



North Korea: Introduction/Historical Overview

U.S. ARMY

(U) This infographic provides an Introduction/Historical Overview of North Korea. The evolution of the Korean People's Army (KPA) from a regional military to an aspiring nuclear force with intercontinental strike capabilities is the result of decades of commitment to two consistent requirements given to the military by the Kim family regime. First is to preserve the North Korean state's independent existence against any external power and second is to provide the means for North Korea to dominate the Korean Peninsula. Over the course of its existence, the KPA has seen both the decline of some core strengths and the evolution of new capabilities, but it has retained these two central requirements. Although expanded in scope, the new capabilities North Korea's military is developing are consistent with its founding objectives. They are intended to counter potential US aggression and maintain the capacity to inflict sufficient damage on the South, such that both countries have no choice but to respect the North's sovereignty and treat it as an equal.

Origins and Combat History of the KPA, 1948–1953

The KPA was founded in 1948 as an infantry-centric force established to provide Kim Il Sung a means to defend his new regime, provide a platform to indoctrinate his people, and allow him to achieve dominance over the entire Korean Peninsula.



Kim Il Sung Soviet-backed North Korean leader who rose to power after the peninsula was divided in 1945—

In 1950, Kim launched a general invasion of South Korea with the intention of reunifying the peninsula under Pyongyang's rule.

The Korean War remains the only sustained conflict in which the KPA participated as a major belligerent. North Korea suffered an estimated 1.5 million soldiers and civilians killed in the war and endured devastating damage from aerial bombing and ground assault. These losses deeply influenced North Korean strategic thinking and military and defense planning, resonating into the present day. Although hostilities were suspended with an Armistice Agreement in 1953, no peace treaty was signed, and the peninsula technically remains in a state of war.

The Post-Korean War KPA, 1953-1991



Rebuilding after the Korean War, North Korea had shifted its military strategy by the 1960s to a Maoist-style war of attrition, hoping to undermine the government in Seoul through covert infiltration, assassinations, and attempts to foster Communist insurgencies.

During this period, Kim embarked on a program to modernize the KPA and posture it to defend in depth against any foreign aggressor.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the North Korean regime accelerated and redirected KPA modernization initiatives toward reestablishing offensive conventional warfare capabilities.



Shift to Asymmetric Capabilities, 1991-Present

With the loss of direct Soviet and Chinese military-to-military support in the early 1990s, North Korea became less and less likely to prevail in a conventional war on the peninsula. The KPA emphasized asymmetric capabilities, postured against the predominantly civilian population in Seoul and renewed its emphasis on developing a nuclear strike capability.



Since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011, North Korea has introduced a few new conventional systems and equipment sets across its military services. The extent to which new equipment has been integrated into the force is unclear, but these modernization efforts suggest a continuing emphasis on strike weaponry (to include nuclear weapons), improving surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and broadening the regime's options for raids or other special forces operations in South Korea.

The North Korean military has never abandoned its ambition of dominating the peninsula and reunifying it under Pyongyang's rule. The KPA currently lacks the operational capability to forcibly reunify the Korean Peninsula, but KPA forces are developing capabilities that will provide a wider range of asymmetric options to menace and deter his regional adversaries.

North Korea's "Military First," or Songun, philosophy established the military as the most important North Korean institution and a means to solve social, economic, and political problems.

Sources: [North Korea Military Power](#) (DIA)