

Kilju (also spelled **Kilchu**) is a county seat in North Hamgyong Province with a 2020 estimated population of 157,678. It is one of the largest cities in the province.

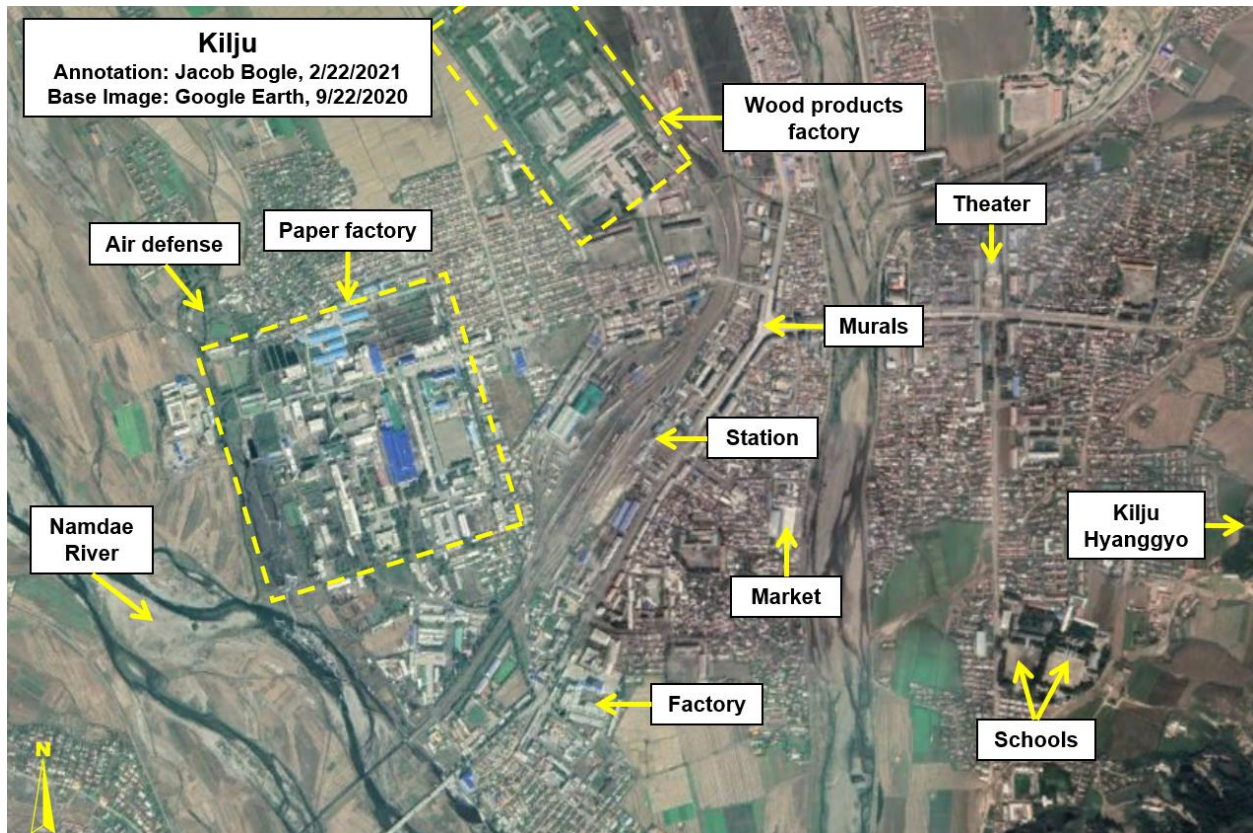
Kilju was part of the multiethnic Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC-668 AD) and then the Balhae Kingdom (698-926 AD) until the rise of the ethnic Korean Goryeo Kingdom in 918, during which Kilju was incorporated into it in 1107. It was given county status in 1398. Kilju's current administrative extent was finalized in 1952.

In 1107, State Councilor Yun Kwan was promoted to Chief Commander and built nine fortresses in Hamgyong to protect the region from Chinese incursion. One fortress was constructed at Ulligollyŏng Pass in Kilju. While I have not been able to locate the pass, I know of three fortress ruins within 23 km of the city. A hillfort is at 41.146653° 129.213405° (near Punggye-ri), a heavily eroded fort is at 40.886772° 129.113005° , and there's another at 40.845127° 129.295971° . One of these may or not be the Yun Kwan fortress, but they're good candidate sites.

Kilju was the site of a three-day long battle beginning on Nov. 3, 1950, when UN-South Korean forces captured the town. North Korean casualties were an order of magnitude greater than South Korean losses. While the town was later retaken by the DPRK and Chinese forces, the effects of the air war resulted in significant damage to the town and the surrounding area, including the destruction of the 700-meter-long rail bridge across the Namdae River.

After the War, the majority of reconstruction had been completed by the end of the 1960s with substantial assistance from the Soviet Union.

Two remaining historic sites within the town itself are the Kilju Hyanggyo, a school for the children of "scholar-aristocrats" built in 1655 (and lastly rebuilt in 1882), and the old Magistrate's Hall which was built in 1888.



Economy

Kilju has a moderate-sized economic base of light industry, agriculture and timber, and it is a local rail transportation hub.

The Kilju Paper Factory is the largest factory in the county and occupies over 36 hectares. The wastewater from the factory is dumped directly into the Namdae River, where treating agents, bleaching chemicals, and other waste are clearly seen as a white discharge in satellite imagery and can still be identified as far away as 700 meters downriver.

This contaminates the rest of the river's 29 km course down to the sea.

Nearby is the smaller Kilju Plywood Factory. A large portion of the factory grounds have become overgrown, so it's difficult to ascertain if the factory is at full capacity or not. The plant growth could either be from neglect *or* from the factory manager trying to grow food products for trade, as is common. All of the wood for the two factories comes from North Hamgyong and Ryanggang provinces.

Transportation in the city is provided by the Hamhung-Chongjin Highway and the Pyongra Railway. Kilju Station also has a medium-sized railyard and freight depot. The rail line splits at Rodong Station (6.5 km southwest) and has a small line running into Hwadae County to the Soksong Coal Mine there. This material is then transited through Kilju.

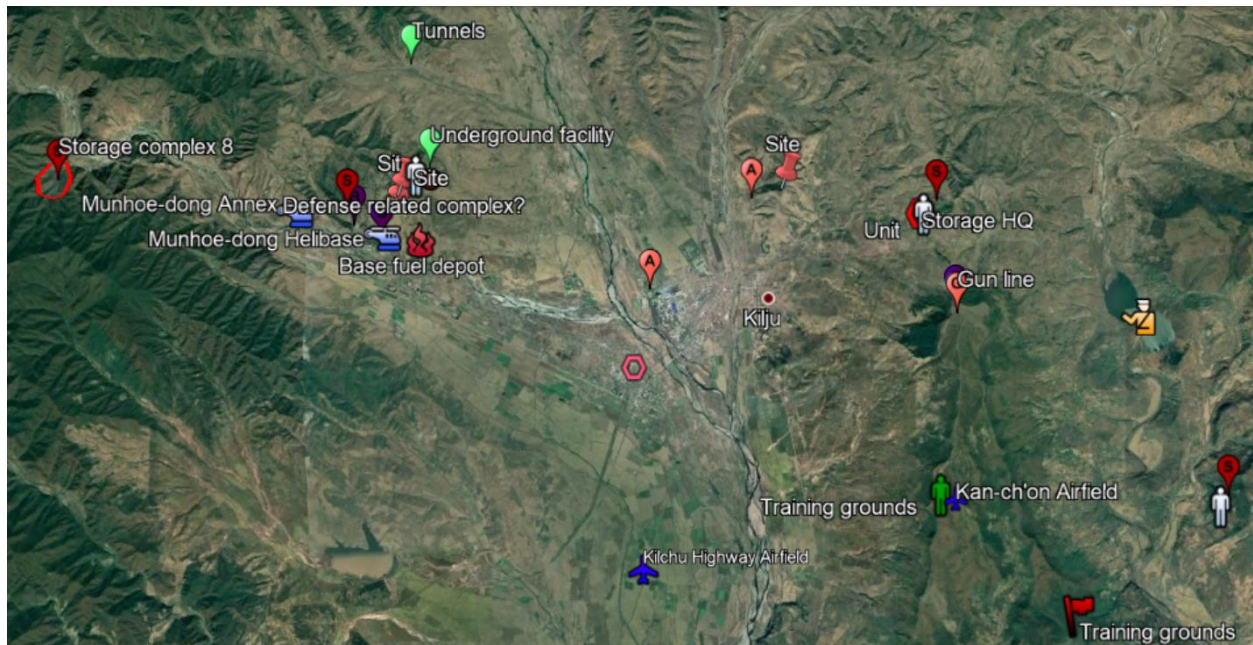
Kilju County also includes the small Ilthan Coal Mine (near the Hwadae border) and very small mines scattered in the hills to the west of town.

Partial electricity for Kilju comes from the hydroelectric Songgang Youth Power Station and small micro-hydroelectric sites. The rest is delivered by the main national electric grid.

Despite a steady growth in population, Kilju's official market area hasn't grown since 2004. It has 6,100 sq. meters of stall space.

The county has a large central plateau and adequate water supplies, so Kilju is surrounded by farmland for up to 7 km in almost every direction. This includes rice, wheat, small orchards, the occasional livestock center, and at least four small fish farms.

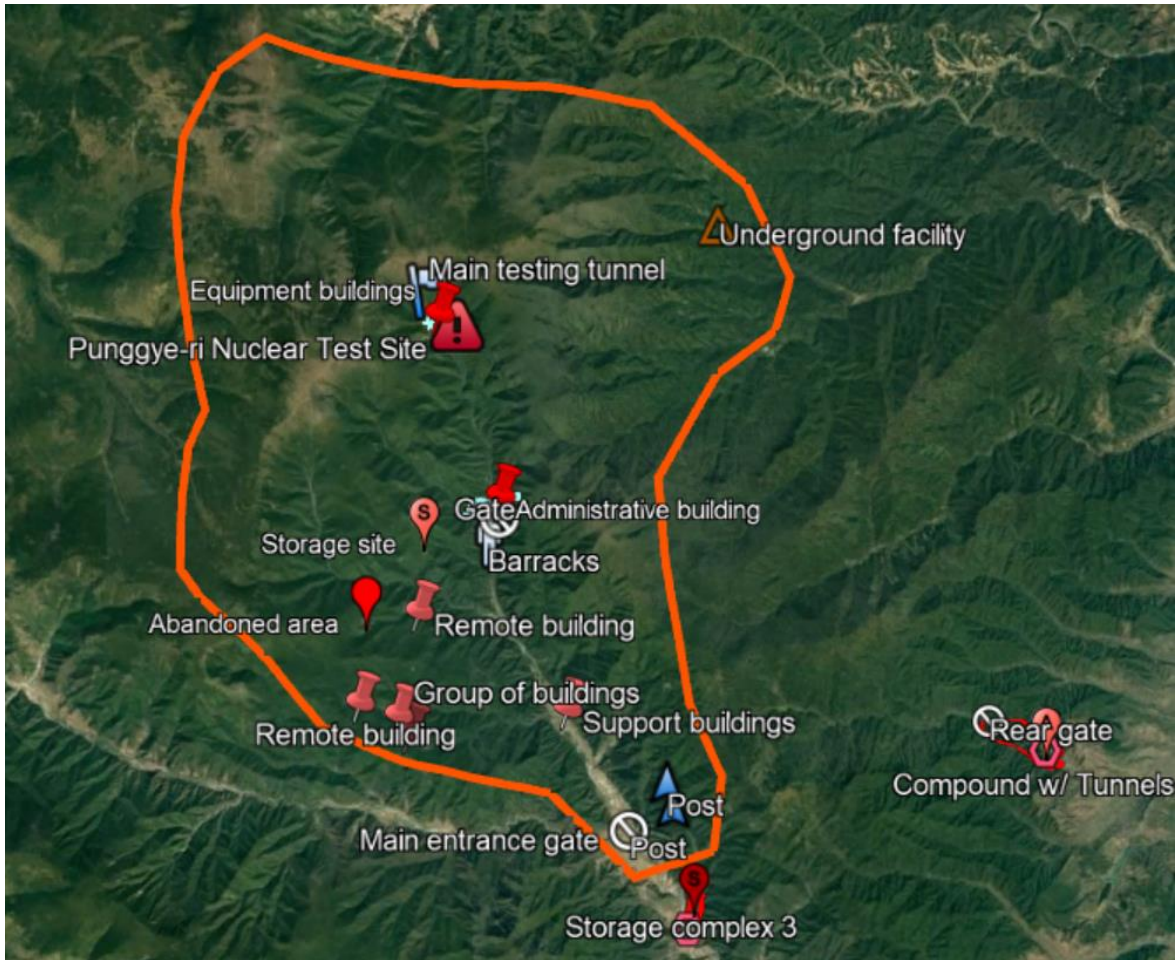
Military



Kilju Military sites from the [AccessDPRK 2021 Map](#).

As Kilju is an important transportation link and helps connect the rest of the province, it would be a military target all its own. However, the county also includes the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Complex and is near the Tonghae Satellite Launching Station as well. This makes Kilju County strategically important for North Korea and would be an important target in the event of a war.

The Paektusan-Chongnyon Line splits off from the Pyongra Line at Kilju. This line provides rail access to Punggye-ri. The nuclear test complex was established in the early 2000s with the construction of four test tunnels (portals) and support facilities along a 17-km-long valley at the foot of Mt. Mantap in Kilju County.



Basic layout of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Complex.

Punggye-ri is the only nuclear test site in North Korea and has been the site of all six of the country's nuclear tests. Following negotiations with South Korea and the United States in May 2018, North Korea destroyed the entrances to two portals and declared that there was no further need for underground nuclear testing. However, the other two portals that were never used still remain and almost all of the administrative and support facilities [still stand](#). It is estimated that Punggye-ri could be re-activated within a few weeks and new testing carried out at the other portals if Kim Jong Un ever gave the order. In other words, there has been no permanent degradation of the DPRK's nuclear testing capabilities.

Despite the underground nature of the tests, some radioactive venting has occurred and testimony from people living in Kilju and other nearby areas have [claimed](#) that illnesses due to radioactive contamination have been seen in the local population, as well as at the Hwasong Concentration Camp. The Camp's border touches the Punggye-ri site, and it has been alleged that prisoners were used to build and clear the tunnels after each nuclear test resulting in significant health problems.

Other than Punggye-ri, several small military bases are in Kilju along with a training facility and storage sites. The Munhoe Helibase is located 6 km west of town at 40.969262° 129.249385°. There is also the Kilju Emergency Highway Strip to the south, which had aircraft parking revetments built in 2016, and the

disused Kan-ch'on Airfield at 40.926588° 129.377741°. Additionally, Kilju has two air defense artillery batteries.

***Originally created for an AccessDPRK Patreon supporter. Free online access has been granted by the patron. This city brief has been edited for tone, context, and added references when needed.**

Jacob Bogle, February 2021 (updated March 2023)

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