

What Christians Need to Know About North Korea

On July 4, 2017, North Korea launched an intercontinental ballistic missile powerful enough to reach the mainland United States. On July 21, authorities in Hawaii announced that they would reactivate a network of Cold War-era sirens to alert the public in the event of a nuclear strike.

On Sept. 3, North Korea tested a nuclear weapon seven times the size of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now its foreign minister has warned that it could test a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific Ocean, which could bring devastating effects to the environment.

Why is a nation less than one-tenth the population of the United States such a challenge to the world?

What is “North Korea”?

“Korea” is derived from *Goryeo*, a name used for the Korean peninsula as early as the fifth century. In 1910, following the Russo-Japanese War, Japan annexed the peninsula.

The country spent the next thirty-five years under military rule. After World War II, U.S. troops occupied the southern part of the peninsula while Soviet forces secured the region north of the thirty-eighth parallel.

Kim Il-sung was a Communist guerrilla working to liberate Korea from Japan. Supported by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, he became the first premier of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. Elections in the South led to a constitution and the inauguration of the Republic of Korea, with its capital in Seoul.

In 1950, Soviet-backed North Korean troops invaded the South.

The Korean War continued until 1953, costing at least 2.5 million lives. An armistice in 1953 ended hostilities but did not officially end the war. A demilitarized zone, roughly following the 38th parallel, separates South Korea from North Korea. The U.S. maintains a strong military presence in South Korea, which the North depicts as an imperialist occupation force.

Kim Il-sung remained in office until his death in 1994. His son, Kim Jong-il, then became Supreme Leader. He died in 2011 and was succeeded by his youngest son, Kim Jong-un.

How does North Korea treat Christians?

The DPRK is officially an atheist state. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry recently found the Kim regime officially guilty of numerous crimes against humanity, including its persecution of Christians.

Open Doors, a ministry to persecuted believers worldwide, ranks North Korea as the “most oppressive place in the world for Christians.” Worship of the Kim family is mandated for all Koreans. Those who refuse are arrested, imprisoned, tortured and often killed. Since North Korea is effectively a police state, public worship is difficult if not impossible.

Why does Kim want nuclear weapons?

During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur reportedly wanted to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and China. Kim Il-sung took this threat seriously, seeking to develop the nuclear capacity to defend his nation from such an attack.

Kim Il-sung began seeking a functional nuclear weapon using Cold War-era Soviet technology. Kim Jong-il carried out the first underground nuclear test in 2006. Five more tests have been conducted in the years since, each one stronger than

before.

The regime has at least four reasons to pursue nuclear weapons.

One: To prevent an attack from South Korea and its allies.

The Kim dynasty seeks regime survival above all else. It knows that an attack from the far superior forces of the South would threaten its future. It views nuclear weapons as a deterrent to such a confrontation.

Two: To aid in its plan to reunify the peninsula.

The Kim regime seeks to capture the South and “reunify” the peninsula. It knows, however, that invading the South would bring a swift and devastating response from US forces stationed there. It believes that nuclear weapons, if capable of striking an American city, would prevent the U.S. from defending the South, enabling the DPRK’s military to defeat its longtime enemy.

Three: To use for negotiating purposes.

North Korea’s leaders have watched the U.S. and other Western nations negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program. They note the support Western leaders have given to India and Pakistan following their nuclear weapons development as well. They may view nuclear weapons as tools they can use in negotiating for sanctions relief and economic and trade support.

Four: To enhance the status of the regime.

North Korea’s leaders seek to be accepted as full members of the international community. They have observed the heightened status accorded nations that have developed nuclear weapons. Such weapons are a source of pride within North Korea and buttress the regime’s authority.

What comes next?

The U.S. has four strategic options:

1. Destroy North Korea's nuclear arsenals, take out its leadership and destroy its military. This approach, however, is not guaranteed to remove all North Korea's missiles or leaders and would require a massive military deployment. Enough armaments could remain to enable North Korea to kill millions within hours.
2. Launch a limited conventional military attack to reduce North Korea's capabilities, forcing Kim Jong-un to abandon his pursuit of nuclear ICBMs. However, it is difficult to limit the escalation of such a conflict, which could threaten Seoul's nearly ten million residents.
3. Attempt regime change, seeking to remove Kim and his inner circle and replace them with leaders more willing to open North Korea to the rest of the world. However, it would be very difficult to get close enough to Kim to remove him. If an attempt were unsuccessful, it could lead to unpredictable, devastating responses.
4. Accept that Kim is obtaining nuclear weapons and seek to limit his ambitions. People in South Korea have lived with the threat of northern invasion for decades. A nuclear strike on the South or the U.S. would bring a devastating response against the North. If there are no acceptable military solutions, diplomatic approaches must be attempted.

No one can predict what Kim Jong-un will do. But we do know that our Father is the King of the universe. "But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and an everlasting King. At his wrath the earth trembles, and the nations cannot endure his indignation" (Jer. 10:10). The psalmist testified: "God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne" (Ps. 47:8).

We can trust the God of eternity with our fears for the future. And we can say with Paul: "Now to the eternal, immortal, invisible King, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17). {eoa}

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