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## Korea, North



**North Korea.**

**North Korea.** (Credit: Encyclopdia Britannica, Inc.)

The

country of **North Korea** occupies the northern part of the Korean peninsula, which juts out from the Asian mainland in the east. **North Korea** covers about 55 percent of the peninsula's land area; [South Korea](#) covers the rest. The two Koreas were long united as a single nation, but since the mid-20th century they have been separated and have taken very different paths. While **South Korea** is a democracy, **North Korea** follows a communist system of government. Relations between the two countries have generally been hostile. The capital of **North Korea** is [Pyongyang](#).



**Credit: Encyclopedia Britannica 2011**

Credit: Encyclopedia Britannica 2011

## Land and Climate

**North Korea** borders China on the **north** and touches [Russia](#) in the extreme northeast. **South Korea** lies to the south. To the east is the East Sea ([Sea of Japan](#)) and to the west is the [Yellow Sea](#).

**North** and **South Korea** are separated by a region called the demilitarized zone (DMZ), which is about 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) wide. The DMZ was established by the truce that ending fighting in the [Korean War](#) in 1953. It roughly follows latitude 38° N, commonly called the 38th parallel. The areas **north** and south of the DMZ are heavily fortified, and both sides maintain large contingents of troops there.

The landscape of **North Korea** is rugged, with mountains and valleys dominating. The Kaema Highlands, a plateau in the northeast, have an average elevation of 3,300 feet (1,000 meters) and are called the roof of the Korean peninsula. At the northern edge of this plateau rises Mount Paektu (9,022 feet [2,750 meters]), the highest mountain in **North Korea** and on the peninsula. It is an extinct volcano in the Changbaek (Changbai) Mountains along the **North Korea**–China border. The Nangnim Mountains run from **north** to south through the middle of the country, and the Kangnam and Myohyang ranges run parallel to each other toward the southwest. The western mountains are separated by large river-valley plains, which merge with a narrow coastal plain along the Yellow Sea. The Hamgyong Mountains extend from the Nangnim Mountains

to the northeast. Along the east coast, the Taebaek Mountains extend from southeastern **North Korea** into South **Korea**.

The longest river on the Korean peninsula is the Yalu, which forms the northwestern boundary between **North Korea** and China. From its source on Mount Paektu, it flows southwest for some 500 miles (800 kilometers) into the Yellow Sea. The Tumen River, also beginning at Mount Paektu, flows northeast for about 325 miles (520 kilometers) into the East Sea. Another important river is the Taedong, which flows through Pyongyang.

**North Korea** has a continental climate with a wide range of temperatures from summer to winter. The summer, from June to September, is warm, with average July temperatures above the upper 60s F (about 20 °C) in most places. The winter, from December to March, is long and cold; average January temperatures range between about 20 °F (−7 °C) in the south and −10 °F (−23 °C) in the northern interior.

Most of the country receives about 40 inches (100 centimeters) of precipitation each year. About three fifths of the annual precipitation falls from June to September. This heavy concentration of rainfall is related to the humid summer [monsoon](#) (seasonal wind) from the Pacific Ocean, which also produces occasional typhoons. Although only a small portion of the total precipitation occurs in winter, snowfall can accumulate to a depth of several feet in the northern mountains.

## Plants and Animals

Plant life in the mountains, especially around Mount Paektu, consists of coniferous (cone-bearing) trees such as fir, spruce, and pine. The western lowlands were originally covered by mixed forests with many types of plants, but [deforestation](#) has left only remote patches of the original forests. Most of the lowlands are now cultivated, except for some of the hills that are covered with small pine groves mixed with oaks, lindens, maples, and birches.

Deer, antelope, goats, tigers, and leopards were once plentiful in **North Korea**, but their numbers have greatly decreased because of deforestation. Today these animals are restricted to the remote forests. In the plains, however, it is still possible to see wild pigeons, herons, cranes, and many migratory waterfowl.

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the DMZ between **North** and South **Korea** has been almost untouched and has largely reverted to nature. It contains many ecosystems, including forests, estuaries, and wetlands. It serves as a sanctuary for hundreds of bird species and is home to dozens of fish species and Asiatic black bears, lynxes, and other mammals.

## People and Culture

The population of **North Korea** grew fairly rapidly after the Korean War, more than doubling in size between 1953 and 1993. Although the rate of population increase began slowing in the late 20th century, it remained nearly twice that of South **Korea**. **North Korea** is much more sparsely populated, however, with a population density less than half that of the South. The population of **North Korea** is unevenly distributed, with heavy concentrations along the coasts and only scattered settlements in the interior.

## Ethnic Groups and Languages

The Korean peninsula is one of the most ethnically homogeneous regions in the world. The population of **North Korea** is almost entirely Korean, with a small group of Chinese as the only significant minority. All Koreans speak the Korean language. The relationship of Korean to other languages is not known for certain. It may be related to Japanese or to languages of the Altaic group, which includes Turkish and Mongolian. Korean also contains many loanwords from Chinese. The Korean alphabet, known in **North Korea** as Choson muntcha and in South **Korea** as Hangul, is composed of 24 letters, including 10 vowels and 14 consonants. In **North Korea** a systematic effort has been made to eliminate Chinese and Western loanwords, as well as any traces of the Japanese imposed during the colonial period.

## Religion

The communist government of **North Korea** discourages religion. Nevertheless, many **North** Koreans practice Chondogyo, a native Korean religion whose name means "Religion of the Heavenly Way." Known

originally as Tonghak (Eastern Learning), it combines elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and [Roman Catholicism](#). It was founded in the mid-19th century in opposition to foreign cultural influences. Shamanism—the belief that certain individuals have special powers through their contact with the spirit world—was an important force before the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism. Today, however, its practice has nearly died out in **North Korea**.

## Culture

Korean culture is rooted in the ancient traditions of shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. **Korea** has historically been part of the Chinese cultural realm, though the Chinese influence has been given a distinctive Korean stamp. The introduction of Western cultural elements, begun in the late 19th century, was accomplished in harmony with Korean tradition.

Under communist rule, however, **North Korea** underwent a cultural upheaval. Since the 1950s every **North Korean** has been assigned to a unit outside the family, whether it be a school unit, a military unit, or a work unit. The unit provides housing, medical care, and food. Usually a family lives in a home provided by the father's work unit. The unit controls most aspects of a person's life; members must ask the unit for permission to travel, to see a doctor, or to purchase certain goods, and they must receive the unit's approval before marrying.

Most **North Koreans** have little free time. In addition to work or school, they are required to attend political study sessions and perform volunteer labor for the government. Leisure and cultural activities are regimented and geared toward organized group activities, such as rallies and museum tours. All of these activities are done with the members of one's unit.



### Women perform during the Arirang Festival

Women perform during the Arirang Festival at May Day Stadium in Pyongyang, **North Korea**, in 2005. (Credit: Lee Jin-man/Lee Jin-man/AP/AP)



### Visitors to the Korean Revolution Museum

Visitors to the Korean Revolution Museum in Pyongyang, **North Korea**, bow to a statue of Kim Il Sung. (Credit: Edoardo FornaciariGammaLiaison/Edoardo FornaciariGammaLiaison)

A dominant force in the culture of **North Korea** is the cult of [Kim Il Sung](#), the country's founding leader. Statues of Kim adorn all sorts of public places, and photographs hang in workplaces, schools, hospitals, shops, and people's homes. Schoolchildren memorize poems about him, and adults quote from his writings. The government uses the fine arts and cultural institutions to promote the Kim cult and promote communist ideology. All **North Korean** writers, artists, dancers, and musicians are assigned to government institutions such as the National Theater for the Arts and the State Symphony Orchestra in Pyongyang and provincial organizations of music, ballet, and drama. Government-sponsored museums include the Korean Revolution Museum and the Korean Fine Arts Museum in the capital.

## Education and Social Welfare

In **North Korea** education is free and compulsory for those between ages 5 and 16. The system includes one year of preschool, four years of primary school, and six years of secondary school. Schools emphasize science and technology. Institutions of higher education offer programs of two to six years in length. The most important of these schools is Kim Il Sung University, in Pyongyang. A well-developed system of adult education includes technical schools in large industrial cities.

**North Korea** is a welfare state. Medical care is free, but there is a shortage of doctors, medical equipment, and medicine. Medical benefits are provided for workers who are temporarily or permanently disabled and women during pregnancy and childbirth. There are also old-age pensions.

The standard of living has improved for the average **North Korean** since World War II. Because of the high priority given to industrialization and defense, however, the distribution of goods and social services has long been inadequate. During the 1990s **North Korea** endured a devastating famine that forced many people to



leave their homes and families in search of food. Hospitals and health care centers ran out of medicine and medical supplies, and the social welfare system failed despite much assistance from national and international relief agencies. The country remains heavily dependent on food aid.

## Urban and Rural Settlement

The population of the Korean peninsula was predominantly rural until well into the 20th century. During the Japanese occupation (1910–45), cities grew as industry and transportation were developed. Later, the communist government's emphasis on manufacturing encouraged many **North** Koreans to move from the countryside to the cities. Most of the cities were destroyed during the Korean War of the 1950s and have since been rebuilt. Urbanization increased rapidly after the war, especially in the period 1953–60. By the early 21st century almost two thirds of the country's population lived in urban areas. [Pyongyang](#) is by far the largest city, its population greatly outnumbering that of Hamhung, the second largest city. Other major cities include Nampo, Chongjin, and [Kaesong](#). Most of the rural population inhabits the eastern and western coastal lowlands and river-valley plains.



**The skyline of  
Pyongyang, North  
Korea.**

## Economy

**North Korea** has a command economy, meaning that the central government owns the land and major equipment and controls economic activity. Because the government also controls the release of information, reliable data on economic performance usually have been lacking. Outside observers, however, have agreed that the **North** Korean economy has consistently struggled because of years of poor central planning and a lack of modern technology and equipment.

The skyline of  
Pyongyang, **North  
Korea**. (Credit: Ron  
McMillan/Gamma  
Liaison)

In the early 1990s the country's economic problems were compounded by the demise of the [Soviet Union](#) and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which had been its largest trading partners and sources of aid. By the mid-1990s many **North** Koreans were dying of starvation because of the government's inability to produce enough food. Despite the national policy of self-reliance—called *juche*—this poor economic performance led the government to pursue some foreign investment and increase trade. By the turn of the 21st century the situation had improved somewhat because of international food assistance, but food shortages and malnutrition remained serious problems.

Overall, **North Korea** has changed from an agricultural to an industrial country since World War II. In 1954 the government began laying out the country's economic policy in national economic plans. The plans have generally emphasized the development of heavy industries and mining at the expense of agriculture and the production of consumer goods.

## Agriculture, Fishing, and Forestry

Most of **North** Korea's agricultural land is in collective farms; the remainder is in state-operated farms. The collective farms include hundreds of families and are managed by committees, which supervise the work teams and set production quotas. Produce is delivered to the government, which controls distribution through state stores. The state farms serve as models for research and development.

Since the winters are long and cold, most of **North** Korea's farmland supports only a summer crop. The country has seen an increase in cultivated land, irrigation projects, the use of chemical fertilizers, and mechanization. However, since the early 1990s it has also experienced chronic shortages of fertilizers, seed grains, and farming equipment. The leading food crops are grains, including rice, corn (maize), wheat, and barley. Potatoes, sweet potatoes, soybeans, cabbages, and apples and other fruits are also important. Livestock such as goats, pigs, sheep, and cattle are raised mainly in areas poorly suited for crop raising.

Fish are an important part of **North** Korea's food supply. Most fishing takes place along the coasts on each side of the peninsula, but deep-sea fishing expanded beginning in the late 20th century. The catch includes pollack, sardines, mackerel, herring, pike, yellowtail, and shellfish.

Although **North Korea's** forests were depleted under Japanese rule, enough stands remain to support some logging operations. Spruce, fir, larch, and pine are the main commercial species. Much of the wood cut is used for fuel.

## Industry

**North Korea** contains most of the mineral deposits on the Korean peninsula. The most important include coal, iron ore, magnesite, lead, and zinc. Hydroelectric plants on the Yalu River and its tributaries are the main power source, but thermal plants are also important because of the unreliability of hydroelectricity during the dry season.

The emphasis on heavy industry in **North Korea** has led to the development of large iron and steel, machinery, and chemicals industries. The machine-building industry produces large quantities of military equipment in addition to industrial and farm machinery. The chemical industry focuses mainly on fertilizers and petrochemicals. Other valuable products include textiles and cement.

## Services

The government's policy of self-reliance has historically caused **North Korea** to deemphasize foreign trade. At first **North Korea** traded only with the Soviet Union and China, but since the 1960s the number of trading partners has grown. China remains the leading source of imports and destination of exports. Trade with **South Korea**, banned after the Korean War, was resumed in 1988; by the early 21st century **South Korea** was the North's second largest trading partner. **North Korea** also trades with Thailand, Russia, and Japan. Major imports are food and beverages, mineral fuels, machinery and electronic products, and textiles and clothing. Exports include live animals and agricultural products, textiles and clothing, machinery, and mineral fuels.

The government maintains strict control over tourism. Most visitors come from Asia, particularly from China, with which **North Korea** maintains close relations. Tourists, especially those from the West, are tightly restricted in their movements and are accompanied by official **North Korean** guides.

## Transportation and Communications

Railways are the main means of transport in **North Korea** for both passengers and freight. Road transportation is not as important because few people own motor vehicles. River transportation is important for moving agricultural products, minerals, and passengers. The most important rivers used for freight transportation are the Yalu, Taedong, and Chaeryong. The principal ports include Chongjin, Wonsan, Haeju, and Nampo. Air services are controlled by the air force, and both domestic and international air links are limited. International flights connect Pyongyang with Beijing, Moscow, and a few other Asian and European cities.

Telecommunications services are lacking in **North Korea**. While **South Korea** has become a global leader in telecommunications, **North Korea** has lagged far behind. The numbers of landline and cellular telephones in the **North** are only fractions of those in the South. The majority of private homes in the **North**, especially outside the cities, lack radios and televisions. Almost all **North Korean** households have access to radio broadcasts, however, as a result of a government project to link household loudspeakers to village receivers. The government strictly controls the content of all broadcasts, which serve its own ideological purposes. Internet use is highly restricted.

## Government

**North Korea**—officially called the Democratic People's Republic of **Korea**—has a communist government. According to the **North Korean** constitution, the country's highest organ of state power is the legislature, called the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA). It is made up of representatives who are elected every five years. A presidium, or standing committee, within the assembly is empowered to act on behalf of the assembly when it is not in session. The dominant executive and administrative body is the cabinet. It includes the premier, several vice premiers, and various ministers, all of whom are appointed by the assembly. The cabinet is accountable to the assembly.

Despite the official outline of powers in the constitution, the government of **North Korea** is dominated by the

Korean Workers' (communist) party (KWP). The SPA, though nominally the highest power, really serves only to ratify the decisions of the KWP. Although the president of the assembly is the nominal head of state, that position is actually held by the leader of the KWP. Since 1998 the head of state has also been the chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC), which leads the military. A constitutional amendment in 2009 identified the NDC chairman as the country's "supreme leader."

A number of other nominal political parties and social organizations serve to support the KWP. All political activities, however, are directed by the KWP or require its approval and must closely follow the party line and policies. The KWP controls the electoral system and draws up lists of approved candidates.

**North** Korea's judiciary functions on three levels, with the Central Court at the top, the provincial courts at the intermediate level, and people's courts in the cities, counties, and districts at the base. Central Court judges are elected for three-year terms by the SPA; members of provincial and local courts are elected by people's assemblies from a list of KWP-approved candidates. Closely linked to the courts is the Central Procurator's Office. This office, assisted by provincial and local procurators, investigates and prosecutes crimes. The Procuracy is headed by a procurator-general, who is chosen by the SPA.

## History

**Korea** was freed from 35 years of Japanese rule by the defeat of [Japan](#) in [World War II](#). Following the end of the war in 1945, the [Soviet Union](#) occupied the peninsula **north** of latitude 38° N (the 38th parallel), and the [United States](#) occupied the area south of that line. Representatives from the Soviet and U.S. military commands met to plan the reunification of **Korea**, but the talks were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the Soviets set up a communist government in the **north** led by [Kim Il Sung](#), a leader of the resistance movement against the Japanese occupation.

The [United Nations](#) (UN) took up the question of Korean unification in 1947. It called for UN-supervised nationwide elections to establish a single Korean government. Although the Soviet Union refused to allow the **north** to participate, the south held elections that eventually led to the establishment of the Republic of **Korea**, or [South Korea](#). In the **north**, the communist government proclaimed the Democratic People's Republic of **Korea** in September 1948. (For a full history before 1948, see [Korea](#).)

Although the Soviets left **North Korea** in late 1948, they continued to provide military training and equipment. In June 1950, hoping to reunify **Korea** under a communist government, Kim Il Sung launched an invasion of South **Korea**, thereby igniting the [Korean War](#). U.S. troops and other UN forces fought back the invasion, however. In late 1950 communist China entered the war on the side of **North Korea**. The war ended in a stalemate in 1953. A demilitarized zone (DMZ) about 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) wide was created between **North** and South **Korea**, roughly along the prewar boundary.

## North Korea under Kim Il Sung

As head of state, Kim Il Sung quickly crushed all opposition to his rule and eliminated his last rivals for power within the Korean Workers' party. He would rule unchallenged for 46 years over one of the world's most isolated and repressive societies. He maintained his firm hold on power by promoting a personality cult centered on himself as the "Great Leader" of the Korean people.

Kim set out to transform **North Korea** into a militaristic and highly regimented society devoted to the twin goals of industrialization and the reunification of the Korean peninsula under **North** Korean rule. He introduced a philosophy of *juche*, or "self-reliance," under which **North Korea** tried to develop its economy with little or no help from foreign countries. In fact, however, the country did accept aid from its communist allies—the Soviet Union, China, and the countries of Eastern Europe. **North** Korea's economy grew rapidly in the 1950s and '60s, but it began to stagnate as aid from the Soviet Union and China declined. Another strain on the economy was the country's massive spending on the armed forces. In addition, the strong emphasis on heavy industries led to shortages of everyday necessities and a decline in living conditions.

A new constitution introduced in 1972 changed the premiership to a presidency, which Kim Il Sung assumed. Kim also retained control of the Korean Workers' party. In 1980 he raised his eldest son, Kim Jong Il, to high posts in the party and the military, in effect designating the younger Kim as his heir.

In foreign policy **North Korea** cultivated close ties with the Soviet Union and China and remained hostile to the United States and South **Korea**. One of its most brazen acts against South **Korea** was sending



commandos to Seoul in an attempt to assassinate President [Park Chung Hee](#) in 1968. In the early 1970s the two Koreas came together for the first time to discuss reunification, but **North Korea** suspended the talks in 1973. In the 1980s and early 1990s **North** Korean policy toward the South alternated between provocation and gestures of peace. A breakthrough came in 1991, when **North** and South **Korea** signed a nonaggression agreement, and the two countries were simultaneously admitted to the United Nations. This thaw in relations stalled, however, as suspicion grew that **North Korea** planned to build nuclear weapons.

## The Kim Jong II Era



**Kim Jong II.**

Kim Jong II.(Credit: AFP/Getty Images)

Kim II Sung died in 1994, and his son Kim Jong II ascended to power. In a revised constitution introduced in 1998, the office of president was written out and the elder Kim was written in as “eternal president of the republic.” Kim Jong II was reelected chairman of the National Defense Commission, which became the country's highest office.

Throughout the 1990s **North** Korea's economy struggled as a result of many years of government mismanagement. The situation was made worse by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist governments of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, which eliminated most of the country's trading partners and much of its foreign aid. In addition, in the mid-1990s the country suffered a series of natural disasters, including floods and drought. Serious food shortages resulted, and as many as 1 million **North** Koreans may have died of starvation. These problems led the government to open up the country to trade and foreign food aid.

During this period **North Korea** took steps to improve its relations with many other countries. Shortly after Kim Jong II came to power in 1994, the **North** Korean government signed an agreement with the United States in which it agreed not to develop nuclear weapons. The agreement restored hope for reconciliation between the two Koreas. Hopes for a peaceful reunification were encouraged by South Korean President [Kim Dae Jung](#)'s visit to **North Korea** in 2000—the first time any Korean head of state had traveled to the other side. In 2007 trains from both the **North** and the South crossed the demilitarized zone to the other side, the first such travel since the Korean War. Later that year the two Koreas held a second summit, in which South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun met with Kim Jong II in Pyongyang.



**North Korean premier Kim Jong II meet in Pyongyang**

Tensions on the peninsula rose again, however, after the election of Lee Myung-bak as South Korean president in late 2007. Lee took a more hard-line position toward the **North**. In response, the **North** Korean government announced that it planned to close the land border and telephone links with South **Korea**. Then it announced that it was nullifying all military and political agreements with South **Korea**.

**North** Korean premier Kim Jong II (left) and South Korean president Kim Dae Jung (right) meet in Pyongyang, **North Korea**, in June 2000.(Credit: Newsmakers/Getty Images)

A perpetual strain on **North-South** relations was **North** Korea's nuclear ambitions. In 2002 the **North** confirmed international suspicions by revealing that it had continued its nuclear program in violation of the 1994 agreement with the United States. Multiparty talks about the nuclear issue—involving the United States, **North** and South **Korea**, Russia, China, and Japan—ended in 2004 without an agreement. **North Korea** claimed to have nuclear weapons in 2005 and conducted tests of nuclear devices in 2006 and 2009, raising tensions not only on the peninsula but also in the international community.

Two incidents in 2010 further inflamed tensions between the Koreas. In March, after a South Korean warship exploded and sank in the Yellow Sea, international investigators concluded that the explosion had been caused by a torpedo fired from a **North** Korean submarine. South **Korea** soon ended all trade relations with the **North**. **North Korea**, denying responsibility for the attack, severed all ties with the South. Then in November, as South **Korea** was conducting a military exercise off the country's northwestern coast, **North** Korean artillery shells bombarded the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. The shells hit a military base and civilian homes, and there were several casualties. South Korean forces returned fire. The incident was

considered one of the most serious episodes of hostility between the **North** and South in years.

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