

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #027
North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom
February 18, 2020

[00:00:05] Hello hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:00:14] Today, we are going to be talking about North Korea, one of the most **isolated¹** and strangest places in the world.

[00:00:23] Before we get right into it, I just want to remind those of you listening to this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iVoox, or wherever you get your podcasts that you can get a copy of the transcript and key vocabulary over on the website, which is [Leonardoenglish.com](http://leonardoenglish.com).

¹ having minimal contact or little in common with others

[00:00:43] We've also launched a really cool new [feature](#)² so that the transcript [animates](#)³ as you listen, so instead of scrolling down the page or reading the PDF, it's as if there were subtitles for the podcast.

[00:00:59] I think it's pretty cool, everyone who has used it says, whoa, that's quite [neat](#)⁴, and it does make it a lot, lot easier to follow every single word.

[00:01:10] So check that out. It's over at leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:16] Right then North Korea.

[00:01:19] Today we are going to ask ourselves, how did it get to this?

[00:01:24] One country [slap bang in the middle](#)⁵ of the economic [powerhouses](#)⁶ of China, Japan, and South Korea, that has ended up being pretty much the most [isolated](#) place in the world to outsiders and a complete [pariah](#)⁷ state.

² something that makes a product, machine, or system different, and usually better, than others of a similar type

³ moves

⁴ cool

⁵ exactly in the middle

⁶ a country, organization, or person with a lot of influence, power, or energy

⁷ a person who is not accepted by a social group, especially because he or she is not liked, respected, or trusted

[00:01:45] So much so that in English it's known as the [hermit](#)⁸ kingdom, so a [hermit](#) is normally someone who cuts themselves off from society, usually for religious reasons.

[00:02:00] The reasons that North Korea is cut off from the rest of the world aren't religious, of course, and there isn't one single reason.

[00:02:11] Especially given everything that has been going on in the past few years with Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, it's easy for people to characterise the situation into being a sort of mad [dictator](#)⁹ with nuclear powers, sort of like a Austin Powers situation.

[00:02:32] But the situation is a lot more complicated than that.

[00:02:37] And the story of North Korea is a really interesting one to try and understand some of the power dynamics that have been going on between the East and the West in the past hundred years or so.

[00:02:52] Today we are going to be asking ourselves, how did it get to this?

[00:02:58] Why does North Korea really continue to develop nuclear weapons and what might the future hold for North Korea?

[00:03:08] We'll also end with four very strange facts about North Korea that I'd be willing to bet you didn't know.

⁸ a person who lives alone and apart from the rest of society , especially for religious reasons

⁹ a leader who has complete power in a country and has not been elected by the people

[00:03:18] As always, it's worth just [recapping](#)¹⁰ a little bit of history to understand how we got to this situation.

[00:03:26] For the purposes of today's podcast, we'll start at the beginning of the 20th century, just over a hundred years ago when the entire Korean [peninsula](#)¹¹ was occupied and then [annexed](#)¹² by the Japanese.

[00:03:42] It was kept as a Japanese [colony](#)¹³ for the next 35 years until Japan was defeated in the Second World War.

[00:03:53] When Japan finally surrendered, the Northern part of the Korean [peninsula](#) was occupied by the Russians, and the Southern part was occupied by the Americans.

[00:04:06] Neither wanted to give up territory and influence in this very strategic point of East Asia, and so the [peninsula](#) was divided into two countries, the North being the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the South being the American-aligned Republic of Korea.

¹⁰ repeating the main points of an explanation or description

¹¹ a long piece of land that sticks out from a larger area of land into the sea or into a lake

¹² to take possession of an area of land or a country, usually by force or without permission

¹³ a country or area controlled politically by a more powerful country that is often far away

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:04:30] As leader of the North, the Soviets installed a man called Kim Il-sung who had previously been a communist [guerilla](#)¹⁴.

[00:04:41] So it was actually only in 1948 that North Korea was formed - previously there never was North and South Korea, this is actually a pretty recent [construct](#)¹⁵.

[00:04:57] However, even though the [peninsula](#) had been split into two parts, both the North and the South claimed that they had [jurisdiction](#)¹⁶ over the entire [peninsula](#), and so in 1950, just two years after the formation of North Korea, the North, with the [backing](#)¹⁷ of the Soviets, attacked the South, which kicked off the Korean war.

[00:05:27] The United States, of course sensing that if the South was defeated, they would lose an important [stronghold](#)¹⁸ in East Asia, they supported the South and the end result was this very nasty messy war that cost the lives of two and a half million people, most of them actually civilians.

¹⁴ a member of an unofficial military group that is trying to change the government by making sudden, unexpected attacks on the official army forces

¹⁵ an idea or an imaginary situation

¹⁶ a country, state, or other area where a particular set of laws or rules must be obeyed

¹⁷ support, especially money, that someone gives to a person or plan

¹⁸ a building or position that is strongly defended

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:05:52] In 1953, after three years of a pretty pointless war an [armistice](#) was signed, and note that it was only an [armistice¹⁹](#), a temporary peace, the war is still technically ongoing.

[00:06:11] Since then, however, South Korea has developed into a [thriving²⁰](#) country with high living standards, some world-class companies, and a big cultural impact on the world.

[00:06:26] North Korea, as you will know, is almost a [polar²¹](#) opposite.

[00:06:32] You could be forgiven for thinking that it was immediately downhill for North Korea.

[00:06:38] However, until the 1980s or so, North Korea was actually more advanced than its Southern neighbor.

[00:06:48] It invested heavily in industries like mining and steel production, and it built up a sizeable military.

¹⁹ a formal agreement between two countries or groups at war to stop fighting for a particular time, especially to talk about possible peace

²⁰ growing, developing, or being successful

²¹ complete

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:06:58] It was able to do this mainly through support from the Soviet Union. However, as the Soviet Union began to [unwind](#)²², the money and support stopped flowing to North Korea and things went backward pretty quickly.

[00:07:16] With the [dissolution](#)²³ of the Soviet Union, North Korea soon realised that it was pretty short of friends.

[00:07:25] Communist governments were falling, they were being [toppled](#)²⁴, all across the world, and without allies, North Korea would be in a pretty [precarious](#)²⁵ position if its Southern neighbour decided to attack it.

[00:07:42] So North Korea made efforts to [cozy up](#)²⁶ even more to China, it tried to befriend China even more.

[00:07:50] After the collapse of the USSR, China was most certainly the world's dominant communist power.

²² if you unwind something that is wrapped around an object, you unfasten it, and if it unwinds, it becomes unfastened

²³ the act or process of ending an official organisation or legal agreement

²⁴ forced out of power

²⁵ in a dangerous state because of not being safe or not being held in place firmly

²⁶ to try to become more friendly with

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:07:50] It was, and still is in China's advantage to have an ally in North Korea as it acts as a [buffer](#)²⁷, a sort of protective wall against the US [affiliated](#)²⁸ South.

[00:08:06] Without North Korea, and if the entire Korean [peninsula](#) was taken over by what's now South Korea, China would in effect have a border with a US-aligned country and it evidently doesn't want to do that.

[00:08:25] Cut off from the world and only supported by China, life turned from bad to worse in North Korea.

[00:08:35] There were huge famines in the 1990s and millions of people [perished](#)²⁹.

[00:08:42] The original leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung died in 1994 and was replaced by his son, Kim Jong-il.

[00:08:51] And it was under Kim Jong-il that North Korea first started [enriching](#)³⁰ [uranium](#)³¹ in order to create its own nuclear capabilities, despite having promised not to.

²⁷ something or someone that helps protect from harm

²⁸ connected with or controlled by a group or organisation

²⁹ died

³⁰ to increase the level of a particular isotope (= one form of an atom) in an element in order to make it more powerful or make it explode more powerfully

³¹ a chemical element that is a heavy, radioactive metal, used in the production of nuclear power and in some types of nuclear weapon

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:09:04] Fast forward a few years and after Kim Jong-il died in 2011 and was replaced by one of his sons, Kim Jong-un, things continued to get weirder and more [volatile](#)³², more unpredictable, in the hermit kingdom.

[00:09:23] Kim Jong-un appears to be a pretty [ruthless](#)³³ leader, executing members of his own family, including his oldest half brother and his uncle.

[00:09:35] He also appears to be a highly [erratic](#)³⁴ individual, testing nuclear weapons in 2017 despite knowing that his [counterpart](#)³⁵ in the White House was probably equally [erratic](#) and impulsive.

[00:09:52] And I don't know about you, but the idea that Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump both almost literally had their fingers on a big red button, that's not a particularly comforting thought.

[00:10:08] So that's a quick bit of North Korean history, which helps explain how we have got to the situation we're in now.

[00:10:18] One of the main questions people have about North Korea now though, is about why it continues to develop nuclear weapons.

³² likely to change suddenly and unexpectedly, especially by getting worse

³³ not thinking or worrying about any pain caused to others; cruel

³⁴ moving or behaving in a way that is not regular, certain, or expected

³⁵ a person or thing that has the same purpose as another one in a different place or organization

[00:10:29] You can't really talk about North Korea without mentioning the fact that it is a nuclear power controlled by a pretty [erratic](#) dictator, so this seems to be one of the first questions that people ask.

[00:10:45] If they could just be brought back into world society, if they could just be another normal country, if they gave up nuclear weapons, why don't they do it?

[00:10:57] Well, there are a few reasons here.

[00:11:01] It's certainly not that they actually want to use them [offensively](#)³⁶ for an attack on the South or Japan or the US or anywhere else.

[00:11:12] Doing so would lead to immediate [reprisals](#)³⁷, immediate payback, causing huge devastation in the North, and it would make absolutely no sense to do so.

[00:11:24] It would be a completely suicidal move for the regime.

[00:11:30] So if it's not for [offensive](#)³⁸ reasons, it must be for defensive reasons, to defend North Korea against a potential attack from the South or from the US.

³⁶ in a way that relates to attacking someone or something

³⁷ (an example of) activity against another person, especially as a punishment by military forces or a political group

³⁸ used for attacking

[00:11:44] Or rather, we should say that it's for defensive reasons, but more as a [deterrent](#)³⁹ than as a real defense.

[00:11:53] Having nuclear weapons just shows what you're capable of if someone attacks you, so it helps you avoid being attacked in the first place.

[00:12:04] While this is supposedly the reason that any country would have nuclear weapons, it's particularly true for North Korea.

[00:12:11] So the primary reason, according to most experts, that North Korea has nuclear weapons is this one, to act as a [deterrent](#).

[00:12:24] But it's not quite as simple as that, and there are a few more important reasons that it's worth talking about.

[00:12:32] Firstly, without nuclear weapons, North Korea would have really very little [bargaining](#)⁴⁰ power when it comes to economic or [diplomatic](#)⁴¹ negotiations.

³⁹ to prevent someone from doing something or to make someone less enthusiastic about doing something by making it difficult for that person to do it or by threatening bad results if they do it

⁴⁰ discussions between people in order to reach agreement on something such as prices, wages, working conditions, etc.

⁴¹ involving the management of relationships between countries

[00:12:45] As we have seen through the start of the negotiations with the US, the North thinks that it can use its nuclear capabilities as a way to extract [concessions](#)⁴² in a negotiation, as a way to get more than it would otherwise.

[00:13:06] Basically saying, you should give us more favourable treatment, and in return, we will get rid of our nuclear weapons, or at least you need to give us better treatment because we have nuclear weapons.

[00:13:22] There's also the factor that living standards in North Korea are pretty [dismal](#)⁴³, pretty terrible, and having nuclear weapons is a great source of national [prestige](#)⁴⁴, used to make people more proud of their country despite their pretty terrible day-to-day life.

[00:13:44] Kim Jong-un, as he doesn't have any of the revolutionary [credentials](#)⁴⁵ of his grandfather or the political [longevity](#)⁴⁶ credentials of his father, he has [portrayed](#)⁴⁷ himself as the keeper of the nuclear weapons, consistently publishing pictures of

⁴² something that is allowed or given up, often in order to end a disagreement, or the act of allowing or giving this

⁴³ sad and without hope

⁴⁴ respect and admiration given to someone or something, usually because of a reputation for high quality, success, or social influence

⁴⁵ documents that state the abilities and experience of a person and show that the person is qualified for a particular job or activity

⁴⁶ living for a long time

⁴⁷ shown to be

himself with [missiles](#)⁴⁸, inspecting weapons facilities, and the nuclear weapons are also a sort of personal [legitimacy](#)⁴⁹ for Kim Jong-un.

[00:14:18] So there are several pretty good reasons that the North has to keep its nuclear weapons and it doesn't seem very likely at all that they will do anything to give them up, no matter how many love letters Kim Jong-un receives from Donald Trump.

[00:14:39] This being said, relations between the North and the South, between North Korea and South Korea, and North Korea and the rest of the world, they appear to be slightly better than they were at least five years ago.

[00:14:53] Kim Jong-un and the South Korean president Moon Jae-in met in April, 2018 almost two years ago, and that was for the first time in 10 years.

[00:15:06] And there have been several other [gestures](#)⁵⁰ such as North Korea sending a team to the winter Olympics in South Korea in 2018, and these slightly [surreal](#)⁵¹ conferences between the US and North Korea, between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump.

⁴⁸ a flying weapon that has its own engine so that it can travel a long distance before exploding at the place that it has been aimed at

⁴⁹ the quality of being legal

⁵⁰ an action that expresses your feelings or intentions, although it might have little practical effect

⁵¹ strange; not seeming real; like a dream

[00:15:26] But life in North Korea, despite these gestures, is still pretty [brutal](#)⁵².

[00:15:35] It's estimated that hundreds of thousands of people are imprisoned in labour camps, there are frequent food shortages and any criticism of the ruling party is met with fierce punishment.

[00:15:52] It's still possible to visit as a tourist and a few thousand people do travel there every year.

[00:15:59] However, it's very tightly controlled and after the death, or should I say murder of a US tourist in 2017 after he was arrested for stealing a poster from a hotel and [sentenced](#)⁵³ to 15 years imprisonment, I imagine many people are understandably thinking twice about North Korea as their next holiday destination.

[00:16:29] So the question we asked ourselves at the start of the podcast was North Korea, how did it get to this?

[00:16:37] And I guess the response is, well, it's actually quite complicated.

[00:16:42] And I guess the response is, well, North Korea is, to a certain degree, a victim of the post world war two power struggle between East and West as both battled for influence in East Asia, whether it's lack of allies and lack of economic growth, North

⁵² cruel, violent, and completely without feelings

⁵³ given an official punishment

Korea felt itself backed into a corner and started developing nuclear weapons and has now found itself in a sort of impossible position of being a rogue nuclear state.

[00:16:42] It doesn't really know what to do. The rest of the world doesn't really know what to do and nobody is really sure what will happen.

[00:16:42] But I think it's fascinating to understand more about it, and as always, things aren't as simple as they may be **portrayed** to be by the media.

[00:16:54] Before we call it a day for today though, I want to just finish with some strange and sort of **lighthearted**⁵⁴ facts about North Korea.

[00:17:04] Firstly, it's that it isn't just freedom of speech that is **curtailed**⁵⁵, that is limited.

[00:17:12] The style of your haircuts also have to match a particular style, each of which is state approved.

[00:17:21] There are only 28 hairstyles approved by Kim Jong-un.

[00:17:25] Men can choose between 10 hairstyles and women can decide between 18 various styles.

[00:17:35] I don't know about you, but part of me thinks that this isn't actually a terrible idea.

⁵⁴ amusing

⁵⁵ to stop something before it is finished, or to reduce or limit something

[00:17:41] Going to the hairdresser and just saying, "please can I have a number eight" would remove a lot of confusion.

[00:17:49] Second interesting bit of [trivia](#)⁵⁶ about North Korea - while free speech is certainly not allowed, marijuana is allowed.

[00:18:01] I couldn't find out exactly why that is, but it is true, there is nothing illegal about smoking marijuana in North Korea, and apparently 30% of North Koreans regularly use drugs. Who would have known?

[00:18:15] Thirdly, and here is another fact provided by the North Korean press, but I will let you make up your own mind as to whether you believe it.

[00:18:27] Kim Jong-il, the son of the country's first leader, has performed amazing [feats](#)⁵⁷, amazing acts, according to state controlled media.

[00:18:38] These include him scoring a perfect 300 the first time he went bowling and the first time he played golf, he [sank](#)⁵⁸ 11 [holes in one](#)⁵⁹.

[00:18:52] What a [phenomenally](#)⁶⁰ talented man.

⁵⁶ details or information that are not important

⁵⁷ difficult things needing a lot of skill, strength, courage, etc. to achieve

⁵⁸ hit a ball into a hole or pocket, especially in golf or snooker

⁵⁹ in golf, an occasion when someone's ball goes into the hole the first time they hit it

⁶⁰ extremely

North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:18:55] And finally, our final weird fact about North Korea is that the calendar isn't quite the same as the one that you or I probably use.

[00:19:05] In North Korea the calendar starts on the 15th of April, 1912 which was Kim Il-sung's date of birth.

[00:19:15] So while now it's the year 2020 for most of the world, in North Korea it's the year 107 and later on it'll be 108.

[00:19:26] Okay then, I hope that this has been an [enlightening](#)⁶¹ little dip into North Korea, the hermit kingdom.

[00:19:34] It's a hugely complicated situation, but pretty fascinating to think about how it has got to this.

[00:19:42] As always, I'd love to know what you thought of the podcast.

[00:19:46] You can hit us up at hi@leonardoenglish.com, or on Facebook or Instagram.

[00:19:52] And final point, do check out the new animating transcripts on the website.

[00:19:58] It means you can listen to the audio with the words flashing up on the screen in front of you, and it is a really cool way to listen while also not missing out on one single word.

[00:20:10] That's over at leonardoenglish.com.

⁶¹ giving you more information and understanding of something

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North Korea - The Hermit Kingdom

[00:20:13] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:20:18] I'm Alastair Budge and I will catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Isolated	having minimal contact or little in common with others
Feature	something that makes a product, machine, or system different, and usually better, than others of a similar type
Animates	moves
Neat	cool
Slap bang in the middle	exactly in the middle
Powerhouse	a country, organization, or person with a lot of influence, power, or energy
Pariah	a person who is not accepted by a social group, especially because he or she is not liked, respected, or trusted
Hermit	a person who lives alone and apart from the rest of society , especially for religious reasons
Dictator	a leader who has complete power in a country and has not been elected by the people
Recapping	repeating the main points of an explanation or description
Peninsula	a long piece of land that sticks out from a larger area of land into the sea or into a lake
Annexed	to take possession of an area of land or a country, usually by force

or without permission

Colony

a country or area controlled politically by a more powerful country that is often far away

Guerilla

a member of an unofficial military group that is trying to change the government by making sudden, unexpected attacks on the official army forces

Construct

an idea or an imaginary situation

Jurisdiction

a country, state, or other area where a particular set of laws or rules must be obeyed

Backing

support, especially money, that someone gives to a person or plan

Stronghold

a building or position that is strongly defended

Armistice

a formal agreement between two countries or groups at war to stop fighting for a particular time, especially to talk about possible peace

Thriving

growing, developing, or being successful

Polar

complete

Unwind

if you unwind something that is wrapped around an object, you unfasten it, and if it unwinds, it becomes unfastened

Dissolution

the act or process of ending an official organisation or legal agreement

Toppled

forced out of power

Precarious

in a dangerous state because of not being safe or not being held in

place firmly

Cozy up

to try to become more friendly with

Buffer

something or someone that helps protect from harm

Affiliated

connected with or controlled by a group or organisation

Perished

died

Enriching

to increase the level of a particular isotope (= one form of an atom) in an element in order to make it more powerful or make it explode more powerfully

Uranium

a chemical element that is a heavy, radioactive metal, used in the production of nuclear power and in some types of nuclear weapon

Volatile

likely to change suddenly and unexpectedly, especially by getting worse

Ruthless

not thinking or worrying about any pain caused to others; cruel

Erratic

moving or behaving in a way that is not regular, certain, or expected

Counterpart

a person or thing that has the same purpose as another one in a different place or organization

Offensively

in a way that relates to attacking someone or something

Reprisal

(an example of) activity against another person, especially as a punishment by military forces or a political group

Offensive	used for attacking
Deterrent	to prevent someone from doing something or to make someone less enthusiastic about doing something by making it difficult for that person to do it or by threatening bad results if they do it
Bargaining	discussions between people in order to reach agreement on something such as prices, wages, working conditions, etc.
Diplomatic	involving the management of relationships between countries
Concessions	something that is allowed or given up, often in order to end a disagreement, or the act of allowing or giving this
Dismal	sad and without hope
Prestige	respect and admiration given to someone or something, usually because of a reputation for high quality, success, or social influence
Credentials	documents that state the abilities and experience of a person and show that the person is qualified for a particular job or activity
Longevity	living for a long time
Portrayed	shown to be
Missile	a flying weapon that has its own engine so that it can travel a long distance before exploding at the place that it has been aimed at
Legitimacy	the quality of being legal
Gestures	an action that expresses your feelings or intentions, although it might have little practical effect

Surreal	strange; not seeming real; like a dream
Brutal	cruel, violent, and completely without feelings
Sentenced	given an official punishment
Lighthearted	amusing
Curtail	to stop something before it is finished, or to reduce or limit something
Trivia	details or information that are not important
Feats	difficult things needing a lot of skill, strength, courage, etc. to achieve
Sank	hit a ball into a hole or pocket, especially in golf or snooker
Hole in one	in golf, an occasion when someone's ball goes into the hole the first time they hit it
Phenomenally	extremely
Enlightening	giving you more information and understanding of something

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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