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# Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

## Background

Ever since the Korean wars of the 1950s, the relationship between the DPRK and the US has been difficult. Each side has been deeply suspicious of the other. However, talks have taken place over the years and agreements have been reached.

When the US withdrew its nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, the DPRK agreed to fulfil its obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that it had signed in 1985. These included a safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), which was finalised early in 1992. However, there were problems over the inspection of some nuclear facilities (including some spent nuclear fuel being removed without IAEA supervision as required under the NPT) and in June 1994, the DPRK announced that it would not co-operate with IAEA inspectors.

Talks between the DPRK and the US led to the 1994 Agreed Framework. This meant that the DPRK agreed to bring a halt to its nuclear programme and that the US would help develop a nuclear power station to be completed by 2003. In the meantime, the US would supply around 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil as an alternative energy source. The Agreed Framework also meant that the DPRK had to fulfil all its obligations under the NPT and that the US would not target the DPRK with nuclear weapons.

## The roots of the current situation

During the Clinton administration discussions continued and proposals were put forward. That all changed when George W Bush became President. As well as calling for increased inspections and complaining about the DPRK's missile programme, the Bush Administration did nothing about providing the nuclear reactor. It did, however, insist on the DPRK adhering to the Agreed Framework. The DPRK made it clear that if the US did not supply alternative energy sources then it would have to restart its nuclear power programme and ignore the Agreed Framework.

The DPRK was, of course, one of the countries

named in Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech in January 2002. It was also one of the countries named as targets in the Nuclear Posture Review. Towards the end of 2002 the DPRK revealed that it had produced highly enriched uranium and that it had the right to develop nuclear weapons in response to threats from the US. After that announcement, the US suspended all of its obligations under the Agreed Framework until the DPRK's nuclear programme was halted. The war of words continued with no attempt to set up any talks to try to solve the problems.

In January 2003, the DPRK threw out the IAEA inspectors and announced its withdrawal from the NPT. It then test launched missiles and talked about pre-emptive strikes. The world was distracted from what was happening with the DPRK by the war on Iraq - although many did wonder why the response to the two countries was so different. Later in 2003, the US along with Japan and Australia looked at changing international law so that they could stop DPRK ships suspected of carrying missile parts. The DPRK responded by threatening all out war that would include Japan.

## Consequences

The tension in the whole region is escalating almost daily. The DPRK says that it has reprocessed enough spent fuel rods to produce about six nuclear weapons. Although this has not been verified it should be taken seriously. Reports from the US claim that there is a draft plan for a possible war with the DPRK. Some of the proposed scenarios include surveillance flights close to DPRK airspace forcing aircraft to scramble and use up valuable, scarce fuel, and conducting a surprise large military exercise designed to make people head for bunkers and, again, use up valuable stores of food and water.

China and Russia are urging talks to begin and, along with many other countries in the region, are pushing for a nuclear weapon-free Korean Peninsula. This has to be the way forward. Otherwise, the consequences for the region are truly terrifying. We are already seeing the possibility of nuclear weapons being introduced to other countries in response to the DPRK threat. Not so long ago, any talk of nuclear

weapons or an increased, more assertive military force in Japan would not have been taken seriously. But things have changed. There is a risk of military competition with China, a country not on particularly good terms with Japan. The annual defence budget of Japan is around \$47 billion.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the news that there is talk of a nuclear weapons option for Australia. Reports claim that a former senior government science adviser says that a new A\$600 million reactor will give Australia the technology to launch a nuclear weapons programme. There is also the possibility of the US supplying tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a regional crisis.

### **Summary**

The DPRK may or may not have nuclear weapons. Nobody is absolutely certain. There are those who think that the poor economic conditions of the country and the low level of technology make it unlikely. There are also those who think that it has more than it is saying.

Much of the language coming from the DPRK and

South Korea is typical of what happens when tensions rise between neighbouring states. South Korea and Japan have joined the United States in saying that they would not tolerate the DPRK having nuclear weapons. There should be immediate talks to try to resolve the problems. These talks should include China, Japan, Australia and the Association of South East Asian Nations as well as the DPRK and US.

The current situation highlights the ongoing problem that the world cannot put off dealing with any longer. As long as the possession of nuclear weapons is justified by the declared nuclear weapon states (UK, US, France, Russia and China) and they are allowed to spread (India, Pakistan and Israel), then other states will want them too. The hypocrisy of allowing some countries to have nuclear weapons and doing everything possible to stop others joining the club, even going to war, must end. The bottom line is that no country can justify the possession of nuclear weapons. Whether it is for 'defence' or a response to the action of another country, there is no good reason at all for any country to research, develop, test or deploy a nuclear weapon.