When President Obama met with President-elect Donald Trump in the Oval Office after the 2016 election, Obama reportedly warned his successor that North Korea was the nation’s most serious foreign policy challenge.

Indeed, Trump had scarcely been sworn in on Jan. 20 when long-simmering tension between the United States and North Korea, a nuclear power with increasingly sophisticated capabilities, threatened to escalate into armed conflict.

Within days, reports surfaced that North Korea had restarted a reactor used to make plutonium for nuclear bombs. In March, after the United States and Japan demonstrated new technology to shoot down incoming ballistic missiles, North Korea test-fired missiles in the Sea of Japan that reached within 200 miles of Japan.

In turn, the United States, South Korea and Japan dispatched high-tech missile defense ships to the region and engaged in large-scale military drills — only to have North Korea conduct additional missile tests. These included, on May 13, an intermediate-range missile that flew more than 430 miles and reached an estimated altitude of more than 1,245 miles, drawing sharp international condemnation and potentially putting U.S. military bases in Guam within range of North Korea’s growing arsenal.

With Japan holding evacuation drills to prepare for a North Korean missile attack and U.S. leaders floating the prospect of a pre-emptive military strike, Washington and Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital, found themselves agreeing on one thing: the Korean Peninsula potentially faced a catastrophic war.
"[W]e could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea," Trump said on April 28. "We'd love to solve things diplomatically, but it's very difficult." But every warning by White House officials, including repeated declarations by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and others that "all options are on the table," only served to stiffen North Korea's resolve.

Assailing the United States for "becoming more vicious and aggressive" under Trump, North Korea's vice foreign minister, Han Song-ryol, said, "We will go to war if they choose." A North Korea army spokesman added, "Nothing will be more foolish if the United States thinks it can deal with us the way it treated Iraq and Libya, miserable victims of its aggression."

Long known as the "Hermit Kingdom," North Korea is the world's most isolated and secretive country, ruled since the end of World War II by a family dynasty with Stalinist roots that tightly controls information and brutally stamps out dissent. A 2014 U.N. report said the country's human rights abuses were the worst in the world. Thousands of defectors flee every year, including a small but growing number of more-affluent North Koreans, leading some analysts to wonder if the regime of leader Kim Jong Un is becoming unstable. But Kim has shown remarkable resilience.

U.S.-North Korea animosity dates to 1953, when the Korean War ended with an uneasy armistice and North and South Korea divided by a narrow, 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the 38th parallel. Washington has never recognized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea — the name North Korea prefers — and Pyongyang repeatedly has launched provocative attacks on South Korea, including a 2010 bombardment of the island of Yeonpyeong that left four South Koreans dead.

The stakes have risen dramatically over the past decade. North Korea has tested five nuclear bombs since...
orth Korea Showdown

and attack helicopters. For its part, South Korea has a formidable armada of tanks, armored fighting vehicles, fighter jets and attack helicopters.

The United States and U.N. Security Council have tried for years to persuade Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear program, imposing increasingly strict economic sanctions and sharply condemning its nuclear bomb and missile tests. Trump and his foreign policy team have vowed a break from past administration policies, including Obama’s “strategic patience” approach of slowly pressuring Pyongyang until it agrees to come to the negotiating table. But it is unclear what course the new administration will take, and foreign policy and military experts warn the crisis will be difficult to resolve.

Kim, who succeeded his father in 2011, has accelerated the nation’s push toward greater military capabilities. North Korea has tested three nuclear bombs since the younger Kim took power, including its most powerful yet: an estimated 10–kiloton explosion in 2016, two-thirds the explosive force of the 15–kiloton bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima during World War II.

North Korea’s missiles also are increasingly sophisticated, as shown by a successful February test of its new solid-fuel, intermediate-range missile, the KN-15, which is difficult to detect because it can be fired from a mobile launcher.

In addition, North Korea is believed to have vast stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons. Pyongyang allegedly used a banned chemical agent to kill Kim’s estranged half-brother at an airport in Malaysia in February, possibly signaling its willingness to use chemical weapons if provoked.

North Korea also has long-range artillery massed along the DMZ that could destroy much of the South Korean capital of Seoul, one of the world’s largest metropolitan areas, and an international center of commerce. For its part, South Korea has a formidable armada of tanks, armored fighting vehicles, fighter jets and attack helicopters.

And this spring the United States, which has more than 60,000 troops stationed in South Korea and nearby Japan, began deploying a powerful antimissile system — the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD — in South Korea, despite strong objections from neighboring China, which views the system as a threat to its own military operations.

Washington also is believed to be using cyber and electronic attacks to sabotage North Korea’s test missile launches, under a program initiated by President Obama in 2013. Although it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the strategy, several recent North Korean missiles have blown up almost immediately upon launch.

North Korea itself also has exhibited considerable cyber-prowess. It was blamed for a massive 2014 hack of Sony Pictures Entertainment after the company produced a movie, “The Interview,” about a fictional assassination plot against Kim Jong Un. Although Pyongyang denied it was behind the hacking, President Obama in 2015 ordered additional sanctions against North Korea. Cyber-security firms also found evidence potentially linking North Korea with ransomware attacks in mid-May that crippled computer systems worldwide.

With all sides poised for major retaliation if attacked, policy experts say the situation is highly combustible.

“I’m fairly worried,” says Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey, Calif. “Every party in this conflict sees their forces as defensive. That’s the good news. The bad news is that everybody sees everyone else’s forces as offensive. In a crisis, that could be an excuse to strike first.”

Roiling the waters, South Korea’s newly elected president, Moon Jae-in, has embraced a more reconciliatory approach to Pyongyang than the previous government, which could put it at odds with the Trump administration. China, which shares an 880–mile-long border with North Korea and fears a wave of North Korean refugees if war breaks out, wants Washington to set aside its threats and engage in talks with Pyongyang.

“We must stay committed to the path of dialogue and negotiation,” said China’s foreign minister Wang Yi. “The use of force does not solve differences and will only lead to bigger disasters.”

Still to be determined, however, is the role China will play in bringing Pyongyang to the negotiating table. The
As officials on both sides of the Pacific seek to de-escalate the situation, here are key questions they are debating:

**Is there a viable nonmilitary strategy to get North Korea to drop its nuclear weapons program?**

When fragments from a North Korean rocket fell into the Yellow Sea last year, international weapons experts who examined them made an interesting discovery: Many of the key components came from China. This and other findings led the United Nations earlier this year to conclude that years of international sanctions have failed to cut off materials and technologies needed by North Korea to keep developing nuclear weapons.

“That case demonstrates the continuing critical importance of high-end, foreign-sourced components” for North Korea’s military programs, stated a U.N. report. “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea continues to trade in arms and related materiel, exploiting markets and procurement services in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.”

In fact, despite military pressure, global sanctions and on-and-off negotiations, North Korea has continued — and even accelerated — its march toward increasingly powerful nuclear bombs and missiles.

Exasperated, top White House officials say it’s time to change strategies.

“[T]he political and diplomatic efforts of the past 20 years to bring North Korea to the point of denuclearization have failed,” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in March, less than two months after assuming his position. “In the face of this ever-escalating threat, it is clear that a different approach is required.”

Policy experts, however, are divided over what, if anything, can stop North Korea from developing an even more potent arsenal.

The two decades of efforts Tillerson referenced began with a 1994 agreement between the United States and North Korea in which Pyongyang agreed to freeze and
North Korea raises nuclear stakes

Nuclear bombs tested by North Korea have been increasingly powerful, with the latest, in September 2016, generally estimated at 10 kilotons, although some analysts believe it may have been up to 30 kilotons. By comparison, the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, during World War II was 15 kilotons. North Korea also has tested several ballistic missiles, the most recent of which flew more than 430 miles and demonstrated Pyongyang’s increasing military capability.

North Korean nuclear bomb tests, 2006-2016


Ruggiero and other foreign policy experts say the United States should consider so-called “secondary sanctions,” or directly targeting companies, including those based in China, that are selling banned goods to North Korea. Such sanctions could, in theory, choke off the flow of goods and money to North Korea.

“We need to do a much better job of, first, devoting sufficient resources to finding out where North Korea’s money laundering is going through, and second, we have to have the political will to sanction, to designate, to freeze the assets of companies and banks in third countries, including China, that are helping North Korea violate the sanctions,” said Joshua Stanton, a Washington-based attorney and former U.S. Army judge advocate in South Korea who has advised the House Foreign Affairs Committee on North Korean sanctions.19

Other foreign policy experts, however, warn that tougher sanctions could further isolate Pyongyang, leaving it more entrenched than ever. In addition, Beijing might not take kindly to the United States
In North Korea happens — the regime collapses or they moderate some policies.”

Other foreign policy experts, however, doubt that negotiations would do any good. Proponents of such a policy “have provided no rationale for why yet another attempt at negotiations would be any more successful than previous failures,” said Bruce Klinger, a North Korea expert with the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington. Instead, he told a subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in March, sanctions will have an effect — if policymakers give them enough time.20

“It is a policy of a slow python constriction,” he said, “rather than a rapid cobra strike.”21

Is military action against North Korea a realistic option?

Battling Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan, the United States this year for the first time deployed its most powerful non-nuclear weapon, known as the “mother of all bombs,” on a cave complex where the fighters were hiding. The unusually aggressive tactic left foreign policy experts wondering if the Trump administration was sending a message to North Korea.

If Pyongyang refuses to change course, the United States should consider a pre-emptive military attack on North Korea as a last-ditch option to keep it from developing missiles that could drop nuclear bombs on U.S. cities, some congressional leaders have said. “[There are] no good choices left, but if there’s a war today, it’s over there,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a member of the Armed Services Committee. “In the future, if there’s a war and they get a missile, it comes here.”22

Many foreign policy and military experts, however, warn that even a limited attack on North Korea could trigger a full-scale war with almost unimaginable casualties, especially for two of America’s closest allies: South Korea and Japan. North Korea has one of the world’s largest armies, a formidable array of artillery and chemical and biological weapons in addition to its nuclear bombs — and appears determined to defend itself by any means possible.

“That’s a very serious business,” says Nicholas Eberstadt, an expert in international security in the Korean Peninsula and Asia at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank in Washington. “I would
hope that people thinking about a military option would have given a great deal of thought to the risks.”

The risks begin with metropolitan Seoul, home to about 25 million people. North Korea has amassed hundreds of long-range artillery pieces near the demilitarized zone that can unleash a catastrophic assault. “They essentially have the equivalent of a nuclear option pointed at Seoul in the form of artillery,” says the Wilson Center’s Litwak. South Korea, whose army of 655,000 is about half the size of North Korea’s, has a modern air force and navy as well as thousands of artillery pieces, but Pyongyang is not within artillery range of the DMZ like Seoul is.23

Other risks include the more than 130,000 Americans who live in South Korea and about 28,000 U.S. troops who are stationed there.24 “If we had 20,000 troops incinerated, I’m pretty sure we would consider that a war,” says Jim Walsh, a senior research associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Security Studies Program.

North Korean missiles also pose a “grave threat” to Japan, says Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has warned that Pyongyang could strike Japan with missiles loaded with sarin, a highly toxic chemical weapon.25

While U.S. leaders hope a pre-emptive strike could disable North Korea, military experts say that is unlikely. North Korea is believed to have many hundreds of missiles, some kept in underground bunkers that would be hard to detect and destroy, as well as 10,000 artillery shells in caves and other hiding places that can reach Seoul within minutes.26

But Pyongyang’s weapons of mass destruction represent its greatest threat. North Korea has an estimated 2,500 tons of chemical weapons, including the deadly VX nerve agent allegedly used to kill Kim’s estranged half-brother in Malaysia in February. It also is believed to have biological weapons that could spread deadly diseases such as smallpox. And military experts are deeply uncertain whether a U.S. pre-emptive strike could wipe out North Korea’s approximately 20 nuclear bombs.27

“Every U.S. administration, as they have looked at this problem, has said that all options are available. But that’s not really true,” said Carl Baker, a retired Air Force officer with extensive experience in South Korea who is now director of programs at the Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “We really don’t have a military option.”28

U.S. politicians have also floated the idea of targeted attacks on North Korea’s leaders. Ohio Gov. John Kasich, a Republican presidential candidate in 2016, recently suggested that the United States could “eradicate” the leadership of North Korea. “The North Korean top leadership has to go,” he said. “And, you know, I think that is not beyond our capability to achieve that.”29

Korean experts, however, say that even if such a strike succeeded, it might unleash chaos, with the country potentially splintering into violent factions squaring off with chemical weapons while U.S. and Chinese forces maneuver to take control.

“It’s really astonishing to me that people don’t think of the consequences of doing that in any serious way,” says Joel Wit, co-founder and senior fellow of the U.S.-Korea Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. “We

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**North Korea’s Economy Dwarfed by South’s**

The North Korean economy was about 1 percent of South Korea’s in 2015. North Korea’s GDP — the total market value of its goods and services — in 2015 was $16.1 billion, equal to about half the economic output of Vermont, the lowest of any U.S. state. South Korea’s GDP in 2015 was nearly $1.4 trillion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(in $ billions)</th>
<th>GDPs of South Korea and North Korea, 2005-2015</th>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>South Korea ($1.4T)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2015</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>2,600</td>
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would have such a security nightmare that people might yearn for the good old days of a nuclear North Korea with a central government."

Is North Korea at risk of collapse?

In 2013, Kim Jong Un turned his guns on his own family. He arranged for two trusted deputies of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, to be executed in a particularly gruesome way — with antiaircraft guns. He then ordered that his uncle, widely viewed as the nation’s second most powerful official and a voice for reform, be executed in the same way.30

Since assuming power at the end of 2011, Kim has moved ruthlessly against potential rivals, executing more than 300 people, including senior government, military and ruling Korean Workers’ Party officials, according to a 2016 report by a South Korean think tank, the Institute for National Security Strategy.31

U.S. policy makers question whether Kim is tightening his grip on power or if the executions indicate that he is struggling to control growing dissent. “There are people who would say he has consolidated his power with these purges and that may be true, but I can’t help but wonder if this stuff also undermines his regime,” says the AEI’s Eberstadt.

Others cite the gradually rising number of mostly low-level North Korean officials and more affluent residents who are defecting every year. The most senior defector in years — North Korea’s former deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, who defected last summer with his family — said dissent is spreading in North Korea. “Kim Jong Un’s days are numbered,” the defector, Thae Yong Ho, said earlier this year. “Control over the residents has been collapsing due to information seeping in.”32

Long-time Korean observers, however, cautioned against assuming the regime will fall any time soon. The Kim family has demonstrated enormous staying power since taking control of the country. They survived war with South Korea and the United States in the early 1950s, a famine in the 1990s that killed up to 2.5 million people and the transition to power of Kim Jong Un, who was only about 27 years old at the time, following the sudden death of his father.

The demise of the regime “has always been more of a hope than a realistic policy outcome,” says Carnegie’s Dalton. “They have survived all manner of calamities, crises, disasters, tricky political transitions. If you were looking for signs of decay, you would look for loss of government control in border regions and more high-level defections that might indicate stress in the system. But I don’t see it.”

Korean experts say the younger Kim relies on a few trusted aides and a network of security services, often pitted against each other, to reduce threats to the leader. Anyone suspected of disloyalty faces death or years of confinement in extremely harsh prison camps.

A devastating 2014 report by a special U.N. investigative commission documented human rights abuses in North Korea, which the panel said exceeded those of any other contemporary dictatorship. “The gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world,” concluded the report. Drawing on public testimony and private interviews with hundreds of victims and witnesses, the report accused the government of retaining its hold on power through such tactics as murder, enslavement, torture, sexual violence and prolonged starvation. It estimated that 80,000–120,000 political prisoners were held in four large political prison camps.33

“The key to the political system is the vast political and security apparatus that strategically uses surveillance,
coercion, fear and punishment to preclude the expression of any dissent,” the report stated. “Public executions and enforced disappearance to political prison camps serve as the ultimate means to terrorize the population into submission.”

Daily life is extremely difficult even for average residents. With its GDP per capita ranked 180th out of 193 countries by the United Nations, North Korea is among the world’s poorest nations. About half its population is believed to live in “extreme poverty,” and 84 percent had “borderline” or “poor” levels of food consumption in 2013, according to the U.N. But the more affluent living in Pyongyang in recent years have enjoyed well-stocked stores, cellphones and other luxuries of modern life.

The combination of brutal repression and extreme poverty might seem a source of substantial discontent among the population. But North Korean experts warn against such a conclusion.

“It’s not like you’re living in Western Europe and your standard of living has dramatically nosedived,” says Wit of Johns Hopkins University. “It’s more like you’re living in a developing country where you’re not used to a very high standard of living, but you can improve your lot.

“There’s a lot of nationalism,” he adds. “These are not people who grew up in a democracy. It’s not as though North Koreans are saying to themselves, ‘I wish I lived in the United States.’ It’s a very different reality there.”

In recent years, some central controls have been relaxed, and North Koreans appear to have more economic opportunities. The result has been a slow increase in the buying and selling of goods and services, sometimes under the official aegis of the state and sometimes unofficially tolerated by authorities, who had cracked down more vigorously on the black market under the regime of Kim’s father, Kim Jong-Il.

“My perception is at least in Pyongyang things are better than they were 10 years ago,” says MIT’s Walsh. “The government has clearly recognized that they need to evolve their economy if they are to survive.”

That slow marketization, along with an increased awareness of the outside world through cellphone contacts and more access to South Korean media, could nudge the country on a different path, experts say. But it may take time.

“That trend could be five years, it could be 50 years,” Walsh says, “before it amounts to something.”

**BACKGROUND**

**Early Era**

Although North Korea and South Korea emerged as separate nations comparatively recently, the Korean Peninsula has a long history of division and reunification while contending with external threats. From 56 B.C. until 926, the land was divided into three kingdoms, unified under the Silla dynasty and then divided again into three kingdoms.

The peninsula was reunified under the Koryo dynasty, established by a general named Wang Kon, and was first named “Korea.” The Koryo royal rulers, who reigned from the 10th to 14th centuries, introduced a civil service, codified a legal system and allowed Buddhism to spread through the peninsula. After the Mongols invaded in 1231, the Koryo family eventually was replaced by the Choson dynasty, started by Gen. Yi Song-gye, in 1391.

The Choson leaders, who would govern Korea as an independent nation for nearly 500 years, depended on China for military protection and borrowed liberally from Chinese society, adopting Confucianism as the official religion. However, after repeated invasions by the Japanese, the Manchu (who ruled China) and others, Korea gradually closed its doors to foreigners in the 18th century, becoming known as the “Hermit Kingdom.” Its isolation ended in the mid-19th century, after European and American traders and missionaries moved into the region.

But Koreans remained highly suspicious of Western motives. When the armed merchant vessel *U.S.S. General Sherman* sailed up the Taedon River to Pyongyang in 1866 and became stranded on a sandbar, Koreans attacked it and killed the crew.

Korea remained independent through the late 19th century, but in 1910 Japan annexed the peninsula after victories in both the Sino-Japanese (1894–1895) and Russo-Japanese (1904–1905) wars and claimed Korea as part of its growing empire.

**Colonial Period**

Under Japan’s colonial rule, which lasted until 1945, Korea became more industrialized and began to build a modern infrastructure. But the Japanese repeatedly and savagely crushed resistance. After unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the Japanese, the Western-educated politician,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHRONOLOGY</th>
<th>1940s–1950s</th>
<th>Korean Peninsula is divided into North and South, followed by war and a tense standoff.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Korea splits as World War II ends, with the Soviet-backed communist regime ruling the North and a U.S.-backed regime controlling the South in Cold War maneuvering.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>As Soviet and U.S. troops begin to withdraw, longtime communist guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung takes control of the North.</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>North Korean troops invade the South; U.S. and U.N. troops rapidly enter the war to help the South, and then China enters on the side of the North.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>After massive loss of life, armistice divides peninsula at 38th Parallel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960s–1980s</td>
<td>Aided by China and Russia, North undergoes industrial growth and escalates provocations against the South.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>North's nuclear weapons program begins as the Soviets help build its first nuclear reactor, at Yongbyon.</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>North seizes U.S. spy ship U.S.S. Pueblo, releases crew a year later.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Amid mounting North Korean provocations, Pyongyang tries unsuccessfully to assassinate South Korean president.</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>North test-fires first SCUD missile.</td>
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<td>1990s</td>
<td>North faces famine and a transfer of political leadership from Kim Il Sung to his son but continues military buildup.</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>North and South begin ministerial talks in Pyongyang. . . . U.S. withdraws nuclear weapons from South.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Three-year famine leaves up to 2.5 million dead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000s–Present</td>
<td>North develops increasingly powerful nuclear arsenal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>North withdraws from Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. . . . Six-party talks begin among U.S., North Korea, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea.</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>North agrees to disable its nuclear facilities for economic aid.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>North cuts diplomatic ties with South, carries out second underground nuclear test.</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>North shells South Korean island of Yeonpyeong months after it reportedly sank a South Korean warship, killing 46 sailors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Kim Jong Un succeeds his father, Kim Jong Il, as North Korea's leader.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>North Korea tests 10–kiloton nuclear bomb, its most powerful to date.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Kim Jong Un's estranged half-brother is killed with a chemical agent in Malaysia; suspicion quickly turns to Pyongyang (Feb. 13). . . . North Korea test-fires four missiles into the Sea of Japan, penetrating Japan's 200-mile economic exclusion zone (March 6). . . . President Trump warns of the potential for &quot;major, major conflict&quot; with North Korea; (April 28). Moon Jae-in wins South Korean presidency, pledges to reach out to North in potential split with Washington.</td>
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Syngman Rhee, established a provisional Korean government in Shanghai in 1919.

Meanwhile, a communist-led guerrilla movement soldiered on against the Japanese until 1940, when some of its leaders, including Kim Il Sung, fled to the Soviet Union to avoid capture by the Japanese. Kim became a major in the Soviet Army and did not return to Korea until 1945.

During World War II, the United States, Britain and China agreed at a 1943 conference in Cairo that Korea would return to its independent status after the war. But after the war the peninsula became caught up in a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Soviets, who occupied northern Korea and adjoining areas of Manchuria in China, viewed the peninsula as an important buffer zone to protect against attacks from the east. The United States, in turn, viewed it as a bulwark against communist expansion. In August 1945, the United States decided unilaterally to divide Korea at the 38th parallel into Soviet and U.S. zones. Within a month, 25,000 American soldiers occupied South Korea while Soviet forces took over the north, accompanied by Kim Il Sung and other Korean communist leaders. Koreans protested both occupying forces as a continuation of colonialism.

Joint American and Soviet discussions over the future of Korea made little progress, and the country was permanently divided in 1948. The Republic of Korea was established in the South, with Rhee elected as the first president. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was established in the North, headed by resistance fighter Kim, who became premier.

Kim nationalized industry and became very popular, while the new leaders in the South were seen as “puppets” of their occupiers. Kim’s brand of communism was not a carbon copy of the Soviet model. Rather, he developed a highly nationalistic ideology known as juche, which stressed self-reliance, independence and resistance to foreign influence.

**War and Aftermath**

After years of border skirmishes, Kim Il Sung — with support from the Soviet Union and the new communist government of China — invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, quickly taking control of the South except for a small southeastern corner near the port of Pusan. The United States and other allies immediately came to the aid of South Korea.

Before ending in a virtual stalemate, the three-year Korean War produced a massive loss of life: 800,000 Koreans, 115,000 Chinese and 37,000 Americans. An armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, officially splitting the peninsula at the 38th parallel and suspending hostilities, but not technically ending the war. An uneasy truce prevailed between the two countries throughout the 1950s and ’60s. The North, ruled by the autocratic Kim, again became a closed society. A huge personality cult helped lift the “Dear Leader,” as Kim was called, to almost godlike status among his people. The communist Korean Workers’ Party, the leading political entity in the North, ran the centralized government, the military and the economy.

After the Korean War, Moscow and Beijing helped rebuild the war-torn North, and its industrialized economy surged ahead of the South. Eventually, however, bolstered by the United States and others, the South developed export-oriented industries and became a growing economic power, surpassing the North in the 1970s. Today it has the world’s 15th-largest economy and is home to such industrial giants as Samsung and Hyundai.

By the 1990s, North Korea’s sputtering economy and international isolation left it vulnerable to grave crises. Kim Il Sung died of a heart attack in 1994 and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong II. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the economy went into steep decline because of reduced trade and the loss of subsidized Soviet oil. Economic mismanagement, coupled with widespread floods in 1995 led to a three-year famine that left an estimated 600,000 to 2.5 million dead.

As the younger Kim consolidated his hold on power, he announced small market-oriented measures, such as bonuses to high-performing workers.

**Rising Provocations**

Even as the North and South created contrasting economic systems in the years after the Korean War, they built up massive armed forces. The United States established military bases after the armistice was signed and stationed some of its nuclear arsenal in the South. The North responded by focusing increasingly on strengthening its military, while provoking the leaders of South Korea and the United States.
Personality Cult Makes Kim a God

“All-encompassing indoctrination” begins in early childhood.

North Korea is one of the world’s poorest nations, with nearly half its population living in extreme poverty. But that hasn’t stopped the ruling regime from erecting massive, 70-foot statues of its leader, Kim Jong Un, in provincial capitals across the country. Residents also can gaze upon miniature statues of Kim’s predecessors — his father Kim Jong Il and grandfather Kim Il Sung — at the Pyongyang Folk Park, a theme park that features tiny versions of North Korean landmarks.

From the time the Kim family took power following World War II, the state has attributed godlike powers to them. Now the government is extending this cult of personality to Kim Jong Un, who was just in his late 20s when he took over in 2011 upon his father’s death.

From early childhood, North Koreans are bombarded with images of the ruling family. The state requires that portraits of the leaders be cleaned daily with a special cloth and look out at residents in every home, office, classroom and other public spaces, including train cars. Starting in kindergarten, teachers and officials regularly instruct children about the greatness of their leaders.

“The milk would arrive [in kindergarten] and we would go up one by one to fill our cups,” a North Korean woman told The Washington Post. “The teachers would say: ‘Do you know where the milk came from? It came from the Dear Leader. Because of his love and consideration, we are drinking milk today.’”

Governments, especially those run by dictators, regularly try to instill a sense of respect or even awe toward their rulers. But the Kim dynasty takes this veneration to a different level, using a nonstop barrage of propaganda about the nation’s leaders as a way of cementing their grip on power.

“It’s clear they have very good control of the country, and part of it is because of this cult of personality which permeates the whole system from when you’re in kindergarten to when you’re in university,” says Joel Wit, a senior fellow at the U.S.-Korea Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington.

In addition to the ubiquitous images, Pyongyang cultivates quasi-mystical worship of the Kims. The nation’s calendar calculates time from 1912, when Kim Il Sung is said to have descended to Earth from heaven. More than two decades after his death in 1994, he remains the “eternal president” under the North Korean constitution. His son, Kim Jong Il, who ruled from 1994 to 2011, was also said to have extraordinary abilities, such as walking at just three weeks, talking at eight weeks and writing 1,500 books while studying at Kim Il Sung University.

Even as this cult of personality continues to extol the virtues of North Korea’s first two rulers, it is now also turning to Kim Jong Un. He is said to have demonstrated pistol marksmanship at age 3. As a youth, he supposedly mastered seven languages, discovered new geographical features and became a scholar of famous generals in world history.

In 1964, Pyongyang took its first steps toward developing nuclear weapons by setting up a nuclear-energy research complex at Yongbyon, where the Soviets had built the North’s first nuclear reactor.

In 1968, tensions with the United States flared after the North captured the USS Pueblo, an electronic spy ship that was cruising in international waters off the coast of North Korea gathering intelligence. After 11 months of negotiations, Pyongyang agreed to release the 82 crew members — who had been starved and tortured — in exchange for an admission of guilt and an apology, both of which Washington retracted once the crew were safe. The Pueblo remains a “hostage” in North Korea, and the loss of its sensitive surveillance equipment to a communist country during the Cold War is considered one of the greatest intelligence debacles in U.S. history.

Despite ongoing tensions, Koreans on both sides of the border hoped for reconciliation. Many families and friends were separated by the DMZ. But border skirmishes and provocations periodically dashed such dreams.
A 2014 United Nations report on human rights violations in North Korea said the propaganda serves as a powerful tool for the government, building up support for the leaders while directing hatred toward other countries, including the United States, South Korea and Japan.

“The State operates an all-encompassing indoctrination machine that takes root from childhood to propagate an official personality cult and to manufacture absolute obedience to the Supreme Leader (Suryong), effectively to the exclusion of any thought independent of official ideology and State propaganda,” the report said.4

The money spent on advancing this personality cult, the report added, comes at the expense of “providing food to the starving general population.”5

But some Korean experts say the propaganda is becoming less persuasive. Increasing numbers of North Koreans are able to get alternative views from the outside world because of the growing availability of cellphones, homemade radios and the internet, although access is limited.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank, and author of *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World*, says this technology may make it harder to maintain the cult of personality.

“It’s increasingly less effective,” he says. “It’s so much easier now to be aware that you’re being lied to.”

— David Hosansky


5 Ibid.

In 1971 negotiations offered hope for reunifying the two nations, and an agreement on ground rules for unification was reached in 1972. But many of the talks were scuttled by provocative actions by the North, such as alleged assassination attempts on South Korean leaders in 1968 and 1974, a bombing that killed 17 South Korean officials in 1983 and the North’s continued efforts to develop nuclear weapons.42

Nevertheless, in 2000 both nations signed the North-South Declaration, promising to seek peaceful reunification. Over the following decade, the two countries held a series of talks aimed at normalizing relations. The South pursued a so-called Sunshine Policy, which aimed to project diplomatic “warmth” toward the North. But the countries failed to achieve significant breakthroughs. The North’s numerous provocations — including an artillery attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong and an apparent torpedo attack on a South Korean warship, both in 2010 — eradicated any chance for reconciliation.

The death of Kim Jong Il in 2011 briefly stirred speculation that the regime might struggle to maintain its
Defectors Risk Death to Escape

“How could our country lie so completely to us?”

Thae Yong Ho grew weary of lying to his sons about the greatness of their country. Posted in London as North Korea’s deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, he kept fending off questions from his oldest son, a high school student who wanted to study computer science at a London university, about why North Korea was so different. Why did their native country not permit access to the internet or allow residents to watch foreign films?

“As a father, it was hard for me to tell lies, and it started a debate within the family,” Thae said at a Jan. 25 press conference in Seoul, South Korea. “This North Korean system is a really inhuman system. It even abuses the love between parents and their children.”

Finally, last summer, Thae defected with his wife and two sons. He made headlines because he was the highest-ranking defector in years. But several thousand North Koreans reportedly flee the country annually.

For North Koreans, the decision to leave is fraught with peril. The most straightforward route is north across the Yalu River into China, but North Korean ruler Kim Jong Un has increased security along the border in recent years. Those who are caught face imprisonment or even execution. And those who make it into China can face difficulties, such as human trafficking or being arrested by police and sent back to North Korea.

Defectors also must deal with guilt when the regime punishes relatives left behind. Park Sang-hak fled North Korea in 1999 after discovering his family would be punished because his father, who was working in Japan, had decided against coming back. Park bribed a border guard to cross the Yalu into China with his mother, brother and sister. But the regime exacted retribution after he escaped: His fiancée was beaten so badly she was left unrecognizable; two uncles were tortured to death; and his teenage cousins lost their jobs and had to beg in the streets.

Nowadays, relatives and a black market are helping a small but growing number of more-affluent North Koreans, especially those with family members already living abroad, to find their way to South Korea or other nations.

“There have been shifts in the composition of defectors,” says Scott Snyder, a senior fellow for Korea studies and director of the program on U.S.-Korea policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank in Washington. “It used to be a lot more people living in the border areas who were marginalized individuals.” But today, he says, most defectors are elites who rely on family connections and brokers. “Money is paid, arrangements are made,” Snyder says. “People are almost pulled out by their relatives and the growing influence of cash.”

Although the numbers don’t indicate “true internal instability,” Snyder says, the defections are nevertheless important “because they open up greater understanding and information for people on the outside about the parts of the regime that really matter.”

Thae, who has both spoken privately with South Korean officials and gone public with media interviews, has painted a grim picture of the Kim government. “When Kim Jong Un first came to power I was hopeful that he would make reasonable and rational decisions to save North Korea from poverty,” he said. “But I soon fell into despair watching him purging officials for no proper reason.”

A South Korean journalist said at the time: “The chances of a smooth succession by Kim Jong Un are less than 10 percent” because of his few supporters.

But the younger Kim was named supreme leader after his father’s funeral and assumed his father’s posts as leader of the Korean Workers’ Party and the highest position in the military.

At the same time, he relentlessly purged potential rivals. After his reform-minded uncle, Jang, was spectacularly executed in 2013, along with his family, a
Despite the difficulties of life in North Korea, defectors have had mixed experiences abroad.

Seoul is home to an estimated 28,000 defectors, most of whom are women, possibly because women have more freedom of movement and can defect more easily than men without being immediately detected.\(^1\)

Among the best known is Hyeonseo Lee, who wrote a bestselling book about her experiences, *The Girl with Seven Names*. While she grew up in a comparatively wealthy family, Lee was traumatized by such experiences as seeing an execution when she was 7. Eventually, after secretly watching Chinese television as a teenager, she crossed an icy river into China. After narrowly avoiding servitude in a brothel and surviving a police interrogation by pretending to be Chinese, she made her way to South Korea and then daringly snuck back into North Korea to guide her mother and brother to China.

These experiences haunt her, Lee said, and she sometimes cries. “When I meet people, I forget the pain,” she said in an interview last year. “I want to keep positive and show that North Koreans can be positive people. But when I am on my own, I think about the past and it gives me more trauma.”\(^6\)

Some defectors seek to liberate those still in North Korea. Defector Park now uses homemade balloons to send millions of leaflets across the border criticizing the Kim government, along with declarations of human rights and booklets about South Korea. He believes such information is the best way to undermine Pyongyang.

“All defectors,” he said, “ask the same question: How could our country lie so completely to us?”

— David Hosansky


6 Birrell, ibid.

7 Ibid.

deputy security minister, O Sang-hon, who was accused of conspiring with Jang, reportedly was executed with a flame thrower.\(^44\) Kim also continued his father’s military policies and continued to push for his grandfather’s dream of developing nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Arsenal

North Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons can be traced back to the Korean War, when Kim Il Sung discovered that U.S. Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur had asked to use nuclear weapons against the North. Declassified documents show that during the Korean War Kim asked both Russia and China for help in developing a nuclear arsenal.\(^45\) But the North’s nuclear program made its biggest gains after the government obtained centrifuges and nuclear secrets from Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan in the 1990s.\(^46\)

The North first tested a ballistic missile in 1984, using Soviet Scud missile technology. Although the North joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
(NPT) in 1985, international inspections to determine whether the North was abiding by the treaty did not begin until 1992. In 1994, following nearly 18 months of bilateral negotiations, the United States and North Korea signed the so-called Agreed Framework, in which the North Korea agreed to abide by the NPT and both sides agreed to remove barriers to full economic and diplomatic relations.

For halting its nuclear program the North would receive oil and nuclear reactors to generate electric power. At the time, Western intelligence agencies believed the North had enough plutonium for one or two bombs. In 1999, North Korea agreed to suspend missile testing, and the United States eased trade sanctions it had imposed in 1988, for the bombing of a South Korean jetliner in 1987, which killed all 115 passengers.

In 2002 U.S. negotiators accused the North of running a clandestine uranium-enrichment program. The Bush administration immediately stopped oil shipments to the North and persuaded other nations to follow suit. North Korea responded by expelling international monitors and restarting its nuclear reactor and reprocessing plant.

In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT, prompting creation of six-party talks — negotiations among the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and North and South Korea that aimed to push the North to eliminate or reduce its nuclear arsenal. In return, the North sought, among other things, a guarantee of its security, the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, the normalization of diplomatic relations and the lifting of trade sanctions. The United States and Japan wanted verifiable, irreversible disarmament, while China and Russia wanted a more gradual disarmament process, in which the North is rewarded with some form of aid.

Negotiations broke down, however, and in October 2006 North Korea tested its first nuclear device, becoming the world’s eighth atomic power and drawing strong international condemnation. Simultaneously, North Korea was building a rocket delivery system. In April 2009, it failed in an attempt to launch the long-range Taepodong-2 rocket, designed to travel more than 3,000 miles.

After a second nuclear test in 2009, the U.N. Security Council unanimously tightened sanctions on North Korea and encouraged member nations to inspect airplanes and vessels suspected of transporting weapons and other military materiel to North Korea. Besides developing nuclear weapons, Pyongyang also was accused of exporting nuclear and ballistic technology to other states, including Syria and Iran.

Despite the protests and sanctions, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has expanded. In 2012, the Obama administration agreed to provide North Korea with food aid and nutritional supplements for children in return for Pyongyang imposing a moratorium on long-range missile launches and activity at the nation’s main nuclear facility. But less than a year later, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test — the first under Kim Jong Un. North Korea’s National Defense Commission said the tests and launches will build to an “upcoming all-out action” against the United States, “the sworn enemy of the Korean people.”

In 2015, North Korea claimed to have a hydrogen bomb and to have successfully miniaturized nuclear warheads to fit on ballistic missiles. Although U.S. officials expressed skepticism about both claims, no one questioned North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities.

Then last Sept. 9, about a month before the U.S. presidential election, North Korea detonated the nuclear warhead estimated to have the explosive power of 10 kilotons or possibly more — its most powerful to date.

**CURRENT SITUATION**

**Trump Policies**

In its first months in office, the Trump administration has made vague, sometimes conflicting statements about North Korea. The underlying message, though, is clear: the United States will not stand by while Pyongyang develops increasingly advanced nuclear weapons that could eventually target the United States.

“We can’t allow it to happen,” Trump said in an interview in late April. “We cannot let what’s been going on for a long period of years to continue.”

But the administration’s own approach has yet to come into focus. Officials have suggested that tighter sanctions, coordination with China, talks with North Korea and, if necessary, military action might resolve the crisis.

“All options for responding to future provocation must remain on the table,” Secretary of State Tillerson told the UN. Security Council on April 29. “Diplomatic and financial levers of power will be backed up by a
Should the U.S. tighten penalties on companies dealing with North Korea?

**YES**

Sue Mi Terry  
*Managing Director, Korea, Bower Group Asia*

Excerpted from testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, on Feb. 7, 2017, http://tinyurl.com/m7skg3v.

Contrary to what many believe, the U.S. has not yet used every option available at our disposal to ratchet up pressure against the Kim regime. As a near-term solution, there’s much more we can still do on sanctions, on human rights, on getting information into the North, as well as on deterrence, defense and on diplomacy. . . .

The first step to raise the cost for North Korea is through stricter sanctions, by adding even more individuals and entities to the sanctions list and by seeking better enforcement of sanctions, including secondary sanctions.

Until February 2016 . . . U.S. sanctions against North Korea were a mere shadow of the sanctions applied to Iran, Syria or Burma, and even narrower than those applicable to countries like Belarus and Zimbabwe. Thankfully, with the bipartisan support of this committee, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 was passed and signed into law, and today we finally have stronger sanctions in place.

A month after its passage, in March, the United Nations Security Council also unanimously passed a resolution, U.N. Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2270, imposing new sanctions on the Kim regime, including mining exports.

In June, triggered by the requirements of the Sanctions Act, the Obama administration finally designated North Korea as a primary money laundering concern, and in July, the Treasury Department sanctioned Kim Jong Un and 10 other senior North Korean individuals and five organizations for human rights violations.

In late November, the U.N. Security Council also got around to another round of sanctions, adopting UNSC Resolution 2321, which further caps North Korea’s coal exports, its chief source of hard currency.

But for sanctions to work, [they] will need to be pursued over the course of several years as we did with Iran, and most importantly, they need to be enforced. Here, the chief problem has been that Beijing is still reluctant to follow through in fully and aggressively implementing the U.N. sanctions. . . .

Secondary sanctions must be placed on Chinese banks that help North Korea launder its money and Chinese entities that trade with North Korea or are involved with North Korea’s procurement activities. . . . Even if the U.S. has to endure some ire from Beijing for enforcing secondary sanctions, this is exactly what Washington should do.

**NO**

Doug Bandow  
*Senior Fellow, Cato Institute; Author, Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World*

Written for *CQ Researcher*, May 2017

No one outside of Pyongyang wants the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to have nuclear weapons. But there is no obvious way to stop North Korea’s program, and enhancing sanctions likely won’t work.

Despite the claim that the DPRK’s leader Kim Jong Un is irrational, he, along with his grandfather and father, behaved rationally in developing nuclear weapons. Otherwise, no one would pay attention to the small, impoverished state. Nukes also offer North Korea national prestige and a tool for extortion. Most important, nuclear weapons are the only sure deterrent to U.S. military action. Washington is allied with the South, routinely deploys threatening naval and air forces near the North and imposes regime change in nations whenever the whim strikes American policymakers.

If diplomacy ever was going to dissuade the North from building nukes, that time has passed. Military action would be a wild gamble and likely would trigger the Second Korean War with catastrophic consequences.

Unfortunately, tougher economic penalties likely will be ineffective without China’s cooperation. Winning that assistance requires more than offering unspecified trade concessions. The United States must address Beijing’s political and security concerns about a failed DPRK and a reunited, U.S.-allied Korea.

Washington could impose secondary sanctions, penalizing Chinese enterprises dealing with the North. But that would likely generate resistance from China, a rising nationalistic power. Economic penalties also would disrupt Washington’s relationship with Beijing in several important areas. North Korea also might well refuse to comply even if the United States imposed more sanctions. The Kim dynasty refused to change policy even during the mass starvation of the 1990s — and survived.

It would be better if the United States took a multifaceted approach toward the DPRK. Washington should coordinate with Japan and South Korea, engage the North, develop a comprehensive offer for Pyongyang, forge a deal with China to win the latter’s support and only then press sanctions with Beijing’s support if the North refuses to negotiate. Finally, to reduce North Korea’s insecurity, Washington should back away from the two Koreas’ military struggle. Washington should withdraw its forces from the South because Seoul can defend itself from conventional attack.

There is no simple answer for eliminating Pyongyang’s nuclear program, and focusing on more sanctions is unlikely to work.
willingness to counteract North Korean aggression with military action if necessary.”

Tillerson called for better enforcement of existing sanctions and new international sanctions, such as halting a guest-worker program under which Pyongyang gets hard currency from other countries in exchange for cheap labor.

Underscoring U.S. determination on the issue, Tillerson visited the DMZ in March. A month later, the Trump administration sent Vice President Mike Pence to the border “so they can see our resolve in my face,” as he said. The administration also dispatched an aircraft carrier, the *Carl Vinson*, to the Sea of Japan in April to stage drills with the South Korean navy. Also in April, the administration summoned all 100 members of the U.S. Senate to the White House for an emergency briefing on the situation, although officials reportedly said little new. A similar briefing was provided on Capitol Hill for members of the House.

Although Trump’s actions on North Korea so far have not differed notably from those of past presidents, the administration’s rhetoric has been sharper and more dramatic than that of his predecessors. The “theatrics of the Trump administration can be very useful in sending a message to Pyongyang,” said Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan foreign policy think tank in Washington that favors stronger sanctions on North Korea. “So much of this is about psychology.”

Other experts, however, worry about administration missteps. For example, the White House for days said the *Carl Vinson* was headed toward the Sea of Japan when, in fact, it was moving in the other direction (it eventually changed course). Trump also angered South Koreans when he said Korea “used to be a part of China” (technically it wasn’t) and called on Seoul to pay for the THAAD antimissile system, which was not Seoul’s understanding of who was paying for it. Recently, Trump also surprised both U.S. officials and allies by praising Kim Jong Un as a “pretty smart cookie” and saying he would be “honored” to meet with Kim “under the right circumstances.” The abrupt shifts in rhetoric can make the already tense situation more dangerous, Korea experts warn. “When they take position A one day and position B the next, that is inherently destabilizing,” says MIT’s Walsh. “The chances of misinterpretation are larger than they’ve been in the past.”

If Washington expects to intimidate Kim, there is no sign it is succeeding. During the new president’s first 100 days in office, North Korea conducted nine missile tests — although not all were successful — and repeatedly threatened overwhelming retaliation to any U.S. military strikes. The *Rodong Sinmun*, official newspaper of the ruling Korean Workers’ Party, warned of a “super-mighty preemptive strike” that would reduce American military forces “to ashes.”

Subsequently, North Korea accused U.S. and South Korean intelligence agencies in early May of plotting to assassinate Kim Jong Un with biochemical agents and warned it could counterattack. South Korea’s National Intelligence Service dismissed the accusation.

In recent months, North Korea has further raised tensions by detaining two American professors working at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, bringing the total of detained U.S. citizens to four. The State Department had little comment on the most recent detention, except to say it was “aware of reports” that an American had been detained and was working with the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang.

Further clouding the situation, South Korea on May 9 elected a new president, human rights lawyer Moon.
Jaein, who favors a more conciliatory approach with North Korea, emphasizing dialogue instead of sanctions and pressure. He contended that South Korea must “embrace the North Korean people to achieve peaceful reunification one day.”65 This position puts him at odds with the United States and could greatly complicate Trump administration efforts to pressure Pyongyang.

Some experts say the growing tensions may provide the catalyst for China to take a harder line with Kim. Although Beijing has been reluctant to pressure him in the past, alarms are rising in Beijing over the prospect of war. “China may finally be persuaded to put pressure on North Korea,” says the Wilson Center’s Litwak.

Other foreign policy experts, however, warn that even if Beijing wanted to pressure North Korea — which remains uncertain — it may not have as much influence as the Trump administration hopes.

“Those who focus on China suggest that Chinese leaders can snap their fingers and North Korea would come to heel,” says Cato’s Bandow. “That almost certainly is not the case. North Korea doesn’t want to be subject to anyone.”

Fratricide

On Feb. 13, the estranged half-brother of North Korea’s ruler Kim Jong Un was waiting to catch a flight at Kuala Lumpur International Airport to his home in Macau when two young women walked up to him and touched something to his face. Within moments, he was struggling to breathe. He died on his way to the hospital.

Authorities rapidly determined that the 45-year-old was killed by VX nerve agent, a banned chemical weapon that North Korea is suspected of stockpiling. Suspicion immediately turned to the North Korean government, even though Pyongyang denied any involvement.

South Korea’s acting president Hwang Kyo-ahn said the killing “starkly demonstrated the North Korean regime’s recklessness and cruelty as well as the fact that it will do anything, everything, in order to maintain its power.”66

Kim Jong Nam had questioned his family’s right to hereditary rule, and he had worried for years that his half-brother might try to kill him. But he had little interest in politics and was living in Macau, an autonomous administrative district of China, under Beijing’s protection, including sometimes a round-the-clock security detail.

Foreign policy analysts question why Pyongyang would go to such lengths to kill Kim Jong Nam, and to do so with a banned chemical agent in a public place. Some observers speculate that a key motive may have been self-preservation. If the United States or other countries wanted to assassinate Kim Jong Un, then eliminating his half-brother would make it harder to find a successor.

“It shouldn’t be surprising that, if people are talking about decapitation, the logical counter is to decapitate the prospective successors,” says MIT’s Walsh. “The prospects of the half-brother really being a leader were limited, but China was protecting him because they wanted an option.”

Indeed, Beijing officials were reportedly shocked by the effrontery of the murder. “China’s inner circle of government is highly nervous about this,” said Wang Weimin, a professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University in Shanghai. The assassination, he argued, makes China “more aware of how unpredictable and cruel the current North Korean regime is.”67

Kim also may have been demonstrating that his arsenal extends beyond nuclear weapons. North Korea, which is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention — a 1997 treaty that prohibits the use, development, production and stockpiling of chemical weapons — has produced chemical weapons since the 1980s and is believed to have biological weapons.68

In a war, experts say, Pyongyang could use aircraft, missiles, artillery or even grenades to attack South Korea and possibly Japan with chemical and biological weapons.

And deploying VX nerve agent — which forces a victim’s muscles to clench uncontrollably, preventing breathing — in a crowded airport may have been intended to send a message about Pyongyang’s willingness to expose large populations to lethal chemicals.

“This may have been a timely reminder to adversaries that North Korea has more than one way to strike back,” Walsh says.

OUTLOOK

Signs of Prosperity

John Delury, an assistant professor of international studies at Yonsei University in Seoul, says that when he used to travel to North Korea he could easily keep track of
how many cars he saw. But when he went in 2013, there were too many cars to count, as well as a surprising number of people with cellphones.

“The crude economic indicators that we get are of steady growth,” said Delury. “You can see the emergence of a public-consumer culture.”

Delury and other Korea specialists say the North Korean economy, while still lagging far behind most countries, seems to be in somewhat better shape since Kim Jong Un eased government restrictions on commercial activities. A booming black market is boosting the importation of consumer goods, largely from China. Residents, especially in Pyongyang, have more access to South Korean soap operas through cellphones, flash drives and other technologies, many made in China.

Some observers of North Korea say the greater affluence and access to information may lead to an increased openness and perhaps an eventual softening in government policies. “There are more cellphones, more North Koreans doing business,” says MIT’s Walsh. “North Koreans are more aware, and you might make an argument that opening up is a first step toward a resolution.”

Like Delury, other recent visitors to Pyongyang have been surprised at signs of prosperity despite years of sanctions. Journalist Jean Lee, who opened up an Associated Press bureau in Pyongyang five years ago and then returned to the country this year as a global fellow with the Wilson Center, said nearly everyone in the city had smartphones and plenty of shopping options.

It’s “just amazing the kinds of products that they have on the shelves,” she said. “I saw so many varieties of potato chips, varieties of canned goods, what would be their equivalent of Spam, for example, but all kinds of things — computers, tablets, PCs — all kinds of things that you might not expect to see in a country that is still very poor.”

An increasing number of goods appear to be made locally, reportedly driven by government policies designed to make the country more self-sufficient and to diminish the potential impact of sanctions. “Around 2013, Kim Jong Un started talking about the need for import substitution,” said Andray Abrahamian, associate director of research at the Choson Exchange, a Singapore-based group that trains North Koreans in business skills. “There was clearly recognition that too many products were being imported from China.”

If sanctions and negotiations don’t work, some foreign policy experts wonder if Washington could play for time, in the hopes that North Korea — like the Soviet Union and Maoist China decades ago — will becomes less of a military threat as it moves toward a more market-oriented system.

Some say the consensus in Washington is that the United States must stop North Korea from developing intercontinental missiles, even if that means covert actions to topple the Kim government or a military strike. “Otherwise, we’re staring down the barrel of an ICBM,” said Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

But some long-time Korean observers say the calculus may not be so clear-cut. “We lived through the Cold War with Soviet missiles aimed at every American city,” Walsh says. “It wasn’t pretty, but we got through it.”

NOTES

4. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


23. McCarthy, op. cit.


27. Ibid.


34. Ibid. See the press release accompanying the report, which is at http://tinyurl.com/peobg3f.


57. Crowley, op. cit.


60. Also see Choe Sang-Hun, “Trump rattles South Korea by saying it should pay for antimissile system,”


72. Fifield and Gearan, op. cit.

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A native of the Soviet Union who has studied North Korea since visiting as an exchange student in the 1980s looks at how its leaders have sustained the regime with limited resources and amid international hostility.


This international bestseller tells of Lee’s escape from North Korea at age 17, her subsequent struggles in China and her daring trip back to North Korea to bring her mother and brother to South Korea.


Two Korea experts examine the ongoing conflicts between South and North and show how the once unified nations might achieve reconciliation.

Articles


The author interviews defectors in South Korea to learn about their life in the North, their escapes and their struggles to adapt to new lives.


Journalist Bowden, author of Black Hawk Down, portrays the North Korean leader as clever, ruthless, impetuous and very much in charge.


Hunt, Katie, K.J. Kwon and Jason Hanna, “North Korea claims successful test of nuclear warhead,” CNN, Sept. 10, 2016, http://tinyurl.com/gpn89e. The authors cover North Korea’s fifth and most powerful nuclear bomb test and provide context on Pyongyang’s nuclear program.


Reports and Studies


For More Information


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