



U.S.-North Korea Relations

Since the breakdown in 2019 of negotiations between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to freeze and dismantle the North's nuclear weapons program, North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) largely has ignored U.S. and South Korean attempts to resume dialogue, including offers of humanitarian assistance. Over the past decade under Kim, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have evolved from a threat to U.S. interests and allies in East Asia to a potential direct threat to the U.S. homeland. Other U.S. concerns include the DPRK's cybercrime and other illicit revenue generating activities; expanded DPRK-Russia ties that may provide North Korea with more advanced military capabilities; improved DPRK-China relations, which help blunt the impact of U.S. pressure tactics; North Korea's systemic human rights abuses; the potential for North Korea to resume conventional military attacks against U.S. treaty ally South Korea (Republic of Korea, or ROK); and the risk that a DPRK-ROK clash escalates into a major military conflict.

Since 2022, North Korea has test launched scores of ballistic missiles, including multiple tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of delivering nuclear warheads. The tests appear to have advanced the reliability and precision of DPRK missile forces and improved North Korea's ability to defeat regional missile defense systems. Kim has declared North Korea will never denuclearize. In 2023 and 2024, Kim abandoned decades of official policy and declared that South Korea is not inhabited by "fellow countrymen" but is a separate, "hostile" state that North Korea would "subjugate" if war broke out.

U.S. and ROK Approaches to the DPRK

President Trump has called for the resumption of his 2018-2019 dialogue with Kim, a stance supported by ROK President Lee Jae Myung, who seeks to promote peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula. Some reports indicate the Trump Administration is prepared to re-open dialogue without preconditions. In 2026, Kim reiterated his view that "there is no reason we cannot get on well with the United States" if the United States drops its push for denuclearization and its "hostile policy" toward North Korea. The Administration officially maintains a longstanding U.S. goal of seeking North Korea's "complete denuclearization." Some U.S. and ROK analysts argue that negotiations with North Korea should focus on arms control and risk reduction, rather than denuclearization.

U.S. and International Sanctions

North Korea is the target of scores of U.S. and UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. UNSC sanctions require member states to curtail trade with North Korea, affecting

over 80% of the items it could once sell abroad. The sanctions cap North Korean imports, such as oil, at levels to meet basic livelihood requirements. In 2016, 2017, and 2019, Congress passed, and Presidents Obama and Trump signed, legislation expanding U.S. sanctions (P.L. 114-122, P.L. 115-44, and P.L. 116-92). Both Administrations issued executive orders and designations to authorize and apply sanctions against North Korean entities and secondary sanctions targeting those engaged in, financing, or otherwise facilitating trade with North Korea. The Biden Administration designated for sanctions North Koreans conducting illicit cyber and cryptocurrency-related activities, weapons procurement and transfers (to Russia), and fuel trade that violates U.S. and UNSC restrictions. The second Trump Administration has designated for sanctions North Koreans conducting illicit cyber activities and weapons transfers (to Burma).



Sources: CRS. Boundaries, U.S. Department of State.

DPRK-Russia and DPRK-China Relations

North Korea's growing military and nuclear capabilities, along with its expanded partnership with Russia and improved relations with China over the past three years could give it greater confidence to conduct aggressive actions against the United States, South Korea, and/or Japan. Since 2023, Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin have held two summits and signed a treaty that includes a "mutual military assistance" clause. North Korea has supported Russia's military actions in Ukraine by providing weapons and deploying over 10,000 troops to Russia. This has allowed the DPRK to gain funds, wartime experience, and perhaps military technology. In June 2026, China's leader Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang for a two-day summit. Notably, Xi made no mention of denuclearization, a contrast with Xi-Kim summits in 2018 and 2019. The visit underscored the restoration of closer bilateral ties, which had cooled since 2019. Bilateral trade has surpassed levels recorded prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted Kim to shut North Korea's borders. Nearly all reported DPRK trade is conducted with China.

The UNSC has documented North Korea's efforts to evade sanctions, including ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal in the waters off China's and Russia's coasts, and other sources have provided evidence that the two countries also abet other DPRK sanctions-evading activities. In 2022, China and Russia blocked U.S.-led efforts at the UNSC to tighten restrictions on DPRK's petroleum imports. In contrast, from 2006 to 2017, China and Russia supported the adoption of 10 UNSC sanctions resolutions in response to North Korean ICBM and/or nuclear tests.

Nuclear, Missile, and Cyber Programs

North Korea continues to increase its nuclear weapons stockpile and improve its missile capabilities. Missile tests appear to be an effort to improve the ability to strike the United States and its allies and assets and to thwart regional missile defenses. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reportedly has assessed that North Korea, which last tested a nuclear device in 2017, has successfully developed a nuclear warhead that is "miniaturized" or sufficiently small to be delivered by a long-range ballistic missile. U.S. official statements reiterate that "any nuclear attack by the DPRK against the United States or its allies is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime."

North Korea has said its nuclear weapons are intended to deter an attack by the United States. In 2022, North Korea adopted a new law expanding the conditions under which it would use nuclear weapons to include non-nuclear attacks and situations that threaten the regime's survival.

According to the U.S. Intelligence Community's 2025 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA), Kim views nuclear weapons as a "guarantor of regime security" and has "no intention" to renounce them. Some analysts worry that North Korea may become emboldened to launch attacks or to use nuclear blackmail to achieve other policy objectives if it believes it has developed a sufficiently robust deterrent against U.S. and South Korean retaliation.

U.S. officials have voiced concerns about Pyongyang's improving and expanding cyber capabilities. Suspected DPRK-affiliated cyber actors, at times operating outside North Korea, reportedly have generated billions in illicit revenue through theft, hacks, and ransomware campaigns.

North Korea's Human Rights Record

Reports portray extreme human rights abuses by the DPRK government, including a system of prison camps housing up to 200,000 prisoners. In 2014, a UN Human Rights Council commission concluded that North Korea had committed "crimes against humanity" and argued the individuals responsible should face charges. The North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-122), as amended, prohibits U.S. imports of North Korean goods based on a "rebuttable presumption" that they were made with convict, forced, or indentured labor. The act also requires the President to certify human rights improvements in order to suspend or terminate most sanctions.

North Korea's Internal Situation

Kim Jong-un, believed to be in his early 40s, succeeded his father in 2011. On assuming power, Kim purged high-level

officials to solidify his status as paramount leader. For the first several years of his tenure, the DPRK economy appeared to expand, partly due to the government allowing previously prohibited markets and granting enterprises somewhat greater autonomy. After 2016, when the UNSC began to impose sanctions targeting critical sectors, growth appears to have fallen. The freezing or rollback of many reforms and the near collapse of DPRK exports as trading partners implemented sanctions contributed to the slowdown. For over 30 years, North Korea has experienced chronic food shortages. The UN estimates that over 10 million North Koreans, or roughly 40% of the population, are undernourished. There are few outward signs, however, that economic difficulties are threatening the regime's stability or compelling it to engage with the United States or South Korea. Since North Korea selectively ended COVID-19-related closures of its border in 2023, increased trade with Russia and China, along with revenue from cyber theft, may be boosting the DPRK economy.

Congressional Actions

As North Korea demonstrates greater military capability, some Members of Congress have pushed for the United States to increase pressure, while others have called for incentives for North Korea to return to negotiations. Congress has created tools to shape North Korea's information environment, both through sanctions policy and funds to support disseminating Korean-language media into North Korea. During the second Trump Administration, information-dissemination activities into North Korea have been disrupted by funding cuts, with many operations pausing in 2025 and resuming in 2026 at reduced levels.

Some Members have expressed support for reauthorizing the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 (H.R. 5959/H.R. 4900), which established a Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues in the State Department and authorized assistance from FY2005 through FY2022 for human rights, democracy, freedom of information, and humanitarian support for North Korean refugees. The Special Envoy position has been vacant since the start of the second Trump Administration, as it was during the first Trump Administration. Since 2019, some Members of Congress have advocated for the executive branch to streamline procedures in the U.S. government and at the United Nations that authorize the delivery of humanitarian assistance to North Korea. In early 2026, the Administration reportedly agreed at the UN to exempt several aid projects from UNSC sanctions, after previously opposing such exemptions. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, North Korea generally has refused to accept U.S. and ROK aid and has restricted the ability of international organizations to operate inside the country. In July 2026, the Administration renewed for a year restrictions on using U.S. passports to travel to North Korea.

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