

**The Nuclear Crisis: A North Korean Conflict Map**  
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## **Summary Description**

The North Korean conflict was initially the result of the division of the Koreas and the subsequent Korean War. Although it began as an isolated conflict on Korean unification, the conflict has since evolved into a world conflict defined by North Korea's tumultuous relationships with a number of United Nations member states. This is due in part to North Korea's economic and political isolation as well as their continued policy of nuclear proliferation. North Korea has continued to build and maintain an arsenal of defensive nuclear weapons, which countries such as the United States have taken as an act of aggression. The United States has also taken issue with the Kim regime's numerous human rights offenses.

At surface level, the conflicts that stem from North Korea's relations center around nuclear weapons. Under critical analysis, it is apparent these conflicts are also the result of the opposing values of North Korea and western states. The dissonance between the two parties is exacerbated by the lack of communication as well as the lack of available information within North Korea about the U.S., and within the U.S. about North Korea. In a vicious cycle, stereotyping has continuously led to further polarization of parties.

Harsh economic sanctions have been, and continue to be, a temporary and ineffectual solution to North Korea's continued nuclear proliferation and violation of international agreements. Instead, trust and respect must be the preconditions of any mediation or attempt at resolution, rather than belittling or making demands of either party. Although resolution showed promised in March of 2018, the regulation potential of the conflict is largely dependent on the ability of parties to the conflict to disregard previous animosities in favor of preventing nuclear war and promoting peace on the Peninsula.

## **Conflict History**

From 1910 until 1945, the Korean Peninsula was part of Japan's colonial empire. Following the Second World War, the Peninsula was temporarily divided into two states, along a boundary referred to as the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel (Palka and Galgano 2004, xi). The communist North was bolstered by fellow Red states, China and the Soviet Union, while the South developed under the guidance of the United States (Palka and Galgano 2004, xi).

In 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea declared Kim Il Sung as its leader; satisfied with this arrangement, the Soviet Union withdrew their troops (BBC 2018). Two years later, North Korea invaded the South, thus beginning the Korean War. The conflict was a proxy war between allied Soviet Union and China on the side of the North, and the U.S. and the United Nations supporting the South (CFR 2018). Although the war reached ceasefire, and the conflict parties both signed an armistice, an official peace treaty was never signed. North and South Korea technically still remain at war.

A key provision of the signed armistice established the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a 2.5-mile wide stretch running roughly along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. In October of 1966, both North and South Korea invaded the DMZ, violating the terms of the 1953 armistice. While the ceasefire has more or less held for the past 65 years, there have been intermittent eruptions of tensions and violence every few years (CFR 2018). In 1985, Kim Il Sung signed on to the Treaty on the Non Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which prohibited the production or stockpile of nuclear weapons. North Korea violated the treaty in 1986 by opening a research nuclear reactor in Yongbyon, and then again six years later, by test firing a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan (BBC 2018).

In 1994, Kim Jong Il succeeded his late father, Kim Il Sung. Later that year, Kim signed an agreement with the United States halting North Korean nuclear development in exchange for heavy fuel oil and two light water nuclear reactors. In response to North Korea's later admission of developing uranium based nuclear weapons, the United States, Japan and South Korea placed an oil embargo on the country (BBC 2018). In January of 2003, North Korea formally withdrew from the NPT, citing national security issues as its reason for doing so (Davenport 2018).

Over the last ten years, North Korea has continued to maintain and even expand their nuclear arsenal. U.N. condemnation of long range missile launches led North Korea to walk out of six party peace talks with South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States (Davenport 2018). The international community has continued to place increasingly stringent sanctions on North Korea as their policy radicalizes and their proliferation of nuclear weapons continues. In January of 2017, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea was nearly finished developing long range guided missiles (BBC 2018). As a result, tensions rose in a “war of words” between Kim and President Trump (BBC 2018). In March of 2018, conflict resolution showed promise when a South Korean delegate announced that Trump had accepted Kim's invitation to meet.

### **Conflict Context**

North Korea's political structure is defined by a dictatorship of the Kim dynasty, currently lead by Kim Jong Un. Using censorship and fear tactics, the Kim family has created a cult of personality which the citizens of North Korea seem to worship. Kim Jong Un is known for his prioritization of military and nuclear research, and has become a well-known name in the United States for his presence in President Trump's personally insulting tweets (Pearlstone 2017).

Relations between the United States and North Korea have long suffered from a power imbalance. President Trump has since made the conflict personal, resulting in the same response from Kim Jong Un, targeting each other directly on Twitter and even in official statements rather than as a government. Adding to this tension, three American citizens are currently being detained in North Korea as ‘war prisoners’, two of which the Kim regime has accused of “hostile acts” (Goldman 2017). The authorities have not yet released substantive details regarding the imprisonment of these three men, increasing the difficulty for these U.S. citizens to return home.

As news regarding North Korea’s nuclear capabilities is restricted to the outside world, so too is information regarding the outside world restricted to North Korean citizens. Under Kim Jong Un, news and media are extremely censored. The only newspapers available are published by Central Korean News Agency; the only way to watch television is in public spaces, such as train stations; and internet access is only given to authorities with specific jobs (Jerreat 2017). Public intake of media is controlled by the government; citizens caught with uncensored material face punishment from the state (Jerreat 2017). This control allows the government to use propaganda to maintain anti U.S. sentiment and drastically decrease the impact of economic sanctions.

As a result of self-isolation and lack of cooperation, knowledge of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities is extremely limited. A few notable examples of Kim Jong Un’s non-cooperation have included when North Korea pulled out of the six party talks and when Kim evicted U.N. representatives who were investigating the country’s nuclear research. Experts currently believe that North Korea maintains the largest arsenal of short range ballistic missiles, an arsenal the regime has tested nearly 50 times (Martino 2017). Additionally, they have tested nine medium range missiles, which reach Japan, and two intercontinental ballistic missiles, which experts

estimate could reach as far as Los Angeles (Martino 2017). However, it is unlikely that these missiles could go this far with a heavier load of nuclear warhead.

Although North Korea looks to expand its nuclear reach, the immediate nuclear threat falls upon its neighboring countries, Russia, China, and South Korea. South Korea has had a tumultuous relationship with its northern counterpart. Even still, Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae In have recently began meeting to discuss peace. China and Russia have remained relatively neutral in regards to the greater North Korean conflict, however both nations have received backlash from the United Nations for refusing to enforce economic sanctions on North Korea (Rinna 2018).

### **Conflict Parties**

*Primary Parties:* The sanctions imposed by the United States, United Nations, and European Union have carried adverse effects on the North Korean economy. The nation has become increasingly isolated from both politics and the global market (Albert 2018). The North Korean government has sought to correct this asymmetrical power imbalance with other foreign governments by building up their nuclear arsenal. As the size and capability of their nuclear arsenal grows, the power balance between North Korea and the United States becomes increasingly levelled. Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un's tightly controlled government faces little opposition. The flow of information is carefully regulated and citizens are "bombarded" with daily propaganda (Grant 2012).

In continued shows of hard power, the United States has imposed unilateral sanctions targeted at the Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Denuclearization (CVID) of North Korea. U.S. diplomats seek denuclearization to establish peace in the region, secure weapons technology

that could be easily sold to terrorist organizations, and maintain the legitimacy of the NPT (Allison 2013). Moreover, the U.S. fears the use of nuclear weapons by a weak, unstable, and unpredictable regime (Snyder 2018). Throughout his first year in office, President Donald Trump was noted for his frequent and provocative Tweets regarding Kim Jong Un, which initially deteriorated U.S. Korea relations. Relations have since improved, as Kim and Trump scheduled to meet in May of 2018 (Sang Hun 2018).

*Secondary Party:* In spite of their capability to develop nuclear weapons, South Korea has maintained a policy of non-proliferation. South Korea's longstanding security alliance with the U.S. has proven effective in maintaining peace on the Peninsula (Snyder 2018). President Moon has been a helpful bridge in negotiations between North Korean and U.S. officials. As a nation within close proximity of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, South Korea carries strong interest in creating and maintaining nuclear non-proliferation on the Peninsula. Moon and Trump have agreed to remain coordinated as negotiations with Pyongyang progress (Jeong 2018).

*Interested Third Parties:* Since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, the United Nations Security Council has passed nine resolutions imposing economic and commercial sanctions on the current regime. In December of 2017, the United Nations approved further sanctions on the North Korean economy, restricting the importation of refined petroleum products by nearly 90% (Zhou 2017). Sanctions have not yet limited humanitarian assistance by the UN.

As North Korea's largest trade partner, China maintains roughly 80-85% of the country's economy (Albert 2018). China fears a loss of prestige and relevance in negotiations as well as the possibility of a reunified Korea with strong American influence (Perlez 2018). China's cautious approach to diplomacy in North Korea has valued maintaining Kim's regime in order to

ensure regional stability (Albert 2018). A number of American diplomats have admonished China's relaxed approach towards enforcing economic and political sanctions. As diplomats continue to fund the regime and are unwilling to enforce decisions made by foreign powers, sanctions imposed carry little weight. According to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cooperation with North Korea has prospered in the last few years (FMPRC 2017). Experts have countered, arguing that relations between the two countries are deteriorating as Chinese diplomats face mounting pressure to enforce sanctions (Albert 2018).

## **Issues**

*Fact Based:* The North Korean government views their nation as a victim of foreign intervention in both their way of life and foreign policy (Byman and Lind 2010). The government believes the United States is an aggressive nation seeking North Korean disarmament in order to further their goal of uniting the Peninsula under the democratic model. Meanwhile, the U.S. contends that North Korea unjustifiably maintains a nuclear arsenal in violation of international protocol while posing a credible threat to world peace. This perception discrepancy allows both governments to act aggressively against their enemies while maintaining the perceived moral high ground.

Through North Korea's propaganda, the dictatorship can promote the narrative that their nation is under attack. The same tools of propaganda are used in the United States to promote the idea of an 'evil' North Korea bent on destroying them. Each country and its citizens believe themselves to be acting righteously, in an effort to prevent nuclear war and mass casualties. However, the United States often fails to recognize their own complicity in allowing North Korea's continued violation of human rights and international treaties.



*Value Based:* North Korea is a fascist regime which imposes restrictions on its people through various means, including censorship, which nations around the world vehemently oppose. As a result of the censorship by the North Korean government, citizens have no reference of what life is like in other nations (Sedaghat 2014). These restrictions allow Kim Jong Un to more easily control and limit internal opposition.

Communism has long been opposed by the United States and democracies across the globe as a threat to global peace and stability. Moreover, as a result of historic precedent, it is widely believed that communism is an unfair system which directly contradicts personal freedom, oppresses citizenries, and leads to mass casualties through starvation, purges, or work camps. In contrast, North Korea's government holds communism in high regard, and refuses to introduce ideas of capitalism and republicanism. This promotes conflict on the Korean peninsula, as South Korea moves in strides towards being an economic capitalist powerhouse (Kim 2017).

The United States has continually asserted that the only solution that would be acceptable is Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) (Philipp 2016). This fixation on CVID being the singular solution is a result of the United States government's evaluation of which nations have the right to nuclear armament.

To a lesser extent, an additional issue is the treatment of citizens in North Korea. The state infamously kills or imprisons dissenters of the government, often placing them in gulags (Diamond 1998). Food scarcity is also a problem in North Korea, with hundreds of thousands of citizens dying as a result (Dinville 2017). While conflicting governmental styles contribute to tensions between parties of the conflict, human rights abuses are of smaller importance in the nuclear conflict.

*Interest Based:* The North Korean conflict raises the question of what nations should be allowed nuclear weapons. The United States and other superpowers want to denuclearize the Korean peninsula, believing North Korea to be an imminent threat to the world. It is widely agreed that Kim Jong Un and the North Korean government are unstable, and willing to launch nuclear attacks at a moment's notice. However, North Korea views their stockpile of nuclear weapons as defense against the United States and world, who have large amounts of nuclear weapons at their disposal. North Korea believes they have the right to bear nuclear arms because of the antagonistic approach world governments have taken against them.

*Non Realistic:* North Korea's foreign policy has become increasingly isolationist. Their lack of ability and desire to engage in dialogue with foreign governments exacerbates the conflict. Another nonrealistic issue plaguing the North Korean conflict arose recently, as U.S. President Donald Trump has used violent rhetoric against Kim Jong Un, in both speeches and tweets. Kim Jong Un has responded with equally visceral language and threats against both Donald Trump and the U.S. government. The style of communication between the two parties has increased tensions throughout the world and has led to an increasingly unstable armistice.

## **Dynamics**

*Precipitating Events:* In 1986, it became widely known that North Korea had been operating a nuclear reactor for research in Yongbyon, which violated the NPT (BBC 2018). Their violation was one of the first precipitating events that hinted at the surfacing of a major international conflict and North Korea's future stereotype as the face of nuclear weapons.

In the following years, North Korea oscillated between agreeing to non-proliferation treaties and continuously violating the terms with missile launches and nuclear research. This

included the missile North Korea fired into the Sea of Japan in 1993, their development of uranium based nuclear weapons in 2002, and a nuclear test underground in 2006. During this time, the United States, Japan, and South Korea placed an oil embargo on North Korea and the United Nations set economic and commercial sanctions against the country (BBC 2018).

*Issue Emergence, Transformation, and Proliferation:* The worldview of North Korea shifted when the country joined the United Nations in 1991. It seemed as if North Korea's leader at the time, Kim Il Sung, was willing to cooperate with other nations and that the U.N. could move forward with negotiations and peace. This view was short lasting.

The first year of Donald Trump's presidency has pressured Kim Jong Un into communication and participation (Baker 2018). Trump's impulsivity makes him both dangerous and easily malleable – two incentives for the North Korean leader to meet with him. Trump accepted an invitation to the table with North Korea and South Korea without hesitation or much discussion at his meeting with South Korean President Moon (Baker and Sang-Hun 2018).

*Polarization:* As allies such as the United States, South Korea, and the U.N. grow stronger and set harsher economic sanctions, they tend to distance themselves from North Korea, creating a depersonalization of the opposing party. This depersonalization leads to a mirror-imaging phenomenon, in which each party stereotypes the other as a mirror image of their own beliefs and ideals. As a result, North Korea and the Kim dynasty are known for their untrustworthiness and dangerous flirtation with nuclear weapons, and it has become inconceivable for other nations to think of them otherwise.

*Stereotyping:* Western civilization now has of stereotype of the North Korea as unpredictable and secretive, while the stereotype that North Koreans tend to have of America is that they are dangerous and willing to kill. This North Korean viewpoint stems from the U.S.

violence during the Korean War and the anti U.S. propaganda teaching that the U.S. started the war (Berlinger 2017). The tendency to stereotype the opposition leads to vast miscommunication and a difficult road to change.

*Spiraling:* The current United States administration has taken the conflict with North Korea to a personal level in the form of insulting tweets and comments by both President Trump and Kim Jong Un. In September of 2017, Trump derogatorily referred to Kim Jong Un as “rocket man.” In response, Kim Jong Un called Trump a “dotard,” to which Trump responded in a tweet, “Kim Jong Un of North Korea, who is obviously a madman who doesn't mind starving or killing his people, will be tested like never before!” (Hamedy 2018). By transforming the conflict between the U.S. and North Korea into a personal argument, it can spiral into a verbal exchange of insults rather than the dangerous international conflict on which the governments must be focused.

### **Alternative Routes to Solutions of the Problems**

Position based bargaining by U.S. diplomats has led to a series of unsuccessful diplomatic talks, treaties, and sanctions. In spite of the continued failure of position-bargaining, parties to the conflict have yet to deviate from their approach to one that is interest focused. The position based approach has sought to ensure North Korea’s compliance with non-proliferation treaties, continued diplomatic talks, and explore regime change options in the region. President Barack Obama added a slight variation to this approach by setting the precondition that North Korea denuclearize before diplomatic talks began (Hecker 2017). Moreover, Obama pushed for tighter sanctions and put pressure on Beijing to enforce them. Similarly, President Trump has proved that he will hold China accountable for any North Korean provocations (Campbell 2018).

North Korean officials have refused international monitoring and verification, in spite of it being a critical piece of past agreements. It has since been found that Pyongyang has continued to maintain and expand their nuclear program (Sherman and Revere 2018). An integrative approach in North Korea will separate Kim Jong Un from the problem of nuclear proliferation, focus on the interest of preventing nuclear war, and allow for both North Korean and U.S. interests to be realized (Fischer, Ury, and Patton 1991, 10).

Many have argued that through overwhelming and harshly imposed sanctions, the international community can compel the North Korean government to make a stark choice between regime survival and their continued proliferation of nuclear weapons (Sherman and Revere 2018). Such an approach obscures the reasons North Korea feels it necessary to maintain their nuclear program and fails to address issues that will lead to a long term solution in the Korean Peninsula. The international community must adopt an approach to the crisis in North Korea that incorporates a thorough understanding of North Korea's interests in the region. North Korea's interest in a nuclear weapons program is rooted in ensuring "regime survival against U.S. military power" and uniting the Korean Peninsula "on its [own] terms" (Sherman and Revere 2018). As such, an effective and integrative approach must establish solid diplomatic relations that assure Kim Jong Un of his regime's survival. Convincing Kim that the international community is not seeking a regime change will be difficult given that the North Korean government watched Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi give up their nuclear weapons, get toppled, and die "ignominious deaths" (Conca 2017). Separating the leaders from the conflict is admittedly more difficult when politics and regime are closely interwoven.

Establishing a baseline of trust must be one of the first steps towards forming a lasting agreement. Such a process would involve bringing the North Korean government back into the

fold of international politics and governance. Their involvement in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea was a productive step in this direction. Further relations of this kind are needed to incite productive treaties that are based in mutual trust.

Additionally, the international community must end all preconditions to begin diplomatic talks. Parties to the conflict must first meet and normalize relations before any productive decisions made be made. Parties to the conflict, particularly the United States, must accept that “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization” is but a fantasy (Conca 2017). These two steps will allow for a normalization of relations that will likely lead to productive diplomatic relations between parties to the conflict.

Early talks should not focus on the contentious issue of nuclear proliferation but rather on strengthening regional dialogue and bringing North Korea into the fold of international politics. Subsequent talks and negotiations should emphasize the destructive nature of nuclear war to officials in Pyongyang. Doing so will allow all sides of the conflict to be united in the common goal of preventing nuclear war. As nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker asserts, the goal of early talks should be to “avoid misinterpretation of actions that could lead to conflict and potential escalation to the nuclear level” (Hecker 2017). Any additional demands of nuclear non-proliferation should be met with security guarantees, economic and food aid, and other confidence building steps (Sherman and Revere 2018).

Any diplomatic and political efforts must be effectively coordinated with the international community. China, Japan, and the United States play particularly important roles in the conflict and carry the responsibility to act as effective ‘third side’ parties. In order to advance diplomacy, China must loosen their already lackadaisical approach to economic and political sanctions in North Korea (The Financial Times 2017). As long term solutions will ultimately

bring North Korea into the fold of international politics, “any diplomatic offensive must hold out the option of lessening North Korean isolation, in return for nuclear concessions” (The Financial Times 2017).

### **Conflict Regulation Potential**

*Internal Limiting Factors:* North Korea has already suffered economically due to sanctions from the UN, EU, and the U.S. (Albert 2018). South Korea and the United States currently have no sanctions placed on them, but if conflict with North Korea escalates, they could suffer from economic stagnation and an increase in military spending (Stiglitz 2003).

Moreover, if the conflict escalates into the nuclear realm, total destruction could occur. While parties involved continue to maintain stockpiles of nuclear weapons and have threatened to use them to attack, all recognize the devastation that would occur if nuclear war broke out. The nations in conflict would cease to exist, depending on the scale of the attacks (Lewis 2017). Nuclear weapons are desired by the parties because it shows strength and aggression which might improve their standing in the conflict and world. But, on some level, it is understood what nuclear war would do the planet, and the parties want to avoid this for as long as possible.

*External Limiting Factors:* No clear external authority seems to have the ability to limit the conflict between the U.S. and North Korea. The United Nations has the most potential to be this regulating force, but their imposition of sanctions on North Korea has soured that relationship and have failed to address the root of the conflict.

*Trusted Third Parties:* Trusted third parties seem few and far between in this conflict, as it has forced governments and diplomats to make the choice of siding either with North Korea or the United States. Russia is distrusted by the United States, and would not help de-escalate,

especially given their historical precedent of supporting North Korea. China is the closest “ally” North Korea has, due to their similar communist ideologies and leaders who created a cult of personality. The United Nations has tried to de-escalate the conflict by imposing economic sanctions, but is now viewed as an enemy by North Korea (Blanchard 2017). South Korea’s recent diplomatic success, reflected by the Olympics and upcoming peace talks seems to be a sign that South Korea is a viable third party (Rothman 2018).

*Techniques of Conflict Management:* North Korea displays an aggressive conflict style, highlighted by their inability to address concerns and needs of other parties. This limits the ability for peace because it is harder for a middle ground agreement to be found. President Trump’s recent foreign policy indicates that he also has this hard line approach to conflict, making it unlikely North Korea and the United States will be able to solve conflict on their own. It will take a third party or other mediators from those countries or abroad to bridge the gap.



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