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Korea, South



South Korea.

South Korea. (Credit: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.)

A country of eastern [Asia](#), **South Korea** occupies the southern part of the Korean peninsula. It makes up about 45 percent of the peninsula's land area; **North Korea** covers the rest. United until the late 1940s, the two Koreas share much of their culture and history. Today, however, they are separated by a demilitarized zone that was established at the end of the Korean War in 1953. That conflict, which pitted the democratic **South** against the communist North, ended in a stalemate. Since then, tensions between the two Koreas have often run high. The capital of **South Korea** is [Seoul](#).

Land and Climate

South Korea's only land border, on the north, is with **North Korea**. It is also bounded by the East Sea ([Sea of Japan](#)) to the east, the East China Sea to the **south**, and the [Yellow Sea](#) to the west. The main islands of [Japan](#) lie 120 miles (190 kilometers) southeast of the **South Korean** coast across the **Korea Strait**.

Between **South Korea** and **North Korea** is the demilitarized zone (DMZ). About 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) wide, the DMZ runs from about 40 miles (64 kilometers) north of the 38th parallel on the east to about 20 miles (32 kilometers) **south** on the west.

South Korea is largely mountainous, with small valleys and narrow plains along the coast. The Taebaek Mountains run in roughly a north-**south** direction along the east coast and northward into **North Korea**. The range has many spurs to the west and **south**. The longest spur—the Sobaek Mountains—extends to the southwestern corner of the peninsula. None of **South Korea's**



Credit: Encyclopedia Britannica 2011

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mountains are very high. The highest peak, the extinct volcano Mount Halla on Cheju Island, is 6,398 feet (1,950 meters) above sea level.

South Korea has fairly extensive lowlands along the lower parts of its main rivers. The east coast is relatively straight and rocky, while the **south** and west coasts are deeply indented and have long stretches of mudflats. The largest islands of **South Korea** are Cheju, Koje, Chin, and Namhae, off the **south** and west coasts, and Ullung, in the East Sea.

South Korea's three main rivers are the Han, Kum, and Nakdong, all of which flow from the Taebaek Mountains. Nearly all the country's rivers flow westward or southward into either the Yellow Sea or the East China Sea; only a few short rivers drain eastward from the Taebaek Mountains. The lower courses of the larger rivers are navigable. **South Korea**, like the peninsula as a whole, has no large lakes.

South Korea has a continental climate marked by sharp seasonal changes. Summers are hot and humid, with daytime temperatures commonly reaching the high 80s and low 90s F. In winter, the coldest average monthly temperatures drop below freezing everywhere except along the southern coast. The average January temperature in Seoul is in the low 20s F. The country juts far enough **south** to reach the warm waters of the Kuroshio, or Japan Current. The southern coast has a humid, subtropical climate.

Annual precipitation in mainland **South Korea** ranges from about 35 to 60 inches (90 to 150 centimeters). Taegu, in the east, is the driest area, while the southern coast is the wettest; southern Cheju Island receives more than 70 inches (180 centimeters) annually. Most precipitation falls as rain, which is heaviest from April to September. The remainder of the year is relatively dry. In late summer and early autumn, torrential rains accompany the typhoons that strike the peninsula from the **south** and east. Winter snows are heaviest in the Taebaek Mountains.

Plants and Animals

The original vegetation of the Korean peninsula was notable for its many varieties of trees, shrubs, and flowering plants. But the rich forests that once covered most of the peninsula have been largely removed from the plains and adjacent mountain slopes. Some species were merely thinned out, but broad areas were cut too often to allow new trees to mature, and artificial plantings favored a few fast-growing species. Most of the country has mixed forests of oak, pine, elm, beech, and poplar. The narrow subtropical belt along the southern coast and on Cheju Island supports broadleaf evergreen forest and bamboo.

Early in the 20th century **South Korea** still had a rich variety of wild animals, including sables, martens, foxes, beavers, otters, antelope, bears, lynx, tigers, and leopards. Most of these animals have either disappeared completely or are found only in small numbers in remote mountain areas. They were killed for their fur or their forest habitat was destroyed. Today the most numerous larger mammals are deer. There are also many smaller mammals and birds, as well as reptiles and fish.

Mostly untouched since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the DMZ between North and **South Korea** has become an unofficial nature preserve. The zone encompasses forests, estuaries, and wetlands. It serves as a sanctuary for hundreds of bird species and is home to Asiatic black bears, lynx, and other mammals.

People and Culture

South Korea's population more than doubled over the second half of the 20th century. Birth rates decreased rapidly after 1960, however, and by the beginning of the 21st century the rate of population growth was very low. During the same period the urban population grew rapidly as many rural dwellers moved to cities. Today roughly half the population lives in the country's seven largest cities. Thus, although the country's population growth rate is low, its overall population density is high—about two and a half times that of North **Korea**.



The Taebaek Mountains of South Korea reach

The Taebaek Mountains of **South Korea** reach an elevation of 5,604 feet (1,708 meters) at Mt. Sorak in the northeast. (Credit: KimBavaria Verlag)

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Like the peninsula as a whole, **South Korea** has a population made up almost entirely of ethnic Koreans. The largest foreign groups—people from Japan, the United States (including members of the military), and China—make up only small fractions of the population. The number of foreigners is growing, however, especially in the cities.

All Koreans speak the Korean language. Experts do not agree on the relationship of Korean to other languages, but many classify it in the Altaic group, which also includes Mongolian and Turkish. Korean also has similarities to Japanese and has many loanwords from Chinese. The Korean script, called Hangeul in **South Korea** and Choson muntcha in North **Korea**, consists of 10 vowels and 14 consonants. In **South Korea** the language often is written as a combination of Hangeul and Chinese symbols, though the trend is toward using less Chinese. Many English words and phrases have crept into the language as a result of the American presence in the country since 1950.

Religion

The **South** Korean constitution guarantees freedom of religion, and the religious profile of the population is diverse. About half of the people do not belong to an organized religion. Among those who do, the most prevalent religion is [Christianity](#). More than two fifths of the country's believers are Christians, with Protestants, independent Christians, and Roman Catholics the largest groups. Christianity is relatively new in **Korea**; Roman Catholic missionaries reached the peninsula only in the late 18th century, and their Protestant counterparts came a century later. Christianity has had a profound effect on the modernization of Korean society.

Historically,



**Korean shamans
petition the spirits to
protect**

Korean shamans petition the spirits to protect the community's fishermen.
(Credit: Karen Sparks)

the way of life and the value system of Koreans were based fundamentally on [Confucian](#) thought, which spread to the peninsula from China. The values and beliefs of Confucianism still strongly influence Korean daily life and family relationships. [Buddhism](#), introduced from China in the 4th century, was also important in Korea's cultural development. Today Buddhists account for nearly a quarter of **South** Korea's religious believers, and Buddhism remains influential even among people who are nominally Christian. Small groups practice indigenous religions such as Chondogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way), a blend of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Roman Catholicism. Shamanism, the worship of spirits, has existed in **Korea** since ancient times and is still widespread in rural areas.

Culture

Much of Korean culture exhibits a strong Chinese influence. Confucianism and Buddhism, along with shamanism, form the foundation of modern Korean thought and habit. After World War II, and especially after the Korean War, modern trends became integrated into **South** Korean cultural life, though traditional ideas still play an important role.

Traditional Korean family life centers on rituals marking life-cycle milestones and the observation of holidays and ancestral rites. The most important passages in a person's life are the completion of a baby's first 100 days, one's marriage, and one's 60th birthday, or *hangab*, which marks the completion of a full life cycle. According to traditional Korean belief, the spirits of the departed do not leave Earth for several generations; thus, deceased parents and grandparents are still considered part of the family. Ancestral rites (*cherye*) are performed to honor them on death anniversaries and on major holidays. Two of the most important holidays are the Lunar New Year, in late January or early February, and the Harvest Moon Festival, in late September. These are marked by the gathering of families in the ancestral hometown or at the home of the head of the family.

The

South Korean government is active in supporting and promoting traditional performing arts. Among these arts is the *sandae*, or masked dance theater. Originally performed in the late 14th century, the *sandae* satirized the nobility and corrupt priests of the time. Today it is still performed by villagers in some parts of the country. *P'ansori*, a traditional form of sung narrative accompanied by drumming, was revived with government help beginning in the 1960s. Folk music, accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as the zither, has also undergone a revival and is performed at ceremonies and festive occasions.



A musician plays an ajaeng, a type of bowed zither

A musician plays an ajaeng, a type of bowed zither, in a traditional Korean ensemble. (Credit: **Korea Britannica Corp.**)



A Korean bottle of the Koryo dynasty has a celadon

A Korean bottle of the Koryo dynasty (13th century) has a celadon glaze and inlaid decoration. (Credit: Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; photograph, Wilfrid Walter)

In the fine arts, ceramics almost certainly represent Korea's most significant contribution. Functional as well as decorative, Korean ceramics have an unmistakable character. During the Koryo period (935–1392), **Korea** produced especially fine celadon ware with brilliant brushed or inlaid designs. Every province continues to produce its distinctive ceramic ware.

Cultural institutions in **South Korea** preserve traditional arts and crafts and promote contemporary ones. The National Museum of **Korea**, centered in Seoul but with branch museums across the country, maintains artifacts of Korean culture. The largest collection of contemporary art is in the National Museum of Contemporary Art at Kwachon, near Seoul. The National Theater, in Seoul, is home to four resident companies: the National Drama Company, National Changguk (traditional Korean musical drama) Company, National Dance Company, and National Orchestra. The Korean Symphony Orchestra and the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra are two of the best-known organizations performing Western music.

Education and Social Welfare

Education is free and compulsory for nine years. This period includes six years of primary school beginning at age six and three years of middle school beginning at age 12. Nearly all middle-school graduates continue on in academic or vocational high schools. Admission to colleges and universities is based on a highly competitive examination. The state-run Seoul National

University is **South** Korea's largest institution of higher education. Among its better-known private institutions are Yonsei University, Ewha Women's University, and **Korea** University, all in Seoul.

Health care improved greatly in **South Korea** after the Korean War. Today even remote rural areas have clinics that meet the basic needs of the population. Although the great majority of doctors in **South Korea** practice Western-style medicine, traditional Korean medicine continues to play an important role. So-called "Oriental doctors" are trained in specialized colleges that offer courses in both Western and Korean approaches. In their practices they use herbal medicines, acupuncture, and other traditional methods. Shamans, who are not medically trained, operate in some rural areas.

The standard of living in **South Korea** has improved steadily since the Korean War. The government provides a range of social welfare services, including public pensions, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and health insurance. Household incomes have risen dramatically, especially among industrial workers. Despite these general improvements, however, the quality of life in rural areas still lags behind that of the cities.

Urban and Rural Settlement

Until recently the population of the Korean peninsula was mostly rural. In 1925 less than 5 percent of the population lived in cities. Since then, however, the urban population has grown enormously, especially in **South**

Korea. In the early 21st century more than four fifths of all **South** Koreans were city dwellers. [Seoul](#), the capital and largest city by far, has more than 10 million inhabitants. Satellite cities around Seoul—notably Anyang, Songnam, Suwon, and Puchon—also have grown rapidly. Outside of the Seoul metropolitan area, the major cities include [Pusan](#), Incheon, [Taegu](#), and Taejon.

In rural areas, clustered villages ranging from a few houses to several hundred are common in river valleys and coastal lowlands. Villages are frequently located along the foothills facing toward the **south**, backed by hills that give protection from the severe northwestern winter winds. Clusters of small fishing villages are found along the coast. In contrast to the lowlands, settlements in the mountains are usually scattered.

Economy

The **South** Korean economy has grown remarkably since the 1960s. During that period **South Korea** has transformed itself from a poor, agricultural society to one of the world's most highly industrialized countries. Government and business leaders worked together to target specific industries for development, and beginning in 1962 this strategy was implemented in a series of economic development plans. In the 1980s the government began to reduce its role in the economy even as it continued to put forth its five-year plans. In the 1990s and early 21st century the economy moved further in the direction of private ownership and control. In 1996 **South Korea** joined the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organization with the goal of stimulating economic progress and world trade.

A dominant force in **South** Korea's economy are the huge business conglomerates called *chaebol*. The *chaebol* control much of the country's industry and enjoy favorable treatment from the government. When the Asian financial crisis of 1997 shook **South** Korea's economy, however, the *chaebol* structure took much of the blame. Thereafter the government took steps to loosen its ties to the conglomerates and to make them more open and accountable in their operations.

Agriculture, Fishing, and Forestry



Flooded paddy field in the region south of Seoul

Flooded paddy field in the region **south** of Seoul, **South Korea**. (Credit: Shostal Associates)

For decades farming has declined in **South Korea** in terms of both production and employment. In the 1950s more than half of the labor force worked in agriculture, but in the early 21st century less than 10 percent did. During the same period, the proportion of national income derived from agriculture decreased from nearly half to less than 5 percent. The average farm is small and still depends largely on manual labor and animal power, which has resulted in generally low yields. More recently, however, a greater emphasis on machinery and other improvements in farming methods have led to increased productivity. Rice is the major crop. Other leading crops include vegetables (especially cabbages) and a wide variety of fruits, including tangerines and other citrus fruits, pears, persimmons, and strawberries. Barley, wheat, potatoes, and soybeans are also grown, but the country must still import large quantities of these crops to meet its needs. Pigs, cattle, and chickens are the principal livestock; pork, beef, and milk are among the top agricultural products.

The fishing industry has long been an important source of food for **South Korea**. Since the 1970s **South Korea** has been one of the world's major deep-sea fishing countries. The catch is sufficient to meet domestic demand

and to allow for exports.

South Korea's forests were badly overcut during and after World War II. Reforestation programs begun in the 1970s have successfully restored much forestland. Domestic timber production meets only a fraction of the demand, however, and therefore lumber must be imported.



Village on Cheju Island, South Korea.

Village on Cheju Island, **South Korea**. (Credit: Knodel/Knodel/Shostal Associates)

Industry

As agriculture declined in **South Korea**, manufacturing boomed. The first industries targeted by the economic development plans introduced in the 1960s were textiles and light manufacturing. Textiles and other labor-intensive industries remain important in **South Korea**, but they have declined from their former preeminence in the economy. Beginning in the 1970s the economic plans emphasized heavy industries, which greatly boosted the output of cement, fertilizer, petrochemicals, and iron and steel.

Later, the focus shifted to high-technology industries. The production of ships, motor vehicles, and electronic equipment grew after 1980, and in the early 21st century **South Korea** ranked among the world leaders in each category. The expansion of the electronics industry was made possible by the country's leadership in the manufacture of [semiconductors](#), which are key elements of computers and other electronic devices. Other important high-technology industries include the production of bioengineering, aerospace, and information technology equipment.

South Korea has few natural resources, and mining makes up only a very small part of the national economy. The country's chief mineral reserves include anthracite coal, iron ore, graphite, tungsten, zinc, lead, gold, and silver. All of the country's crude oil requirements and most of its metallic mineral needs are met by imports. More than half of the country's electric power is generated by coal- and oil-fired thermal plants. The country's first nuclear power station began operating in 1977, and since then nuclear power has been an increasingly important source of electricity. In the early 21st century nuclear plants accounted for more than one third of the country's electric power. A small amount of electric power comes from hydroelectric plants in the northern mountains.



The oil refinery at Ulsan, South Korea

The oil refinery at Ulsan, **South Korea**, is among the largest in the world. (Credit: Shostal Associates)

Services

Despite the continued strength of industry, services account for the majority of **South Korea's** employment and production. Key industries in this wide-ranging sector include finance, trade, and tourism.

With government encouragement, **South Korea's** foreign trade grew substantially beginning in the 1960s. The strength of the country's exports has been a key factor in its economic success. Manufactured goods make up the bulk of the exports; among them are telecommunications equipment, semiconductors, motor vehicles, ships, chemicals, and petroleum and petroleum products. Imports include petroleum, natural gas, electrical machinery, chemicals, and iron and steel. China, Japan, and the United States are **South Korea's** main trading partners.

Tourists are drawn to **South Korea** by its many palaces and other historical attractions, religious sites, including Buddhist temples, and natural beauty. The growing international recognition of **South Korea's** popular culture, such as music, films, and television dramas, also has generated tourist interest. The majority of visitors come from other Asian countries—mostly from Japan and, to a lesser extent, from China—although the number of tourists from the United States also has been substantial.

Transportation and Communications

The transportation system of **South Korea** was expanded and improved considerably after 1960. The first modern expressway connected Seoul and Incheon in 1968. Since then a modern highway network has been constructed and roads have surpassed railways as the main means of carrying passengers and freight. The country's first high-speed rail line, connecting Seoul and Pusan, began operations in 2004. Air service links the major cities with each other and with the rest of the world. The main international airport is at Incheon; it opened in 2001. Gimpo Airport, also near Seoul and formerly the main international airport, now serves only domestic destinations. **South Korea's** principal seaport is Pusan, which has one of the largest container terminals in the world. Other major ports include Ulsan, Incheon, and Cheju.

With the strong support of the government, **South Korea** has developed one of the most advanced telecommunications networks in the world. In contrast to North **Korea**, almost all homes in **South Korea** have a landline telephone, and the use of cellular phones exploded beginning in the late 1990s. Most homes also have a computer with a broadband (high-speed) connection to the Internet.

Government

South Korea was established in 1948 as a democratic republic. Its official name is the Republic of **Korea**. Its amended constitution of 1987 provides for three separate and independent branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—and a system of checks and balances.

The executive branch of the government is headed by the president, who is head of state, chief administrator, and commander in chief of the armed forces. The president is elected by direct popular vote for one five-year term. There is no vice-president. The State Council, which serves as a presidential cabinet, is composed of the president, the prime minister, and the heads of the executive ministries. The prime minister is appointed by the president and approved by the National Assembly. The heads of the ministries are also named by the president.

The one-house National Assembly is responsible for lawmaking, approving the national budget, and ratifying treaties. Most of the seats are filled by popular vote, and the remaining are apportioned among the political parties according to their share of the popular vote. Assembly members hold office for four-year terms.

The Supreme Court has 14 justices, including the chief justice, who is appointed for a single six-year term by the president. The other justices are appointed by the president on the chief justice's recommendation and serve renewable six-year terms. All justices must be approved by the National Assembly. The Supreme Court is the court of last resort and determines the constitutionality of administrative decrees. Constitutionality of laws enacted by the National Assembly is determined by the Constitutional Court.

The court system of **South Korea** also includes High Courts, district courts, and specialized courts. The five High Courts—located in the cities of Seoul, Pusan, Taegu, Taejon, and Kwangju—hear appeals from lower courts. The district courts have primary jurisdiction over civil and criminal cases. A family court in Seoul deals only with such matters as domestic relations and juvenile delinquency, and a patent court in Taejon handles only patent issues. Military courts try members of the armed forces and may also try civilians accused of such military crimes as espionage.

The electoral system in **South Korea** is based on direct, equal, and secret suffrage. All citizens over the age of 19 have the right to vote. In addition to the ballot, **South** Koreans often use other forms of political expression, such as organized demonstrations. The press is also an important voice of **South** Korean political opinion.

History



Syngman Rhee.

Syngman Rhee.(Credit: Harris Ewing

The defeat of [Japan](#) in [World War II](#) ended 35 years of Japanese rule over **Korea**. At the end of the war in 1945, the peninsula was divided into two zones, with the **south** controlled by a [United States](#) military government and the north dominated by the [Soviet Union](#). Talks aimed at reunifying **Korea** failed, and the problem was turned over to the [United Nations](#) (UN). The UN called for elections to choose a government for all of **Korea**, but the Soviets barred UN representatives from the north. The **south**, however, held elections that eventually led to the creation in August 1948 of the Republic of **Korea**. Its first president was [Syngman Rhee](#), who had been president of a Korean government in exile for 20 years during the Japanese occupation. (For a full history before 1948, see **Korea**.)

By 1950 all U.S. and Soviet troops had been withdrawn from **Korea**. But in June the Soviet-equipped North Korean army invaded **South Korea**, beginning the Korean War. The United

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Nations voted to aid **South Korea**, but most of the troops sent to fight the North Koreans were furnished by the United States. At the end of 1950 communist [China](#) entered the war in support of North **Korea**. In 1953 a truce

was signed, with the truce line at approximately the prewar border. A demilitarized zone (DMZ) was created by pulling back the respective forces 1.2 miles (2 kilometers) along each side of the boundary.



United Nations forces fight to recapture Seoul

United Nations forces fight to recapture Seoul, **South Korea**, from communist invaders in September 1950. (Credit: U.S. Army Photo)

Postwar Politics

As president, Rhee assumed dictatorial powers, tolerating little domestic opposition to his rule. He was reelected three times, but his 1960 victory brought accusations of election fraud. Huge student demonstrations turned violent, leading to the deaths of many protesters. Rhee resigned under pressure and fled to exile in Hawaii.

Political instability continued after Rhee's departure, with various political factions vying for power. In 1961 a military junta seized control of the country. General Park Chung Hee, the junta leader, was elected president in 1963. The country's rapid economic growth led to Park's reelection in 1967 and again in 1971. In 1972 he declared martial law, banned all political activity, and dissolved the National Assembly. The Yushin Constitution, giving Park almost unlimited powers, was adopted; he was reelected in 1972 and 1978.

Antigovernment riots broke out in October 1979 after Park expelled a popular opposition leader from the National Assembly. The crisis culminated on October 26 with Park's assassination by the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. The caretaker president, Choi Kyu Hah, restored the civil rights of dissidents, but a return to democratic rule depended on constitutional reform. In 1980 Chun Doo Hwan, a former lieutenant general, was elected president. Later that year a new constitution, limiting the president to a single seven-year term, was approved by voters. In 1987 widespread protests against the constitution and its electoral-college system of selecting a president led to further constitutional changes. The amended constitution, approved in a national referendum in October 1987, provided for direct popular election of the president and reduced the presidential term to five years.

[Roh Tae Woo](#), a former army general and a strong supporter of the new constitution, was elected president in late 1987. He committed himself to the democratization of **South** Korean politics. His government also cultivated new ties with the Soviet Union (and later Russia) and China and signed an agreement with North **Korea** in 1991 calling for nonaggression between the two Koreas.

In 1992 Roh was succeeded by Kim Young Sam, **South** Korea's first civilian president in more than 30 years. He established firm civilian control over the military and launched reforms designed to eliminate political corruption. Even his two presidential predecessors, Roh Tae Woo and Chun Doo Hwan, were prosecuted for crimes they had committed while in power.



Kim Dae Jung.

Kim Dae Jung. (Credit: Newsmakers/Getty Images)

The remarkable economic growth that began in the 1960s continued without interruption for more than three decades, transforming **South Korea** from an agricultural country into an industrial powerhouse. In 1997, however, **South Korea** experienced an economic downturn caused by a financial crisis that swept through Southeast and East Asia. The crisis produced a strong backlash against **South** Korea's ruling party and helped [Kim Dae Jung](#), a longtime prodemocracy advocate, to win the presidency in 1997. Kim was the first opposition party candidate to become president of **South Korea**.

Relations with the North

Relations between **South Korea** and North **Korea** remained tense after the Korean War. Tensions were heightened by acts of terrorism by the North. In

1968 North Korean guerrillas on a mission to assassinate **South** Korean President Park Chung Hee were stopped less than a mile from the presidential mansion in Seoul. In 1983 a bombing by North Koreans in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar), killed several members of the **South** Korean government. In 1987 the North was responsible for a time bomb that destroyed a **South** Korean airliner over the border between Thailand and Burma.

Reunification meetings between North and **South**, which began in 1971, remained deadlocked for years. North-**South** relations appeared to reach a milestone with the signing of the reconciliation and nonaggression pact of 1991. Earlier that year North **Korea** had retreated from its insistence on a single, shared Korean membership in the United Nations, and the two countries were admitted separately.

Reunification talks soon stalled, however, over the issue of North Korea's capabilities to produce nuclear weapons. The north's nuclear program became an issue of international concern. In 1994 North **Korea** signed an agreement with the United States in which it pledged to stop its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, after years of international suspicion, North **Korea** revealed the existence of a secret nuclear program in 2002. It conducted its first test of a nuclear weapon in 2006.



At the government complex in Seoul in October 2006

At the government complex in Seoul in October 2006, a **South** Korean citizen demonstrates his opposition to the North Korean nuclear test. (Credit: AP)



A North Korean train crosses

A North Korean train crosses from the demilitarized zone into **South Korea** in May 2007. (Credit: Getty Images)

Korean ruler Kim Jong Il. During the historic summit, which marked the first meeting between leaders of North and **South Korea**, both sides agreed to work toward reunification. **South** Korean president Roh Moo Hyun met with Kim Jong Il in a second summit in 2007. Also that year, trains from both North and **South Korea** began crossing the demilitarized zone to the other side, the first time such travel had occurred since the Korean War. After Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh as **South Korea's** president in 2008, however, he took a harder line with North **Korea**, and the relationship between the two countries again began to deteriorate.

In 2010 two incidents raised tensions between the North and **South**. In March a **South** Korean warship exploded and sank in the Yellow Sea, and international investigators determined that a torpedo fired from a North Korean submarine caused the explosion. **South Korea** subsequently ended trade relations with the North, while the North Korean government denied responsibility and severed all ties with the **South**. In November, as **South Korea** conducted a military exercise off the country's northwestern coast, the North Korean military bombarded the **South** Korean island of Yeonpyeong with artillery shells. A military base and numerous civilian houses were damaged, and there were several casualties. **South** Korean forces returned fire

Meanwhile,

talks between North **Korea** and **South Korea** resumed in 1998 after a four-year hiatus, and in 2000 **South** Korean President Kim Dae Jung met with North



Lee Myung-bak waves to supporters in downtown

Lee Myung-bak waves to supporters in downtown Seoul after his victory in **South Korea's** presidential elections of December 2007. (Credit: Choi Won-Suk/AFP/Getty Images)

and raised the level of military preparedness on the island.

Economic and Social Developments

The economic crisis of the late 1990s exposed some underlying weaknesses in the **South** Korean economy. In response, the country introduced a number of economic reforms, including restructuring its *chaebol* (business conglomerates) and financial system. **South Korea** recovered quickly from the crisis, and the country entered the 21st century on a relatively firm economic footing.

Along with its economic transformation, **South Korea** experienced great social changes following the Korean War. The population more than doubled between the end of the war and the turn of the 21st century. At the same time, modern education developed rapidly. The growth of educational institutions and of businesses in and around **South** Korea's major cities attracted an increasing number of rural people to urban areas. Seoul, in particular, grew some 10-fold to about 10 million people between the end of World War II and the early 21st century.

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