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The Situation in North Korea



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Introduction

One of the key geopolitical situations in the past 70 years has been the situation on the Korean Peninsula. When the region was liberated from Japan after the Second World War, it became a proxy battlefield between the United States and Soviet Union, and the cultural, political, and economic rift caused by this remains to this day.

In the immediate post war period, the northern region was controlled by the communist Soviet Union, and the south administered by various governments supported by the United States. The armistice following the Korean War cemented these influences, creating an authoritarian communist government in the north, and alternating republics and military dictatorships in the capitalist south. Since this split, paths of the two Koreas have been radically different. South Korea has become a manufacturing and technology hub, and is reminiscent of post war Japan in its embrace of Western capitalism, free markets, and democratic governance. However, the North has taken a radically different path. It became an extremely authoritarian communist nation, and has suffered from its political and economic disconnect from most of the world outside of itself and China. This has led to a complex situation domestically and internationally, with several issues surrounding the country.

Domestically, the country has been ruled unilaterally for the past 70 odd years by a total of three men, Kim Il-Sung, his son Kim Jong-Il, and grandson, the current leader, Kim Jong-Un. Personal freedom in all aspects of life- politically, economically, socially, and culturally- is suppressed by the government, according to Amnesty International. Further, due both to sanctions and economic difficulty, there have been periodic food shortages which affect vast swaths of the population.



Internationally, many America oriented nations see North Korean foreign policy as a situation to be dealt with. The country uses aggressive language when dealing with many foreign powers, and has not in fact signed a peace deal with South Korea, making renewed international military conflict a grave consideration. Further, it is allegedly developing nuclear weapons and Long Range Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (LCBMs) which would have the potential to deliver a payload to the mainland United States. In recent months, the country has taken an increasingly hostile tone with its neighbours, as well as the US, often threatening violence.

There are many aspects of the situation in North Korea that should be examined, and nearly every regional power has a different position on this issue.

Definition of Key Terms

Famine

Famine: widespread and/or extreme food shortage accompanied by human mortality from starvation.

ICMBs

ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, a missile designed to be fired over long ranges of more than 5500km. They are generally designed for use with nuclear warheads (please see Appendix).

Human Rights Abuse

Deliberate maltreatment of groups of human's beings including violations of generally-accepted fundamental rights as stated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

General Overview

History

In 1910, during a period of pacific wide expansion, Japan annexed the Korean peninsula, maintaining a military government in the country until the conclusion of the



Second World War. As the war drew to a close, Soviet forces took control of the northern half of the peninsula, while after the surrender of Japan, the United States occupied the southern half. As plans for a unified government stalled, governments allied to the respective occupiers were established in the now-communist North and capitalist South. Despite a historically unified culture, these two Koreas differed in their social, political, and economic structures.

These differences caused tensions which led to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, which destroyed what little infrastructure was left of the Japanese occupation in addition to any remaining chances at unified government. After the war, the North began to rely on China for economic and political stability, while the South had a similar relationship with the United States. This further shaped the paths of the respective nations. While poverty was widespread in both in the years following the war, with South Korean per capita income hovering around \$100 per year, both countries relied upon their respective major donors. Due in large part international aid and trade, primarily from the United States, South Korea has managed a turnaround from days of poverty and the authoritarian or military leaders that ruled for the decades following WW2, to become the 14th largest economy in the world and a democracy. However, the situation in the North is little changed from the 1950s.

Current Issues

Primarily, there are several domestic concerns which continue to plague the residents of North Korea. The country is in a state of poverty due to a few factors. Economically, the country relies on trade with China, and has lacks skilled labour, arable land, and technological development. This has impeded economic growth and has made the quality of live volatile. The country has suffered numerous famines, notably from 1994-1998 and again in 2014. These were attributed to a few factors, including economic mismanagement and a lack of arable land. The country's economic isolation meant that domestic firms were not subject to international competition, reducing efficiency and quality. Further, when there was a shortage of food, the country was unable to import sufficient food. The country has since opened itself up to foreign markets somewhat, but the fundamental problem remains. Economic isolationism could be potentially sustainable but the country lacks sufficient land to cultivate sufficient food, with around 20% of the land being arable according to the CIA World Factbook. This causes thin margins between consumption and potential supply. China could export food to the country in both cases. However, relations between North Korea and China, its biggest and effectively only ally have cooled in the past year, with China cutting coal



exports. If it decides to do the same with food, North Korea will find itself even more reliant on foreign aid.

Additionally, the government is criticised as one of the most repressive in the world by the UN, United States, South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International, which in its annual global human rights claimed that ‘Citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) continued to suffer violations of most aspects of their human rights.’ The right of self-determination of its citizens is non-existent, being run autocratically by descendants of the first leader of the country, Kim Il-Sung. The current leader is Kim Jong-un, who has continued with policies of repression against the citizens of the country. While it is difficult to establish the full nature of life in the country, accounts of wide ranging limitations of freedoms are not uncommon. Freedom of expression and religion are non-existent, and information is tightly controlled. Further, a system of violence is used to maintain the control of the government. Dissenters are subject to kidnappings, execution, or a lifetime of internment in one of many labour camps strewn throughout the country. It is believed that the families of those detained are also kept in camps. There have been multiple high-profile incidents in recent years which returned international attention to the human rights situation in the country. Most recently, the half-brother of Kim Jong-Un, Kim Jong-Nam, was killed in an airport in Kuala Lumpur by two women suspected to be acting for the North Korean government. Briefly favoured to succeed Kim Jong-Il for leadership of the country, Kim Jong-Nam fell out of favour with the government for ‘turning capitalist’ according to his father. He left the country, and lived in exile for around 15 years before being killed, allegedly by the North Korean. For its part, however, North Korea has denied that it was responsible for his death.

These internal struggles worry many foreign nations, not only because of concern for the country’s citizens, who are left with a low standard of living and heavily restricted freedoms. It is also thought to be one of the causes of many international concerns raised by the United States and its allies.

Ever since the Korean War, relations between North Korea and the United States, along with its allies, have been tense at best. However, several specific incidents have provoked major concern in much of the international community. Primarily, the foreign policy of the North is generally exceedingly confrontational. War has not formally ceased with the South, and the North maintains a constant threat of renewed conflict, with Japan and the United States in addition to its neighbour. It has, for example, threatened to turn Seoul into ‘a



sea of fire,' and 'reduce [Japan] into ashes,' according to Bloomberg Politics. To further this rhetoric, it has conducted public missile and nuclear tests, which South Korea, the United States, and Japan say serve to threaten them. In the past months, the country has stepped up the frequency of these tests, conducting five tests between April 4th and June 8th. This prompted the United States to divert a carrier group to the region around the peninsula, and has heightened tensions in the area.

The North Korean missile development program runs back decades, and aims to produce an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), capable of targeting large swaths of the United States mainland in addition to Pacific military installations.

It began its independent program with the acquisition of Scud missiles, reportedly from Egypt, in 1976, at which point it began working on its own model. Since that time, it has steadily updated its arsenal, most notably increasing the range of targets it is able to hit. The current longest range of a North Korean missile is estimated to be between 2500 km and 4000 km. The operational capability of these has been verified with publicly conducted tests. As seen below, with this range it is easily able to reach Japan, South Korea, and even, though unseen below, American military bases in the Pacific.

Currently, development is focused on the models known in the US as KN-08 and KN-14, two different models of ICMBs, with a range of at least 11,500 km, giving them the capability to reach the much of the US, including parts of the East Coast. Exact progress in the development of these is currently unknown, and there have been no known full flight tests of either model. However, there have been known tests of various components of the missiles, such as stage separation. What this signifies for their development is not known, as it would be strategically advisable to keep foreign nations unaware of such capability, but North Korea is famous for publicly projecting its military power.

There are similar concerns with the North's research into and development of nuclear weaponry. These programs run in parallel, as, particularly ICMBs, the medium and long-range missiles being developed are believed to be intended to deliver nuclear warheads, especially as the damage done by conventional payloads would be minimal in relation to the cost, in terms of time and resources, of the production of these missiles.

North Korea is believed to have begun development of nuclear capability in 1956, when Soviet scientists began training domestic engineers. There is thought to have been steady progress, with a known test detonation of a 0.7 kiloton warhead on 9 October 2006.



At the moment, the country is thought to possess the nuclear warheads that can be mounted on missiles, though production is thought to be limited.

This programme is criticised by the United States, Japan, and South Korea as being 'a clear and present danger to all,' as stated by the US Secretary of Defence. The worry is the destructive power of nuclear weaponry being in the hands of a power as unstable as North Korea, which is known to threaten other nations readily and is still at war with a neighbouring country, will dramatically increase the threat of nuclear warfare. This would cause untold damage to the population not only directly in the area as well as the environment.

There are 8 other countries which possess nuclear capability, including the United States, one of the largest detractors of the North Korea's nuclear programme. However, all except Israel, Pakistan, and India are signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and have reduced the number of available warheads since 1968.

Further, nuclear capability in the North, as well as development of missiles capable of long range deployment, is likely to maintain or even increase nuclear proliferation in the region, as the United States is unlikely to reduce its arsenal in the region while North Korea has nuclear weaponry. A consequence of this is Chinese unwillingness to proliferate, as it would want to maintain a balance of power in the region and counteract American capability. This is contrary to the non-proliferation treaty, and increases the potential human and environmental costs of any conflict in the area. All parties except North Korea have expressed interest in eliminating and preventing North Korean nuclear capability.

This tension is maintained because of the diplomatic backing of North Korea by China. This protects it from major reprisals, both diplomatically and militarily. While one state supporting another diplomatically and militarily is common, and the China-North Korea relationship mirrors the relationship between the US and South Korea before the South's rapid economic expansion, the United States maintains that China is propping up an authoritarian regime, and pressures it to reduce ties and aid to the North.

Major Parties Involved

The degree to which these various happenings are considered issues or even acknowledged as happening, as well as the solutions endorsed, varies by party. There are three main groups, but the individual members of each have nuanced positions.



North Korea and China

The primary group is North Korea and its primary ally China, which generally sides with the North in international discussions.

For the most part, North Korea does not acknowledge the existence of many domestic issues, particularly economic difficulties. When Kim Jong-Un called the first Party Congress in decades, economic reform was not mentioned once. It has been known to stock grocery stores with plastic replicas for visiting journalists to present an image of abundance. However, Kim Jong-Un notably did publicly acknowledge the presence of hunger in his country, saying he "cannot sleep" for worry in February 2015.

To attempt to combat this issue, North Korea is pursuing two primary solutions. First, it had attempted for years to make its economy self-sustaining by employing substantial amounts of workers in agricultural work and improving internal infrastructure. However, this has had minimal effect on the economic issues plaguing its citizens, and it has had to resort to its other main attempt at easing this burden, which is accepting foreign aid. For example, the US donated around \$1.3bn to North Korea between 1995 and 2008. However, it should be noted that there have been accusations of corruption in the North Korean government, as for example hunger continues alongside the construction of water parks and 4D cinemas. (Phebe, 2014)

North Korea tends to deny accusations of the worst offences against its people, such as the killing of Kim Jong-Nam or the existence of labour camps. However, for the most part, North Korea and China seem to view restrictions on personal freedom and state-sponsored violence not as violations of human rights, but as necessary for the maintenance of a secure internal state. China itself practices many of the same policies as North Korea, limiting the freedom of the press and detaining dissenters, though arguably to a less violent extent. As such, they oppose action to mitigate these policies, as doing so would threaten China's domestic policy.

As would be expected, North Korea itself justifies its own foreign policy. It presents the three main sources of international concern-it development of missiles and nuclear warheads as well as its aggression towards other nations-as the justified response of a country under threat from its neighbours and a global superpower. For example, after a nuclear test in 2013, it defended its action against widespread criticism by saying that it was self-defence against 'U.S. hostility.'



China's internal position on its neighbour's foreign policy is not fully known. In the Korean War, China sent forces which effectively turned the tide of the UN counter invasion and established the current border. It generally stands with the North, and in 2012 the US Defence secretary claimed that China aided the North Korean program by selling technology. It opposes most international responses to North Korean actions, fearing the destabilisation of the region. As a rule of thumb, it vetoes all but the most watered-down sanctions in the Security Council, on which it sits as a permanent member. However, in recent years, China has become wary of the DPRK's foreign aggression. After the spate of missile tests in early 2017, it called upon the country to suspend its missile and nuclear tests, and in 2013 warned the country to 'stop any rhetoric or acts that could worsen situations.' It has participated against some international sanctions against the country over its weapons testing, and in February 2017 halted its imports of coal from North Korea. As North Korea relies upon China for 2/3 of its international trade, and coal is one of the most lucrative of North Korea's industries, this move is especially significant. There is further speculation that China may halt oil trade with the North as well, and China had in the past stopped purchasing precious metals, and halted exports of fuel and other weapon program related products.

The government of North Korea views all of its actions as justified, and does not believe in major attempts to change it. As mentioned, it maintains that many of its alleged human rights abuses are for the maintenance of internal stability, and that aggressive rhetoric and actions as well as nuclear and missile development are purely in the interest of self-defence.

South Korea, Japan, and United States

The main detractors of the DPRK, North Korea's name for itself, are the United States, South Korea, and recently, Japan. It should be noted that there is a historical animosity between South Korea and Japan for the harsh Japanese Imperial presence in Korea, but many policies towards North Korea are similar. A further wrinkle is the recent election of a relatively liberal leader in South Korea, who is likely to pivot away from the United States and reopen diplomatic contact with the North. As such, their policy towards the North is evolving as time goes on.

The US, Japan, and South Korea tend to see a solution to the economic issues in the opening of North Korean markets to the international community. The argument goes that by subjecting the North Korean economy to competition, efficiency and quality will improve, benefiting consumers. Additionally, this would generally boost economic output, creating



stability. This would also allow for greater flexibility in times of crisis, as varied firms would be able to vary supply of different goods as needed.

South Korea, the United States, Japan, and the United Nations all condemn North Korea's system of internal repression. While these countries take limited steps independently regarding this issue, all use the UN to attempt to reduce the magnitude of this issue.

The rest of the international community, particularly the US, South Korea, and Japan, condemn much of North Korea's aggression and weapons testing and development. Generally, these parties aim for increased stability in the region through an end to North Korea's violent rhetoric and an end to its nuclear capability. There have been long running economic sanctions, by all parties, including the United Nations to this end, though with a target on the nuclear program. A full table of current sanctions can be seen in the appendix.

The primary concern with many of these countries is that the domestic instability of the country, combined with the total power concentrated in the hands of one person, means nuclear capability and aggressive military action could be used erratically, potentially with disastrous consequences. This is not fully a hypothetical either. The Korean War was fought for over three years, is estimated to have killed over 1.2 million people, and yet the border between the two countries remained effectively unmoved. Should a similar conflict break out again, but with increased nuclear capabilities, the scale of destruction would be greatly increased.

UN

Finally, the international community, generally organised through the United Nations, to a certain extent plays the role of arbiter, though it often views North Korea's actions similarly to South Korea and the US.

Economically, the international community tends to favour more open markets in a manner similar to Japan, South Korea, and the United States

The UN has passed a number of resolutions on the human rights situation in the North, a selection of which can be found in [UN Resolutions](#) section, and has a number of sanctions in place against North Korea over its weapons development.



Timeline of Key Events

Timeline of events in reverse chronological order leading up to present day.

Date	Description of Event
27 December 1945	Allied Powers announce joint trusteeship over the Korean peninsula
25 June 1950	North Korea invades South Korea, starting the Korean War
27 July 1953	Ceasefire in Korean War
1973	South Korea's GDP per capita rises above North Korea's, where it has stayed
17 September 1991	Both North and South Korea are admitted to the United Nations
1995	Floods strike North Korea, exacerbating a famine which will last until 1998 and kill at least 3 million
15 February 1997	A relative of the ruling family and defector, Yi Han-yong, is shot by three North Korean agents in Seoul
17 December 2011	Death of Kim Jong-Il, leading to the succession of Kim Jong-Un as leader
9 September 2016	North Korea successfully conducts a test of a nuclear warhead it says can be mounted on a missile
13 February 2017	Exiled half-brother of Kim Jong-Un, Kim Jong-Nam, is killed by suspected North Korean agents
14 May 2017	North Korea conducts most recent ballistic missile tests
26 April 2017	Top US officials release statement saying they aim to 'increase pressure on the DPRK.'

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

There are countless UN resolutions on North Korea, going back decades. During the Korean War, the UN Security Council in S/1501 voted to declare that the North instigated a 'breach of peace,' and then voted to recommend member states assist South Korea. Now, the General Assembly annually passes a resolution condemning the human rights situation in the country. Additionally, it has passed a number of resolutions, such as GA resolution



A/C.3/71/L.23 from October 2016 which ‘expresses its very serious concern over’ at what it termed a ‘persistence of continuing reports of human rights abuses.’

Various other UN committees have passed resolutions on the topic, such as UNHRC resolution 34/L.23 from March 2017, which ‘Stresses and restates its grave concern about the commission’s finding that the body of testimony gathered and the information received provided reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in [the DPRK].’

- Complaint of aggression upon the Republic of Korea, 25 June 1950 (S/RES/82)
- Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 24 March 2017 (A/HRC/34/L.23)
- Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, 31 October 2015, (A/C.3/71/L.23)

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Korean War

The most direct attempt in history to address the situation in North Korea was in fact the Korean War. The South Korea and the United Nations, led by the United States, counter-invaded North Korea after incursions below the 38th parallel, then the border between the countries. These forces pushed nearly to the Chinese border, until a surprise intervention by China brought the battle lines to roughly the 38th parallel, where a new border was established.

This caused massive amounts of casualties as well as economic destruction on both sides and its legacy is a bulwark against many peaceful attempts at resolution.

Sanctions

The United States, South Korea, Japan, European Union, the United Nations, and China all have some degree of sanctions in place against North Korea, generally targeting its nuclear program. For the most part, these sanction directly relevant trade, such as fuel and heavy weaponry, but also target goods which benefit the ruling class, such as luxury goods.



The degree of effect of these is unknown. Some designate them the most effective measure being taken, as they are peaceful and nominally only target those inflicting internal damage on the country. They are likely to have increased the difficulty of acquiring nuclear weapons, as they must be developed fully internally.

However, others argue that they are counterproductive. The development of nuclear weapons is a major target of the Kim dynasty, and it is thought that the increased cost of development caused by sanctions is borne by exacting a higher toll on the civilian population. Further, destabilizing the North Korean economy could increase the chance of a nuclear strike.

Economic Aid

Many countries provide economic aid to the North Korean people and government, generally in the form of food aid. The hope is that this will directly improve the quality of life in the country regardless of the actions of the government. This policy has seen success in mitigating the damage caused by famines, but there is concern that the North Korean government does not distribute aid to those most in need.

Possible Solutions

Reunification

The prospect of reunification is one that all parties regularly express hope for, including the North. (Park, 2014) If reunification were carried out, the hope is that the leadership of the South would reduce or eliminate many of the concerns. However, there are a number of obstacles to this. Primarily, the form of reunification that would be accepted by the North would likely give its current political system more power than would be acceptable by the South, meaning that fewer of the issues would be resolved. Further, despite a shared past, there is more a half a century of major social, economic, and cultural divide between the countries, the mending of which would likely prove costly. Due to these issues, as well as longstanding and currently heightened tension in the region, this is considered very unlikely to occur.

Sanctions

Many parties already implement sanctions. These are popular because much simpler to implement, can be introduced or removed conditionally, are peaceful in nature, and can be



targeted. However, there are concerns about the damage these do to the stability of the country as well as the quality of life for the citizens of the country.

Economic Aid

One way to increase the quality of life of many citizens, as well as increase stability is economic aid. This is promoted for its targeted nature, allowing people to be helped without supporting the regime, and the stabilising effect on the country. Caution should be taken to ensure that the government does not use this aid to their own ends, or that it is taken as a symbol of approval from the international community.

Dialogue

South Korea especially has long promoted dialogue between foreign governments and North Korea. This has the effect of allowing common ground to be reached, increasing the odds for longer term solutions. Deals can be reached as needed to reduce the severity of the situation in North Korea, and in such a way as to promote goodwill, rather than forcing them to change behaviour to preserve economic vitality, as sanctions do.

This is especially risky, however, as the North often disregards deals it is a part of, for example ignoring and then leaving the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Additionally, this measure often requires the use of other methods as incentives to insure compliance.

Appendix

Sanctions in place against North Korea

Body	Financial Sanctions	Arms Sales	Related Goods	Travel	Other
United States	Individuals involved in weapons programs cannot do business in the US	Arms sales are prohibited		Restricted travel for related individuals	No minerals trade
United Nations	Restrictions on money transfers	Arms imports and	No goods can be sold relating		



		exports are illegal	to weapons development		
South Korea	No inter-Korean trade with single industrial exception	UN Restrictions	South Korean shipping lanes off limits for all goods		Cultural exchange prohibited
Japan	No payments to North Korea greater than \$800, and must be humanitarian	UN Restrictions	Ban on ships which have called at or are from North Korea	North Korean citizens are not allowed entry	Missile or nuclear engineers who have been to North Korea cannot enter
European Union	No financial support for trade with North Korea that might contribute to weapons programs.	No sale of arms or related goods	Inspections of and advance information on cargo to and from North Korea	Restrictions on access to E.U. airports for certain flights	Ban on luxury goods, minerals, and technology

ICMBs

North Korean missile ranges



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