



U.S.-North Korea Relations

North Korea has posed one of the most persistent U.S. foreign policy challenges of the post-Cold War period. Having made advances in its nuclear and missile capabilities under its leader, Kim Jong-un, North Korea has evolved into a grave security threat to the United States. The United States and North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) began denuclearization talks in 2018, but those negotiations essentially have been frozen since February 2019, with little apparent prospect for a breakthrough. Meanwhile, North Korea simultaneously has continued to develop its nuclear and missile capabilities. Other U.S. concerns include North Korea's cyberspace activities, conventional military capabilities, egregious human rights violations, international terrorism, and illicit activities such as money laundering and smuggling.



Source: Map generated by CRS using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); DeLorme (2014).

Internal Situation

Kim Jong-un became DPRK leader in 2011, succeeding his father and becoming the third generation of the Kim dynasty to rule. After assuming power, Kim consolidated his grip, engaging in several purges of high-level officials. In April 2020, his extended disappearance from public view prompted unconfirmed media reports that he was gravely ill or had died following heart surgery. The 36-year-old Kim, obese and a heavy smoker, is believed to have suffered from various health problems over the years. Kim is believed to have three children under 10, but has no obvious heir. If he dies or becomes incapacitated, it is uncertain who would succeed him. His younger sister and confidante, Kim Yo Jong, is among the most likely. She played a prominent role in summit diplomacy, but analysts wonder whether a woman could become the leader, particularly if not designated as successor by her brother. If a power struggle emerges, implications abound for U.S. interests, including questions about control of the DPRK's nuclear arsenal, the potential for a humanitarian crisis, and the possibility of a confrontation with China that could alter the fundamental security structure of the region.

Although most North Koreans still live in meager circumstances, particularly outside of Pyongyang, the DPRK economy as a whole appears to have expanded for much of Kim's tenure. Previously prohibited markets containing many consumer goods and a range of services have proliferated. Overall growth appears to have fallen since 2016, perhaps due to a tightening of sanctions, which have led to the virtual collapse of DPRK exports. Nevertheless, there have been few signs of severe economic distress that could trigger a systemic collapse.

North Korea says it has avoided any cases of COVID-19. Although experts doubt this sweeping claim, the country's under-resourced health system does not appear to have become overwhelmed, perhaps due to the closure of all borders in January 2020 and other strict measures. Both South Korea and the United States have offered assistance to help the North deal with the health crisis.

The U.S. Approach to North Korea

Under the Trump Administration, North Korea policy has shifted from a "maximum pressure" campaign in 2017 that sought to punish North Korea through international sanctions for its repeated nuclear and missile tests to an approach that emphasizes leader-to-leader dialogue. Trump and Kim have held three meetings: in Singapore (June 2018); Hanoi (February 2019); and Panmunjom (June 2019). Over the course of this engagement, Kim has pledged in writing to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," and to allow the "permanent dismantlement" of nuclear facilities in the Yongbyon nuclear complex, "as the United States takes corresponding measures." In addition, since November 2017 North Korea has refrained from testing nuclear devices and long-range and medium-range ballistic missiles. Since May 2019, however, the DPRK has conducted over a dozen short-range missile tests, in violation of U.N. Security Council sanctions.

U.S.-DPRK denuclearization diplomacy essentially has been frozen since February 2019, when Trump and Kim's Hanoi summit ended without an agreement. The two sides disagreed over the scope and sequencing of concessions, specifically North Korean denuclearization measures in exchange for relief from international and U.S. sanctions. U.S. officials say their North Korean counterparts have refused to engage in additional negotiations since fall 2019. In December 2019, Kim announced that due to the continuation of sanctions, "there is no ground" for North Korea to continue its nuclear and missile testing moratoria. Kim criticized the United States' joint military exercises with and transfers of advanced military equipment to South

Korea. He warned he would reveal “a new strategic weapon” if the United States did not change approach.

Inter-Korean relations also have been paralyzed, despite South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s efforts to engage North Korea. Moon helped broker U.S.-DPRK negotiations and in 2018 met with Kim three times. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have fallen markedly since 2017, and the two Koreas have concluded some preliminary pacts, including a military confidence-building agreement. However, since the Hanoi Summit, North Korea generally has shunned engaging with South Korea.

U.S. and International Sanctions on North Korea

In 2016 and 2017, the Obama and Trump Administrations responded to North Korean nuclear and missile tests by expanding multilateral sanctions. Collectively, U.N. Security Council sanctions prohibit North Korea from exporting over 80% of the items it sold abroad in 2016, as well as most types of financial interactions with DPRK individuals and entities. Important North Korean imports, such as oil, are prohibited or capped. Additionally, in 2016, 2017, and 2019 Congress passed, and Presidents Obama and Trump signed, legislation expanding U.S. sanctions (P.L. 114-122, P.L. 115-44, and P.L. 116-92). Both Administrations issued executive orders and designations authorizing and applying sanctions against North Korean entities. In September 2017, for instance, the Trump Administration issued an executive order that authorizes secondary sanctions, including on individuals or entities that trade with North Korea and on foreign financial institutions that conduct transactions related to DPRK trade.

Despite the emphasis on diplomacy since early 2018, these sanctions remain in place. Several countries, however, appear to be less robustly enforcing international sanctions against the DPRK than before the rapprochement began. The U.N. has documented North Korea’s efforts to evade sanctions, including ship-to-ship transfers of massive amounts of oil and coal in the waters off China and Russia’s coasts. Although the Trump Administration periodically has issued North Korea sanctions designations, it has refrained from applying them as aggressively as it could, particularly in the area of secondary sanctions.

Nuclear, Missile, and Cyber Capabilities

North Korea has said its nuclear weapons are a deterrent to prevent an attack by the United States. Some analysts worry that the DPRK may become emboldened to launch attacks if it believes it has developed a sufficiently robust deterrent, or to use nuclear blackmail to achieve other policy objectives. In its 2019 worldwide threat assessment for Congress, the U.S. intelligence community said that North Korea “... is unlikely to give up all of its nuclear weapons and production capabilities, even as it seeks to negotiate partial denuclearization steps to obtain key U.S. and international concessions.”

North Korea has tested six nuclear devices: in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and in 2017. The DPRK government

claimed that it had successfully tested a hydrogen (thermonuclear) bomb that can be mounted on an intercontinental ballistic missile in 2017. Since the Six-Party nuclear talks (among China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) broke down in 2009, North Korea is believed to have restarted its nuclear facilities that produce fissile material for nuclear weapons.

North Korea conducted four ballistic missile tests between July and November 2017 that are widely believed to have intercontinental range. The Defense Intelligence Agency reportedly found that North Korea has successfully developed a nuclear warhead that is “miniaturized” or sufficiently small enough to be mounted on long-range ballistic missiles. The DPRK’s recent short-range ballistic missile tests were likely aimed at advancing reliability of its solid fuel and guidance systems, and its ability to thwart regional missile defenses. Security experts and U.S. officials have also voiced concerns about Pyongyang’s improving cyber capabilities, which the regime may use for retaliation, coercion, espionage, and/or financial gain.

China’s Role

The post-2017 flurry of diplomatic activity has rekindled DPRK-China relations, which were deeply strained after Kim took power in 2011. As North Korea’s dominant trading partner, China provides food, crude oil, and investment that are essential lifelines for the regime in Pyongyang. China voted for all 10 sanctions resolutions at the U.N. Security Council, albeit after watering them down. Trump Administration officials say Beijing generally is enforcing these sanctions in the main, though it tolerates significant evasion, and with Russia has proposed relaxing sanctions. China’s overriding priority appears to be preventing what it calls “chaos and war,” fearing the destabilizing effects of a humanitarian crisis and the uncertainty of how other nations, particularly the United States, would assert themselves on the Korean peninsula if the regime collapses.

North Korea’s Human Rights Record

Reports by the U.S. government, the United Nations and private organizations portray extreme human rights abuses by the North Korean government over many decades. Multiple reports describe a system of prison camps that house approximately 100,000 political prisoners. In 2016, the State Department—acting in accordance with the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-122)—identified Kim and other DPRK officials as responsible for human rights violations and created requirements for the President to certify human rights improvements in order to suspend or terminate sanctions. In 2014, a U.N. Human Rights Council commission concluded that North Korea had committed “crimes against humanity” and argued that the individuals responsible should face charges at the International Criminal Court.

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