TOPIC PREPARATION GUIDE

Situation in North Korea

Topic Background

The Korean Peninsula has been a hotspot for almost sixty years now. At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union controlled half of Korea and the United States the other half. Rather than decide whose supporters would control the whole area, they split the country in two at a place on the map called the 38th Parallel. North Korea, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), was led by Kim Il-Sung. Kim gained the favor of the Soviets by deciding that the country would have a Communist-style government. South Korea became an ally of the United States, which was determined to keep Communism from spreading.

In 1950, after years of tensions between the North and South, North Korea launched an attack across the dividing line between the two sides to try to take over South Korea. The United Nations, led by the United States, sent a military mission to push back the North. After years of fighting, and the intervention of China on the side of North Korea, the Korean War ended in a stalemate. Rather than signing a peace treaty, an armistice was signed, or temporary peace. This means that the two countries are technically at war even today.

To separate the two, a Demilitarized Zone was set up, a 160-mile long, 4 mile wide stretch of land at the border where no military troops could stay. The United Nations still has a presence there, and the United States still hosts several thousand troops to keep watch. South Korea, though led by a military dictator for decades, eventually became a democracy and now has one of the largest economies in the world. North Korea remains on of the poorest countries on Earth.

North Korea is also one of the most isolated countries in the world. It strictly controls its borders and the flow of information to its citizens. North Koreans are taught from birth that the Kim family are not just the leaders of the country, but more than mere humans. They are also taught to adhere to Kim Il-Sung's Juche idea, originally an offshoot of Communism. Juche, often translated as “self-determination”, requires that the people of North Korea show loyalty to the ruling Workers Party of Korea, as the only way to prosperity is through relying on North Korea's national resources and having a strong army to protect the Party and country.

The large amount that the DPRK spends on its military in pursuit of juche is part of the reason for the DPRK's lack of development. Despite the poverty of its civilians, the North Korean Army is one of the largest in the world. North Korea has long been mistrustful of the West and uses this as a reason to keep its army large. Kim Il-Sung's son, Kim Jong-Il, sought to prevent a new invasion of North Korea by seeking nuclear weapons technology.
North Korea's nuclear program first came under suspicion in 1992 when International Atomic Energy Agency officials were unable to verify Korean claims about how and why it came to possess enriched uranium and plutonium. Uranium is a radioactive element that powers nuclear power plants but can also make nuclear weapons; plutonium is almost only used for nuclear bombs. When North Korea threatened to pull out of international agreements policing nuclear programs, the United States and the DPRK came to an agreement where the US would provide food aid and build two small nuclear power plants in exchange for North Korea giving up the idea of having nuclear weapons.

The 1994 Agreed Framework slowly but surely broke down over the next decade. By 2003, North Korea had walked away from the deal it had come to with the United States and resumed its pursuit of a nuclear technology. In 2006, North Korea successfully detonated a nuclear weapon. Japan and South Korea, as neighbors and potential targets of North Korea, reacted with shock and fear. The world strongly condemned North Korea, but it still possesses a small nuclear stockpile.

Kim Jong-Il died in 2012, after a long period of uncertainty about his health. Kim Jong-Un, Kim Jong-Il's son, took over as leader of North Korea. Many that study North Korea hoped that North Korea would show signs of change under Kim. Instead, to show his leadership of the country, North Korea attempted to launch what it claimed was a satellite into orbit in April 2012. Other states said that the rocket launch was actually a missile test. In either case, the launch failed, exploding soon after takeoff.

Meanwhile, North Korea remains one of the countries most in need of international assistance. Famines in North Korea are frequent, as are smaller food shortages. While the international community offers aid to North Korea, the amount it gets from sources other than the UN’s World Food Programme often depends on how well it cooperates with demands to halt its missile tests and other actions that raise tensions in East Asia. North Korea sometimes does and sometimes doesn't cooperate, making it hard for those civilians who need this aid to survive.

In 2014, the UN Human Rights Council commissioned a report that documented numerous human rights violations by the government of North Korea. It directly blamed leader Kim Jong-Un. Human rights experts have cited the report and said that Kim Jong-Un could face charges by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. However bringing a state leader before the course would require approval by the UN Security Council.

Past International Action

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was drafted in 1968 and represented a landmark agreement on halting the spread of nuclear weapons. Under the NPT, those states with nuclear weapons, known as the nuclear weapons states, would agree to limit its number of weapons and not spread the technology to other states. Those without nuclear weapons would agree not to pursue them, in exchange for the right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes.

Almost all states in the United Nations have agreed to the NPT. North Korea first signed the NPT in 1985, but declared that it had withdrawn from the agreement in 2003. Of those countries that once signed and ratified the Treaty, only North Korea has withdrawn. In doing
so, North Korea also rejected International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear facilities. The relationship between the DPRK and IAEA has varied wildly over the years with inspectors currently invited to enter the country.

The UN Security Council has had the Situation in Korea on its agenda for over fifty years now. Since it began its nuclear weapons testing, the Security Council has issued several rounds of sanctions on North Korea. These sanctions include a weapons embargo, banning the sale of weapons materials to and from the DPRK. Specifically, these sanctions target the ability of the DPRK to produce missiles and create new nuclear production facilities.

Starting in 2003, there have been a series of negotiations known as the Six Party Talks. North Korea, South Korea, the United States, Russia, China, and Japan have all met together to discuss ways that North Korea can be convinced to give up its nuclear program. Some breakthroughs have occurred, such as deals in 2005 and 2009. These deals have rarely been completely followed through, leading to setbacks. Talks have been stalled since 2009 due to the United States and North Korea disagreeing on conditions that need to be met to restart negotiations.

The United States and North Korea have agreed to several smaller deals outside of the Six Party Talks. In February 2012, the US and DPRK came to an agreement on a way for the US to start sending food aid to North Korea again. In exchange for this food aid, the DPRK promised to stop enriching uranium, invite in IAEA inspectors, and halt its nuclear and long-range missile testing. This agreement was ended after the April 2012 “rocket launch”.

Possible Solutions

The United Nations Charter gives the United Nations Security Council the ability to act to protect “international peace and stability”. It is also given the power to force countries to follow its resolutions, both in general under international law, and by using economic sanctions or military action. The goal of the Security Council’s efforts is to encourage peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, a goal that has long been unmet.

On the Security Council, several members of the Six Party Talks hold permanent seats. The United States, China, and Russia all hold a veto power over the actions of the Council because of those permanent seats. That means that if any of them disagree with a resolution, it does not pass. China has long favored a much softer approach to North Korea than the United States. This policy prevented the passage of a strong resolution condemning North Korea’s failed “rocket launch” in April 2012.

Both the United Nations and individual countries already heavily sanction North Korea. This means it is hard to find ways to make North Korea follow demands of the Security Council without also adding things North Korea wants, like new food aid. Many say that giving this aid to North Korea means the regime is able to back out of its side of agreements. Others say that having aid to civilians in North Korea tied to government cooperation with the international community’s demands is cruel. The debate in the Security Council on how to handle North Korea swings between these two ideas.

The Security Council must focus on three key goals to solve the situation on the Korean Peninsula:
• Recommend a way for the Six Party Talks to be brought back to life;
• Find a solution where North Korea will commit to giving up nuclear weapons;
• Provide a way for other countries to believe the DPRK if and when it says it has given up nuclear weapons.

And additionally, the Security Council could address the alleged human rights violations taking place in North Korea. The Security Council potentially call for Kim Jong-Un to be tried before the International Criminal Court.

The situation in North Korea not only affects the people who live there, but also the people of South Korea, Japan, China, and others in the region. A peaceful solution will be hard to come by, but needs to happen. Otherwise, the millions of people of North Korea will continue to struggle and suffer while the rest of the world watches North Korea’s government for what it will do next.

Further Research

Questions to consider:
• Does your nation take part in the Six Party Talks? If so, what are its goals regarding North Korea?
• Has your country signed the NPT? If not, why?
• Does your country believe that North Korea should get international aid even if it doesn’t live up to its agreements?

Resources:
• The Six Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Program – A useful background from the Council on Foreign Relations
• IAEA & DPRK – The IAEA’s hub for information on North Korea
• The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – The full text of the NPT
• Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

1 http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/united_nations_korean_war.htm
4 http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/juche.htm
6 http://wwwisis-online.org/publications/military-balance/the-military-balance-2012/
10 http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT.shtml
11 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2644593.stm
12 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/29/north-korea-moratorium-nuclear-programme
13 UN Charter, Chapter V