



North Korea spends lavishly on its military, as seen in a parade in Pyongyang. Kim Jong Un (below) inspects defenses.

KOREAN WAR PART 2?

Sixty years after the end of the war, tensions are rising on the Korean peninsula

BY CHOE SANG-HUN IN SEOUL

Ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, North and South Korea have uneasily coexisted on either side of a tense and heavily fortified “demilitarized zone” (DMZ).

In the North, a secretive totalitarian Communist regime has ruled over a starving, tightly controlled population. In the South, a vibrant democracy, protected by U.S. troops, has produced one of the world’s most technologically advanced economies.

Not at war, but not at peace either, the two nations have maintained a mostly nonviolent standoff, with hopes on both sides for an eventual reunification of the two Koreas.

But recent actions by North Korea and its young, unpredictable leader, Kim Jong Un, have raised the threat of a military confrontation. Last month, the North declared the armistice that ended the war and has largely kept the peace for the last 60 years “nullified.” And it threatened to launch a “pre-emptive nuclear strike” against South Korea and the United States. In response, the U.S. sent B-2 stealth bombers over South Korea in a show of force.

It’s difficult for outsiders to know exactly what Kim’s true intentions are, but given North Korea’s history of provocative actions and bizarre behavior, the threats are being taken seriously. Taking no chances, the U.S. announced it would spend \$1 billion on additional missile defenses in Alaska and California.



▶ WATCH A VIDEO
The Korean War
WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

"The Korean peninsula is heading into a difficult and very dangerous period," says Donald Gregg, a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea.

Tensions on the Korean peninsula are nothing new. When World War II ended in 1945, the Soviet Union occupied the north and installed a Communist regime, while U.S. and Allied forces controlled what became South Korea.

In 1950, North Korea invaded the South. The United Nations called up an international force to defend South Korea, with the U.S. supplying 90 percent of the troops. By the time the fighting stopped in 1953, 34,000 Americans had been killed. North and South Korea signed an armistice but never a peace treaty.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, North Korea's economy began a catastrophic decline. While millions starved, the regime spent a fortune to maintain what is now a million-man army and build up a secret nuclear-weapons program.

In 2006, North Korea announced it had exploded a nuclear bomb. Three years later, it tested missiles and expelled U.N. nuclear inspectors. In 2010, North Korea revealed a uranium-enrichment plant at Yongbyon thought to be for producing more nuclear weapons. In February, it conducted a third nuclear test against the wishes of its only major ally, China.

All this is deeply troubling to the U.S.—which has 28,000 troops in South Korea, within easy range of a North Korean attack.

The threats are influencing South Korean public opinion as well: Polls indicate that two thirds of South Koreans now want their government to have its own nuclear arsenal rather than depend on U.S. military strength as a deterrent.

"The third nuclear test was for South Korea what the Cuban Missile Crisis was for the U.S.," says Han Yong-sup, a professor at the Korea National Defense University in Seoul. "It has made the North Korean threat seem very close."

Labor Camps & Starvation

Conditions within North Korea have sharply deteriorated in recent years. The economy is in shambles: Three-quarters of its factories sit idle. A series of droughts and floods led to massive crop failure starting in the 1990s, and as many as 2 million people have died of starvation.



A North Korean propaganda poster shows missiles attacking the U.S. Capitol in Washington. It reads: "If someone starts an invasion war, we will crush the U.S. bastards first."

Very few people have Internet access. TVs and radios are altered so they receive only government channels, and people live in fear of being sent to labor camps for any kind of dissent.

The young Kim took control after the 2011 death of his father, Kim Jong Il (who took over from his father, North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung). Initial hopes that Kim might be a reformer have been dashed.

Life in South Korea couldn't be more different. Its booming economy is the 12th-largest in the world, and it's a major exporter of cars and electronic goods. South Korea boasts the world's fastest Internet connections—substantially faster than in the U.S.

South Korea is also a thriving democracy. In December, in a closely fought election, voters chose the country's first female president, Park Geun-hye.

Despite the war-like rhetoric coming from the North—including a bizarre statement that blamed rising tensions on the "venomous swish" of President Park's skirt—there has been no sign of actual hostilities. South Korea says the North's threats are intended to strengthen Kim's leadership at home and put pressure on the U.S. and South Korea to return to negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program.

Park has promised to retaliate if South Korea is attacked. But she's also pledged to work to build "trust" with North Korea.

Ironically, the only American who's gotten close to the young North Korean leader is the eccentric former NBA star Dennis Rodman. Kim is a huge basketball fan and recently hosted Rodman in Pyongyang. The two watched an exhibition basketball game together and Rodman attended a party at Kim's palace.

Rodman came home with a diplomatic message of sorts: "He wants Obama to do one thing: Call him," Rodman told *ABC News* after arriving back in the U.S. According to Rodman, Kim said, "I don't want to do war." Though Kim's statements and actions following Rodman's February visit suggest otherwise. ●

Choe Sang-hun is a Times reporter in South Korea. Additional reporting by Martin Fackler of The Times.

Side by Side

North Korea | South Korea

Population



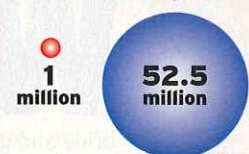
Per Capita GDP



Exports



Number of cellphones



Miles of Paved Roads



SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK 2012 (C.I.A.)

nds
y:
ng
g Un

ED JONES/AFF/GETTY IMAGES (PARADE); KCNA VIA KNS/AP PHOTO (KIM JONG UN)

STRAP PHOTO