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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The 2017 Korean Missile Crisis

Policy Analysis Unit | August 2017

US North Korean Tensions Reach Boiling Point

Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

The aggressive rhetoric traded between Washington, DC and Pyongyang has reached levels not seen since the end of the Korean War, with both powers trading threats of a nuclear attack. Tensions escalated abruptly when North Korea test-fired two Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles in July. The incident coincided with the release of an intelligence assessment by the Defense Intelligence Agency in the United States, which suggested that North Korea had recently become capable of loading its long-range missiles with nuclear warheads, rendering Pyongyang a nuclear power¹. A further US intelligence report suggested that North Korea had also recently expanded its nuclear arsenal, estimating that Pyongyang now possessed 60 nuclear warheads, and that the country could now produce engines for ICBMs all on its own. In sum, North Korea could now strike the US mainland². This builds on North Korea's established capacity to strike at US sites elsewhere, including Hawaii and the US territory Guam, the site of an important naval base.

US Escalation

Pessimistic assessments by the US intelligence community drove Donald Trump to increase pressure on North Korea. The UN Security Council—including China and Russia—agreed unanimously to impose further sanctions on Pyongyang. The new sanctions are targeted at reducing up to one-third of Pyongyang's export revenues, which today stand at about US\$ 3 billion. These are largely composed of North Korean exports of fishery products, coal, iron ore and lead. The new sanctions also restrict the country's ability to export labor to other countries,

¹ Joby Warrick, Ellen Nakashima and Anne Fifield, "North Korea now making missile-ready nuclear weapons, U.S. analysts say," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2017, available online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/north-korea-now-making-missile-ready-nuclear-weapons-us-analysts-say/2017/08/08/e14b882a-7b6b-11e7-9d08-b79f191668ed_story.html

² Jonathan Landay, "U.S.: North Korea likely can make missile engines without imports," *Reuters*, August 15, 2017, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-intelligence-idUSKCN1AV2CK>

to establish new joint ventures with other countries or to invest further in existing ventures³. The most significant blow to North Korea has been China's acceptance of the new sanctions, as its greatest economic partner. Beijing's acquiescence signaled Chinese determination to avoid a trade war of its own with the US as the White House grows increasingly hostile.

In response to US belligerence, North Korea declared that the latest crisis was engineered by foreign powers, and warned of the violent retaliatory steps it would take. North Korea also claimed that its most recent missile tests demonstrated that the entire United States were now within range of its nuclear warheads, and emphasized its legitimate right to defend its borders⁴. Trump's response was to threaten that North Korean aggression would be met with "fire and fury"⁵. The rhetorical battling between the various sides reached fever pitch soon afterwards, with Pyongyang accusing the United States of wanting to wage a "preemptive" nuclear strike. To counter this, the North Korean leadership vowed to conduct a test of its nuclear-capable missiles by launching a missile on a target only a few kilometers away from Guam⁶. The Micronesian island, which is only 3,000 kilometers from the Korean Peninsula, is inhabited by around 160,000 people and houses a fleet of US naval submarines and a Coast Guard Station. While the North Korean statement was careful to make clear that Guam itself would not become a target, and no explicit mention was made of nuclear warheads, the stance by North Korea was enough to draw ire from Washington. Trump reacted by stating that "If [President Kim Jong-un] utters one threat in the form of an overt threat" or takes action against the United States territory of Guam or against America's allies, "he will truly regret it and he will regret it fast."⁷

³ Christian Shepherd and Brunnstrom, "Tillerson: U.S. can talk to North Korea if it stops missile tests," *Reuters*, August 6, 2017, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-idUSKBN1AN054>

⁴ :North Korea ready to teach U.S. 'severe lesson', says U.N. abused its authority," *Reuters*, August 7, 2017, available online

⁵ Steven Lee Myers and Choe Sang-Hun, "Trump's 'Fire and Fury' Threat Raises Alarm in Asia," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/world/asia/north-korea-trump-threat-fire-and-fury.html>

⁶ Euan McKirdy, Zachary Cohen and Ivan Watson, "North Korea says Guam strike plan ready within days," *CNN*, August 10, 2017, available online at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/09/politics/north-korea-considering-near-guam-strike/index.html>

⁷ Peter Baker, "Trump Says Military is 'Locked and Loaded' and North Korea will 'Regret' Threats," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/world/asia/trump-north-korea-locked-and-loaded.html>

Climbing down from a Tree

Heightened tensions between the United States and North Korea drove up anxieties surrounding an impending nuclear war both throughout East Asia and within the United States. This in turn precipitated mediation efforts to calm the situation, with North Korea's President Kim announcing on 15 August that his country had unilaterally decided to postpone the missile test launch to Guam pending a response from the US⁸. The US president praised Kim's "wise" move⁹, in line with statements by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that Washington would never be opposed in principle to a dialogue with North Korea, provided that Pyongyang withheld its testing of nuclear-capable missiles¹⁰. Trump endorsed these diplomatic overtures in a statement issued after a meeting of the US' National Security Council in New Jersey¹¹. The clearest illustration yet that Washington was prepared for dialogue to resolve the crisis came from an opinion piece authored jointly by the US Secretaries of Defense and State. Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson stated that the United States was not interested in regime change in North Korea but rather committed to a diplomatic resolution, and the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula"¹².

Other indicators of an American desire for a peaceful resolution to what has been dubbed the "Korean Nuclear Crisis" include media reports of a diplomatic back channel tying the US to North Korea. Specifically, these include reports that the Washington Special Representative for North Korea Policy, Joseph Yun, is in direct communication with prominent North Korean diplomat Pak Song Il, based at the UN. Reports in the media have indicated that these are part

⁸ Zachary Cohen and Joshua Berlinger, "North Korea's Kim to Trump: It's your move," *CNN*, August 15, 2017, available online: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/14/politics/mattis-north-korea-guam-game-on/index.html>

⁹ Makini Brice, "Donald Trump praises Kim Jong-un for a 'wise' decision on Guam," *Reuters*, August 16, 2017, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-idUSKCN1AW0VY>

¹⁰ Abigail Williams and Phil Helsel, "Tillerson Says North Korea Can Show Interest in Talks by Ending Missile Tests," *NBC News*, August 7, 2017, available online:

¹¹ Peter Baker, "Trump Says Military is 'Locked and Loaded' and North Korea will 'Regret' Threats"

¹² Jim Mattis and Rex Tillerson, "We're Holding Pyongyang to Account," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2017, available online from the White House website: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/14/mattis-and-tillerson-were-holding-pyongyang-account>

of a now long established “New York Channel” of communications between the two governments¹³.

Mutual Interest in Peace

The Kim Jong-Un regime undeniably wants to avoid a war with the United States, the outcome of which would be a foregone conclusion, regardless of whether or not nuclear weapons were launched. The United States also has a number of reasons for seeking to calm tensions with North Korea. These include:

- Opposition from US’ allies in East Asia, including South Korea, to further escalation on the Korean Peninsula. South Korean President Moon Jae-in has previously declared that his country would not allow its territory to be used for any military actions against North Korea¹⁴. South Korean anxieties over a possible conflict are understandable, given the massive casualty count likely on the Korean Peninsula in the event of an armed conflict. Even a conventional war is expected to cost tens of thousands of South Korean lives. The same applies to Japan which lies within range of North Korea’s short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs).
- Chinese opposition to war, rooted in its fear of regime collapse in the event of a far-reaching conflict threatening to push massive waves of refugees over its borders. An editorial in the English language *Global Times*, widely accepted as representing the official line from Beijing, suggested that China ought to make clear that it would come to Pyongyang’s defense if Washington were the primary attacker in a nuclear conflict. The article stated that Beijing should not stand idly by if the US tried to topple a China-friendly government in North Korea¹⁵.
- Opposition from the US diplomatic, military and intelligence communities to a strike on North Korea before all diplomatic and economic avenues are exhausted. This was the view crystallized by the op-ed penned by Mattis and Tillerson in the *Wall Street Journal*, and is

¹³ Matthew Pennington, “Beyond bluster, US, N. Korea in regular contact,” *Associated Press*, August 12, available online: <https://apnews.com/686ac7c761694b28b67793a1d8297145>

¹⁴ Zachary Cohen and Joshua Berlinger, “North Korea’s Kim to Trump: It’s your move”

¹⁵ “Trump warns N Korea that US military is ‘locked and loaded,’” *BBC*, August 11, 2017, available online: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40901746>

motivated by the knowledge of the large number of US nationals who live well within the range of North Korean missiles already. These include the 130,000 Americans who live in South Korea, another 30,000 US military personnel stationed in the De-militarized Zone between the two Korean states, as well as the residents and military personnel on Guam.

Conclusion

Both powers appear to have succeeded in containing tensions, for now. Each has also managed to secure part of its aims. Washington has forced North Korea to back down from its threat of launching a nuclear attack on the island of Guam. It has also managed to use its diplomatic influence to impose further sanctions on Pyongyang, even winning the consent of Russia and China.

Yet North Korea too has been able to assert its position in a number of ways. This includes its now proven capability to produce and launch long-range ballistic missiles, capable of threatening US territory, and has avoided paying too heavy a price. Furthermore, Pyongyang seems to have succeeded in one of its long-term strategic aims. It has brought the US to the negotiating table, for substantive dialogue which may ultimately lead to recognition of North Korea as a regional power. That would likely be followed by the negotiation of a non-aggression pact and the lifting of economic sanctions, in line with the type of deal Iran secured under Obama. It remains unclear if the Trump Administration, already burdened by a litany of domestic and foreign crises, will be willing to play by these rules, but what is certain is that North Korea has secured its place on the world stage.