



DOES NORTH KOREA HAVE THE H-BOMB?

Its most recent nuclear test is just the latest cause for alarm about this isolated Communist regime

BY PATRICIA SMITH

North Korea is one of the most belligerent—and unpredictable—countries on Earth. So when its young dictator Kim Jong Un announced last month that his nation had exploded a hydrogen bomb for the first time, it was hardly a surprise. But it did alarm the entire world.

The explosion of a hydrogen bomb “could potentially shake up the security landscape of Northeast Asia and fundamentally change the nature of the North Korean nuclear threat,” said South Korean President Park Geun-Hye.

A hydrogen bomb is much more powerful than a conventional nuclear weapon, which North Korea has detonated three times before, and would represent a significantly increased risk—if North Korea’s claims are true.

But there’s wide skepticism about those claims. Officials in the U.S. and South Korea say the data from the impact of the explosion is not what you’d expect



from a hydrogen bomb; it was more in keeping with that of a traditional atomic device.

But even if last month’s nuclear test wasn’t a hydrogen bomb, it was yet another reminder of the threat that a nuclear-armed, totalitarian regime like North Korea poses to America’s ally South Korea and to the rest of the world. And it’s further proof that North Korea

KCNA/KCNA/REUTERS (KIM JONG UN); JIM MCHAHON (MAP)

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continues to work on advancing its nuclear capabilities, despite international sanctions and ongoing pressure to abandon its program.

“This is North Korea thumbing its nose at the international community,” says Richard Bush, a North Korea expert at the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C. “It reminds us that North Korea’s ambition is to be a country with nuclear weapons.”

For the U.S., North Korea’s latest nuclear test is unwelcome news. It comes just months after the U.S. and five other nations brokered a deal with Iran to curtail its alleged nuclear weapons program.

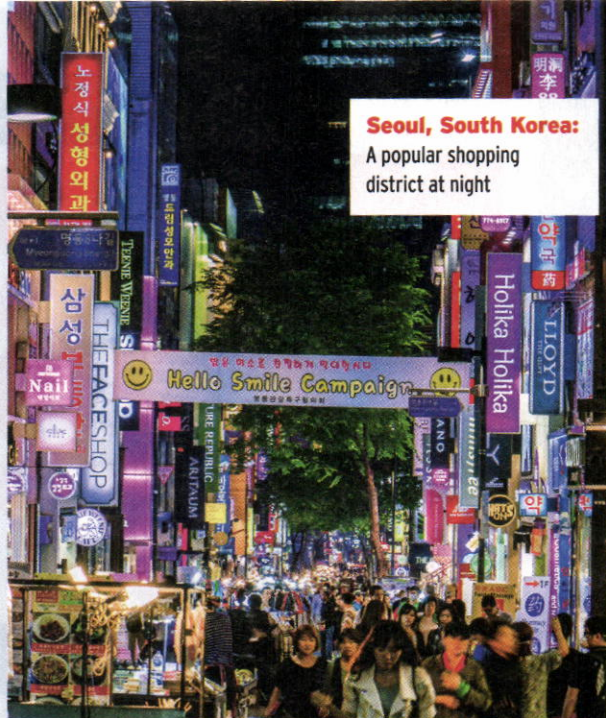
Seven Decades of Conflict

North Korea has a long history of antagonizing the international community, and the U.S. and North Korea have been at odds for seven decades. The roots of the conflict go back to the end of World War II.

In 1945, the Soviet Union occupied Korea north of the 38th parallel and installed a Communist regime, while U.S. and Allied forces controlled what became South Korea.

The North later invaded the South, and the Korean War (1950-53) followed. That conflict, in which 34,000 Americans died, ended in a stalemate, leading to two very different nations (see “South Korea’s Rise,” above).

South Korea developed into a thriving democracy with a strong, high-tech economy. It’s long been a staunch American ally, with 28,000 U.S. troops



Seoul, South Korea:
A popular shopping district at night

South Korea’s Rise

The other country on the Korean Peninsula is the polar opposite of North Korea

South Korea is one of the great global success stories of the late-20th century. In the 1960s, the country’s per capita GDP was similar to those of many of the world’s poorest countries. Today, it’s a thriving democracy with a booming economy—the 13th largest in the world.

For nearly 40 years after the end of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea swung between democracy and authoritarianism, going through a succession of coups, elections, riots, and assassinations. Elections in 1988 ushered in the South’s current period of prosperity and its emergence as a manufacturing powerhouse. It’s now a major exporter of cars and electronics, and brands like Hyundai and Samsung have become familiar to American consumers. South Korea also boasts the world’s fastest Internet connections, which are substantially faster than in the U.S.

stationed there to protect South Korea.

North Korea, on the other hand, became a Communist country and one of the most repressive and isolated regimes in the world. When Kim Jong Un, then in his late 20s, inherited the dictatorship after the 2011 death of his father, Kim Jong Il, there was hope that he might modernize the country and improve relations with the inter-

national community. But he’s proved to be as ruthless as his father and his grandfather, who founded the regime. He’s continued to test missiles and even threatened a nuclear strike against South Korea and the United States. In 2013, Kim ordered the execution of his uncle—his second-in-command and mentor—for allegedly plotting a coup. There were also unconfirmed reports



KOREA KEY DATES

1945 At the end of World War II, Korea is divided, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. troops in the south.

1950-53 The Korean War, in which 34,000 Americans and more than 2 million Koreans die, ends in a stalemate, with the country still divided.

1995 While South Korea’s economy is booming, North Korea suffers from a terrible famine when its state-run economy can’t produce enough food; hundreds of thousands die.