

June 25, 2015

## U.S.-North Korea Relations

North Korea has presented the United States with some of the most vexing and persistent foreign policy challenges of the post-Cold War period. Efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program have occupied the past three U.S. administrations. Since 2009, North Korea has rebuffed U.S. and South Korean offers to negotiate on denuclearization, despite previous commitments to do so. Particularly under its young leader Kim Jong-un, North Korea has continued to develop its nuclear and missile programs. Although the primary focus of U.S. policy toward North Korea has been the nuclear weapons program, many other issues populate the U.S. policy agenda, including Pyongyang's missile programs, illicit activities, provocations against South Korea, and human rights violations.



**Source:** Graphic created by CRS. Map generated by Hannah Fischer using Department of State Boundaries (2011); Esri (2014); DeLorme (2014).

### U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

The Obama administration's policy toward North Korea, often referred to as "strategic patience," is to put pressure on the regime in Pyongyang while insisting that North Korea return to the six-nation denuclearization negotiations, called the Six-Party Talks. (The talks, which began in 2003 but have not been held since 2008, include the United States, China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and Russia.) The U.S. government has closely coordinated this approach with allies Japan and South Korea and attempted to convince China to be tougher on North Korea. At the same time, the United States has sought to pressure Pyongyang through international and unilateral sanctions and arms interdictions. U.S. officials have stated that, under the right conditions, they seek a comprehensive package deal for North Korea's complete denuclearization that might include the normalization of relations and significant aid.

Critics claim that the Administration's policy has not prevented Pyongyang from improving its missile and nuclear capabilities. The policy also depends on U.S. allies maintaining unity, which could crumble if those capitals

take divergent approaches. Furthermore, the collapse of the nuclear talks has intensified concerns about proliferation, as cash-strapped North Korea might sell its nuclear technology or fissile material to another country or a non-state actor. Evidence of North Korea's past nuclear cooperation with Syria and Libya has alarmed some national security experts.

The Obama Administration reached an agreement with North Korea on February 29, 2012 (the so-called "Leap Day Agreement") that proved to be short-lived. The deal committed North Korea to a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment at the Yongbyon nuclear facility, as well as the readmission of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. The Obama administration pledged 240,000 metric tons of "nutritional assistance" and greater engagement with Pyongyang. North Korea scuttled the deal only two months later by launching a long-range rocket. A third nuclear test in February 2013 further hindered efforts to restart talks.

### Nuclear, Missile, and Cyber Capabilities

North Korea has tested three nuclear devices, in 2006, 2009, and 2013, and has declared itself a nuclear-armed state. North Korea appears to be expanding its capacity to produce both plutonium and highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. Experts estimate that North Korea has produced between 30 and 50 kilograms of separated plutonium, enough for at least half a dozen nuclear weapons. Since nuclear talks broke down, North Korea has restarted its plutonium-production reactor and has openly built a uranium enrichment plant (other clandestine enrichment facilities likely exist). North Korea has repeatedly emphasized the role of its nuclear weapons as a deterrent.

North Korea has launched five long-range ballistic missiles (sometimes in the guise of a satellite launch) in the past 20 years, and only one (in December 2012) was ostensibly successful. Open source assessments of North Korea's warhead and ballistic missile development have differed, particularly on the question of whether the North has the capability to miniaturize a warhead to fit it on an intercontinental ballistic missile. In October 2014, the Commander of U.S. Forces in Korea remarked that North Korea may have the ability to do so. However, other experts argue that North Korea has not tested its long-range missiles enough to constitute a credible threat.

Security experts and U.S. officials have also voiced concerns about Pyongyang's apparently growing cyber capabilities. South Korea has accused North Korea of launching cyberattacks on media outlets, banks, and a nuclear reactor operator. The FBI has blamed North Korean hackers for a November 2014 attack against Sony Pictures.

Although some cybersecurity experts remain skeptical of North Korea's capabilities, its apparent willingness to use such tactics aggressively is a concern for U.S. officials.

### China's Role

U.S. policy to pressure North Korea depends heavily on China's influence. In addition to being North Korea's largest trading partner by far—accounting for about 70% of North Korea's total trade—China also provides food and energy aid that is an essential lifeline for the regime in Pyongyang. The effectiveness of multilateral sanctions relies heavily on Chinese enforcement. Beijing cannot (or has chosen not to) completely control Pyongyang's behavior, as suggested by North Korea's destabilizing nuclear tests and missile launches. Many analysts agree, however, that even a temporary cessation of Chinese trade and/or aid would have a significant impact on North Korea.

China's overriding priority appears to be to prevent the collapse of North Korea. Beijing states that it fears the destabilizing effects of a humanitarian crisis, significant refugee flows over its borders, and the uncertainty of how other nations, particularly the United States, would assert themselves on the peninsula in the event of a power vacuum. Beijing is supporting joint industrial projects between China's northeastern provinces and North Korea's northern border region. Some Chinese leaders also may see strategic value in having North Korea as a "buffer" between China and the democratic, U.S.-allied South Korea.

However, since 2010 an increasing number of Chinese academics have called for a reappraisal of China's friendly ties with North Korea, citing the material and reputational costs to China of maintaining such ties. The rhetorical emphasis Chinese leaders now place on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—reportedly even in meetings with North Korean officials—may suggest that Beijing's patience could be waning. In what is viewed by many observers as a diplomatic snub, Chinese President Xi Jinping has had several summits with South Korean President Park Geun-hye but has yet to meet with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Despite this apparent cooling in relations, Beijing remains an obstacle to punishing North Korea in international fora, such as the United Nations.

### International Focus on Human Rights Record

Although the nuclear issue has dominated U.S.-North Korea relations, U.S. officials regularly voice concerns about North Korea's "abysmal" human rights record. The plight of many North Koreans is dire. The State Department's annual human rights reports and reports from private organizations have portrayed a little-changing pattern of extreme human rights abuses by the North Korean regime over many years. Multiple reports have described a system of prison camps that house approximately 100,000 political prisoners.

In 2013, the U.N. Human Rights Council established a commission to investigate "the systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights" in North Korea,

concluding in February 2014 that North Korea had committed "crimes against humanity" that are "essential components" of the Kim regime's system of rule. Moreover, the Commission argued that the individuals responsible should face charges at the International Criminal Court (ICC). In November 2014, U.N. member states voted overwhelmingly to recommend that the UNSC refer the human rights situation in North Korea to the ICC. Although many analysts speculate that either Russia or China (or both) will use its veto at the UNSC to prevent this referral, the United Nations has become a central forum for pressuring the North Korean government to respect the human rights of its citizens.

### Internal Situation

Since assuming power in December 2011, supreme leader Kim Jong-un appears to have consolidated his hold on power, though much uncertainty remains, given the opaque nature of the North Korean regime. Kim has been promoting a two-track policy (the so-called *byungjin* line) of economic development and nuclear weapons development. The range of luxury amenities available to the privileged in Pyongyang has expanded, while many if not most North Koreans still live in meager circumstances. Although many non-elite North Koreans' economic fortunes have improved under Kim Jong-un, speculation that his regime might pursue systematic economic reforms to harness market forces has proven incorrect so far.

Kim has engaged in several spasms of executions and purges of high-level North Korean officials. Notably, he executed his uncle-in-law and then-number two leader, Jang Song-taek, in December 2013, demonstrating a brutal leadership style. Jang's departure also eliminated one of Beijing's main contacts within the regime; Jang had been seen as relatively friendly to Chinese-style economic reforms. Kim also purged Ri Yong-ho, then-North Korea's army chief, in 2012 and reportedly executed Hyon Yong-chul, the Minister of Defense, and 15 other high-level officials in 2015. Almost 70 top officials reportedly have been executed in North Korea since Kim came to power.

Pyongyang appears to be slowly losing its ability to control information flows from the outside world into North Korea. Surveys of North Korean defectors reveal that some within North Korea are growing increasingly wary of government propaganda and are turning to outside sources of news, especially foreign radio broadcasts, which are officially illegal. North Korea in 2009 also restarted a mobile phone network that now has over 2.4 million subscribers. Although phone conversations in the country are monitored, the spread of cell phones could enable faster and wider dissemination of information.

---

**Emma Chanlett-Avery**, [echanlettavery@crs.loc.gov](mailto:echanlettavery@crs.loc.gov), 7-7748

**Ian E. Rinehart**, [irinehart@crs.loc.gov](mailto:irinehart@crs.loc.gov), 7-0345  
**Sungtae Park**, [jspark@crs.loc.gov](mailto:jspark@crs.loc.gov), 7-5050