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

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Is China going to assist the United States toward the elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program?

Unlikely. U.S. Administrations have actively looked to China to convince North Korea, one way or the other, to give up its nuclear weapons program. China has increasingly become North Korea's key conduit to the world and is the source of about 90% of Pyongyang's foreign trade. However, Beijing has consistently prioritized regional stability over denuclearization and has not been willing to take actions that could potentially destabilize North Korea. The Chinese are focused on "managing" the overall North Korea situation as opposed to pursuing resolution of the nuclear issue.

Are North Korean missiles able to reach the continental United States?

Eventually. A pre-emptive strike targeting North Korea will likely be recommended to President Trump once U.S. defense experts determine that North Korea has developed the capability of launching a missile fitted with a miniaturized nuclear warhead that could reach the United States.

North Korea has made significant technical progress in its missile program in the past year and is developing a road-mobile long-range missile with the potential to reach the continental United States.

Should the U.S. be willing to negotiate directly with North Korea?

Yes. However, officials within the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch are mixed in their opinions about whether, when, and how to engage. Some have argued that engaging in negotiations without precondition would provide opportunities to slow or roll back North Korea's nuclear program. Others have argued that past negotiations have been unsuccessful, and that the U.S. should refrain from dialogue until North Korea is serious about denuclearization.

Did all U.S. military personnel come home at the end of the Korean War?

No. 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.

Has North Korea's economy and society changed under Kim Jong-un?

Yes. Unlike his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un has not made a major effort to suppress market activities in North Korea. Under Kim Jong Un, residents of Pyongyang have become better off and are increasingly able to afford consumer goods, such as televisions and cell phones.

Conditions remain bleak in the countryside and in smaller cities, but food production has generally improved in recent years and malnutrition has declined. North Koreans' ability to access information and foreign media has also increased since Kim Jong Un took power, but punishment for dissent has remained extremely harsh.

What is the likelihood of the collapse of the DPRK regime?

Unlikely. For over two decades, experts and analysts have predicted the imminent collapse of the North Korean regime. After Kim Jong Un took power in late 2011, his youth and inexperience were pointed to as indicators of the imminent failure of the North Korean state.

However, evidence suggests that Kim has largely consolidated his authority and the North Korean economy has reportedly experienced modest growth under his tenure.

Are human rights issues within North Korea of concern to the U.S. government?

Yes. However, Congress has typically been more active than the White House on this issue. The North Korean Human Rights Act, first passed in 2004, has been renewed several times. The recent North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act contained provisions mandating that North Korean human rights abusers be sanctioned. The Obama Administration encouraged the launch of the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korean human rights, and earlier this year designated North Korea's Leader, Kim Jong Un, for human rights abuses against the North Korean people.

Are some U.S. nongovernmental organizations still operating inside North Korea?

Yes. The few remaining American private organizations working in North Korea are largely focused on humanitarian and health-related projects. For example, multi-drug resistant tuberculosis and hepatitis B, which know no border, are now major health threats in North Korea.

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Keith Luse, Executive Director
1111 19th Street, NW, Suite 650
Washington, D.C. 20036