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North Korea: January 2020 update

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Summary

2017 was a year of rapidly rising tensions between the US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (henceforth North Korea). During that year, North Korea conducted two intercontinental ballistic missile tests and a sixth nuclear weapons test.

The regime looked close to having a nuclear weapons capability that could hit the US mainland. US President Donald Trump called on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme or face destruction. UN sanctions were further tightened.

However, there was a sudden improvement in relations in early-2018, with both sides talking up the prospects for peace. Then in April 2018 North Korean President Kim Jong-un announced a moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear tests, saying the country no longer needed such tests. The US welcomed the announcement.

There have been two US-North Korea summits since then. Both involved direct meetings (the first ever) between the leaders of the two countries. There was also a third face-to-face meeting in the Demilitarised Zone which divides the two Korea. There was a series of summits between North Korea and South Korea, at which important confidence-building measures were agreed.

But in recent months the mood has darkened once again, heightening concerns that the parties are abandoning dialogue for confrontation.

Kim Jong-un announced in late-2019 that the US had until the end of the year to make concrete proposals to revive the dialogue. He said that, in their absence, North Korea would give the world a "Christmas gift".

Few expected it to be a welcome one. There was speculation that it would be either another nuclear weapons test or the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the US mainland.

On 25 December, a Central Committee meeting of the Korean Workers Party began. Kim made several speeches at the meeting. He called for "positive and offensive measures" to safeguard the country's "sovereignty and security", announcing that North Korea was abandoning its moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile testing.

He also said that regime would be unveiling a new "strategic weapon" soon. Nobody is sure what kind of weapon this might be. However, some suggest that it might be a new class of ballistic missile submarine.

With the US Administration addressing domestic political challenges and involved in escalating tension with Iran, North Korea may feel it does not yet have its full attention. So even though the promised "Christmas gift" did not materialise, some kind of provocative military operation is still possible if the US-North Korea dialogue does not revive.

Experts disagree about which of the two holds the stronger cards in the current stand-off. Aidan Foster-Carter has argued recently that Kim Jong-un has the upper hand. By contrast, fellow expert Nicholas Eberstadt believes that the US enjoys the advantage – which might explain why President Trump appears relatively relaxed about the situation.

It might also explain why the US remains disinclined to move towards the North Korean position on denuclearisation, which remains a gradualist one based on reciprocal actions – with some sanctions relief upfront: 'something for something'.

The US continues to hold to its view that North Korea should denuclearise first, after which everything else will follow: security guarantees through a peace treaty that ends the Korean War and the complete lifting of sanctions.

As for inter-Korean negotiations, these will only revive if the US-North Korean dialogue re-starts in earnest.

More broadly, crucial strategic questions remain unanswered.

Is North Korea willing to denuclearise? Some experts believe Kim has made a definitive switch towards prioritising North Korea's ailing economy, meaning everything really is up for negotiation. But many find it hard to believe that it will completely give up its nuclear weapons.

Will the US sustain its insistence that North Korea must denuclearise? Or could it ultimately accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, albeit one that has scaled down its capabilities dramatically (above all, in terms of its ability to strike the US mainland) and which is subject to credible verification?

Finally, what happens next will be heavily impacted by wider relations between the US and China. The two have been in a trade war and are testing each other out in the South China Sea. China sees North Korea as its backyard, albeit often a very troublesome one.

If the US-North Korea dialogue is to revive, the two global superpowers will need to maintain lines of communication on the issue and find ways of coordinating their actions.

Drawing conclusions about future prospects on the nuclear issue is not straight-forward. Indeed, making sense of North Korea is not easy. Many North Korea experts [acknowledge](#) that "most of the time we are entirely ignorant, and a very large part of what is reported in the media is based on unreliable hearsay."

For further background, please consult the following Library publications:

[Making sense of the impending US-North Korea summit](#), Library blog, May 2018

[Prospects for the second US-North Korea summit](#), Library blog, February 2019

1. Renewed nuclear crisis?

1.1 2018-19: Summitry delivers little of substance

2017 was a year of rapidly rising tensions between the US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (henceforth North Korea). During that year, North Korea conducted two intercontinental ballistic missile tests and a sixth nuclear weapons test. The regime looked close to having a nuclear weapons capability that could hit the US mainland. US President Donald Trump called on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme or face destruction. UN sanctions were further tightened.

However, there was a sudden improvement in relations in early-2018, with both sides talking up the prospects for peace. Then in April North Korean President Kim Jong-un announced a moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear tests, saying the country no longer needed such tests. The US welcomed the announcement.

There have been two US-North Korea summits since then. Both involved direct meetings (the first ever) between the leaders of the two countries.

The first US-North Korea summit was held in [Singapore](#) in June 2018.

Several [confidence-building actions](#) followed the Singapore summit. North Korea stopped testing nuclear weapons and put some facilities and equipment out of use; the US and South Korea [suspended their military exercises](#).

The second US-North Korea summit took place in Vietnam in February 2019.

There was considerable optimism ahead of the Vietnam summit that further progress towards peace could be made. However, the summit [broke up early](#) without any agreement.

Both sides showed considerable restraint in the aftermath, avoiding overt finger-pointing and declining to rule out future summits should the conditions be right.

There were also three important inter-Korean summits during this period, attended by Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. These led to numerous tangible [confidence-building measures](#)

In 2018 the two men signed the Panmunjom Declaration, which announced a new era of peace on the Korean peninsula and set out their commitment to formally end the Korean War.

The set-back in Vietnam confirmed that the two sides continue to have very different ideas about what denuclearisation should mean and how it should happen. The US wants total denuclearisation by North Korea by the end of 2020 (when President Trump will be seeking re-election). Once this has been done, UN sanctions can be lifted.

North Korea calls instead for the [denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula](#), which potentially brings into play the US 'security umbrella' which has protected South Korea. It has sought a 'step-for-step' process in which sanctions are lifted over time as it moves towards denuclearisation.

The two leaders did [meet again](#) at the end of June 2019 in the Demilitarised Zone that divides the two Koreas. South Korean President Moon also attended. Donald Trump symbolically stepped into North Korea during the meeting. This raised hopes that the two sides might find a way forward through negotiations after all. But despite continuing contacts by high-ranking officials, nothing concrete materialised.

There was also no breakthrough during this period on a peace treaty to end the Korean War (1950-53). Currently there is only an armistice in place.

1.2 Late-2019: the mood darkens

In recent months the atmosphere between the US and North Korea has deteriorated again, heightening concerns that the two sides are abandoning dialogue for confrontation.

Critics have argued that neither US-North Korea summit produced much of substance beyond warm words and symbolic gestures. However, they did help to relax tensions between the two countries over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

Kim Jong-un announced that the US had until the end of 2019 to make concrete proposals to revive the dialogue. He said that, in their absence, North Korea would give the world a "[Christmas gift](#)".

Few expected it to be a welcome one. There was speculation that it would be either another nuclear weapons test or the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the US mainland. An imminent deadline of 22 December under UN sanctions for countries to deport all North Korean workers was viewed as further evidence that the regime was likely to conduct a major military operation before the end of 2019.

During 2019 North Korea [continued testing](#) weapons and technology. It was difficult to be sure of the precise objectives behind the testing. None were of nuclear weapons or intercontinental ballistic missiles.

One expert [said](#):

All of the missiles have several things in common. They are solid fuel, they are mobile, they are fast, they fly low, and at least the KN-23 can manoeuvre in flight, which is very impressive. Any one of the missiles would pose a challenge to regional and ROK [South Korean] missile defences given these characteristics. Together, they pose a nightmare.

Meanwhile, the inter-Korean dialogue has ground to a [complete halt](#). In late-2019 North Korea carried out [artillery drills](#) near the sea border with the South. This violated the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, under which

both sides had pledged to "cease all live-fire and maritime manoeuvre exercises" near what is formally called the '[Northern Limit Line](#)', mothballing their artillery and ship guns in the area.

During 2019, North Korea also took further steps to [cement its relationships](#) with China and Russia. Kim Jong-un attended summits with [Xi Jinping](#) and [Vladimir Putin](#). were widely viewed as ensuring that the regime would have diplomatic cover if relations with the US deteriorated.

In the last weeks of 2019 US diplomacy appeared to go into a relative upswing. Until then it had been relatively becalmed. The US special envoy on North Korea, Stephen Biegun, visited Seoul and [called](#) for a resumption of US-North Korea negotiations. However, he rejected the idea of any end-of-year deadline and there were no signs of a breakthrough.

President Trump appeared [unconcerned](#) about what might happen next, saying on 16 December:

We'll see. I'd be disappointed if something would be in the works. And if it is, we'll take care of it [...] We're watching it very closely.

Christmas came and went without the major military operation that many observers had anticipated. One observer [argued](#) that people had become over-excited by North Korean statements and that the regime had little to gain from conducting another nuclear weapons or intercontinental ballistic missile test, claiming that either would alienate China and Russia, for whom such tests were a 'red line' not to be crossed. Another [pointed out](#) that the regime had announced in 2017 that its intercontinental ballistic missile test programme had been completed, which if true meant that another test was unnecessary.

However, others [warned](#) that this could be the "uneasy calm before the storm" – 2019 was not yet over. On 25 December, a Central Committee meeting of the Korean Workers Party began. Kim made several speeches at the meeting. He [called](#) for "positive and offensive measures" to safeguard the country's "sovereignty and security", announcing that North Korea was abandoning its moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile testing.

Kim also [said](#) that regime would be unveiling a new "strategic weapon" in the near future. Nobody is sure what kind of weapon this will prove to be. However, some [suggest](#) that it might be a new class of ballistic missile submarine.

Finally, Kim said that the North Korean people should [prepare](#) for tough economic times ahead, suggesting that he has abandoned hopes that UN sanctions will be relaxed any time soon.

2. Have UN sanctions worked?

North Korea's turn toward dialogue with the US and South Korea during 2018 was attributed by some observers to the emergence of a more stringent and effective UN sanctions regime in 2017.

Nobody would disagree that the North Korean economy faces massive challenges. No country in which 40% of the population is [estimated](#) by the UN to be in "urgent need" of food assistance can be viewed as having a thriving economy. But for some analysts this simply confirms that UN sanctions are harming ordinary people far more than the elite which they are supposed to be targeting.

However, several have argued that it would be a mistake prematurely to relax sanctions at precisely the moment that they are [making a difference](#). Joshua Stanton said in April 2019:

The fact that Pyongyang can no longer hide the effects of sanctions is bad news for a government that invested much credibility, bravado, and maskirovka¹ in the narrative that sanctions wouldn't work. It had considerable success in selling that narrative to Twitter sanctions experts and the media darlings of the commentariat, many of whom would also suffer significant deductions from their credibility if we lived in a world where experts were judged by the predictive value of their analysis. They will answer—and they will be right—that sanctions only "work" when they end the threat posed by the target's behavior. Our Treasury Department is as adept at creating economic pressure as our State Department is inept at translating it into just and lasting peace. Time and pressure will tell us whether Kim Jong-un will feel the hot breath of his generals and agree to disarm, but for once, time is on our side, and our chances of diplomatic success will rise in proportion to the internal pressure on Kim Jong-un.

Other commentators are not so sure, suggesting that North Korea is still finding ways around the UN regime – for example, the leadership is successfully evading attempts to restrict its ability to [access luxury goods](#). Writing in July 2019, the US-based non-profit organisation C4ADS said:

[...] current export control regimes developed by Member States in response to the luxury goods prohibitions in UNSCR 1718 (2006) have limited utility for multilateral enforcement.²

Sceptics about sanctions have argued that, whatever difference tightening them in recent years may have made, they are [increasingly ineffective](#). Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt claimed in October 2019:

When it comes to North Korea sanctions, US policymakers are failing to grasp a hard truth: UN sanctions are a depreciating asset and the needle can't be pointed in the other direction.

Inadequate sanctions and effective North Korean efforts at circumvention are compounded by a widening gulf at the UN on

¹ A Russian word meaning 'disguise'.

² For another interesting C4ADS report, see: "[Dispatched: mapping overseas forced labour in North Korea's proliferation finance system](#)", August 2018.

everything from the content and strategic direction of sanctions to the mechanics of implementation.

The ability of the UN Panel of Experts to monitor and report on sanctions and recommend measures to improve implementation has been irreparably weakened.

The crumbling of the sanctions regime for North Korea has put the North in a stronger position and will increase its leverage in future US-DPRK negotiations.

The Trump administration bears special responsibility for this situation. It has been its own worst enemy in the maximum pressure campaign.

Whatever challenges it may be experiencing, the UN Panel of Experts on the operation of the current sanctions regime continues to submit reports to the Secretary-General. The most recent was [submitted in August 2019](#), in which it said that North Korea was still violating UN resolutions. Below is an extract from its executive summary:

[...] the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continued to violate sanctions through ongoing illicit ship-to-ship transfers and the procurement of weapons of mass destruction-related items and luxury goods. These and other sanctions violations are facilitated through the country's access to the global financial system, through bank representatives and networks operating worldwide. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has also used cyberspace to launch increasingly sophisticated attacks to steal funds from financial institutions and cryptocurrency exchanges to generate income.

Over the years, analysts have pointed fingers at several countries which were allegedly complicit in North Korea's efforts to evade UN sanctions. Most often singled-out has been China, which has never been enthusiastic about sanctions as a tool of international policy.

It reluctantly went along with the toughening of the UN sanctions regime during 2017, but appears to have [relaxed enforcement](#) since the 2018 Singapore summit. Given that 90% of North Korea's trade is with China, any such relaxation can only undermine the effectiveness of the sanctions.

Kim Jong-un has been busy seeking to [mend fences](#) with both China and Russia during 2019. In the last month or so, despite the signs that US-North Korea relations are deteriorating again, China and Russia have been arguing for a significant loosening of UN sanctions against North Korea.

On 16 December 2019 they tabled a draft resolution [proposing](#) lifting the current ban on North Korean exports of statues, seafood and textiles, along with easing restrictions on infrastructure projects and North Koreans working overseas. Negotiations continued in the Security Council through to the end of the year. Western countries are expected to veto any resolution of this kind if it is put to the vote.

3. UK policy

Successive UK governments have closely aligned their stance with that of the US. This has remained the case since President Trump took office in January 2017.

During 2018 and 2019 the UK has provided four Royal Navy vessels in to a US-coordinated maritime sanctions enforcement operation. In April 2019 the Ministry of Defence [reported](#) that the frigate HMS Montrose had “successfully tracked an illegal fuel transfer at sea while conducting United Nations sanctions enforcement against North Korea.”

Below is a selection of statements on the issue by the last Conservative government. The new government has not yet issued any statements.

[North Korea: Human Rights: Written question - HL431](#)

Asked by Lord Alton of Liverpool

Asked on: 28 October 2019

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of remarks made by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea on 22 October that (1) North Korea is placing severe and widespread restrictions on basic freedoms, including surveillance and close monitoring of civilians, and (2) many citizens permanently disappear to a kwanliso political prison camp with families never informed of the decisions or of the whereabouts of their relatives; whether the UK Ambassador to North Korea has raised those allegations with the government of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea; and if so, what response they received.

Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

Answered on: 04 November 2019

We have grave concerns about the human rights situation in North Korea. As the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea made clear on 22 October, citizens in North Korea are subject to arrest and imprisonment in horrifying conditions for attempts to exercise even basic, universally accepted, human rights, such as freedom of expression and belief. Our Ambassador in Pyongyang regularly raises human rights concerns with the DPRK authorities, including reports of severe restrictions on freedoms and conditions in prison camps. North Korea routinely challenges the evidence base for such allegations.

We also raise our human rights concerns in international fora. At the UN General Assembly in October, we called on the North Korean Government to show the world that freedoms supposedly enshrined in its constitution are not a mirage, and at North Korea's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May, we called on the authorities to end all surveillance and censorship of individuals and organisations. We have also urged North Korea to permit access for the Special Rapporteur and other UN human rights bodies. North Korea continues to reject allegations of human rights violations, and took note of our UPR recommendations but with no commitment to action.

[North Korea: Guided Weapons: Written question - HL18020](#)

Asked by Lord Taylor of Warwick

Asked on: 02 October 2019

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports that North Korea fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile.

Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

Answered on: 08 October 2019

We are deeply concerned that North Korea has conducted a submarine-launched ballistic missile test. This follows ten other sets of ballistic missile tests this year and is another clear violation of UN Security Council Resolutions. The UK Government has repeatedly expressed its concern at North Korea's breaches of international law and has ensured UN Security Council consideration of the matter, most recently on Tuesday 27 August. We urge North Korea to cease these tests and engage in good faith with the United States. Until the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, UN sanctions must remain in place and be fully enforced. It is our firm belief that complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation is the path to a peaceful and more prosperous future for the North Korean people.

[North Korea: Sanctions: Written question - 252879](#)

Asked by Paul Girvan (South Antrim)

Asked on: 10 May 2019

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what steps he is taking with his international counterparts to enforce international sanctions on North Korea.

Answered by: Mark Field

Answered on: 16 May 2019

The Government is actively working with international partners to fully implement all relevant UN Security Council measures in respect of North Korea. The UK has contributed four Royal Navy vessels in the past year to a US-coordinated maritime sanctions enforcement operation. We have lobbied widely to encourage all States to enforce sanctions on North Korea and to stem major sources of illicit revenue for North Korea, such as overseas labourers and cyber-crime. Until North Korea takes concrete steps towards its complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation sanctions must remain and all states must continue to enforce them in full.

We also welcome the work of the UN Panel of Experts who report on States' implementation of UN Security Council measures. The Panel's latest report details continued evasion of sanctions by North Korea. The Panel of Experts reports can be found at https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1718/panel_experts/reports.

In August 2017 Malcolm Chalmers from the Royal United Services Institute [called](#) on the UK government to pay greater attention to North Korea in its military planning.

He wrote:

What we do know is that, if war did begin, the president would be on the phone to 10 Downing Street within an hour asking for support [...]

He argued that the US would most likely ask for “RAF and special forces capabilities.”

4. Conclusion

The détente which unexpectedly emerged between the US, South Korea and North Korea in 2018 is now under severe threat. With the US Administration busy addressing domestic political challenges and involved in escalating tension with Iran, North Korea may feel it does not yet have its full attention. So even though the promised “Christmas gift” did not materialise, a provocative military operation still looks possible before long if the US-North Korea dialogue does not revive.

A North Korea expert based at Stanford University, Robert Carlin, takes the view that North Korea has already decided to [abandon](#) the dialogue with the US. However, this does not necessarily mean that it wants renewed tension, so a provocative military move may not happen.

Only time will prove whether he is right. The US Administration has not yet given up hope that dialogue can be revived. It is still giving off [signals](#) that it would like talks to re-start. Whether the fact that the US is now in election year will help or hinder efforts to revive the talks remains to be seen.

Just as there has been debate about whether UN sanctions are working or not, so too is there [disagreement](#) about whether North Korea or the US now holds the stronger cards.

Another North Korea expert, Aidan Foster-Carter, an Honorary Research Fellow at Leeds University, has [argued](#) recently that Kim Jong-un has the upper hand. By contrast, Nicholas Eberstadt, who works at the American Enterprise Institute, believes that the US enjoys the advantage – which perhaps might then explain why President Trump appears relatively relaxed about the current situation.

It might also explain why the US remains disinclined to move towards the North Korean position on denuclearisation, which remains a [gradualist](#) one based on reciprocal actions – with some sanctions relief upfront: ‘something for something’. The US continues to hold to its view that North Korea should denuclearise first, after which everything else will follow: security guarantees through a peace treaty that ends the Korean War and the complete lifting of sanctions.

As for the inter-Korean track, this will only revive if the US-North Korean dialogue re-starts in earnest.

What happens next will also be heavily impacted by wider relations [between the US and China](#). The two have been in a trade war and are testing each other out in the South China Sea. China sees North Korea as its backyard, albeit often a very troublesome one.

If the US-North Korea dialogue is to revive, the two global superpowers will need to maintain lines of communication on the issue and find ways of coordinating their actions.

Finally, looking at the current situation more broadly, crucial strategic questions remain unanswered.

Is North Korea willing to denuclearise? Some experts believe Kim has made a definitive switch towards prioritising North Korea's ailing economy, meaning everything really is up for negotiation. But many find it hard to believe that it will completely give up its nuclear weapons. They recall Libya, where the Gaddafi regime was toppled after it had voluntarily [abandoned](#) its own programme. North Korea does not want to go the same way.

Will the US sustain its insistence that North Korea must denuclearise? Or might it eventually decide that it can tolerate North Korea as a nuclear weapons state if it scales down its capabilities dramatically (above all, in terms of its ability to strike the US mainland) and is subject to credible verification?

Drawing conclusions about future prospects on the nuclear issue is not straight-forward. Indeed, making sense of North Korea is not easy. Many North Korea experts [acknowledge](#) that "most of the time we are entirely ignorant, and a very large part of what is reported in the media is based on unreliable hearsay."

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