



Kim Jong Un inherited control of North Korea from his father in 2011.

KCNA/KCNA/REUTERS (KIM JONG UN); JIM NICHolson (DAP)

DOES NORTH KOREA HAVE THE H-BOMB?

Its most recent nuclear test is just the latest cause for alarm about this isolated Communist regime

BY PATRICIA SMITH

North Korea is one of the most belligerent—and unpredictable—countries on Earth. So when its young dictator Kim Jong Un announced last month that his nation had exploded a hydrogen bomb for the first time, it was hardly a surprise. But it did alarm the entire world.

The explosion of a hydrogen bomb “could potentially shake up the security landscape of Northeast Asia and fundamentally change the nature of the North Korean nuclear threat,” said South Korean President Park Geun-Hye.

A hydrogen bomb is much more powerful than a conventional nuclear weapon, which North Korea has detonated three times before, and would represent a significantly increased risk—if North Korea’s claims are true.

But there’s wide skepticism about those claims. Officials in the U.S. and South Korea say the data from the impact of the explosion is not what you’d expect



from a hydrogen bomb; it was more in keeping with that of a traditional atomic device.

But even if last month’s nuclear test wasn’t a hydrogen bomb, it was yet another reminder of the threat that a nuclear-armed, totalitarian regime like North Korea poses to America’s ally South Korea and to the rest of the world. And it’s further proof that North Korea

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continues to work on advancing its nuclear capabilities, despite international sanctions and ongoing pressure to abandon its program.

"This is North Korea thumbing its nose at the international community," says Richard Bush, a North Korea expert at the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C. "It reminds us that North Korea's ambition is to be a country with nuclear weapons."

For the U.S., North Korea's latest nuclear test is unwelcome news. It comes just months after the U.S. and five other nations brokered a deal with Iran to curtail its alleged nuclear weapons program.

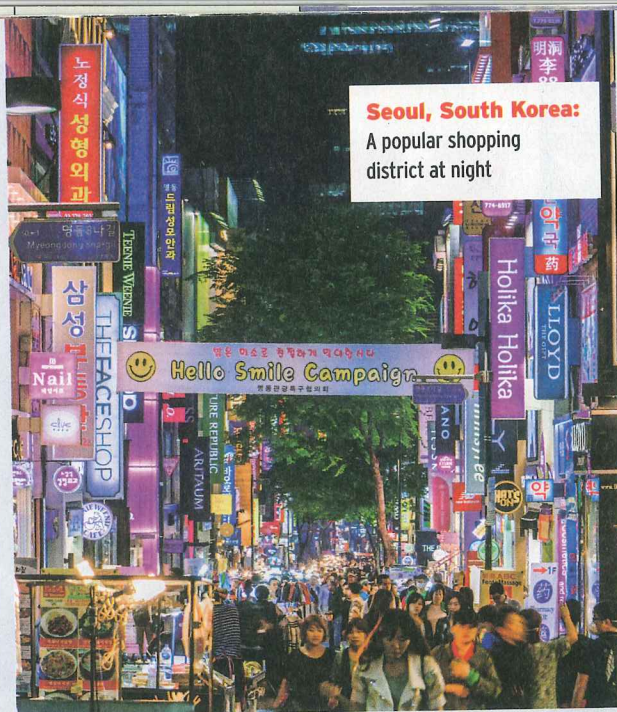
Seven Decades of Conflict

North Korea has a long history of antagonizing the international community, and the U.S. and North Korea have been at odds for seven decades. The roots of the conflict go back to the end of World War II.

In 1945, the Soviet Union occupied Korea north of the 38th parallel and installed a Communist regime, while U.S. and Allied forces controlled what became South Korea.

The North later invaded the South, and the Korean War (1950-53) followed. That conflict, in which 34,000 Americans died, ended in a stalemate, leading to two very different nations (see "South Korea's Rise," above).

South Korea developed into a thriving democracy with a strong, high-tech economy. It's long been a staunch American ally, with 28,000 U.S. troops



Seoul, South Korea:
A popular shopping district at night

South Korea's Rise

The other country on the Korean Peninsula is the polar opposite of North Korea

South Korea is one of the great global success stories of the late-20th century. In the 1960s, the country's per capita GDP was similar to those of many of the world's poorest countries. Today, it's a thriving democracy with a booming economy—the 13th largest in the world.

For nearly 40 years after the end of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea swung between democracy and authoritarianism, going through a succession of coups, elections, riots, and assassinations. Elections in 1988 ushered in the South's current period of prosperity and its emergence as a manufacturing powerhouse. It's now a major exporter of cars and electronics, and brands like Hyundai and Samsung have become familiar to American consumers. South Korea also boasts the world's fastest Internet connections, which are substantially faster than in the U.S.

stationed there to protect South Korea.

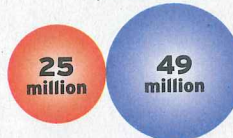
North Korea, on the other hand, became a Communist country and one of the most repressive and isolated regimes in the world. When Kim Jong Un, then in his late 20s, inherited the dictatorship after the 2011 death of his father, Kim Jong Il, there was hope that he might modernize the country and improve relations with the inter-

national community. But he's proved to be as ruthless as his father and his grandfather, who founded the regime. He's continued to test missiles and even threatened a nuclear strike against South Korea and the United States. In 2013, Kim ordered the execution of his uncle—his second-in-command and mentor—for allegedly plotting a coup. There were also unconfirmed reports

Side by Side

North Korea | South Korea

Population



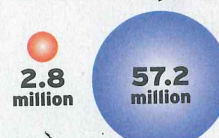
Life expectancy



Per capita GDP



Number of cellphones



Miles of paved roads



SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK (C.I.A.)

that Kim had his uncle's entire family—including children—executed as well.

Under Kim's rule, North Koreans continue to live in a totalitarian "Big Brother" state, in which even thoughts are controlled—as George Orwell depicted in his novel 1984. Ordinary citizens have no Internet access, and TVs and radios receive only government channels. Homes are equipped with loudspeakers that blare state-sponsored slogans and sanitized news all day long and can't be shut off.

Food is scarce. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, North Korea's economy, which had long relied on Soviet aid, began a catastrophic decline. While millions have starved, the regime has spent billions on a massive army and nuclear weapons program.

Anyone who dares to challenge the government is treated mercilessly. A 2014 United Nations report accused the Kim regime of committing "crimes against humanity" and estimated that there are up to 120,000 political prisoners in four camps. Starvation, the report says, has been used to control and punish North Koreans, both in the camps and in the general population.

With so many problems at home, Kim seems to have calculated that cementing the country's status as a nuclear power will boost his standing and distract North Koreans from the dire state of the nation's economy.

"The benefits of being a nuclear power—to deter external threats and prove strength domestically—must in his mind outweigh the costs of facing yet another round of condemnation and sanc-



Grass for lunch: Amid widespread famine, North Korean girls collect grass to eat in the village of Jung Pyong Ri in 2010.

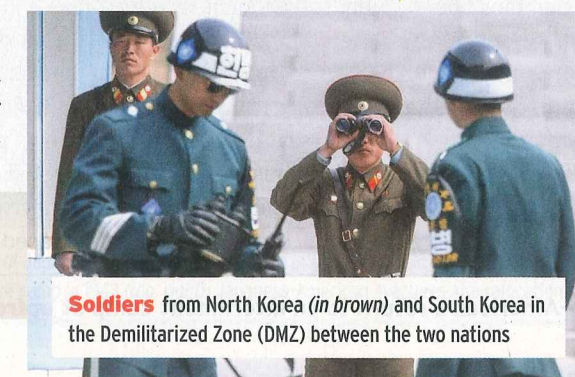
'With this test, [Kim] projects power and claims to enhance national security.'

tions, which [North Korea] is used to by now," says John Delury, a North Korea expert at Yonsei University in Seoul. "So with this test, he projects power and claims to enhance national security."

A Bargaining Chip?

Many analysts believe that North Korea may be trying to use its nuclear power as a bargaining chip to get the international community to agree to send more aid. Others suggest that North Korea genuinely fears an attack by the U.S. or South Korea and sees the nuclear tests as a deterrent. Highlighting a perceived threat from abroad is a favorite tool of the North Korean government to encourage domestic unity.

But the latest nuclear test has infuri-



Soldiers from North Korea (in brown) and South Korea in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the two nations

ated China, North Korea's only major ally.

"China strongly opposes this act," says Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "China will firmly push for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

In 2014, trade between China and North Korea totaled \$6.4 billion and included shipments of critically needed resources like oil and food, so the threat that China might suspend, or even reduce, trade should concern North Korean leaders. But at the same time, China is in a bit of a bind.

"Putting more economic pressure on North Korea might also lead to the fall of Kim, the collapse of the regime, and all kinds of unpredictable situa-

tions China does not wish to see," says Cheng Xiaohe, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing.

Just after the most recent nuclear test, the United Nations Security Council condemned North Korea and met to consider new sanctions against the Kim regime—even though it was becoming increasingly clear that his government hadn't tested a hydrogen bomb, as it claimed.

Bush, the North Korea expert at Brookings, says that even though Kim appears to have exaggerated what his scientists accomplished, it's not a time for other nations to be complacent.

"We should not just breathe a sigh of relief because it wasn't a hydrogen weapon and go back to business as usual," he says. "They are making progress; this was an advance." •

With reporting by Choe Sang-Hun and Javier C. Hernández of *The New York Times*.

Today When Kim Jong Un inherited control from his father in 2011, there were hopes he would mend relations with the world. But he continues to threaten other nations, including South Korea and the U.S.

KOREA KEY DATES

1945 At the end of World War II, Korea is divided, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. troops in the south.

1950-53 The Korean War, in which 34,000 Americans and more than 2 million Koreans die, ends in a stalemate, with the country still divided.

1995 While South Korea's economy is booming, North Korea suffers from a terrible famine when its state-run economy can't produce enough food; hundreds of thousands die.

2006 North Korea tests its first atomic weapon despite efforts by the U.S. and the U.N. to prevent it from becoming a nuclear power.