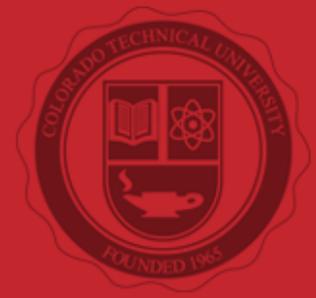


# Global Security Series – The North Korean Threat



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Recent tensions between North Korea on the one hand, and South Korea and the United States on the other, have led to serious concern that war might again break out on the Korean Peninsula. This backgrounder is designed to provide basic information on North Korea, and it will briefly address the issues of: North Korea's worldview, the North Korean military, the country's nuclear program, the regime, and finally, the country's economy and population.

## **North Korea's Worldview**

According to some studies of North Korea, despite the fact that the country is ostensibly a communist dictatorship (and communism, among other things, divides human society by classes, not by nationality, race or ethnicity), it is obsessed with the idea of Korean racial purity and sees itself as the guardian of the Korean race and culture.<sup>1</sup> If this analysis is accurate, it means that the regime ensconced in the country's capital, Pyongyang, views its role in an irrational fashion (i.e., protecting the Korean race against those who would supposedly corrupt it), rather than safeguarding the welfare of its people. This harks back somewhat to Nazi ideology, and it was this same desire to supposedly safeguard the Aryan race that led Adolf Hitler to embark on a course of destruction against others and ultimately against Germany itself. This aspect of North Korea's worldview can lead to further concerns that the country may lash out at its perceived enemies (the United States, South Korea and Japan) without any rational reason for doing so.

## **North Korea's Military Might**

North Korea has one of the world's largest armies with 1.2 million men and women in uniform. However, due to the country's economic problems, the military is saddled with aging and poorly maintained equipment, as well as serious morale and troop welfare issues. Accordingly, North Korea has built its military strategy around asymmetric warfare using long-range artillery, attacks by special operations forces, and ballistic missiles.<sup>2</sup>

North Korea has also been actively pursuing a long-range ballistic missile program. Ballistic missiles operate somewhat like bullets. Just as a bullet is powered by the gunpowder in the casing but, once free of the firearm, flies along a trajectory without any independent source of power (it is just a piece of metal flying through the air), similarly, a ballistic missile warhead is propelled out of the earth's atmosphere by rocket



motors and then follows a trajectory and is pulled back down to the earth by the force of gravity rather than its own power source. The longest-range ballistic missiles are known as Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), and the regime in Pyongyang was experimenting with one of these when, on April 13, 2012, it launched a missile into orbit. The launch itself was a spectacular failure with the missile exploding over the Yellow Sea within less than two minutes of takeoff, but the North Koreans were undaunted and finally succeeded on December 12, 2012, in launching a missile into space (they claim it deployed a satellite). This means, in theory, North Korea now has the capacity to build ICBMs that could hit the US mainland, because if a country can launch a satellite or any other object into space, then it is well-timed to start developing an arsenal of ICBMs (much of the Cold War “Space Race” between the US and the Soviet Union had as much to do with developing military capabilities as it had with reaching the moon). Of course, building ICBMs that can accurately deliver a warhead from North Korea to the US mainland may still take years, but this is of little consolation to Washington, which understands that the regime in Pyongyang is aggressive, extremist and more than a bit irrational.

### **North Korea’s Nuclear Program**

North Korea has been working on developing nuclear weapons capability since the 1980s when it began building a nuclear reactor in the town of Yongbyon in the far north of the country. Though the reactor was shut down in 2007 due to international pressure, the North Koreans have frequently threatened to restart it. A working nuclear reactor can produce quantities of plutonium that can be used in the core of a nuclear device. In addition, the country has a uranium enrichment capability at the facility at Yongbyon (uranium enrichment can be used to create fuel for a nuclear reactor and, if enrichment proceeds to higher levels, can be used to build the core of a nuclear bomb).<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, North Korea began obstructing inspection visits by the International Atomic Energy Agency and announced that it was considering withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. According to statements made by former officials who were then serving in the Clinton Administration, President Clinton had seriously considered a preemptive military strike on Pyongyang’s nuclear facilities.<sup>4</sup> North Korea has since carried out three underground nuclear test explosions in 2006, 2009, and in February of this year.

### **North Korea’s Regime**

North Korea, officially known as the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea, is ostensibly a communist state modeled on the Soviet Union during the Stalinist period. Kim Il-sung, the grandfather of the current dictator, Kim Jong-un, founded the regime. The regime’s two pillars of power are the North Korean army and the Communist Party. While little is known about the secretive North Korean regime, it is thought that the current balance of power in Pyongyang favors the Communist Party over the military.<sup>5</sup> If indeed the Party has become stronger than the military, it is not clear as to whether it will make North Korea less aggressive



or more aggressive. At present, it appears that the country is being more aggressive in its posturing, and this may suggest that the Party needs to prove to the army that it can be just as tough on the country's perceived enemies, or perhaps even a bit tougher.

### **North Korea's Economy and Population**

North Korea is a very poor country with a population of 23 million people. Due to the inefficiencies involved in a communist centralized economy (of the kind that has long gone out of style in China, and previously went out of style in the former Soviet Union), massive military spending, underinvestment in industry and agriculture, and other factors, North Korea's GDP per capita (a measure of the average income per person) is only \$1,800 – which is roughly equivalent to average income levels in Kenya, Senegal and Tanzania. North Korea's long-suffering population has experienced several severe food shortages and famines. In the mid-1990s, North Korea experienced a major famine that is thought to have caused anywhere between 900,000 and 2.4 million people to have lost their lives due to starvation or illnesses related to malnutrition.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, North Korea issued yet another appeal for food aid. A US delegation arrived in the country in May 2011 and had expressed concern that food aid was being diverted from the needy population to the military and elites in the country.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As the brief discussion of various aspects of North Korea suggests, North Korea is a country with the technological and military capacity to cause significant problems in East Asia and the Pacific region, and its regime appears to be more than slightly paranoid and irrational. Given these realities, even if war does not break out on the Korean Peninsula, the regime in Pyongyang is likely to keep American, South Korean and Japanese military leaders and civilian policymakers busy for as long as that regime is able to suppress its people, and thus ensure its continued survival.



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## Sources

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