

North Korea Country Brief



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North Korea



Population: 24.1 million

Capital: Pyongyang

Head of State: Supreme Commander of
the Korean People's Army,
Kim Jong Un
(KIHM JAWNG-UHN);
since Dec 17, 2011



CIA World Factbook, 2012

North Korea is the most closed, repressive, unpredictable, and isolated country on the planet—and one that is nuclear-armed and continues to threaten regional stability.

History

Since 1948, North Korea has been ruled by a totalitarian dictatorship. In 1950, Kim Il Sung, the leader of North Korea, invaded South Korea in an attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula under Communist rule. The U.S. came to South Korea's aid, counterattacking and pushing deeply into North Korea. China then sent hundreds of thousands of "volunteers" into the conflict. The war killed nearly 2.5 million people.

In 1953, North and South Korea signed an armistice—though not a peace treaty—putting an end to active fighting. The countries remain hostile to this day.

Since the armistice, the U.S. has maintained a large presence in South Korea—currently 28,500 American military personnel are stationed in the country, which has the most heavily militarized border in the world.¹ Tension with the North has only increased since it tested a nuclear weapon in 2006.²

Leadership

North Korea is built around the cult of personality of the members of the Kim family, treating them as divinities imbued with supernatural powers.³ Kim Jong Il, the son of the regime's founder, Kim Il Sung, died in December 2011 after a 17-year rule. He designated his son, Kim Jong Un, as his successor.⁴ Little is known about Kim Jong Un, but he has continued his father's repressive and unpredictable regime.⁵

Repression

North Korea is the world's most repressive nation. The regime subjects citizens to a constant barrage of propaganda through radios—which cannot be turned off—installed in almost every home and workplace. It imprisons dissidents, their families, and scores of others (including children) in barbaric prison camps, where they are subject to starvation, torture, and execution.⁶ There is no freedom of the press, and populations are often uprooted to be forcibly resettled elsewhere.⁷ Virtually all resources flow to the ruling class

and the military, leaving the population to face constant deprivation and regular waves of mass starvation.⁸

North Korea is also considered the most corrupt country in the world.⁹ A centralized economy and lack of a food distribution system have created a reliance on the black market for goods and services.¹⁰ Corruption among the senior leadership and the military is the norm.¹¹

The international community has imposed and maintained harsh sanctions on North Korea for decades. Internally, the country has adopted a philosophy of *Juche*, or “self-reliance,” to convince the population to cope with the shortages.

Nuclear Weapons Program

The U.S. first suspected North Korea had a clandestine nuclear weapons program during the 1980s.¹² U.N. nuclear inspectors found evidence of a program in 1992.

Since 1994, North Korea has engaged in cycles of (1) demonstrating progress on its nuclear weapons program with either nuclear tests or missile launches, (2) negotiations with other countries to suspend its nuclear program, (3) agreements to freeze its program or allow U.N. inspection in exchange for aid, (4) suspending talks and ejecting U.N. inspectors, and (5) withdrawing until the next round of threats.¹³

In April 2012, North Korea began the cycle again when it launched a missile that exploded shortly after liftoff.

Pyongyang also threatened a nuclear test later in the year.¹⁴

In December 2012, North Korea successfully launched a rocket which introduced a satellite into orbit—in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1874.¹⁵ In early February 2013, North Korea performed an underground nuclear test.

- Experts suggest significant hurdles remain in North Korea’s path to develop a reliable intercontinental ballistic missile capable of threatening the U.S.¹⁶

- Nonetheless, some believe North Korea is capable of developing a small nuclear arsenal of a dozen weapons.¹⁷

Threats to Regional Stability

North Korea continuously harasses its neighbors, seizing Chinese fishing boats for ransom, abducting Japanese citizens, and threatening South Korea.¹⁸ As a result of its erratic behavior, North Korea has poor relations with most of the world. Even China, which assisted North Korea during the Korean War, has limited influence over the country.¹⁹ Short of war, however, there is little pressure the U.S. can bring to bear on Pyongyang that is not already in place.

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END NOTES

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