

## 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 its recent advances in its nuclear and missile capabilities under 33-year-old leader Kim Jong-un, North Korea has evolved to become a grave security threat to the United States and its allies. Efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program have occupied the past four U.S. administrations. Since 2009, North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) has rebuffed U.S. and South Korean offers to negotiate on denuclearization, and has continued to develop its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Although the weapons programs have been the primary focus of U.S. policy toward North Korea, other U.S. concerns include North Korea's illicit activities, such as counterfeiting currency and narcotics trafficking, attacks against South Korea, and egregious human rights violations.



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

### The U.S. Approach to North Korea

Since early 2017, the Trump Administration has raised North Korea's nuclear and missile programs to a top U.S. foreign policy priority and has described its approach as "maximum pressure." The officially stated policy, unveiled in April 2017, is to "pressure North Korea into dismantling its nuclear, ballistic missile, and proliferation programs by tightening economic sanctions and pursuing diplomatic measures with our Allies and regional partners." The Administration has stated that it hopes increasing pressure will convince Pyongyang "to de-escalate and return to the path of dialogue." Additionally, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has said, "[W]e do not seek a regime change, we do not seek the collapse of the regime...." The Administration has urged China, which accounts for around 90% of North Korea's trade, to apply more pressure on the DPRK to change its behavior. The Administration also has expanded efforts around the globe to convince other countries to cease or curtail their trade and other interactions with the DPRK.

The sense of urgency has been heightened by North Korea's September 2017 nuclear test, its sixth and largest, and multiple tests in 2017 of long-range ballistic missiles that many observers believe have intercontinental range. Following two such missile tests in July, Congress passed and President Trump signed H.R. 3364/P.L. 115-44, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, which strengthens the use of sanctions on those who facilitate North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs. In August, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a new sanctions resolution against North Korea (its eighth) that banned all imports of DPRK coal, iron products, and seafood. In September 2017, after North Korea's nuclear test, the UNSC adopted another resolution that bans imports of DPRK apparel and textiles; caps exports of petroleum products and bans exports of gas products to North Korea; prohibits nearly all joint ventures with DPRK companies; and imposes new requirements for interdicting vessels suspected of trading prohibited goods with North Korea. Also in September 2017, the 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. In November, the Administration re-designated North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Some U.S. and South Korean commentators have characterized Trump Administration officials' remarks on North Korea as contradictory, particularly on the questions of under what conditions the United States would negotiate with North Korea and whether the United States is prepared to launch a preventive attack against North Korea. In repeated public remarks, Administration officials, including the President, have emphasized a possible preventive military attack against North Korea. However, at other times, President Trump and other Administration officials have said they would be open to dialogue.

### Coordination with South Korea

The latest North Korean crisis has highlighted differences in approach between Washington and Seoul and introduced new strains. Already, many observers saw a lack of robust coordination between the two allies. Amidst North Korean provocations, reports emerged in early September 2017 that the Administration was considering withdrawing from the U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement, seen by many as a key pillar of the bilateral relationship. In addition, following the DPRK's September 2017 nuclear test, President Trump tweeted criticisms of South Korea's attempts to initiate low-level dialogue with North Korea, calling the efforts "appeasement." Although Trump had what many regarded as a successful November 2017 visit to

Seoul, and the United States approved South Korea's request to lift restrictions on its missile payload capabilities, Trump's words have raised concerns among many in South Korea about the level of U.S. commitment.

### 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.

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. 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

U.S. policy to pressure North Korea depends heavily on China. In addition to being North Korea's largest trading partner by far, China reportedly provides food, crude oil, and investment that are essential lifelines for the regime in Pyongyang. Since Kim Jong-un assumed power in 2011, China has held the North Korean regime at arms-length. Since becoming China's top leader in 2012, President Xi Jinping has yet to meet with Kim. China also has voted for all nine UNSC resolutions against North Korea, albeit after insisting on changes that often weakened them. China says that it is implementing UNSC sanctions, and according to Chinese customs data, year-on-year DPRK exports to China declined by nearly 30% over the first 10 months of 2017.

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. Some Chinese leaders also may see strategic value in preserving North Korea as a "buffer" between China and South Korea.

How effectively China implements U.N. sanctions could be an indicator of Beijing's willingness to punish the Kim regime. The United States and South Korea have rejected the joint proposal of China and Russia that the United States and South Korea halt military exercises in exchange for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. President Trump has alternated between praising China for its efforts to persuade North Korea to change its behavior and threatening China with diplomatic and economic retaliation if Beijing does not apply more pressure.

### 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 Jong-un and other DPRK officials as responsible for human rights violations. 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 Jong-un appears to have consolidated his hold on power, though much uncertainty remains. Kim has engaged in several purges of high-level North Korean officials. Kim has been promoting a two-track policy (the so-called *byungjin* line) of economic development and nuclear weapons development. Although most North Koreans still live in meager circumstances, particularly outside of Pyongyang, the DPRK economy as a whole appears to have expanded since Kim came into power. 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. 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.

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