

**IB Extended Essay**

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**The Implications of The North Korean Missile Crisis Being a Cold War**

**Research Question:** To what extent is the North Korean Missile Crisis a cold war?

**Subject Area:** Global Politics

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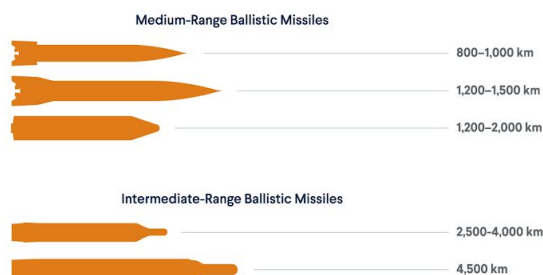
## Introduction

While the Cold War was “The period of Soviet-American antagonism that dominated the international system from approximately 1945 to 1991,” (Atkinson, David) a cold war is “an ideological, political, economic, cultural, military, and strategic contest” (Atkinson, David). This general definition can be applied to other outstanding conflicts, namely the Korean Missile Crisis. Currently, the Korean Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea is considered to be the most dangerous border in the world, also making the list is the border between North Korea and China. Hundreds of people have died in these zones due to active soldiers and landmines. Many variations of missiles have been created, following are the missiles which North Korea has created, their classification and their approximate range.



These Short-Range Ballistic Missiles and Anti Ship Cruise Missiles are capable of reaching the edges of Japan and the coast of China as well as all of mainland South Korea. Next, the Medium Range Ballistic Missiles are capable of hitting all of mainland Japan as well as part of China. The

Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles can reach all of mainland, Mongolia, China, Thailand,



Japan, South Korea, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, Philippines, and parts of Russia, Indonesia,

Malaysia, India, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Papua New Guinea. Lastly the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles reach the longest. The only parts which they are incapable of



reaching is South America, Antarctica, the Southern tip of Africa, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Honduras Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. While some would argue that the North Korean Missile Crisis is an arms race, it goes

beyond that. While it might have started as an arms race, the North Korean Missile Crisis is a cold war.

### **Common Characteristics of a Cold War**

If we begin by defining terms, one meaningful way to start might be by asking “how do we classify a war as a Cold War?”

#### **A. Mutual distrust**

At the inception of a cold war, it is common to see distrust between two countries often rooted in fear. This fear can manifest in different forms. Sometimes it's due to the worry of losing territory or being removed from an economic trade. Other times it could be due to military reasons or opposing ideologies. For example, during World War II there was distrust between the Soviets and the US, this began when the USSR felt that their allies delayed forming a second front to fight Germany, weakening the Soviets. This distrust is the first schism which serves as the starting point. From there, things escalate.

#### **B. Mutual fear**

Distrust soon turns into a mutual fear. The Soviet's distrust of America and Western countries was further fueled by fear upon the US dropping the A-bomb, a weapon the

Soviets didn't know existed. While the Soviets felt threatened by this new weapon, the US felt threatened by the presence of a new world power with opposing ideologies and goals. This mutual fear is a piece which fuels most of the other characteristics.

### **C. Arms race**

Due to the distrust and fear between the two countries they need to beat the other country without engaging in war with them; this takes form in an arms race. As a result of the Cold War, approximately 125,000 nuclear warheads (93% of the world's nuclear arsenal) were created between the US and USSR("U.S. and Russia: Arms Race to Nowhere"). These arms races both begin and continue through either countries' need to be on top. Both countries feel threatened and thus need more weapons to feel safe.

### **D. Major alliances**

As the tensions between either country escalates and fear increases, either side should begin to gather other countries to their side. While this can be like NATO, SEATO, and the Warsaw Pact, in which the countries wanted to be part of an alliance, its not the only way. The US also used money to buy allies. As a result of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan approximately 15.4 billion dollars was given from the US to countries of Europe in an attempt to paint the US as a good guy and the Soviets as the bad one. While the two countries won't go to war, one side having more allies will incite fear in the opposing country.

### **E. Foreign policies aimed at the opposing country**

In an attempt to "deal" with the enemy, policies aimed at that country are often created. Out of fear of communism, George Kennan believed that "the main element of any

United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies,” (Kennan, George). In creating these policies, the country can assuage the common folks’ fear through demonstrating that the government is dealing with the “problem.”

#### **F. Internal Paranoia**

Fear further drives internal paranoia inside the country, not only in the government but in the common people. Joseph McCarthy overrode US law and prosecuted people whom he believed were either communists or associated with communists. This paranoia that communism was inside the US incited fear in the people and established that anyone who disagreed with the government was communist and an enemy. Known as the Red Scare there was fear that communist subversives and spies were in the US Government trying to dismantle it from within, (The Cold War: The American Homefront).

#### **G. Proxy Wars**

As stated in the introduction, a cold war is short of violence between the two countries. This doesn’t mean that they can’t use other countries to fight each other. These “proxy wars” were common in the US-USSR Cold War, some of these proxy wars were the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Yom Kippur War, and the Soviet Afghanistan War. In these proxy wars, they would each back an opposing side. They could then fight using that side in order to demonstrate their power without actually going to war with each other and risking M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction).

#### **H. Threats**

In order to keep the alliances they’ve made, either side needs to show their allies that they

are stronger and they are better off sticking on their side. The two sides will likely threaten each other in order to get the other to break. This is similar to the PSYOPS used by the US on the USSR. Through missile tests, jet flights, and secret research, the US kept the USSR guessing, not sure what the US would do and knocked the USSR off their feet, giving the US the advantage.

### **Common Characteristics of The End of a Cold War**

Just as there are common characteristics of classifying a war as a cold war, in a cold war there are instances which demonstrate that the war is de-escalating and coming to a close. All of these relate to a deescalation and are peaceful in intent; they work on forming understanding. Eventually if the situation is coming to a close or if the leaders recognize that any further competition is pointless then they will meet, most likely, at a Summit. As Peter R. Weilemann said, "The first key element of summitry is executive participation, Diplomacy at the highest possible level," (Weilemann, Peter). A Summit is an international conference with heads of state in order to discuss tensions in a diplomatic way. At these Summits, the leaders often discuss peace or limitations; more often the latter. During the Cold War, 23 Summits occurred, 15 of which discussed arms Limitations. As discussed before, fear is a characteristic which guides many actions in a cold war, through coming to conclusions on limitations, countries' fears can be assuaged. The reason why multiple summits must happen is because there is still distrust present at the beginning of resolution. Each country will want the other to dismantle their weapons before they feel safe to do so. In the Cold War, the US's SDI was a bargaining chip which the USSR was so afraid of that it brought them to the table to discuss limitations. Two Summits ended due to the US's unwillingness to disband the SDI. The Strategic Defense Initiative was a

system the US had created; “The weapons required included space- and ground-based nuclear X-ray lasers, subatomic particle beams, and computer-guided projectiles fired by electromagnetic rail guns—all under the central control of a supercomputer system,” (Crowley, Kevin). While it never was brought to fruition it’s goal was to serve as an umbrella over the US which could intercept incoming ballistic missiles and ignite them before they had a chance to impact the ground. So while not every Summit results in agreement on limitations, they still demonstrate the leaders’ willingness to work towards a solution. Lastly, the one thing which must be present between the two to end the issue is a mutual understanding of each other. The US and USSR began this when they came to work together during the Arab-Israeli wars in order to bring peace to the region.

### **Background of The Korean Missile Crisis (1992-2002)**

The Korean Missile Crisis began in 1952 when North Korea created the Atomic Energy Research Institute and the Academy of Sciences (NTI 3). Soon after they enlisted the aid of the Soviet Union. Through their agreements, North Korean Scientists were trained by Soviet scientists in the Soviet Union. North Korea also found help from China but soon split in 1964 when China refused to give Kim IL Sung their technology. For the next 27 years, North Korea continued constructing new reactors and facilities while conducting research (ACA 1). As a result of this some professors, such as Robert Litwak, have stated that the Korean Missile Crisis is ““The Cuban missile crisis in slow motion,””(Litwak, Robert). In contrast, Scott Sagan believes, “The current Korean missile crisis is even more dangerous than the Cuban one. For one thing, the Cuban missile crisis did not involve a new country becoming a nuclear power,” (Sagan, Scott).



Here is where the fear aspect comes into play. Similar to the Soviet-US Cold War, North Korea fears being “technologically behind” everyone else, “North Korean leadership believes that hostile external forces, including South Korea and the United States, could mount an attack. As a result, in Pyongyang’s eyes, the only way to guarantee national survival is to develop asymmetric military capabilities to thwart its perceived threats,” (Duan, Amber). Again similarly, the US fears a new country, with opposing ideologies, wielding nuclear weapons. As a show of good faith, President Bush withdrew all US tactical nuclear weapons which were deployed outside the US (NTI 6). This was a unilateral move which then inspired not only President Gorbachev to reciprocate this action 8 days later, but also South Korean President Roh Tae Woo of South Korea to announce the Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (ACA 2). This vowed that South Korea would not produce, use, or stockpile nuclear weapons, it also disbanded all nuclear research facilities in South Korea. As a result of all this North Korea signed the “South-North Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” effectively banning all nuclear weapons and research from the peninsula.

While tensions seemed to decrease, they soon began again when it was believed North Korea couldn’t be trusted. In addition to both countries agreeing to not produce and stockpile, they also agreed to inspections by the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). Through these inspections, discrepancies were found in the data which North Korea was presenting. Out of fear and distrust, the US began implementing sanctions on North Korea. This is a pattern which continually shows up in this missile crisis. For example, in 1994, the US and North Korea met in Geneva and concluded that the US would help construct light water reactors in North Korea if they dismantled their nuclear reactors and allowed inspections by the IAEA. Once again

North Korea agreed but then in 1998, the US again imposed sanctions as North Korea was selling missiles and technology to Pakistan. This repeating pattern demonstrated to the world that North Korea couldn't be trusted.

### **North Korean Missile Crisis Present Day (2003-2020)**

In terms of an arms race, for most of history, it has been one sided. This is a result of the US having already done most of their build up during the US-USSR Cold War. Over the course of their near 70 years of development, 1952- 2020, it is presumed by the CIA that North Korea possesses between thirty and sixty. Although due to the information barriers present in North Korea the exact is unknown and some experts believe North Korea only has ten to thirty (Duan, Amber). North Korea has often embellished statistics of their tests before, whether they are claiming successful tests or claiming statistics on their possessed amount of weapons. What makes it so easy for North Korea to do this is the censorship present in North Korea. On top of this, Pyongyang has also stockpiled chemical weapons, a direct violation of the Biological Weapons Convention and the Geneva Protocol. Again due to the information barrier exact amounts are unknown, but it is estimated that they possess “between 2,500 and 5,000 tons of nerve, blister, blood, and choking agents,” (Duan, Amber).

While North Korea has increased their stockpiles the US has stayed true to not only their Soviet-US Cold War agreements but also their North Korean Missile Crisis agreements. As stated previously, the US withdrew its nuclear weapons from South Korea as part of a show of good faith. The problem is, this doesn't mean their military hasn't been hard at work. For example, 7 days after the U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping met to discuss the denuclearization of North Korea In addition to this, the US dropped what was nicknamed the ‘Mother of All Bombs’ in Afghanistan. Its payload was equivalent to 22,000

pounds of TNT. How it works is it, “The bomb explodes a few feet above the ground, and is designed to send a devastating wave of fire and blast hundreds of yards to kill troops, flatten trees, knock over structures, collapse cave entrances and, in general, demoralize those far beyond the impact zone” (Shanker, Thom). This GBU-43 was dropped out the back of a C-130 cargo plane. According to the FAS Military Analysis Network the range of a C-130 is “2,500 miles (2,174 nautical miles) with 25,000 pounds (11,250 kilograms) cargo” (Sherman, Robert). Since C-130s can be flown off of aircraft carriers, the US could easily get this new bomb close enough to North Korea. How is North Korea supposed to feel safe and agree to limitation deals when the US is creating larger bombs and the President is stating things such as, ““We have the greatest military in the world,”” Mr. Trump said. ““We have given them total authorization, and that’s what they’re doing, and frankly, that’s why they’ve been so successful lately.”” (Cooper, Helene and Mashal, Mujib). President Trump stated this in a response to the US dropping the GBU-43 on a suspected Islamic hideout in which casualty reports remain hidden and unknown. In the months following the drop of GBU-43, North Korean missile tests ramped up and by August of 2017 had successfully tested an ICBM along with fitting a miniaturized nuclear warhead on it. Furthermore, in 2019, President Trump withdrew the US from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty(INF Treaty) between the US and Russia and also stated he would not renew the START treaty which is set to expire in 2021. When the INF Treaty was signed in 1987 the US completely eliminated its IRBM and MRBM stockpile. Upon leaving the treaty, President Donald Trump, “called for the development of new types of nuclear weapons, including a new low-yield nuclear warhead which began production in 2019.” (Nuclear Threat Initiative). Not only this but he also began conducting tests of IRBMs(currently banned in the INF treaty). So

while North Korea has broken accepted guidelines, participant countries haven't been exactly non-threatening. This argument could be made for either side; either side could state that they are increasing as a result of the other side's decisions.

Discussion began to arise about the re-evaluation of guidelines to allow South Korea to maintain SRBMs capping off at 800 km. This 800 km max would encompass all of North Korea without posing a threat to the surrounding nations of Russia, China, and Japan. It is imperative to have China and Russia on board since they are part of the P5. The P5 are 5 countries in the Security Council of the UN, these 5 are the US, China, Russia, The UK, and France. If one of these countries veto a resolution, it automatically ends and can't be discussed further. Through having the support of China and Russia, they can work to implement changes which allow South Korea to have the ability to protect themselves. In 2012 this happened and South Korea's guidelines were revised, "increasing the range from 300 to 800 km with 500 kg payload," (NTI 2). Another instance in which all P5 nations were in agreement was in the sanctions of North Korea in 2017. In the UN only the Security Council has the ability to implement sanctions, likewise all P5 countries had to be on board for the sanctions to go through.

### **Major Observations**

Mutual distrust, mutual fear, arms race, major alliances, foreign policies aimed at the opposing country, internal paranoia, proxy wars, and threats, these are the characteristics of a cold war, determined from the US-USSR Cold War. While it certainly isn't as large scale as the US-USSR Cold War, there is and has been a US-North Korean Cold War going on. The beginning was rooted in fear; North Korea feared being not only technologically, but militarily inferior. This was especially pertinent due to the US presence in South Korea. After the Korean War there was a lack of trust that the US wouldn't try to help South Korea reclaim the Korean

peninsula. As the US normally does, they were distrustful of a new country with opposing ideologies looking into nuclear capabilities. The arms race, begun by North Korea, and continued through the US's response further alienated these two countries from one another. The two characteristics which kept this Cold War from being larger was the lack of major alliances and lack of proxy wars. In the beginning, The Soviet Union and China provided aid to North Korea but once they pulled out, North Korea was alone. Threats were common especially with President Trump using his personal twitter often as a basis for responding to and calling out North Korea. Paranoia also goes hand in hand with mutual fear and distrust. Now that we know it's a cold war, why is this helpful?

Through knowing what caused the situation, it can be determined how to bring it to an end. The US-Korean Cold War can be compared to the US-USSR Cold War to see if the same exit strategies apply. The problem is, the thing which brought the US-USSR Cold War to a close was a bluff which now can't be done again. In the first cold war, the US bluffed that they had created the SDI or Strategic Defense Initiative which, as stated before, was a space and ground based system which would utilize lasers and particle beams to shoot down and eliminate incoming missiles before they reached the ground. This scared the USSR because if implemented it would have rendered their missiles useless. This brought them to the table and allowed them to come to terms for peace. Currently the US is at the place where they were in the middle of the first cold war. Both main countries have the necessary nuclear weapons and the only thing stopping them from pressing the button is mutually assured destruction.

### **Conclusion**

Now, this begs the question: why does the information presented in this paper matter? The information here demonstrates why cold wars in our eras can't reach the same scale as the

US-Soviet Cold War did. During the first cold war a major aspect was the sense of the unknown, more commonly, bluffing. In the first Cold War none of the statements presented by either side could be verified due to the lack of connectivity as compared today. A bluff today doesn't work, everything stated by any country is posted all over the internet with many sources working to verify the information presented. Also in the 21st century, with the emergence of memes, "a humorous image, video, piece of text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by internet users" (Oxford Languages), nuclear weapons have become a joke. When the first Cold War occurred, nuclear weapons were something which the common people had no knowledge of. This shroud of secrecy incited fear in the people of the world, all they were hearing was the damage they did to Japan and what they could do. Since nuclear weapons have become a joke, the imminent danger of them has lost their psychological effect they have on people. This North Korean Cold War is distinct due to the era it occurred in, were it to have occurred in the 1940s, it would have reached catastrophic levels of danger.

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