

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. With advances in its nuclear and missile capabilities under 35-year-old leader Kim Jong-un, North Korea has evolved into a grave security threat to the United States. Efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs have occupied the past four U.S. administrations. Although North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) has haltingly engaged in negotiations with the United States under the Trump Administration, it simultaneously has continued to develop these programs. The weapons programs have been the primary focus of U.S. policy toward North Korea, but 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, smuggling, and trafficking of both narcotics and humans.



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

The U.S. Approach to North Korea

Under the Trump Administration, North Korea policy has veered from a “maximum pressure” campaign that sought to punish North Korea through international sanctions for its repeated nuclear and missile tests to an approach that emphasizes leader-to-leader meetings and includes a less vigorous application of sanctions. In March 2018, President Trump agreed to hold a summit with Kim to discuss North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Since then, Trump and Kim have held three meetings: in Singapore (June 2018); Hanoi (February 2019); and Panmunjom (June 2019), which is inside the demilitarized zone that separates the two Koreas.

Kim has also engaged in international diplomacy: after not holding any summits during his first six years in power, since March 2018 he has met on five occasions with Chinese President Xi Jinping, three with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and one with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Over the course of this engagement, the DPRK leader has pledged in writing to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” and pledged to allow the “permanent dismantlement” of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, “as the United States takes corresponding measures.” In addition, North Korea has declared and abided by a unilateral moratorium on nuclear tests and on long-range and medium-range ballistic missile test launches. Pyongyang has not conducted test launches of these devices since November 2017, but since May 2019 has tested short-range missiles multiple times. North Korea has also continued to produce fissile material and developed a submarine capable of carrying ballistic missiles.

South Korean President Moon is a champion of engagement with North Korea, and has applauded U.S. efforts to negotiate with Pyongyang. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have fallen markedly since early 2018, when there was considerable debate about whether the United States would and should conduct a preventive strike against North Korea to disable at least part of its WMD infrastructure.

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 and 2017 Congress passed, and Presidents Obama and Trump signed, legislation expanding U.S. sanctions (P.L. 114-122 and P.L. 115-44). Both Administrations have 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 any individual or entity that conducts trade with North Korea and on any foreign financial institution that conducts 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 United Nations has documented North Korea's efforts to evade sanctions, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China and Russia's coasts. Additionally, 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. In May 2017, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified that the United States knew little of North Korea's nuclear doctrine, but reiterated previous assessments that "Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities are intended for deterrence, international prestige, and coercive diplomacy." 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 stated on September 3, 2017, that it had successfully tested a hydrogen (thermonuclear) bomb that can be mounted on an intercontinental ballistic missile. Notwithstanding Kim's denuclearization pledges, North Korea continues to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. Since the Six-Party nuclear talks (among China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) broke down in 2009, North Korea has restarted its plutonium-production reactor and has openly built a uranium enrichment plant (other clandestine enrichment facilities likely exist).

North Korea conducted four missile tests between July and November 2017 that are widely believed to have intercontinental range. Reportedly, analysis from the Defense Intelligence Agency has found that North Korea has successfully developed a nuclear warhead that is "miniaturized" or sufficiently small to be mounted on long-range ballistic missiles, and may have produced up to 60 warheads. Security experts and U.S. officials have also voiced concerns about Pyongyang's improving cyber operations, which the regime may use for retaliation, coercion, espionage, and/or for financial gain.

China's Role

The flurry of diplomatic activity starting in 2018 has rekindled DPRK-China relations, which had been deeply strained since Kim took power in 2011. U.S. policy to pressure North Korea depends heavily on China. In addition to being North Korea's dominant trading partner, China reportedly provides food, crude oil, and investment that are essential lifelines for the regime in Pyongyang. China has voted for all 10 sanctions resolutions at the U.N. Security Council, and Trump Administration officials say Beijing generally is enforcing these sanctions. China's overriding

priority, however, appears to be preventing what it calls "chaos and war." Chinese analysts state that Beijing fears the destabilizing effects of a humanitarian crisis, including significant refugee flows over its borders and the uncertainty of how other nations, particularly the United States, would assert themselves on the Korean peninsula if a power vacuum develops.

North Korea's Human Rights Record

The plight of many North Koreans is dire. Reports by the U.S. government and private organizations portray extreme human rights abuses by the North Korean government over many years. 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.

Internal Situation

Since assuming power in December 2011, Kim appears to have consolidated his hold on power. Kim has engaged in several purges of high-level North Korean officials. In 2018, he declared the nuclear component of his *byungjin* policy of simultaneously pursuing economic and nuclear weapons development had succeeded, allowing him to focus on North Korea's economy going forward.

Although most North Koreans still live in meager circumstances, particularly outside of Pyongyang, the DPRK economy as a whole appears to have expanded during Kim's tenure. Previously prohibited markets containing many consumer goods and a range of services have proliferated throughout the country, perhaps providing a cushion against external economic pressure. Overall growth appears to have fallen in 2017 and 2018, perhaps due to sanctions, which have led to the virtual collapse of DPRK exports. Nevertheless, there are few signs of severe economic distress.

In addition, Pyongyang appears to be losing its ability to control information inflows from the outside world. Surveys of DPRK defectors reveal that growing numbers of North Koreans are wary of government propaganda and have ways to access outside sources of news.

Emma Chanlett-Avery,
Mark E. Manyin, Specialist in Asian Affairs

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