



## Intro to North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

North Korea has several motivations for pursuing nuclear weapons. First and foremost is security. Ever since the end of the Korean War and the bifurcation of the Korean Peninsula, the Kim regime has perceived an existential threat to their survival. With the US backing two of their closest enemies, Japan and South Korea, North Korea has had a longstanding concern that the West will eventually attempt to overthrow the authoritarian government and install a leader friendlier to democratic ideals and South Korea's Western allies. Pyongyang has determined that the only way to prevent this from happening is to become a nuclear-armed power and uses this belief to justify having nuclear weapons as a way to guarantee protection against the US. Not only does the North Korean government think that their nuclear weapons will deter attacks, but they also provide North Korea with the chance to achieve self-preservation and be militarily self-sufficient.

Another motivation for developing nuclear weapons is legitimacy on the world stage. Since becoming a nuclear power in 2006, North Korea has shoehorned itself into a very small club of countries that have nuclear weapons and put itself to some degree on equal footing with them. Compared to other nations with nuclear weapons, North Korea is by far the least economically, technologically and socially developed. By elevating themselves to be in the same elite group as the United States, Russia and the UK, North Korea is able to upgrade its global status and have their demands as a nation taken seriously.

The legitimacy the Kim regime derives from their nuclear arsenal also allows them to engage in coercive diplomacy. Pyongyang's military threats are usually issued in a [conditional](#) context, portraying them as a necessary response to any potential U.S. attacks. For example, in his 2018 New Year's Day speech, Kim Jong-un [said](#) "As a responsible nuclear weapons state, our Republic will not use a nuclear weapon unless its sovereignty is encroached upon by any aggressive hostile forces with nukes." This statements seems to allude to some sort of 'no first use' sentiment, however without a formal agreement saying as much, this notion has to be disregarded as bluster and propaganda.

North Korea is also motivated by the prestige and fear associated with nuclear weapons, both at home and abroad. Being perceived as strong and powerful has always been very important to the Kim regime, and photo-ops with President Trump have been widely successful in increasing Kim Jong-un's leadership legitimacy within his own country. Moreover, North Korean state media frequently release photos of Kim attending missile parades and launches, often lauding him as the visionary and driving force behind the success of the program. By constructing an image of invincibility, Kim [boosted](#) his personal prestige and, by extension, the prestige of his regime. In addition to serving as propaganda, the continued showboating of their military capabilities perpetuates the fear instigated by the Kim regime. Kim Jong-un wouldn't be seen as nearly as dangerous without his nukes.

