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

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Japan annexed the Korean peninsula in 1910, and the country spent the next 35 years under Japanese military rule. With Japan’s defeat in World War II, U.S. troops landed in the southern part of the peninsula, while Soviet forces secured the area north of latitude 38 degrees North (or the 38th parallel). As communism took firm hold in the north, Kim Il Sung (Kim Jong Un’s grandfather) emerged as the first premier of the newly established Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. Meanwhile, the U.N. General Assembly sanctioned elections held in the south, adoption of a constitution and the inauguration of the Republic of Korea, with Seoul as its capital.

Since Korean War, North and South remain worlds apart

Tensions between the two governments and their powerful allies erupted into war in 1950, when Soviet-backed North Korean troops invaded the South. Fighting in the Korean War — which cost at least 2.5 million lives — ended in July 1953, with the peninsula still divided into two hostile states. A 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone separates North Korea from
South Korea, roughly following the 38th parallel for 150 miles across the peninsula. Established according to the terms of the 1953 armistice, this once-devastated battleground is now essentially a nature preserve, covered by forests, estuaries and wetlands housing hundreds of bird, fish and mammal species.

**Single family has governed North Korea**

Installed by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1948, Kim Il Sung remained in office until his death in 1994. During his nearly 50-year reign, a powerful cult of personality emerged around the man North Koreans referred to, variously, as the Great Leader, Heavenly Leader and even the “Sun.” A new calendar was introduced, 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, and the anniversaries of both his birth and death are considered national holidays. His son, Kim Jong Il, was the center of a similar cult, with some North Koreans convinced he was powerful enough to control the weather. Hundreds of memorial statues dedicated to the Kims dot the countryside, and despite a series of devastating famines and systemic poverty, a massive mausoleum was built on the outskirts of Pyongyang to house the embalmed bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, now permanently on display like many autocratic leaders before them.

**North Korea often referred to as a “hermit kingdom”**

North Korea has remained isolated from the international community, with its governmental, economic and other operations 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 two significant 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, but the pattern of defiant statements and aggressive actions by the young, erratic Kim Jong Un over the course of his reign has steadily weakened this alliance. 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 Pyongyang’s state-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 research for decades. Aspirations to acquire a functional nuclear weapon began during Kim Il Sung’s reign and were built on the foundations of Cold War-era Soviet
technology. According to intelligence analysts and rocket experts, some Russian engineers seeking work after the Soviet Union fell apart moved to North Korea in the early 1990s and helped advance the country’s nuclear program.

By the early 21st century, reports surfaced of underground nuclear facilities and ongoing research into the production of highly enriched uranium. Kim Jong II’s government carried out the country’s first underground nuclear test in 2006, in violation of an earlier pledge to abide by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since then, four more detonations have taken place at the same underground test site in North Korea’s northeast region, Punggye-ri. Each one has been stronger than the last. Experts say that based on current trends, Pyongyang will likely have the skills to build a nuclear-armed missile powerful enough to reach U.S. shores within a decade.

As the New York Times reported in April 2017, a system of tunnels has been excavated underneath the mile-high Mount Mantap for the tests. The pile of debris accumulating there since late 2013 (as seen in satellite images) is now large enough to cover a football field, and very high. Work on the excavations recently slowed, in a possible indication that workers are readying for another detonation. April 15 would have been Kim II Sung’s 105th birthday, a significant date that analysts thought his grandson might celebrate by carrying out another nuclear test, but he did not. The next day, North Korea tried to test a conventional missile but it failed when the missile landed in the sea.
Quiz

1. Read the following paragraph from the section "Single family has governed North Korea."

   In 1998, North Korea’s constitution was amended to proclaim Kim Il Sung the Eternal President of the Republic, and the anniversaries of both his birth and death are considered national holidays. His son, Kim Jong II, was the center of a similar cult, with some North Koreans convinced he was powerful enough to control the weather. Hundreds of memorial statues dedicated to the Kims dot the countryside, and despite a series of devastating famines and systemic poverty, a massive mausoleum was built on the outskirts of Pyongyang to house the embalmed bodies of Kim II Sung and Kim Jong II, now permanently on display like many autocratic leaders before them.

Which of the following can be inferred from this paragraph?

(A) The Kims devoted most of the nation’s resources to reinforcing conditions that ensure their power.

(B) North Koreans spent a lot of money every year to visit the mausoleum housing Kim II Sung and Kim Jong II.

(C) The Kims attempted to ease some of the suffering in their country by creating holidays for people to celebrate.

(D) North Koreans believe that Kim Jong II caused the weather that led to famines and poverty in their country.

2. Which of the following aspects of the article is NOT thoroughly discussed?

   (A) the effects of political tensions between North and South Korea
   (B) the methods used by Kim II Sung and his offspring to enforce loyalty
   (C) the reaction of the North Korean people to Kim Jong Un’s aggression
   (D) the causes that led to North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear technology

3. What purpose is served by including information about North Korea’s shifting alliances?

   (A) It demonstrates how North Korea’s foreign policy has caused its isolation.
   (B) It provides reasons why North Korea has felt the need to defend itself.
   (C) It suggests the effects of North Koreans’ distrust of the state-controlled news media.
   (D) It offers the possibility of peaceful solutions to North Korea’s nuclear programs.
What is the relationship between the first paragraph and the final two paragraphs of the article?

(A) Both describe reasons why North Korea has defied international agreements.

(B) Both outline the effects of international activity in Korean government and politics.

(C) The first paragraph contrasts the ideological differences of North and South Korea, and the final two compare similarities.

(D) The first paragraph summarizes the history that created North Korea, and the final two address what it wants to do in the future.