Nuclear proliferation in North Korea

Nuclear proliferation is the spread of nuclear weapons and technology to countries that do not already have them. The first nuclear bomb was produced by the United States in the “Manhattan Project” program nearing the end of WWII. The United State remained the sole nuclear power until 1949 when the Soviet Union tested its first Atomic bomb. The competition between these countries during the Cold War (1947-1962) led to the development of the more powerful Hydrogen bomb. At the height of this competition, the United States and the Soviet Union together possessed enough nuclear bombs that were strong enough to destroy all life on earth multiple times. With the growing idea of nuclear proliferation, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower launched the “Atoms for Peace” program in 1953. In 1957 the Atoms for Peace program led to the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a United Nations organization that promotes the safe and peaceful use of nuclear technology. In response to the threat of nuclear war, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), was created by the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China in 1968. North Korea joined the NPT in 1985, then withdrew in 2003, and conducted (known) nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, 2016, and 2017. According to American scholar Kenneth Waltz, the spread of nuclear weapons could generate stability and peace, because nuclear powers will be deterred from attacking each other by the threat of nuclear
retaliation. Others, however, have argued that nuclear proliferation inevitably increases the risk of a catastrophic nuclear explosion, whether deliberate or accidental.

North Korea has a military nuclear weapons program and, as of 2020, has around 30-40 nuclear weapons. As of September 8th, 2022, the North Korean parliament passed legislation governing the use of nuclear weapons, which North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, described as a step to solidify the country’s status as a nuclear power. For years, the United States and the international community have tried to negotiate an end to North Korea’s nuclear and missile development. Until 2022, North Korea’s stated policy position was that nuclear weapons “will never be abused or used as a means for a preemptive strike.” This policy changed in 2022 with a law approved by the Supreme People’s Assembly, which states that in the case of an attack against the top leadership or the nuclear command and control system, nuclear attacks against the enemy will be launched automatically. Kim Jong-un made it very clear that the country will resist all international pressures to give up its nuclear weapons. North Korea has a long history of proliferation to developing countries: missile and nuclear trade with Pakistan; missile sales to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen; and chemical weapons assistance to Syria.

North Korea’s announcement makes the prospect of denuclearization talks much slimmer. As of right now, however, the chances of war on the Korean Peninsula remain low. The biggest concern as of right now is the likelier possibility of North Korea selling Nuclear and missile technology to countries in the Middle East. Relying on Israeli counter-proliferation (the prevention of countries gaining access to nuclear weapons) to prevent Weapons of Mass Destruction acquisition in the Middle East is a faulty strategy. North Korean Proliferation could create a new nuclear-armed state in the Middle East and could make for a wider conflict occurring in the region. A nuclear weapon detonation in or near a populated area would cause
massive death and destruction, trigger large-scale displacement, and cause long-term harm to health and well-being, as well as long-term damage to the environment, infrastructure, economic development, and social order. The risks to a nuclear weapon detonation stem notably from the vulnerability of nuclear weapon command and control networks to human error and cyber-attacks, the maintaining of nuclear weapons at high levels of alert, with thousands of weapons ready to be launched within minutes, and the dangers of access to nuclear weapons by non-state actors.

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