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9 questions about North Korea you were too embarrassed to ask

By Alex Ward for *Vox*, September 20, 2017

The news about North Korea sounds, and is, pretty scary.

North Korea now has an intercontinental ballistic missile that is theoretically capable of hitting major US cities including Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. And the US military now believes North Korea has the capability to “miniaturize” a nuclear weapon and fit it onto that missile.

President Trump is openly threatening North Korea with apocalyptic language, warning on August 8 that North Korea “best not make any more threats to the US. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.” And at the United Nations on September 19, Trump threatened to “totally destroy” North Korea if Pyongyang continued to threaten the US or its allies.

Why is all of this happening? Why are we talking about a possible war with a tiny, desperately poor country on the other side of the world? It’s a long, complicated story that goes back decades — all the way back to the Korean War in the early 1950s. It’s a story of diplomatic failures, madcap dictators, and tricky geopolitical maneuvering.

So for those of you who are confused, don’t sweat it — we’ve got you covered. Here are answers to some of the most basic questions about North Korea that will help you get up to speed on where we are in the conflict, how we got here, and where we’re likely headed.

1) What is North Korea?

North Korea, known officially as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), is a small country sandwiched between China and South Korea in Northeast Asia. It is home to an estimated 25 million people, nearly 3 million of whom live in the capital city of Pyongyang.

Since 1948, it has been run by the Kim family. The first leader was Kim Jong Un’s grandfather, Kim Il Sung, who was in power from 1948 to 1994. He was treated like a god in both life and death. He is still known today as the “Great Leader” and the “Eternal President,” and monuments glorifying his reign are everywhere in the country.

Kim Il Sung’s cult of personality really began to take root in 1950, when he led the Soviet-backed invasion of South Korea, kicking off the Korean War. The United States intervened in the war on behalf of South Korea, and China later intervened on behalf of the communist North. It was a bloody war that ultimately killed some 5 million soldiers and civilians.

At the war’s end in 1953, the two countries became separated by a demilitarized zone, or DMZ, and remain so to this day. Technically, both sides are still at war, since an armistice (truce) was signed, not a peace treaty.

After the deal was signed, South Korea — with heavy US financial and security support — began to slowly transform itself into what is now one of the world’s wealthiest, best-educated, and most technologically advanced societies.

The North also briefly flourished because of support from the Soviet Union and China, but those good times didn’t last. Mismanagement, crippling debt, and a series of devastating droughts and floods demolished the North Korean economy and set off what would eventually become lingering food shortages in the country.

At the same time, the Soviet Union was suffering its own economic troubles, causing its leaders to pull back on aid to North Korea. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in the early 1990s, the North Korean economy went into a dramatic downward spiral, culminating in a horrendous famine that killed between 600,000 and 1 million people.

Yet through all of this, Kim Il Sung cultivated a powerful cult of personality. North Koreans were inundated with propaganda branding Kim as the country's benevolent father figure who was transforming the country into a glorious socialist utopia through his unique brand of ideology, known as "juche." Translated as "self-reliance," juche stresses total independence in all facets of national life, from foreign policy to economics to national defense.

When Kim died at the age of 82, the Korean Central News Agency, the country's official news organization, published a glowing seven-page announcement that said "he turned our country, where age-old backwardness and poverty had prevailed, into a powerful Socialist country, independent, self-supporting and self-reliant." He was, as the news agency concluded, the "sun of the nation."

Since Kim's death in 1994, his son and grandson, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, respectively, have carried on his legacy, aiming to run the country exactly like he did. They purposefully demonstrate in their own propaganda how closely they hew to Kim Il Sung's style of governance. Kim Jong Un even goes out of his way to look as much like his grandfather as he possibly can.

Despite some modest reforms to the economy under the two younger Kims, the country is still far, far behind the rest of the world. The CIA ranks North Korea as the 215th-poorest country out of the 230 it tracks, and its people live on about \$1,700 a year.

North Korea is almost solely reliant on China as a trading partner, with most of its money coming from the millions of tons of coal it exports to China every year. It also sends iron ore, seafood, and clothing to the Chinese. This is why the news that China had suspended its coal imports from North Korea back in February was such a big deal, even though China's overall trade with North Korea has increased.

2) Is life for the average North Korean as bad as they say?

Yeah, it is.

As Human Rights Watch notes in gruesome detail:

North Korea remains one of the most repressive authoritarian states in the world. ...Kim Jong-un continued to generate fearful obedience by using public executions, arbitrary detention, and forced labor; tightening travel restrictions to prevent North Koreans from escaping and seeking refuge overseas; and systematically persecuting those with religious contacts inside and outside the country...

[G]ross human rights violations committed by the government included murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortion, and other sexual violence, and constituted crimes against humanity. Nothing exemplifies these violations like the gulags, or forced labor camps, run by the state. Usually, detentions there end in death — and not just for the imprisoned person. North Korea abides by the "three generations of punishment" rule. Basically, if the government thinks you committed a crime, you, your children, and your grandchildren have to suffer the consequences too.

Some North Koreans still find ways to live dignified and relatable lives despite the horrid conditions. In fact, in many ways, life in North Korea can be normal. Subway trains fill with people during rush hour in the capital city, Pyongyang. The city also now suffers from traffic jams, as more people have cars and want to get around on their own. Fashionable Western clothes are available in North Korean stores, and some North Koreans are even getting plastic surgery, despite the procedure's illegality.

North Koreans also enjoy surfing the country's intranet, but their choices are very limited with fewer than 30 sites on offer. There, citizens can find a selection of North Korean recipes and films. Of course, there is also a big section that allows Kim Jong Un to show off what he is doing throughout the day.

The few superrich North Koreans — who usually work in the government, the military, or state-run businesses — aren't too dissimilar from superrich people anywhere else. They lead fairly cosmopolitan lives, frequenting an elite area of the capital nicknamed "Pyonghattan." They wear designer clothes, eat at fancy restaurants, and go on vacations.

But of course, that is not the norm. Out in the rural areas, "life is little more than a daily struggle to find enough food to stay alive," Alf Evans, a British aid worker who spent time in rural North Korea in 2013, told the Telegraph. "Every scrap of earth that can be used to grow something is being used," he continued.

3) Why is the US-North Korea relationship so fraught?

North Korea and the US have been at odds ever since the US backed South Korea in the Korean War. Today, the US has 23,500 US troops stationed in South Korea. That country is also America's sixth-largest trading partner (about \$112.2 billion total in two-way trade during 2016), underscored by the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement that went into effect on March 15, 2012 (something President Donald Trump may to "terminate").

For these reasons, North Korea is not a fan of the United States. North Korean propaganda portrays America as an evil imperialist aggressor hell-bent on subjugating the Korean people. There is an entire museum dedicated to alleged American atrocities during the Korean War.

America isn't exactly thrilled with North Korea either. There are many reasons why, but the main one is that North Korea won't stop developing its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities.

For years, North Korea has tried to develop a nuclear weapon that it can put on a missile and hit its enemies. Most experts believe the country wants nukes as a deterrent so that no foreign country (like, say, the United States) would dare attempt to remove the Kim regime from power.

While some think Kim Jong Un is an irrational, "crazy fat kid" — as Senate Armed Services Committee Chair John McCain labeled the North Korean leader — experts see his actions to ensure the survival of his family's rule as rational.

The theory is that the Kims have seen what happened to leaders who don't have nuclear weapons. Iraq's Saddam Hussein persuaded much of the world that he had restarted his country's nuclear weapons program; he hadn't, but the boasts helped spark the 2003 invasion that drove him from power. In Libya, Muammar Qaddafi gave up his program to build closer ties to the West, but was eventually ousted from power and killed by a mob.

The Kim family wants to survive, and having a credible nuclear weapons program is one way to ensure that it does.

North Korea has accelerated its nuclear program to the point where it can now produce a new bomb every "six or seven weeks." And it now has an intercontinental ballistic missile that is theoretically capable of hitting major US cities including Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, with a nuke.

4) How come China hasn't dealt with North Korea yet?

Trump has repeatedly pushed the idea that China, because of its economic influence, has the ability to rein in North Korea if it wants to. Specifically, the US wants China to cut off oil shipments to North Korea and either sharply limit or entirely halt broader trade with the country. However, after Chinese President Xi Jinping explained the complexity of the issue to Trump during a meeting in April, Trump said he "realized it's not so easy" after only 10 minutes.

So what are the things that make it "not so easy" for China to control North Korea?

First, China uses North Korea as a buffer. If the Koreas were to unify, which remains an extremely thin possibility right now, then for at least some period, American troops would be stationed in a country that borders China. For Beijing, that's a no-no.

Second, should the Kim regime fall, the whole country would fall with it. Having that kind of instability, with millions of refugees flocking to the border, would not make the Chinese government happy. After all, China prides itself on stability in all its forms.

Finally, having America, Japan, and South Korea worried about North Korea takes the focus off China. China has many objectives in the region, and having its adversaries' heads turned as it makes moves in the South China Sea and elsewhere is helpful to its cause.

All of these are reasons why China chooses not to be too hard on the Kim regime. China's leaders may not like the Kim regime or want it to keep developing nuclear weapons, but they prefer that to the alternative scenario of a failed state on their Southern border or, perhaps even worse, an American-controlled state

on their Southern border.

Even if China did more, of course, there's no guarantee that North Korea — a proudly nationalist, nuclear-armed nation — would listen.

Trump, meanwhile, has lost his patience with China and appears to no longer rely on its help.

Donald J. Trump ✓ @realDonaldTrump

Trade between China and North Korea grew almost 40% in the first quarter. So much for China working with us - but we had to give it a try!

6:21 AM - Jul 5, 2017

21,382 21,382 Replies 24,212 24,212 Retweets 100,393 100,393 likes

5) Is there any way to solve this?

The best outcome would be for North Korea to just decide to give up its nuclear weapons program. But that's probably never going to happen. On the other side, the US could just accept that North Korea is going to have nuclear weapons capable of hitting the US homeland. That probably won't happen either.

So what to do?

There are no easy answers, and this situation has confounded presidents and skilled national security officials from both parties. The Trump administration's current approach, according to a joint statement issued in late April by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, is "to pressure North Korea into dismantling its nuclear, ballistic missile, and proliferation programs by tightening economic sanctions and pursuing diplomatic measures with our Allies and regional partners."

In an interview with NPR, Tillerson put it more bluntly, stating that the goal is "a denuclearized North Korea" by way of a negotiated agreement.

But here's the thing: We've tried this before, and it hasn't worked yet. This is essentially the same policy the Obama administration pursued for the past eight years, to no avail.

Indeed, America and others have been trying to come to some sort of negotiated agreement with North Korea since 1985. And we've gotten really close twice. In 1994, the US and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework, in which the North agreed to freeze its plutonium weapons program in exchange for aid. However, the agreement collapsed in 2002, and by January 2003 the North had resumed its nuclear program.

Then in August 2003, the international community launched the so-called "Six Party Talks," which were designed to get North Korea to halt its nuclear program through negotiations with five other countries: China, the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Russia.

In September 2005, it looked like the talks might work — North Korea formally agreed to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" in exchange for energy assistance from the other countries. But in 2009, amid disagreements over technical details related to verification, North Korea walked out on the talks. It says it will never return to the talks and maintains that it is no longer bound by their agreements. And it has been ramping up its nuclear and ballistic missile programs ever since.

The hope is that the administration's "maximum pressure and engagement" strategy will lead to a diplomatic solution. But if it doesn't — and the Trump administration refuses to allow North Korea to have a nuclear weapon that can hit the US mainland — then the only other option that seems to be on the table is a military strike targeting the North's nuclear facilities. In other words, war.

6) What kind of relationships do other countries have with North Korea?

North Korea does not have many friends.

It has China and, to a lesser degree, Russia, both of which oppose unilateral American military strikes on sovereign countries. The two countries believe that any US move would destabilize the region and harm their own interests. North Korea borders China and Russia, and any crisis on the peninsula would add

extra strain to those borders.

(Fun fact: Did you know that if you want to drive from Finland to North Korea, you could drive only through one country? Yeah: Russia is that large.)

On its own, Russia also helps North Korea with its economic woes. Russian Railways is in discussion with the government in Pyongyang to expand the rail connections between the two countries. Moscow also invests heavily in North Korea's energy sector and gives Kim's regime hard currency, which it needs to purchase foreign goods. There are also around 10,000 North Koreans in Russia as part of a guest worker program providing cheap labor to Russia.

But North Korea's cordial relations with other countries basically stop there. It understandably has a bad relationship with South Korea. It's also hostile toward Japan, which Pyongyang has threatened to nuke many times. The most recent animosity stems from Japan's harsh colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

"Japan pushed Koreans to assimilate, requiring them to speak Japanese, take Japanese names, and worship at Shinto shrines," writes Robert S. Boynton in the *New Yorker*. "Men were forced to labor in Japanese factories and mines, and some women were dragooned into sexual slavery." The period of Japanese colonialism understandably left many Koreans with a deep animosity toward Japan, and the Kim family has continued to perpetuate this hostility in its official propaganda.

In addition, Japan, like South Korea, has been backed by the United States since the end of World War II, where America wanted to make its relationship with Tokyo a centerpiece of its postwar strategy in Asia.

Essentially, North Korea is alone in the world, with very few exceptions. But so far, it doesn't seem to care all that much — at least, not enough to change its ways.

7) This is starting to get pretty bleak. Can we pause for a musical break?

Sure thing, especially since you made it this far. Here's your North Korean jam, "Footsteps":

Catchy, right? By the way, the version here has subtitles — you're welcome — but it's worth your time to watch a North Korean chorus sing it live with an orchestra at a big national December concert.

No doubt this song is propagandastastic. It's not a complicated song to understand: The Kim family's message is "stepping with vigorous energy throughout this land." In other words, the Stalinist ideology championed by the Kims in the 1950s is now the operating system of the whole country and may spread further and further.

North Korea, it's fair to say, is a world-class innovator when it comes to propaganda. This country continues to roll out new messages and slogans, including 300 to mark the 70th anniversary of its founding in 2015. Here's a shortened list the BBC provided:

"Let us turn the whole country into a socialist fairyland by the joint operation of the army and people!"

"Serve the country and people! Aid the people! Let the wives of officers become dependable assistants to their husbands!"

"Let this socialist country resound with Song of Big Fish Haul and be permeated with the fragrant smell of fish and other seafoods!"

"Scientists and technicians, stand in the vanguard of the struggle to build a thriving country that is developing, civilizing and advancing at a fast pace! Build 'gold mountains' and 'treasure mountains' with brilliant scientific and technological achievements!"

"More stylish school uniforms and quality school things for our dear children!"

"Let us raise the status of our country to that of a sports power at an earliest date possible! Play sports games in an offensive way, the way the anti-Japanese guerrillas did!"

A lot of North Korean propaganda comes in music form, as we've seen. It's a tool the state uses and blasts over the loudspeakers throughout the day, including the song "We are the Happiest in the World," which I'm going to guess is untrue.

But as you can see, a lot of these slogans are about the Kim family, the improvement of mundane things

like school uniforms, and the desire for scientific improvement. They are meant to cover nearly every aspect of North Korean life. But...

8) How much do the North Korean people believe the propaganda?

Given how little access outside journalists and academics have to North Korea, it's really hard to know with any certainty how many North Koreans truly believe the regime's propaganda and how many just pretend to believe it in order to survive. But North Korean defectors estimate that only about 20 to 50 percent of North Koreans today buy what the regime is selling.

This steady loss of support has been going on since the Great Famine of the 1990s that starved around 23 million North Koreans and killed around 10 percent of the population. The country was and remains an agricultural society. The problem is North Korea's climate is tough: It's a mountainous region with harsh winters. Plus, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and with it the help it provided North Korean farmers.

As a result, farm yields dwindled, and the government asked its citizens to "eat only two meals a day!" (Yes, with an exclamation mark.) It also didn't help that in 1995, a big flood took out about 15 percent of North Korea's arable land. As the food went away, so did a lot of the support for the government's propaganda.

New technologies have also begun to play a role. As NK News reports:

[A]s new media technologies have emerged over the past decade or so – simultaneous to increasing numbers of defectors leaving North Korea – the effectiveness of the Pyongyang propaganda is increasingly coming into question. A combination of foreign DVDs, USB drives and defector-run radio stations are all slowly chipping away at the propaganda that Pyongyang monopolized for so long.

So while the propaganda is still prominent, there are clear signs that the Kim family's grip on information is starting to slip. That's a big development, and one that needs to be watched in the years to come.

9) How big of a threat is North Korea actually?

We now know that North Korea appears capable, based on tests it has carried out, of firing a long-range missile that could reach the eastern seaboard of the United States. And the US military believes North Korea has the capability to "miniaturize" a nuclear weapon and fit it onto that missile, though questions remain about how accurate their targeting is and whether a nuclear bomb would be able to survive reentry into the earth's atmosphere using their current ICBM design.

Experts are more confident that if North Korea wanted to strike South Korea and Japan with a nuclear weapon, it could very likely do so. And any nuclear strike on those countries would put American troops stationed there directly in harm's way.

This is partially why the United States has decided to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea to defend against certain missile strikes and why America is conducting missile interception tests with Japan.

But while the nuclear and missile programs get all the attention, a seriously underappreciated threat comes from North Korea's arsenal of conventional weapons, including the world's largest artillery force. And a third danger comes from the country's elite special operations forces that could magnify the impact of a North Korean strike on South Korea.

South Korea's capital city, Seoul, is a so-called "megacity" with a whopping 25.6 million residents living in the greater metropolitan area. It also happens to be within direct firing range of thousands of pieces of North Korean artillery already lined up along the border, also known as the demilitarized zone. Around 70 percent of North Korea's ground forces are within 90 miles of the DMZ, presumably ready to move south at a moment's notice.

Simulations of a large-scale artillery fight between the North and South produce pretty bleak results. One war game convened by the Atlantic back in 2005 predicted that a North Korean attack would kill 100,000 people in Seoul in the first few days alone. Others put the estimate even higher. A war game mentioned by the National Interest predicted Seoul could "be hit by over half-a-million shells in under an hour."

Those results don't bode well for one of Washington's closest allies, or for the tens of millions of people living in Seoul. And they raise the stakes in the most important question of all: What happens next?

That, unfortunately, is the question we don't have an answer for.

Response Options:

- Summarize the author's main points about North Korea.
- What questions do you still have about North Korea? Explore them and their answers using helpful resources.
- Does anything in the article surprise you? Explain.