North Korea’s Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons

OVERVIEW
This chapter presented the four levels of analysis that are used to analyze world politics. This case study discusses the serious problem of North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and its reluctance to give up this idea. The purpose of the case study is to enable you to grasp more fully the ways in which the levels of analysis may be used to investigate a particular situation, crisis, or event in the international arena. The discussion begins with an overview of North Korea at the state level of analysis. It then moves to the individual level of analysis, where North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Il, plays a very important role. Third, the roles of the regional players—China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea—are presented, and, finally, the view shifts to the international system as a whole. In reading the material, ask yourself which bits of information at which level of analysis give you the clearest understanding of why North Korea seems to be adamant in pursuing a nuclear program. If you can zero in on one level of analysis, you may have found a key to solving the nuclear impasse.

STATE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS
North Korea occupies a mountainous territory, slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Pennsylvania, north of the 38th parallel on the 600-mile-long Korean peninsula. In 2004, the population was estimated around 22,700,000, with a growth rate of 1.0 percent.

Background
From 1910–1945, Japan occupied Korea as a colonial power. After the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II, Korea was partitioned into two zones of occupation, the Russian or Soviet zone in the north and the U.S. zone in the south. In 1948, the division was made permanent with the creation of a Western-oriented South Korean state and a communist North Korean state under the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung. In June 1950, the North Koreans launched a well-timed and orchestrated surprise invasion of South Korea, hoping to unite the peninsula under one communist regime. The UN Security Council—with the exception of the Soviet Union, whose representative walked out of the discussions—unanimously condemned the attack. The U.S. and British governments quickly organized a multinational UN command. The newly constituted Chinese communist government determined to protect its own borders, entered the war, and drove U.S. troops and their allies south of Seoul, the South Korean capital. The conflict finally stabilized at the 38th parallel. In 1953, an armistice was signed confirming the border between the two states. A U.S. force was permanently stationed at the border to ensure there were no violations.

The situation remained relatively stable until 1994, when North Korea refused to allow UN inspectors to inspect its nuclear sites. The death of Kim Il Sung and the uncertainty attending the leadership of his son, Kim Jong II, increased fears of a nuclear fallout. Under U.S. President Bill Clinton, an agreement was reached whereby North Korea agreed to admit the inspectors in exchange for two U.S.-built light water reactors, provided by South Korea.

From 1995 on, a countrywide famine in North Korea turned international concern away from the nuclear crisis. Two years of rain and floods, followed by droughts, provoked catastrophic crop failure in 1997 and 1998, resulting in estimates of over 2 million dead and thousands fleeing into China for refuge. Lack of distribution facilities made it difficult for the UN to distribute food, and as late as 2002, there were reports that many North Koreans were eating grass for lack of food.

Famine did not stop the North Korean government from launching a missile test over the Sea of Japan in 1998, alarming Japan. Tension between North and South Korea came into the open when the South Koreans twice struck North Korean vessels, hitting the first and sinking the second.

The Recent Crisis
In 2000, the then South Korean president Kim Dae Jung inaugurated a “sunshine policy” toward the North by organizing a summit meeting with Kim Jong Il, the first meeting between the leaders of the two countries. Despite the South’s overtures and North Korea’s desperate need for food and assistance, the latter continued on its nuclear path. In the fall of 2002, North Korea announced it had violated the 1994 agreement freezing its nuclear weapons program and had indeed been developing nuclear bombs. The North Korean government further announced that in the 1970s and 1980s it had kidnapped around a dozen Japanese for the purpose of training North Korean spies. In December 2002 the North Koreans expelled the UN nuclear inspectors and in January 2003 officially withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) they had signed in 1985. President Kim then activated a plant at Yongbyon that converts nuclear waste into nuclear-grade plutonium. In March 2003, four North Korean MiGs
intercepted a U.S. Air Force spy plane, forcing abandonment of the mission.

In the second round of six-party multilateral talks held in April 2003, North Korea said it had already made nuclear weapons, and in July it announced that it had reprocessed enough plutonium to build a six nuclear bombs. What explanations can we find for North Korea's seemingly destructive behavior? One key lies in the character of the dictator, Kim Jong II. Who is he? What does he want?

**INDIVIDUAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS**

The present dictator of North Korea was born in 1942, probably somewhere in the far eastern part of the former Soviet Union, to which his father, Kim Il Sung, had fled as a guerrilla to escape the Japanese. His father returned to Korea after 1945, and the Soviets made him head of the new North Korean communist state.

Kim Jong II graduated from the Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang and seems to have become a major figure in the propaganda department. In 1980, Kim Il Sung officially made Kim Jong II his successor and in 1991 the commander-in-chief of North Korea's armed forces. Kim Il Sung died suddenly of a heart attack in 1994. In honor of his father, Kim Jong II left the post of president vacant and designated himself chairman of the Workers (Communist) Party and head of the ten-man National Defense Commission. Under his administration, the country has experienced a military buildup that was unimaginable under his father.

Observers still do not know what to make of the North Korean dictator. He has been outside his country only four times and so knows very little about what lies beyond his "Hermit Kingdom." The reverence for him in North Korea is extraordinary, and he clearly is in control. Like his father, who started it, Kim Jong II endorses the policy of *juche*, or self-reliance and economic self-sufficiency, shutting off the country from the rest of the world. Indeed, Kim has adhered even more strictly to *juche* than his father, since he came to power during the breakup of the USSR, which had been North Korea's main economic support. Kim Jong II has many detractors, but some see him as a pragmatic leader who has played a bad hand of cards shrewdly. He has managed to obtain millions of dollars for his country without conceding anything in return.

Is Kim Jong II's pursuit of nuclear weapons and his refusal to sit down at conferences and discuss the issues a form of nuclear blackmail to extort money from his neighbors and the United States? Is his military buildup a way of saying, "This is my kingdom, and I am running it. There will be no reunification except under my terms?" Kim Jong II remains a mystery.

**REGIONAL LEVEL OF ANALYSIS**

North Korea's neighbors are South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China. Each has pursued ambivalent policies toward the North, for different reasons. A look at South Korea comes first.

South Korea's worst fear is that North Korea will again launch an invasion. Fifty years have passed since the Korean War, and the South is no longer sure that the United States will come to its aid if North Korea should attack; it is also no longer certain that U.S. assistance is desirable. The 2003 elections brought to power Roh Moo-hyun, a man who engineered his win largely on the anti-American stance of younger voters, who see the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea as a hindrance to reunification with the North. Roh campaigned successfully on a policy of leniency and reconciliation with the North, as opposed to his opponent, Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party, who advocated a get-tough stance. However, the sunshine policy of reconciliation with North Korea, adopted by Roh's predecessor and pursued by the new president, has led to few concrete results. South Korea continues to pursue a strategy of a more open economic and political policy across the 38th parallel, but its admission in the fall of 2004 that an institute affiliated with the South Korean government had conducted a test to enrich uranium four years previously suggest it has been thinking of assuming a more aggressive defensive posture.

China is in a difficult position. For over fifty years, as the leading Asian communist power China championed its communist neighbor to the north. Since the 1970s, however, China has experienced rapid economic development, and its growth rate has outpaced that of the other developing Asian countries. Foreign investment and international trade are way up. China finds itself once again the regional leader of a prosperous East Asian region. In the 1950s, the chairman of the Chinese People's Republic, Mao Zedong, may have called the U.S. atomic bomb "a paper tiger" and tried to recruit the North Koreans to his point of view. Today, however, China has too much going for it to want to risk a nuclear war in Asia, and it is now among the defenders of a multilateral solution to the problem. As such, China has reversed its anti-imperial, anti-United States, forward-with-communist-revolution stance and it has become a defender of the status quo.

The architect of China's new, more diplomatic approach to North Korea is the current president, Hu Jintao, who wants to maximize his country's diplomatic gains to promote Chinese prestige and status in Asia. Because all the regional players are in favor of negotiation, China wants to be seen as the lead player. The Chinese fully support the sunshine policy of negotiation rather than confrontation with North Korea. Its long-term interests focus on reunification with Taiwan, and any war would set back the realization of this project.

The consequences of the shift in foreign policy may be far-reaching. For one thing, China has shown its willingness to serve as mediator between the United States...
and North Korea in support of U.S. efforts to get Pyongyang to show restraint. The North Koreans accuse the Chinese of biased mediation, but in fact, through its control of some 20 percent of North Korea's foreign trade, China has forced Kim Jong II to the bargaining table by threatening his oil supplies. China may hold more cards in the game of modifying North Korea's behavior, but at the same time, it risks losing face if it is seen as adhering too closely to U.S. strategy.

Russia's position on the nuclear crisis is more ambivalent than China's. On August 9, 2004, the Russian newspaper Pravda published an article alleging that the United States had expressed official concern that Russia was cooperating closely with North Korea in the development of a new ballistic missile that could be launched from a ship and was capable of hitting a target up to 4,000 miles away, including the United States. Spokesmen from the military design complex in Chilyabinsk where the missile was originally developed accused the United States of new attacks against the Russian military defense industry.7

The fact that Russian scientists may unofficially be helping North Korea develop a missile comes as no surprise. Under the Soviet regime, the Soviet government openly assisted and supported the North Koreans in the development of their military. The contacts made during that period have not all been broken, and many scientists employed in the Russian military were left after the fall of the USSR with low pay and few prospects for their services. One could also argue that the nuclear armament of North Korea assures that country's survival as a buffer for Russia on the Pacific coast. Equally critical, Russia's tacit assistance to a North Korean nuclear program means that the United States, China, and Japan cannot leave Russia out of the current multilateral talks with North Korea, as the United States did in the 1994–1995 agreement.

However, officially, Russian interests are, like the Chinese, in negotiation. The nuclearization of the Korean peninsula would weaken Russia's military and political influence in the Pacific, while a preemptive strike against the North Koreans by the United States would collapse Russian hopes of a stable Pacific market and threaten the Russian–North Korean border. Russia does not want to see American domination of the Korean peninsula. While the United States is occupied in the Middle East, Russia may have a window of opportunity to use diplomacy to influence the outcome of the multilateral talks.

Japan is the only regional neighbor that has not normalized relations with North Korea. The Japanese insisted that normalization would be possible only after the North Koreans admit their action and returned all the Japanese they kidnapped. When North Korea made the admission, in 2002, the Japanese still hung back. As with South Korea, there is a great deal of mistrust and misunderstanding between the former colonial power and its colony, and this mistrust has not been diminished by North Korea's firing of missiles over the Sea of Japan nor Japan's refusal to apologize for the thousands of Koreans it abduced during World War II, including innocent women used as "comfort women" for the Japanese armed forces. Improvement in relations between Japan and the peoples of the Korean peninsula is a key to any successful solution to the nuclear standoff. The Koreans perceive Japan's attitude as that of a past bully wanting once again to become regional hegemon.

**The International System as a Whole Level of Analysis**

In discussing the positions of North Korea's neighbors, we have, in effect, presented the views of the major players in the international system, except that of the United States. It is clearly in the interest of the United States to avoid a war on the Korean Peninsula, especially given its heavy involvement in regime building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to 9/11 the United States might have had direct leverage and the ability to conduct bilateral talks with Pyongyang. The Twin towers catastrophe eliminated that possibility, because the United States saw North Korea, Iran, and Iraq with tacit assistance from Russia, as rogue states cooperating in the development of missiles and nuclear weapons. President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002 dotted the Is on who's in who in the "axis of evil."8 Today the United States cannot rely, as it did in 1994–1995, on South Korea to transmit its message to the North since the new South Korean president came to power on a strong anti-American platform. As the former colonial power, Japan has little bargaining power with Kim Jong II. The remaining great powers in Asia are China and Russia. The Cold War has not been over long enough to remove the legacy of mistrust and suspicion generated by fifty years of antagonism. While the United States recognizes a legitimate military and political role for Russia in the Pacific Rim, it is unhappy with President Vladimir Putin's apparent return to a more authoritarian form of government and with his crackdown on the free press and on his opposition. The United States has not forgotten the strong Russian opposition to the U.S.–led invasion of Iraq, which caused loss of face in the Security Council, nor has Russia forgotten the U.S. slap in its face by accepting the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Baltic states into NATO. The war on terrorism is another divisive issue, as the United States is reluctant to recognize a direct linkage between the war in Russia's southern republic of Chechnya and the international Islamist terrorist movement. Moreover, the Russian people are not happy with their diminished status in world affairs and tend to support an assertive independent Russian foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Russia does have longstanding contacts in North Korea, and neither Russia nor the United States wants to see the emergence of nuclear rivals on the Korean
Peninsula. So the United States has turned to Russia to use what influence it has.

As this discussion points out, the country with the most influence is China. The United States has turned to China as the mediator of the crisis and is pressing China to pull the North Koreans into honest discussions of a solution to the crisis. In return for the favor, the Chinese will certainly press for a definitive statement of U.S. support for the One China policy that defines China and Taiwan as one country. The question is whether the promise of a nuclear-free Korea is worth sacrificing if the idea of a free democratic Taiwan must be given up.

In summary, all three of the Asian powers—China, Russia, Japan—and the United States have a common interest in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In 2003 and 2004, the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South and North Korea held three rounds of six-party talks, with the United States meeting separately with North Korea during the sessions. On February 10, 2005, North Korea announced it had nuclear weapons and suspended further participation in the talks. The North Koreans, however, returned to the table to attend the fourth round of talks in the fall of 2005, at the end of which the six parties issued a joint statement of framework principles.

The fifth round of talks got under way in November 2005 and lasted until February 2007. During this time, China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States each had one-on-one talks with their North Korean counterparts. In July 2006, disregarding warnings from the international community, North Korea test fired seven long-range missiles at least one of which had a range of 3,730 miles capable of reaching Japan and possibly Alaska. The launch failed. North Korea’s action was immediately condemned by the Security Council and served as an impetus to keep the six party talks going. On February 13, 2007, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Christopher Hill announced a six-point agreement to which all the parties adhered. The agreement was similar to the U.S.–North Korean agreement of 1994, with the important difference that this time, all six parties were signatories. The main points of the agreement were that North Korea would shut down and seal its Yongbyon nuclear facility by April 14, 2007, and invite back IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) personnel to monitor compliance. In return, the other five parties agreed to provide 50,000 tons of emergency fuel oil to North Korea to commence within sixty days of the signing. In March 2007, as a further incentive to comply, Assistant Secretary Hill announced that the $25 million in funds belonging to North Korea that had been frozen in an Asian bank were being unfrozen to reciprocate progress made in shutting down the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and readmitting IAEA inspectors. The problem was the North Koreans refused to take any further steps until they received their money. April 14, 2007, came and went with the reactor still in operation. The sixth round of talks destined to finalize the February agreement was thus abandoned, before it had really begun.

The situation remains critical. Shared history and proximity to North Korea make Japan especially vulnerable to North Korea’s missiles. To strengthen its position, Japan has threatened to revitalize its military forces and sought stronger U.S. commitment to Japan’s defense. On May Day, 2007, the U.S.–Japan Security Consultative Committee issued a joint statement in which the United States committed itself to extending the “full range of its military capabilities—both nuclear and non-nuclear strike forces and defensive capabilities” to defend Japan. On its part South Korea continues to pursue its sunshine policy, agreeing to send rice north to alleviate the food problem. In May 2007, North and South Korea reopened talks on implementing trial runs of the cross-border railway. Trains have not run on these tracks for over fifty years. How will the story end? Will the North Koreans shut down their nuclear operation? You decide.

NOTES

1. For an overview of the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea, see “Korea, North” on infoplease at http://www.infoplease.com/countries.html.
10. Associated Press, “2 Koreas agree to talks on train tests; U.S. cautions South Korea on embracing North Korea

QUESTIONS

Test Your Understanding
1. Why has China changed its position from supporting North Korea to supporting the status quo in Asia?
2. What are the problems in dealing with North Korea?
3. Why has Russia come back into the multilateral talks?
4. Why is the United States reluctant to deal with North Korea separately?
5. How has South Korea changed its policy toward the North?

Analyze the Issues
1. What level of analysis tells you most about North Korean/South Korean relations?
2. At what level of analysis do you discover the importance of China’s role? Why at this level?
3. At the international level, how do U.S. policies in other parts of the world affect the ability of the United States to negotiate with North Korea?
4. How important in reaching a solution is understanding Kim Jong Il’s motives and his interactions with other lead players in the crisis?
5. Which level of analysis or combination of levels gives you the clearest insight into the nature of the problem? Why?

FURTHER INFORMATION


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