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NORTH KOREA





INTRODUCTION

Executive Summary	North Korea's conflict with the international community is a high-risk and deteriorating situation. Despite relative stability in governance and militarization, the interdependence of the central government with the military and high levels of demographic stress are significant risk factors. All key stakeholders have a negative impact, and no single entity can achieve positive developments. The expected outcome is that the conflict will remain a frozen conflict in the next six months, with North Korea continuing to expand its nuclear arsenal and increasing tensions in the region. There is limited communication between North and South Korea, making it unlikely that any major progress will be made towards resolving the conflict in the near future. North Korea's nuclear development is a serious threat to peace, security, and the international non-proliferation regime, with the South Korean government and other states making ongoing efforts to resolve the issue. ⁱ
Background	Following the end of WWII and after decades of Japanese colonization, the Korean peninsula was divided into two distinct states — North and South Korea. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, marking the start of the Korean War. ⁱⁱ In 1953 an armistice was signed ending the armed conflict between the two Koreas. ⁱⁱⁱ In the decades since, the authoritarian North Korea has remained very isolated internationally and highly underdeveloped economically. ^{iv} North Korea continues to maintain tense relations with neighboring South Korea and other nations such as the United States. In 2006, after decades of attempts, North Korea successfully completed its first nuclear weapon test. ^v Since then, it has expanded its nuclear program which has increased tensions significantly in the region. The country has subsequently been subject to increased economic sanctions from the UN. ^{vi} Despite diplomatic efforts by the United States in 2018 and 2019, North Korea's rate of nuclearization and militarization has accelerated in recent years. ^{vii} South Korea and other powers in the region have sharpened their own defense initiatives in response. ^{viii}

INDICATORS

HISTORY OF ARMED CONFLICT (Risk level: High, Deteriorating)	
Stabilizing Factors	North Korea has adopted a strategy of (calculated) restraint in its military activities vis-à-vis the Republic of Korea. ^{ix} North Korea has largely refrained from provocative action as it pertains to their strategic and nuclear weapons arsenal, although recent developments suggest that this course of action is prone to change in the near future. Moreover, the United Nations Security Council has passed a series of sanctioning resolutions (in addition to unilateral sanctions imposed by other global powers) to coerce North Korean denuclearization. ^x In 2018, a series of bilateral summits between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in signaled the potential for diplomatic efforts to contribute to ending the conflict. ^{xi} The interstate conflict has not produced any deaths (according to official reports) ^{xii} , and no publicly available information exists to assess the number of internally displaced peoples, although a small number of North Korean defectors do flee the country each year. ^{xiii}
Destabilizing Factors	Despite concerted international efforts to curtail advancements in North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles programs, the country continues to conduct ballistic missile tests and military parades. Recent evidence suggests that North Korea currently possesses a considerable stockpile of nuclear weaponry and that it will continue to enhance its nuclear offense capabilities intended to bypass regional ballistic missile defenses. ^{xiv} North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests since 2006, and despite a public announcement in 2018 that the country would cease its nuclear testing, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports observed that North Korea had begun restoring its test tunnels in March 2022. ^{xv} Ballistic missile tests also occurred at unprecedented levels in 2022, with a total of 63 launches throughout the year. ^{xvi}
Assessment	North Korea currently remains hostile to bilateral dialogue and the involvement of third-party actors. External interventions have failed to produce meaningful results in terms of conflict resolution. The country possesses robust cyber capabilities and maintains an evolving nuclear arsenal and weapons stock that pose an existential threat to the Republic of Korea and potentially other key stakeholders. Recent developments suggest that North Korea may seek to enhance its nuclear and ballistic missile capacity in the near future and escalate provocative engagements with South Korea.

INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES (Risk level: High, Deteriorating)	
Stabilizing Factors	North Korea is a member of the United Nations and is actively involved in UN based organizations such as UNICEF, WFP, and FAO. North Korea receives tens of millions of USD in aid from these organizations per year. ^{xvii} Most of North Korea's closest neighbors are stable democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. ^{xviii}
Destabilizing Factors	North Korea is neither a member of any international economic organizations nor a party to any major global financial institutions such as the World Bank or World Trade Organization. ^{xix} North Korea and China recently renewed a mutual defense treaty in 2021. ^{xx} Though there are no ongoing armed conflicts in the region, there has been a steady rise in tension between nearby China and Taiwan and a subsequent increase in these states' military exercises. ^{xxi} There was a brief period of improved relations between the United States and North Korea in 2018 and 2019. ^{xxii} However, since then, there has been a sizeable increase in tensions over North Korea's nuclearization as South Korea, the US, and North Korea have increased their military activities in the region. ^{xxiii}
Assessment	The recent breakdown in relations since 2019 between South Korea, the United States and North Korea has been worrying, as both military maneuvers and rhetoric have escalated accordingly. This increased hostility suggests that the risk of miscalculation and conflict has risen.

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY (Risk level: High, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	By all metrics, North Korea's governance is utterly repressive. The absence of free media, political competition, and civil rights as well as rule by a personality cult have been staples of the regime for decades. ^{xxiv} As of 2013, this has led to a stable authoritarian regime with no significant changes since 1967. ^{xxv} All aspects of civil life are subject to systematic and arbitrary injustice by the regime. ^{xxvi} While these are unequivocally negative factors, they contribute to the stability of a regime capable of horrendous acts if contested.
Destabilizing Factors	In light of the pandemic, North Korea has tightened its borders and implemented shoot-to-kill orders to prevent entry, exit, and COVID. Within its borders, the regime denies the presence of COVID-19. ^{xxvii} Additionally, failed nuclear weapons reductions negotiations with the US, and new missile capabilities present more recent threats to stability. Corruption has ebbed and flowed from 4.3 in 2017 to 2.4 in 2021 (lower scores indicating more corruption) with a low of 1.4 in 2020. ^{xxviii} While there is no disaggregated or qualitative data on corruption, supplementary news sources would imply that the strain of COVID on the economy has heightened bribery practices. ^{xxix}
Assessment	While COVID-19 may exacerbate living conditions and increase corruption in North Korea, the regime has survived many inflictions on its population. The pervasive and institutional government control on citizens has created internal stability for the regime.

MILITARIZATION (Risk level: High, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	In North Korea, the military holds a central position of power, with disproportionate influence concentrated among military officials. Since 1969, the party has maintained control over the military through its committees and the General Political Department (GPD), where political officers are stationed at all levels of the hierarchy. ^{xxx} The military-first politics approach has been used to politicize the armed forces and enforce the party's will. Kim Il-Sung redefined the party-military, suggesting that "the party committees are the collective political-military leadership bodies" and "all intra-military affairs are determined by the party committee decisions". ^{xxxi}
Destabilizing Factors	There has been a witnessed increase of military exercises within North Korea and as well as in the region, namely in China and Taiwan. Moreover, COVID-19 has exacerbated the military's involvement in keeping order and obedience the government's protocol.
Assessment	The interdependence of the central government and the military poses a significant risk. The military is deeply intertwined with political power, providing support and protection for the regime.

DEMOGRAPHIC STRESS (Risk level: High, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	In North Korea, a shadow economy has emerged as a means for citizens to obtain necessary goods and services. ^{xxxii} Through bribes and negotiations, citizens are able to supplement their meager incomes and improve their standard of living. ^{xxxiii} Despite its limited impact, the shadow economy represents a crucial source of support for ordinary citizens in the country.
Destabilizing Factors	North Korea is facing a severe humanitarian crisis as a result of widespread food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already dire situation, leading to food availability dropping to unprecedented levels since the 1990s famine. ^{xxxiv} The country is also facing the detrimental effects of international sanctions, which are driving up the cost of goods and making it increasingly difficult for citizens to meet their basic needs. ^{xxxv}
Assessment	North Korea's food insecurity crisis is a critical challenge to the country's development. As citizens struggle to afford basic necessities, their ability to secure meaningful employment is severely compromised, hindering the country's economic growth. Furthermore, the shadow economy is unlikely to provide sufficient support for the population, leaving the citizens in a precarious situation.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (Risk level: Moderate, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	North Korea has relatively high rates of both primary and secondary enrollment at 89% and 97.8% respectively. ^{xxxvi} However, this data only pertains to 2017-2018 as this information is not updated continuously. Infant mortality and maternal mortality rates have been steadily dropping for the past five years and are significantly below the world averages. ^{xxxvii} The life expectancy rate has been gradually increasing as well, from 71.2 years in 2017 to 72.3 years in 2021. ^{xxxviii} The country's citizens also have a reasonably high access to basic sanitation at 82% in 2017. ^{xxxix}
Destabilizing Factors	In 2018, a scientific study was released which reported that HIV/AIDs infections have been steadily rising to 0.069% of the country's population. ^{xl} Though this is a relatively low positivity rate globally, North Korea's poor medical infrastructure suggests that the rate of infection could escalate without detection or proper treatment of the infected. ^{xli} North Korea's access to improved water's sources, though stable from 2016-2020 at around 66% of the population, is below the world average of 74%. ^{xlii} There are also reports of child labour in the country, but the scale of the practice is unknown. ^{xliii} It is also uncertain the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the health of North Koreans. ^{xliv}
Assessment	Though there are some negative trends in regard to certain human development indicators (such as HIV/AIDS, access to improved water sources, and child labour), most human development indicators North Korea are middling. There is much room for improvement regarding human development in North Korea, but it is not a growing or existential threat to the state.

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE (Risk level: Moderate, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	Most assessments of North Korea's economic indicators are carried out by external actors based on estimates derived from available information. The most recent estimation of real GDP (purchasing power parity) in 2015 is valued at \$40 billion US dollars, identical to the two prior years. ^{xlv} This puts GDP per capita at \$1700 US dollars per the 2015 estimate. ^{xlvi} GDP estimates for North Korea are released yearly by the Bank of Korea (located in South Korea). Per BoK calculations, the North Korean real annual GDP decreased by 0.1% in 2021. ^{xlvii} North Korea's inflation rate, official exchange rate, foreign direct investment figures, total debt service and trade openness are publicly unavailable. Primary data on wealth distribution is also not available; however, scholars have turned to innovative means to evaluate income distribution among the population. Available information suggests that a small elite controls an overwhelming proportion of resources, with the remainder of the population surviving at/below subsistence level. ^{xlviii} This stable state of current affairs, in combination with the totalitarian nature of the regime, precludes any mass mobilization on an economic basis.
Destabilizing Factors	North Korea has a centrally planned economy that has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, crop failures, international sanctions, and isolationist policies. This has resulted in declining growth and trade and an increased reliance on China, while also facing poor exchange rate stability. ^{xlix}
Assessment	The North Korean economy remains one of the world's most isolated economies, with limited growth, limited access to modern technology and equipment, and widespread poverty. ^l The economy has been hard hit by international sanctions, natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have limited its ability to trade and engage in international commerce. The government continues to exert tight control over the country's economic activity and resources, which makes it difficult to obtain reliable or comprehensive data on the state of the economy.

POPULATION AND HETEROGENEITY (Risk level: Low, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	North Korea's ethnic composition is one of the most homogenous in the world, with an overwhelmingly majority Korean population. ^{li} There is a small Chinese minority community and a limited number of ethnic Japanese inhabitants. ^{lii} The government exercises tight control over the population and prohibits independent census or demographic data collection, which renders accurate population assessments exceedingly difficult.
Destabilizing Factors	There are no critical destabilizing factors to North Korea's population and heterogeneity at this time. North Korea's demographic situation is stable; ethnic rebellion is unlikely given the small size of ethnic minority groups and the state's oppressive capacity. Negative net migration figures (-1, 589) in 2021 suggest that population inflows and accompanying changes to demographic composition are unlikely to be disruptive factors. ^{liii}
Assessment	The available data suggests that North Korea's population heterogeneity does not factor among the key drivers of conflict with the Republic of Korea. Because of existing restrictions of access to demographic data, exact numbers of ethnic and religious minorities are difficult to both obtain and verify.

ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS (Risk level: Low, Stable)	
Stabilizing Factors	According to statistics from the world development indicators North Korea's rates of fresh water utilization (27.7%), arable lands as percentage of land (19%), and forest as percentage of land coverage (50.6%) are sustainable, stable, and not a source of issue. ^{liv}
Destabilizing Factors	N/A
Assessment	As noted above, North Korea's metrics on key environmental stresses indicate low stress and have done so for some time with negligible change in the last five years.

STAKEHOLDERS

Primary Stakeholders

North Korean government	Negative Impact	Between 2018 and 2019, under the leadership of Kim Jong-un, North Korea improved relations with South Korea and the United States in hopes of loosening the sanctions imposed upon them. ^{lv} However, North Korea in 2019 flatly refused to fully denuclearize its arsenal. ^{lvi} North Korea, since its most recent failed meeting with the United States in 2019, has grown more aggressive in its actions. The state has ramped up missile/ICBM testing, increased its nuclear arsenal, and entirely severed any communication with South Korea. ^{lvii} North Korea now appears to be increasing its nuclear capability to safeguard the regime and deter US or South Korean action.
Republic of Korea (South Korea)	Negative Impact	South Korea is most strongly tied to North Korea in the event of a conflict materialization. Should North Korea act or provoke an attack with any country, it is most plausible that South Korea will be the first choice, mainly given the shared contentious history as well as South Korea's geographic proximity. Further, should there be instability within North Korea that comes from any number of factors such as a humanitarian crisis or conflict with any other country, there will be masses of displaced persons who will flood South Korea's borders. In the event of the worst-case scenario where nuclear attacks are engaged with North Korea, this will have far reaching consequences upon South Korea, due to the contamination of radiation and the severity of the attack harming South Koreans as well.
People's Republic of China (PRC)	Mixed impact	North Korea maintains a relationship of dependency with China as its basic survival relies heavily on Chinese energy, consumer products and food aid. ^{lviii} External observers tend to describe the two states as allies, while Chinese analysts designate the relationship as one of "dubious friendship". ^{lix} Although China has long advanced a policy in favour of a nonnuclear Korean peninsula, it is not Beijing's ultimate interest put a halt to North Korea's nuclear program. Rather, its objectives are more complex and oriented towards the long term; China primarily seeks regime survival and stability in North Korea, as regime collapse would entail significant human and economic repercussions and could pose a considerable threat to China's national security. ^{lx} Despite these ties with North Korea, China's preoccupation with regional stability has prompted it to strengthen ties with South Korea, including diplomatic and trade relations. ^{lxi} Further, given its custodial position, China has considerable leverage over North Korea and its strong ties with South Korea grant it further leverage in influencing the outcome of the conflict. ^{lxii}

Secondary Stakeholders		
Japan	Negative Impact	Japan, along with South Korea in 2018, supported talks between North Korea and the United States regarding North Korean denuclearization. ^{bxi} However, since then, North Korea has increased its missile tests near Japan. ^{bxi} In December 2022, Japan responded by implementing a new policy to increase its military spending from 1 to 2% of the nation's GDP. Further, it is purchasing hundreds of missiles from the US to develop its own "counter strike capacity". ^{bxi} This has damaged its relations with both North Korea and South Korea. ^{bxi} This new military policy represents a sizable escalation in Japan's response to North Korean aggressions as the nation seeks to more actively defend itself.
Russian Federation	Negative Impact	Russia and North Korea share a long history of diplomatic relations that have ebbed and flowed. However, more recently, hostility towards the United States and Western-centric values of governance have pushed the two states to establish closer relations. The war in Ukraine has been a catalyst for these relations, with North Korea demonstrating support for Russia's invasion during a UN General Assembly vote as well as Russian-held referendums in Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. ^{bxi} North Korea has since sold arms to Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and relations between the nations have picked up with Putin publicly declaring desire for closer connections. ^{bxi} Thus, furthering the relationship between the two states and the implications brought to potential conflict
United Nations	Mixed Impact	In 2022, the Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) to the UN publicly condemned the UN as a puppet for the United States and its interests, arguing that US interests are leading to escalated tensions on the peninsula, and overtly disregarding obligations made by the regime to the United Nations. ^{bxi} Internally, UN resolutions regarding Pyongyang's missile proliferation have been halted by two of the permanent security members. ^{bxi} Some cite this as the reason for increased missile testing and the new laws in North Korea having the lowest threshold for nuclear warfare use of any country on earth. ^{bxi} However, it is important to note that North Korea's nuclear proliferation has flourished even under the strictest sanctions imposed by the UN and other actors, thus diminishing the UN's effectiveness in controlling missile proliferation.
United States	Negative Impact	There has been growing animosity between the United States and North Korea, with North Korea perceiving the US as a major adversary, and the level of tension fluctuating depending on the presidential administration. In response, North Korea has conducted nuclear weapons tests to determine if they can reach the US. In turn, the US views North Korea as a threat and a mutual adversary, making the US a key stakeholder in the situation. In the event of increased tensions, the US needs to be prepared to protect its citizens. As a secondary conflict, should North Korea engage in conflict with any of the United States' East Asian allies, the United States has committed to aiding its allies and being a stabilizing force in the region. This is apparent through American military bases planted within South Korea and Japan. ^{bxi}

SCENARIOS

Best Case	North Korea and South Korea again establish between themselves a direct means of communication. North Korea and South Korea reaffirm their commitment to honor the 2018 inter-Korean military deal, thereby decreasing the prevalence of military activity in proximity of each other's borders and reducing the likelihood of hostile interactions. North Korea reduces their missile testing, especially near neighbors such as Japan and South Korea. South Korea and the United States lower the level of joint drills they perform on the peninsula. This lessening of tension and hostility then may provide an opportunity for South Korea, the US, and North Korea to increase their engagement with each other.
Most Likely	It is most likely that the North Korean conflict will remain a "frozen conflict" in the next six months. North Korea is expected to continue expanding its nuclear arsenal, relations with Russia, and conducting tests, which will likely increase tensions in the region. However, with a lack of communication between North and South Korea, it is unlikely that any significant progress will be made towards resolving the conflict in the next six months.
Worst Case	North Korea continues to build up its nuclear arsenal against the wishes of the international community and international organizations such as the United Nations. The international community will rally to approve more sanctions on North Korea as a form of deterrence, but they are ineffective in dissuading North Korea. The acceleration of its nuclear program will allow it to become North Korea to become more bold and conduct missile tests over territories in East Asia as well as towards the US. With weapons being launched over their sovereign territory, these international actors will view it as a security threat and start to engage with North Korea as an adversary and tensions will ultimately build. Aggression is shown towards South Korea with a buildup of military clashes and firing in the northern region of South Korea. This will cause an increase of distrust and tension towards both actors and an overall deteriorating security situation for South Korea.

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