

What You Need to Know About North Korea and its Nuclear Program

Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and the country spent the next 35 years under Japanese military rule. After Japan was defeated in World War II, U.S. troops landed in the southern part of the peninsula. Communist Soviet forces moved in and occupied the area north of latitude 38 degrees North, famously known as the 38th parallel.

The next 40 or so years were called the "Cold War," because the U.S. and the Soviet Union fought for influence over the world. They each tried to spread their ways of life to other countries. The U.S. pushed for democratic capitalism and the Soviet Union tried to spread communism.

As communism took firm hold in the northern part of Korea, Kim Il Sung emerged as the first premier of the newly established Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. Meanwhile, the Republic of Korea was created in the southern part of the country, with Seoul as its capital. The newly formed democracy held elections and adopted a constitution.

Since Korean War, North and South remain worlds apart

Tensions between North Korea and South Korea and their powerful allies erupted into war in 1950, when Soviet-backed North Korean troops invaded the South. Fighting in the Korean War cost at least 2.5 million lives. It ended in July 1953, with the peninsula still divided into two hostile states. Today, a 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone separates North Korea from South Korea, roughly following the 38th parallel for 150 miles across the peninsula. This former battleground is now essentially a nature preserve covered by forests.

Single family has governed North Korea

Kim Il Sung was put in power by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1948 and remained leader of North Korea until his death in 1994. During his nearly 50-year reign, a powerful cult of personality emerged around him, as North Koreans were forced to worship Kim Il Sung. North Koreans referred to him as the Great Leader, Heavenly Leader and even the "Sun." He created a new calendar, which used 1912 — the year of Kim Il Sung's birth — as year one. Every elementary school in the country was equipped with a special training room where young children were indoctrinated in the regime's teachings.

In 1998, North Korea's constitution was amended to proclaim Kim Il Sung the Eternal President of the Republic. The anniversaries of both his birth and death are considered national holidays. His son, Kim Jong Il, was the center of a similar cult, and some North Koreans were convinced he was powerful enough to control the weather. Hundreds of memorial statues dedicated to the Kims dot the countryside. Despite a series of devastating famines and widespread poverty, a massive mausoleum was built in North Korea to house the embalmed bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which are now permanently on display.

Isolated from international community

North Korea has remained isolated from the international community. Its governmental, economic and other operations are veiled in secrecy. Restrictions on travel into or out of the country and a tightly controlled press helped maintain this isolation. North Korea's foreign policy has been marked by major alliances with China and the Soviet Union, and by enduring hostility to South Korea and the United States. The USSR's collapse in the early 1990s left China as the country's most important ally.

However, current leader Kim Jong Un is young and erratic, and his defiant statements and aggressive actions have steadily weakened North Korea's alliance with China. More recently, North Korea and Russia have developed increasingly close diplomatic and economic ties. In 2017, Russia topped the list of countries friendly toward North Korea for the third straight year, according to North Korea's government-controlled news agency, KCNA.

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons is not new

Despite the fact that North Korea is generally a poor and isolated nation, it has been pursuing nuclear power for decades. North Korea began trying to build a functional nuclear weapon during Kim Il Sung's reign. Its nuclear weapons have been built with Soviet technology left over from the Cold War era. According to intelligence analysts and rocket experts, Russian engineers have helped build the country's nuclear program. They moved to North Korea after the Soviet Union fell apart, looking for work.

By the early 2000s, reports surfaced that North Korea had underground nuclear facilities and was trying to produce highly enriched uranium. Kim Jong Il's government carried out the country's first underground nuclear test in 2006, violating an earlier pledge to abide by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since then, it has detonated four more bombs at the same underground test site in North Korea's northeast region. Each bomb has been stronger than the last. Experts predict North Korea will likely be able to build a nuclear missile powerful enough to reach the U.S. within a decade.

Tests conducted in tunnels beneath Mount Mantap

The North Korean government has excavated a system of tunnels underneath the mile-high Mount Mantap to conduct the tests. Since late 2013, a pile of debris has built up there and can be seen in satellite images. The pile is now large enough to cover a football field, and is very high. Work on the tunnels recently slowed, which may indicate that workers are readying for another detonation. April 15 would have been Kim Il Sung's 105th birthday. Experts thought his grandson might have celebrated this important date by carrying out another nuclear test, but he did not. The next day, North Korea tried to test a missile but it failed when the missile landed in the sea.