

UNITED STATES AND NORTH KOREA RELATIONS: THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR MISSILES

POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A common fear in the United States during the Cold War era was that nuclear missiles could come and ruin anyone's life at any moment. During that time, the U.S. was well aware of Russia's proliferation of nuclear arms and took strategic action to stop it without creating a war. A similar issue with North Korea is developing, where proliferation is growing and the U.S. has not been able to deter it. The same fear from the Cold War era looms over everyone today.

Without intervention by the United States, amongst other countries, North Korea would not face any opposition to the development of nuclear weapons. China and South Korea may be able to intervene and make talks with North Korea, but the position of the United States as a global power makes it an utmost priority for them to be involved. Additionally, the fact that the change of leaders to Kim Jong-Un lead to an increase in missile tests means that the relationships between countries' leaders become a top priority. Through policies such as sanctions, peace talks, and former President Obama's idea of "strategic patience," the United States has many options it could utilize in order to help stop North Korea's nuclear proliferation. Ultimately, the United States must continue to take action in order to prevent North Korea's gains of military strength.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

After creating a strong allegiance with South Korea, the United States' role in the relations between the two Korea's remains clear: protect the South from North Korea. Following the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, which split Korea into two, the U.S. began stationing troops permanently in South Korea (Bong, 2017). The worry over North Korea has grown as Kim Jong-Un, the current leader, has made nuclear proliferation, or development of nuclear weapons, a priority. Peace was thought to be reached when North Korea signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1985, but tensions rose again when they withdrew in 2003. They conducted their first nuclear test three years later. Following the claim to power by Kim Jong-Un, North Korea has conducted 89 nuclear launch tests in 8 years. Where the U.S. determines a threat is typically driven by the presence of missiles (Metter, Reiter, 2013); therefore, the Korean peninsula has become a focal point for U.S. efforts abroad.

Successful and Failed Launches



WHO PLAYS A ROLE IN THE CONFLICT?

The proliferation in North Korea is not solely a United States problem, it represents a cross-section of many difficult relationships. South Korea and China both have some type of hand to play concerning the situation. A common misconception may be that the United States has put more effort into stopping North Korea and that South Korea's government cares little about what happens. In actuality, South Korea has become increasingly focused on defense, for they have gradually accepted more U.S. forces and developed other forms of defense cooperation (Choi, 2013). Complications arise as the respective countries decide what to prioritize: the stabilization of North Korea or denuclearization. Over time, South Korea has adopted a stance similar to China where they prioritize maintaining a healthy relationship in fears that too much pressure could destabilize the country (Yoo, 2012). China's ideology stems from a want to have some amount of control of the peninsula. There rests a fear that if instability leads to the reunification of the two Korea's, then there will be a stronger U.S.-South Korea alliance. Instead of letting that occur, China has attempted to discourage North Korea from escalating tension and has become a main economic supporter of the country. Their main goal is to prevent the region from collapsing and for North Korea to see them as an ally (Choi).

SANCTIONS, ARE THEY EFFECTIVE?

A common criticism is the use of sanctions to try and resolve international issues, especially when focusing on North Korea. According to an analysis done by the Council of Foreign Relations, there are numerous challenges that come with sanctions. Some believe that sanctions may cause Kim Jong-un to only advance proliferation, and others believe that sanctions do not deter his plans because they are not powerful enough. The key issue here is that sanctions can have an extreme impact on the normal citizens of North Korea. The people most affected are the average families, which live in a rigid class system that dictates their rations and jobs. Sanctions and extended periods of drought have left 25 million people malnourished and exacerbated issues with access to clean water and medicine (Albert).



WHAT CAN BE DONE?

When it comes to how the United States should deal with the situation of North Korea, many experts hold far too many different opinions. Some believe that the United States needs to relax its focus on North Korea as solely a nation with nuclear weapons because it gives them too much leverage (Miller, Bosworth, Hecker, 2012). Others still believe in former President Obama's idea on strategic patience, where hopefully with enough time and sanctions, North Korea will give up their attempts at the building their nuclear program (Chanlett-Avery, Rinehart, 2013). President Trump came out with the idea of using military aggression a year back but has now resolved to attempted peace talks with Kim Jong-un (Albert). Every single one of these solutions have clear problems. There is too much of a lack of consensus on relaxing America's priority of North Korea. Additionally, some experts believe that North Korea has little to no intentions to ever give up their nuclear weapons program (Chanlett-Avery, Rinehart). Finally, military aggression has little place to be taken seriously in this situation. An invasion of North Korea would only result in the loss of many American lives, America would not have the upper hand because of the difficult terrain of the peninsula, and there is the fear that China could get involved (Lee, 2017). Overall, the choices appear grim for how to deal with the situation; however, I fully support the continued usage of sanctions and patience in order to fix the problem. While sanctions do harm the people more than the actual regime, putting sanctions specifically on other nations, people, or businesses that do business with Kim Jong-Un may hold more leverage. Continuing the status quo with a focus on the North Korean leader will, hopefully, help to deter the threat of continued aggression from the peninsula.

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