

North Korea: Possible scenarios

SUMMARY

On 3 September 2017, North Korea conducted a sixth nuclear test, its most powerful yet, claiming to have successfully tested a miniaturised hydrogen bomb that would fit in an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The North Korean crisis, which has a long history, has now the potential to develop into a large-scale conflict affecting a large variety of actors across the globe. Pyongyang has become a global threat combining increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons and missiles programmes that could strike the USA and even Europe. This has been made possible by the international community's lack of a common strategy and Chinese support for the North Korean regime. All the while, this 'hermit kingdom', which a 2014 United Nations (UN) report accused of crimes against humanity, has continued to feed its traditional anti-American rhetoric and has succeeded in taking its devastating human rights record off the international agenda.

As the international community tries to resolve the current crisis, analysts have identified a number of possible scenarios: reinforcing international sanctions to push Pyongyang to the table to negotiate an agreement to renounce its nuclear programme in exchange for economic support and a guarantee of not being attacked; performing a pre-emptive strike against its nuclear sites, undergoing the risk of retaliation against Seoul; and assenting to North Korea's demand to be recognised as a *de facto* nuclear power and to conclude the peace treaty that was never signed at the end of the 1950-1953 Korean War – which ultimately is Kim's real goal and the reason for this escalation.



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From the Korean War to military escalation

Partition of the Korean peninsula and the origin of Pyongyang's nuclear programme

After the Japanese withdrawal at the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided in two on the 38th parallel: the USSR-supported the North (Democratic Popular Republic of Korea, DPRK) and the USA-supported the South (Republic of Korea, ROK). In June 1950 the North – sustained by the USSR and China – invaded the South. The USA formed a UN-backed allied force that pushed the invaders back but provoked Chinese intervention. The [armistice](#) of July 1953 ended the stalemate of a bloody conflict that left [two million Koreans dead](#). A peace treaty was never signed and the two sides are still technically at war. In 1974 North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and in 1985 joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) without, however, having completed a safeguards agreement with the IAEA. However Pyongyang succeeded in building a nuclear programme, [allegedly](#) with Pakistani support providing Chinese technology. In 1994, former US president Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang and negotiated a [deal](#) dismantling the North Korean nuclear programme in exchange for proliferation-resistant power reactors (North Korea had just withdrawn from the IAEA). In 2002, then US president George W. Bush accused North Korea of forming an 'axis of evil' with Iraq and Iran and of implementing a secret uranium enrichment programme. The deal on the nuclear programme fell through and in 2003 North Korea announced its [withdrawal](#) from the NPT. This resulted in the Six-Party Talks (SPT) between China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Russia and the USA. The talks aimed to find a peaceful resolution to the security concerns arising from the North Korean nuclear weapons programme. In 2005 North Korea [declared](#) it had nuclear weapons. In October 2006 Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test. In April 2009 North Korea quit the SPT and ceased all cooperation with the IAEA; one month later Pyongyang conducted its second nuclear test.

Escalation under Kim Jong-un

Though projecting a more [modern image](#) through Kim Jong-un, who succeeded his father in December 2011, the regime has not changed, remaining closed to the rest of the world while increasing its anti-American rhetoric. In February 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights issued a [report](#) accusing North Korea of crimes against humanity. Meanwhile, North Korea conducted three more nuclear tests in February 2013, and January and September 2016. Pyongyang has also performed a number of missile tests. In July 2017 it test-fired its first ICBM twice. On 9 August 2017 North Korean media said Pyongyang was [considering](#) firing missiles at [Guam](#), a Pacific island where the USA has a military base. On 29 August 2017 it launched a ballistic missile over Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. Most recently, on 3 September 2017, North Korea conducted a [sixth nuclear test](#), the [most powerful](#) yet, claiming to have successfully tested a miniaturised hydrogen bomb that would fit in an ICBM.

Despite being closed to the world and being targeted by UN sanctions since 2006, North Korea [sustains itself](#) through trade with China (importing oil and selling coal) but also allegedly through reserves in Chinese banks, revenues from hacking banks, the [black market for weapons and illicit minerals](#), and selling forced labour. [Arguably](#) North Korea has won time to diversify its revenues on account of China's stalling and vetoing more meaningful sanctions at UN level. North Korea has also taken advantage of the [divisions](#) between the main regional actors (China, Japan and South Korea) whose economies are interconnected, but whose political relations are often strained owing to territorial disputes and historical legacies linked to the resurgence of nationalism. Frictions between them and the on-going US administration are emerging.

South Korea has been going through [political turmoil](#) with little US support. President Trump wants to [renegotiate](#) the US-Korea trade agreement, KORUS, at a time of instability on the peninsula. Analysts argue that the exchanges of [words](#) between the US and North Korean leadership in recent months may have undermined Washington's [credibility](#) and cast doubt on the existence of a coherent US [strategy](#). UN Secretary-General António Guterres has [warned](#) against using 'confrontational rhetoric' on the North Korea crisis and has asked the major powers to come up with a single strategy.

The Chinese conundrum

The North Korea crisis has put China in an uncomfortable position. US President Trump has [criticised](#) China for not taking more action against Pyongyang despite its leverage (it accounts for [90 %](#) of North Korea's trade and their [exchanges have increased](#) in 2017). Beijing has suspended Pyongyang's [coal imports](#) until the end of 2017 but is under pressure to adopt a full [embargo of oil](#) exports to North Korea. It has been [argued](#) that the North Korea crisis helps Beijing to distract world attention from its assertiveness in the South and East China Sea. China, together with Russia, advocates '[dual suspension](#)' of North Korea's tests and US military exercises in South Korea. Its main interest is in keeping the region's peace and security, while Kim's rhetoric has offered the USA a pretext to [deploy](#) a terminal high-altitude area defence ([THAAD](#)) system in South Korea, which Beijing claims could be used to intercept Chinese missiles.

Possible scenarios

Negotiation

The international community has consistently condemned Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests, inviting North Korea to refrain from further challenges to regional stability, in the hope of coaxing it to the table to negotiate renouncing the nuclear programme in exchange for food aid, economic support, and guarantees that the regime will not be overthrown and the country not attacked. However the [UN sanctions](#) that have regularly been adopted by the Security Council – and increasingly endorsed by the previously reluctant [China](#) and Russia – have failed to convince Pyongyang, which has gained time to achieve the ballistic capability of reaching the [USA](#) (and soon Europe too, as [warned](#) by French defence minister, Florence Parly on 5 September 2017). [Analysts](#) point to [loopholes](#) in the UN-adopted sanctions, while the [USA](#), [South Korea](#), [Japan](#) and [Australia](#) have called on China, which has decisive leverage over Pyongyang, to isolate North Korea economically by cutting oil supplies in order to bring the regime to its knees. [Russia](#), however, is against this move. [South Korea's](#) President Moon Jae-in is still pushing for a peace proposal, combining the offer of talks with increased pressure, but so far [without success](#). US President Donald Trump, departing from the previous administration's policy of '[strategic patience](#)', has threatened to stop trade with countries doing business with North Korea – a threat that is [hard to apply](#) and that has been criticised by [China](#). Meanwhile Pyongyang refuses to put its '[nuclear deterrent](#)' on the negotiating table.

Use of pre-emptive force

On several occasions [US President Trump](#) has hinted at the use of force through a [pre-emptive strike](#) against North Korea. Meanwhile US Defence Secretary James Mattis has [said](#) that the USA is 'never out of diplomatic solutions' in dealing with North Korea. [China and Russia](#) have warned against the mounting rhetoric and the use of force to solve the North Korean crisis. Indeed, North Korea's retaliation could strike Seoul, a 10-million inhabitant metropolis around 40 kilometres from the border, potentially causing huge casualties. The lives of the 28 500 US soldiers based in South Korea would

also be in danger, as would the territory of allied Japan, which is host to US bases with 47 000 soldiers. The Chinese, bound by the 1961 Treaty of Mutual Assistance, are also afraid that a war on the Korean Peninsula could bring a humanitarian catastrophe to its borders with an influx of refugees, and the loss of a key buffer state should the two Koreas reunify with Washington's support.

Conceding to North Korean demands

[Analysts](#) note that it is unlikely that Kim Jong-un would give the order to attack another country. The nuclear and missile programmes, while strengthening his legitimacy in the eyes of the North Koreans, represent life insurance for him and his regime, in order to avoid the fate of other tyrants like Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi or Slobodan Milosevic. North Korea's hope is to conclude a peace treaty with the USA, a perspective that, according to [analysts](#), would risk side-lining South Korea and undermining its security, as Pyongyang may secure the departure of US troops. North Korea also wants to be recognised as a [nuclear power](#). This is acknowledged by [Russia](#), which is against tougher sanctions. Recognition would be inconsistent with the NPT, but the examples of the India, Pakistan and Israel show that a country can be given *de facto* nuclear power status. Meanwhile, other countries in the region (e.g. [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#) – Tokyo is planning a 2.5 % [defence budget increase](#)) might react by deciding to acquire nuclear capabilities, resulting in escalation and further instability in the region.

Long-term efforts bringing regime change

Analysts have long predicted the collapse of the North Korean regime but have been proved wrong. The country is isolated but can still destabilise the region. The sanctions approved so far have been ineffective because they do not affect the elite that is increasingly [opposed to Kim's rule](#). In the long term, a change of leadership could be achieved by means of a persistent counter-information campaign targeting the population, [breaking](#) the state's [monopoly on information](#), in [support](#) of the efforts of [North Korean defectors](#).

The European Union on North Korea

The EU has a policy of [critical engagement](#) towards North Korea, aimed at supporting a lasting reduction in tension on the peninsula and in the region, upholding the international non-proliferation regime and improving the human rights situation. The EU has implemented the UN Security Council sanctions but has also kept dialogue channels open. Of the 28 Member States, 26 have diplomatic relations with North Korea. The European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on North Korea on 21 January 2016 urging Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and advocating a diplomatic and political solution. MEPs pointed to the human rights situation and called on the international community to bring those responsible for crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court while imposing targeted sanctions.

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