’ at its main nuclear complex at Yongbyon, North Pyongan province. The restarting of the Yongbyon facilities appeared to reflect a decision by the North Korean leadership to prioritize nuclear weapons as the central element in the country’s defence planning and national security strategy. The stated purpose of the move was ‘developing the self-reliant nuclear power industry’ for generating electricity and ‘bolstering up the nuclear armed force both in quality and quantity’. The twin goals were consistent with the new ‘strategic line’, the so-called Byongjin line, set out by Kim Jong Un in remarks at a plenary meeting of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee on 31 March. The new line called for simultaneously

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17 Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), ‘DPRK to adjust uses of existing nuclear facilities’, 2 Apr. 2013. For a description of the Yongbyon facilities see chapter 6, section IX, in this volume.
18 Duchâtel and Schell (note 8), pp. 1–2.
19 Korean Central News Agency (note 17).
20 ‘Kim Jong Un’s report and remarks at KWP Central Committee meeting 31 March 2013’, North Korea Leadership Watch, <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/kim-jong-un/kim-jong-
rebuilding the country’s economy while building up its nuclear forces as the core of its so-called military-first (songun) policy. Kim explained that this simultaneous approach would ‘further reinforce the country’s defense capabilities with a small outlay without increasing national defense spending, while directing great efforts to the economic construction and the improvement of the people’s living standards’. Kim emphasized that North Korea’s nuclear weapons were indispensable for deterring US aggression and were not ‘goods for getting U.S. dollars [or] a political bargaining chip . . . to be put on the table of negotiations aimed at forcing [North Korea] to disarm itself’.

Kim’s remarks underscored the deep differences between his country on the one side and the USA, Japan and South Korea on the other, over the scope and sequencing of steps for beginning a dialogue aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula. On 14 April the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, indicated that the USA and its allies were willing to hold talks with North Korea but reiterated that it first had to stop making threats and take tangible steps to demonstrate that it was serious about denuclearization.

North Korea did not rule out the US overture for dialogue amid signs that it was seeking to reduce tensions. However, a statement from its National Defence Commission on 18 April described as ‘foolish and brigandish’ the call for North Korea to ‘show its “will for denuclearization”’ before any talks could start. The statement set out North Korea’s conditions for a dialogue, including a demand that the UN Security Council must lift sanctions placed on North Korea’s past nuclear and ballistic missile activities. Additionally, the USA would have to withdraw all ‘nuclear war means’ from the region and stop joint military exercises with South Korea. North Korea’s conditions were immediately rejected by the USA and South Korea.


21 ‘Kim Jong Un’s report and remarks at KWP Central Committee Meeting 31 March 2013’ (note 20).


Political and diplomatic developments

In the second half of 2013 relations between North and South Korea gradually improved, as both sides moved to defuse an increasingly tense confrontation that had raised fears of an armed conflict. In June South Korea accepted a proposal by North Korea to hold high-level talks—the first such inter-Korean dialogue in six years—on a range of joint ventures.\(^{27}\) Although the talks were cancelled by North Korea following a disagreement over a protocol dispute, both countries expressed interest in re-establishing their cooperation.\(^{28}\)

At the same time, South Korea and the USA strengthened their military cooperation to address the threats posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapon and ballistic missile capabilities. On 2 October they signed an agreement for a bilateral ‘tailored deterrence’ strategy against North Korea.\(^{29}\) The new strategy reportedly called for large-scale pre-emptive strikes against North Korea if there were clear indications of an imminent nuclear attack by it.\(^{30}\) However, according to South Korean media reports, South Korea rejected US efforts to deploy advanced ground-based missile interceptors and X-band radar systems in the country due to strong opposition from China.\(^{31}\)

During the latter half of 2013 international efforts to revive the dormant Six-Party Talks made little progress. China took the lead in holding a series of discussions with the parties to explore options and conditions for resuming the talks.\(^{32}\) China also reportedly pressed North Korea to return to negotiations while simultaneously tightening enforcement of UN sanctions targeting North Korean financial transactions.\(^{33}\) However, none of the parties showed signs of moving away from established positions for restarting multilateral negotiations to denuclearize North Korea.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{27}\) Choe, S.-H., ‘South and North Korea agree to meet at a border village’, New York Times, 7 June 2013.


\(^{33}\) ‘N. Korea seeks new talks on its nuclear program, China says’, Bloomberg News, 20 June 2013.

Continued impasse

In 2013 the North Korean leadership reaffirmed its intention to retain nuclear weapons for the indefinite future amid escalating tensions following its third nuclear test explosion. It articulated a long-term strategy for augmenting the country’s nuclear forces, both in terms of quantity and quality, in conjunction with the rebuilding of the economy. During the year Japan, South Korea and the USA emphasized that they would not accept North Korea’s self-claimed status as a legitimate nuclear weapon-possessing state or agree to restart the stalled Six-Party Talks without a clear denuclearization commitment from North Korea. The year ended with little prospect of achieving a breakthrough in the diplomatic stalemate over North Korea’s nuclear programme.