

Symposium Nuclear Weapons and the Korean Peninsula

Editor's Introduction: As this issue goes to press, the nuclear situation on the Korean peninsula is a critical global geopolitical problem. We are most appreciative that three Korea specialists, featured in this symposium, agreed to both share their perspective with *EAA* readers and contribute, because of the fluidity of the situation, follow-up supplemental online essays written after the announcement of the proposed Donald Trump–Kim Jong-un summit.



Kim Jong-un and officers watching a missile launch test, with a photo of a launched missile in the background. Sources: Photo montage/illustration by Willa Davis. Kim and officers from *The Drive* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y9z9hdh4> and the missile launch from a video on the *Al Jazeera* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yakllr8c>.

What Honors High School and Undergraduate Survey Instructors Should Know about North Korea's Nuclear Threat

By Michael J. Seth



MICHAEL J. SETH is a Professor of History at James Madison University. He received his PhD from the University of Hawai'i. He is the author of five books on Korea, including *Education Fever: Society, Politics and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* (2002) and *North Korea: A History* (2018).

In October 2006, North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as it is officially known, detonated a small nuclear device. By the end of 2017, it had conducted four more nuclear weapons tests; the last on September 3, 2017, perhaps a hydrogen bomb, was capable of destroying a major city. It is the only country to have tested nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century. P'yŏngyang is also developing a missile delivery system that will be able to reach any part of the United States. Missile tests in 2017 have revealed that the regime is close to achieving this. This raises several questions: What is North Korea's purpose in developing these nuclear weapons? How great a threat does this pose? What are our options for dealing with it?

North Korea's weapons program is part of its larger and consistent objective to create a militarily strong, politically independent state that will unite all the Korean people and erase past humiliations. It is driven by a fierce nationalism verging on xenophobia that sees the story of Korea as one long record of a people struggling to maintain their autonomy and ethnic/racial purity in the face of repeated invasions by foreigners. The last of the invaders were the Japanese, who ruled Korea as a colony from 1910 to 1945. From its inception, the leadership of the North regarded the division of the country by the US and the Soviet Union as temporary, unacceptable, and reunification under its leadership inevitable. Two years after gaining its

independence from the Soviet Union in 1948, the DPRK under Kim Il-sung attempted to unite the country by force but was thwarted by the intervention of the United States. After the 1953 ceasefire that ended the Korean War, the US continued to maintain forces in the South, providing a serious obstacle to another attempt at reunification.

In the decades after the end of Korean War, North Korea sought to confirm that it was the true representative of the Korean nation through economic development and military strength, while searching for ways to pressure the US to withdraw its troops and encouraging the people of the South to rise up against the corrupt, repressive government of Japanese collaborators and American lackeys. But the US did not withdraw, the series of authoritarian governments in the South were replaced by a stable democratic political system, and it was the South rather than the North that prospered. Early impressive industrial development in North Korea in the 1950s and 1960s was followed by economic stagnation, decline, and—at one point in the late 1990s—mass famine.

The regime in the North could not give up its dream of unifying the country; it could not admit its failures and the successes of the South

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without undermining its very reason for existing. Instead, as the economy declined, it ratcheted up the antiforeign rhetoric, telling its people that their suffering was the result of imperialists' efforts to destroy their country and take away their hard-fought independence. They were able to reinforce this fear and hatred of the imperialists by keeping alive the memory of the brutal Japanese colonial regime and the alleged atrocities committed by the Americans during the Korean War. The latter include not only fabricated stories but also the horrific US bombing campaign in which hundreds of thousands of North Korean civilians perished. It is, the North Korean people have been told, only the expanding military might of the DPRK under the brilliant leadership of the Kim Il-sung family that has prevented the imperialists from reinvading and enslaving them. Additionally, North Koreans were told that the people of the South were still under the control of foreign imperialists and their collaborators, and that they are looking to the people of the North to liberate them.

Thus, much of North Korea's military buildup is for domestic purposes. It also means that a state of almost-continual crises and threats of imminent war serve the purpose of justifying the regime and explaining the hardships its people are enduring. Tensions with South Korea and the US also serve to isolate the people from a reality that would be potentially fatal to the regime: that there is no imperialist conspiracy to conquer the DPRK and that, rather than seeing them as liberators, most South Koreans view the North as backward and its leadership as both tyrannical and absurd. Additionally, the nuclear weapons and missiles development program is the one achievement that the North Korean regime, which has fallen so far from its goals at creating a prosperous nation, can hold up to their people with pride. In addition to impressing a domestic audience, nuclear weapons provide security to the leadership, while ruling out an attempt at an Iraq-style regime change by the US. Nuclear weapons are also useful bargaining chips for seeking economic aid or other concessions from South Korea and the United States. Thus, the nuclear program is too important for the regime to give up, and American efforts to encourage them have been unsuccessful.

Scholars disagree on whether the leadership of North Korea still hopes to unify the country one day or if their only purpose is to survive.

All evidence, however, points to the fact that the leadership really has no immediate or medium-term goals other than to hang on to their power and privileges. One point is clear: the Kim clan and the elite families that dominate the country are survivors capable of making rational calculations if it promotes their self-preservation. Foreigners have periodically predicted the collapse of the regime, but it endures. For all the wild rhetoric, they have been pragmatic in adjusting the ideology and tinkering with the economy, including incorporating elements of a market economy, adjusting their internal institutions, and engaging with the outside world when they find it is necessary. Even the periodic crises the regime creates follow a familiar pattern: acting as if they are on the verge of war, then stepping back from the brink to engage in diplomacy, and then repeating the cycle again.

While it is reassuring that the North Korean leadership is pragmatic, rational, and even flexible, and that seven decades of provocations and fiery rhetoric have not resulted in renewed conflict, there is always the risk of miscalculation. North Korea could go too far and provoke a reaction by the US or South Korea that leads to war. There is also the concern that the North Koreans who have violated almost every norm of international behavior could sell their weapons or the knowledge of how to make them to countries or groups that wish the US harm. So the risk remains.

Unfortunately, there are few good options for dealing with the situation. North Korea wants the US to establish formal diplomatic relations with it and recognize their country as a nuclear power, while the US insists that P'yongyang give up its nuclear weapons. The United Nations has unanimously supported American-led efforts to punish North Korea for testing nuclear weapons and missiles by imposing sanctions. These, while hurting the DRPK economy, have not effectively crippled or deterred it from pursuing its weapons programs. The North Koreans have been able to circumvent many restrictions on its trade, and it does not have an economy heavily reliant on international commerce. More importantly, 90 percent of its external trade is with or goes through China, thus Beijing's full cooperation is necessary for these sanctions to be effective. Although China has supported UN measures, the Chinese government has only partially enforced them. Beijing is worried about North Ko-

rea's nuclear weapons, but it fears that economic sanctions, if too tightly enforced, could bring about the collapse of the regime. This, in turn, could mean chaos on China's borders, a flood of refugees, "loose nukes," and other problems. Furthermore, the fall of the North Korean regime could mean a South Korean takeover of the country. The Chinese government does not wish to have a unified Korea that is allied with the United States and Japan on its border. Effective US policy measures also depend on South Korean cooperation, but the South Koreans remain divided on how to deal with North Korea. Some, such as current President Moon Jae-in, advocate peaceful negotiations and cooperation with the North; others are more skeptical and take a harder line. However, almost no one wants war, knowing that it would likely be catastrophic for both Koreas; and Seoul, too, fears the chaos a sudden end of the DPRK state could bring.

Some American policymakers have considered a possible military intervention into North Korea to destroy its nuclear weapons and delivery system, but this has many problems. A war on the peninsula, which North Korea would probably quickly lose, could still result in many thousands of casualties and many billions of dollars in damages in South Korea since Seoul is only twenty miles from the border and within range of well-protected North Korean artillery. P'yongyang could strike Japanese cities with its missiles as well. Another problem is that the US does not have good intelligence about North Korea and may not be able to find and destroy its nuclear weapons before the regime is able to use some of them. Just one nuclear strike on the US is a horrible risk to contemplate. While some advocate doing nothing but waiting until internal change comes to North Korea, this could be a long wait. North Korea has the longest-lasting totalitarian regime in modern history and shows no signs of changing or reforming.

Successive American and South Korean administrations have wrestled with ways of getting North Korea to give up its plans to be a nuclear power, from offers of aid and trade to sanctions and military shows of force. However, the regime in P'yongyang has regarded its weapons programs as essential to its survival. At present, North Korea's nuclear program remains a threat with no obvious solution. ■