
A North Korea Primer for 2017 U.S. Policy Makers

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Q. How advanced is North Korea's nuclear program?

Analysts estimate that North Korea has accumulated enough plutonium and highly-enriched uranium to produce at least 20 nuclear weapons, and may be producing enough fissile material to add another weapon to this stockpile every [six to seven weeks](#). U.S. military officials have stated that North Korea likely has the capability to produce nuclear warheads compact enough to be paired atop a ballistic [missile](#). Although there is no evidence that North Korea has developed a two-stage hydrogen bomb, Pyongyang may have tested a “boosted fission” weapon in January 2016, marking substantial progress in its warhead designs.

Q. Is North Korea close to deploying an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)?

North Korea appears to be developing two variants of a road-mobile ICBM. Although Pyongyang has not yet flight-tested this missile, it may have [conducted tests](#) of its engines and heat shield, and could be prepared to begin test launches soon. However, it [could require](#) multiple tests conducted over several years for North Korea to develop a reliable ICBM capability. The majority of North Korea's recent intermediate-range missile tests have been failures.

Pyongyang has had more recent success in developing a medium-range solid-fueled

missile, which could be fired from either a submarine or a highly-mobile launch vehicle. Deployment of this missile would pose a significant regional threat, given its survivability and short launch times.

Q. Are there direct channels of communication between the governments of the United States and North Korea?

Interaction between American and North Korean officials typically occurs via the North Korean Mission to the United Nations (often referred to as the “New York Channel”), although other back channels have been used as well. The U.S. does not have formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, and the Government of Sweden is the Protecting Power of U.S. interests in North Korea.

Q. Are American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) currently operating inside North Korea?

A handful of American private NGOs continue to work with North Korean citizens to address unmet humanitarian needs, such as treating tuberculosis and hepatitis B, or providing nutritional supplements to children at hospitals or orphanages. The spread of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis in North Korea is a particularly severe public health crisis that NGOS are working to address.

Q: How have North Korea's economy and society changed under Kim Jong-un?

Unlike his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un has not made a major effort to suppress market activities in North Korea. Many state-owned enterprises function as pseudo-private entities, even as formal property rights remain unrecognized. Amidst modest economic growth, residents of Pyongyang have become better off, and a nascent middle class has emerged. However, conditions remain bleak in the countryside, and the government continues to devote a large proportion of its resources to the military and to showcase projects.

Q: How has the U.S. addressed the issue of American soldiers who remained “unaccounted for” following the Korean War?

About 8,000 Americans were “unaccounted for” at the end of the Korean War -- a term used to describe those who remained captive or missing at the conclusion of hostilities, or those killed in action whose remains have not been located, recovered, and identified. For decades, U.S. Presidents were inconsistent

in their emphasis on resolving the American POW/MIA/human remains issues following the Korean War. In recent years, U.S. attention has intermittently focused on the retrieval and identification of U.S. military personnel remains in North Korea. The U.S. conducted recovery operations in North Korea from 1996-2005, but these have been suspended indefinitely. During the fall of 2016, Rick Downes, President of the Coalition of Families of Korean and Cold War POW/MIAs, visited North Korea and engaged directly on Korean War POW/MIA/human remains issues.

Q: Should the U.S. seek a negotiated freeze of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs?

Proponents of such a freeze argue that it would constrain the development of North Korea's WMD program, and that it would not entail abandoning the goal of eventual denuclearization. However, critics argue that a comprehensive freeze would require intrusive verification measures that North Korea would be unlikely to agree to, and that Pyongyang might seek to simply pocket foreign concessions before walking away from its obligation.

Pending Congressional Legislation on North Korea

H.Res. 92 "Condemning North Korea's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and for other purposes". Sponsored by Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC-2)

H.R. 479 "North Korea State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act of 2017". Sponsored by Representative Ted Poe (R-TX-2)

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