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# Resources for Studying North Korea



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# Contents



1. Important Considerations
2. Interpreting DPRK State Media
3. Sources: State Media
4. Leadership: The Kim Dynasty
5. Words you've probably heard: *Juche* and *Songun*
6. Reliable Sources of Analysis
7. China-North Korea Relations
8. Russia-North Korea Relations
9. Recommended Books on North Korea
10. Recommend Commentary on North Korea
11. North Korean Cyber
12. The Korean People's Army
13. Unconventional, Intelligence, and Security Forces
14. Final thoughts



# Important Considerations



**First and foremost, North Korea is the “hardest of hard targets” and commonly referred to in intelligence circles as “an information black hole.”** The Regime considers information control critical to its survival. All internal media is state controlled. All foreign visitors are assigned party minders, cameras, and phones are routinely searched, and hotels and restaurants for foreigners are bugged. North Korea has its own internal internet and phone service that does not connect to the outside world, except for specially evaluated officials.

**Global media demand for information on North Korea exceeds the legitimate supply.** As a result, stories on North Korea are run based on little to no sourcing, rumors spread like wildfire across the feeds, and the standard for reporting is salaciousness rather than accuracy. Undeniably, North Korea’s isolation and over the top rhetoric have led it to be portrayed as a uniquely weird place. And it is.

**But it is also a deadly serious place,** where [public mass executions](#) are common for crimes such as listening to K-Pop, poverty is widespread, and forced labor for the state is part of daily life. [Kim Jong Un assassinated his brother](#) in a crowded Malaysian airport with VX nerve agent, a Weapon of Mass Destruction,



# Interpreting DPRK State Media

**Why is this included?** Given the totality of state control, the Regime has options for delivering information that scales with authoritativeness.

**Tier 1: Highest Authority**  
Kim Jong Un (KJU)

KJU himself, or statements attributed to him

**As authoritative and predictive as North Korean media gets**

**Tier 2: Highly Authoritative**

Kim Yo Jong  
Cabinet Ministers or official Ministry Statements  
Senior military leaders (marshals, vice marshals)  
Major agency heads (CPRF, UFD, MSS, etc)

**Regime has clearly settled on a course of action, but unclear on timing, exact means, etc. Flexibility may remain.**

**Tier 3: Semi-Official Statements**

Unnamed senior officials “responding” to reporter’s questions  
Signed KCNA or Rodong Sinmun commentaries  
Signed articles by ranking ministry personnel

**Give clues, but cannot predict action. Hints at future Tier 1 or 2 statement.**

**Tier 4: Not Authoritative**

“Man on the street” interviews, letters to the editor, and regional party editorials

**Filler material or clarifying commentary, often higher tier material repurposed for a smaller medium**



# Sources: State Media

**Major actors in DPRK state media.** North Korean media outlets are targeted and tailored to the Party, State, Military, general domestic audience, and outsiders.

- *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*: the national news service.
- *Rodong Sinmun* (“Labor Newspaper”): largest newspaper in the country, represents the ruling Workers Party of Korea (WPK).
- *Uriminzokkiri* (“Bringing our nations together”): **currently offline**, but formerly North Korea’s hub to disseminate propaganda on outside social media. Its return could signal a changing approach to propagandizing the South.
- *Minju Choson* (“Democratic Korea”): second largest daily newspaper targeted to senior party and government officials.
- *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*: self explanatory; it often just reports which foreigner praised one of the Kims this week, but will also carry major foreign policy statements.
- *The Pyongyang Times*: exclusively English language paper targeted to the anglophone world; great place to start studying DPRK propaganda.

**Excellent Resource:** [KCNA Watch](#), a DPRK media aggregator



# Leadership: The Kim Dynasty

North Korea has arguably the most pronounced, invasive, omnipresent, and effective cult of personality in history. The DPRK is effectively an absolute hereditary monarchy dressed in the trappings of communism. The leaders are human, yet divinely inspired. Infallible, but capable of receiving bad advice.



**KIM Il Sung**

1912-1994

Regime Founder, *Great Leader*, and  
“Eternal President”



**KIM Jong Il**

1941-2011

The *Dear Leader* and  
“Eternal General Secretary”



**KIM Jong Un**

b. 1984

“Respected Comrade  
General Secretary”



# Words You've Probably Heard: Juche

**Juche** (“self reliance” or more accurately “agency”<sup>1</sup>) is North Korea’s official state ideology. Simply and inartfully, it’s a blending of the hagiographic personality cult of the ruling Kims, calls for autarky, and allusions to communism. Sometimes North Korea will also call it *Kimilsungism*.

- **What does it mean?** Whatever the ruling Kim wants it to mean. It is attributed to founder Kim Il Sung. The bumper sticker is Kim Il Sung’s assertion that “man is the master of his own destiny.”<sup>3</sup> Dates in the North are recorded in “Juche years” with Juche 0 being Kim Il Sung’s birthday (1912).
- **Why does it matter?** Because the Regime uses it as shorthand for one man rule by Kim Jong Un. Foreign commentators often try to ascribe the North’s actions to its “Juche ideology” to find some kind of signal in the noise.
- **How can I study it?** You really cannot, unless you want to do a LOT of mind numbing, repetitive, and technical reading. There is no Juche Bible. Juche officially comprises the infallible works of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un.

**Bottom line:** attributing North Korea’s actions to *Juche* gives it more social scientific legitimacy and philosophical grounding than it deserves.<sup>2</sup>





# Words You've Probably Heard: Songun



**Songun** (“military first”) is North Korea’s official state policy of putting the military first. Kim Jong Il issued the ideology in response to North Korea becoming a failed state in the 1990s with the fall of its Soviet benefactor. When combined with *Juche*, North Korea will sometimes call it “*Kimilsungism/Kimjongilism*” to unite the two ideologies.

- **What does it mean?** the Korean People’s Army is officially the most important organization in North Korea.
- **Why does it matter?** North Korea propagates a garrison state worldview of constant threat by outsiders. That threat is military (the United States), philosophical (anticommunism), spiritual (decadent anti-Koreanness), and existential. *Songun* is for Kim Jong Il what *Juche* was for Kim Il Sung.
- **How can I study it?** See the slides with book, website, and think tank recommendations, as well as study the general activities of North Korea over the last thirty years.

**Bottom line:** *Songun* was designed to ensure the military’s loyalty to the leadership through allocation of resources and status. And it worked.





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on North Korea

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/p/northkoreaproducts>



# Foreign Military Studies Office



FMSO is all about original-language sources and primary documents - FMSO's *Operational Environment Watch* journal provides translated selections and analysis from a diverse range of foreign articles and other media that our analysts believe will give military and security experts an added dimension to their critical thinking about the Operational Environment

- Find analysis of North Korean national strategy, technology and tactics

<https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/>



# Sources of Analysis (1 of 2)



- [Congressional Research Service](#)<sup>1</sup>
- [DIA Military Power and Threat Reports](#)
- North Korea Military Power Reports to Congress<sup>2</sup>
- [Korea Institute for Defense Analyses \(KIDA\)](#)
- [Korea Institute for National Unification](#)
- [Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea](#)



Ministry of  
Unification



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# Sources of Analysis (2 of 2)



- [38 North](#), project of the Stimson Center
- [Asan Institute for Policy Studies](#)
- [Atlantic Council](#) (Markus Garlauskas)
- [Brookings Institution](#)
- [CSIS Korea Chair](#) (Victor Cha)
- [Center for a New American Security](#) (CNAS)
- [Hudson Institute](#)
- [National Bureau of Asian Research](#) (NBR)
- [RAND Corporation](#)
- [U.S. Institute of Peace](#)



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# China-DPRK Relations: Overview

China and North Korea<sup>1</sup> have a mutual security alliance<sup>2</sup>, the only such formal agreement China has.

While the treaty is state-to-state, the relationship is primarily conducted as Party-to-Party (CCP-Workers Party of Korea), with the key leader of the relationship on the Chinese side typically being the head of the CCP's International Liaison Department.<sup>3</sup>



Long Live the Victory of the Korean People's Army  
and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army!

In Beijing's own words "China has consistently advocated for the complete prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons" and for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

# China-DPRK Relations: Does Beijing Control Pyongyang?

**The belief that Beijing controls Pyongyang is widespread.** Commentators will usually say something akin to “whenever the world gets tough on China, Beijing sics North Korea on South Korea or Japan to distract us.” Another version is “North Korea’s doesn’t do anything without China’s permission.”

**It’s true that China has a lot of *potential* influence over North Korea, but nothing near any real definition of “control.”** North Korea’s attitude behind closed doors is nearly identical to its attitude in public statements: belligerent independence and a “dare us” attitude.

**The relationship can be understood as “too important to fail,”** despite deep concern on China’s part for North Korea’s actions. Pyongyang likely knows that China’s overarching desire to avoid a collapsed North Korea on its border outweighs any other impetus China might have to use its considerable military and economic leverage to modify the North’s behavior.

Countries, the United States and China included, have been trying to “buy” good North Korean behavior for decades. It never works for long.

# Russia-DPRK Relations: Overview

**The Russia-North Korea relationship goes back to the North's founding at the end of World War 2.** The Soviet Union put regime founder Kim Il Sung on the proverbial throne when it occupied what is now North Korea.<sup>1</sup>

While Stalin approved the North's 1950 invasion of the south, he didn't provide direct military support. When the North started to lose, Mao's China sent "volunteers" that pushed the United Nations forces back to what is now the border between North and South Korea at the 38th parallel.<sup>2</sup>

**Moscow was North Korea's main supporter.** Russia provided annual subsidies until the USSR's dissolution. When the subsidies stopped, the North's economy collapsed in a period known as the "arduous march." The stories you hear about cannibalism and mass starvation are documented from this period.

**Putin and Kim Jong Un signed an updated mutual defense treaty in 2024.** However, the North never really recovered from this, and Pyongyang still harbors resentment toward Moscow for abandoning it.

For more information, [read this CRS report.](#)





# Recommended Books on North Korea

- Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea Past and Future*, Ecco, 2012.
- Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, Random House, 2010.
- T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War, The Classic Korean War History, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*, Potomac Books, 2001.<sup>1</sup>
- KANG Chol-hwan, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*, Basic Books, 2005.
- Suki Kim, *Without You There is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite*, Crown, 2015.
- Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and Kim Dynasty*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2006.<sup>2</sup>
- B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves*, Melville House, 2011.
- B.R. Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth*, Sthele Press, 2015.<sup>3</sup>



# Recommended Commentary on North Korea

- Victor Cha and Andy Lim, *Slow Boil: What to Expect from the DPRK in 2024*, CSIS, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/slow-boil-what-expect-dprk-2024>
- Bo Ram Kwon, *What Does ROK-NATO Cooperation Mean for Relations on the Korean Peninsula?*, 38 North, 2024. <https://www.38north.org/2024/04/what-does-rok-nato-cooperation-mean-for-relations-on-the-korean-peninsula/>
- Bruce Bennett, *The Uncertain Russia-North Korea Relationship*. RAND Corporation, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/07/the-uncertain-russia-north-korea-relationship.html>
- Anthony W. Holmes, *The Futile Pursuit of North Korea's Golden Concession*, Nikkei Asia, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/The-futile-pursuit-of-North-Korea-s-golden-concession>

This page will be regularly updated with new relevant commentary



# North Korea Cyber (1 of 3)



*North Korea's cyber program will pose a sophisticated and agile espionage, cybercrime, and attack threat. Pyongyang's cyber forces have matured and are fully capable of achieving a variety of strategic objectives against diverse targets, including a wider target set in the United States and South Korea.*

*North Korea will continue its ongoing cyber campaign, particularly cryptocurrency heists; seek a broad variety of approaches to launder and cash out stolen cryptocurrency; and maintain a program of IT workers serving abroad to earn additional funds.*



THE OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE'S  
2024 ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT





# North Korea Cyber (2 of 3)



**North Korea is proficient at cyber operations**, as both an intelligence tool for influence and collection, as well as for deniably circumventing sanctions to fund the Regime's illicit activities. Here are some major examples.

## ***The Interview, The Sony Hack (2014)***

**Background:** arguably the most famous breach in entertainment history, alleged actors from the DPRK Reconnaissance General Bureau initiated a massive [cyberattack against Sony Pictures](#) in response to the satirical film *The Interview* that depicted the assassination of Kim Jong Un. Hackers exfiltrated and leaked confidential personal and business information, and wiped Sony's computer servers. In 2018, the [U.S. Department of Justice formally charged](#) North Korean actors for the attack.



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# North Korea Cyber (3 of 3)



## *The Bangladesh Bank Robbery (2016)*

**Background:** [hackers used false instructions](#) to order the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to transfer US\$1 billion to the central bank of Bangladesh. US\$101 million was successfully transferred. The United States assessed North Korea was behind the attack, and charged DPRK cyber actors with the crime.

## *WannaCry 2.0 Ransomware Attack (2017)*

**Background:** a ransomware attack that affected over 200,000 computers in 150 countries, notably computers supporting the United Kingdom's National Health Service. Attackers demanded payments in BitCoin. Analysts broadly [attributed the attack to North Korea](#).





# The Korean People's Army





# Korean People's Army (KPA)



**The KPA is the party armed forces of North Korea.** It officially traces its origins to Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerilla army during World War II.

- It is a large, ground-centric force composed of land, air, naval, special operations, and missile forces. The majority are deployed within 100km of the Demilitarized Zone.
- It is the world's fourth largest standing army, with 1 million personnel under arms. Six percent of the country's 25 million people are on active duty, and another 25-30 percent are assigned to reserve, paramilitary, or other units subject to wartime mobilization.
- The force fields legacy equipment that is only selectively updated. Kim has [prioritized development of missile systems](#) and unconventional capabilities to make up for its degraded state. With the general exception of SOF units, the KPA's readiness and capabilities are assessed as poor due to endemic corruption, malnourishment, lack of maintenance, and poor leadership.
- The North also maintains a vast array of hard and deeply buried targets and is trained in tunnel warfare, both to protect against U.S. and allied airstrikes, and to avoid detection by foreign ISR.

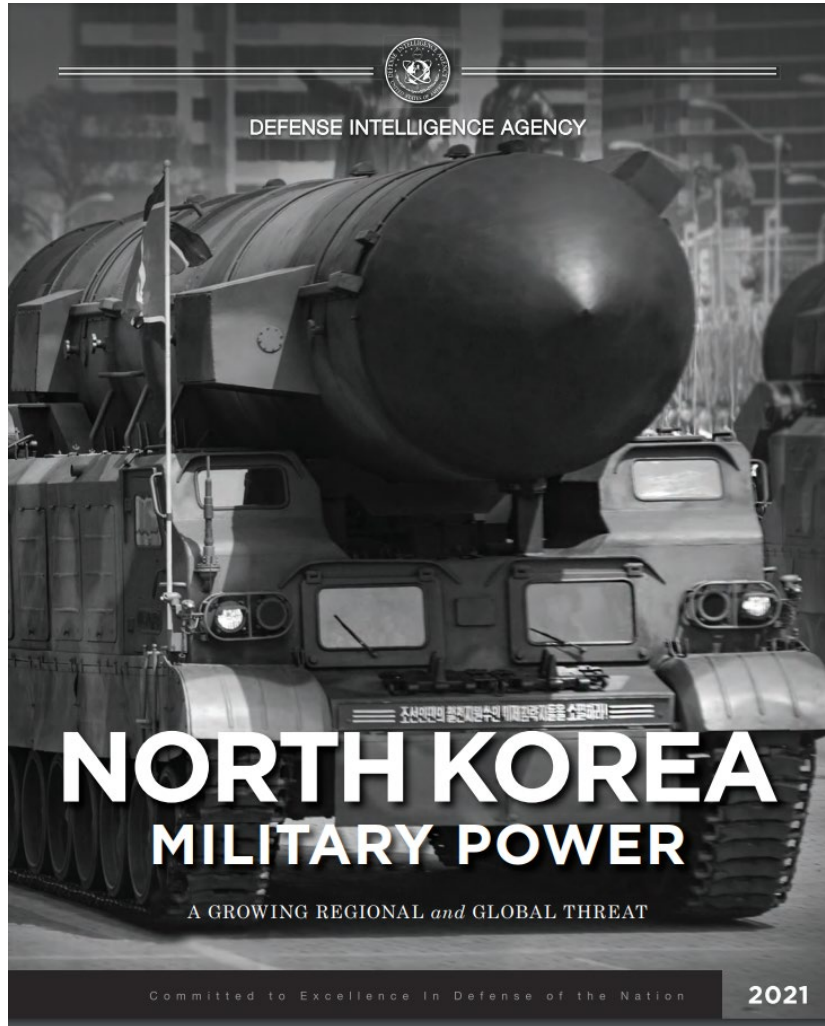




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# KPA In-Depth (1 of 3)





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# KPA In-Depth (2 of 3)



## **NORTH KOREA** Enabling Russian Missile Strikes Against Ukraine

MAY 2024





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# KPA In-Depth (3 of 3)



## MILITARY AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS INVOLVING THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

REPORT TO CONGRESS



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE





# Unconventional, Intelligence, and Security



**The Reconnaissance General Bureau:** is North Korea's primary foreign intelligence service, responsible for collection and clandestine operations. The RGB comprises six bureaus with compartmented functions, including operations, reconnaissance, technology and cyber capabilities, overseas intelligence, inter-Korean talks, and service support.



**The Ministry of State Security:** is North Korea's primary counterintelligence service and is an autonomous agency of the North Korean Government reporting directly to Kim Jong Un. The MSS is responsible for operating North Korean prison camps (including the [notorious Yodok](#)), investigating cases of domestic espionage, repatriating defectors, and conducting overseas counterespionage activities in North Korea's foreign missions.

**The United Front Department:** functions as both a party foreign ministry for international relationships with communist governments abroad, but also as a liaison organization with underground communist movements. Also responsible for writing and disseminating North Korean propaganda to the outside world.



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# Unconventional, Intelligence, and Security



- **225th Bureau:** responsible for training infiltration agents into the ROK and establishing underground, pro-North political parties. It focuses on fomenting unrest and revolution.
- **Office 39:** maintains the slush fund for the leaders, as well as circumventing sanctions to ensure the regime has foreign cash and luxury goods available for both the leadership and as gifts to reward loyalty.
- **Chosen Soren (aka Chongryon):** the *General Association of Korean Residents in Japan*, the North's de facto embassy in Japan and made up of Korean residents who sympathize with North Korea. Has lost much of its influence in Japan over the last decade, but remains an important link between the Japanese and North Korean governments.





# Final Thoughts



**Study South Korea, Japan, and other countries in the region, too.** North Korea does not exist in a vacuum. Japan and South Korea are U.S. allies, but **never forget** they have their own national security objectives.

- Japan and South Korea are modern, democratic, free, open, and dynamic societies. Both have adopted major defense and security policies to address China and North Korea.
- North Korea's founding mythology centers around Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese guerilla forces during the Japanese occupation of Korea (~1905-1945). In North Korea's version of events, Kim Il Sung basically single handedly defeated Japan. Japan remains North Korea's "mortal enemy."
- South Korea's political right and left disagree on when the Republic of Korea was founded: when it officially declared independence from Japan at the end of WW2, or when the various anti-Japan militias began fighting (respectively).
- South Korea-Japan relations are subject to wild political swings. Japan's right angers Seoul by visiting [Yasukuni Shrine](#) or obtuse statements about the Japanese occupation. Conversely, Tokyo asserts that Seoul likes to [reopen old wounds](#) and nothing Tokyo does is ever good enough.



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# Questions?



잊지말라 승냥이미제를!