
North Korea: Past, Present, and Future of Foreign Relations

The Korean nuclear issue is the most complicated and uncertain factor for Northeast Asian security. It has now become the focus of attention in the Asia Pacific and even the world at large. North Korea's foreign relations are shaped by a mixture of historical, nationalistic, ideological, and pragmatic considerations. The territorial division of the peninsula looms large in the political thinking of North Korean leaders and is a driving force in their management of internal and external affairs. Over the centuries, unequal relations, foreign depredation, dependence on foreigners for assorted favors, and the emulation of foreign cultures and institutions are less the exception than the rule in Korea's relationship with the outside world. These patterns give rise to the widely shared assumption among Koreans that their capacity to control their national destiny is limited by geopolitical constraints.

By 1948, the result of the great power rivalry had been to institutionalize a Korean civil war between the North zone and the South zone. The timing and method of the North Korean attack were dictated by the Japanese factor. By 1949, it was clear that the U.S. intended to revive Japan as the key to the cold war system in Asia, a move that raised the idea of the reintegration of the South into a Japanese sphere of influence, backed by the U.S.. For Kim Il-Sung, the war was a pre-emptive move, designed to snatch the South from a new threat and allow a united Korea greater freedom of maneuver within the Socialist Bloc. He thought that South Korea would quickly collapse before the United States could intervene. He gambled with the future of the country and it proved to be costly. Even though the North Koreans took over 90 percent of the South in the summer of 1950, they were held at the Pusan perimeter and threatened with utter defeat by General Mac Arthur's landing at Inchon. Kim Il-Sung and North Korea were only saved by the contribution of the Chinese People's Volunteers, and the fighting ended in a stalemate in July 1953.

The Korean war was a disaster for North Korea. It became the most heavily bombed country in history. The major cities were leveled to the ground and industry was shattered. Human losses were particularly traumatic. A plausible estimate is that at least 12 percent and possibly as high as 15 percent of the population were killed during the war. (Smith, Rhodes, Pritchard, & Magill p.55) Kim Il-Sung was not held to account for the death and destruction visited on his country. Instead, he became a symbol of national resistance, using the bitter experience of war to consolidate his power. Because of this, North Koreans grew to hate Americans and American foreign policy. Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, and his son Kim Jong Il took over for him and follows in his father's path of leadership for North Korea.

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In recent times, North Korea has been an interesting topic considering Nuclear weapons. In 1994, North Korea became international headline news because of clashes with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). North Korea's possible nuclear capabilities threatened the stability in East Asia. The incomprehension and mistrust between North Korea and the West even produced talk of a war in 1994. In October 1994, the United States and North Korea signed an agreement designed to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. The Agreed Framework was the first constrictive measure that the United States and North Korea had taken to ease tensions on the Korean peninsula. The United States negotiated to persuade North Korea to remain a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to dissuade it from further developing nuclear capabilities by providing alternative energy sources. Since then, the situation has died down, mostly because of the hard financial times that have stricken the country. But still, the stability of North Korea, and its role in the talks with the IAEA are of great concern to most major countries.

North Korea has continued to develop their weapons program. On August 31, 1998 North Korea conducted a test of their medium range Taepo Dong I missile. The missile was fired over Japan, and the test concerned many Japanese officials. The launch proved that North Korea could build a multistage missile, even though the one that was fired encountered some problems in flight. The missile's three stages did not separate properly, and it was unable to launch a satellite into orbit. The test missile fell into the ocean, but the possibility of a North Korean missile program startled many East Asian countries. North Koreans are expected to conduct another test of the Taepo Dong 1 missile sometime later this year. North Korea's development of a missile program is not in violation of the settlement reached in 1994, but South Korean President Kim Dae Jung said that it is "cause for deep concern." (S.J. Mercury News 11/21/98) The conclusion that North Korea is developing a weapons program is one of a few signs of increased hostility from the country.

In the last week of November 1998, the relationship between the United States and North Korean government was once again major news. During a recent trip by President Bill Clinton to Asia, he was confronted with the problem of a North Korean arms drive. Clinton already had to address this problem in 1994. After the settlement in 1994, North Korea promised to not develop nuclear weapons or the ingredients for them. In exchange, Japan and South Korea agreed to help build the kind of nuclear power plants for North Korea that could not be used to produce weapons grade plutonium. The United States agreed to supply fuel oil to North Korea. Now, U.S. analysts believe that an underground site is being developed near the North Korean capital of Pyongyang. It is believed, but not confirmed, to house a weapons producing nuclear reactor. (S.J. Mercury News 11/21/98) If this is the case, it would be in direct violation of the accord reached in 1994. In the past six months, North Korea has presented a threatening position.

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The launching of a newly developed missile across Japanese airspace and the underground construction project might be the evidence of a new nuclear weapons installation. This leads to a lot of suspicion surrounding the North Korean weapons program. The Clinton administration fears that the construction site may be evidence that North Korea has abandoned their 1994 pledge. There is strong sentiment in Washington for the 1994 deal to be reworked or revised in order to deal with current problems. People in Washington want to prevent the region from becoming a major crisis.

Toward the end of the Clinton administration, the door to normalizing relations between the U.S. and North Korea was once again opened slightly. On October 9, 2000, Kim Jong-il's second-in-command, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, visited Washington as a special envoy. And on October 23, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright started a historic two-day visit to Pyongyang, where she was met by Kim Jong-il himself. She forwarded to the North Korean leaders President Clinton's suggestions about how to improve U.S.-DPRK relations and discussed with the North Korean side the nuclear and missile issue as well as the possibility of removing North Korea from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. The discussions also touched on setting up liaison offices and then lifting the offices to the level of diplomatic representatives at a later stage. The two sides had so much agreement that they even discussed the possibility of President Clinton visiting North Korea. After Secretary Albright returned home, the U.S. planned for a visit by President Clinton to North Korea and a possible return visit by Kim Jong-il. However, as the U.S. was already entering presidential elections, the lame duck Clinton administration had no time to realize this vision. In her memoir, Secretary Albright wrote that on the day before she left the White House, President Clinton told her that he wished he had taken up the chance to go to North Korea instead of staying in Washington to make a final push toward a peace agreement in the Middle East.

The recent developments between the United States and North Korea have provided some tense negotiations between the two countries. Relations between the U.S. and North Korea since the Korean war have improved, but in the last few years the possibility of North Korean nuclear weapons production has forced the U.S. to take an authoritative approach toward negotiations. They do not want this to turn into the next global crisis. It is difficult to speculate what the foreign relations of North Korea will be like in the future, but it will be interesting to see what will happen in the next few months because it is a situation that needs to be dealt with and it will have an impact on the entire global community.

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