

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

Introduction

Focus

This *CBC News in Review* story focuses on North Korea and the potential threat its nuclear program poses to Asia and the rest of the world. The country's history, government system, international relations, and mysterious leader, Kim Jong-il, are profiled.

On October 8, 2006, North Korea boldly and proudly announced to the world that it had successfully detonated a nuclear bomb. It had been widely known that North Korea possessed such a weapon and that it had been conducting a nuclear research program for many years. However, the fact that it had actually tested it caught its Asian neighbours, the United States, and the rest of the world by surprise. International reaction to the test was swift and universally negative. The United States and Japan denounced North Korea for its action and called for immediate and punitive economic sanctions against it. South Korea expressed grave concerns that the nuclear test might indicate the escalation of hostile relations between the two nations. Even China and Russia, two countries that have pursued friendly relations with North Korea in the past, strongly criticized the test and supported a unanimous UN Security Council resolution condemning it.

At first, there were some doubts as to whether or not the test had actually been conducted, and if it had been the complete success North Korea claimed it to be. North Korea's government is probably the most secretive, reclusive regime in the world, and independent confirmation of the test was almost impossible to achieve. However, Russian observers did state that they had detected higher than normal levels of radiation near the alleged test site, as well as seismographic indications of a massive underground explosion. Assuming that the North Korean claim was true, the test inflamed the long-running confrontation over the nuclear issue between the regime of Kim Jong-

il in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, and the U.S. administration of President George W. Bush.

Relations between Pyongyang and Washington have been strained ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953 and the Cold War that continued for decades after it. Unlike Germany and Vietnam, two countries that were once divided into communist and non-communist sectors and are now reunited, Korea remains bitterly split between the North, ruled by a dictatorial communist regime, and the democratic and far more prosperous South. In January 2002 in his State of the Union Address to Congress after the terrorist attacks of September 11 on New York and Washington, Bush included North Korea with Iraq and Iran as countries that formed an "axis of evil." One of the most serious charges he levelled at these countries was that their governments lent support to international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in their attacks on the United States and other Western countries. While Bush did not provide any concrete evidence of Pyongyang's support for terrorism, it was true that North Korea did maintain friendly relations with Iran, Syria, Libya, and other countries that have been, or still are viewed as, potential enemies of the United States.

The North Korean reaction to Bush's statements was predictable and, to some observers, understandable. Fearing that U.S. condemnation was a prelude to a possible military attack, Pyongyang withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and began to reactivate its nuclear facility in Yongbyon. It also expelled international inspectors and

Further Research

To learn more about Korean affairs, consider visiting the official Web site for the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea at www.korea-dpr.com, and for a broad range of information about South Korea, try www.korea.net.

announced it was developing a nuclear weapon as a means of deterring any possible American military aggression.

It is within this context—a standoff over North Korea's nuclear program that has continued for years and the worsening of the already poor relations between it and the U.S. under the Bush administration—that the testing of the nuclear weapon should be viewed. Reacting with defiance to the unanimous Security Council resolution against his country, North Korea's ambassador to the UN, Pak Gil Yon, made the following statement. "It is gangster-like of the Security Council to have adopted a coercive resolution against North Korea while neglecting the nuclear threat and moves for sanctions and pressure of the United States" (CBC News In Depth: North Korea: Punishment for nuclear tests). He continued to warn that if the U.S. persisted in its hostile actions against his country, North Korea might regard this as an act of war and respond accordingly.

The potential of a nuclear war breaking out in Asia is a major international

concern. However, some observers believed that Kim Jong-il's real intention was to use the nuclear bomb as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions and better economic relations with the U.S. and neighbouring countries. North Korea's economy is widely believed to be in a state of crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people dying from starvation after the failure of its agricultural program and devastating floods. It relies almost totally on foreign aid for its food and resource needs. Given the strength of North Korea's armed forces, and the danger that it might use a nuclear weapon if attacked, it is highly unlikely that the U.S. would seriously consider a military solution to the crisis, as it did in Iraq. But even though tensions appeared to have subsided in the weeks immediately following the nuclear test, the war of words continued. At the same time, there were calls for the six countries most directly concerned with the issue—Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and North Korea itself—to resume negotiations to resolve the conflict peacefully.

To Consider

1. Why was North Korea's announcement that it had conducted a nuclear test not surprising, but nevertheless alarming to its neighbours and the United States?
2. Why have relations between North Korea and the United States been tense since the 1950s? What events worsened relations?
3. How might the nuclear standoff between North Korea and the rest of the world be resolved peacefully? Why is a military solution to it unlikely?
4. What role, if any, might Canada play in this crisis?

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

Video Review

Respond to the questions as you view the video. Make sure you have successfully understood and answered all questions.

1. What recent action by the government of North Korea has alarmed the world?

2. Why was South Korea so concerned?

3. What weapons does North Korea have in resisting UN sanctions?

4. What is North Korea's greatest weakness? _____

5. Why is there a ban on the shipment of luxury goods to North Korea?

6. What does North Korea want from the six-nation talks?

7. What are living conditions like in North Korea?

8. How do you think the North Korea nuclear issue will end? Be specific.

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

A Profile of North Korea

CBC Archives

To explore an audio-visual account of Canada's role in the Korean War, visit the CBC Digital Archives at www.cbc.ca/archives and view the file entitled "Forgotten Heroes, Canada and the Korean War."



Which countries would most likely be concerned with North Korea's nuclear ambitions?

North Korea occupies the northern part of the Korean peninsula, bordering South Korea at the line of demarcation that was drawn following the end of the Korean War in 1953. To the north, it shares a border with China and Russia. Its population is approximately 22 million, and its land area is 120 540 square kilometres, or about twice the size of Nova Scotia. Its people are almost totally ethnic Koreans, speaking the same language as those living in the South. Pyongyang is the country's capital city, and by far the largest and most important urban area. Most of North Korea is composed of arid and

mountainous regions; only 16 per cent of its land is suitable for agriculture. It is a heavily industrialized country, but much of its manufacturing is outdated and inefficient after years of economic mismanagement. For most North Koreans, especially those living in rural areas of the country, life is harsh and difficult. Widespread famines have been reported in recent years, resulting from natural disasters such as flooding combined with the government's ruinous agricultural policies. But because of the tight controls the government imposes on reporting on news within the country, it is difficult for outside observers to obtain an accurate view of events taking place in North Korea and their impact on its citizens.

Nicknamed the "hermit kingdom," North Korea is probably one of the most reclusive, secretive nations on Earth. It is ruled by a hardline communist dictator, Kim Jong-il, who inherited the position from his father, Kim Il-sung, on the latter's death in 1994. It gained its independence in 1948 after the Second World War, having been a Japanese colony before that. At that time, Korea was divided into two states—South Korea, with an anti-communist government supported by the United States, and North Korea, a communist regime backed by the Soviet Union and later China. Kim Il-sung, who had led a communist guerrilla force against the Japanese during the war, assumed control, proclaiming himself the "Great Leader" of the Korean people and creating a "cult of personality" that elevated him to almost god-like status in the eyes of his countrymen. He proclaimed a policy of *Juche*, which means self-reliance, a combination of orthodox communist economic policies

Did you know . . .

Nearly 30 000 Canadian soldiers fought in the Korean War, and over 500 lost their lives.

and Korean nationalism. Two years after assuming power, Kim launched a full-scale invasion of South Korea, hoping to forestall a potential U.S. attack on his regime and also reunite the entire peninsula under communist rule.

In response to this action, the U.S. succeeded in obtaining a United Nations Security Council Resolution authorizing it to lead a multinational military force to repel North Korea from the South. This force included a detachment from Canada. In the three-year conflict that resulted, millions of Koreans on both sides lost their lives, and the country was almost totally devastated. Early North Korean successes, including the capture of Seoul, the South Korean capital, were later reversed by UN forces under the command of U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. The North Korean People's Army was pushed back almost to the Chinese border. At that time, Mao Zedong, China's new communist leader, sent troops across the Yalu River to aid North Korea and regained much of the ground the communist forces had previously lost. In response, MacArthur wanted to use the nuclear bomb to destroy the North, but President Harry S Truman refused to authorize this action.

By 1953, with the military situation in a stalemate, a ceasefire was finally negotiated, and the two Koreas remained divided at the 38th parallel. Chinese troops withdrew from the North, but the United States continued to maintain a significant military presence in the South as a guarantee against

any future North Korean attacks. In response to this, North Korea has continued to maintain a strong military, with an army of 1.2 million, the fourth largest in the world. It spends over 30 per cent of its gross domestic production on its armed forces and has been developing a nuclear program since the 1960s, with help from Russia. In addition, it exports weapons and military technology to countries that maintain friendly relations with it, including Iran, Libya, and Syria.

Since the end of the Korean War, efforts to reunite the peninsula by peaceful means have proved unsuccessful—the latest being the “sunshine diplomacy” initiated by former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung designed to foster friendlier relations between Seoul and Pyongyang. Despite the continuing hostility and division between the North and the South, a majority of Koreans on both sides of the border would like to see an end to the bitter divisions between the two countries. One of the most unfortunate results of this is the separation of families whose members have not been able to see each other for over half a century. Koreans are one people, sharing a language, culture, and history. The division between North and South is one of the few relics of the Cold War period of modern history still existing today. But because of the unpredictability of Kim Jong-il and the legitimate fears North Koreans harbour about the U.S.'s intentions, the threat of a potential nuclear catastrophe occurring in the region remains a matter of great international concern.

Analysis

1. Why is the nickname “the hermit kingdom” appropriate for North Korea?
2. Why was the Korean War such a devastating and divisive episode in Korea's history?
3. Why does North Korea maintain such a strong military force?
4. Why is the possibility of a nuclear war in Asia so disturbing? In your opinion, how likely is it to occur? Explain.

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

“The Dear Leader”: North Korea’s Kim Jong-il

To some, North Korea’s “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il is a comic or even ridiculous figure, popularly satirized on American television programs. With his diminutive height artificially enhanced by platform shoes and a bouffant hairstyle, coupled with his bizarre personal tastes and eccentric behaviour, Kim is widely viewed in the West as a potentially dangerous mix of unpredictability, instability, absolute power, ruthlessness, and profound personal corruption. But to millions of North Koreans, force-fed a steady diet of propaganda extolling his virtues, Kim is the country’s “Dear Leader,” the son of the great Kim Il-sung. Known throughout his rule as the “Great Leader,” Kim the father freed his people from Japanese rule and established the communist regime in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, the official name of North Korea). Upon his death in 1994, the regime elevated him to the position of president for eternity, giving his son the title of “supreme leader.”

Kim Jong-il’s background remains shrouded in mystery and is aided by the exaggerations of the government-sponsored personality cult that never fails to praise him for his achievements. Even the details of his birth are unclear, with most Western observers believing that he was born in Siberia in 1941 while his father was conducting the anti-Japanese guerrilla campaign from Soviet soil. But according to the North Korean propaganda machine, Kim was born in a log cabin, Abraham Lincoln-style, located at the summit of Mount Paektu, Korea’s highest peak, in 1942. At that time, so the official story goes, “there were flashes of lightning and thunder, the iceberg in the pond of Mount Paektu emitted a mysterious sound as it broke, and a bright double rainbow rose up in the sky.” These events, it is claimed,

were signs that a great leader had entered the world. (Source of quote: CBC News In Depth: “North Korea: Kim Jong-il: Evil genius or just plain crazy?”)

Kim grew up as the child of privilege in the North Korea ruled by his father. But his early life was not untouched by tragedy. A younger brother drowned while he was a child, and he lost his mother at the age of seven. He was sent to Manchuria in 1950 when the Korean War broke out and did not return until the end of hostilities three years later. In 1964 he graduated from the university in Pyongyang named after his father, where according to state propaganda he wrote 1 500 books. He also supposedly scored six operas, which the regime claims are better than the works of Verdi, Puccini, or Wagner, and designed the 150-metre *Juche* tower in Pyongyang that commemorates his father. Kim Il-sung officially designated him as his successor in 1980, and he was subsequently appointed to senior positions in the government and military. Shortly before coming to power on the death of his father, he assumed supreme command of the People’s Army, despite his total lack of military knowledge and experience. It is widely believed that this step was taken in order to ensure his succession against any rival claims from within the regime.

Kim is believed to be the father of three children, all of whom have a different mother. He loves Hollywood films, possessing a personal library of over 20 000 DVDs and videos. In 1978, he engineered the kidnapping of a South Korean film director and his girlfriend in order to promote North Korea’s film industry, which he officially directs. He enjoys the good life, in stark contrast to the vast majority of the people he rules, who eke out a basic existence with severely limited food supplies and

Did you know . . .

As part of the UN sanctions on North Korea, Canada must not export certain luxuries to the regime, including lobster, furs, gourmet foods, and alcoholic beverages.

resources. On a recent visit, Russian diplomat Konstantin Pulikovsky reported that Kim had a fresh supply of lobster flown in to his train as it crossed Russia every day and that he ate with silver chopsticks. Over dinner, Kim entertained his Russian guest with champagne and the company of a group of hand-picked North Korean women, famed for both their great beauty and intelligence, and of course, their love of their “Dear Leader.”

Kim’s personal excesses may have led to a deterioration of his health. Some foreign observers believe that he suffers from gastric and kidney problems, probably exacerbated by his consumption of rich food and alcohol. In addition to wine and champagne, which he consumes in great quantities, he is also partial to Hennessy, an expensive French cognac. A paranoid who is constantly obsessed with his own personal security, Kim is believed to employ at least half-a-dozen lookalikes who have copied the “Dear Leader’s” hairstyle and pot belly. They appear in his place at numerous official engagements, completely fooling their audiences.

Despite his bizarre behaviour and the ludicrous claims his propaganda machine makes about his greatness, many Western experts believe that it is a grave error to dismiss Kim Jong-il as a buffoon, or to underestimate his intelligence and cunning. On a visit to North Korea during the 1990s, former U.S. secretary of state Madeline Albright was impressed with Kim’s grasp of world events. She did not consider him to be delusional, despite the wild and implausible claims he made to her about the

performance of the North Korean economy. On that visit, she presented Kim with a basketball signed by NBA great Michael Jordan, a sports figure Kim greatly admires. Unlike the vast majority of North Koreans, whose main sources of information are totally controlled by the regime, Kim has daily access to CNN and the Internet, which he uses to follow world affairs and indulge his love of American movies and professional sports.

Some even believe that Kim deliberately cultivates this aura of eccentricity to fool Western leaders into thinking he does not need to be taken seriously. He once said that, “I know I am an object of criticism around the world, but if I am being talked about, I must be doing the right things” (BBC News: “Profile: Kim Jong-il”). During the 1990s, for example, he was able to use the nuclear card to negotiate favourable economic terms with the United States, resulting in massive foreign economic and humanitarian food aid in return for his temporary cessation of his nuclear program. Many believe that his decision to order a nuclear bomb test in October 2006 may be another example of Kim’s tactic of using a seemingly dangerous and outrageous action to attract world attention and eventually achieve economic concessions from his neighbours and potential enemies. Such measures no doubt help to bolster his hold on power, which many outside North Korea regard as extremely shaky, despite the barrage of pro-Kim propaganda to which its citizens are continually subjected.

Inquiry

1. Why do many international observers believe Kim Jong-il to be a ridiculous figure?
2. Do you think Kim’s bizarre behaviour and tastes are deliberately cultivated in order to lead foreign leaders to underestimate and misjudge him?
3. Despite his claims to be a dedicated communist, what aspects of Kim’s leadership style would seem to contradict the teachings of Karl Marx and the examples of other communist leaders of the past?

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

The Nuclear Standoff: Questions and Answers

1. Why is North Korea's claim to have tested a nuclear weapon so significant?

The North Korean nuclear test is the culmination of many years of growing tension between that country and the United States. It poses a serious threat to the security of the entire East Asian region, including China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. It raises North Korea to the status of a global nuclear power (the others are the U.S., Russia, France, Britain, China, India, Pakistan, and Israel), and also raises the stakes in the arms race among the East Asian countries, including North Korea's exposed neighbour, South Korea. The test places increasing pressure on the government in Seoul, the southern capital, to consider starting its own nuclear program.

2. Why did North Korea decide to go ahead with the nuclear test?

Some observers believe that Kim Jong-il decided to test the nuclear weapon because he had concluded that peaceful negotiations with the United States and the other parties involved in the six-nations talks (Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea) were going nowhere. He may also have thought that the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, who previously included his country in the three-nation "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq, would never agree to his terms for the abandonment of his country's nuclear program. These would have included the declaration that the United States would never attack North Korea, and a significant increase in American foreign economic aid to his country. It is even possible that Kim feared that Bush was

planning a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea and needed his nuclear weapon as a means of deterring such an action. Feeling increasingly isolated, with even former allies such as Russia and China turning their backs on him, and facing mounting pressure over serious economic difficulties, Kim may have decided that the nuclear test was the only means of shoring up his base of support at home.

3. What is really known about North Korea's nuclear weapons program?

It is believed that North Korea began its nuclear program during the Korean War, when Kim Il-sung established the Atomic Energy Research Institute in 1952. Four years later, North Korea and the Soviet Union founded a Joint Institute for Nuclear Research that enabled North Korean scientists to study in Soviet nuclear facilities. By the early 1960s, the Soviets were supervising the construction of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Centre south of Pyongyang, the headquarters of North Korea's nuclear program. By the 1970s, Soviet assistance to North Korea's nuclear development reached a peak, with Moscow supplying Pyongyang with plutonium-processing technology.

In 1985, North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NNPT), committing its nuclear program to peaceful uses only. In return, it asked for permission to receive Soviet assistance in the construction of four new reactors in Yongbyon. After signing the NNPT, North Korea was given an 18-month deadline to satisfy the "safeguards" agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency

Further Research

For detailed information about the NNPT, visit the UN Disarmament section at www.un.org/Depts/dda/WMD/treaty/.

(IAEA), the UN body responsible for monitoring nuclear research programs worldwide. This was meant to ensure that North Korea's nuclear program was intended for peaceful purposes. However, despite being granted even more time than usual to fulfill its commitments, Pyongyang procrastinated, demanding that the United States remove its own nuclear weapons from South Korea.

In 1991, U.S. President George H.W. Bush agreed to this demand. Both Koreas subsequently signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, committing both sides to refraining from testing, producing, receiving, possessing, storing, deploying, or using nuclear weapons. In 1992, North Korea signed the IAEA safeguards, but was reluctant to permit international inspectors to have access to all of its nuclear sites. Two years later, it threatened to withdraw from the NNPT. However, after the personal intervention of former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, Pyongyang accepted an "Agreed Framework" that would commit it to terminating its nuclear weapons development program. In return, North Korea would receive significant U.S. economic aid and permission to build two nuclear generating stations for peaceful purposes.

After the U.S. decided to suspend heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea in 1998, Pyongyang restarted its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and also began construction of two other nuclear facilities—at Taechon and Kumho.

After Bush included North Korea in the "axis of evil" in his address to Congress in January 2002, relations between Pyongyang and Washington hit a new low. One year later, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NNPT, reactivated the reactor at

Yongbyon, and announced it had reprocessed 8 000 spent fuel rods, enough material to manufacture at least six nuclear weapons.

Since 2003, the six-nation talks involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States have sought to resolve the nuclear issue. Under this proposed agreement, North Korea would abandon its nuclear weapons program in return for economic assistance and normalization of relations with the United States. But Pyongyang continues to insist that as long as the United States makes hostile and threatening statements against it, it will require nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a possible U.S. invasion of North Korea.

4. How many nuclear weapons does North Korea possess and is it capable of using them?

U.S. observers believe that Pyongyang possesses no more than one or two nuclear bombs, but the 8 000 spent fuel rods put into storage in 1994 may yield enough weapons-grade plutonium for a few more. Other estimates of North Korea's nuclear arsenal range as high as eight weapons. Even though it detonated a nuclear weapon in an underground test in October 2006, North Korea probably does not yet have the capacity to deliver such a bomb by missile against a foreign target. As of now, the only way it could do so would be by aircraft. This kind of move would be closely monitored by the United States and neighbouring countries. However, along with its nuclear program, Pyongyang is also working on the development of long-range missiles that would enable it eventually to launch a nuclear attack on South Korea or Japan.

5. *What is Canada's position on the North Korean nuclear issue?*

Along with the United States and other Western countries, Canada was quick to condemn North Korea for conducting a nuclear test in October 2006 and strongly endorsed the imposition of harsh economic and trade sanctions as punishment for this act. Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay stated that Canada had a “direct interest” in seeing sanctions imposed on Pyongyang. As one of the countries that contributed troops to the defence of South Korea during the Korean War, Canada is obligated by treaty to come to the aid of the Seoul government should North Korea attack again. However, since

establishing diplomatic relations with the North in 2000, Canada has also sought to use its diplomatic leverage to assist the six nations most closely involved in negotiating the nuclear issue to resolve the matter peacefully. Canada has a large immigrant community from South Korea—concentrated mainly in the Toronto area—with a strong interest in events occurring in its country of origin. Most South Korean immigrants in Canada are strongly opposed to the communist regime of Kim Jong-il in the North, but at the same time hope that one day their homeland can be peacefully reunited, as has already taken place in Germany and Vietnam.

Activity

1. After reading the passage above, form seven groups with your classmates to discuss the issues raised in the reading.
2. Each group should represent one of the countries involved in the six nations' talks on North Korea's nuclear program (North and South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States), and also Canada.
3. Each group should prepare and present a position on the issue that it could submit to a round-table conference designed to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully and to the mutual satisfaction of all parties.
4. Once each group has developed its position, one member should be selected to serve as its representative.
5. Once all the positions have been presented, negotiations on settling the dispute can begin.
6. After the negotiations have been concluded, the entire class can discuss and debrief the activity to determine whether or not a peaceful resolution to this conflict can be achieved, and on what terms.

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

Activity: Future Prospects for Peace in East Asia

Use the following suggested resources and any other sources you are able to locate that deal with the current crisis over North Korea's nuclear program, its background, and possible future developments. Prepare a report on the conflict, suggesting ways in which it might be resolved, or any other scenarios you think are likely to occur in the future. Explain what useful role Canada might play in the peaceful resolution of this high-stakes crisis. Support your vision statement with specific references to the information you are able to gather from your research on this topic.

www.state.gov

U.S. Department of State background notes on North Korea

<http://llcweb2.loc.gov>

U.S. Library of Congress, country studies, North Korea

www.kcna.com

Official Web site of the Korean Central News Agency (North Korea)

www.korea-dpr.com

Official Web site of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (North Korea)

www.cia.gov

CIA World Fact Book, North Korea

www.bbc.co.uk

BBC News Country Profile, North Korea

www.crisisgroup.org

International Crisis Group analysis of North Korean nuclear issue

<http://archives.cbc.ca>

CBC Archives: Forgotten Heroes, Canada and the Korean War

Extension

If you feel that you have created some useful options, consider writing letters to some or all of the following:

- Local newspaper
- Local Member of Parliament
- Prime Minister of Canada