

North Korea and its Neighbors



Map by Alexander Sayer Gard-Murray

Introduction: North Korea and Nuclear Weapons

North Korea today is one of the most isolated societies on earth. Despite recent economic growth, millions suffer from hunger and malnutrition. North Koreans are kept separate from the rest of the world by an extremely repressive state. They are forbidden to have any contact with the world outside of North Korea by mail, telephone, internet, or radio.

At the same time, North Korea is one of the most militarized countries in the world. There are one million soldiers in its military, many of whom are poised along the border with South Korea. South Korea and North Korea have been locked in a hostile conflict since the Korean War in the early 1950s. At the end of war, the countries did not sign a peace treaty; technically they are still at war. There have been outbreaks of violence over the years. For example, in March 2010, a torpedo sank a South Korean warship; forty-six sailors lost their lives. Most believe that the torpedo was fired by North Korea, although North Korea denies responsibility. In November 2010, after a South Korean military exercise near the border, North Korea fired more than 180 artillery shells into South Korea killing four South Koreans and wounding sixteen. South Korea responded by firing shells back.

While these attacks are of great concern, a greater worry is North Korea's nuclear weapons program. In February 2013, North Korea conducted an underground test of a nuclear device. Officials claimed that it was larger and more successful than two previous tests (conducted in October 2006 and May 2009). Leaders around the world resoundingly condemned North Korea's action. Many expressed concern and frustration. North Korea, an isolated state with few allies, made it clear to

the world that it continues to pursue nuclear weapons. North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons continues despite nearly two decades of high-level international talks aimed at convincing it to end the program. Analysts believe that North Korea has enough weapons-grade plutonium for six to eight nuclear weapons, much of it acquired in the last decade.

Why does North Korea want nuclear weapons? Experts have many theories. Some say that North Korea is raising tensions in order to secure greater economic aid from the international community, in return for further promises to end its nuclear program. North Korean officials argue that the weapons are to deter attacks from other countries and for self-defense. They claim that the country is still under threat from South Korea and the United States, one of South Korea's biggest allies. The United States has had tens of thousands of troops stationed in South Korea since the 1950s. Others argue that North Korea wants nuclear weapons to increase its international prestige, particularly among countries like the United States, China, and Russia. Still others point to domestic concerns—in particular North Korea's young, new leader Kim Jong Un's desire to prove his power and credibility—as contributors to North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

In order to understand North Korea and its desire for nuclear weapons, it is important to understand the history of the Korean Peninsula. What role have other countries played in Korea? Why is Korea divided? Why are U.S.-North Korean relations hostile today? Understanding the answers to these questions will help you as you consider how the United States should respond to the challenge of a nuclear North Korea.

Korea and the Outside World

Today we think of the Korean Peninsula—North and South Korea—as a place of division and conflict. But Korea was a politically unified state for much of the last fourteen hundred years. Centuries of shared history, culture, language, and ethnicity have created a strong sense of national identity among Koreans. It is only in the last half century that the peninsula has been divided, ruled by two governments following divergent ideologies.

The people on the Korean Peninsula were first united in the seventh century, when the kingdom of Silla conquered other kingdoms in the region. Outside of a few brief periods, Korea remained independent and unified under a centralized monarchy from 668 CE until the start of the twentieth century.

What was Korea's historical relationship with other countries?

Korean society developed in close interaction with other societies in Northeast Asia. In particular, Korea's written language, arts, religions, and forms of government were heavily influenced by China throughout its history. In turn, Korean culture exerted a great deal of influence on Japan.

Although Korea remained independent before the twentieth century, it also acknowledged China as the supreme authority in East Asia, as did other states in the region. Successive leaders in Korea paid tribute to the Chinese kingdom. In return, Korea received military protection from China against invasions from other states.

For example, the Chinese came to Korea's aid during a Japanese invasion at the end of the sixteenth century. Japan was driven back but the war devastated Korea. Thirty years later, Korea was invaded again, this time by the Manchus, a dynasty that ruled China from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. After these invasions, the Korean government decided to follow a policy of isolationism. It limited its interactions with both Japan and China, and closed its borders to all other foreigners.

In the nineteenth century, Western countries increasingly pushed for trade and diplomatic relations as well as colonial territories in East and Southeast Asia. They often referred to Korea as the "Hermit Kingdom."

Korea Divided

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Korea was one of the last places in Asia that had not been forced open by Western imperialism. British, French, and U.S. diplomats and militaries had all unsuccessfully attempted to secure the right to trade in Korea. In the end, it was Japan that opened Korea's borders. In 1876, the Japanese forced Korea to sign the Treaty of Kanghwa, which gave Japan special trading rights and privileges in Korea. Over the next few years, Korea signed similar treaties with other European countries and the United States.

Competition for influence in Korea at the turn of the twentieth century was fierce. Countries wanted access to Korea's ports as well as to its gold mines and forests. China in particular saw Japanese and Russian advances on the peninsula as a threat to its historic economic and cultural dominance of Korea. Japan fought wars with China (1894-1895) and Russia (1904-1905) to retain its supremacy in Korea. In 1905 Japan occupied the peninsula and in 1910 annexed Korea as a colony.

Japanese colonialism, which lasted until 1945, was often harsh and oppressive. Many groups formed during this period to oppose Japanese rule. At the same time, as a result of Japanese economic policies, Korea was the second-most industrialized country in Asia (after Japan) by the end of World War II.

Why was Korea divided in two?

The Cold War shaped the next phase of Korean history (see box on page 3). At the end of World War II, the Japanese forces in Korea surrendered to the United States in the south and to the Soviets in the north. The superpow-

The Cold War

The end of World War II marked the beginning of nearly forty-five years of ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This conflict, known as the Cold War, was the dominant foreign policy concern of the United States and Russia between the late 1940s and the late 1980s. During this period both countries devoted vast resources to their militaries. Each had nuclear weapons and were in competition for power and influence around the world.

During the Cold War, the United States adopted a policy of containing the spread of communism around the world. For their part, the Soviets were interested in extending their influence and establishing allies in different parts of the world. Although the superpowers never engaged in direct military action against one another, they opposed each other by becoming involved in other wars, in countries where communism had gained a foothold. The first of these wars was fought on the Korean Peninsula in the early 1950s. While the Korean War ended in a stalemate, it was a turning point in international relations. The war reversed the disarmament of the United States and USSR after World War II and firmly established the Cold War as a military conflict.

ers created a line of demarcation between the two regions. This was supposed to be temporary, but U.S. and Soviet officials failed to come to an agreement to unify the country. This line divided the country in two—a communist north and a capitalist south.

“No division of a nation in the present world is so astonishing in its origin as the division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role. Finally, there is no division for which the U.S. government bears so heavy a share of the responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea.”

—Gregory Henderson, former U.S. Foreign Service officer, 1974

Two separate governments were established, each claiming to be the legitimate government of the entire peninsula. In the south, now the Republic of Korea, U.S.-backed Syngman Rhee became president and set up a hard-line anti-communist administration. In the north, renamed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the government was led by

Kim Il Sung, a staunch communist who had lived for many years in China as well as in the Soviet Union. Kim Il Sung would lead North Korea for the next four-and-a-half decades.

How did the Korean War begin?

Kim Il Sung hoped to reunify the two Koreas by conquering the South, and he sought permission to invade from Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

“Lately I do not sleep at night, thinking about how to resolve the question of the unification of the whole country. If the matter of the liberation of the people of the southern portion of Korea and the unification of the country is drawn out, then I can lose the trust of the people of Korea.”

—Kim Il Sung to Soviet embassy officers, 1950

Stalin agreed, and on June 25, 1950, the North launched an invasion backed by Soviet equipment and military advisors. The North Koreans captured Seoul, South Korea's capital, in a matter of days.

Why did the United States intervene in Korea?

For the United States these developments

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North Korea and the Nuclear Threat
Student Readings



USAMHI.

U.S. bombers drop napalm (a flammable explosive) on North Korean railroad lines in the early 1950s.

were a cause for great alarm. China had become a communist state and tensions with the Soviets in Europe were extremely high. U.S. President Truman believed that communist aggression needed to be checked wherever it occurred in the world.

U.S. troops stationed in Japan were quickly sent to South Korea. But North Korean forces continued to advance, pushing U.S. and South Korean troops to the southeastern tip of the country. The United States called for assistance from the UN. (The Security Council at that time did not include communist China, and the Soviets were boycotting its meetings.) A coalition of fifteen countries under the auspices of the United Nations landed troops in South Korea, retook Seoul, and forced North Korean troops to retreat. UN troops pushed North Korean forces north, towards the border of China. This advance triggered a large-scale intervention by the Chinese, who said they would not allow North Korea to fall.

The Korean War lasted for another three years. More than three million Koreans were killed or wounded, and as many as four million people died in the conflict, including nine hundred thousand Chinese troops and 36,940

U.S. troops. Although a truce was negotiated, South Korea's president refused to sign it. This meant that the North and South were technically still at war, although the fighting had ended. The border between North and South Korea remained.

How were relations on the peninsula after the war?

The Korean War left both North and South Korea devastated: millions had been killed, millions more were displaced from their homes, and the war had destroyed much of the economic infrastructure (including things like factories, agriculture,

transportation, and communications) in both countries. The war also created a cultural division among Koreans, fed by wartime animosity and governments of opposing ideologies.

The war created a physical barrier between the Koreas as well: a three-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ). But in fact, the border between the Koreas became a highly militarized area where each side faced the other down on a daily basis. Today the DMZ is the most heavily armed border in the world.

In addition, the United States left fifty-thousand troops in bases near Seoul. In the late 1950s, it also brought nuclear weapons to bases in South Korea. While the number of weapons changed over time, the United States did not remove its last nuclear weapons from South Korea until 1991. Today, 28,500 U.S. troops remain in South Korea.

While North and South Korea talked separately about unification, hostility remained fierce in the decades after the truce. Each side continued to pursue unification, but this time by covert attack. There were numerous efforts at infiltration, espionage, and provocation.

By 1976, small scale fighting had resulted in the deaths of over one thousand Koreans and forty-nine U.S. troops. North Korea hoped to eliminate the South Korean government, which it saw as a puppet of U.S. imperialism. For example, in 1971 and again in 1974, North Korean agents attempted to assassinate South Korea's President Park Chung Hee. Continued tension between the two countries also led to attacks against civilians. For instance, in 1987, a North Korean agent planted a bomb on a Korean Airlines flight, killing all 115 people on board. This attack was aimed at disrupting the 1988 Olympics that would take place in Seoul.

How did North and South Korea develop after the war?

After the Korean War, the economies of both countries were in tatters. North Korea's economy bounced back much more quickly than the South's. Helped by significant assistance from the Soviet Union, China, and a number of Eastern European countries, North Korea rapidly industrialized. By the late 1950s, it had one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The North Korean government focused its economic efforts on strengthening the military. It felt it was threatened by the U.S. presence in the South and the lack of a peace treaty between the two Koreas.

In contrast, South Korea's economy faltered for many years. In 1953 it was one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite a great deal of assistance from the United States and other Western countries, the economy did not begin to improve until the 1960s.

Both countries had authoritarian governments in the decades that followed the war. South Korea was led by successive, U.S.-backed military regimes from 1961 until the 1980s. It continued to maintain a close political relationship with the United States. For example, to support the United States in the Vietnam War, South Korea sent more than 300,000 troops in total, making it the second largest foreign force in the war (behind the United States).

In North Korea, the country remained controlled by one man: Kim Il Sung. Kim crushed all political opposition and created a highly centralized government that gave him unlimited power. North Korea maintained close relationships with China and the Soviet Union. Its economy was socialist (run by the government). The government controlled every facet of life in North Korea, including employment, social services, and the media. Kim built a national ideology based on ideas of militant nationalism, political independence, and self-reliance.

Kim also created a mythology around himself that some experts have likened to a religious cult. North Korea's government told its people that Korea was a chosen land and the site where civilization originated. Images of Kim—known to his people as "The Great Leader"—hung in every shop, home, and subway car. Everything that Kim said became law. No dissent or criticism was permitted. One could be imprisoned for simply sitting on a piece of newspaper with a photo of



North Koreans pass by a mural of Kim Il Sung (left) and Kim Jong Il (right).

Photograph by Mike Connolly. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

Kim or his son. The outside world has known little of North Korea since the 1950s, due to the government's strict limit on the entry of foreigners. But refugees and defectors have told stories of abuse, torture, and public execution of those who do not conform with Kim's ideology.

The Korean Peninsula Today

In the 1970s, the economic fortunes of the Koreas reversed. South Korea began to pursue a policy of rapid industrialization and integration into the world economy. The economy grew in leaps and bounds. Today South Korea has one of the twelve largest economies in the world, centered on high tech sectors and computer manufacturing. The later part of the twentieth century also saw great political change. In the 1980s the country instituted some democratic reforms and in 1992 Kim Young Sam was elected the country's first civilian president in three decades.

In contrast, North Korea's policy of economic self-sufficiency left the country ill-equipped to participate in the global economy. When Soviet aid was cut in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economy shrunk dramatically. Starvation and hardship were widespread. According to the North Korean government, as many as three million people perished from famine in the mid-1990s. During this period, the United States became the largest humanitarian donor to North Korea.

Lacking resources, the North Korean government was unable to continue to control every aspect of its citizens' lives. It allowed certain changes, including the existence of some private businesses. Then, in 1994, the North's Great Leader Kim Il Sung died. The post of president is eternally held by Kim Il Sung, even after his death. The country held a three year mourning period for its lost leader.

Many observers believed that North Korea's communist system would collapse under the economic strain, much like what happened in other communist states in Eastern Europe at the time. But North Korea endured.

Power passed to Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, who became the head of state. (Kim Jong Il was known as "The Dear Leader.") In 2011, Kim Jong Il died and his son, Kim Jong Un became the leader of North Korea.

What is life like in North Korea today?

North Korea remains one of the world's most isolated societies. People in North Korea have very little access to the world beyond their borders. All media in North Korea is state-run. According to the media rights group Reporters Without Borders, North Korea is the world's worst violator of press freedom. No television or publications from outside the country are allowed, and civilians caught listening to foreign news sources are subject to harsh punishment. In addition, the North Korean government strictly controls travel both into and out of the country. Over the years, tens of thousands have fled North Korea, mainly for economic reasons and to escape starvation. Many settle in China and South Korea. Once they leave, most no longer have contact with their families and cannot return for fear of severe punishment.

The economic challenges of the last decade have led to some changes in North Korean society. After depending on the state for decades to supply basic necessities, North Koreans were forced to find alternatives when the economy collapsed in the 1990s. Today, the government's control over the people is no longer as strong as it was before the collapse.

The Korean Peninsula at a Glance

	North Korea	South Korea
Area	120,538 square km	99,720 square km
Population	24.5 million	48.9 million
Life expectancy	69 years	79.3 years
GDP	\$40 billion	\$1.62 trillion
Per capita GDP	\$1,800	\$32,400

Source: The CIA World Factbook.

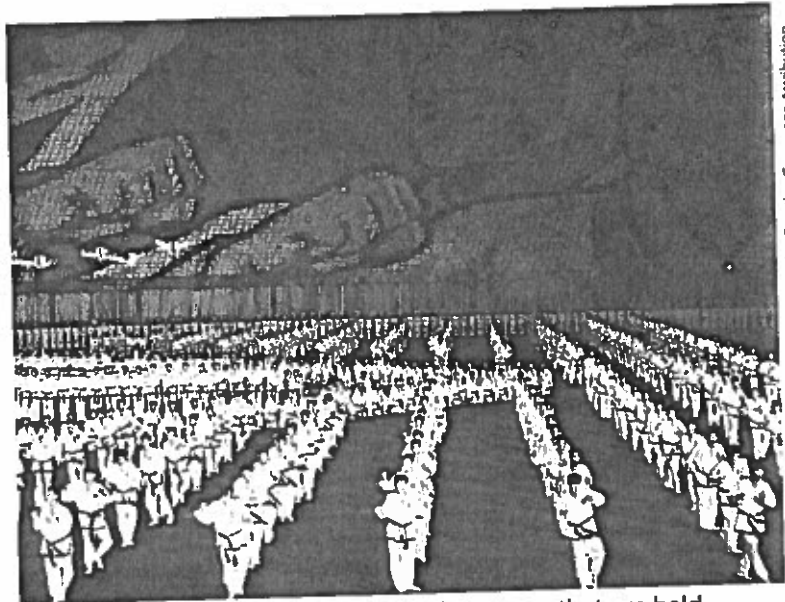
North Korea has been dependent on food aid since the economic crisis, and the UN estimates that more than a third of North Korea's population is dependent on this assistance. In 2008, North Korea's economy experienced its largest growth rate in recent years, boosted by increased agricultural production and the country's many natural resources. Nevertheless, many North Koreans continue to cope with shortages of food, fuel, and power on a daily basis.

Overall, many parts of North Korean society remain unchanged. Nearly 100 percent of North Koreans are literate. Schools continue to teach students about the mythic beginnings of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and the country of Korea. Their birthdays are celebrated as national holidays, with elaborate mass games (see image).

How did the end of the Cold War affect the Korean Peninsula?

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of an era. For the United States, it meant the end of more than four decades of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. For North Korea, it meant that aid and support from the Soviet Union ceased. North Korea sought to improve relations with the United States but was met with a cold shoulder due to U.S. concerns about North Korea's repressive policies, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its radical ideology.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the United States maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars per year. The troops are there to demonstrate a U.S. commitment to South Korean security. Many South Koreans have come to see U.S. policy as an obstacle to better relations with North Korea and many resent the presence of U.S. forces in their country. Recently the United States has begun pulling



Performers at the mass gymnastic performances that are held regularly to commemorate national holidays such as the birthday of Kim Il Sung. Thousands of performers participate in these games. The mural in the back, which changes throughout the course of the performance, is created by thousands of school children holding colored signs.

Photograph by Kok Leng Yeo. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>

its troops back from the DMZ to bases deeper in South Korean territory.

North Korea today maintains one of the largest armies in the world, with more than a million troops. South Korea's military is slightly smaller, but its military expenditures are much higher. The vast majority of both forces are stationed near the DMZ.

How are relations between the two countries?

After decades of hostility, relations between North and South Korea began to improve in the late 1990s. In order to promote reconciliation, South Korea encouraged interaction between the two countries and offered humanitarian aid and economic investment to the North. This policy became known as the "sunshine policy." South Korea established a number of business zones over the border, where South Korean businesses could open factories and employ North Korean workers. In 2000, for the first time since the states were created in 1948, the leaders of the two Koreas met in a North-South summit. Many lauded

By Edward N. Johnson, U.S. Army



North Korean soldiers look south across the DMZ.

South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung for his policies. In 2000 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But critics argued that the sunshine policy was helping to prop up a hostile, oppressive regime in North Korea.

Despite the efforts of President Kim Dae Jung, relations between the two countries are not normalized. For example, for more than fifty years, there has been no direct communication (phone calls or mail exchange) or free travel between the two countries, at least for the general population. There are deep social rifts that have been left by Korea's division. The South Korean Red Cross estimates that as many as ten million families are separated by the border, and most have not had contact in decades. There are also many unresolved issues in North-South relations. For example, South Korea claims that the North continues to hold at least one thousand South Koreans in prisons. In addition, armed skirmishes have continued between the two countries. Both governments contend that their ultimate goal is unification of the peninsula. But technically, the two countries are still at war.

In the last few years, relations between the two have grown increasingly chilled. After a decade of relatively peaceful cooperation, the 2008 election of Lee Myung-bak as South

Korea's president ushered in an era of increased tensions. Lee has made some of the South's aid to North Korea conditional on the North's commitment to end its nuclear weapons program, much to the anger of North Korean officials. The sinking of the South Korean naval vessel in March 2010, and the exchange of artillery fire in November 2010 have raised tensions to a new level.

North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

Over the last few decades, North Korea has signaled its intention to pursue a nuclear weapons program. North Korea's nuclear program stretches back to the years after the Korean War. At that time, North Korea signed a number of agreements with China and the Soviet Union to build its nuclear capacity, at least in part to help rebuild its devastated economy. North Korea's first nuclear reactor, built with Soviet help, became active in 1967. At the time, many countries around the world were experimenting with nuclear power as an alternative fuel source to supply electricity. It was only in the 1980s that observers became concerned that North Korea was using its nuclear capabilities not only to create nuclear power but also to create nuclear weapons.

How did the United States and its allies respond to the North Korean nuclear program in the 1990s?

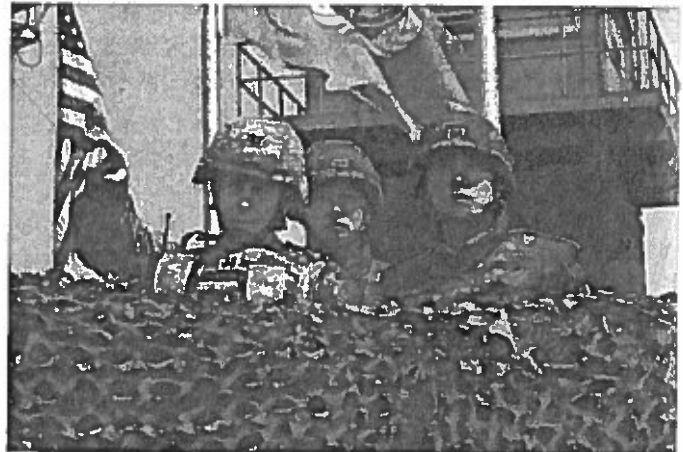
In 1985, North Korea signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a treaty in which countries that do not have nuclear weapons agree not to acquire them. But in the late 1980s, U.S. satellites detected evidence that North Korea was increasing its nuclear capabilities in order to create nuclear weapons. International concern intensified in 1993 when North Korea banned inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from entering the country. That same year,

North Korea threatened to withdraw from the NPT.

The United States, led by President Bill Clinton, began to meet with North Korea. After difficult negotiations, in 1994 the United States and North Korea signed the "Agreed Framework." North Korea agreed to suspend construction of reactors that could produce weapons-grade plutonium as a by-product. In exchange, the United States made a commitment to take the lead in construction by 2003 of a reactor that would meet North Korea's energy needs without producing weapons-grade plutonium. (Japan and South Korea would be principle funders in the construction of this reactor.) It also agreed to provide energy and other forms of economic aid in the interim. In addition, the United States agreed to work towards normalization of political and economic relations between the two countries.

The 1994 Agreed Framework did not last. Many Republican representatives in the United States were distrustful of North Korea and did not believe the North Korean government would give up its nuclear program. North Korea was also suspicious of the United States and concerned that it would not keep its end of the bargain. With little Congressional support for the agreement, in 1999 the United States announced that the light water reactors would not be completed in 2003 as promised, but would be delayed until 2007 or 2008. North Korea threatened to resume its nuclear program if the 1994 agreement was not fulfilled.

In addition to nuclear weapons, many in the international community were also concerned about North Korea's missile capabilities. In 1998, North Korea conducted a test, firing missiles over Japan and into the Pacific Ocean. Missile technology could give North Korea the capability to fire a nuclear weapon from within its borders (as opposed to dropping it by plane, as was done by the United States in the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki).



Edward N. Johnson, U.S. Army.

U.S. and South Korean soldiers monitor the DMZ, from the south looking north.

What did President Bush say about North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union Address?

The United States became less willing to negotiate with North Korea after the election of George W. Bush to the presidency. During President Bush's first administration, the U.S. government refused to negotiate with North Korea until it took steps to dismantle its nuclear program.

Following September 11, 2001, the Bush administration began to confront regimes it considered a threat to U.S. security. North Korea fell into this category. In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President Bush condemned North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" (which also included Iran and Iraq). Bush criticized the North Korean government for starving its citizens while threatening the world with missiles and weapons of mass destruction. He warned that he would not allow North Korea to threaten the United States. He cancelled work on the light water reactors and suspended energy assistance. Tension between North Korea and the international community heated up once again.

How did tensions escalate in 2002?

In the fall of 2002, U.S. officials discovered that North Korea had developed a separate uranium-enrichment program, in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea

expelled weapons monitors from the IAEA, announced that it was beginning production of nuclear materials, and withdrew from the NPT. In response, the United States, Japan, and South Korea cut their supplies of oil to North Korea and halted construction on the two nuclear reactors.

Experts feared that if North Korea had nuclear weapons, it might sell weapons or nuclear technology to other countries or to terrorists. North Korea demanded direct negotiations with the United States, but refused to sit down to talks until the United States proclaimed that it would not attack North Korea with military force. (The United States had recently invaded Iraq.)

How did the international community deal with North Korea's nuclear program?

In August 2003, six countries—the United States, Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan—met in the first of a series of meetings to negotiate an end to North Korea's nuclear program. Delegates met frequently over the next few years in what became known as the “six-party talks.”

Despite the efforts of the international community, in February 2005 North Korea announced to the world that it had nuclear weapons. In July 2006 it conducted additional missile tests and in October 2006 conducted its first nuclear test. Because the blast from this underground test was small, many experts believed that it was not entirely successful. Within days, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution to impose significant economic and diplomatic sanctions on North Korea for its actions.

When the six-party talks resumed in February 2007, the delegates reached a tentative agreement. In exchange for fuel and other economic aid, North Korea began disabling its plutonium-producing reactor. It also handed over documentation of its past nuclear activities to the six-party delegates. Many believed that North Korea was on its way to renouncing its nuclear weapons program for good.

“This can be a moment of opportunity for North Korea. If North Korea continues to make the right choices, it can repair its relationship with the international community....”

—U.S. President Bush after North Korea provided documentation of its nuclear weapons program, June 2008

In late 2008, the United States removed North Korea from its list of countries that sponsor terrorism as part of an additional agreement. But North Korea's position on its nuclear program reversed yet again in 2009, when it conducted its second nuclear test.

How did North Korean missile tests affect international relations?

Relations on the Korean Peninsula took a turn for the worse in early 2009. South Korea's President Lee announced that South Korean aid would be tied to the ending of North Korea's nuclear program. Shortly after, North Korean officials announced that they would no longer abide by previous agreements to ease military tensions on the peninsula.

In April 2009, North Korea launched a rocket that it claimed was carrying a communications satellite. Many believed that, in fact, North Korea was conducting a long-range missile test. The UN Security Council condemned the launching. In response, North Korea quit the six-party talks and expelled UN observers. One month later, it conducted a second underground test of a nuclear device—this time more successfully.

“The Democratic People's Republic of Korea successfully conducted one more underground nuclear test on May 25 as part of the measures to bolster up its nuclear deterrent for self-defence.... The test will contribute to defending the sovereignty of the country and the nation and socialism and ensuring peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and the region around it.”

—From an announcement by North Korea's government-run media, May 25, 2009

Weeks later, North Korea conducted a variety of additional missile tests. North Korea's actions increased regional tension and drew widespread condemnation. South Korea announced that it would intercept North Korean ships suspected of carrying weapons of mass destruction.

Within weeks the Security Council agreed to impose additional sanctions on North Korea. On June 12, 2009 the Council unanimously passed a resolution authorizing UN members to inspect North Korean vessels that they suspect might be carrying banned materials or weapons. North Korea has stated that it will consider the interception of any of its ships as an act of war.

The North Korean government has continued to insist on bilateral talks with the United States. The Obama administration has made it clear that it plans to take a strong stance against North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

“North Korea is not only deepening its own isolation, it's also inviting stronger international pressure—that's evident overnight, as Russia and China, as well as our traditional allies of South Korea and Japan, have all come to the same conclusion: North Korea will not find security and respect through threats and illegal weapons.”

—U.S. President Obama, May 26, 2009

How have tensions increased in recent years?

The death of Kim Jong Il in 2011 and the assumption of power of his youngest son, twenty-seven-year-old Kim Jong Un has raised questions about both the intentions and the stability of the North Korean government. In addition, a series of serious military incidents heightened tensions in the region and put North Korea in the international spotlight.

In March 2010, a torpedo sank a South Korean naval vessel killing forty-six South Korean sailors. The torpedo was most likely from a North Korean submarine. North Ko-

rea denied responsibility for the sinking. In a second incident, in November 2010, North Korea showed a new and previously unknown facility for producing nuclear materials to a U.S. scientist. This discovery came as a shock and prompted calls for increased diplomacy and tightened sanctions on North Korea. The discovery of the nuclear facility was overshadowed later that month by North Korea's artillery attack that killed and injured South Korean civilians and soldiers. Although South Korea fired back, some in South Korea were dissatisfied with their government's response.

In February 2013, North Korea conducted a third and more powerful nuclear test than its first two. Leaders around the world resoundingly condemned North Korea's action.

“The danger posed by North Korea's threatening activities warrants further swift and credible action by the international community. The United States will also continue to take steps necessary to defend ourselves and our allies.”

—President Barack Obama,
February 12, 2013

U.S. President Obama has stated that North Korea's actions are a threat to international peace. Experts believe that North Korea has not yet developed the capacity to launch a nuclear weapon via missile, but long-range missile tests in 2012 increased fears that North Korea is closer to being able launch a nuclear weapon at another country. Analysts believe that North Korea has enough weapons-grade plutonium for six to eight nuclear weapons.

What is the U.S. position on North Korea?

The Obama administration argues that the international community negotiated with North Korea in the past because it believed that North Korea was willing to give up its nuclear program. Now, many believe that North Korea has no intention of giving up its nuclear capabilities. Obama's aides have stated that the president no longer wants to negotiate a gradual dismantling of North Korea's nuclear

program, but instead wants to secure a permanent, irreversible end.

The United States and the international community face critical policy decisions about North Korea and its nuclear weapons program. In the past, policy choices have been affected by what policy makers believe are the reasons behind North Korea's aggressive behavior and nuclear weapons program. Does North Korea want nuclear weapons to increase its international prestige? Does it believe it needs them to deter an attack by the United States? Is North Korea using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip to secure additional food, fuel, and security guarantees from the international community? Is North Korea's aggressive behavior related to the transfer of power from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un? Is Kim Jong Un pursuing nuclear weapons as a way to increase his own domestic power or is it a policy supported by all of North Korea's government? The answers to these questions have determined, in large part, the policy debate on this issue.

Chronology of North Korea and Nuclear Weapons

- 1958 The United States deploys nuclear weapons to South Korea as part of its Cold War strategy.
- 1962 With Soviet help, North Korea establishes a nuclear research facility in Yongbyon. The Soviets also help North Korea create a two-kilowatt nuclear reactor, which becomes operational in 1967.
- 1977 North Korea signs an agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), allowing the IAEA to monitor its reactor and research facility.
- 1985 The United States announces that it has intelligence information that North Korea is building a secret nuclear reactor.
- 1985 North Korea, under duress, signs the NPT in return for Russian promises to build reactors for nuclear power. According to the NPT, countries must also sign concurrent agreements with the IAEA. North Korea delays signing the IAEA's Full Scope Safeguards Agreement—which would allow inspectors to monitor its nuclear facilities—until 1992.
- 1986 North Korea begins building a reactor at Yongbyon, with Soviet help.
- 1991 The United States withdraws its remaining nuclear weapons from South Korea as part of its larger policy of disarmament.
- 1991 North and South Korea set up a Joint Nuclear Control Committee to ensure that neither country has nuclear weapons in the future.
- 1993 North Korea bars inspectors from entering the country. It also announces it will withdraw from the NPT, but later suspends its withdrawal.
- March 1993 The *U.S. News & World Report* reports that Iran and North Korea are cooperating in developing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.
- 1994 The "Agreed Framework" is signed between North Korea and the United States. North Korea will freeze and dismantle its plutonium-based nuclear weapons program and end its nuclear weapons research in return for help building two reactors for nuclear power. The funding for the reactors will come primarily from South Korea and Japan.
- August 1998 North Korea tests a missile, firing over Japan and into the Pacific Ocean.
- November 1998 High level talks between the United States and North Korea take place in Pyongyang over North Korea's suspected underground nuclear facilities.
- September 1999 North Korea pledges to end its long-range missile tests. The United States eases its economic sanctions against North Korea for the first time since the end of the Korean War in 1953.
- 2001 Construction begins on the U.S.-sponsored nuclear reactors, way behind schedule. In 2000, North Korea had threatened to restart its nuclear program if the United States did not compensate it for the loss of electricity caused by this delay.
- October 2002 U.S. officials discover a North Korean uranium enrichment program.
- November 2002 The United States, Japan, and South Korea halt their supply of oil to North Korea (they supplied this oil as part of the 1994 agreement) and stop construction on the two nuclear reactors.
- December 2002 North Korea expels the IAEA.
- January 2003 North Korea withdraws from the NPT.
- August 2003 North Korea joins the first round of six-party talks.

February 2004	Second round of six-party talks.
June 2004	Third round of six-party talks.
February 2005	North Korea announces that it has nuclear weapons.
July, September 2005	Fourth round of six-party talks. An agreement is reached: North Korea will dismantle its nuclear programs in exchange for additional aid. The U.S. says it has no plans to invade and will respect North Korea's sovereignty.
November 2005	Fifth round of six-party talks.
January 2006	North Korea announces it will not return to negotiations until the United States removes financial restrictions it had imposed in 2005.
July 2006	North Korea launches seven missiles into the Sea of Japan. The UN Security Council passes a resolution condemning the tests and demanding North Korea stop its missile program.
October 9, 2006	North Korea announces that it has conducted an underground nuclear test. The small blast leads many to doubt the success of this test.
October 14, 2006	The UN Security Council unanimously adopts a resolution to impose significant economic and diplomatic sanctions on North Korea.
February 2007	Sixth round of six-party talks. The delegates reach a tentative agreement on disarmament in exchange for energy aid, along with a timetable of "initial actions" and deadlines.
July 2007	North Korea closes five nuclear reactors, including the one in Yongbyon, after \$25 million in frozen North Korean assets are released.
September 2007	Israeli planes bomb a site in Syria. The United States later says the site was an unfinished nuclear reactor, being built with North Korean help and modelled after the reactor in Yongbyon.
November 2007	North Korea, monitored by international observers, begins disabling its reactor in Yongbyon.
June 2008	Many months after the original deadline, North Korea hands over documentation of its past nuclear activities.
July 2008	The six countries agree on steps to continue disarmament: North Korea is to finish disabling its Yongbyon reactor by October and the United States, Russia, Japan, and South Korea must deliver fuel and other economic aid.
October 11, 2008	The U.S. removes North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terror.
April 5, 2009	North Korea launches a rocket that it claims is carrying a communications satellite. Many believe it is a cover for another long-range missile test. The UN Security Council imposes additional sanctions.
April 14-25, 2009	North Korea announces that it will quit the six-party talks and restart the partially disabled plant at Yongbyon. It expels UN observers.
May 7-12, 2009	The United States announces that it is ready for direct talks with North Korean officials. North Korea dismisses the offer as "useless."
May 25, 2009	North Korea conducts a second underground nuclear test.
June 12, 2009	The UN Security Council authorizes UN member states to inspect North Korean vessels suspected of carrying banned weapons or materials.
March 26, 2010	An explosion sinks the South Korean warship Cheonan, killing forty-six sailors. North Korea later denies allegations of responsibility.
November 23, 2010	North and South Korean militaries exchange fire across the border.
February 12, 2013	North Korea conducts a third and more powerful underground nuclear test.