

The Perennial North Korea Problem at the G7 Summit

JOANNA WEIR
The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

North Korea's security policy – specifically their weapons development programme – has been a perennial problem. It has consistently been on the agenda at G7/8 summits, yet never resolved. This briefing explores the history of the G7/8's tackling of the North Korea problem, and argues that, despite decisive rhetoric at this year's G7 summit in Taormina that the problem will be settled once and for all, it will almost certainly make its way onto next year's security agenda with little or no progress made.

Background

The recent security concerns regarding North Korea are hardly unprecedented. Since its first missile test in 1984, North

Korea has [conducted](#) 14 missile test firings, including 6 ballistic missile firings, five nuclear tests, and one claimed hydrogen bomb test. However, treatment of the most recent ballistic missile tests in the last three months – where in one case, three missiles fell into the Exclusive Economic Zone of Japan – has caused significant alarm. As well as the expected statement of [condemnation](#) from the primary international body for dealing with such developments, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), who also called for relevant countries to double-down on sanctions, some observers have noted that the situation may be more tumultuous than usual due to the [“instability”](#) of US President Donald Trump regarding foreign relations. Some observers have even predicted that

ultimately the situation could catalyse a [third world war](#).

How recent summits have addressed North Korea

Security concerns regarding North Korea have featured on the agenda at [all](#) G7/8 summits in the last ten years. Every G7/8 summit since 2007 has addressed North Korean security policy, specifically their weapons development programme. North Korean nuclear testing and ballistic missile launches have been consistently condemned, with the North Korean government being “urged” and “demanded” to give up its nuclear programme, engage in the Six Party Talks, and halt ballistic missile testing. These rhetorical statements have been included in the joint declarations released at the end of each summit. However, none of the statements have referenced the failures of the previous condemnations to have an impact on North Korea’s activities, let

alone suggest that a more rigorous approach is needed.

The stagnation of the issue is clear in the language of the statements also. The 2011, 2014, 2015 and 2016 statements on North Korea all began with the phrase “We condemn [North Korea’s activities]” or “We strongly condemn [North Korea’s activities]”. The 2012 statement on North Korea opened with: “We continue to have deep concerns about provocative actions of the DPRK”, which, in the 2013 statement, progressed to: “We remain deeply concerned about North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes”.

The statements about North Korea from previous G7/8 summits are mostly limited to these rhetorical response; however, they have occasionally made some reference to previously agreed commitments to action. The 2014 statement did not propose any new action but did call for the continuation of full UN sanctions. The 2010 statement did not propose action on the North Korean weapons programme

specifically, but did propose practical action in response to the sinking of the South Korean Cheonan ship – which, it was concluded, was the result of a North Korean attack.

On the whole, G7/8 responses to North Korean weapons development activities have so far been characterised by reiterations of previous condemnations, and re-affirmations of resolutions made by other bodies such as the UNSC. Progress on the issue is not apparent. However, there are two reasons why this year's G7 had the potential to change this.

Firstly, the last twelve months mark a year of significant action on the part of North Korea in developing its missile capabilities, with increasing frequency of tests, including missiles entering Japan's air defence zone. The latest series of weapons tests have occurred in close proximity to the time of the Taormina Summit, with the [failed](#) ballistic missile test being carried out just six weeks before the start of the summit, and [another](#) medium-range missile test

conducted just days before. Verbal [threats](#) from Pyongyang have also continued right up to the week of the summit.

Secondly, the G7 in Taormina marks the first for US President Donald Trump, who has used [strong language](#) regarding North Korea, and is thought to be more [unstable](#) and [unpredictable](#) than previous leaders. This is important as the US has long been a close ally of Japan – a country at [high risk](#) if North Korea chooses to use its weapons to launch an attack – and the summit gives Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, along with the other G7 members, the opportunity to take a fresh approach to the North Korea issue.

Progress at the G7 in Taormina?

The G7 summit in Taormina saw two key meetings where the issue of North Korean weapons development could be progressed. The bilateral session between Abe and Trump and the multilateral session between all the G7

member state leaders. Progress seemed promising as the day before the start of the summit, Trump [promised](#) that the North Korea issue would be settled: “It will be solved. You can bet on that.” Additionally, for the first time, the North Korea issue was also given top priority on the agenda, with momentum for addressing the issue building since the previous G7 summit, which was chaired by Prime Minister Abe in Japan.

In the 55 minute US-Japan bilateral meeting (which overran by 25 minutes), the majority of time, 30 minutes, was dedicated to the discussion of North Korea. According to the White House, they agreed upon increasing existing sanctions applied to the North Korean regime, although this prospect of action was tempered by Maruyama Norio, Abe’s spokesman, who would only confirm the consideration of more rigorous sanctions in the event of further provocations from North Korea. Furthermore, Mr Maruyama emphasised the Japanese position that impactful

sanctions depend upon cooperation from China.

Defensive action, in the form of increased spending on Japan’s Self Defence Forces, was confirmed by Prime Minister Abe. This will include the joint development, between the US and Japan, of an advanced model interceptor missile. In a less clear statement, Japan has supported the position, outlined by Trump, that when it comes to North Korea “all options are on the table”. It is difficult to believe that options, such as a pre-emptive strike or invasion, are in fact “on the table”. It is likely that such rhetoric is really just another way of saying “we don’t have a comprehensive plan.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the end, the [joint communiqué](#) between all members featured the same statements of condemnation and reiterations of commitment to UNSC resolutions as the past ten years of communiqués, with no additions proposing action or a new approach.

Whether measured or extreme, more decisive action being agreed at the G7 in Taormina regarding the North Korea weapons issue seemed like it might be a realistic prospect. Indeed, the bilateral meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Abe has provided some practical plans of action. However, any strength in the rhetoric that has come out of the talks seems to have been counterbalanced by more reserved statements and caveats, and the practical action is limited to defensive reinforcement. As such, the North Korea

issue still remains very far from anything resembling resolution, and is a problem likely to appear in the same form, or worse, next year. When it comes to the G7, North Korea's weapons programme is a perennial weed, and the member states' leaders are poor gardeners.

Joanna Weir is a Masters student in International Relations at the University of Sheffield.