



OCGG Security Section

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Effective Multilateralism

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Project
North Korea

The UN squaring up to North Korea

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EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

The adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 1718 on 14 October 2006 constitutes a watershed for the global WMD non-proliferation regime.

Less than a week after North Korea became the world's 9th nuclear power by conducting an under-

ground nuclear test, the Security Council imposed sanctions against the world's possibly greatest nuclear threat and certainly most challenging regime.

The agreement sets out the international community's first decisive measures since concerns about Pyongyang's military nuclear activities were first raised in the late 1980s.

MAIN POINTS

The international community has through UNSC resolution 1718 finally agreed firm steps for dealing with North Korea. This could enhance progress towards an effective multilateral non-proliferation policy. Success depends on maintaining international consensus and engaging the US, China, and Russia.

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THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR TEST

North Korea's decision to catch the world's attention by conducting a nuclear test was shaped by several factors at different levels. Understanding these is vital to crafting effective responses to not only this event but also future developments.

Global. The test must first of all be seen against the backdrop of global long term strategic developments. It is the culmination of two decades of growing tension between North Korea and the United States.

The US has increasingly been able to assume a leadership role in the international community by pressing for North Korean compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, IAEA obligations, UN demands, and international law. At the same time however the past imposition of unilateral sanctions and persistent refusal of bilateral negotiations by the US may have contributed to cornering North Korea in the isolated and desperate position that caused further escalation of the conflict.

Two broader issues keep hampering non-proliferation efforts. One is hypocriti-

cal inequality. The US and other nuclear powers are not only not disarming their own arsenals but actually developing new generations of warheads and delivery vehicles. Another is power balance. Faced with a US that has declared hostile intent and a track record of going to war in violation of international law, WMD do in fact provide an effective deterrent, as seen in the contrast between US caution towards a nuclear North Korea and hawkishness against a non-nuclear Iran

Regional. The test was timed to take place in the context of several key political events in Northeast Asia. It happened on the day following the anniversary of Kim Jong Il's accession as General Secretary of the National Workers Party and a day prior to the 61st anniversary of the founding of the party. It also coincides with South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki-Moon's election as UN secretary general and new Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's first visit to Seoul and Beijing.

Bilateral. The test was carried out in the wake of emerging cracks in the relations between North Korea and China. It may be a result of North Korea's growing discontent with Sino-North Korean relations and defiance towards China. The growing rift may have loosened China's ability to constrain North Korea.

Domestic. The decision to conduct the test must also be seen in light of rising tensions between hardliners and moderates within the North Korean leadership. It may have been triggered in the course of Kim Jong Il's attempt to maintain control over rivaling factions by interchangeably signaling reconciliation and resilience.

THE UN RESPONSE

UNSC resolution 1718, which imposes a complete embargo on military assets and luxury goods, is the first constraining measure the UN has imposed on North Korea. It does not authorize the use of force to impose the will of the international community on North Korea but rather applies pressure to urge Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks with its neighbors. The US initially tabled a harsher draft but this had to be watered down to meet Russian and Chinese concerns.

The resolution breaks new ground in two ways. First, simply because it was passed, which means both China and Russia conceded to create a historical precedent, unlike both in 1989, when the US reportedly learnt about the defueling of a North Korean reactor, and in 1994, when IAEA inspectors found that North Korea pos-

sessed more plutonium than previously stated. Second, because it was passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which shows the gravity of the threat and the seriousness of the response have reached an unprecedented level.

UNSC resolution 1718 is a carefully crafted sophisticated document. As French ambassador to the UN Jean-Marc de la Sablière puts it, it shows the "UN responsibility" in the matter. This is good news for the global non-proliferation regime since for the first time the whole international community and not only a US led coalition is taking active steps to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue.

CHINA AND RUSSIA – LAST STRAW OR NEW STRATEGY?

Chinese and Russian support for the resolution was not a foregone conclusion. Their willingness to apply pressure on North Korea was long considered unpredictable. Chinese ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya also qualified the sanctions as "firm but appropriate". And Russia only accepted the resolution at the very last minute. As noted by several analysts, Russia may be even more reluctant than China to endorse any move that

eventually may lead to the use of force against North Korea.

In the end both countries showed they are prepared to be pragmatic and flexible in contributing to a common international position on North Korea. It remains to be seen whether voting for the resolution represents a positive change in the Chinese and Russian strategies towards a closer partnership with the rest of the UN Security Council or whether it was the last straw they will concede to the international community. The global non-proliferation regime will be tested further by both the ongoing conflict with Iran and further developments in North Korea.

US PROLIFERATION SECURITY INITIATIVE VS UN TRACK

As soon as the resolution was adopted, US ambassador to the UN John Bolton didn't miss the opportunity to claim it also was a victory for the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) launched by the US in 2003.

However, although the resolution and the PSI share the goal of preventing nuclear related materials being transported

to or from North Korea, they have little beyond that in common. The resolution, adopted by a 15-0 vote, is a multilateral and institutional measure as opposed to the US-led and ad-hoc PSI. That this matters was seen in the recent protests in Seoul which were directed not only against North Korea for testing their nuclear capabilities but also against what was perceived as a US attempt to exploit the event to get South Korea into the PSI. US campaigning for the PSI could not only put Seoul in a very difficult position but also undermine the progress with regards to Beijing and Moscow and ultimately endanger the entire UN process.

The Security Council should therefore make it clear that UN discussions on further measures against North Korea are separate from the PSI. All parties are also well advised to keep in mind that international security is at stake and that they therefore should look beyond narrow national interests. How to handle North Korea is a common challenge to the world.

LOOKING AHEAD

North Korea has already responded to the sanctions in its usual fashion by emphasizing that it "totally rejected the proposal" and by pointing out the US as

the primary culprit. It also indicated that “further pressure from the US would be regarded as a “declaration of war”. This could mean that their 1994 statement than “any sanctions could mean war” was just blackmail. However Pyongyang may also conclude it cannot afford to let the sanctions pass without reacting as the credibility of the regime would be at stake.

In the case of further North Korean provocations, which unfortunately seem likely, the Security Council will be faced with a serious challenge in responding robustly while maintaining peace. A new war on the Korean peninsula or involving Japan, which could result in hundreds of thousands of deaths, cannot be allowed to happen.

After imposing sanctions and presenting demands, the main goal of the Security Council should now be to avoid escalation and defuse the crisis. It should make it a top priority to maintain the consensus achieved so far in the international community and narrow the differences remaining among the US, China, and Russia.

If the UN manages to sustain international consensus for effective multilateralism, China applies its leverage, especially over

oil supplies, and the US permits bilateral discussions, perhaps discreetly at the margins of renewed Six Party Talks, then that might just be the combination of carrots and sticks required to persuade Kim Jong Il it is in his interest to abandon the bomb and rejoin the world.

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