

North Korea Nuclear IV: Satellite Launch

Background:

A crisis surrounding the launch of a satellite and a nuclear test by North Korea began on 11 March 2009 and lasted until 4 August 2009. Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States were the crisis actors. This was the fourth crisis related to North Korea's nuclear program (see cases #408, 441, and 450). Though Japan was involved in each of the previous three crises in this protracted conflict, this was the first in which Japan perceived a foreign policy crisis itself. It was also the first time since the end of World War II that Japan was involved in a crisis as a crisis actor.

PRE-CRISIS:

Rumors of a planned missile launch by North Korea began circulating in February 2009, when South Korean sources said that North Korea was assembling the Taepodong-2 rocket at a missile base on its east coast. On 24 February, the South Korean media reported that North Korean preparations for launching an experimental communications satellite were underway. Japan, South Korea, and the United States warned North Korea that the planned satellite launch would be in violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718 that called on North Korea to abandon its missile and nuclear programs. They also indicated that the Security Council would consider further action should North Korea go through with the launch. North Korea responded that the launch was part of a legitimate and peaceful space program and that shooting it down would be an act of war.

Summary:

On 11 March 2009, North Korea announced a time frame for its satellite launch, turning its previous general statements about a potential future launch into a concrete situation with a finite time frame. This triggered a crisis for Japan, South Korea, and the United States, all three of which believed that the satellite launch was actually a disguised missile test (a perception held by many other members of the international community as well). The following day the United States implemented the most important part of its major response by moving naval forces to South Korea to participate in joint military drills. The drills occurred that same day, and while they were a regularly scheduled annual exercise, two US ships capable of intercepting the North Korean launch remained after the drills were completed and were hosted by South Korea. This triggered a crisis for North Korea that same day. South Korea's major response to the crisis trigger consisted of hosting the US ships after the joint military drills were completed on 12 March, and most importantly, an announcement on 18 March that it would deploy an interception-capable destroyer to track North Korea's planned missile launch. Also on 18 March, Japan announced that it was considering deploying its own naval units capable of interception in coordination with the United States; this constituted the most important part of its major response. North Korea reiterated that an attempt to intercept the launch would be considered an act of war. Over the following two days, North Korea rejected further American food aid, despite continuing need, and detained two American journalists. Japan, South Korea, and the United States mobilized Aegis-equipped destroyers to potentially intercept debris from the launch in late March.

On 5 April, North Korea proceeded with the launch. The decision to go through with these drills represented North Korea's major response to its crisis trigger. No interception attempt or damage from debris occurred. North Korea claimed that the launch was a success and that the satellite was sent into orbit, but much of the international community contends that the payload fell into the Pacific Ocean without reaching orbit. The launch of the rocket was sharply condemned by the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and the United States as a clear violation of UNSC Resolution 1718.

On 13 April, the UN Security Council issued a presidential statement condemning the rocket launch, and declaring it a violation of Resolution 1718. In response, North Korea withdrew from the six-party talks and stated that it would no longer be bound by any agreements previously reached under the talks. On 16 April, North Korea expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and US monitors from the Yongbyon nuclear complex.

On 25 May, North Korea conducted its second underground nuclear test, which was met with condemnation from the international community. In response to the test, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1874 on June 12, formally condemning the test and tightening sanctions on North Korea. In July, a number of North Korean entities were designated for sanctions, which was a follow-up step in the implementation of Resolution 1874.

Tensions began to slowly fade until 4 August, when former US President Bill Clinton visited North Korea and secured the release of the US journalists detained by North Korea. This led to a return to pre-crisis levels of all four crisis actors' perceptions of threat, thus terminating the crisis.

References:

Arms Control Association; Associated Press; BBC; Guardian; KCNA; Korea Times; New York Times; Reuters; Telegraph; TIME magazine; Washington Post.