

## **The Enigma of the Korean Peninsula: An Examination of North Korea and Relevant Security Implications**

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### **Abstract**

In the past decade alone, North Korea has caused unprecedented problems for the system of international security. The aggressive stance that North Korea has taken towards outside attempts at diplomacy combined with the unstable nature of the nation makes for a security issue that the remainder of the world has yet to find an answer for. This paper examines several vital factors including political, economical, social, and militaristic aspects of North Korea in order to accurately address what is required on a global scale to stabilize the Korean Peninsula. If allowed to continue their current behavior, the North Korean nation has the resources to cause a nuclear or militaristic catastrophe with global implications. To attempt to solve the problem, this paper recommends that the U.S. and the surrounding Asian powers seek a multilateral effort with the U.N. to devise a nuclear and military disarmament plan for North Korea in exchange for a strong economic stimulus package that would revitalize and stabilize the nation. Without the stability resulting from the policy shaped in this paper, chaos would certainly ensue in the Eastern Asian region and beyond.

**Key words:** North Korea, East Asia, International Security, and Korean Peninsula

### **Introduction**

Nuclear proliferation, famine, extreme economic depression, hundreds of thousands of fleeing refugees, huge military buildup, and an incredibly repressive political regime are all terms that could easily be associated with the current state of North Korea. While several of its Asian neighboring nations have prospered at unprecedented economic levels, North Korea continues to be an unstable presence in an area which is largely considered to be emerging as a new center of the international community in terms of both politics and economy. The precarious status of North Korea threatens the rapid globalization that Asia has been experiencing, which makes it imperative that something be done to calm the current situation. To face even the slightest chance at changing their exceedingly confrontational, external security policies, this paper examines North Korea through several factors including political, economical, social, and military aspects in order to best formulate a plan of action regarding how to handle the regional, nuclear and militaristic threat that they pose upon the international community. Ultimately, this paper recommends that the U.S. seek a multilateral effort with the Asian powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the U.N. to devise a nuclear and military disarmament plan for North Korea in exchange for a strong economic stimulus package that would revitalize and stabilize the nation. By bringing stability to the area, the U.S. will be able to show commitment to the improvement of both the Korean Peninsula and security within the Eastern Asian region.

## Political Factors

Many of the underlying problems with North Korea's aggressive, provocative foreign policy originate from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime and the political system controlled at the helm by Kim Jong-Il. As the current leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-Il inherited his position from his father, Kim Il-Sung, through an abnormal and illegitimate process that had been previously planned for decades in order to ensure a somewhat smooth transition of power from father to son. Because of this, the regime has always had a problem with legitimacy, i.e., its relationship with the people (Shulong, 2007). With Kim Jong-Il's current state of health and the lack of a true heir to the "dear leader", the idea of succession in the near future remains a very delicate issue. Some believe it very possible that the National Defense Commission (NDC, the top state executive body), which was enlarged this year and whose role was formalized in recent constitutional revisions, would formally take charge with the Korean People's Army playing a vital role in leading the nation (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). However, if Kim Jong-Il were to die and the country was left with no centralized leader to pledge subservience to, it would be very likely that long-suppressed factionalism and policy disputes could break out, with an incapable NDC left to contain them. This could easily lead to internal strife, whether it is political or even physical conflict.

Another important aspect of North Korea's political system contributing to further internal problems is the adopted philosophy of *juche*. According to Lerner (2007), Kim Jong-Il continues to support his father's definition of *juche*, where he consistently articulated three realms in which its application was vital, demanding "independence in politics, self-reliance in the economy, and self-defense in national defense." By definition, the "Juche" ideology emphasizes the importance of the solidarity of the Korean people. This ideology is well propagandized to touch and control every North Korean's heart (Jeong and Lee, 2009). With such a strong policy built around the idea of self-reliance, North Korea continues to isolate itself from the foreign community as all society is dominated by the ideals of *juche*, which also serves as a barrier to reform within the country. Furthermore, this policy translates to a hazy view of North Korea from the outside world, which leaves many to question the enigma that surrounds the nation. There is much debate as to whether Kim Jong-Il has total control over his country or that he might be controlled by other, more powerful militaristic figures. Even if this is not the case, Kim Jong-Il lacks much of the charisma that his father had, which means that the current leader of North Korea needs to deliver results if he is to maintain the loyalty of his people (Kim, 1996). Both the future of the nation and Kim Jong-Il will ultimately be decided by the success and failure of his policies, which raises much alarm to the outside world because the old policies that he clings to out of self-reliance are clearly failing. As a result, the badly aging political system and lack of reform due to *juche* have led to dire economic consequences.

## Economic Factors and the Severity of North Korea's Current Situation

Even in today's world where many Asian countries are experiencing economic booms, North Korea's economic situation continues to worsen. North Korean GNP has been steadily declining since 1989. The industry infrastructure is generally poor and outdated, and the energy sector has collapsed completely (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). Grain production also has been falling, creating serious food shortages (Kim, 1996). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2009):

Even in good times North Korea cannot grow enough food to meet its needs, leaving the gap to be filled by imports or aid. Aid has fallen for two reasons: donor fatigue and restrictions imposed by North Korea on the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and other agencies. About one-third of the population remains hungry with the WFP able to provide for only 1.4m of the 6m people who need food aid.

An unreasonably large share of North Korea's GDP is also devoted to its military, yet another factor contributing to the economy's poor performance (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). Paired with the ideas set forth by *juche*, Kim has effectively cut off most economic aid from other countries, even in times of dire need. In addition, North Korean leaders fear that economic reforms, which would inevitably bring an infusion of foreign capital and influence, could endanger their survival based on *juche* policy. Although China continues to send aid along with a few other Asian countries, North Korea has suffered greatly even since the fall of the Soviet Union deprived it of one of its largest trading partners and aid providers (Shin, 2001). North Korea will continue to fall behind the South economically if it remains set in the ways of self-reliance, contrasted sharply by South Korea's embrace of private enterprise and economic achievement as a means of furthering the strength of their country.

Luckily, North Korea has shown past glimmers of hope in terms of initiating an economic reform and accepting aid from other countries as a form of furthering interaction with the international community. North Korea began a series of radical reform measures in 2002, including the legalization of markets and removal of subsidies, which suggested that the regime may have finally been ready to embrace some sort of change (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). Despite the authorities' efforts to suppress the development of markets, the semi-privatization of the economy and need for foreign exchange and investment means that North Korea is definitely more open to foreign business than many may otherwise believe. The nation has also taken part in several reform-like economic experiments, including small sectors throughout North Korea that allow privatization, foreign investment, and the cooperation of South Korean companies with North Korean workers (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). Other countries have used economic and physical aid as a means of furthering negotiations with North Korea. Although many cases show that North Korea will often take the aid offered without agreeing to the demands of those that offer it, these actions ultimately show that Kim Jong-Il may be inclined towards a more open policy of reform.

### **Social Factors**

Not only does understanding the economic aspects of North Korea play a key role in formulating policy, but one must also examine the social factors at hand when dealing with such a complex situation. The extremely poor condition of the North Korean people have led many to fear that Kim Jong-Il will be ousted out of power by less capable leaders, which could further harm the current situation. Over the past several years, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have been forced out of the country due to substandard living conditions and famine. Some NGOs estimate that there are around 300,000 North Korean refugees living in China alone and that those who are caught for fleeing the country face punishments ranging from a few months of "labor correction" to execution for betraying the "fatherland" (Margesson, Chanlett-Avery, and Bruno, 2007). According to Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (2010):

North Korea maintains a record of consistent, severe human rights violations, stemming from the government's total control over all activity. All sources of media, such as radio, television, and news organizations, are controlled by the regime and heavily censored. Reported human rights abuses include arbitrary and lengthy imprisonment, torture and degrading treatment, poor prison conditions, public executions, prohibitions or severe restrictions on freedom of speech, the press, movement, assembly, religion, and privacy, denial of the right of citizens to change their government, and suppression of workers' rights.

With the combination of a population forced into starvation, a shocking lack of human rights, and a regime that demands loyalty to an illegitimate leader, the repressed population of North Korea must certainly be an important factor in the formation of policy regarding North Korean security implications.

### **Military Factors and the Nuclear Scare**

The last factor to be examined is the size and threat of North Korea's military, including both conventional forces and nuclear weapons. One of the most alarming parts of North Korea has been its ability to bolster its conventional forces and covertly build a nuclear arsenal despite a collapsing economy and widespread famine (Robinson). North Korea has one of the largest armies in the world, with an estimated active duty military force of up to 1.2 million personnel, which is almost double of that in the South. The large military also contributes to the economic failures of North Korea, as estimations state that almost a quarter of GNP is spent on the military (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). Although the navy and air force are largely obsolete, North Korea has deployed the bulk of its powerful conventional forces on the border shared with the South and there is an alarming number of artillery pointed with clear aim towards Seoul. If any outside policy were made to trigger a proposal of war with North Korea, one would be assured a costly conflict with thousands of casualties.

While the conventional buildup of forces is no laughing matter by any means, another large fear that comes from North Korea's recent provocative behavior is their development and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Having withdrawn from both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Agreed Framework (Kim, 1996), North Korea seems determined to show its desire to remain a nuclear power. Physical shows of force complement North Korea's refusal of diplomacy, with missile tests coming closer and closer to outside nations and the ranges of ballistic missile capabilities increasing. Although tests have proven to be inaccurate as of late, North Korea with time could develop truly dangerous, accurate missiles capable of striking both the U.S. and neighboring Asian countries.

North Korea's military strategy, just like any other nation, can be viewed as a reflection of their national goals, and historically the foremost goal has been the reunification of the Korean Peninsula (Hodge, 2003). Hodge describes the importance of this goal to the North Korean regime, as their constitution describes reunification as "the supreme national task," and it remains a consistently pervasive theme in North Korean media (Hodge, 2003). While this may seem like a respective goal, the problem lies in Kim Jong-Il's view of the Korean Peninsula. The Kim regime in North Korea considers the entire peninsula as constituting its sovereign territory and does not recognize South Korea as being a separate nation or having a legitimate

government for that matter (Hodge, 2003). This means that reunification under North Korean standards must happen by force, since diplomatic negotiations cannot be made with a government that one does not recognize. The idea that North Korea would use both conventional forces and a buildup of ballistic weapons as a means of unifying the Korean Peninsula poses incredibly dangerous security implications for the surrounding region.

### Examining the Options

With a closer understanding of North Korea, one must now wonder how to tackle the issue of confronting North Korea with a plan that stabilizes the country while ensuring that their continued confrontational action is deterred and punished in a way that will not result in physical conflict. Over the course of North Korea's inconsistent actions and peculiar diplomacy, several arguments have been formulated in regards to what Washington can do to solve the numerous security problems that North Korea generates within the Asian region.

One option in dealing with North Korea would be for the U.S. to lead an increase of harsh U.N. sanctions with support from numerous other countries in order to show that the current behavior of North Korea is unacceptable to the international community. In fact, President Barack Obama relayed this argument as a means of his administration's plan to prevent proliferation in North Korea. In a 2009 speech to the Czech Republic, President Obama stated:

Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something. The world must stand together to prevent the spread of these weapons. Now is the time for a strong international response -- (applause) -- now is the time for a strong international response, and North Korea must know that the path to security and respect will never come through threats and illegal weapons. All nations must come together to build a stronger, global regime. And that's why we must stand shoulder to shoulder to pressure the North Koreans to change course (The White House, 2009).

Stronger sanctions make sense in a way, as they would logically serve as a deterrent to bad behavior in the international community for North Korea among other disobedient nations. As apparent from the quote above, Washington must take part in actions that will back up the strong American rhetoric regarding North Korea. Harsher sanctions would follow this ideal, and show North Korea that the U.S. has the resolve to follow through on what it says. However, there are drawbacks to this plan. Past records indicate that North Korea will continue to exercise its bad behavior despite slaps on the wrist, proven by the Bush administration's attempts at imposing harsh financial sanctions on the North over counterfeiting and drug-running. After effectively shutting off the North's access to the international financial system and forcing world banks to steer clear of North Korean funds, North Korea continued to boycott six-party nuclear disarmament talks until forcing the U.S. to transfer the funds they had frozen back to North Korea (Kim, 2009). Furthermore, pushing sanctions with increased severity upon North Korea could result in a worsened situation where North Korea is forced to sell nuclear weapon materials abroad out of economic necessity to even more dangerous non-state actors. As stated by Ferguson, North Korea has already sold several hundred million dollars worth of missiles to Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Vietnam, and Yemen, in recent years, and it helped Syria build a nuclear reactor that was intended for plutonium production. Facing dire economic conditions, North Korea certainly has a strong motivation to profit from its only expertise

(Ferguson, 2009). This is exactly what the U.S. seeks to prevent first and foremost, and the spread of proliferation to other countries is unacceptable during a time where Washington seeks a policy of disarmament with other major world powers. Besides the spread of weapons, famine would become more widespread and the refugee problem would intensify within the country. With further strains on the economy and a pattern of continued investment in an already powerful military deployed offensively, the combination of both strongly suggests that North Korean leaders perceive the military as the only remaining instrument to complete their main objective of reunifying the Korean Peninsula. In doing so, it would be quite feasible for North Korea to begin a preemptive invasion of South Korea out of economic necessity. Lastly, China would surely oppose any extreme sanctions, as it is in their best interest to maintain a stable North Korea, proven by their devotion to economic aid and a desire to stop refugees from fleeing into their country. Without China's support, the sanctions would have a difficult time both with implementation as well as achieving approval with the U.N.

Another less confrontational argument towards approaching the North Korean nuclear situation would be to ignore the current North Korean threats and continue the current sanctions that have already been passed through the U.N. By waiting with the current sanctions in place, the U.S. and other powers would give North Korea a sense of punishment for their recent actions but also make sure not to provoke them into further proliferation or other violent acts. In a similar precedent, many claimed that America took advantage of the "biological solution" by waiting until Fidel Castro died to make strides in negotiating with Cuba. This same solution may also apply to this situation, as many reports claim that Kim Jong-Il suffers from increasingly deteriorating health conditions. By ignoring North Korean actions and remaining patient under the current sanctions, the U.S. could hope for the eventual incapacitation of Kim Jong-Il and a transition to a different regime that may be more open to diplomacy than before. There are many weaknesses to this argument however. As discussed previously, the current regime is already one that suffers from illegitimacy and if a transition of power were to occur due to the poor health of Kim Jong-Il, it will most likely be unstable, preventing Washington from standing on the sidelines until an opening was to show itself for further negotiations. There is also a growing sense, stated by Klingner (2009) that Pyongyang's antics and stalling tactics are not merely negotiating ploys, but instead are designed to achieve international acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear power. If this were indeed true and the U.S. continued to wait the situation out, North Korea would get precisely what it had originally aimed for.

The last apparent case for solving the problems that North Korea presents is one of immense international aid, with an effort spearheaded by the U.S. By revoking most of the sanctions placed on North Korea and instead offering them much needed economic aid, the U.S. could open up channels for negotiation and attempts at diplomacy that North Korea desires. Fewer refugees would be forced to leave as the famine would eventually decrease. A plan of U.S.-led aid would also align with China's security goals, as North Korea would become a more stable country. Also, the economic stimulus may help relieve tension for South Korea, as North Korea would have a chance to branch funds to other needed areas of development besides the military. Although somewhat of a stretch, giving aid directly to the citizens of North Korea could begin a self-generated reform within the nation, as new resources become available to them. Once again, there are counterarguments to this situation. As history has proven, Kim Jong-Il could easily take the proposed aid despite any possible strings attached to the deal and could easily retract after utilizing any and all aid that is immediately given. More aid flowing into North Korea could also have serious security implications for South Korea, as an empowerment

of the North could lead to the thought that they would be in a advantageous position to invade the South.

### **Concluding Policy Recommendation**

The combination of unique factors and arguments involving the nation of North Korea have merged to create one of the most difficult security issues facing the world today. In an attempt to integrate the best points of each case while keeping all other factors in mind, the best course of action would be for the U.S. to lead a multilateral effort with several other Asian nations (notably Japan, China, and South Korea) in an attempt to revitalize the past atmosphere created by the six-party talks. Although little was accomplished during the talks, the fact remains that North Korea was present and willing to negotiate with other nations. If structured properly, a gathering in the form of a summit or forum could allow the United States to reassert its leadership in an area where many nations are beginning to doubt U.S. influence. Laney and Shaplen (2007) also point out another advantage, indicating the new gathering could provide a valuable safety mechanism in the form of preventing rising nationalism and a competition of assertiveness between Japan, China, and South Korea.

To bring North Korea back to the negotiating table however, an appealing economic stimulus package must first be created in order to change the mindset regarding past incentives that have been given. North Korea must know that by at least attempting to consult outside nations through means of diplomacy, economic engagement will be provided by direct aid that could be used to stop famine and give a much needed revitalization to North Korean industry. However, it must be assured by all countries involved that the aid is not allowed to be used towards funding either military or nuclear development within North Korea. By ensuring economic aid is used in the right areas, a combination of the U.S. and various other Asian powers could eventually convince North Korea to return to the negotiating table while preventing military buildup.

A fundamental part of this plan rests with devising a strategy of nuclear and military disarmament that would be realistically adopted by North Korea in return for vast amounts of foreign aid. Although the large amount of conventional forces that North Korea has at its current disposal is certainly a threat, strides must first be made to at least stop the process of proliferation in North Korea. If economic aid is not enough of an incentive to prevent North Korea from doing so, the U.S. could show firm resolve by leading a treaty similar to the recent pledges made between Russia and the U.S. to reduce the stockpile of deployed, strategic nuclear weapons. In doing so, the U.S. would show that it is willing to treat North Korea on the same terms as a world power and that it is serious in pursuing bilateral relations. The U.S. nuclear stockpile vastly outnumbers those of North Korea, so only minor concessions would be made in return for major progress towards future stability in the Asian region.

Although some may contest, the argument stands that bringing economic aid to North Korea is in the best interest of all involved. First and foremost, increased aid to the Korean Peninsula would also increase the stability of the surrounding region. Instead of pushing North Korea into a corner and forcing them further into the kinds of shadowy state criminality that it has been previously involved with, North Korea would be given room to develop and provide its people with basic needs. With the aid specified towards industries other than the military and nuclear weapons facilities, South Korea would not have to worry about an increased offensive force approaching its border with the North. At the same time, North Korea would still be able to

enjoy a militaristic advantage instead of looking like a purely shabbier version of the economically booming South. Japan would be able to avoid provocative missile tests by North Korea and by cooperating with the U.S. in such a delicate matter, would build upon the belief that a Japan-U.S. relationship is essential to Japan's security. China is already in the process of sending aid to North Korea, and would have fewer refugees entering the country. To top it all off, the associated gathering necessary to enact a plan of this caliber would allow Sino-Japan and Sino-U.S. rivalries to cool as a strong trilateral cooperation between the three world powers would be required to impose a plan such as this.

The prescriptive policy suggestion previously described is incredibly large in scope and would require a vast amount of resources and cooperation on an unprecedented international level. However, such a plan would at the very least show U.S. resolve towards forming habits of cooperation with the numerous Asian powers. If North Korea were to again take the aid proposed and continue to belligerently threaten other countries after doing so, they must not be allowed to do so without some form of punishment. However, the U.S. must make every effort to remind North Korea that it is ready and willing to attempt a policy of engagement through the incentive of an appealing economic stimulus package backed by multiple Asian powers. If this process were successful, there could be definite progress towards the abandonment of nuclear weapons by North Korea, along with a new era of stability heralded by U.S. involvement in an area vital to security around the globe.



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