

Why North Korea Survives

Here's how the Kim regime has proven so resilient.

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North Koreans visit statues of late North Korean leaders Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, February 16, 2024. (Photo by KIM Won Jin/AFP.)

North Korea's recent [jettisoning of reunification](#) with South Korea as a national goal has raised much speculation about Pyongyang's goals and strategy. Relatively overlooked in recent [debates](#) over whether the Kim regime might be preparing for war with South Korea—[more than it is usually, anyway](#)—is the simple but surprising fact of North Korea's continued survival. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is among a handful of regimes that survived not only the collapse of communism in the 1990s but successive waves of democratization since.

The keys to North Korea's survival are multifold, as the Kim family cannot continue to rule unless it succeeds in managing multiple threats to regime survival simultaneously. And understanding how North Korea has survived as long as it has should help to shape the policy of the United States and its allies. Here are some of the techniques that have been particularly prominent (and, from the perspective of survival, effective) in the first decade of Kim Jong Un's rule.

Coup-proof the regime. The transfer of power from one generation to another is [notoriously difficult](#) for dictators—yet the Kim family has pulled it off twice. New analysis [suggests](#) that current leader Kim Jong Un began engineering a friendly elite several years before he took power.

He replaced his father's military supporters with civilian elites that he drew from the Korean Workers' Party, decentered the National Defense Commission that had dominated during his father's tenure, and strengthened party control after an era of what the late Kim Jong Il referred to as "military-first politics."

Strengthening the party had another salutary effect for Kim Jong Un's survival: reducing the threat posed by his own military. Unlike other dictatorships, which most commonly lose power to rivalrous elite insiders, Leninist regimes tend to have fewer coups d'état—perhaps because they use a different set of tools, including purges, political commissars, and party discipline processes, to maintain control over the military and coercive apparatus. Kim Jong Il, however, reportedly faced both an [attempted coup](#) by the military and assassination [attempts](#) during his tenure—prompting Kim Jong Un to course-correct.

Blend market mechanisms with political control. Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has followed a model called "party-state capitalism" in China, and "market Leninism" by scholars of Vietnam, that seeks to institutionalize [market mechanisms under party control](#). During the Kim Jong Il era, so-called "marketization from below" eroded the regime's control at the grassroots and allowed citizens to develop economic independence through black or grey-market trading. This development posed a threat to regime control over North Korean society and allowed information from outside to penetrate the "mosquito net" of regime censorship.

Under Kim Jong Un, the party-state stepped back in. It formalized governance of (certain forms of) market activity, which allowed the state to reassert control through regulation and taxation. This move gave the regime renewed control over cross-border market activity; limited opportunities for bribery and corruption; and allowed much-needed revenue to be siphoned upward for regime use.

At the same time, North Korean authorities tightened social control at the grassroots and launched ideological campaigns aimed at "annihilating anti-socialist behavior." Aided by COVID, border security was locked down, decimating cross-border trade with China and halting the [flow of defectors](#) into South Korea. (This intensification of border monitoring was facilitated by developments on the Chinese side: stringent mobility controls under zero-COVID and the increasing prevalence of facial recognition surveillance across Chinese cities.)

Make friends abroad. There is an international component to North Korea's political-economic reorientation under Kim Jong Un as well. The DPRK has [deepened ties with Russia](#), [enhanced revenue-generating efforts through cyber-attacks and cybercrime](#), and [closed embassies](#) in countries where old streams of revenue-generation may have dried up. Aspects of this rebalance are not altogether surprising: The country's 2016 five-year economic plan [reportedly called](#) for diversification away from economic dependence on China by increasing trade with Russia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. War in Ukraine has offered an opportunity to achieve this aim by [deepening North Korea's relationship with Russia](#), including through armaments supplies.

How revenue is generated matters for autocratic survival. External sources of revenue that come in at the top and are distributed downward can be used for patronage to maintain the loyalty of regime supporters. Previously, North Korea manufactured and exported [drugs and counterfeit](#)

[currency](#) to obtain this kind of income. Today, external sources of revenue that flow through the military (such as trade with Russia) and regime-sponsored cyber groups (hacking for profit) serve much the same function, thereby bolstering regime survival.

Target propaganda strategically. All regimes use public messaging, propaganda, ideology, and national myths to influence domestic audiences, and North Korea is of course no exception. Kim Il Sung outlined the importance of these projects in a seminal 1955 [speech](#), and the country's second leader, Kim Jong Il, rose to power through the propaganda apparatus. Today, the regime targets its propaganda messages differently depending on whom it's talking to and how those propaganda targets can help the regime stay in power.

In a [recent study](#), my co-authors and I found that Kim Jong Un uses different propaganda for ordinary North Koreans than he does for elites in Pyongyang. That's because elites and ordinary citizens play different roles in bolstering regime survival: Kim needs to mobilize rural peasants to grow crops and serve in the military, while he needs to co-opt elites and persuade them that they are better off supporting him than any other alternative.

Propaganda messages to rural mass audiences therefore mobilize them around serving in the Korean People's Army and growing agricultural crops (one sign I saw repeatedly in fields on a 2012 visit exhorted: "Everyone to the weeding battle!"). Messages to elites, on the other hand, remind them of the history that binds them to the Kim family and promise benefits for sticking with the regime, especially economic prosperity and modernization (one sign in Pyongyang, for example, read "Raise the flag of the new-century industrial revolution toward a high-tech breakthrough!").

Manage the diaspora. The Arab Spring showed how émigrés and exiles could provide an extraterritorial basis for opposition, coordination, and anti-regime mobilization that could destabilize authoritarian regimes. Not surprisingly, then, Pyongyang [views the diaspora](#) as a threat to regime security, and treats it accordingly, using three major tools.

First, it dissuades people from leaving: Even among repressive autocracies, few restrict emigration as much as North Korea does. Second, it discredits those who do leave. North Korean authorities mount aggressive internal and international propaganda campaigns against defectors, both individually and collectively. Third and finally, it deters them from engaging in anti-regime activity or attempting to contact, inform, and extricate other DPRK residents. This "[closing of the mosquito net](#)" can involve threatening phone calls to ordinary North Koreans in Seoul, as well as more severe forms of transnational repression, including assassination.

Have nuclear weapons. There is little question that North Korea sees a robust nuclear weapons program together with delivery systems capabilities as key to regime survival. That program continues, with the DPRK claiming in January 2024 to have tested both a [new intermediate-range, solid-fueled hypersonic missile](#) and a new type of "[strategic cruise missile](#)."

Little is known about North Korea's written nuclear doctrine, and the purpose of these weapons may be as much for coercion and political advancement as for actual warfare. Former intelligence official Syd Seiler [notes](#) that North Korea tends to make dramatic threats and then not follow

through, while the attacks it does carry out have been largely by surprise. But the threats force South Korea, the United States, and other American allies and partners (such as Japan) to invest heavily in deterrence and to [periodically revisit](#) whether it's possible to break the deadlock over the nuclear weapons program through diplomacy. However, no nuclear weapons state has ever given up its nuclear warheads voluntarily without experiencing regime change or transformation. North Korea shows little sign of being the first.

Clear understanding of North Korea's techniques for regime survival can inform policymaking by the United States, its allies, and the broader international community. Knowing how North Korea seeks to repress and control émigrés, for example, should inform both global human rights work and resettlement support programs provided by the United States and other countries. Programs that seek to expand freedom of information inside North Korea will be able to deliver information better and more effectively if they understand who the regime targets with propaganda messaging, and why.

And while the centrality of nuclear weapons to Kim Jong Un's political survival means it will be very difficult to get rid of these weapons entirely absent a change in leadership in Pyongyang, up-to-date knowledge of how North Korea's foreign policy generates revenue for weapons development gives the United States and the international community a chance to slow or degrade the advance of the most dangerous and destabilizing capabilities, to deter their use, and, if necessary, to combat them in case of active conflict on the peninsula. In "the [land of lousy options](#)," as policymakers have [often](#) termed North Korea, such limited successes are nonetheless worth pursuing.

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