

Observation no: 104 North Korea

Country-year: 1949

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was founded on September 9, 1948 with political and military backing from the Soviet Union. To head the regime, the Soviet Union (Stalin) chose Kim Il Sung.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.

In the two years prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, Kim Il Sung and a cadre of elites consolidated military, political, and ideological power. From 1948 until 1950, "the paramount interest of this elite was to have the big army and full panoply of military equipment that they so sorely lacked in the 1930s."² The nascent country did not experience a military coup during this time.

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

Yes.

Kim Il Sung was "a Korean guerilla commander who had initially fought the Japanese in China but had spent the last years of World War II in Manchurian training camps commanded by the Soviet army."³ During the Japanese occupation, Kim commanded a division of Korean-Chinese troops, with several Chinese regimental commanders under him.⁴ Later during WWII, Kim led a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against the Japanese.⁵

4. Are ethnic, sectarian, or racial criteria used to exclude segments of the population from the officer corps?

No.

The elite regime that came to power in 1948 consisted entirely of Korean military leaders who fought in the brutal counterinsurgency guerilla campaigns against the

¹ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 7.

² Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War* (New York: Random House, 2010), 56.

³ Oberdorfer, 8.

⁴ Cumings, 52.

⁵ Cumings, 53-54.

Japanese. Kim Il Sung and members of his extended family constituted the nexus.⁶ The pedigree of the military officer's accomplishments during the resistance determined membership and rank in the regime. Thus, ethnic and sectarian backgrounds were of less importance in the racially homogenous Korean peninsula.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

At the birth of the DPRK, Kim Il Sung developed a strict political ideology to promote "unity above all else, and by whatever means necessary. From then onward the North Korean leadership promoted a totalized politics: no dissent, no political alternatives, our way or the highway. Almost as soon as they came into power they put key guerilla leaders in charge of almost everything."⁷

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

In 1949, party membership and resistance pedigree constituted the sine qua none condition of entry into the senior officer corps.⁸

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

The KPA's training system "is designed to produce soldiers who, by dint of their superior ideological training, physical conditioning, and superior skills in guerrilla warfare, can defeat a numerically and technologically superior enemy. Political and ideological training are stressed." The daily training regime consists of four hours of 'political education' and 'military instruction.'⁹ In addition to extensive political and ideological indoctrination, the new recruit to the KPA "is typically educated, indoctrinated and motivated by the strict and regimented society of his country. His view of the world has been regulated since birth by the state-controlled information and education systems."¹⁰

⁶ Cumings, 55-56.

⁷ Cumings, 55.

⁸ Cumings, 57; Joseph S. Bermudez, *The Armed Forces of North Korea* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 20.

⁹ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Bermudez, 83-84.

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes.

Several internal security organizations subordinate to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces (MPAF) and the State Security Department continuously work to repress internal dissent. These organizations "protect the government and the KWP from domestic threats," and maintain domestic tranquility through the continual application of force against any individual who dissents against the regime.¹¹ From 1948 to 1950, the armed forces were used to systematically target any group or individual that opposed the DPRK regime, especially individuals suspected of collaboration with the Japanese.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

Yes.

The military regime has governed the DPRK since its birth: "The two cornerstones upon which the nation has been built are the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and the Korean People's Army (KPA). Technically, the KPA was officially established (8 February 1948) prior to both the government (9 September 1948) and the KWP (June 1949)."¹²

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes.

The Guard Command is subordinate to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces (MPAF) and ensures the personal security of the regime leader (Kim Il-Sung) and high-ranking officials.¹³ However, the Security Command also performs this function as part of an intentional overlapping strategy.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

¹¹ For an overview, see Bermudez, Ch. 7: Intelligence and Internal Security Services.

¹² Joseph S. Bermudez, *The Armed Forces of North Korea* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 1; Bermudez, 197-198; US Department of Defense, *Country Handbook: North Korea* (Washington: DOD, August 2000), 33.

¹³

The Security Command (subordinate to MPAF but controlled by the State Security Department) is responsible for internal security within the KPA. As an intelligence organization, the Security Command conducts surveillance “of high-ranking general officers both in their offices and homes.” The core mission of the organization is to actively seek out and expose “elements [in the regular military] which are corrupt, disloyal or which present a threat for a coup d’état.” Furthermore, the Security Command in conjunction with the State Security Department performs direct internal security missions, such as periodic purges of military leaders order by the regime leader.¹⁴

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes.

Kim Il-Sung purged all opposition forces from the military when he came to power in 1948. Any officers suspected of collaboration with the Japanese or whose loyalty was not rock-solid were purged.¹⁵

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes.

There is little separation between the top leadership (Kim Il-Sung), the military officers, and civilian bureaucrats. “All political, governmental and military control within the DPRK begins with Kim Il-Sung, who is simultaneously Chairman of the National Defense Commission, General Secretary of the KWP, and Supreme Command of the Korean People’s Army. It then proceeds down three distinct paths – National Defense Commission, KWP, and Cabinet.”¹⁶ Since these institutions receive and communicate information about North Korea’s internal and external security environment to the top leadership, some sort of institutionalized forum exists in the Central Military Committee and National Defense Commission.

¹⁴ Bermudez, 197-202.

¹⁵ Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Ecco, 2012).

¹⁶ Bermudez, 20; Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington Books, 1990), 123.