United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency
Background Guide
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The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is the world’s central intergovernmental forum for technical and scientific cooperation in the nuclear field. Created in 1957 in response to increased fears and expectations generated by the discoveries of nuclear technology, the objectives of the IAEA’s dual mission were to promote and control the Atom.¹ Today, the Agency works for the safe, secure, and peaceful uses of nuclear science, contributes to international peace and security, and promotes the United Nations sustainable development goals.²

I. Nuclear Non-Proliferation in DPRK and Stability of Korean Peninsula

Statement of the Issue:

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) is known to have an active and increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program, and is believed to have chemical and biological weapon capabilities. The country’s nuclear program can be traced back to the Cold War, when the outbreak of the Korean War convinced Kim Il Sung of the need to amass an arsenal potent enough to defend against the United States. In the wake of the Korean War’s armistice, the Soviet Union assisted North Korea in the research needed to achieve nuclear capability.³ Despite the international community’s efforts to curb proliferation of nuclear states, North Korea has withdrawn from or chosen to ignore international non-proliferation treaties and conventions. Sanctions, too, have proved minimally effective, as North Korea continues to forge ahead in its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) activities.⁴

North Korea’s nuclear program is of concern to the stability of the Korean Peninsula and of East Asia, more broadly. Foreign policy toward North Korea has emphasized nuclear deterrence, a strategy aimed at discouraging an adversary from taking an unwanted action by
raising the costs of that action.\textsuperscript{5} Generally speaking, the main objective of deterrence has been to discourage the North from launching a military operation to invade South Korea; the U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance has been the primary instrument of showcasing a formidable defense posture that would discourage provocations from the North.\textsuperscript{6} At the same time, however, the joint military exercises carried out by the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command are controversial for the fact that they aggravate the DPRK, thus exacerbating the security situation in times of heightened tension.\textsuperscript{7}

**History:**

As North Korea struggled to compete with the South’s economic development of the late 60s and early 70s, significant external debt was being accumulated from the purchase of complete factories from Europe and Japan. In an attempt to raise hard currency, the DPRK began counterfeiting American dollars and the proliferation of WMD.\textsuperscript{8} In this process, North Korea became known as a “rogue state.” In December 1985, the DPRK ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), a multilateral international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology. Despite the agreement, the failing economy and widespread famine resulting from the loss of Soviet support pushed the DPRK further along the secret development of a nuclear program, which it hoped would serve as a bargaining counter to use in extracting economic assistance from those it deemed its enemy. It also continued the development of WMD, which were exported to rogue states in exchange for foreign currency.

In 1992, the two Koreas signed a Joint Declaration on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, agreeing not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons.

The DPRK had submitted its initial report to IAEA under the NPT Safeguards Agreement in 1992, after which inspections began. Inconsistencies between the DPRK's initial declaration and the agency's findings were evident, suggesting that the DPRK possessed undeclared plutonium.\textsuperscript{9} IAEA requested access to additional information and to two sites which seemed to be related to the storage of nuclear waste the following year, yet Pyongyang rejected request for further inspections by the United Nations IAEA, furthermore announcing its intent to leave the NPT. Talks ensued with U.S. diplomats in New York, and the country thus suspended its withdrawal. North Korea agreed to comply with the UN's specified safeguards and thus, the first IAEA inspections took place in March 1994.\textsuperscript{10}
The development of nuclear weapons and proliferation of WMD led to confrontation with the U.S., one instance of which led to the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. North Korea committed to freezing its illicit plutonium weapons program and halting construction on nuclear reactors, in exchange for the United States promise to provide sanctions relief, aid, oil, and two light-water reactors for civilian use. The Agreement lapsed under the Bush Administration; the DPRK was accused of violating the framework by starting a program to enrich uranium, while the U.S. was accused of failing to follow through with promises. By January 2003, North Korea disrupted IAEA monitoring and expelled UN inspectors, officially exiting the NPT.

Deterioration of stability promoted a 6 party multilateral dialogue -- China, North Korea, U.S., Japan, Russia, South Korea -- in April 2003 with the aim of ending Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. In the 4th round of talks, known as the Six Party Talks, the parties signed a Statement of Principles, whereby North Korea would abandon its nuclear programs and return to the NPT and the IAEA safeguards regime. The parties also agreed that the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, prohibiting uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing, should be observed and implemented. Despite the diplomatic efforts of the Six Party Talks, North Korea shocked the international community by conducting nuclear tests in 2006. The Six Parties reconvened in 2007, this time agreeing on the Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement, again committing North Korea to abandoning its nuclear weapons and existing programs and to restore the NPT and international IAEA safeguards.

Further rounds of Six Party Talks commenced, with promises being made and subsequently broken. From 2010 onward, efforts at denuclearization are marred by the North’s uranium enrichment program and further nuclear tests. The first year of Trump’s presidency is plagued with tension, as the DPRK claims it can strike the mainland U.S. with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles and North Korea is redesignated as a state sponsor of terrorism. The next year, however, breakthroughs with Kim’s ‘visit’ to meet with ROK President Moon and the meeting between Kim and Trump in Singapore suggest a desire to move toward peace and stability.

Analysis:
The tenuous history of North Korea’s commitment to international agreements can make discerning North Korea’s objective of developing nuclear weapons difficult. Certainly, possessing nuclear weapons serves multiple aims concurrently. For one, they deter the possibility of a U.S. attack. They also serve as an effective bargaining tool for coercive
diplomacy, to ensure concessions and diplomatic benefits. The development of a nuclear program also lends credibility to the regime; state media helps to portray an image of Kim’s infallibility, thus adding to his aura of power and influence. Achieving these important aims is instrumental in ensuring the very survival of the regime itself.

The Trump Administration broke from diplomatic norms when President Trump became the first sitting American president to have a face-to-face meeting with a leader from North Korea. The historical summit took place in Singapore in June 2018, with Trump unilaterally agreeing to stop the annual U.S.-ROK military exercises and signaling intention to remove American troops from the South. Kim’s promise to ‘denuclearize’ was in line with commitments from previous North Korean leaders. Two years later, U.S. and DPRK relations seem to have deteriorated, as North Korea’s Foreign Minister stated on the anniversary of the Singapore summit, Pyongyang will remain focused on its strategic goal “to build up more reliable force to cope with the long-term military threats from the U.S.”

Prospects for lasting stability on the Korean peninsula largely depend on the U.S.’s commitment to maintaining a presence. Trump’s idea of reducing the U.S. military presence in South Korea plays into the larger discussion of defense cost-sharing; the Trump Administration has expressed concern that South Korea should be contributing more to joint defense efforts. Several rounds of negotiations have taken place, ultimately without coming to a concrete consensus. Disagreement over cost-sharing can undermine military preparedness to deal with a threat from the North. Furthermore, the demands from the Trump Administration have caused the Japanese and South Koreans to more openly discuss options for becoming more self-reliant in national defense. Such considerations have far reaching consequences for altering the current status quo of the security environment in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion:

For decades, the U.S. and South Korea have pushed for ‘denuclearization,’ meaning a dismantling of North Korea’s program, carried out under the eyes of independent observers. The distrust and broken promises can be due to the fact that the North views denuclearization in a different light, with the concept extending to the entirety of the Korean peninsula; the American presence in South Korea is viewed as a nuclear military threat. The fundamental differences in approach clearly allow either side little room for compromise. But as nuclear weapons remain paramount to North Korea’s vital interests, the question remains: Can peace and stability be achieved despite the nonrealistic prospects of denuclearization? Rather than emphasizing denuclearization as an immediate demand, it should be recognized that
denuclearization must be a long-term process, if at all possible. In the meantime, stability can be more achievable through trade relations and diplomatic engagements.

Questions:

1. Does diplomatic engagement with North Korea legitimize the state?
2. Do more research on the cost-sharing demands of the Trump Administration. What agreement do you see to be fair?
3. Is denuclearization a prerequisite to peace? How can both parties move towards this as a reality?
Resources

1 “History.” International Atomic Energy Agency, https://www.iaea.org/about/overview/history


11 Ibid.


II. Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East/Iran’s Nuclear Proliferation

Statement of the Issue:

The United Nations and the IAEA recognize the importance of nuclear non-proliferation to enhance international peace and security. To ensure stability in the region, the IAEA has established safeguards for States to comply with as a way to monitor the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.¹

While government officials have not publicly conducted a nuclear test and will neither admit nor deny having nuclear weapons, it is universally believed that Israel possesses nuclear arms and is the only country in the region with this capability. During the 62nd General Conference of the IAEA, Mr. Zeev Snir, Director General of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, stated that Iran and Syria serve as imminent threats to Israel in the region and therefore force Israel to take action to protect its nuclear facilities which are in line with IAEA safety guidelines. Israel encourages regional cooperation and is willing to collaborate with all of its neighboring countries on safety and security issues.²

Iran’s nuclear proliferation is the subject of current focus in the Middle East. Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement reached in 2015, Iran was to suspend their nuclear program and testing facilities. However, as recently as March of 2020, a leaked document to member States claimed that an IAEA request to access two unidentified sites had been denied. The IAEA also reported that Iran, now unrestricted from the JCPOA, has almost tripled its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, leaving it only 30 kg short to have the amount experts claim are required to produce a warhead. Iran insists its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes.³

History:

Signed in 1968 and entered into force in 1970, the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was a landmark international treaty whose objective was to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, while promoting cooperation in using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The ultimate goal was (and still is) to achieve nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament. The treaty established a safeguard system under the responsibility of the IAEA, which is used to verify compliance with the treaty through regular inspections of nuclear facilities.⁴

Four years later, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 3236 calling for the Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ) to prohibit nuclear weapons in the Middle
East. The resolution has been adopted every year since then. In the following decades, many other resolutions have been introduced to reach the same accord. In 1991 at the Madrid Conference, the Arms Control and Regional Security group was established to provide a unilateral mechanism to move the international community to MENWFZ. However, this pursuit collapsed in 1995 due to complications in the peace process and the ongoing disagreement between Israel and Egypt on when to place a discussion of a WMD-free-zone on the agenda.\footnote{5}

Iran’s interest in nuclear technology and its nuclear program date back to the 1950s, when the Shah of Iran received technical assistance under the U.S. Atoms for Peace program. This program was an initiative under the Eisenhower administration that opened up nuclear research to countries that had not previously possessed nuclear capabilities. In 1967, the United States supplied the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (TNRC) with a small reactor fueled by highly-enriched uranium. By 1973, the Shah released ambitious plans that called for significant nuclear power by the end of the 20th Century, as Iran established contracts with foreign suppliers and invested billions in education and training for future personnel.

All of this progress came to an abrupt halt in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution that toppled the Shah and established the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, who was opposed to nuclear technology. This new position in leadership, along with most of Iranian talent having fled the country, resulted in the near disintegration of the Iranian nuclear program post-1979. However, following the end of a costly war with Iraq, Iranian leaders reshifted their focus back to developing nuclear technology. In 1987 and 1990, Iran signed nuclear cooperation agreements with Pakistan and China. In 1992, Russia and Iran signed a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement and suddenly Iran was becoming a major world player in nuclear technology. After revealing the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in 2002, Iran entered into negotiations with the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the U.K.), and agreed to cooperate with the IAEA to temporarily suspend enrichment activities.

The ensuing years resulted in Iran continuing to carry on small-scale tests and hiding blueprints about potential warhead capabilities, all while facing sanctions from violating the Paris Agreements in 2004. These sanctions grew in the 2010s, with the United States designating the Government of Iran as “entities of money laundering concern.” In 2013, a U.S. Congressional Committee approved legislation to further limit Iran’s oil exports and access to foreign currency reserves. That same year, Iran experienced a change in leadership when Hassan Rouhani, a moderate wanting to “elevate Iran’s position on national interest and lifting of oppressive sanctions,” won the presidential election.
After almost two years of negotiations, the P5 +1 States and Iran signed the JCPOA, or more commonly referred to as the Iran deal. Essentially, Iran was to suspend its nuclear program in exchange for a halt on economic sanctions; the US and EU lifted oil and trade-related sanctions as well as sanctions placed upon Iran’s banking and financial system.

In 2018, the U.S. administration under Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and began to re-impose nuclear sanctions on Iran, despite public support of the deal from the remaining P5 States and the UN. The IAEA released a detailed report in 2019 declaring that Iran was in accordance with IAEA agreements, yet the extent of current actions being taken by Iran have yet to be determined.6

Analysis:

While foreign policy experts believed that the U.S. could have negotiated for more stringent regulations on Iran’s nuclear program in the JCPOA, it was widely recognized as a step in the right direction toward nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East. Many in the international community actually believed that the agreement achieved the desired outcome for Iran’s nuclear program. However, President Donald Trump saw major flaws in the deal, highlighting the lack of controls on Iran’s nuclear ballistic missile program and the only temporary suspension of Iran’s uranium enrichment program until 2030.

When the U.S. announced the decision to pull out of the JCPOA, the Trump administration created a massive divide among Iran’s political elite. President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, known as reformists who favored improved relations with the United States, were now seen as “politically dead.” Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei publicly chastised Rouhani, questioning why he signed the JCPOA in the first place. The deal they promised Iranian citizens was now non-existent with the United States, and the hardliners, those who view the U.S. as a rival, were now able to claim more legitimacy.

It is also important to note that the JCPOA was a multilateral accord– even though the United States has pulled out, the deal remains in force with seven of the original eight parties still adhering to the agreement. However, the lack of a U.S. presence has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of the deal, while putting the countries who are still in the JCPOA at risk. Iran’s economy is also more likely to be harmed by the new U.S. sanctions because they are still committed to the other countries that kept the agreement.

On September 14th, 2019, Abqaiq, a major Saudi oil facility, along with another oil field were rocked by a series of explosions. The air attacks knocked out more than half of Saudi Arabia’s output- five percent of the global oil supply.7 While Yemen’s Houthi rebels initially
claimed responsibility, the number of impact points, the sophistication of the strike, and the amount of distance all indicated this claim to be untrue. Saudi Arabia has also produced photos that show the wreckage of a missile with striking similarities to Iranian technology. While the UN was unable to officially confirm Iran’s involvement, it is widely assumed in the international community that Iran was behind the attacks.

**Conclusion:**

The threat of a more nuclear Middle East increased when the United States withdrew from the JCPOA. Iran shows an anti-U.S. sentiment and has taken action to spread this ideology throughout the region, and further development of its nuclear program strongly aligns with Iran’s interest in becoming the regional hegemon. With its economy crippled, Iran is biding its time and waiting to see if the U.S. experiences a change in leadership this November. The outcome of the election could determine whether there is a change in policy toward Iran and has strong implications for the stability of the region for the foreseeable future.

**Questions:**

1. Is nuclear non-proliferation the best path forward for peace in the region?
2. How can the international community do their part to prevent nuclear proliferation in the region?
3. What is the best option for the United States moving forward? Should there be efforts focused on drafting a second Iran deal?
Resources


