

North Korea Primer : Understanding The Political, Social and Economical History

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I. ABSTRACT



Image 1: North Korea political map¹

North Korea is one of the most secretive and authoritarian regimes in the world, governed by the Kim family's dynastic dictatorship. This paper critically examines the country's rigid political structure, surveillance apparatus, economic stagnation, and the ideological dominance of Juche. It explores how the regime sustains control through propaganda, fear, and information suppression while navigating external pressures such as international sanctions and diplomatic isolation. The study also analyzes North Korea's nuclear ambitions and its complex relations with global powers including the United States, China, South Korea, and India. Despite signs of resistance through black markets and limited foreign influence, the path to reform remains uncertain. This paper argues that sustained international engagement, paired with strategic diplomacy, may offer avenues for gradual transformation.

¹ [Britannica](#)

Keywords : North Korea, authoritarianism, Juche ideology, international diplomacy, nuclear politics

II. INTRODUCTION

A. Demographics and Geography of North Korea

1. Population and Ethnic Composition

Category	Details
Total Population	26,547,624 ²
Global Population Share	0.32% ³
Global Population Rank	56th ⁴
Annual Growth Rate in 2024	0.31% ⁵
Population Increase (From 2023)	+80,619 ⁶
Urban Population	62.9% (~16.67 million) ⁷
Rural Population	37.1% (~9.87 million) ⁸
Largest City	Pyongyang ⁹
Median Age	36.3 years ¹⁰
Fertility Rate	1.78 children per woman ¹¹
Population Density	221 people per sq. km ¹²
Life Expectancy	73.74 years (Men: 70.4, Women: 74.5) ¹³
Infant Mortality Rate	13.3 deaths per 1,000 live births ¹⁴
Ethnic Composition	Predominantly Korean (Highly Homogeneous) ¹⁵
Minority communities	Small Chinese & Japanese populations ¹⁶
Immigration Policy	Strict, maintaining national purity ¹⁷

Table 1: Population and Ethnic Composition of North Korea (March 2025)

² [Worldometer,2025](#)

³ [Worldometer,2025](#)

⁴ [Worldometer,2025](#)

⁵ [Macrotrends,2024](#)

⁶ [Macrotrends,2024](#)

⁷ [CIA World Factbook, 2024](#)

⁸ [CIA World Factbook, 2024](#)

⁹ [CIA World Factbook,2024](#)

¹⁰ [CIA World Factbook, 2024](#)

¹¹ [CIA World Factbook,2024](#)

¹² [Worldometer, 2025](#)

¹³ [WHO,2024](#)

¹⁴ [WHO,2024](#)

¹⁵ [CIA World Factbook,2024](#)

¹⁶ [CIA World Factbook,2024](#)

¹⁷ [CIA World Factbook,2024](#)

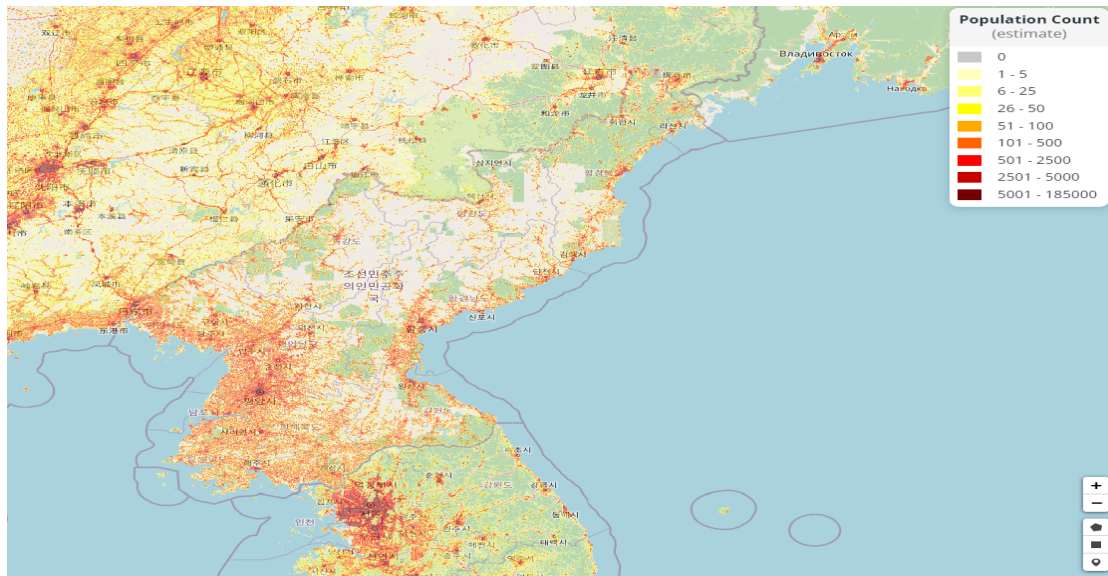


Image 2: Population Density of North Korea¹⁸

2. Geographic Overview

Geographic features	Details
Total Area	120,540 sq. km (Slightly smaller than Mississippi, USA) ¹⁹
Borders	China (1,352 km), South Korea (238 km), Russia (17 km) ²⁰
Key Rivers	Yalu River (China-North Korea border), Tumen River (North Korea-Russia border) ²¹
Mountainous Terrain	~80% of land covered by mountains, steep hills, and highlands ²²
Major Agricultural Plain	Pyongyang Plain (Main farming region for rice and corn) ²³
Kaema Plateau	"Roof of Korea" - high altitude, extreme climate, rocky soil ²⁴
Economic & Strategic Importance	Rivers shape trade, mountains provide isolation and defense, plains support limited farming ²⁵

Table 2: Geographic Overview of North Korea

¹⁸ [Wikimedia Commons](#)

¹⁹ [CIA World Factbook, 2024](#)

²⁰ [World Atlas, 2024](#)

²¹ [Britannica, 2024](#)

²² [Library of Congress, 2024](#)

²³ [FAO, 2023](#)

²⁴ [National Geographic, 2023](#)

²⁵ [World Bank, 2024](#)

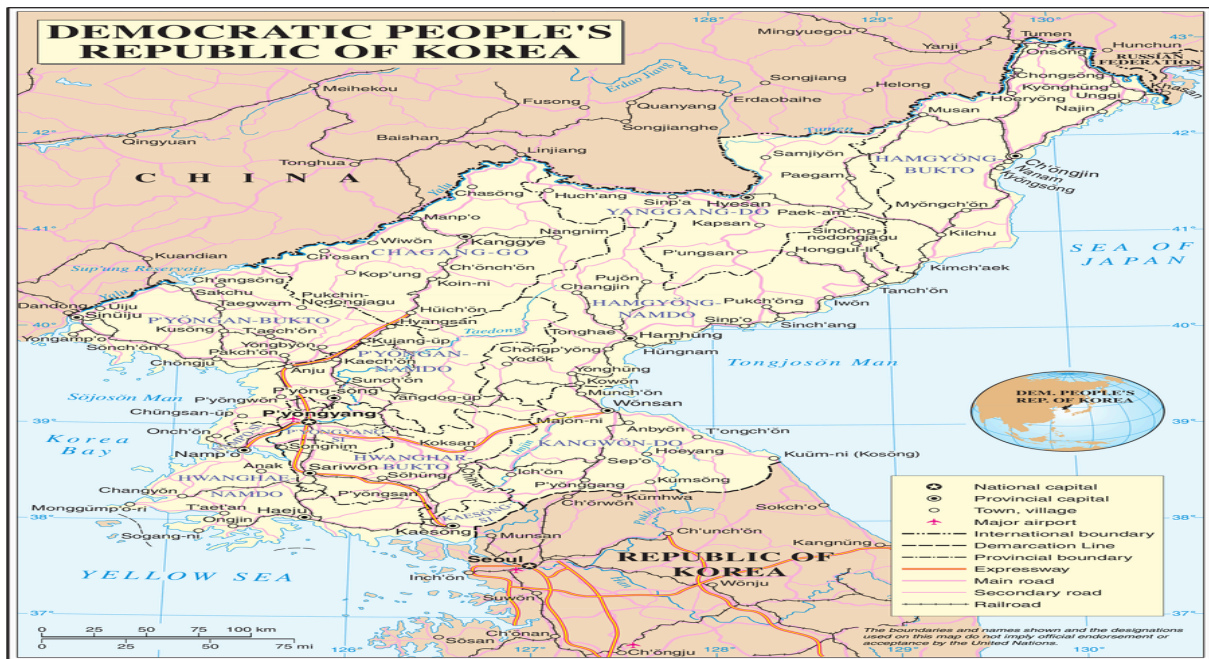


Image 3: Geography of North Korea²⁶

B. Climate and Environmental Factors

North Korea's continental climate is characterized by harsh winters and warm summers. In Pyongyang, winter temperatures can plummet to -13°C (8°F), accompanied by biting winds and heavy frost, while summer temperatures often exceed 30°C (86°F), resulting in hot and humid conditions. Over the past century, the country has experienced a significant warming trend. Between 1918 and 2000, average temperatures increased by 1.9°C , with winter temperatures rising by an average of 4.9°C and spring temperatures by 2.4°C . These climatic changes have profound implications for North Korea's agriculture-based economy. The nation has faced severe food shortages exacerbated by climate change and natural disasters. Recent flooding along its border with China has caused significant agricultural damage, further straining food production. Despite efforts to improve agricultural productivity, many citizens do not receive the minimum required rations, leading to increased reliance on unofficial imports and aid from neighboring countries.²⁷

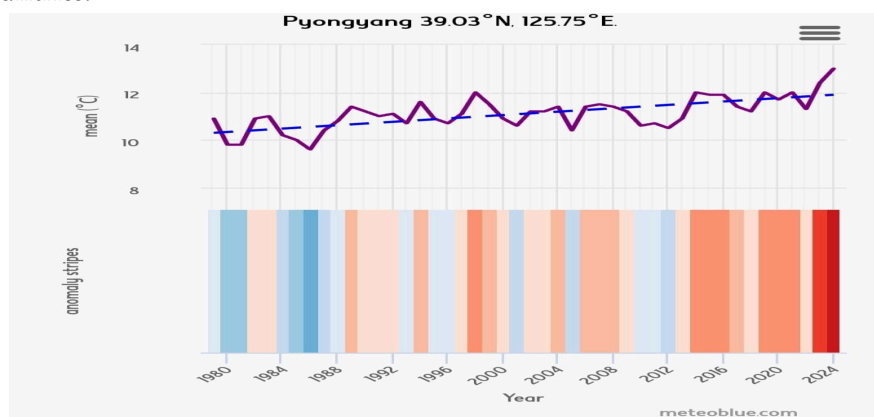


Image 4: Yearly Temperature Change in Pyongyang²⁸

²⁶ [Wikipedia](#)

²⁷ [Le Monde, August, 2024](#)

²⁸ [Meteoblue](#)

Compounding these challenges is the rapid decline in forest cover. Once covering approximately 70% of the country in 1990, North Korea's forests have diminished significantly due to logging, land conversion for farming, and fuelwood collection. This deforestation exacerbates environmental issues, increasing flood risks, leading to soil erosion, and reducing the limited arable land. Consequently, the nation faces a vicious cycle where deforestation worsens flooding, which then harms agriculture, further threatening food security and exacerbating existing economic hardships. Addressing these environmental challenges is crucial for North Korea's survival. Implementing sustainable land management and reforestation efforts is essential to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, protect agricultural systems, and ensure food security for its population.

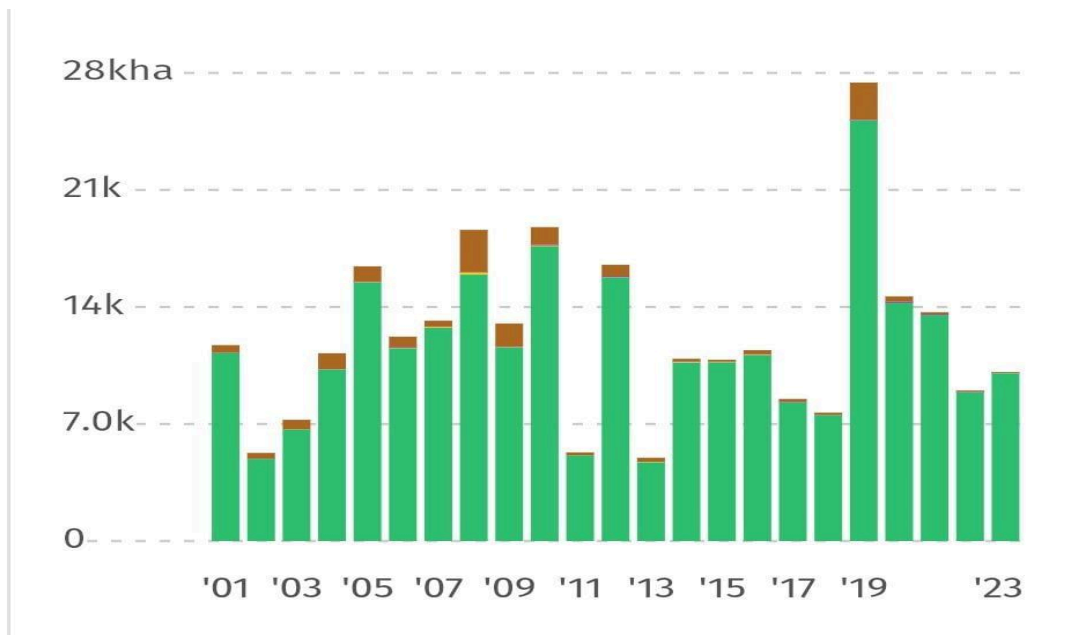


Image 5: Annual Tree Cover Loss By Dominant Driver In North Korea²⁹

C. Major Cities and Regions

Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, is home to approximately 3 million people and stands at the heart of the nation's political, economic, and cultural life³⁰. It is not just the seat of power for the ruling elite but also a carefully curated symbol of the regime's strength and modernity. Wide boulevards, towering monuments, and state-approved infrastructure projects present a controlled image of progress though this reality is often far removed from the daily struggles faced by ordinary citizens. Beyond Pyongyang, several other cities play critical roles in shaping North Korea's economy and infrastructure:

²⁹ [Global Forest Watch](#)

³⁰ [Amnesty International, 2024](#)

City	Population	Significance	Key Industries & Role	Challenges
Hamhung ³¹	~ 700,000	Major Industrial Centre	Chemical and textile industries, heavy manufacturing	Outdated facilities, limited resources
Chongjin ³²	~600,000	Key port city	Trade gateway with China, maritime commerce	Strict state control, trade benefits regime over local population
Nampo ³³	~400,000	Trade & industrial hub	Hosts North Korea's main seaport, supports self-reliance through exports	Restricted foreign trade, outdated infrastructure
Wonsan ³⁴	~360,000	Strategic military & tourism center	Military presence, promoted as a luxury tourist destination	Propaganda-driven projects, unfinished developments

Table 3: Cities in North Korea: Population, Economic Roles, and Challenges

While Pyongyang remains the most developed and tightly controlled urban center, these cities collectively form the backbone of North Korea's industrial and economic landscape. Each city serves a specific purpose be it industrial production, trade, or military strategy reflecting how North Korea's urban planning is deeply intertwined with the regime's political and economic goals. Yet, beneath these structured roles lies a harsh truth: development is far from evenly spread. Pyongyang shines as a showcase city, while others grapple with aging infrastructure, limited resources, and strict surveillance, a reminder that North Korea's urban landscape is as much about control and image as it is about functionality.



Image 6: Major Cities In North Korea³⁵

³¹ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

³² [Le Monde, 2024](#)

³³ [World Bank, 2023](#)

³⁴ [Amnesty International, 2024](#)

³⁵ [Cia.gov](#)

D. Religious Landscape

North Korea is officially an atheist state, where the government enforces strict restrictions on religious practices and views any form of independent faith as a potential threat to state authority. While the country's past was shaped by spiritual traditions like Buddhism and Confucianism, these practices have largely faded under decades of state control, reduced to cultural symbols rather than active belief systems. Christianity, once more prominent in Korea's history, now exists in secret. Due to intense persecution by the regime, it is estimated that between 10,000 to 30,000 Christians continue to worship in underground churches, hidden gatherings where faith is practiced at great personal risk. Being caught with a Bible or attending a clandestine prayer meeting can result in harsh punishment, including imprisonment in labor camps. Though Buddhism still maintains a presence, it functions under the heavy oversight of the government. Monks and temples are closely monitored, and religious activities are allowed only when they align with state ideology, often staged for propaganda purposes to create an illusion of religious tolerance³⁶.

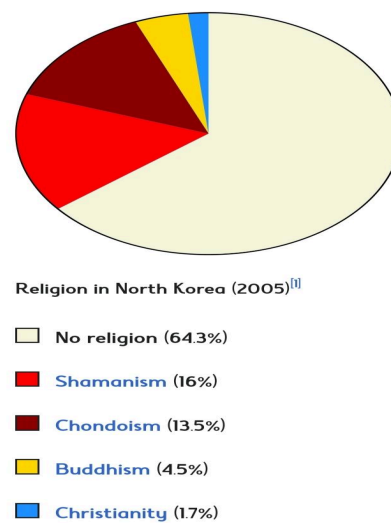


Image 7: Religion in North Korea 2005³⁷

At the core of North Korea's ideological landscape is Juche, a state-crafted philosophy introduced by Kim Il-sung that emphasizes political independence, economic self-sufficiency, and military autonomy. While it is framed as a doctrine of self-reliance, Juche operates more deeply as a quasi-religious belief system that demands absolute loyalty to the ruling Kim dynasty. It replaces traditional religious and moral frameworks with an unwavering commitment to the state and its leaders. More than just an ideology, Juche dictates social behavior, cultural norms, and national identity, casting the leadership as near-divine figures. Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un are portrayed not only as political leaders but as paternal guardians of the nation, evoking a level of reverence that mirrors religious worship. According to Amnesty International (2024)³⁸ and visual data, religious diversity in North Korea is practically non-existent. The overwhelming dominance of Juche has marginalized traditional faiths, leaving small pockets of believers to practice in secrecy or under state surveillance. Ultimately, faith in North Korea is not just a personal matter—it is a political statement. Any form of belief that strays from the state's teachings is seen as an act of defiance. As a result, religion has been pushed into the shadows, while Juche stands as the regime's unchallenged "faith," reinforcing its control over both hearts and minds.

³⁶ [Amnesty International, 2024](#)

³⁷ [Wikipedia](#)

³⁸ [Amnesty International, 2024](#)

E. Language Diversity

The official language of North Korea is Korean, with the Pyongyang dialect serving as the national standard for communication. Unlike in South Korea, where the language has evolved by adopting numerous foreign loanwords, especially from English. North Korea has taken a starkly different approach. The regime has deliberately purged foreign influences from its vocabulary, promoting what it calls linguistic purity. This effort aligns with the state's broader ideology of self-reliance (Juche), reinforcing the notion that even language must reflect national independence and loyalty to the regime. Everyday speech in North Korea is not just a means of communication but a tool of control. The state carefully curates the language used in schools, media, and propaganda to ensure it reflects the party's ideology. Words and phrases linked to Western or capitalist ideas are often replaced with state-approved alternatives, creating a linguistic barrier that further isolates North Koreans from outside influences.³⁹

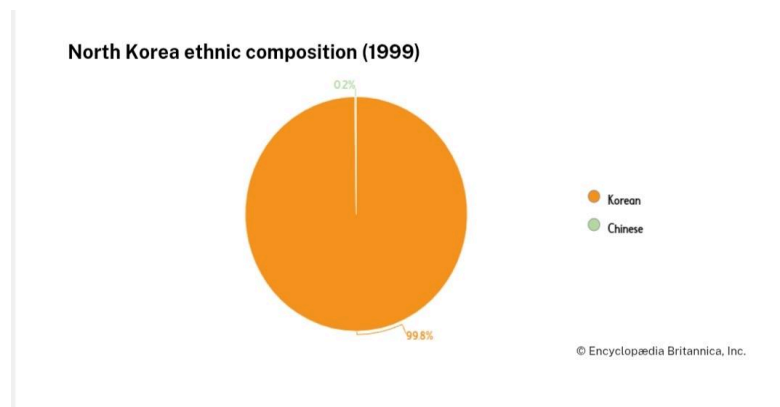


Image 8: North Korea Ethnic Composition (1999)⁴⁰

Despite the country's strong emphasis on ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, small minority communities which are primarily Chinese and Russian still exist. However, these groups, like the broader population, predominantly speak Korean in daily life. The use of their native languages is limited, as the regime prioritizes a unified national identity over cultural diversity. According to Foreign Affairs (2024)⁴¹ and the accompanying chart, this strict control over language highlights North Korea's desire to maintain an isolated national identity, not only through its borders but through its words. Language, in this context, is not just about preserving heritage; it is about preserving loyalty. Ultimately, in North Korea, language serves as more than a means of expression, it becomes a political tool, carefully shaped to reflect the regime's ideology and reinforce its control over both communication and thought.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. The Korean Peninsula: A Divided History

The history of the Korean Peninsula is a story of both unity and division, shaped by a complex mix of internal struggles and external pressures. For centuries, Korea existed as a unified kingdom, preserving its distinct language, culture, and political systems despite the influence of its powerful neighbor, China⁴². This unity, however, was violently disrupted in the early 20th century when Japanese colonial rule took hold,

³⁹ [Foreign Affairs, 2024](#)

⁴⁰ [Britannica](#)

⁴¹ [Foreign Affairs, 2024](#)

⁴² [Worden, 2008](#)

fundamentally altering the course of Korean history. Japan's colonization of Korea, formalized in 1910, was marked by the systematic suppression of Korean identity. The regime imposed its language, banned traditional Korean cultural practices, and forced Koreans to adopt Japanese names. Meanwhile, Korea's natural resources and labor were exploited to fuel Japan's imperial ambitions⁴³. This period of imperial domination not only left deep economic and cultural scars but also ignited a spirit of resistance but gave rise to both nationalist and communist movements that would shape the peninsula's future⁴⁴.



Image 9: Map of the Korean peninsula including North and South Korea⁴⁵

The end of World War II in 1945 did not bring about Korean independence, but rather, a new form of division, this time drawn by Cold War geopolitics. With Japan's defeat, the United States and the Soviet Union divided the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel, an arbitrary line that ignored the will of the Korean people⁴⁶. The Soviet Union occupied the North, installing a communist regime led by Kim Il-sung, while the United States controlled the South, backing a pro-Western government under Syngman Rhee. What was meant to be a temporary division quickly hardened into a permanent political split as Cold War tensions escalated. The North, influenced by Soviet communism, pushed for a centralized, state-controlled system, while the South aligned itself with Western democratic ideals setting the stage for decades of hostility and mistrust⁴⁷. Ultimately, the division of Korea was not born from internal conflict but from the competing agendas of global superpowers. It transformed the peninsula into a symbol of Cold War rivalry with North and South Korea evolving into two vastly different nations, each shaped by the ideologies of their respective allies.

B. Establishment of North Korea

1. Japanese Colonial Rule (1910–1945)

The period of Japanese colonial rule over Korea from 1910 to 1945 was marked by severe repression and exploitation. For 35 years, the Japanese authorities imposed harsh policies aimed at systematically erasing Korean culture and replacing it with their own. The Korean language was banned in schools, traditional

⁴³ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁴⁴ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

⁴⁵ [History.com](#)

⁴⁶ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁴⁷ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

customs were suppressed, and Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names, all part of a larger effort to enforce cultural assimilation and strip the Korean people of their national identity⁴⁸. Beyond cultural repression, the colonial regime subjected Koreans to forced labor. Thousands were conscripted to work in factories, mines, and military projects both in Korea and across Japan's expanding empire. This exploitation intensified during World War II, as Japan's war effort demanded even more resources and manpower, pushing many Koreans into grueling conditions with little regard for their well-being⁴⁹. Amid this climate of oppression, resistance movements emerged, driven by both nationalist and communist forces determined to reclaim Korea's sovereignty. These movements ranged from organized protests to underground guerrilla warfare, with leaders rising from various ideological backgrounds. One figure who gained particular prominence was Kim Il-sung, the man who would later become North Korea's founding leader. Kim Il-sung's reputation was built during his time as a guerrilla fighter in Manchuria, where he led armed resistance against Japanese forces. His defiance against imperial rule became a cornerstone of North Korea's revolutionary narrative. The regime later portrayed him not just as a soldier, but as the "savior" of the Korean people, a heroic figure who liberated the nation from colonial oppression and laid the foundation for a self-reliant, independent state⁵⁰. This carefully crafted image of Kim Il-sung as an anti-imperialist warrior continues to serve the North Korean regime's propaganda, reinforcing the idea that its legitimacy is rooted in a long-standing struggle against foreign domination. Ultimately, the legacy of Japanese colonialism left deep scars on the Korean Peninsula. It not only devastated Korea's cultural and economic fabric but also planted the seeds of future political division, as resistance leaders, shaped by their battle against imperialism, went on to lead the two Koreas down very different paths.

2. Liberation and Division (1945–1948)

In 1945, the end of World War II brought both hope and heartbreak to the Korean Peninsula. After 35 years of harsh Japanese colonial rule, Koreans rejoiced at their long-awaited liberation. However, their freedom came with an unexpected cost, a sudden division of their homeland. The United States and the Soviet Union, emerging as global superpowers locked in Cold War rivalry, agreed to split Korea along the 38th parallel. Initially intended as a temporary measure to disarm Japanese forces, this division quickly hardened into a permanent political split due to rising ideological tensions between the two powers⁵¹. In the North, the Soviets backed Kim Il-sung, a fierce anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter and a committed communist. With Soviet support, Kim consolidated his power by eliminating rival factions and securing his position as the leader of the newly formed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948⁵². Meanwhile, in the South, Syngman Rhee emerged as the face of the Republic of Korea (ROK). Supported by the United States, Rhee was a vocal anti-communist who sought to align South Korea with Western democratic values. His government, formally established in 1948, stood in direct opposition to Kim's regime⁵³. Both Kim and Rhee claimed to be the legitimate ruler of the entire Korean Peninsula. Their clashing ambitions, fueled by Cold War politics, turned the 38th parallel into more than just a border, it became a fault line of ideology, dividing families, communities, and a nation. By 1948, the division of Korea was no longer just a geopolitical arrangement; it was a deeply entrenched reality. The peninsula stood fractured, a painful symbol of the broader global struggle between

⁴⁸ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁴⁹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁵⁰ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁵¹ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁵² [Chadwick, 2002](#)

⁵³ [Worden, 2008](#)

communism and capitalism, setting the stage for the bloody conflict that would erupt just two years later⁵⁴.

3. Korean War (1950–1953)

In the early hours of June 25, 1950, the silence along the 38th parallel shattered as North Korean troops, backed by the Soviet Union and later China, surged into South Korea. What began as a bid to unify the peninsula under communist rule swiftly spiraled into a full-blown war, a conflict not just between two Koreas, but between two competing ideologies⁵⁵. Kim Il-sung, the leader of North Korea, believed that the South's U.S.-supported regime under Syngman Rhee was fragile and lacked public support. Confident that a quick victory was within reach, Kim sought and secured Stalin's hesitant approval before launching the invasion, a gamble that would turn the Korean Peninsula into a Cold War flashpoint⁵⁶. The United States, viewing the attack as a dangerous communist expansion, swiftly intervened, leading a United Nations coalition to defend South Korea. The war took a brutal turn when China entered the fray, sending waves of troops to push back U.S. and South Korean forces, further entrenching the conflict⁵⁷.



Image 10: Korean War, June–August 1950⁵⁸

For ordinary Koreans, the war was nothing short of catastrophic. Cities were reduced to rubble, families were torn apart, and millions of civilians lost their lives. The once-vivid dream of a unified Korea faded beneath the smoke of bombed-out towns and the unyielding lines of battle. By 1953, after three years of relentless fighting, the war ground to a bloody stalemate. An armistice was signed, creating the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a heavily fortified strip of land that still divides North and South Korea today⁵⁹. But this was no peace treaty. The two Koreas technically remain at war, their unresolved conflict a haunting reminder of the Cold War's enduring scars. For Kim Il-sung, the war wasn't just about territorial conquest, it became a tool of political survival. He framed North Korea's struggle as a heroic stand against imperialist forces, weaving the narrative of resistance into the very fabric of the state's identity. This portrayal of defiance against foreign aggression still fuels North Korea's propaganda machine to this day⁶⁰.

⁵⁴ [McEachern, 2009](#)

⁵⁵ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁵⁶ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁵⁷ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

⁵⁸ [Britannica](#)

⁵⁹ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁶⁰ [McEachern, 2009](#)

C. Post-War Reconstruction and Kim Il-sung's Rise

The end of the Korean War in 1953 left North Korea in ruins, cities reduced to rubble, infrastructure shattered, and a population struggling to survive. Yet, from the ashes of this devastation, Kim Il-sung emerged not just as a leader but as the unchallenged architect of a new North Korean identity. With heavy aid from the Soviet Union and China, North Korea launched an aggressive reconstruction effort, focusing on rapid industrialization and military strengthening⁶¹. Factories sprang up, steel production surged, and Kim promised his people a future built on self-reliance and strength. For a brief period in the 1950s and 60s, the North's economy even outpaced the South's, a fact Kim wielded as proof of communism's superiority, though much of this growth was propped up by Soviet and Chinese support⁶². But Kim's vision for North Korea extended far beyond economic recovery; it was about cementing his absolute authority. Within the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), he systematically eliminated rivals, ensuring no one could challenge his rule. Those who opposed him disappeared from public life, often meeting grim fates behind closed doors⁶³.

At the heart of Kim's grip on power was Juche, a political ideology he crafted that championed national self-reliance in politics, economics, and defense. On the surface, Juche appeared to celebrate independence, portraying North Korea as a nation that needed no help from foreign powers. In reality, it became a tool to justify the regime's isolationist policies and strengthen Kim's cult of personality. The message was clear: the North Korean people must rely solely on their "Great Leader" for guidance, protection, and prosperity⁶⁴. Propaganda reinforced this narrative, painting Kim as the heroic figure who had liberated Korea from Japanese colonial rule and stood firm against Western imperialism. His image loomed over every aspect of life as in classrooms, on billboards, and in mass rallies, solidifying his godlike status in the national psyche⁶⁵.

Beneath the surface of progress lay a darker reality. Kim Il-sung's authoritarian rule relied as much on fear as it did on loyalty. The regime constructed an extensive surveillance state, embedding informants into everyday life- neighbors, colleagues, and even family members could secretly report signs of dissent. The system of *yeon-jwa-je*, or "guilt by association," ensured that punishment extended beyond the individual, often resulting in entire families being sent to forced labor camps for the perceived crimes of a single member⁶⁶. Through a calculated blend of propaganda, repression, and selectively orchestrated economic initiatives, Kim Il-sung did more than rebuild a war-torn nation- he reshaped it in his own image. The North Korean state became an extension of Kim himself, with his ideology, authority, and legacy embedded into the very foundation of national identity.

D. From History to Contemporary North Korea

Kim Il-sung's rule didn't just shape North Korea's early years but it laid the foundation for a dynasty that would grip the nation for generations. When he died in 1994, his son Kim Jong-il seamlessly stepped into power, not through democratic transition, but through the machinery of a carefully cultivated personality cult. The image of Kim Il-sung as the "Eternal President" lingered, while Kim Jong-il positioned himself as the rightful heir, reinforcing the Juche ideology of self-reliance and painting his family's rule as inseparable

⁶¹ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁶² [Noland, 1997](#)

⁶³ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁶⁴ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁶⁵ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁶⁶ [Worden, 2008](#)

from the nation's survival⁶⁷. However, Kim Jong-il's reign unfolded against a backdrop of immense hardship. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s . North Korea's primary economic lifeline sent shockwaves through the country. Without Soviet aid, the nation's fragile, state-controlled economy spiraled into crisis, leading to a devastating famine known as the Arduous March. Between 1994 and 1998, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of North Koreans, died from starvation⁶⁸.

While people scavenged for food and black markets quietly took root, Kim Jong-il clung to power, pouring what little resources North Korea had into its military under the Songun or "Military First" policy. His regime justified this militarization by portraying the outside world, especially the United States and South Korea as ever-looming threats to North Korea's sovereignty. The narrative was clear: the Kim family alone could protect the nation from foreign enemies⁶⁹. In 2011, the leadership baton passed once again this time to Kim Jong-un, Kim Il-sung's grandson. Young and relatively unknown, Kim Jong-un quickly asserted his authority through a brutal mix of public purges, military displays, and an intensified focus on nuclear weapons development. His regime accelerated North Korea's nuclear program, conducting missile tests and framing nuclear strength as a necessary shield against Western aggression⁷⁰. Despite brief moments of diplomacy such as his historic summits with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Donald Trump between 2018 and 2019 Kim Jong-un's North Korea remains one of the most isolated and repressive regimes in the world. These diplomatic gestures, often portrayed in state media as victories over imperialist forces, did little to ease the country's economic woes or loosen the regime's grip on its people.

Today, the Kim dynasty endures, sustained by a toxic blend of military might, relentless propaganda, and an unwavering narrative of resistance. The state's ideology frames the ruling family not as mere political leaders but as guardians of the nation's very existence, a dynasty bound to the fate of North Korea itself⁷¹. For the people of North Korea, this means life under a regime where loyalty is mandatory, dissent is dangerous, and the future remains uncertain, locked in the shadow of a family that has ruled for over seven decades.

IV. POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

North Korea's political landscape today is like a fortress tightly controlled, deeply secretive, and centered entirely on the unyielding authority of the Kim dynasty. At its core lies an intricate system of power, bound together by Juche ideology, military dominance, and an all-seeing surveillance state. Kim Jong-un, the third ruler in the Kim family line, has continued his ancestors' legacy of authoritarian control. Since taking power in 2011, he has not only preserved North Korea's isolationist stance but sharpened it using nuclear weapons not just as a defense mechanism, but as a powerful bargaining chip in international diplomacy. Every missile test, every military parade, is carefully staged to remind the world that North Korea will not be ignored⁷².

At the heart of this political machinery is the Korean Workers' Party (WPK), the regime's most important tool of governance. Though it presents itself as a party of the people, the WPK is, in reality, an extension of Kim's will. It controls every aspect of life from education and the media to the economy ensuring that loyalty to Kim is synonymous with loyalty to the nation itself. Over time, Kim has skillfully balanced totalitarian rule with what some experts call collective authoritarianism a system where a small circle of elites holds influence, but only as

⁶⁷ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁶⁸ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁶⁹ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁷⁰ [McEachern, 2009](#)

⁷¹ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁷² [McEachern, 2009](#)

long as they remain fiercely loyal to him⁷³. Juche, the state's official ideology, continues to serve as both a philosophy and a political weapon. Originally crafted by Kim Il-sung to emphasize self-reliance, it has since evolved into a tool to justify North Korea's isolation. The regime portrays itself as a lone warrior, bravely standing against foreign "imperialists", a narrative used to rally citizens around the Kim family, casting their rule as essential to the nation's survival⁷⁴.

Yet beneath the surface of this iron grip lies a delicate balancing act. Kim Jong-un relies on fear of public executions, purges of disloyal officials, and constant surveillance to keep his inner circle in check. The songbun system, a hereditary social classification, ensures that a person's access to jobs, food, and even education depends entirely on their family's perceived loyalty to the regime⁷⁵. But fear alone is not enough. Kim also works to project strength, parading missile launches on state television and framing diplomatic summits with global leaders as personal victories. Each show of military might reinforces his image as the protector of North Korea against a hostile world. Ultimately, North Korea's political landscape under Kim Jong-un is a careful blend of old and new. The fear-driven, tightly controlled state built by Kim Il-sung remains intact, but Kim Jong-un has added his own signature using military strength not just for defense, but as a strategic weapon in global diplomacy. His rule rests on a fragile but effective mix of propaganda, fear, and the unyielding narrative that without the Kim family, there is no North Korea⁷⁶.

A. Juche Ideology: The Illusion of Self-Reliance

At the heart of North Korea's political identity lies Juche, an ideology first introduced by Kim Il-sung in the 1950s. Though often translated as "self-reliance," Juche is far more than a call for economic independence. It is a sweeping political doctrine that emphasizes national sovereignty, ideological purity, and, most importantly, unwavering loyalty to the Supreme Leader⁷⁷. On the surface, Juche paints North Korea as a fiercely independent nation, one that thrives without foreign influence and carves its own path. Kim Il-sung framed it as a bold response to both Western imperialism and Soviet control, positioning North Korea as a state that owed nothing to anyone, proudly charting its own destiny⁷⁸. But in practice, Juche has become a weaponized ideology, a tool used not to empower the people, but to tighten the regime's grip. It justifies North Korea's isolationist policies, framing the country's economic struggles and diplomatic alienation as noble sacrifices in the name of self-sufficiency. Under Kim Jong-un, Juche has evolved further. It is no longer simply about national independence, it is about reinforcing the belief that the Kim family is the sole guardian of North Korea's sovereignty. The message is clear: without the Kims, the nation cannot stand⁷⁹.

For ordinary North Koreans, Juche is not some distant political theory, it governs their daily lives. It is taught in schools, woven into every textbook and classroom discussion. Children grow up learning that their hardships, whether food shortages, power outages, or lack of basic goods are not failures of leadership but patriotic tests of endurance. When crops fail or blackouts darken entire cities, the state's propaganda machine works overtime, framing these crises as heroic struggles against foreign "enemies." The blame never falls on Kim Jong-un's leadership; it is always the fault of external forces plotting to undermine North Korea's independence⁸⁰. This twisting of Juche transforms suffering into a symbol of patriotism. Starvation

⁷³ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁷⁴ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁷⁵ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁷⁶ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁷⁷ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁷⁸ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁷⁹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁸⁰ [Lankov, 2013](#)

becomes proof of loyalty. Isolation becomes a badge of honor. The very people who bear the brunt of the regime's policies are told their pain is a necessary price for defending the nation's freedom, a cruel irony that deepens the regime's control. Ultimately, Juche is more than just an ideology in North Korea, it is the regime's lifeline. It cements the belief that the Kim dynasty is not just leading the nation but embodying it. To question the leader is to question the very existence of North Korea, a dangerous thought in a land where loyalty is not optional, and survival often depends on blind obedience.

B. Leadership and Governance: The Role of the Kim Dynasty

The Kim dynasty is more than a political family, it is the unshakable foundation of North Korea's identity. For over seven decades, the Kims have ruled not just through official titles but through a carefully crafted personality cult, intertwining their authority with the very existence of the state. Challenging the Kim family's rule is synonymous with questioning North Korea's very existence, an act that few dare to commit. When Kim Jong-un rose to power in 2011 following the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, the world and even North Korea's inner circle doubted him. At just 27, Kim was seen as young and inexperienced, especially compared to the older, battle-hardened elites who had served under his father and grandfather. Many wondered whether he could hold the same iron grip on the country as his predecessors⁸¹.

But Kim wasted no time in proving his ruthlessness. The most shocking display of his authority came in 2013 with the execution of his once-powerful uncle, Jang Song-thaek, a figure who had long been considered the regime's second-in-command. Jang was accused of treason and corruption, but his real crime was likely his growing influence and rumored dissent. By having Jang publicly purged a rare and brutal move Kim sent an unmistakable message: loyalty to him was non-negotiable, even for family members⁸². Since then, Kim has ruled with a blend of fear and calculated visibility. Unlike his father, who often preferred to rule from the shadows, Kim Jong-un has embraced a more public image. He is frequently seen overseeing missile launches, inspecting military bases, and touring factories, all meticulously staged moments designed to present him as a strong, hands-on leader, defending North Korea against ever-present foreign "threats"⁸³. Each military parade and weapons test is not just a show of strength to the outside world but a reminder to his people and his inner circle that he alone commands the nation's fate.

Yet Kim's rule is not just authoritarian; it is dynastic. The Kim family is portrayed as North Korea's eternal guardians, a bloodline chosen to shield the country from imperialist forces. State propaganda refers to Kim Jong-un as the "Great Successor", reinforcing the idea that North Korea's survival hinges entirely on the Kim family's continued rule. His leadership is framed as both a continuation of his grandfather's revolutionary legacy and a necessary force to secure the nation's future⁸⁴. Ultimately, Kim Jong-un has solidified his grip on power by fusing fear with symbolism. His reign rests on the belief that without the Kim dynasty, there is no North Korea. This narrative, relentlessly pushed by state propaganda, ensures that the people do not see Kim as merely a ruler, they see him as the living embodiment of their nation.

C. The Role of the Korean Workers' Party (WPK)

The Korean Workers' Party (WPK) stands at the heart of North Korea's political system, not just as a ruling party but as an extension of Kim Jong-un's authority. While it once emerged as a platform for communist

⁸¹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁸² [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁸³ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁸⁴ [Worden, 2008](#)

governance, the WPK has long since transformed into a tool for solidifying the Kim family's hold on power. Under Kim Jong-un, the party has regained its central role after his father, Kim Jong-il, had tilted influence toward the military through the Songun policy. The 7th Party Congress in 2016 the first since 1980 and the 8th Congress in 2021 were meticulously choreographed events. These gatherings weren't about genuine political debate but were grand spectacles designed to reaffirm Kim's leadership and showcase the Byungjin policy: a dual-track strategy of advancing nuclear weapons while promising economic growth⁸⁵.

However, the WPK's true power lies not in policymaking but in controlling minds. It commands the country's propaganda machinery, shaping education, art, and media to glorify the Kim dynasty. In North Korean classrooms, children are taught that loving Kim is the same as loving their country. Their loyalty to the leader is inseparable from their national pride. State-run news outlets blame every economic struggle on foreign sanctions and Western conspiracies, ensuring public anger never turns inward⁸⁶. Ultimately, the WPK functions less like a governing body and more like an instrument of Kim's will, a constant reminder that the party and the leader are not two entities but one and the same.

D. Totalitarian Government and Surveillance State

Life in North Korea unfolds under the unrelenting gaze of the state. The government's control seeps into every corner of daily life from the workplace to the classroom, and even within the privacy of one's home. At the heart of this surveillance apparatus is the Ministry of State Security, which plants informants everywhere, colleagues, neighbors, and sometimes even family members. The result is an atmosphere of constant fear, where a single offhand remark or a misplaced expression of doubt can lead to imprisonment or worse. A crucial part of this control is the songbun system, a rigid social classification structure that decides a person's fate based on their family's perceived loyalty to the regime. Every North Korean is placed into one of three main categories: the core class (trusted supporters of the Kim dynasty), the wavering class (those whose loyalty is questionable), and the hostile class (descendants of so-called "traitors," defectors, or former landowners)⁸⁷. This invisible label governs access to education, jobs, housing, and even food rations. For those in the "hostile" class, life is a grim reality marked by forced labor in kwanlison as prison camps where torture, starvation, and public executions are routine.

Under Kim Jong-un, this surveillance state has expanded into the digital realm. Biometric data is now collected at border checkpoints, and internet access is restricted to a tightly controlled intranet, ensuring that foreign information, a potential spark for dissent, never reaches the public⁸⁸. For the average North Korean, survival means more than just securing food or shelter; it means constantly performing loyalty, knowing that watchful eyes are always near.

E. Collective Authoritarianism: Loyalty and Elite Circles

Despite Kim Jong-un's portrayal as an all-powerful, unchallenged leader, his grip on North Korea is carefully maintained through a system of collective authoritarianism. While Kim holds the ultimate authority, his rule relies on a network of elite figures particularly within the Politburo and the Central Military Commission who help implement his policies and enforce state control. On the surface, this might seem like a form of shared governance, but in reality, it's a calculated strategy designed not to distribute power, but to secure

⁸⁵ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁸⁶ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁸⁷ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁸⁸ [Lankov, 2013](#)

unwavering loyalty from those around him. Kim binds these high-ranking officials to his regime by making them complicit in its most critical decisions from nuclear tests to economic strategies. Their loyalty is rewarded with privileges: luxury residences in Pyongyang, access to rare imported goods, and prestigious titles.

However, this system is not built solely on rewards; it is equally rooted in fear. Any hint of disloyalty is met with swift and brutal punishment. The 2013 execution of Jang Song-thaek Kim's once-powerful uncle sent shockwaves through the regime, reinforcing the message that blood ties do not guarantee immunity. Similarly, the 2018 purge of military leader Ri Yong-ho served as a chilling reminder that loyalty to Kim must be absolute, and even the most senior officials are not beyond his reach⁸⁹. This delicate balance of fear and favor keeps the elite tethered to Kim's survival. Their personal fates are inextricably linked to his, ensuring that their support stems not just from ideological devotion, but from self-preservation. For them, allegiance to Kim is not merely political, it is a matter of life and death.

F. Current Leadership and Ideological Direction

As of 2025, Kim Jong-un stands firmly at the helm of North Korea, holding titles like Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. His rule, though built on the foundation laid by his father and grandfather, has started to carve out a path of its own. While Juche the state's ideology of self-reliance remains central to his narrative, Kim is gradually shaping what some analysts are calling "Kimjongunism" a developing doctrine meant to set his leadership apart⁹⁰. It's more than just a nod to his predecessors; it's a clear attempt to build a legacy that reflects his unique vision for North Korea's future. A key element of this shift is Kim's focus on blending military strength with ideological loyalty. In a recent address to military leaders, he emphasized that "weapons without ideology are merely ironware" a powerful reminder that military might, in his view, is useless without unwavering dedication to the party's principles. This move signals more than just a desire for military dominance; it reveals Kim's broader strategy: to ensure that even the most potent institutions in the country remain ideologically bound to him⁹¹.

At the same time, there's been a noticeable change in how Kim is portrayed within North Korea. Recent reports suggest that he is now often referred to as "Great Comrade" a title that seems to soften his image without diluting his authority. This rebranding appears calculated, presenting him not only as a strong, decisive leader but also as a relatable figure, someone guiding the nation through its struggles and sacrifices. It's a subtle yet significant shift in an effort to humanize his rule while reinforcing his control. Ultimately, Kim's leadership today seems to balance the old and the new. He retains the fear-driven tactics of his father, ensuring loyalty through purges and public displays of power, but he's also carefully crafting an ideology that is distinctly his. The collective authoritarian system keeps the elite tethered to his regime, but Kim's push to develop his own doctrine shows that he's not content with merely inheriting power; he's determined to reshape it in his own image.

V. ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

North Korea's economy remains tightly bound by a rigid, state-controlled framework, where government policies dictate everything from food distribution to industrial production. Unlike most modern economies,

⁸⁹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁹⁰ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁹¹ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

which respond to supply and demand, North Korea's economic model is rooted in the Juche principle, an ideology of self-reliance that often translates into extreme economic isolation⁹². While Juche promises national independence, in practice, it has pushed the country further into poverty, as the regime resists foreign trade, investment, and market-driven reforms. This isolation, compounded by decades of international sanctions and internal mismanagement, has resulted in chronic shortages, widespread poverty, and economic stagnation. For the average North Korean, economic survival is an ongoing struggle. The once-reliable Public Distribution System (PDS), which provided state-rationed food, has steadily crumbled, forcing millions to seek alternatives. Many now rely on *jangmadang* as informal markets where smuggled goods, homegrown produce, and everyday essentials are traded. These black markets, though illegal, have become a lifeline, offering everything from rice to foreign electronics, revealing a quiet, underground rebellion against the state's economic grip⁹³.

North Korea's industrial sector, once the pride of its post-war rebuilding efforts, is also in decline. Mining and manufacturing two crucial industries operate with outdated technology and limited access to global markets, further squeezing the nation's financial stability⁹⁴. Factories run on obsolete machinery, and energy shortages cause frequent shutdowns. While the government boasts of self-sufficiency, the reality is one of decaying infrastructure and unfulfilled quotas. Despite these mounting hardships, the regime continues to prioritize military development over economic reform. Kim Jong-un's *Byungjin* policy, the simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic growth has overwhelmingly favored military spending, with vast sums directed toward nuclear programs and military infrastructure rather than food security or industrial modernization⁹⁵. This unwavering focus on defense over development has only deepened the economic crisis. However, cracks in the system are beginning to show. The growing influence of black markets, fluctuating border trade particularly with China and increasing external pressure have started to reshape North Korea's economic landscape. While Pyongyang insists on maintaining its command economy, ordinary citizens are quietly rewriting the rules, engaging in informal trade and building underground networks for survival. In many ways, these hidden markets reflect the people's resilience and unspoken defiance against a system that demands loyalty but offers little in return.

A. Famine: The Arduous March and Lingering Food Insecurity

One of the darkest chapters in North Korea's modern economic history unfolded during the Arduous March (1994–1998) a devastating famine that claimed the lives of an estimated 240,000 to 3.5 million people. This humanitarian disaster was not the result of a single cause but a brutal convergence of internal failures and external shocks. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dealt a heavy blow to North Korea's already fragile economy, severing vital aid and trade partnerships. Almost overnight, the country lost access to crucial imports of fuel, machinery, and agricultural supplies, leaving its farming sector crippled⁹⁶. As if the economic turmoil wasn't enough, nature struck mercilessly. Severe flooding in 1995 and 1996, followed by relentless droughts, ravaged the country's limited arable land, pushing food production into freefall⁹⁷. However, what turned a crisis into a catastrophe was the regime's refusal to open its borders to meaningful foreign aid. Guided by the Juche ideology which emphasizes self-reliance the government rejected large-scale humanitarian assistance, framing it as a threat to national sovereignty. Food distribution, managed through the Public Distribution System (PDS), collapsed under the weight of these combined pressures. Once a

⁹² [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁹³ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁹⁴ [Worden, 2008](#)

⁹⁵ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

⁹⁶ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

⁹⁷ [Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2023](#)

source of state-rationed food, the PDS could no longer provide for the population, leaving millions with no choice but to turn to *jangmadang*, informal markets where smuggled goods, homegrown produce, and other essentials were traded for survival. These black markets, born out of desperation, remain a crucial part of everyday life for ordinary North Koreans today⁹⁸.

The scars of the Arduous March still linger. Recent reports reveal that food insecurity in North Korea has once again reached alarming levels. According to a 2023 report by the World Food Programme (WFP), more than 10.7 million people over 40% of the population are undernourished. The situation has been worsened by ongoing natural disasters and the regime's continued resistance to accepting foreign aid⁹⁹. For many North Koreans, hunger is not just a memory, it is a present reality. The famine of the 1990s shattered the illusion of state-provided security, forcing people to carve out their own paths for survival. Today, as food shortages mount once again, it is the underground markets, not government handouts, that often stand between life and death.

B. Centralized Economic Policies: Command Economy and Resource Allocation

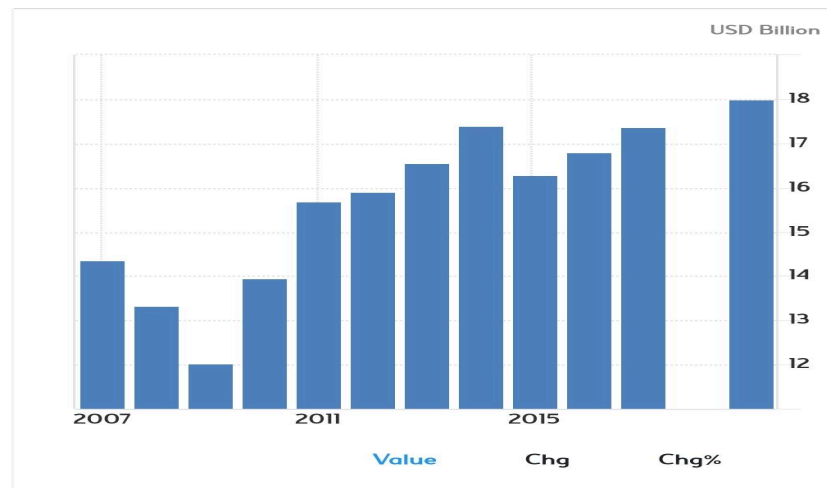


Image 11: North Korea GDP¹⁰⁰

North Korea's economy operates within the tight grip of a command economy, a system where the state owns all means of production and dictates economic priorities. Every factory, farm, and enterprise functions not in response to supply and demand, but according to government-mandated quotas. Economic planning is carried out through multi-year national plans, with the first Five-Year Plan introduced in 1957, focusing heavily on industrial growth particularly in steel, coal, and chemicals. These plans have remained firmly rooted in Juche ideology, emphasizing self-reliance over market reforms, even as the country's economic struggles have deepened¹⁰¹. Under Kim Jong-un, this state-centric model has been further shaped by the Byungjin policy, a dual strategy announced in 2013 that aims to simultaneously develop nuclear weapons and economic growth. In theory, Byungjin promised progress on both fronts, but in practice, the relentless push for military expansion has come at the cost of civilian industries. Funds that could have modernized agriculture, healthcare, and manufacturing have instead flowed into missile programs and military infrastructure, widening the gap between defense priorities and the people's basic needs.

⁹⁸ [Lankov, 2013](#)

⁹⁹ [WFP, 2023](#)

¹⁰⁰ [Trading Economics](#)

¹⁰¹ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

The rigidity of this central planning has bred severe inefficiencies. Factories often produce surplus goods that have little practical value while failing to manufacture essentials like food, medicine, and consumer goods. For instance, state-run plants may meet their steel production quotas, but shelves remain empty of basic necessities. This mismatch between production and demand reflects a system designed to serve political goals rather than the daily realities of its citizens. The economic strain has only worsened in recent years. According to a 2022 report by the Bank of Korea (South Korea), North Korea's GDP contracted by 0.1% in 2021, a continuation of its economic decline. The downturn has been fueled by a combination of strict border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the weight of international sanctions imposed in response to the regime's nuclear ambitions. With trade especially with China severely restricted, North Korea's already isolated economy has been pushed further into stagnation. Ultimately, North Korea's centralized economic model remains a system of contradictions: it preaches self-sufficiency but relies on covert trade; it promises growth but funnels resources into weapons; and it claims to serve the people while leaving millions struggling for basic necessities. As long as military strength outweighs economic reform, the command economy seems destined to deepen the very crisis it claims to control.

C. Major Industries and Sectors: Isolation and Self-Sufficiency

North Korea's economy revolves around a few key industries, each shaped by the country's isolationist stance and its unwavering commitment to self-sufficiency under the Juche ideology. Rather than allowing market forces to guide production, the state dictates economic priorities often favoring strategic sectors over the basic needs of its people. The country's economic structure is divided into three main sectors: agriculture, industry, and services. Agriculture accounts for about 22% of North Korea's GDP, though limited arable land, outdated farming methods, and chronic food shortages prevent the sector from meeting the population's needs. The largest portion of the economy 47% comes from industry, which focuses heavily on steel, chemicals, and military production. The services sector makes up the remaining 31%. A vital part of North Korea's industrial backbone is its mining sector, particularly coal and iron ore. These resources are crucial for generating revenue, with most exports albeit restricted by international sanctions funneled to China, the regime's primary trading partner¹⁰². Despite sanctions aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, trade with China remains a lifeline, keeping the mining industry afloat.

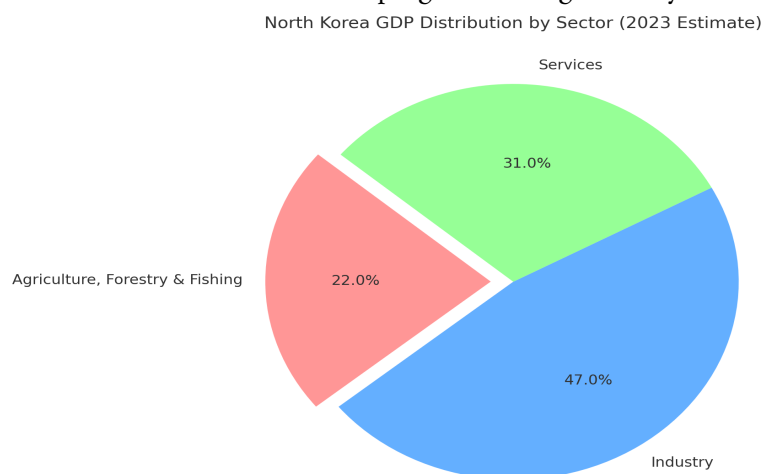


Image 12: North Korea GDP Distribution¹⁰³

¹⁰² [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹⁰³ [Cia.gov](#)

Manufacturing plays a more limited role, focusing mainly on textiles, footwear, and basic consumer goods. However, productivity in this sector remains dismally low. Factories often rely on obsolete technology and struggle to access raw materials, a direct result of the country's economic isolation. Unlike market economies, where competition drives efficiency and innovation, North Korean factories operate under state-imposed production quotas. These quotas prioritize quantity over quality, meaning factories may produce thousands of poorly made shoes while basic items like soap or medicine remain scarce¹⁰⁴. North Korea's rigid economic model also discourages foreign investment, viewing it as a threat to national sovereignty. This isolation has kept the country largely disconnected from global markets, limiting opportunities for technological advancement and industrial modernization. Even its vital trade relationship with China suffered a major blow during the COVID-19 pandemic, when strict border closures caused bilateral trade to drop by over 80%. This further weakened an already fragile economy, exposing the dangers of relying on a single trading partner while rejecting broader international engagement¹⁰⁵. Ultimately, North Korea's industries reflect a paradox: the government champions self-sufficiency, yet its most critical sectors like mining and military manufacturing depend heavily on exports to China. Factories produce goods to meet quotas, not consumer needs. And while the state preaches independence, its economic survival hinges on a delicate and often strained relationship with its most powerful ally. The result is an economy trapped between its ideological roots and an inescapable reliance on external lifelines.

D. Agricultural Challenges and Food Security

Agriculture remains a vital yet deeply fragile part of North Korea's economy, struggling under the weight of systemic inefficiencies and environmental hardships. With only 17% of the country's land, approximately 1.4 million hectares suitable for farming, food production is inherently limited, making it nearly impossible to achieve self-sufficiency. The sector's challenges are not just rooted in geography. North Korean agriculture relies heavily on collective farming, a system where land is state-owned, and farmers work according to government-mandated quotas. This model stifles individual initiative and often leads to inefficiency, as farmers have little incentive to boost productivity beyond the state's demands. Compounding these issues is the country's lack of modern farming equipment, fertilizers, and fuel, which drastically reduces yields. Outdated machinery and chronic shortages mean that planting and harvesting remain largely manual processes, a labor-intensive method that falls far short of meeting national food needs¹⁰⁶.

Adding to the crisis is climate change. North Korea faces frequent flooding and droughts, extreme weather patterns that have only grown more intense over the years. In 2022, for instance, maize production fell by 30% compared to previous years due to severe weather, further exacerbating the nation's food insecurity¹⁰⁷. The unpredictability of the climate, combined with the regime's refusal to adopt advanced agricultural techniques or accept significant foreign aid, leaves the country's food supply dangerously vulnerable. Access to food is also deeply tied to political loyalty. The state-run Public Distribution System (PDS) once a cornerstone of North Korean food security now functions more as a tool of control than support. Distribution is often dictated by the songbun system, a social classification that prioritizes the elite and military personnel over ordinary citizens. As a result, many North Koreans, particularly those in rural areas, receive little to no rations and are left to fend for themselves¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁴ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹⁰⁵ [Bank of Korea, 2022](#)

¹⁰⁶ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹⁰⁷ [WFP, 2023](#)

¹⁰⁸ [Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2023](#)

For millions, survival depends on *jangmadang*, informal markets where food, often smuggled or homegrown, is bought and sold. These black markets have become not just a lifeline but a quiet form of resistance, as they undermine the state's monopoly over food distribution. Despite government crackdowns, these markets remain essential for those excluded from state support. In an attempt to address protein shortages, North Korea's recent rural development strategy has focused on increasing livestock farming. However, progress has been slow, hampered by resource shortages and poor infrastructure¹⁰⁹. Ultimately, North Korea's agricultural system reflects a stark reality: the state's commitment to self-reliance has left its people more dependent than ever not on their government, but on underground markets and unpredictable harvests. As climate change worsens and political priorities override public welfare, the path to food security seems increasingly fragile.

E. Infrastructure: Struggling to Modernize

North Korea's infrastructure tells a story of sharp contrasts, a tale of two worlds. In Pyongyang, the capital showcases high-rise buildings, broad boulevards, and public amenities designed to project an image of modernity and progress. Yet, beyond the capital's carefully curated façade, the reality is starkly different. The rest of the country remains trapped in underdevelopment, with crumbling infrastructure and limited access to basic services¹¹⁰. Transportation highlights this divide. While Pyongyang's main roads appear well-maintained, North Korea's overall road network spans 25,554 kilometers, with only 724 kilometers paved, less than 3% of the total. This makes travel and trade incredibly challenging, particularly for rural populations who must navigate unpaved roads and deteriorating pathways. The country's railway system, serving as the backbone of public transportation, suffers from outdated equipment and poor maintenance. Trains are notoriously slow and prone to frequent delays, with much of the rolling stock dating back to the mid-20th century¹¹¹. These deficiencies don't just restrict individual movement, they choke regional connectivity and limit economic mobility, further isolating rural communities.

The energy sector reflects similar inefficiencies. North Korea's national power grid is unreliable, supplying less than 30% of the country's electricity needs. Even in Pyongyang, blackouts are a grim reminder that the capital's modern skyline is more about optics than functionality. The situation is even bleaker outside the city, where only 52.6% of North Koreans had access to electricity as of 2021, leaving nearly half the population in the dark¹¹². The country's total installed electricity-generating capacity stood at 8.4 million kilowatts in 2020, a figure that underscores its struggle to meet growing energy demands¹¹³. Basic infrastructure like housing and sanitation also reflects these imbalances. While Pyongyang boasts newly constructed apartment complexes, many homes in rural areas lack running water and proper sewage systems. Access to clean water is often inconsistent, with makeshift solutions serving as a temporary fix for deeper systemic failures¹¹⁴.

Ultimately, North Korea's infrastructure development is as much about political theater as it is about modernization. Investment is heavily concentrated in Pyongyang not to uplift the nation but to showcase a polished, forward-facing image to the outside world. The glittering skyline serves as a symbol of state power,

¹⁰⁹ [Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2023](#)

¹¹⁰ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹¹¹ [World Bank, 2022](#)

¹¹² [World Bank, 2021](#)

¹¹³ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹¹⁴ [UNDP, 2022](#)

masking the harsh reality faced by millions in rural provinces who live without basic utilities or reliable transportation. The regime's focus on selective modernization reveals a broader pattern: infrastructure is not just about roads, power, or housing; it is a tool for control, visibility, and propaganda.

F. Contemporary Economic Landscape: 2023–2025

North Korea's economic landscape remains a complex web of modest recoveries, persistent struggles, and state-driven propaganda. According to the Bank of Korea, North Korea's GDP grew by 0.4% in 2023, a slight rebound after years of decline. This uptick was largely due to improved agricultural output and minor gains in industrial production following the partial easing of COVID-19 border controls. However, the country's economic pulse remains weak, with the growth doing little to reverse years of stagnation and hardship¹¹⁵. Trade with China, North Korea's most crucial economic partner, saw a 51% rise in 2023, reaching \$1.59 billion. Yet, this figure is a shadow of pre-pandemic levels, as international sanctions continue to choke North Korea's access to global markets, foreign currency, and advanced technology¹¹⁶. These sanctions, imposed in response to the regime's nuclear ambitions, have cut Pyongyang off from vital financial networks, making economic recovery an uphill battle.

In recent policy statements, the North Korean government has emphasized rural development as a key priority. Kim Jong-un's regime has pledged to boost agricultural output and reduce reliance on *jangmadang*, the informal markets that many citizens depend on for food and goods. The goal is clear: tighten state control over food distribution and undermine black markets that challenge the government's economic grip. Yet, these plans face structural barriers including chronic resource shortages and the regime's unwavering focus on military spending¹¹⁷. Despite ongoing food insecurity and crumbling infrastructure, the state narrative remains rooted in *Juche* and *Byungjin* ideologies that promote self-reliance alongside military development. Kim Jong-un continues to frame nuclear advancements and economic resilience as twin pillars of national strength. To the outside world, this messaging projects defiance. To the North Korean people, however, it often translates into empty promises, as basic needs go unmet while military parades roll on. For ordinary citizens, economic hardship defines daily life. Food shortages persist, with blackouts becoming routine, and legitimate job opportunities remain scarce. While Pyongyang speaks of growth and independence, most North Koreans struggle to navigate a system where survival often hinges on informal trade networks rather than state support. The small GDP rise of 2023 may offer a glimmer of recovery on paper, but for those on the ground, it does little to ease the weight of economic reality.

VI. SOCIAL ISSUES

North Korea faces severe social issues, including poverty, food insecurity, human rights violations, and a rigid class-based system known as *songbun*. This system categorizes citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the regime, affecting access to jobs, education, and even food distribution¹¹⁸. The Public Distribution System (PDS), once the primary source of food, has largely collapsed, forcing many North Koreans to rely on *jangmadang* (black markets) for survival. Approximately 40% of the population suffers from malnutrition, a crisis exacerbated by government mismanagement, economic isolation, and international sanctions¹¹⁹. Beyond economic hardships, the regime maintains control through forced labor camps, where an estimated 100,000

¹¹⁵ [Reuters, 2024](#)

¹¹⁶ [Reuters, 2024](#)

¹¹⁷ [CIA World Factbook, 2023](#)

¹¹⁸ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹¹⁹ [Amnesty International, 2023](#)

individuals, including political prisoners, endure inhumane conditions¹²⁰. Basic freedoms are severely restricted; freedom of speech, movement, and access to information are nonexistent. Even watching foreign television or listening to South Korean music can lead to imprisonment, as the state enforces strict ideological purity¹²¹.

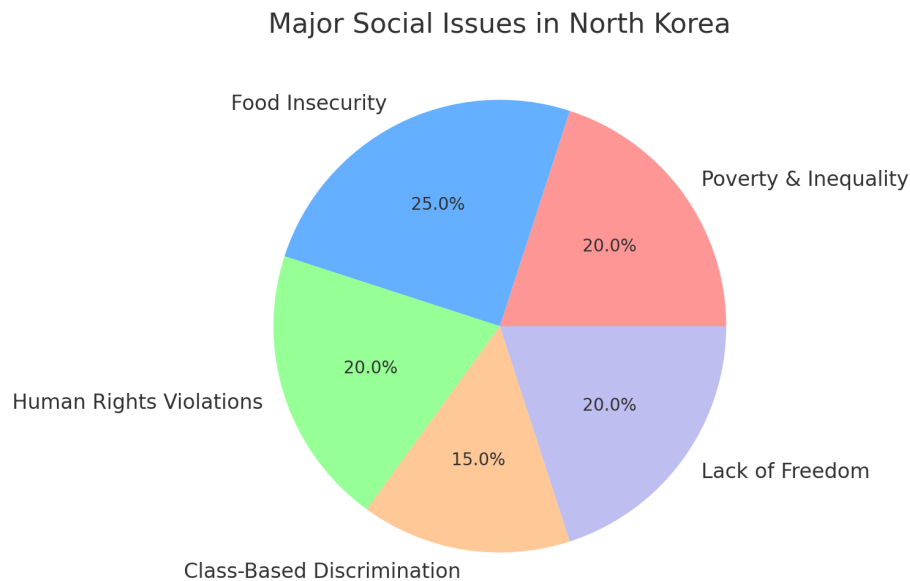


Image 13: Major social issues in North Korea¹²²

A. Daily Life in North Korea: Totalitarian vs. Collective Authoritarian Rule

Under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, North Korea functioned as a strictly totalitarian state, where the government controlled every aspect of life. Jobs were assigned, housing was dictated, and surveillance networks monitored even private conversations¹²³. However, economic struggles and shifting governance under Kim Jong-un have led to a gradual transition toward a collective authoritarian model. While the regime still maintains absolute control, informal markets (jangmadang) and limited private trade have emerged as crucial survival mechanisms¹²⁴. Despite these changes, government food rations remain a primary, yet often insufficient, source of sustenance, leaving many citizens vulnerable to chronic food shortages. Meanwhile, the elite in Pyongyang continue to enjoy access to luxury goods and better living conditions, creating a stark divide between the capital and the rest of the country¹²⁵. For the average citizen, daily life is marked by restricted movement, constant censorship, and frequent power shortages, reinforcing the state's iron grip despite small economic shifts¹²⁶.

¹²⁰ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹²¹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹²² [Human rights watch, 2023](#)

¹²³ [McEachern, 2009](#)

¹²⁴ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹²⁵ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹²⁶ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

B. Education and Propaganda

Education in North Korea functions as both a formal learning system and a powerful propaganda tool, ensuring absolute loyalty to the regime. Indoctrination begins in early childhood, with up to 30% of school lessons dedicated to glorifying the ruling Kim family¹²⁷. Textbooks distort historical events, portraying North Korea as a self-reliant, heroic state while attributing all successes to the leadership¹²⁸. Higher education is highly restricted, with university admissions based more on political loyalty and songbun status than academic merit¹²⁹. Beyond the classroom, information control is strict, internet access is virtually nonexistent for civilians, and foreign media, especially South Korean entertainment, is banned¹³⁰. Possession of unauthorized content can result in severe punishments, including imprisonment or even execution, reinforcing the state's monopoly over knowledge and ideology¹³¹.

C. Religion and Traditional Practices

Religious freedom in North Korea is virtually nonexistent, as the state promotes Juche, a political ideology centered on self-reliance and loyalty to the leader as a quasi-religion¹³². Traditional faiths such as Christianity and Buddhism have been systematically suppressed, with practitioners facing arrest, imprisonment, or even execution if caught engaging in religious activities¹³³. Despite this harsh repression, Confucian values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and strict family hierarchy remain deeply embedded in society¹³⁴. Many families continue to practice jesa, a Confucian ancestral worship ritual, though often in secrecy to avoid government scrutiny¹³⁵. This quiet persistence of tradition reflects the resilience of cultural heritage, even under an authoritarian regime that seeks to control every aspect of personal belief.

D. Art and Entertainment

Art in North Korea functions primarily as a tool for state propaganda, with all creative expressions in films, literature, music, and theater designed to glorify the leadership and reinforce state ideology¹³⁶. Every artistic production must align with the regime's narrative, often receiving direct approval from the Supreme Leader. One of the most well-known state-sponsored performances is the Arirang Mass Games, an elaborate display of synchronized gymnastics and nationalist storytelling, involving tens of thousands of performers¹³⁷. Despite strict censorship, many North Koreans secretly consume foreign media, particularly South Korean dramas and K-pop music, which are smuggled into the country on USB drives and SD cards¹³⁸. These underground entertainment sources offer a rare glimpse of the outside world, fueling quiet dissent among younger generations. In response, the government has intensified crackdowns, with severe punishments including public executions imposed on those caught watching or distributing banned content¹³⁹. Even in the realm of entertainment, the struggle between state control and individual curiosity continues to shape North Korean society.

¹²⁷ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹²⁸ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹²⁹ [Freedom House, 2022](#)

¹³⁰ [Washington Post, 2017](#)

¹³¹ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹³² [Amnesty International, 2003](#)

¹³³ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹³⁴ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹³⁵ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹³⁶ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹³⁷ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹³⁸ [Washington Post, 2017](#)

¹³⁹ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

E. Women in North Korea

Women in North Korea face systemic gender discrimination and economic hardship, despite the government's official stance on gender equality. While state propaganda promotes the idea of women as equal contributors to society, in reality, they have limited leadership opportunities and are often confined to domestic roles¹⁴⁰. However, economic struggles have pushed many women to become the primary breadwinners, as government wages and food rations remain unreliable. Many participate in informal markets (jangmadang), playing a crucial role in North Korea's underground economy¹⁴¹. Despite their growing economic influence, women remain highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, particularly in detention centers and state-controlled environments, where reports of sexual violence and coercion are widespread¹⁴². Women attempting to defect face immense risks, including trafficking and forced labor, especially when crossing into China¹⁴³. Yet, despite these barriers, North Korean women continue to challenge traditional roles, driving economic change through underground trade and informal networks¹⁴⁴. Their resilience is quietly reshaping the country's economy from the ground up.

VII. MILITARY AND SECURITY

A. North Korea's Military Capabilities

North Korea maintains one of the world's largest standing armies, with 1.2 million active-duty soldiers and over 6 million reservists¹⁴⁵. Despite relying on an outdated conventional military, the country has prioritized asymmetric warfare, focusing on cyber warfare, ballistic missile technology, and special forces operations to offset its technological disadvantages¹⁴⁶. The Korean People's Army (KPA) is divided into ground, naval, air, cyber, and strategic rocket forces, each serving a crucial role in deterrence and internal control¹⁴⁷. North Korea's ground forces maintain an extensive arsenal of 13,000+ artillery pieces, capable of targeting Seoul within minutes, making them a key threat to regional stability¹⁴⁸. Though relatively small, the navy operates submarines that could potentially be used for nuclear weapon delivery¹⁴⁹. Additionally, North Korea has aggressively expanded its cyber warfare capabilities, carrying out high-profile cyber attacks on banks, infrastructure, and foreign governments¹⁵⁰. Despite facing severe economic hardships, the regime continues to prioritize military expansion, using its armed forces not only for national defense but also as a tool of internal control and international leverage. This strategy allows North Korea to project power beyond its economic means, reinforcing the regime's grip on both its people and the geopolitical landscape.

B. Nuclear Weapons Programme

North Korea's nuclear program is the cornerstone of its national security strategy, designed to deter foreign intervention and reinforce the regime's grip on power. Since its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, the country has conducted six nuclear tests, with its largest

¹⁴⁰ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁴¹ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹⁴² [Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)

¹⁴³ [Amnesty International, 2003](#)

¹⁴⁴ [McEachern, 2009](#)

¹⁴⁵ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

¹⁴⁶ [McEachern, 2009](#)

¹⁴⁷ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹⁴⁸ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹⁴⁹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁵⁰ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

detonation in 2017, estimated at 100-250 kilotons¹⁵¹. The country's nuclear arsenal includes intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) such as the Hwasong-15 and Hwasong-17, which are capable of reaching the U.S. mainland¹⁵². Additionally, North Korea is actively developing hypersonic missiles and tactical nuclear weapons, increasing the threat to South Korea and Japan¹⁵³. These advancements suggest that Pyongyang is not solely focused on deterrence but also aims to use its nuclear capabilities for strategic leverage, pressuring international actors for economic and political concessions¹⁵⁴. Despite severe UN sanctions and diplomatic efforts, North Korea continues to expand its nuclear capabilities, making the prospect of denuclearization increasingly unlikely. The regime's persistent pursuit of advanced nuclear technology underscores its commitment to military power as a means of survival and negotiation on the global stage.

C. Regional Security Concerns

North Korea's military activities pose a direct threat to regional stability, particularly for South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) remains one of the most fortified borders in the world, frequently witnessing military provocations, including artillery shelling, missile tests, and border incursions¹⁵⁵. Past incidents highlight the regime's willingness to escalate tensions. In 2010, North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong Island, killing South Korean civilians, and in 2015, it planted landmines along the border, injuring South Korean soldiers¹⁵⁶. Beyond conventional threats, North Korea has developed sophisticated cyber warfare capabilities, conducting attacks on financial institutions and critical infrastructure across South Korea, the U.S., and Europe¹⁵⁷. Additionally, North Korea has been accused of selling missile technology to nations like Iran and Syria, further raising global concerns over weapons proliferation¹⁵⁸. These actions indicate that North Korea's military ambitions extend beyond national defense, as the regime actively seeks to expand its influence through both direct threats and covert operations.

D. Diplomatic Efforts

Despite its aggressive military stance, North Korea has periodically engaged in diplomatic negotiations, primarily to secure economic relief and strategic advantages. The Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) which included China, the U.S., Russia, Japan, and South Korea attempted to negotiate denuclearization, but ultimately collapsed when North Korea rejected verification measures¹⁵⁹. More recently, Kim Jong-un held historic summits with the-U.S. President Donald Trump in 2018 and 2019, marking an unprecedented diplomatic engagement. However, these talks failed due to disagreements over sanctions relief and denuclearization commitments¹⁶⁰. While North Korea maintains strong ties with China and Russia, these allies do not fully endorse its nuclear ambitions, instead seeking to balance regional stability while countering Western influence¹⁶¹. As it stands, diplomatic efforts remain stalled, with North Korea

¹⁵¹ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁵² [Reuters, 2024](#)

¹⁵³ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁵⁴ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁵⁵ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁵⁶ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

¹⁵⁷ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁵⁸ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹⁵⁹ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹⁶⁰ [BBC, 2019](#)

¹⁶¹ [McEachern, 2009](#)

demanding full sanction relief without committing to irreversible denuclearization, making future negotiations highly uncertain.

E. Nuclear Threat and Global Concerns

North Korea's nuclear ambitions pose a major global security threat, raising concerns over direct military confrontation, nuclear proliferation, and accidental escalation. In response, the United Nations has imposed some of the most severe sanctions in history, restricting North Korea's access to international markets, technology, and financial systems¹⁶². However, the regime continues to evade these sanctions through illicit trade, cyber theft, and arms smuggling¹⁶³. The primary global concerns include:

1. **Nuclear Strikes** : If tensions escalate, North Korea could target U.S. bases in Japan, South Korea, or even launch an ICBM toward the U.S. mainland¹⁶⁴.
2. **Nuclear Proliferation** : Intelligence reports indicate that North Korea has supplied missile technology to Iran, Syria, and other rogue states, increasing instability¹⁶⁵.
3. **Preemptive Conflict** : A military strike by the U.S. or South Korea on North Korea's nuclear facilities could escalate into full-scale war, leading to mass casualties¹⁶⁶.

To counter these threats, the U.S. and its allies have strengthened missile defense systems, increased military exercises, and imposed stricter economic restrictions. However, North Korea remains defiant, continuing missile tests and refusing to dismantle its nuclear program¹⁶⁷. Despite claiming that its military buildup is defensive, North Korea's persistent provocations, missile launches, and cyber warfare tactics suggest a more aggressive regional strategy. Diplomatic efforts toward denuclearization have repeatedly failed, and the international community must balance deterrence, sanctions, and diplomacy to prevent further escalation. As North Korea remains isolated but heavily armed, the future of security in the Korean Peninsula remains highly uncertain.

VIII. FOREIGN RELATIONS

A. Relations with South Korea

North Korea's relationship with South Korea has oscillated between diplomatic engagement and military hostility. Since the Korean War (1950–1953), both nations have remained technically at war, as no formal peace treaty was ever signed¹⁶⁸. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) remains one of the most fortified borders in the world, marked by frequent military tensions and provocations. Periods of diplomatic progress have emerged, notably under South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" (1998–2008), which promoted economic and cultural exchanges¹⁶⁹. However, hostilities resurfaced with North Korea's sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island the same year, escalating tensions¹⁷⁰.

¹⁶² [Amnesty International, 2023](#)

¹⁶³ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹⁶⁴ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁶⁵ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹⁶⁶ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

¹⁶⁷ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁶⁸ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹⁶⁹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁷⁰ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

Recent diplomatic efforts, including historic summits between Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in in 2018, briefly raised hopes for reconciliation¹⁷¹. These talks led to pledges of military de-escalation and economic cooperation. However, North Korea later severed communication channels in 2020, and relations have deteriorated since¹⁷². While South Korea continues to advocate for diplomacy, North Korea remains committed to military deterrence, making long-term peace and reconciliation highly uncertain.

B. Ties with China and Russia

North Korea's closest allies are China and Russia, both of which provide economic aid, diplomatic backing, and military cooperation. China alone accounts for over 90% of North Korea's trade, making it Pyongyang's economic lifeline, even as UN sanctions restrict exports and imports¹⁷³. Historically, China has viewed North Korea as a crucial buffer zone against U.S. influence in Asia and has opposed any efforts that might destabilize the regime¹⁷⁴. However, China remains cautious, balancing its support with diplomatic restraint, particularly when North Korea conducts provocative nuclear tests¹⁷⁵.

Russia, while traditionally less involved than China, has deepened ties with North Korea in recent years, particularly in energy cooperation and military exchanges¹⁷⁶. North Korea has expressed support for Russia's actions in Ukraine, and reports suggest that Pyongyang has supplied weapons to Russia for its military campaigns¹⁷⁷. Both China and Russia have repeatedly blocked or weakened UN resolutions against North Korea, seeing Pyongyang as a strategic counterbalance to Western influence¹⁷⁸. However, while North Korea relies on these allies for survival, it often acts independently, particularly on nuclear policy, sometimes ignoring diplomatic advice from both Beijing and Moscow in pursuit of its own strategic interests. This growing camaraderie reflects a mutual interest in undermining Western-led global norms and reshaping regional power dynamics. As international isolation deepens for both, their partnership signals a broader challenge to the existing security architecture in Northeast Asia.

C. U.S. and North Korea Conflict

The conflict between the U.S. and North Korea is rooted in decades of political and military tensions, dating back to the Korean War (1950–1953). Since then, the U.S. has maintained a military presence in South Korea, with approximately 28,500 troops stationed as a deterrent against Northern aggression¹⁷⁹. North Korea, in turn, has long viewed the U.S. as its primary adversary, using anti-American propaganda to justify its militarization and nuclear ambitions¹⁸⁰. The U.S. has led international efforts to impose sanctions, apply diplomatic pressure, and strengthen military alliances in the Indo-Pacific to counter North Korea's threats¹⁸¹.

Diplomatic efforts have largely failed. The 1994 Agreed Framework saw North Korea pledge to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for aid, but the deal collapsed in 2003 when Pyongyang resumed its nuclear

¹⁷¹ [BBC, 2019](#)

¹⁷² [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁷³ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁷⁴ [McEachern, 2009](#)

¹⁷⁵ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹⁷⁶ [Reuters, 2024](#)

¹⁷⁷ [Human Rights Watch, 2024](#)

¹⁷⁸ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁷⁹ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

¹⁸⁰ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁸¹ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

activities¹⁸². The Trump-Kim summits in 2018 and 2019 were historic but ultimately unsuccessful, as North Korea refused to denuclearize without full sanction relief¹⁸³. Today, relations remain hostile, with North Korea conducting frequent missile tests near U.S. allies as a show of strength¹⁸⁴. The Biden administration has continued a policy of strategic deterrence, working closely with South Korea and Japan to counter North Korea's military advancements. As tensions persist, the possibility of diplomatic breakthroughs remains uncertain, while the risk of escalation continues to shape security dynamics in the region.

D. Diplomatic Isolation

North Korea remains one of the most isolated nations in the world, with limited diplomatic ties and restricted engagement with global institutions. The country maintains formal relations with fewer than 50 nations and has no official diplomatic ties with the United States, Japan, or South Korea¹⁸⁵. It is heavily sanctioned by the United Nations, which has severely restricted its trade, access to international financial systems, and ability to receive foreign aid¹⁸⁶. Even traditional allies like China have shown reluctance to fully support Pyongyang, especially following repeated nuclear tests¹⁸⁷.

Despite this deep diplomatic isolation, North Korea continues to engage in covert activities to bypass sanctions, including illicit arms sales, cyber warfare, and smuggling operations¹⁸⁸. Additionally, the regime has sought closer ties with anti-Western nations like Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, using these relationships to counter its diplomatic exclusion¹⁸⁹. However, North Korea's aggressive foreign policy, human rights violations, and nuclear ambitions make diplomatic normalization nearly impossible. Unless Pyongyang commits to meaningful negotiations, it is likely to remain diplomatically isolated, facing growing economic and political pressure on the international stage.

North Korea's foreign relations are characterized by hostility, selective alliances, and deep diplomatic isolation. While China and Russia provide economic and political support, they remain cautious about fully endorsing North Korea's nuclear provocations. Relations with South Korea are fragile, shifting between diplomatic engagement and military confrontation, while the U.S.-North Korea conflict persists, with failed peace efforts and sanctions maintaining high tensions. At the same time, North Korea's diplomatic isolation has intensified, with few international allies and mounting economic pressure. As Pyongyang remains defiant on the global stage, future diplomatic efforts will require a delicate balance of deterrence, engagement, and economic incentives to prevent further escalation and maintain regional stability.

IX. CONTEMPORARY CONFRONTATION

A. Human Rights Violations

North Korea is widely regarded as one of the world's worst human rights violators, with the regime systematically suppressing freedoms, imprisoning dissidents, and enforcing brutal punishments. According to Human Rights Watch (2024)¹⁹⁰, North Korea operates at least five political prison camps, where an

¹⁸² [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹⁸³ [BBC, 2019](#)

¹⁸⁴ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁸⁵ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹⁸⁶ [Amnesty International, 2023](#)

¹⁸⁷ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

¹⁸⁸ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁸⁹ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

¹⁹⁰ [Human Rights Watch \(2024\)](#)

estimated 100,000 people endure forced labor, torture, and starvation. Defectors have reported extreme abuses, including public executions, forced abortions, and inhumane treatment in detention centers¹⁹¹.

The songbun system, a rigid social classification structure, determines an individual's access to education, employment, and healthcare based on perceived loyalty to the regime¹⁹². Those with "bad" songbun often descendants of perceived enemies of the state face lifelong discrimination and deprivation¹⁹³. Women are particularly vulnerable, suffering from gender-based violence and forced labor, especially in government-run detention facilities¹⁹⁴. The government's absolute control prevents any form of activism or resistance, with even minor offenses such as listening to foreign radio broadcasts resulting in imprisonment or execution¹⁹⁵. These human rights violations remain a central issue in international condemnation of North Korea, but the regime's tight grip on power leaves little room for reform or accountability.

B. Censorship and Propaganda Machinery in Media

North Korea's media operates entirely as a state-controlled propaganda tool, designed to promote the Kim family's cult of personality and suppress independent journalism. All newspapers, television stations, and radio broadcasts are state-owned, with Korean Central Television (KCTV) and the Rodong Sinmun newspaper serving as the primary propaganda outlets¹⁹⁶. These sources continuously depict Kim Jong-un as an infallible leader, attributing all national achievements to his guidance while blaming external enemies, particularly the U.S. and South Korea, for economic struggles¹⁹⁷.

Citizens are required to attend weekly political study sessions, where they are indoctrinated with state-approved narratives reinforcing the regime's ideology¹⁹⁸. Foreign media is strictly banned, and those caught watching South Korean dramas, Western films, or foreign news face severe punishment, including execution¹⁹⁹. The government also spreads disinformation about life outside North Korea, portraying the country as superior to capitalist nations, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary²⁰⁰. This rigid control over information isolates the population from the outside world, preventing citizens from accessing the truth and reinforcing Pyongyang's authoritarian grip on power.

C. Internet and Tech Restrictions

North Korea enforces some of the world's most restrictive internet policies, allowing only a small, government-approved group to access a highly censored intranet called Kwangmyong²⁰¹. The general population has no access to the global internet, with only high-ranking officials, government agencies, and cybersecurity operatives permitted to view foreign websites under strict state monitoring²⁰². To maintain

¹⁹¹ [Amnesty International, 2023](#)

¹⁹² [Worden, 2008](#)

¹⁹³ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁹⁴ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

¹⁹⁵ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

¹⁹⁶ [Lankov, 2013](#)

¹⁹⁷ [McEachern, 2009](#)

¹⁹⁸ [Worden, 2008](#)

¹⁹⁹ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²⁰⁰ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²⁰¹ [Freedom House, 2022](#)

²⁰² [Lankov, 2013](#)

digital control, the government has developed its own operating system, Red Star OS, designed to track users and prevent tampering with state-controlled devices²⁰³.

Despite these restrictions, foreign technology, including USB drives and mobile phones, is smuggled into North Korea, providing some citizens access to banned content. However, those caught sharing or distributing foreign media face severe punishments, including execution²⁰⁴. Beyond internal censorship, North Korea actively engages in cyber warfare through units like Bureau 121, which conduct hacking operations against international financial institutions, steal cryptocurrency, and launch cyberattacks on the U.S. and South Korea²⁰⁵. These strict digital controls not only suppress free speech but also ensure North Koreans remain isolated, limiting any potential for dissent or resistance against the regime.

D. Nuclear Misuse

North Korea's nuclear program has shifted from a defensive deterrent to a tool of political blackmail and international leverage. Since its first nuclear test in 2006, North Korea has repeatedly violated United Nations (UN) resolutions, conducting six nuclear tests and developing ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) capable of reaching the U.S. mainland²⁰⁶. The Hwasong-15 and Hwasong-17 missiles, tested in 2017 and 2022, are believed to have ranges exceeding 10,000 kilometers, putting major U.S. cities within strike range²⁰⁷.

North Korea has used nuclear threats as a diplomatic bargaining tool, demanding sanctions relief while continuing to expand its arsenal²⁰⁸. Intelligence reports suggest that North Korea has also attempted to sell nuclear technology and missile components to countries like Iran and Syria, raising concerns about global nuclear proliferation²⁰⁹. Additionally, experts warn of the risk of accidental escalation, as North Korea's missile tests and military provocations could trigger a conflict with the United States, South Korea, or Japan²¹⁰. Despite international pressure and severe economic sanctions, North Korea refuses to abandon its nuclear ambitions, making it a major global security concern.

North Korea's ongoing confrontation with the international community is shaped by human rights abuses, strict censorship, technological isolation, and nuclear aggression. The regime's absolute control over information and suppression of dissent ensures that its citizens remain disconnected from external realities. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's expanding nuclear arsenal continues to threaten global stability, as it defies sanctions and diplomatic pressure. These factors make North Korea one of the most unpredictable and isolated states in the world, with little hope for change unless internal resistance or external diplomatic efforts lead to a shift in governance.

²⁰³ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

²⁰⁴ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²⁰⁵ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²⁰⁶ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²⁰⁷ [Reuters, 2024](#)

²⁰⁸ [McEachern, 2009](#)

²⁰⁹ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

²¹⁰ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

X. OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

A. Economic Reforms Through International Aid

North Korea's economy has long suffered from mismanagement, sanctions, and international isolation, yet economic reforms and foreign aid could provide a path toward recovery. The country has historically relied on food and energy aid from China, Russia, and the United Nations, particularly during crises like the 1990s Arduous March, when famine led to hundreds of thousands of deaths²¹¹. While North Korea has resisted Western-style market reforms, limited economic shifts such as the growth of informal markets (jangmadang) have enabled some private trade and entrepreneurship²¹².

However, North Korea's refusal to open its financial system has prevented engagement with international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank²¹³. If Pyongyang were to adopt a Chinese or Vietnamese-style economic model, it could integrate into the global economy while maintaining political control. A lifting of sanctions in exchange for denuclearization or human rights improvements could attract foreign direct investment, boosting infrastructure, industrial production, and food security²¹⁴. While economic reform remains a politically sensitive issue, carefully structured international aid programs and monitored development projects could offer incentives for North Korea to modernize its economy, paving the way for greater stability and long-term growth.

B. Reunification Prospects

The prospect of Korean reunification remains complex and highly debated, with both North and South Korea technically supporting the idea but envisioning it in vastly different ways. South Korea advocates for a peaceful, democratic process, while North Korea insists on reunification under its authoritarian system²¹⁵. Over time, the economic, political, and social divide between the two nations has widened, making reunification increasingly difficult. South Korea's GDP is more than 50 times that of North Korea, meaning integration would require massive investments in infrastructure, education, and governance reform²¹⁶.

Despite these obstacles, reunification remains possible through gradual economic and diplomatic cooperation. The Kaesong Industrial Complex, which operated until 2016, proved that economic collaboration could benefit both sides²¹⁷. Other efforts, such as track-two diplomacy, family reunions, and cultural exchanges, have helped maintain some level of dialogue between the two Koreas. A reunification model similar to Germany's post-Cold War integration is often discussed, but North Korea's nuclear ambitions and the ruling elite's fear of losing power make near-term reunification highly unlikely²¹⁸. However, if North Korea undergoes internal political changes, the possibility of reunification discussions may become more realistic in the future.

C. Role of the Global Community

The international community plays a crucial role in shaping North Korea's future through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and humanitarian aid. Key actors including the United Nations (UN), the

²¹¹ [Lankov, 2013](#)

²¹² [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

²¹³ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²¹⁴ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²¹⁵ [Worden, 2008](#)

²¹⁶ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²¹⁷ [Lankov, 2013](#)

²¹⁸ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

United States, China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan have led efforts to curb North Korea's nuclear program and human rights violations²¹⁹. However, these initiatives have produced mixed results while sanctions have weakened North Korea's economy, they have also worsened the suffering of ordinary citizens²²⁰.

A more effective strategy could involve a multilateral approach that balances pressure with incentives. China, as North Korea's largest trading partner, holds significant leverage and could push Pyongyang toward gradual reforms²²¹. The U.S. and its allies could explore diplomatic incentives, such as phased sanction relief in exchange for specific reforms²²². Additionally, track-two diplomacy through NGOs, cultural exchanges, and non-state actors could provide alternative channels for engagement. Integrating North Korea into international institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), could encourage economic openness while addressing security concerns. A coordinated global effort that combines diplomacy, economic engagement, and strategic deterrence remains essential in influencing North Korea's trajectory and preventing further escalation of regional tensions.

D. Cyber Warfare and Digital Transformation

North Korea's cyber capabilities pose both a major security threat and a potential avenue for reform. The country has heavily invested in cyber warfare units like Bureau 121, which are responsible for hacking banks, stealing cryptocurrency, and launching cyberattacks on foreign governments²²³. However, if North Korea shifts its focus toward legitimate technological development, it could leverage IT education and cyber skills for economic growth rather than illicit activities²²⁴.

If North Korea gradually opens its economy, controlled tech investments and internet expansion could help modernize its workforce. Countries like China and Vietnam have successfully balanced state control with technological growth, offering a potential model for North Korea²²⁵. Additionally, allowing controlled access to international tech markets could improve living conditions and create employment opportunities, reducing the regime's reliance on cybercrime and illicit activities²²⁶. While North Korea remains hesitant to embrace technological openness, future leadership changes could create opportunities for limited digital modernization, potentially reshaping its economic landscape while maintaining state control.

E. Denuclearization

Denuclearization remains the most significant challenge in North Korea's transformation, as the regime views its nuclear weapons as essential for survival and has consistently resisted disarmament efforts²²⁷. Despite this, diplomatic pathways exist that could gradually reduce nuclear threats. The Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) which included China, the U.S., Russia, Japan, and South Korea were one of the few coordinated efforts that temporarily halted North Korea's nuclear program before ultimately collapsing²²⁸.

²¹⁹ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²²⁰ [Amnesty International, 2023](#)

²²¹ [McEachern, 2009](#)

²²² [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²²³ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²²⁴ [McEachern, 2009](#)

²²⁵ [Lankov, 2013](#)

²²⁶ [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021](#)

²²⁷ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

²²⁸ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

Similarly, the Trump-Kim summits in 2018 and 2019 briefly raised hopes for progress, but North Korea resumed its nuclear tests after talks failed²²⁹.

A potential solution lies in a phased approach to denuclearization, where North Korea receives economic incentives, security guarantees, and diplomatic recognition in exchange for gradually dismantling its nuclear arsenal²³⁰. Another approach could be arms control agreements, similar to the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), where North Korea would retain a limited nuclear capability under strict international oversight²³¹. While full denuclearization remains unlikely in the near future, an initial freeze on missile testing and warhead production could serve as a realistic first step toward long-term security.

Despite its isolation and authoritarian rule, North Korea has opportunities for change through economic reform, diplomatic engagement, and technological modernization. While full reunification with South Korea remains unlikely in the near future, gradual economic cooperation could build trust and stability. The global community must balance diplomatic pressure with incentives to encourage Pyongyang to abandon its most aggressive policies. Additionally, cyber warfare currently used for financial and political disruption could be redirected toward legitimate technological development, benefiting North Korea's economy. Finally, while complete denuclearization remains a distant goal, incremental arms control measures and diplomatic negotiations could help reduce tensions and integrate North Korea into the global order. The future of North Korea will depend on whether internal reforms, international pressure, and strategic diplomacy can shift the regime's course toward stability and cooperation.

XI. INDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

A. Nuclear Policy and Security Concerns

India maintains a cautious yet firm stance on North Korea's nuclear program, advocating for global non-proliferation while respecting Pyongyang's sovereignty. As a nuclear-armed state and a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) under special provisions, India has consistently opposed the spread of nuclear weapons, particularly to unstable regimes²³². New Delhi has criticized North Korea's repeated nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, aligning with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions imposing sanctions on Pyongyang²³³.

However, India's nuclear stance differs from that of the U.S. and its Western allies, as it does not actively push for regime change in North Korea²³⁴. Instead, India supports denuclearization through diplomatic engagement rather than direct confrontation. A key security concern for India is North Korea's alleged arms trade with Pakistan. Intelligence reports indicate that Pyongyang has provided assistance to Islamabad's missile program, raising alarms about potential threats to India's security²³⁵. Given these concerns, India remains vigilant about any North Korea-Pakistan collaboration that could destabilize the region, while continuing to advocate for peaceful diplomatic solutions to curb nuclear proliferation.

²²⁹ [BBC, 2019](#)

²³⁰ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²³¹ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²³² [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²³³ [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²³⁴ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

²³⁵ [Chadwick, 2002](#)

B. Diplomatic Relations with North Korea

India is one of the few democratic nations to maintain formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, while simultaneously supporting international sanctions and denuclearization efforts²³⁶. New Delhi established ties with Pyongyang in 1973, and although interactions remain limited, the Indian Embassy in North Korea remains operational²³⁷. Unlike the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, which favor maximum pressure policies, India adopts a balanced approach, advocating for dialogue and peaceful engagement²³⁸. In 2018, India's Minister of State for External Affairs, V.K. Singh, became the first high-ranking Indian official to visit North Korea in nearly 20 years, signaling New Delhi's willingness to engage diplomatically²³⁹. Despite voting in favor of UN sanctions against North Korea, India continues to support humanitarian aid and limited trade relations to prevent Pyongyang from further isolation²⁴⁰.

Additionally, India views North Korea as a counterbalance to China's influence in Asia. By maintaining stable but limited ties with Pyongyang, New Delhi ensures that China does not hold complete diplomatic leverage over the Korean Peninsula, an approach similar to India's strategy with Russia²⁴¹. However, India remains cautious about over-engagement, as aligning too closely with North Korea could strain its strategic partnerships with South Korea, the U.S., and Japan.

C. Economic Relations and Trade with North Korea

India's economic ties with North Korea have significantly declined in recent years due to international sanctions and concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear program²⁴². Until 2017, India was North Korea's second-largest trading partner after China, with bilateral trade reaching \$209 million in 2014²⁴³. India's primary exports included food, pharmaceuticals, and machinery, while imports consisted mainly of minerals and chemicals²⁴⁴. However, in compliance with UN sanctions and under pressure from global allies, India halted most trade, restricting its engagement to humanitarian aid, such as food and medical supplies²⁴⁵.

Despite these restrictions, India continues diplomatic engagement through initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, which provides training for North Korean officials in areas like information technology and development economics²⁴⁶. This approach reflects India's broader geopolitical strategy complying with sanctions while ensuring North Korea does not become entirely dependent on China, which could shift the regional balance of power²⁴⁷. While economic ties have diminished, India's continued humanitarian support underscores its commitment to constructive diplomacy. Rather than completely isolating North Korea, India balances non-proliferation concerns with diplomatic stability and economic pragmatism. By maintaining limited but strategic engagement, India reinforces its role as a responsible global player while safeguarding its own security and regional interests.

²³⁶ [McEachern, 2009](#)

²³⁷ [Worden, 2008](#)

²³⁸ [Lankov, 2013](#)

²³⁹ [Reuters, 2018](#)

²⁴⁰ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²⁴¹ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

²⁴² [Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)

²⁴³ [Lankov, 2013](#)

²⁴⁴ [Council on Foreign Relations, 2023](#)

²⁴⁵ [Reuters, 2018](#)

²⁴⁶ [McEachern, 2009](#)

²⁴⁷ [Frank & Park, 2012](#)

India's approach to North Korea is measured and pragmatic, carefully balancing non-proliferation concerns, diplomatic stability, and economic considerations. While India supports global efforts to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, it avoids aggressive posturing, favoring diplomatic engagement over direct confrontation. Economically, India's once-active trade relationship with North Korea has significantly declined due to UN sanctions, yet humanitarian aid and capacity-building initiatives continue. By maintaining limited but strategic relations, India ensures regional balance, prevents North Korea's complete dependence on China, and reinforces its role as a responsible global power while safeguarding its own national security interests.

XII. CONCLUSION

North Korea remains one of the most isolated and unpredictable nations in the world, shaped by authoritarian rule, nuclear ambitions, and fragile international relations. Its rigid political structure, strict censorship, and economic struggles not only impact its own citizens but also pose a challenge to global security. Despite decades of sanctions, diplomatic efforts, and military deterrence, Pyongyang has continued its nuclear weapons program, seeing it as essential for regime survival. This persistent defiance has made full denuclearization highly unlikely in the near future. However, opportunities for change still exist, particularly through economic engagement, diplomatic dialogue, and controlled humanitarian assistance. While North Korea has historically resisted economic reforms, the success of informal markets (*jangmadang*) and limited private enterprise suggests that gradual economic liberalization could be possible if properly incentivized. International financial institutions and trade partnerships could help modernize North Korea's infrastructure, improve food security, and enhance technological development, but this would require a shift in Pyongyang's policies and greater openness to external engagement.

Reunification with South Korea remains a distant goal, as the economic, political, and ideological gaps between the two nations have widened significantly. However, strategic cooperation such as economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and confidence-building measures may serve as a more realistic approach to fostering stability on the Korean Peninsula. Similar models of gradual integration, such as Germany's reunification process, demonstrate that while the path to unification is difficult, it is not impossible under the right conditions. The global community faces a difficult challenge in dealing with North Korea. While diplomatic pressure and sanctions have been necessary to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, complete isolation has only pushed the regime further into dependence on illicit activities and authoritarian control. A balanced approach combining targeted pressure with diplomatic engagement and economic incentives may provide a pathway to de-escalation. By fostering limited but meaningful cooperation, the international community can encourage North Korea to gradually integrate into the global system without compromising regional security.

Ultimately, North Korea stands at a crossroads: it can either continue its current trajectory of militarization and economic hardship or pursue gradual reforms that could improve its economy and international standing. Whether change comes from internal pressures, diplomatic negotiations, or economic necessity, the future of North Korea will depend on its ability to adapt and engage with the evolving global order. Until then, it remains a nation trapped between its pursuit of security and its struggle for survival in an increasingly interconnected world.

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