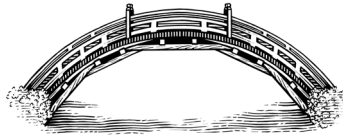


ROUNDTABLE

Confronting the Nuclear Challenge:
North Korea's Ambitions and Regional Strategies



Jenny Town

Chung Min Lee

Evans J.R. Revere

Andrew Scobell

Hideya Kurata

Artyom Lukin

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) has ratcheted up its saber-rattling alarmingly over the past few years. It has labeled the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) a hostile state to be subjugated by war, increased testing of ballistic missiles, adopted a war-focused posture, and warmed ties with Russia, culminating in a new comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between Pyongyang and Moscow in June 2024. More than ever, North Korea has the potential to be disruptive in an already-fraught geopolitical environment. Amid the crescendo of security challenges, the question remains: what to do about North Korea? This *Asia Policy* roundtable contains six essays that examine the current state of the challenges North Korea poses to regional and global security from different vantage points.

Jenny Town opens the roundtable with a reminder that the North Korea nuclear issue cannot be solved in isolation from broader global realities. Kim Jong-un has demonstrated a canny ability to exploit openings in the geopolitical landscape and to play the major Northeast Asian actors against each other. He used the isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic to reset expectations, restore traditional values—including ideological unity and enemy narratives—and recalibrate Pyongyang's approach. During this period, North Korea became "one of the first countries to embrace the idea of a new cold war emerging." The clock cannot be set back on its WMD program; instead, Town argues that getting back to a global disarmament agenda will require political leadership from the great powers to look for geopolitical openings and "change the narrative about what makes countries more secure."

Chung Min Lee next looks at how the growing WMD threat from North Korea is worryingly combining with a convergence of internal threats: an imploding economy, the weakness of ideological indoctrination among the younger generation, the high risks of succession, and Kim Jong-un's determination to strengthen his WMD inventory at the expense of the economy and North Korean citizens' well-being. With North Korea teetering on the edge of simultaneous crises, he argues that the effectiveness of the response will depend on who is in power in Seoul and Washington. In Lee's words, "the United States and South Korea would do well to prioritize planning and preparing for the 'gathering storm' that North Korea presents rather than focus on engagement-building and incentives to return to denuclearization negotiations."

Evans Revere suggests that given current geopolitical challenges, combined with the upcoming fray of elections in the United States, we can expect Pyongyang to “try to keep the United States and its allies off balance.” Revere demonstrates that nuclear weapons are the best support of Pyongyang’s central goal—the security of the Kim family regime—as well as bolster other related ambitions such as weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance and reducing the U.S. military presence on and around the peninsula. With any future efforts at denuclearization negotiations likely to repeat past failures, the United States and its partners must act carefully but determinedly to up the ante for Pyongyang going forward: “since North Korea’s desire for nuclear weapons derives from its belief that these weapons will bring security and ensure regime survival, U.S. policy should focus on convincing the regime that the opposite is true—that is, that nuclear weapons will only bring the regime’s demise closer.”

Andrew Scobell examines the state of North Korea–China relations, noting that “China has tolerated North Korean episodes of saber-rattling and provocations with fluctuating levels of irritation and ire.” But with Pyongyang yo-yoing its relations with Washington and Seoul since summitry in 2018 and 2019, and more recently improving ties to Moscow, Kim seems to have provoked Beijing into a more active relationship. Scobell describes how Chinese leaders are concerned about maintaining China’s influence amid the “thickening relationship between Russia and North Korea”—a vulnerability that North Korea has adroitly exploited. As a result, Scobell argues that “the least bad policy option for Beijing is to bandwagon with small but geostrategically important Pyongyang against its great-power rivals and allies,” which limits the prospect that China will use its influence for any hoped-for positive containment role in North Korea’s nuclear trajectory.

Hideya Kurata addresses North Korea’s nuclear doctrine in its two military strategies: its “war deterrent strategy” and “war strategy.” His essay focuses on the possibility for a conventional armed conflict between North and South Korea that could escalate with the North’s use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW). He examines statements by Kim and other key figures in the regime that show the elevation of these weapons in North Korea’s concepts of preemption and escalation. Kurata also evaluates Pyongyang’s recent redefinition of South Korea as an enemy and endorsement of a hostile two-state situation on the peninsula. These nuclear and political postures are closely linked, Kurata argues: “The potential for the deployment of TNWs spills over into the realm of

national unification. When South Korea is the target of an attack, as Kim Yo-jong suggested in her April 2022 statement, it can be justified by the assertion that the South is no longer part of the same nation as the North.” As North Korea expands and refines its nuclear arsenal, Kurata stresses the importance of the United States, South Korea, and other allies putting a corresponding escalation ladder in place.

Artyom Lukin studies the regional economic and military balances from the perspective of North Korea, noting that the “overall military balance on the peninsula is developing in a direction that is unfavorable to Pyongyang.” He elaborates that “the DPRK’s ability to deal on its own with the emerging external threats and risks is becoming increasingly strained, primarily due to its limited economic and technological base.” Despite a nuclear capability that places South Korea, Japan, and the United States in reach, North Korea faces a worsening economic situation, deteriorating conventional military capabilities, and a significant imbalance in both these areas with South Korea (as well as South Korea’s latency as a nuclear power and coverage by the U.S. nuclear umbrella). These challenges could be making the North Korean regime feel insecure. As a result, Pyongyang is under pressure to find a powerful ally, and “the only possible political-military ally for the DPRK is Russia.” The renewed alliance gives Moscow “a new lever over Washington, Tokyo, and especially Seoul” and offers the promise of defense industrial support. Pyongyang, for its part, gains prestige, formal security guarantees, and a greater opening for transfers of weapons and expertise. However, the limits to and boundaries of the partnership still remain to be seen.

Taken together, the essays in this roundtable point to a new phase in North Korea’s nuclear posturing and highlight key external relationships. The risks posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea have surged and will require new approaches in management focused on containment rather engagement. ◆

North Korea's Strategic Choices amid Shifting Geopolitics

Jenny Town

If there is a lesson to be learned from the recent upgrade in relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) and Russia,¹ it is that the North Korea nuclear issue cannot be solved in isolation of broader global realities. Kim Jong-un, especially, has demonstrated time and time again his willingness to break from tradition to seize opportunities when they arise and to adapt his policies and approaches decisively to the ever-evolving geopolitical circumstances around him. For the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), pursuing approaches that are laser-focused on North Korean denuclearization and trying to find the right mix of pressure and incentives to encourage Pyongyang down that path is an increasingly myopic view of the situation and one that is especially misguided while the global nuclear weapons landscape worsens.

North Korea's Shifting Worldview

The outcome of the 2019 Hanoi Summit, or the lack thereof, appears to have had a significant impact on Kim's assessment of opportunity and strategy. The long-held view in Pyongyang of normalizing relations with the United States both to counterbalance relations with China and to bring about material gain in the form of sanctions relief and global reputation was dashed.² Toward the end of 2019, after U.S.-DPRK relations failed to bring about a post-Hanoi agreement, Kim openly questioned whether a fundamentally different relationship with the United States was even possible.³ It was clear at that time that Kim no longer saw value in

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¹ See "DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), June 20, 2024 ~ <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1718870859-459880358/dprk-russia-treaty-on-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.

² Rachel Minyoung Lee, "The Real Significance of North Korea's Recent Military Activities," 38 North, November 2, 2022 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2022/11/the-real-significance-of-north-koreas-recent-military-activities>.

³ "Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh Central Committee of Workers' Party of Korea Held," KCNA, January 1, 2020 ~ <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1577943153-613054498/fifth-plenary-meeting-of-seventh-central-committee-of-workers-party-of-korea-held>.

continuing negotiations with the United States and South Korea and was reassessing his options. He called for recalibrating the economy to be more resilient to a persistently hostile environment and started shifting attention away from the United States and the ROK toward cultivating deeper relations with states more sympathetic to his cause—other autocratic governments and countries also under sanctions and in antagonistic relationships with the West.⁴

When the pandemic set in, North Korea was the first country to close its borders in January 2020, resulting in minimal international movement of goods or people over the next few years. While this measure had a practical purpose—trying to prevent an epidemic from breaking out in a country with an incredibly vulnerable public health system—it also gave the regime a chance to reset. Kim had taken enormous political risks in the summit era, allowing for both ideological creep and the raising of domestic expectations about how a breakthrough in relations would bring about a new level of economic prosperity, which could be something worth considering limits on the WMD programs to secure. When that failed to come to fruition in a timely manner, Kim took drastic measures to reset expectations, restore traditional values—including those of ideological unity and rebuilding the enemy narratives—and prepare the people for potentially prolonged hardship, both because of the pandemic and as the country recalibrated its approach to the world.

In so doing, North Korea was one of the first countries to embrace the idea of a new cold war emerging and to lean into that paradigm. As U.S. relations with South Korea improved under new leadership in both countries, North Korea expanded its relations with China and Russia on the other side of the equation, largely ignoring or dismissing subsequent attempts from Washington and Seoul to restart negotiations. In addition, as Russia's pariah status has grown in the West, the more Kim has been willing to fill that void, offering Vladimir Putin political and material support—efforts that have been appreciated and reciprocated by Russia and are now paying dividends for North Korea.

Domestic Considerations Informing Strategic Choices

In January 2021, a year into the pandemic, Kim announced a new five-year development plan at the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of

⁴ "Fifth Plenary Meeting of Seventh Central Committee of Workers' Party of Korea Held."

Korea (WPK). The plan's goals emphasized the dominance of ideology and politics over markets and more pragmatic economic principles.⁵ It appeared to roll back major economic reforms, curb market activity, and reassert state planning and control over a once burgeoning civilian economy. It is likely that these shifts were driven by several factors, including the high probability that sanctions on commercial sectors would remain in place indefinitely, limiting the growth potential of light industries; uncertainty regarding how long the Covid-19 pandemic would last and the need to control the masses and manage expectations through a difficult period; and a broader impulse to reassert traditional values and a guiding policy of *juche* (self-reliance) after the wild swings of the summit era when Kim had suddenly embraced the United States and the ROK with fervor. The annual session of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly, held just days after the 8th Party Congress, projected only a 0.9% growth rate in state budget revenue for 2021—the lowest official projection since the famine era of the 1990s.⁶ This notably low estimate supports the idea that the Kim regime was fully aware of how disruptive its pandemic prevention strategy of self-isolation would be to its economic development and uncertain as to when it would let up.

While the regime's expectations for economic performance were understandably low, this was not the case for a laundry list of military goals. While certain milestones had already been reached in 2017, such as the country's introduction of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and a high-yield nuclear device, the five-year plan set ambitious additional goals to improve performance, accuracy, and reliability of delivery systems; diversify missile ranges and launch options; enhance the credibility of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons systems; develop hypersonic weapons; and make progress in other areas such as unmanned aerial vehicles and military reconnaissance satellites.⁷

Amid its prolonged self-isolation, North Korea kicked off 2022 with back-to-back testing of new missile systems, reporting such achievements to a domestic audience in understated ways, and emphasizing progress against the five-year plan. This R&D cycle would come to be supplemented with

⁵ Ruediger Frank, "Key Results of the Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 1 of 2)," 38 North, January 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-1-of-2>.

⁶ Ruediger Frank, "SPA Session: Lowest Official Growth Rate in Decades," 38 North, January 22, 2021 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/spa-session-lowest-official-growth-rate-in-decades>.

⁷ Ruediger Frank, "Key Results of the Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 2 of 2)," 38 North, January 19, 2021 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-2-of-2>.

new types of operational and missile deployment drills, especially as the United States and South Korea restarted joint military exercises. Despite the dismal economic performance of the pandemic years, North Korea checked off several of the military goals.⁸ This gave Kim a way to both demonstrate to a domestic audience national strength through extraordinary hardship and counter the uptick in tempo of joint U.S.-ROK military drills. It also gave Kim the means to show progress against the five-year plan, bolstering his public image of being able to lead through hardship. After all, failures on the economic front were easy to blame on bad circumstances, such as the persistence of sanctions and the prolonged threat of contagion.

In September 2022, North Korea passed the Law on the State Policy on Nuclear Forces, in which it declared itself a “responsible nuclear weapons state” and specified five conditions under which it would consider nuclear weapons use, three of which include preemptive clauses.⁹ When introducing this new law, Kim emphasized how “we have drawn the line of no retreat regarding our nuclear weapons so that there will be no longer any bargaining over them.”¹⁰ The usual conditionality of the country’s nuclear weapons program on the persistence of U.S. hostile policy has rarely been used since that time in any North Korean reference. Moreover, in 2023, Kim also announced a new constitutional amendment to codify the right and mandate to continue developing the country’s nuclear program to “deter war.”¹¹ These developments enshrined the country’s nuclear status in its own law, signifying a fundamental shift in how its nuclear weapons program was framed to a domestic audience and underscoring Kim’s long-term vision for the program.

These military advancements came at a time when geopolitical trends were shifting. Deepening rivalry between the United States and China, as

⁸ See, for instance, Vann H. Van Diepen, “North Korea’s 2022 Missile Activity: Implications for Alliance Security,” 38 North, October 6, 2022 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2022/10/north-koreas-2022-missile-activity-implications-for-alliance-security>; Vann H. Van Diepen, “North Korea Showcases Two Types of ICBMs in November 2022 Tests,” 38 North, December 2, 2022 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2022/12/north-korea-showcases-two-types-of-icbms-in-november-2022-tests>; Josh Smith, “North Korea’s First Spy Satellite Is ‘Alive,’ Can Manoeuvre, Expert Says,” Reuters, February 28, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/technology/space/north-koreas-first-spy-satellite-is-alive-can-manoeuvre-expert-says-2024-02-28>; and Vann H. Van Diepen, “The Sleeper Has Awakened: Six Key Takeaways from the Rollout of North Korea’s ‘Tactical Nuclear Attack Submarine,’” 38 North, September 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2023/09/the-sleeper-has-awakened-six-key-takeaways-from-the-roll-out-of-north-koreas-tactical-nuclear-attack-submarine>.

⁹ “Law on DPRK’s Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated,” KCNA, September 9, 2022 ~ <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1662687258-950776986/law-on-dprks-policy-on-nuclear-forces-promulgated>.

¹⁰ Kim Jong-un, cited in Lee, “The Real Significance of North Korea’s Recent Military Activities.”

¹¹ Soo-Hyang Choi and Hyonhee Shin, “North Korea Amends Constitution on Nuclear Policy, Cites U.S. Provocations,” Reuters, September 27, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-parliament-amends-constitution-enshrine-nuclear-policy-kcna-2023-09-27>.

well as the 2022 collapse in relations between the United States and Russia over the war in Ukraine, meant that the kind of cooperation and cohesion of international sentiment that existed in 2017—when the UN Security Council members unanimously added sectoral sanctions against North Korea for its continued WMD development and testing—no longer existed. While China, Russia, and North Korea relations fall far short of a trilateral alliance, both China and Russia have become more sympathetic to North Korea's position in the last few years and less receptive to U.S. approaches to addressing the situation. This discord has created opportunities for North Korea to exploit.

Nuclear Weapons in Global Context

North Korea's reframing of its nuclear weapons program as nonnegotiable creates new challenges for diplomacy. If a time comes when a denuclearization agenda becomes viable again, the stakes will be naturally higher. Not only have the country's capabilities expanded significantly since the last round of negotiations, but the low-hanging fruit that has often been used to set the stage for negotiations—such as a weapons testing moratorium—now has higher stakes. Going forward, such moves are unlikely to be offered unilaterally and will probably require reciprocation to justify defying the country's own laws and constitution.

That said, the chances of getting back to a denuclearization agenda with North Korea in the current geopolitical environment are dismally low. Global attitudes and trends have elevated the role of nuclear weapons in the concept of national security and the big powers are fully engrossed in nuclear arms racing.

It is worth recalling that in 2009 U.S. president Barack Obama and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev pledged to work toward the total elimination of nuclear weapons. In 2017, the United Nations adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and opened it for signature by member states; it was ratified in 2020 and entered into force in January 2021.¹² The treaty was the first legally binding instrument that prohibited participating in any nuclear weapons activities, including the possession, development, testing, stockpiling, deployment, use, and threat of use. Of course, none of the nuclear-armed states or states under extended nuclear

¹² See "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, adopted July 7, 2017, entered into force January 22, 2021.  <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/tpnw>.

deterrence arrangements signed the treaty.¹³ However, some experts suggest that beyond the lofty goal of global nuclear disarmament, the more important aim of this effort was “to further delegitimize nuclear weapons and thereby add restraints to their use and strengthen a nascent general norm against use.”¹⁴

But times have changed and that push toward disarmament seems to have faded far into the distance. The 2024 *SIPRI Yearbook*, an annual publication of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, notes how nuclear arsenals around the world are currently being expanded, with year-on-year increases in the number of operational warheads.¹⁵ The United States, Russia, and China, in particular, are engaged in nuclear arms racing through multiyear efforts to modernize and expand their arsenals. For Russia, this has taken the form of a decades-long effort to replace the Soviet-era nuclear-capable systems with newer versions.¹⁶ China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal—the U.S. Department of Defense projects Beijing could possess around 1,500 warheads by 2035.¹⁷ It is also advancing its nuclear triad so that its nuclear force, in size and capabilities, can be competitive to forces fielded by the United States and Russia. A report by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory’s Center for Global Security Research about the implications of China’s nuclear expansion for U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy notes that not only are China and Russia “peers by quantitative or qualitative metrics—they are adversaries of the U.S.-led regional and global orders who have made common cause to re-make those orders in a ‘friendship without limits.’ This is a qualitatively new and different problem.”¹⁸ The United States is also engaged in both nuclear modernization efforts to bolster its aging nuclear triad and weighing options on how to address the challenge of dealing with what is commonly

¹³ See “Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.”

¹⁴ See, for example, Hans Blix, “Remarks: When Disarmament Goes ‘Backward,’” *Arms Control Today*, September 2018 ~ <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-09/features/remarks-when-disarmament-goes-backward>.

¹⁵ “Role of Nuclear Weapons Grows as Geopolitical Relations Deteriorate—New SIPRI Yearbook Out Now,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Press Release, June 17, 2024 ~ <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>.

¹⁶ Hans M. Kristensen et al., “Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2024,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 7, 2024 ~ <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2024-03/russian-nuclear-weapons-2024>.

¹⁷ Hideo Asano, “China’s Nuclear Expansion and Implications for U.S. and Global Security,” Nuclear Threat Initiative, July 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.nti.org/atomic-pulse/chinas-nuclear-expansion-and-implications-for-u-s-and-global-security>.

¹⁸ Center for Global Security Research, “China’s Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy,” Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2023, 6 ~ https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR_Two_Peer_230314.pdf.

framed as a two-nuclear-peer problem—how to reliably deter China as a near-nuclear peer and an aggressive Russia, possibly simultaneously.¹⁹

As the big global powers engage in nuclear arms racing, including active testing of ICBM capabilities, hypersonic weapons, and sea-launched weapons systems, as well as subcritical nuclear weapons and even potentially the resumption of underground nuclear weapons testing, the smaller nuclear-armed states are watching closely and taking cues accordingly. In a summary of the 2024 *SIPRI Yearbook*, SIPRI director Dan Smith explains:

Global security continued to deteriorate throughout 2023, as it has for the past decade. There were major armed conflicts in Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine; military spending rose for the ninth successive year to its highest-ever level; ecological disruption continued and 2023 was the hottest year for at least 174 years. International stability was under pressure from intensifying confrontation between the great powers. As a result, the entire six-decade-long nuclear arms control enterprise is at risk of terminating.²⁰

North Korea in Context

Against this backdrop, North Korea has little incentive to buck global trends and see denuclearization or even arms limits as an attractive or compelling proposition. Russia's willingness to overtly undermine the international sanctions regime against North Korea, as emphasized in their treaty signed in June 2024, gives Kim ample opportunity to carry on bolstering the country's WMD capabilities with few repercussions, at least in the short term.²¹ Moreover, as Putin's push to upend the international system gains ground, North Korea can cultivate its own relationships within that space, seeking partnerships that require little to no sacrifice even if the gains are small.

Negotiating and signing a treaty that upgrades Russia-DPRK bilateral relations within two summit meetings with Putin is a political win for Kim that helps offset the failures of his negotiations with Washington and Seoul to bring about tangible, implementable results. The vision, values, and

¹⁹ John R. Harvey, "Meeting the Challenge of Deterring Two Nuclear Peers," Real Clear Defense, October 4, 2023 ~ https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/10/04/meeting_the_challenge_of_deterring_two_nuclear_peers_983713.html.

²⁰ Dan Smith, "Introduction: International Stability and Human Security in 2023," in "SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security—Summary," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024, 1 ~ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/yb24_summary_en_2_1.pdf.

²¹ "DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."

alternate world order that Putin promotes is an attractive offer for Kim, one where sacrifice is not needed to enhance bilateral relations. How sustainable that pathway might be in the long run is uncertain and depends largely on global geopolitical trends. On the current trajectory, however, North Korea has the opportunity to enhance its military and nuclear capabilities, revive its economy, and expand its political standing on the authoritarian side of the divide.

Treaty relations with Moscow, while Russia needs North Korean assistance, also provide Pyongyang with a certain amount of license to be more aggressive toward South Korea. Provocative behavior from Pyongyang can be useful to Russia, for instance, by keeping the United States distracted with managing tensions on the Korean Peninsula and potentially discouraging South Korea from becoming more involved in Ukraine for fear of how far Russia might push military-technical cooperation with the North. Kim may also feel more empowered to engage in military adventurism with the weight of a security pact with Russia behind him. Even if there is skepticism about how solid this partnership truly is, especially if faced with crisis on the North Korean side of the equation, Russia's current and urgent need to keep North Korea close means greater expectations for solidarity in the short term.

For the United States and its allies, there is no good news or easy answers. As long as Russia is willing to provide North Korea with an alternative path to prosperity, there is little incentive for Pyongyang to return to talks with the United States or South Korea. Neither Washington nor Seoul would be willing to provide North Korea even close to the level of cooperation Moscow is offering, at least not without Pyongyang recommitting to a denuclearization agenda, and even then there would be limits on what would be possible, especially on the military and technological fronts. Even trying to engage North Korea on a risk-reduction agenda, as beneficial as that would be for managing regional security dynamics, is unlikely given the utility of tensions in broader geostrategic relations.

However, the first step in trying to navigate relations with North Korea is acknowledging how these geopolitical trends help shape its worldview and influence its assessment of its place within an evolving world order. This is not the time to dust off old denuclearization roadmaps and try to find a new starting point, not while nuclear arms racing is the global trend and confidence in international law and norms is eroding.

New efforts relevant for the North Korean context are needed to create new diplomatic openings. For instance, broader efforts to restore confidence

in the nuclear nonproliferation regime and delegitimize nuclear weapons use could have the spillover effect of shaping Pyongyang's assessment of its choices in the future. Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists, recently highlighted a social media post from the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration commemorating May 26, 1972, the day U.S. president Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed their first nuclear arms control agreement, noting that it was "a good reminder that nuclear arms control agreements didn't come out of nowhere but emerged when competitors agreed they were needed to manage risks."²²

The whiff of hope in this exchange is much appreciated amid the sprawl of hot wars in Europe and the Middle East, tensions flaring in East Asia and the South China Sea, the Doomsday Clock set at 90 seconds to midnight, and the threat of nuclear use looming menacingly in the background. But the other lesson to take away from this historic moment is that nuclear arms control requires nuclear peers—the big powers—to set the tone and lead the way. It will not be a process that starts from small states and spreads, especially in such a tense geopolitical climate. Getting back to a global disarmament agenda will require political leadership, especially from the big powers, to change the narrative about what makes countries more secure.

That said, this is not an excuse to give up on diplomacy regarding North Korea. There will likely come a time when the geopolitical winds have shifted enough that new openings present themselves. Being ready to recognize and act quickly in those moments will be important, although it still will not be easy. North Korea's capabilities have progressed way beyond any notion that sudden and swift denuclearization is possible, and so has Kim's confidence that he can resist pressures to do so.

Future denuclearization approaches will need to acknowledge not only that North Korea is a country of great need but that it has its own security concerns as well. For the United States to say it has no hostile intent toward North Korea is not credible, given the enormous clash of values between the two countries and a history of deep mistrust. Moreover, political relations ebb and flow even among friendly states, especially when dealing with democracies. These are matters that need to be taken into consideration in the planning stages to generate new ideas about a feasible path forward: What kind of security concessions might be necessary to convince an insecure country of the benefits of disarmament? How can early wins be

²² Hans Kristensen, X, May 27, 2024 ~ <https://x.com/nukestrat/status/1795036237243257026>.

institutionalized to promote sustainability? What might U.S. allies be willing to do to reshape the regional security environment, and what would they need to make those choices feasible? While great emphasis, understandably so, is being placed on bolstering U.S. and allied defenses and extended deterrence against a growing North Korean nuclear threat, regular and difficult discussions within the alliances should also be taking place about what might be put on the table in the future that could increase the appeal and credibility of a disarmament track. ◆

The Gathering Storm: A Confluence of North Korea's Looming Crises

Chung Min Lee

For the past thirty years, Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs have been the focus of countless denuclearization policies, inter-Korean and multinational diplomatic initiatives, Track 2 dialogues, and leaders' summits. All have failed in preventing North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) from going nuclear and accelerating its nuclear and other WMD programs. No one is against diplomacy and dialogue focused on reducing escalation on the Korean Peninsula and convincing the DPRK of the merits of denuclearization. But as long as the world's worst totalitarian regime, led by the Kim family, remains in power, the DPRK has made it clear that it will never give up nuclear weapons.

Most importantly, the growing threat emanating from North Korea today is not only nuclear weapons and ever more sophisticated ballistic missiles but the convergence of multiple threats: (1) the bottoming out of the DPRK, driven by an imploding economy despite a temporary respite provided by Russian assistance, continuing economic dependence on the People's Republic of China (PRC), and cybercrime; (2) the growing weakness of ideological indoctrination by the Kim dynasty, especially among the *jangmadang* (free market) generation, North Korea's Generation Z; (3) the high risks associated with the fourth-generation succession of the Kim dynasty; and (4) Kim Jong-un's determination to strengthen his WMD inventory, including hypersonic missiles and nuclear-tipped submarine-launched ballistic missiles, that prevents any shifting of key resources to nonmilitary sectors of the economy.¹

Critical threats from North Korea are more internal in origin than ever before. The consequences are enormous for South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) since it will have limited leverage and means to intervene, if the need arises, to stabilize North Korea. Importantly, how effectively South

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¹ Whether North Korea has successfully developed nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles is a point of contention. "Defense Minister Assesses N. Korea's Hypersonic Missile Test 'Unsuccessful,'" KBS World, April 14, 2024 ~ https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=184878.

Korea responds to simultaneous North Korean crises will depend heavily on the type of government that is in power in Seoul. Likewise, the position of the U.S. president toward managing a North Korean crisis will also be crucial. Domestic political determinants in South Korea and the United States will impact how Seoul and Washington react and coordinate their efforts in the event of major internal turbulence in the DPRK.

This essay explores the crises looming over North Korea—economic-, ideological-, succession-, and posture-based—and assesses that the United States and South Korea would do well to prioritize planning and preparing for the “gathering storm” that North Korea presents rather than focus on engagement-building and incentives to return to denuclearization negotiations.

A Failed Economic State

Since Kim Jong-un became supreme leader in 2011, North Korea has slowly been crumbling, and this is unlikely to be remedied unless the regime reallocates massive amounts of state funds to rebuilding the economy. But it can only do so if Kim opts to fundamentally cut back DPRK defense spending, which, including WMD programs, accounts for 25%–30% of GDP. According to Statista, North Korea’s defense spending as a percentage of GDP was estimated at 33.4% in 2022 and averaged around 26% from 2018 to 2022.²

When Kim assumed power in 2011, many progressive North Korea watchers argued that the time was ripe for the DPRK’s economic reform, since Kim had been partially educated overseas and had a much better understanding of world affairs than his predecessors. Kim promoted the so-called *byungjin noseon* or “parallel line”—i.e., pursuing economic development simultaneously with nuclearization.³ However, food security has continued to be a problem. According to UN sources, some 42% of North Koreans between 2019 and 2021 were malnourished, and the *Economist* reported in March 2023 that the DPRK’s “statist agricultural system has

² L. Yoon, “Military Spending as a Share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in North Korea from 2018 to 2022,” Statista, September 25, 2023 ≈ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/747387/north-korea-share-of-military-spending-in-budget>.

³ Lucas Rengifo-Keller, “Food Insecurity in North Korea Is at Its Worst Since the 1990s Famine,” 38 North, January 19, 2023 ≈ <https://www.38north.org/2023/01/food-insecurity-in-north-korea-is-at-its-worst-since-the-1990s-famine>. Although Kim Jong-il had also toyed with the idea of implementing economic reforms, such as the promotion of free-trade zones that never took off, his reign was marked by the biggest famine in North Korean history, causing between 600,000 and 1 million people to perish in the mid-1990s.

long failed to produce enough food” for the people.⁴ In short, North Korea’s economy has suffered a drawn-out implosion under Kim’s leadership, and the only “achievement” during his reign has been North Korea’s growing nuclear and WMD arsenal.

In February 2024, Kim admitted that the country’s economy was in a “pitiful state” and that “our party and state are facing a serious political problem that we cannot smoothly provide even the basic daily necessities for our people.”⁵ To remedy this, he announced the beginning of an “industry revolution” that includes building twenty consumer product factories in cities and counties over the next ten years to alleviate crushing poverty and shortages—his 20x10 Regional Development Policy⁶—but the plan is unlikely to succeed.

As with previous mega-projects, Kim must rely on the military to provide labor to build the factories. But while the party directs the factories’ construction, it is entirely up to the local governments to come up with the resources to run and power them, resources that they simply do not have. Factory supervisors want to be exempt from building new factories under the new policy, since they know they will not succeed and will be blamed for failing the supreme leader. One factory official stated that “the factories also feel a heavy burden of having to provide all the money, technology, and manpower on their own to meet the goals and targets unilaterally set from above.”⁷

Like his grandfather, who gained strategic dividends by playing the Soviet Union against China, and his father, who relied almost exclusively on Chinese largesse after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, economic realities have meant that Kim Jong-un has no choice but to depend heavily on Beijing. China provides key assistance to North Korea, including food aid, oil, and political cover, for example, but only just enough to ensure North Korea stays afloat. According to data from the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, DPRK trade with China

⁴ “North Koreans Are at Growing Risk of Starvation,” *Economist*, March 21, 2023 ~ <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/03/21/north-koreans-are-at-growing-risk-of-starvation>.

⁵ Kim Jong-un, cited in Kang Dong Wan, “Some Thoughts on Kim Jong Un’s Outdated ‘20x10 Regional Development Policy,’” *Daily NK*, February 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.dailynk.com/english/some-thoughts-kim-jong-uns-outdated-20x10-regional-development-policy>.

⁶ Hyonhee Shin, “North Korea’s Kim Seeks ‘Industry Revolution’ in Rural Areas amid Widening Inequality,” *Reuters*, February 28, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-seeks-industry-revolution-rural-areas-amid-widening-inequality-2024-02-29>.

⁷ Cited in Seulkee Jang, “N. Korea’s Factories Drag Their Feet amid Calls to Achieve 20x10 Policy Targets,” *Daily NK*, February 15, 2024 ~ <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-factories-drag-feet-amid-calls-achieve-20-10-policy-targets>.

in 2022 reached \$1.53 billion, up 125% from 2021, and constituted 96.7% of North Korea's overall trade with the outside world.⁸ While the exact amount of Chinese aid to North Korea is unknown, experts note that it only accounts for a fraction of China's \$3.4 trillion budget, and that since Beijing fears regime collapse more than a nuclearized DPRK, "China will do what it feels is politically in its interest with North Korea, and it's not going to be driven hugely by Chinese wider economic issues."⁹

Cracking Ideology and Regime Loyalty

For just over three-quarters of a century, the Kim family has run North Korea as the world's harshest police state. Among the thousands that have been killed under Kim Jong-un, the most widely reported was his uncle Jang Song-thaek in December 2013. Jang served as a key pipeline to China and an advocate of economic reform, but he amassed a fortune and a growing core group of followers.¹⁰ When Kim came to power in 2011, he must have realized that to secure his power base, he had to depose his uncle. Jang was charged with numerous crimes and labeled as "a traitor to the nation for all ages who perpetrated anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts in a bid to overthrow the leadership of our party and state and the socialist system."¹¹ On February 13, 2017, Kim's older half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, was assassinated with liquid VX by foreigners acting under the orders of North Korea's intelligence agency.¹² In December 2016, the research arm of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, the Institute for National Security Studies, reported that from 2011 until 2016, Kim Jong-un purged approximately 340 officials from the regime, including the execution of about 140 officials in the party, military, and cabinet.¹³

⁸ "N. Korea's Trade Reliance on China Hits 10-Year High in 2022," Yonhap News Agency, July 20, 2023 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230720005300320>.

⁹ Bradley Babson, cited in Christy Lee, "Despite Faltering Economy, China Unlikely to Disrupt Aid to North Korea," Voice of America, August 8, 2023 ~ <https://www.voanews.com/a/despite-faltering-economy-china-unlikely-to-disrupt-aid-to-north-korea/7217382.html>.

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun, "In Hail of Bullet and Fire, North Korea Killed Official Who Wanted Reform," *New York Times*, March 12, 2016 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/asia/north-korea-executions-jang-song-thaek.html>.

¹¹ Jessica Elgot, "Kim Jong Un's Uncle Jang Song Thaek 'Executed by Machine Gun Fire' in N Korea," Huffington Post, January 23, 2014 ~ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/12/13/north-korea-execute_n_4437788.html; and Alastair Gale, "What North Korea Said about Jang Song Thaek," *Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2013 ~ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-KRTB-4665>.

¹² Joe Brock and John Chalmers, "Murder at the Airport: The Brazen Attack on Kim Jong Nam," Reuters, April 1, 2019 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1RD185>.

¹³ "N. Korea Purges 340 during 5-Year Rule of Kim Jong-un: Think Tank," Yonhap News Agency, December 29, 2016 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20161229003600315>.

Millions of North Koreans continue to live in abject fear of the regime, but at the same time the level of fear has coincided with a growing indifference to the constant barrage of propaganda. Despite promises of a better life, which every North Korean leader has promised but failed to deliver, those in their twenties and thirties—the jangmadang generation—have never depended on the state for food. The net result is a much weaker and thinning loyalty to Kim and his regime. The civic organization Liberty in North Korea, which includes North Korean defectors, South Koreans, and others determined to bring freedom to North Korea, noted that:

The famine forced people at all levels of society to find alternate ways to survive. Many government officials seized opportunities for camouflaged capitalism to enrich themselves personally. Even security officials accommodated the markets, accepting bribes to turn the other way and allow access to the Chinese border for trade. This corrupt state apparatus has further degraded the integrity and power of North Korean leaders....The growing market economy has also created opportunities for foreign media and information to proliferate in North Korea.¹⁴

One of the most important indicators of regime erosion is the growing failure to stem the flow of foreign information, especially news, dramas, movies, and goods from South Korea. In January 2024, media outlets showed footage from a 2022 public trial where two sixteen-year-old boys were sentenced to twelve years of hard labor for watching South Korean entertainment, which is forbidden by law.¹⁵ Ironically, the fact that the regime is doing everything possible to crack down on anti-socialist behavior, such as the growing attraction of South Korean pop culture, actually implies the failure of indoctrination and waning loyalty to the regime.

The Succession Challenge

Should Kim Jong-un suddenly die and the regime stumble with a Kim child unable to consolidate power, it would trigger a highly unstable environment in North Korea. Currently, Kim's eleven-year-old daughter Kim Ju-ae appears to be his chosen heir to the family dynasty. Whether Ju-ae or another of Kim's children will succeed him will depend on their age and ability to grasp and control North Korea's critical power centers, such

¹⁴ "How North Korean People Are Changing North Korea," Liberty in North Korea, March 21, 2022
 ~ <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/blog/how-north-korean-people-are-changing-north-korea>.

¹⁵ Sangmi Han, "North Korea: Rare Footage Show Teens Sentenced to Hard Labour over K-Drama," BBC, January 18, 2024 ~ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68015652>.

as the military, security forces, intelligence agencies, and Office 39 (which guards the family's hard currency). If Kim dies before Ju-ae or another of his children reaches adulthood, his sister and second-in-command, Kim Yo-jong, will likely be the supreme-leader-in-waiting.

When Kim Jong-il suffered a major stroke in 2008, Jang Song-thaek ran North Korea day to day while preparing Kim Jong-un to ultimately succeed his father. Typical of palace coups, assassinations, and purges in bygone dynasties, if Kim dies without a firm successor in place or the designated child is too young to rule, two women will fight for their own and their families' lives: Kim Yo-jong, who also runs the party's propaganda and agitation bureau (with a misleading title as deputy head), and Kim Jong-un's wife, Ri Sol-ju. There is no chance that Ri will allow Kim Yo-jong to become the new supreme leader without doing everything possible first to put one of her children on the throne. But if Ju-ae or another child is too young (i.e., in their teens or even early twenties), it remains doubtful whether the North Korean nomenklatura will pledge their loyalty to such a young leader. Compared to her sister-in-law, Ri has no independent levers of power, whereas Kim Yo-jong can traverse the corridors of power to ensure that her palace coup succeeds.

To those outside, the lack of credible and real-time intelligence on critical movements and developments in Pyongyang will likely emerge as the biggest threat to implementing effective countermeasures and responses to any North Korean crisis. South Korea's National Intelligence Service, China's Ministry of State Security, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, and key agencies in the U.S. intelligence community all likely have human intelligence assets within North Korea, but how much access they actually have in critical organizations is a black box. As a result, the combination of an extremely dangerous power struggle in North Korea in the event of Kim's sudden demise and highly limited actionable intelligence makes for a central problem in the event of a major North Korean crisis.

Doubling Down on Nuclear Weapons and Renouncing Reunification

The main reason why nuclear diplomacy with North Korea has failed and will continue to fail is because the nature of the North Korean threat has evolved since Kim Jon-un succeeded his father in December 2011. In his thirteen years in power, Kim's biggest achievement has been ramping up North Korea's nuclear and WMD programs and ensuring continued support from China and, more recently, Russia. North Korea's nuclear

inventory is estimated to have grown to between 35 to 63 warheads, but more importantly, the country has successfully miniaturized warheads for delivery on various missiles.¹⁶ Although South Korea remains under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol have strengthened extended deterrence by creating a Nuclear Consultative Group and beefing up strategic military exercises, the fact remains that a North Korea armed with increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons poses immense challenges to both the ROK and the United States.

Kim has affirmed on numerous occasions that he will never give up nuclear weapons and has codified North Korea's status as a self-declared nuclear weapon state.¹⁷ In September 2022, the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, passed a law that enshrined nuclear weapons as an integral part of the nation's defense.¹⁸ According to remarks made by the official Korea Central News Agency, Kim said that "the aim of the United States is not just to eliminate our nuclear weapons themselves but also ultimately to bring down our [leadership at] anytime by forcing [North Korea] to put down nuclear weapons and give up or weaken the power to exercise self-defense."¹⁹ The law also states that if North Korea faces an imminent attack on its leadership, its nuclear reprisal will be "automatic and immediate" and that Kim maintains "monolithic command" and "all decisive power concerning nuclear weapons."²⁰

Importantly, Kim has recently vowed that unification with South Korea is no longer tenable and that the ROK is now the sworn enemy of the DPRK. He called for revising the North Korean constitution at the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly in January 2024, emphasizing that "we can specify in our constitution the issue of

¹⁶ David Albright, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons Arsenal: New Estimates of Its Size and Configuration," Institute for Science and International Security, April 10, 2023 ~ <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/2023-north-korean-nuclear-weapons-arsenal-new-estimates>; and Pablo Robles and Choe Sang-Hun, "Why North Korea's Latest Nuclear Claims Are Raising Alarms," *New York Times*, June 2, 2023 ~ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/02/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear.html>.

¹⁷ Colin Zwirko and Jeongmin Kim, "Kim Jong Un Says He Will 'Never Give Up' Nuclear Weapons, Rejects Future Talks," NK News, September 9, 2022 ~ <https://www.nknews.org/2022/09/kim-jong-un-says-he-will-never-give-up-nuclear-weapons-rejects-future-talks>; Jon Herskovitz, "How North Korea Is Building a Nuclear Attack Arsenal," Bloomberg, March 22, 2024 ~ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-03-22/how-north-korea-s-kim-jong-un-is-preparing-for-war-nuclear-weapons-missiles>; and Timothy W. Martin and Dasl Yoon, "While the World Was Looking Elsewhere, North Korea Became a Bigger Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2024 ~ <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-un-military-nuclear-f33ede51>.

¹⁸ "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Vows to Never Give Up Nuclear Weapons," Radio Free Asia, September 9, 2022 ~ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nuclear LAW-09092022184333.html>.

¹⁹ Kim Jong-un, cited in *ibid*.

²⁰ Cited in *ibid*.

completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula.”²¹ He also ordered the dismantling of three agencies that were responsible for promoting inter-Korean dialogue²² and the destruction of a unification arch built during his father’s regime as a symbol of inter-Korean ties because it was an “eyesore.”²³ This is an extremely significant departure from the guidelines laid down by his grandfather and father who paid lip service to unification. Kim Il-sung attempted unification through war in 1950. Kim Jong-il invited President Kim Dae-jung to the first inter-Korean summit in 2001 and held a second meeting with President Roh Moo-hyun in 2007. Even Kim Jong-un held a summit with President Moon Jae-in in 2018 and signed agreements that were hailed by both sides as groundbreaking achievements.²⁴

By burying the notion of unification (unless the North takes over the South), Kim is signaling that his policy toward the ROK is no longer going to be constrained by a common Korean heritage but will resemble state-to-state ties with an archenemy.

Politics in South Korea and the United States

If the past thirteen years and the broken history of landmark agreements made by the two Koreas since the early 1990s serve as a guide, Kim has little serious interest in dealing with the ROK or denuclearization negotiations. But progressives in South Korea continue to cling to the same playbook—first enunciated by the Kim Dae-jung administration in the early 2000s—that if Seoul and Washington drop their hostile, hard-line postures toward Pyongyang, Kim will return to the negotiating table.

On April 10, 2024, South Korea’s National Assembly election resulted in a major defeat for incumbent conservative president Yoon Suk Yeol. The progressive opposition Democratic Party already held a majority in the 300-seat parliament, but it won a total of 175 seats, whereas the ruling People’s Power Party won just 108 seats. The remaining seats were divided

²¹ Kim Jong-un, cited in Kim Soo-yeon, “N.K. Leader Calls for Defining S. Korea as ‘Invariable Principal Enemy’ in Constitution,” Yonhap News Agency, January 16, 2024 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240116000653315>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kelsey Davenport, “North Korea Ends Inter-Korean Military Agreement,” Arms Control Association, January/February 2024 ~ <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-02/news/north-korea-ends-inter-korean-military-agreement>.

between minor opposition parties and independents.²⁵ Yoon has said that despite his party's heavy loss at the polls, he will not shift his major foreign and security policies, which include his tough approach to North Korea and strengthening U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral security and defense cooperation.

Nevertheless, because the Democratic Party and other progressive forces favor more balanced ties with China and re-engaging North Korea, Yoon will face constant pressures over the remaining three years of his term. If the Democratic Party wins the presidency in March 2027 and a major North Korean crisis erupts during that president's term (2027–32), how he or she will react will be significantly different from how a more conservative president may choose to respond, including the depth and speed of coordination with the United States and the objectivity of and responses to intelligence estimates as events unfold in North Korea. In Seoul, downplaying North Korean threats rather than more neutrally assessing developments, for example, was the norm in the South Korean intelligence community during the progressive Moon administration (2017–22).²⁶

At the same time, if former U.S. president Donald Trump wins re-election in November 2024 and a major North Korean crisis erupts during his second term, he may take a hands-off approach, given his inclination for allies, such as South Korea, to take the lead while U.S. forces remain in the background. Trump also showed in his term how much he distrusted his own intelligence community, including the CIA and Director of National Intelligence.²⁷ Although Trump and Kim held two summits in 2018 and 2019, Kim was unwilling to reach a nuclear deal. If Trump re-takes the White House in January 2025, he may restart U.S.–North Korea talks, but Pyongyang's nuclear program has grown significantly since he was first

²⁵ "S. Korea's Opposition Wins Landslide Victory in Election," *Chosun Daily*, April 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/04/13/YS5RV35U6FHQTLB47TANDCJ6MA>.

²⁶ See, for example, Yoo Cheong-mo, "Auditor Says Moon Gov't Neglected, Covered Up, Distorted 2020 Death of Fisheries Official" Yonhap News Agency, December 7, 2023 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231207002500315>; and Kim Gwang-ju, "[Ee hangwoneui chek] Jwapa jeong-gwoneun wae gukjeongwoneul muryeokwha shikiyeotsulka? (Ee Byeong-ho jieum | gipalang pyeonaeum)" [[This Single Book] Why Did the Leftist Government Neutralize the National Intelligence Service? (Written by Byung-ho Lee | Published by Giparang)], *Chosun Monthly* 4, April 2024 ~ <https://m.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?ctcd=F&nNewsNumb=202404100028>.

²⁷ Mary Louise Kelly, "A History of Trump's Broken Ties to the U.S. Intelligence Community," NPR, October 28, 2019 ~ <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/28/774178719/a-history-of-trumps-broken-ties-to-the-u-s-intelligence-community>; Olivia Gazis, "CIA Publishes New Account of Describing 'Challenges' of Briefing Trump," CBS News, December 1, 2021 ~ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-cia-briefings-challenge>; and Ewan Palmer, "Donald Trump Says He Trusts Putin More Than U.S. Intelligence 'Lowlifes,'" *Newsweek*, January 30, 2023 ~ <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-trusts-putin-intelligence-lowlife-1777537>.

in office. With added backing from Russia and China, there is even less incentive now for Kim to reach a deal with Trump.

If a Democrat wins the election in November 2024, U.S. options vis-à-vis a highly destabilizing North Korea will still remain limited as well. Securing North Korea's nuclear and WMD assets, for example, is a highly classified component of contingency operations, but even in the best circumstances, it would be extremely difficult for the United States Forces Korea (USFK) and supporting U.S. forces to successfully control North Korea's nuclear sites. North Korea is arguably the world's hardest target for the U.S. intelligence community, and in the initial phases of any profound instabilities such as regime collapse or a military coup, it would take several days at a minimum to monitor and verify critical military movements in North Korea.

Rethinking Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the combined forces of the ROK and the USFK have been able to deter the DPRK from instigating a second Korean War. This does not mean that North Korea has not undertaken limited military operations, such as the sinking of a South Korean vessel and bombing of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 or numerous terrorist attacks dating back to the 1960s. But the threat spectrum emanating from North Korea under Kim Jong-un—the third dictator in the Kim dynasty—is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the threat environment that characterized the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras.

Hoping for regime collapse in North Korea is neither a strategy nor a policy since such a development will have immeasurable consequences and repercussions for South Korea and the United States, as well as for China. But ignoring the growing possibility of regime instability in the DPRK is the worst possible step South Korea can take. No government should inflate North Korean threats but neither should any underemphasize them. Although it is impossible to forecast if and when the Kim regime could collapse, a perfect storm is taking shape in North Korea. The jangmadang generation, coming of age after the Arduous March, has never relied on the North Korean government to survive and has the greatest access to, and familiarity with, outside developments, especially those in South Korea. Those who lived through the tragedy of the famine pay lip service to the Kim dynasty but know all too well the grotesque menagerie of life in “earth's paradise.” Over time, Kim's unwillingness to enact structural economic reforms will mean that maintaining the status quo

is untenable. In more ways than one, the real North Korean crisis is just beginning. Before it is too late, Seoul and Washington must devote critical resources to developing and honing realistic operational options rather than continuing to rely on outdated scenarios and unrealistic possibilities that North Korea might willingly denuclearize. ◆

The United States and North Korea: New Threats, New Challenges, and the Need for New Resolve

Evans J.R. Revere

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) continues to demonstrate to the United States and the international community that it poses a major, growing threat to peninsular, regional, and extraregional peace and stability. In 2024 this threat has intensified and metastasized in troubling ways, underscoring the need for the United States and its allies and partners to further strengthen defense and deterrence arrangements, even as they try to engage the regime in Pyongyang in dialogue aimed at reducing the possibility of conflict. But the growing challenge posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development programs and the regime's increasingly confrontational posture will make dialogue difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, with the U.S. presidential election on the horizon, Pyongyang can be expected to increase tensions with Washington, both to demonstrate its hostility toward the Biden administration's policies and to pressure the next U.S. administration to change its approach.

We can expect the regime to try to keep the United States and its allies off balance, including by increasing ballistic missile development, testing, and production; conducting a seventh nuclear test; escalating threatening rhetoric; and trumpeting its status as a permanent nuclear power, while demanding that the United States and the international community accept it as such. This behavior derives directly from the regime's core strategic goals, its traditional tactics, and the approach North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is adopting—including a radical new posture vis-à-vis the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), a new partnership with Russia, and strengthened ties with China and Iran—as he refines his unique leadership style and moves out from under the shadow of his father and grandfather.

Today, North Korea stresses that its nuclear status is irreversible and leaves no doubt that it regards its possession of nuclear weapons as the best and only guarantee of the regime's most treasured

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aspiration—the continuation of the Kim family regime.¹ Additionally, permanent possession of nuclear weapons supports other core goals of the regime, which include weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance, convincing the United States to reduce its military presence on the Korean Peninsula, and eliminating the tactical and strategic assets the United States deploys in the region against North Korea. Pyongyang believes that attaining these goals will not only give it the security it seeks but also enable it to achieve strategic dominance over the South, setting the stage for the reunification of the peninsula on its own terms.

This essay argues that the quest to convince North Korea to relinquish the country's nuclear status through negotiations will ultimately prove fruitless and that the United States and its allies would do better to seek a new approach focused on forcing Pyongyang to choose between regime survival and nuclear weapons. The first two sections examine efforts to denuclearize North Korea in light of Pyongyang's core goals. The next section assesses North Korea's decision to abandon its policy of dialogue and reconciliation with South Korea. The essay then turns to consider North Korea's rebuilding of partnerships with Russia and China. The essay concludes with possible steps forward for policymakers in the United States and its allies to address the evolving challenge from North Korea.

The Demise of Denuclearization

After decades of effort across several U.S. administrations and tenacious, creative work by U.S. negotiators, the United States today is further away than ever from achieving its goal of denuclearizing North Korea. There no longer is any serious prospect of ending Pyongyang's nuclear program. This is not to criticize current policy, nor does it dismiss the value of past efforts aimed at making progress toward the denuclearization goal. Rather, it simply describes the reality U.S. policymakers now face. It also reminds us that the main obstacle to denuclearization has never been a lack of effort by the United States.

For decades, the essence of the challenge facing U.S. negotiators was encapsulated in a question once posed by a member of the U.S. negotiating team at a staff meeting during the Clinton administration: "Is there a price the United States would be prepared to pay, and which North Korea would

¹ Colin Zwirko and Jeongmin Kim, "Kim Jong Un Says He Will 'Never Give Up' Nuclear Weapons, Rejects Future Talks," NK News, September 9, 2022. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/09/kim-jong-un-says-he-will-never-give-up-nuclear-weapons-rejects-future-talks>.

be willing to accept, that would result in Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear weapons program?"² Reflecting on the proposals and concessions made by U.S. negotiators over the decades, and the failure of these to gain traction, we know today that there was nothing the United States could have put on the table that would have convinced the DPRK to end its nuclear program. Washington's inducements and incentives included normalization of diplomatic relations, establishment of liaison offices (and, eventually, embassies), sanctions easing and removal, economic aid, food and agricultural assistance, provision of fuel, construction of light-water nuclear reactors, U.S. presidential declarations of non-hostility, and military and security guarantees. None of these offers worked, not because they lacked in willingness or sincerity but because North Korea's primary interest was becoming a nuclear power. Nuclear weapons and the missiles designed to deliver those weapons have become core elements of the DPRK's political, diplomatic, and military strategies—they are part of the regime's strategic DNA.

Today, it is inconceivable that the regime would ever abandon a nuclear arsenal that it believes is the only thing preventing the United States and other "hostile powers" from ending the Kim family's rule. The DPRK has invested billions in developing its nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems. Pyongyang has endured isolation, pressure, sanctions, and privation to build this arsenal. North Korea has enshrined its nuclear status in its constitution, established a wartime nuclear use doctrine, and gone as far as to suggest it could strike first with its nuclear arsenal, even in the absence of a U.S. or allied attack.³ Barring the regime's collapse, a change in the regime, or Washington's adoption of a risky policy that would present Pyongyang with a stark choice between denuclearization or the end of the regime, North Korea's nuclear status is now permanent.

Yet U.S. policymakers, who are neither naïve nor delusional, continue to chant the mantra of denuclearization. So, too, do senior South Korean and Japanese officials. Policymakers in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo know how deeply committed Pyongyang is to its status as a nuclear power, and they understand that their longtime vision of a denuclearized DPRK is no longer possible. But they also realize abandoning denuclearization as a policy goal would be interpreted by some as *de facto* acceptance of a permanently

² Author's personal notes, Washington, D.C., May 1999.

³ Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea Passes Nuclear Law," October 2022, Arms Control Association ~ <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law>.

nuclear-armed North Korea. Policymakers understand the damage such a move would do to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime.

U.S. policymakers also know that ending the pursuit of a denuclearized North Korea would signal to the United States' key Asian allies that they would have to live permanently with a nuclear-armed, hostile neighbor. This could undermine allied confidence in the United States and its extended deterrent and likely lead to an upsurge in interest among regional allies in acquiring their own nuclear weapons. So, for the foreseeable future, the denuclearization of North Korea will likely remain the stated goal of U.S. policy, albeit surely a chimera.

Meanwhile, to induce Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table, the Biden administration has declared that the United States is prepared to pursue "interim steps" on the road to denuclearization and that there is no expectation that denuclearization can or must occur all at once.⁴ This assurance is designed in part to dispel the persistent myth, held by some critics of the U.S. administration, that the United States' policy requires the DPRK's full and immediate disarmament. But it will do nothing to appeal to North Korea's leadership, which has no intention of discussing denuclearization and already knows the actual requirements of U.S. policy.

What's Next?

However, Pyongyang may be interested in other aspects of recent U.S. statements suggesting that interim steps could include discussion of confidence building and "threat" or "risk" reduction.⁵ Such talk suggests Washington policymakers may now be prepared to set their sights lower and focus on goals other than denuclearization, including seeking ways to slow or freeze the DPRK's increasingly dangerous WMD programs. If in fact threat or risk reduction means U.S. willingness to engage in arms control discussions with North Korea, Pyongyang may be interested.

In the spring of 2012, North Korea's then foreign minister, speaking to a gathering of U.S. experts and former senior officials, made the case for the United States and North Korea to engage in arms control talks "as one

⁴ Song Sang-ho, "U.S. Nuclear Envoy Underlines Need for 'Interim Steps' toward Ultimate N. Korea Denuclearization," *Yonhap News Agency*, March 6, 2024 ~ <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240306000451315>.

⁵ Mira Rapp-Hooper, interview by Victor Cha, "Biden Administration's North Korea Policy: Mira Rapp-Hooper's Featured Conversation with Victor Cha," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 3, 2024 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/biden-administrations-north-korea-policy>.

nuclear power with another.”⁶ He implied that this was a logical waystation until the United States and the DPRK could find the means to build enough confidence to allow North Korea to “consider” denuclearization.⁷ In this context, U.S. references to interim steps could be appealing to Pyongyang.

If this is indeed what U.S. policymakers are thinking, then the United States may be moving toward seeking a dialogue with North Korea that would try to manage, rather than eliminate, the risk posed by Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile arsenals, reduce the possibility of miscalculation, limit the scope of its arsenal, and take other measures to deal with Pyongyang’s nuclear challenge short of actual denuclearization. But if this is the plan, U.S. officials already know that every previous U.S.-DPRK denuclearization negotiation was based on the idea of building confidence, enhancing transparency, reducing the threat, and moving toward the denuclearization of North Korea via a “freeze” of some or all elements of its nuclear program. They also know that every one of the agreements reached in these negotiations ultimately failed because of North Korea’s deceit, misrepresentation, and determination to become a nuclear weapons power at all costs. That determination has not waned.

In pursuing talks with Pyongyang about goals short of denuclearization, the United States would necessarily have to offer inducements and incentives, perhaps including concessions that Washington was once only prepared to offer in exchange for actual denuclearization. Should Pyongyang agree to risk reduction or arms control negotiations, the regime will demand much in return, including the end of economic and other sanctions. To the degree that the United States would be prepared to offer such inducements, it would eliminate key elements of the very leverage that Washington once held in reserve to achieve the DPRK’s denuclearization.

Pyongyang will also almost certainly demand elimination of the “threat” posed by the U.S.-ROK alliance, the presence of U.S. forces in and near South Korea, and the withdrawal of tactical and strategic assets that threaten the DPRK. In the above-referenced comments by the former North Korean foreign minister, when asked to define the “threat” his government sought to eliminate as part of any dialogue with the United States, he specifically cited those three goals.⁸ In subsequent conversations with DPRK

⁶ Ri Yong-ho, cited in Evans J.R. Revere, “North Korea’s New Nuclear Gambit and the Fate of Denuclearization,” Brookings Institution, March 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/north-koreas-new-nuclear-gambit-and-the-fate-of-denuclearization>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

officials at Track 1.5 and Track 2 events about the former foreign minister's comments and the U.S. "threat," they have made clear that, for a nuclear-armed North Korea, arms control is not about limiting its arsenal; the DPRK aims to reduce the ability of the United States to defend its ROK ally against the North.

As we see new efforts to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table, we must ask whether anything has changed in the DPRK's longtime determination to be a nuclear weapons state. It is also fair to ask why, after acting deceptively regarding its nuclear program for decades, Pyongyang would now suddenly be willing to act in good faith. Would it accept the intrusive steps necessary to verify its compliance with a limitation or freeze on its nuclear program? Before it became a de facto nuclear weapons power, the DPRK vigorously opposed verification, and more than once the result was the collapse of denuclearization dialogue. Why would North Korea be willing to accept intrusive verification now that it has become a full-fledged nuclear state?

Decades of experience at the negotiating table with North Korea tell us that if the United States is prepared to engage it in talks at which the U.S.-ROK alliance, the U.S. military presence in Korea, and the U.S. deterrent are on the table, Pyongyang may well be interested in such a conversation. If Washington's goal would be to limit the size or the rate of growth of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal, the DPRK might accept such a dialogue but, as it has done in the past, offer unverifiable, deceptive, and false promises to the United States in return for major U.S. concessions.

The Biden administration is under increasing pressure to "do something" about the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs, as Pyongyang continues to make significant strides in increasing its nuclear and missile threats. At the same time, groundless assertions that North Korea has made a "strategic decision" to go to war have no doubt increased the pressure on the Biden administration to take steps to prevent such a possibility.⁹ Such assertions have been debunked and roundly rejected by most North Korea experts and by U.S. and ROK officials, but their frequent repetition by the press has created a false sense of urgency about Pyongyang's intentions.¹⁰

⁹ Jesse Johnson, "Is North Korea's Kim Preparing for an Actual War?" *Japan Times*, January 26, 2024
 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/01/26/asia-pacific/politics/north-korea-kim-war>; and Frances Mao, "Kim Jong Un: Is North Korea's Leader Actually Considering War?" BBC, January 23, 2024
 ~ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68052515>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Finally, a U.S. policy that focuses on goals short of denuclearization will raise deep concerns in Seoul and Tokyo. An arms control or risk reduction approach would be widely viewed as accepting a permanently nuclear-armed DPRK. Reports indicate that South Korean officials are already seeking assurances from the United States about its intentions.¹¹ Importantly, North Korea would no longer see the subject of the U.S. policy approach as whether the DPRK should be a nuclear state but rather how many weapons it will have. It is hard to imagine this approach being acceptable to the United States' two main East Asian allies, who would see themselves as being relegated to living under a permanent threat. It is also impossible to believe that the United States' East Asian allies would support the idea that their respective U.S. alliances, and the presence of the U.S. forces in the region that guarantee their security, would be on the table in any future negotiation with North Korea.

Brothers and Sisters No More

A major U.S. and allied concern today is North Korea's decision to abandon its policy of dialogue, reconciliation, and eventual reunification with South Korea.¹² For decades, Pyongyang and Seoul have engaged in on-again, off-again talks aimed at reducing tension, enhancing transparency, and establishing an arrangement by which the two states could seek reconciliation and lay the groundwork for a united Korea. Pursuit of such dialogue has been the main pillar of every progressive South Korean president's policy toward North Korea since Kim Dae-jung, who famously traveled to Pyongyang to meet with then North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in June 2000. For decades, South Korea's progressives have defined themselves and their party's ideology by the pursuit of conciliatory policies toward North Korea, which South Korean conservatives have frequently criticized as "appeasement."¹³ Kim Jong-un's decision to end dialogue with Seoul, terminate the DPRK's goal of reunification, and define South Korea as a

¹¹ Christy Lee, "Washington's Willingness to Engage Pyongyang Exposes Rare Rift with Seoul," Voice of America, May 8, 2024 ~ <https://www.voanews.com/a/washington-s-willingness-to-engage-pyongyang-exposes-a-rare-rift-with-seoul/7602500.html>.

¹² Kim Tong-hyung and Jiwon Song, "Analysis: North Korea's Rejection of the South Is Both a Shock, and Inevitable," Associated Press, January 16, 2024 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/kim-jong-un-north-korea-south-korea-unification-954ae7bf73d120de117eb4f60bfe3b0a>.

¹³ Park Chan-kyong, "Yoon Suk-yeol Says South Korea Will No Longer 'Appease' North, but Are Seoul's Policies and China Affecting Future Talks?" *South China Morning Post*, May 31, 2022 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3179813/yoon-suk-yeol-says-south-korea-will-no-longer-appease-north>.

foreign, alien state rather than part of the Korean nation came as a surprise to the South. If Seoul's conservative government was surprised, its liberals and progressives were stunned, since Kim's move effectively demolished the foundation of their longtime approach to North Korea.

This major North Korean shift seems to have had several goals. First, it sends South Korea's conservative government, which has been particularly firm in its policy toward Pyongyang, a definitive message that the DPRK will never work with it. By slamming the door on dialogue with President Yoon's government, Pyongyang has ended any hope Yoon may have had that his inducement-laden "audacious initiative" would gain traction in North Korea.¹⁴

Second, Kim has shaken South Korea's progressive camp to its core, leaving liberals searching for a new *raison d'être* when it comes to North-South relations and for a new way of appealing to progressive voters who could once be relied upon to support the Democratic Party's pro-engagement line. A canny observer of South Korean politics, Kim may have calculated that the likely reaction of the South's progressive camp would be to pressure the Yoon government to ease its policies toward North Korea to "avoid war." South Korea's liberal press has done exactly that, castigating the Yoon government, rather than Kim, for the North's break with the South.¹⁵

Third, some observers believe Kim's decision was driven by fear of the South's ability to use its cultural dominance to undermine the North's closed system.¹⁶ It is possible Kim may believe, perhaps thanks to his Russian and Chinese guarantors, that he has achieved a certain strength in dealing with the South and no longer needs the occasional economic and agricultural gifts that ROK progressives once provided to keep the North at the negotiating table. In the military arena, Kim has made North Korea a nuclear and missile power with the ability to target all of South Korea, giving Pyongyang a significant level of confidence and psychological advantage as it deals with Seoul. With his Russian and Chinese patrons guaranteeing economic, food, and fuel assistance, and with Moscow and Beijing both blocking any new UN Security Council sanctions and actively undercutting

¹⁴ Mitch Shin, "Yoon Suk-yeol's Audacious Initiative for Denuclearization Will Fail," *Diplomat*, August 26, 2022 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/yoonsukyeols-audacious-initiative-for-denuclearization-will-fail>.

¹⁵ Park Min-hee, "How Seoul Should Respond to Kim Jong-un's Bellicose Turn," *Hankyoreh*, January 19, 2024 ~ https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1125152.

¹⁶ Chung Min Lee, "The Hollowing Out of Kim Jong Un's North Korea," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 29, 2024 ~ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/the-hollowing-out-of-kim-jong-uns-north-korea?lang=en>.

existing ones, Kim may now feel confident enough to dispense with the traditional North-South niceties and seek to turn his military advantages into political and diplomatic ones.

Finally, Kim's decision to end any pretense of reconciliation and cooperation may signal that Pyongyang now believes the political, military, and diplomatic environment may be improving for the North to realize its long-held goal—unification of the peninsula under the DPRK's rule. By ending dialogue and portraying South Korea not as a state populated by fellow Koreans and a partner in reconciliation but rather as an alien entity and enemy of the DPRK, Kim's move provides a justification for military action and a “war of liberation” against the South in the event of a crisis. Unification by conquest has been the North Korean game plan since the beginning of the Korean War. Over the years, the regime has often found it useful to hide its intentions behind a facade of reconciliation and reunification dialogue. Today, Pyongyang no longer sees a need for such a charade. The “quiet part” of North Korean intentions is now being said out loud.

The Axis of Mischief

One of the most dramatic developments in recent months has been the forging of a new partnership between North Korea and Russia. Intense diplomacy between Moscow and Pyongyang, including Kim's visit to the Russian Far East in 2023 and Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in 2024, has led to a special relationship between the two, with major implications for North Korea's survival; Pyongyang's ability to threaten South Korea, the United States, and Japan; Russia's prosecution of its war against Ukraine; and, by extension, Moscow's confrontation with NATO.

Thanks to Pyongyang's strong “tilt” toward Moscow, North Korea now has a valuable potential source of much-needed missile, satellite, and conventional military technology as well as other assistance. By taking advantage of Russia's logistical need for artillery shells and rockets, Kim has earned Putin's appreciation and willingness to support the DPRK in return. Russia's war against Ukraine has been a remarkable gift of leverage to North Korea.

It is unclear what Moscow has promised in return for Pyongyang's diplomatic support for Russia's war and provision of ammunition for Russian combat operations. But Kim's trip to Russia's Far East saw him visit air, submarine, and space-related facilities—so we have an idea of

what may have been on his shopping list.¹⁷ With North Korea's economic and agricultural production situation still dire, Kim has welcomed Russia's willingness to provide grain, fertilizer, and fuel shipments—the last of which appears to be in violation of UN Security Council sanctions.¹⁸

The Biden administration is deeply concerned about the trajectory of Russia–North Korea relations and the implications for the United States, the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances, Ukraine, and NATO if Russia–North Korea ties include a significant military and technology transfer component. North Korea's acquisition of new ballistic missile guidance, stage separation, satellite launch, and submarine technologies would significantly enhance its threat to its neighbors, U.S. alliance partners, and the United States.

Meanwhile, North Korea's provision of artillery shells to Russia has enabled Moscow's forces to sustain offensive operations in new and dangerous ways. North Korean artillery shells and missiles are today killing Ukrainian forces and civilians. Although Pyongyang's assistance may not be the decisive factor in the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, North Korean military aid is weakening Ukraine's ability to defend itself and is directly undermining U.S. and NATO objectives. At the same time, use of North Korean weaponry on the battlefield is providing Pyongyang with valuable information that will allow the DPRK to improve its weapons systems.

While the specifics of Russia's quid pro quo for North Korean military aid remain unclear, Moscow's diplomatic actions on behalf of Pyongyang have been important. By vetoing the extension of the mandate of the UN Security Council's Panel of Experts, Russia has terminated the work of a body that was providing vitally important information on the implementation and effectiveness of international sanctions on the DPRK. The end of the Panel of Experts' mandate will make it easier for both Russia and China to prevent the international community from obtaining a clear picture of what Moscow and Beijing are doing to undermine the very sanctions they once voted to support.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kim Tong-hyung and Hyung-jin Kim, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Inspects Russian Bombers and a Warship on a Visit to Russia's Far East," Associated Press, September 16, 2023 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-kim-jong-un-putin-vladivostok-0255d844b06e11c39920cc2acdb53406>.

¹⁸ Steve Holland, "Exclusive: Russia Is Shipping Oil to North Korea above UN Mandated Levels—U.S. Official," Reuters, May 7, 2024 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-is-shipping-oil-north-korea-above-un-mandated-levels-us-official-2024-05-02>.

¹⁹ "Security Council Fails to Extend Mandate for Expert Panel Assisting Sanctions Committee on Democratic People's Republic of Korea," United Nations, Press Release, March 28, 2024 ~ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15648.doc.htm>.

Given Pyongyang's strong relations with both Moscow and Beijing, North Korea now has two permanent members of the UN Security Council who have its back and who can block future Security Council actions against the DPRK. China and Russia will also be prepared to look the other way as their government and private entities continue to violate UN sanctions. With Moscow and Beijing now blocking action against the DPRK, the days when the UN Security Council was able to serve as an effective international institution for pressuring North Korea are over. Russian and Chinese diplomatic and political support, together with technical, military, agricultural, and economic aid, are allowing the North Korean regime to act with confidence and impunity as the regime continues to violate international norms and defy the UN Security Council.

China, meanwhile, is guarding its alliance relations with North Korea jealously, including by dispatching a senior Chinese official to Pyongyang in April 2024 to celebrate 75 years of DPRK-Chinese relations.²⁰ Beijing has a major stake in keeping its aid and assistance channels to North Korea open to maintain influence and to balance Russia's efforts. At the same time, Beijing probably also wants to prevent Russia from providing North Korea with so much aid that Kim becomes overly emboldened and engages in military provocations that might affect China's security. China is also surely pleased to see how North Korea's military advances are complicating the military planning processes of the United States and its South Korean and Japanese allies. For Beijing, North Korea is an especially useful tool both in China's ongoing confrontation with the United States and in its strained ties with both South Korea and Japan.

Nonetheless, Beijing remains concerned with the possibility of instability or conflict on its northeastern border, which explains why the Biden administration continues to press Beijing to use its influence with North Korea. But such efforts have largely fallen on deaf ears. China long ago decided that it would no longer "do favors" for the United States in dealing with North Korea.²¹ As long as Pyongyang avoids creating a crisis on China's border, Beijing is likely to remain comfortable with the actions and the trajectory of its North Korean ally.²²

²⁰ "China's No. 3 Leader Vows Firm Ties with North Korea at Anniv. Ceremony," *Kyodo News*, April 12, 2024 ~ <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2024/04/5076dfecd081-chinas-no-3-leader-vows-firm-ties-with-n-korea-at-anniv-ceremony.html>.

²¹ Evans J.R. Revere, "Lips and Teeth: Repairing China-North Korea Relations," *Brookings Institution*, November 2019, 10 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/fp_20191118_china_nk_revere.pdf.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

North Korea is also focusing on relations with Iran—a fellow provider of arms for Russia's war effort. Pyongyang previously worked closely with Tehran on ballistic missile development in a relationship that dates back to the Iran-Iraq War. While Iran has subsequently made significant, independent advances in missile development, renewed Iranian–North Korean cooperation on ballistic missiles could pose a major challenge to the United States' interests, including its support of Ukraine and its special military relationship with Israel. At the same time, potential cooperation on nuclear weapons between Tehran and Pyongyang would be deeply problematic for the United States, its allies, and the international community.²³

U.S. Policy: What Is to Be Done?

U.S. policymakers today face a North Korean threat growing in scope, intensity, and danger. The DPRK not only poses a major challenge to the United States and its regional allies in East Asia but also is now undermining U.S. and NATO goals in Ukraine. North Korea proves the indivisibility of security between the United States' Asian and European alliances, demonstrating the need for cross-alliance partnerships to deal with this new problem.

With no existing restraints on North Korea's ability to enhance its nuclear capabilities, U.S. policymakers may be strongly tempted to do whatever it takes to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. But decades of failed U.S.-DPRK talks tell us that this is a fool's errand. The regime in Pyongyang is more determined than ever for North Korea to remain a nuclear power. Experience has taught us that North Korea will do, say, or promise whatever it takes to remain a nuclear state. The United States paid a dear price for its failure to understand this adequately in the past. This mistake must not be repeated. Wishful thinking and hopes that North Korea has changed will only make things worse. Former president Donald Trump's statement after the Singapore summit with Kim in 2018 that "there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea" seems even more absurd today than it did at the time.²⁴ It reminds us of the danger of pursuing the illusion of progress on denuclearization.

²³ "Intelbrief: Iran and North Korea Draw Closer," Soufan Center, May 7, 2024 ~ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-may-7>.

²⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump Said North Korea Was 'No Longer a Nuclear Threat.' His Spies Disagree," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2018 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/07/02/trump-said-north-korea-was-no-longer-a-nuclear-threat-his-spies-disagree>.


We also know that the only dialogue Kim may be interested in is one that accepts his country's nuclear status, drives wedges between the United States and its allies, weakens the U.S. extended deterrent, and removes U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula. For Kim, "arms control" means controlling the capabilities that the United States would use to aid its allies in a crisis. That is a dialogue the United States should avoid at all costs.

Going forward, the United States must respond to Pyongyang's latest moves vigorously and in close coordination with its Asian and NATO partners. The first task will be to establish a new mechanism that applies, enforces, and monitors the strongest possible international sanctions on the DPRK in ways that neither Beijing nor Moscow can block. New sanctions should build on what we have learned from the Panel of Experts about the deficiencies of previous measures, with a special focus on cutting off the DPRK from the international banking and financial system. This includes targeting Russian and Chinese banks and other institutions that help Pyongyang avoid current UN sanctions. Now that China and Russia have made clear where they stand when it comes to keeping the DPRK afloat, the United States can set aside its previous reluctance to target Russian and Chinese entities out of fear it would affect relations with Beijing and Moscow.

Pyongyang and Moscow must understand they will pay a major price for their cooperation in the war against Ukraine and undermining NATO's efforts to help Kyiv. A good place to start would be to convince South Korea to help Ukraine directly. Russia is quietly working to enhance North Korea's capabilities in ways that undermine ROK security, and North Korea is reciprocating by arming Russia with weapons that are killing Ukrainians and making a Ukrainian defeat more likely. A decision by South Korea, one of the world's leading producers of highly sophisticated weaponry, to provide substantial military equipment and ammunition to Ukraine would be a fitting response.

Finally, returning to the nuclear question, over the years, trying to manage the North Korean nuclear threat by pursuing denuclearization dialogue, negotiating freezes, and offering the DPRK packages of inducements and rewards has produced only failure. Future efforts to launch similar dialogues are destined to be similarly fruitless. Since North Korea's desire for nuclear weapons derives from its belief that these weapons will bring security and ensure regime survival, U.S. policy should focus on convincing the regime that the opposite is true—that is, that nuclear weapons will only bring the regime's demise closer.

This entails developing an approach that forces Pyongyang to choose between regime survival and nuclear weapons. This will be risky and difficult but not impossible. Pursuing this path should begin with a highly focused and deeply coordinated package of sanctions and other diplomatic, military, and political measures, taken in concert with the United States' NATO and Asian allies. These measures must make clear to Kim that as long as he pursues the development of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, his people will suffer, his regime will be challenged, and his prospects for survival will be ever more dim.

Over the decades, we have learned what drives North Korea. The key lesson is that the Kim regime's overarching goal is its own survival. It is time to test whether Kim would be prepared to give up his nuclear weapons in order to survive. An effective policy approach must constantly remind Kim of the pain, isolation, suffering, and deprivation that he and his people will endure until he makes the right choice. There is a chance that a rational North Korean leader, faced with this dismal future, would do the right thing. Therein lies the last best hope for a denuclearized North Korea. 

Grappling with Great-Power Competition: China Bandwagons with Petulant North Korea

Andrew Scobell

Across the decades China has tolerated North Korean episodes of saber-rattling and provocations with fluctuating levels of irritation and ire. The level of indignation approached a breaking point in the late 2010s when relations between Beijing and Pyongyang seemed to plunge to an all-time low. It is worth recalling that as 2018 dawned, Xi Jinping, China's paramount leader since 2012, had yet to hold a tête-à-tête with neighboring dictator Kim Jong-un. Xi's disdain for Kim paralleled the virulent animus among the Chinese people for the obese North Korean dictator, his underfed minions, and malnourished millions.¹ Pyongyang never seemed to consult—let alone coordinate—with Beijing on anything, certainly not when scheduling its nuclear tests and missile launches. Indeed, the timings of the tests and launches became key irritants for Chinese leaders and the Chinese people. A central manifestation of Beijing's animus was a refusal by Xi to meet with his North Korean counterpart.

Summit Racing

In early 2018, after more than five years without direct top-level contact, a flurry of meetings between Xi and Kim transpired within the space of three months. The first was held in March, a second was held in May, and a third took place in June. The impetus for these rapid-fire face-to-face meetings was the dramatic announcement of a forthcoming summit between the North Korean dictator and U.S. president Donald Trump. This unprecedented breakthrough event appeared to catch China flatfooted, and Beijing scrambled to arrange its own top-level meetings with Pyongyang first before and then after the June U.S.–North Korea summit in Singapore. The prospect of impending rapprochement between China's most truculent

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¹ Andrew Scobell et al., "Netizen Opinion and China's Foreign Policy: Interpreting Narratives about North Korea on Chinese Social Media," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (2019): 97–122. ~> <https://www.nbr.org/publication/netizen-opinion-and-chinas-foreign-policy-interpreting-narratives-about-north-korea-on-chinese-social-media>.

neighbor—a putative client state—and Beijing's most formidable strategic competitor prompted a remarkably swift thaw across the Yalu River.

Then, in 2019, two more meetings within the span of six months bookended the February Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi. In January Xi welcomed Kim to China, and then in late June Xi made his first official visit as China's top leader to Pyongyang. While the first four meetings were held quietly, the fifth was an official visit held with fanfare. Noteworthy is that this was not Xi's first visit to the Korean Peninsula as China's head of state. Xi had traveled to Seoul five years earlier.

Geostrategy in Northeast Asia

What explains Xi's sudden about-turn on North Korea? The answer lies in the acute geostrategic vulnerabilities felt by China's Communist rulers. For Beijing, the Korean Peninsula is a highly sensitive piece of real estate, and Chinese leaders pay extremely close attention to this locale. Korea constitutes a key point of overland access to China. Indeed, back in 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly referred to the peninsula as China's *menkou* (doorway).² In Beijing's historical memory, Korea constituted the entry point for the Japanese Imperial Army's early twentieth century invasion of China. Moreover, in late 1950, China's newly installed Communist rulers feared Korea would become the invasion route into the country for U.S. forces who were streaming across the 38th parallel with an unobstructed northward advance toward the Yalu.

While in 2017 China feared that rising tensions on the peninsula would escalate into war with a second U.S. invasion of North Korea imminent, by the spring of 2018, this fear of a cataclysmic conflict on China's doorstep had switched to alarm over the almost equally shocking specter of peace breaking out on the Korean Peninsula and satellite Pyongyang recalibrating its trajectory away from Beijing toward Washington. Yet, the fact that the two Trump-Kim summits—June 2018 in Singapore and February 2019 in Hanoi—saw no meaningful follow-up or substantive breakthrough in U.S.–North Korea relations almost certainly came as a relief to Xi and his Politburo colleagues.

² At a March 2014 news conference, Wang Yi said: "The Korean Peninsula is right on China's doorstep." Zhao Siyuan, "China Has 'Red Line' on Korean Peninsula Instability," *China Daily*, March 8, 2014 ~ https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014npcandcppcc/2014-03/08/content_17332412.htm.

As U.S.-China relations markedly deteriorated in subsequent years, North Korea's value in Beijing's eyes only increased. Why? Because in Northeast Asia, Chinese leaders perceive the balance of hard power as skewed heavily against China in favor of the United States and its allies. Staunch U.S. allies Japan and South Korea possess potent armed forces that are interoperable with the mighty U.S. military. In contrast, China has only one formal ally in Northeast Asia: North Korea, by dint of a 1961 pact. On the one hand, North Korea has the world's fourth-largest armed forces in terms of manpower as well as a growing arsenal of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the armed forces of China and North Korea do not exercise or train together, and there is neither interoperability nor mechanisms for combined command and control. Furthermore, Japan and South Korea are each economic powerhouses with sophisticated tech sectors. By contrast, North Korea remains an economic basket case as the regime continues to be incapable of feeding its own people or providing adequately for their material needs. In short, Pyongyang constitutes a sorry excuse for an ally but remains the only facsimile of one Beijing has in Northeast Asia.

What about Russia?

While in recent years China-Russia relations have assumed alliance-like characteristics, ties between the two do not yet constitute a full-blown alliance.³ Although the two militaries have engaged in joint exercises in an array of locations, including East Asia with a particularly eye-catching display of Chinese and Russian bombers flying along the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula in December 2023, these exercises appear to reveal two militaries functioning in parallel rather than operating together. Moreover, the deployment of Russian military forces in the Far East theater is extremely modest in contrast to the bulk of Moscow's order of battle located closer to Europe, including significant employment of ground forces in Ukraine. Yet, China remains a major market for Russian armaments, and China recently has also provided Russia with nonlethal equipment. Beijing has, however, refrained from increasing its level of military assistance to Russia as the war in Ukraine drags on. China appears reluctant to qualitatively up the armaments it provides to Moscow because Beijing does not want to alienate Europe or unnecessarily antagonize the United States.

³ Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021).

The Ukraine conflict has produced a warming in ties between Moscow and Pyongyang. Kim held a summit with Vladimir Putin in September 2023 in the Russian Far East. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pyongyang in October 2023 and Putin visited in June 2024. Moreover, North Korea has helped alleviate Russian munition shortages by providing some 7,000 containers of ammunition since 2023.⁴

Chinese leaders are concerned about the thickening relationship between Russia and North Korea.⁵ Beijing and Moscow have long jockeyed for influence in Pyongyang.⁶ Successive North Korean leaders proved adept over the years during the Cold War and after in exploiting the Beijing-Moscow rivalry. It is worth recalling that China's formal security pact with North Korea was signed not in the early 1950s when their two armies were fighting shoulder-to-shoulder in the Korean War but, strangely, in 1961. Why? Because the then Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with North Korea in July 1961. China's competing agreement with North Korea came less than a week later. Kim Il-sung traveled expeditiously from Moscow to Beijing to sign back-to-back treaties ensuring Pyongyang had not one but two formal external security guarantors.

While Moscow's treaty with Pyongyang had lapsed, China's treaty with North Korea remained technically in effect, and until Russia and North Korea signed a new treaty with a mutual defense clause in June 2024, it was notably the only such alliance treaty that Beijing and Pyongyang possessed. In April 2024, Zhao Leji, formally the head of the National People's Congress—China's rubber stamp parliament—but more importantly the third-highest-ranking leader of the Chinese Communist Party, visited North Korea to strengthen ties and mark the 75th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.⁷ Zhao is the most senior Chinese leader to visit Pyongyang since the outbreak of Covid-19.

⁴ Kim Tong-hyung, "South Korean Defense Chief Says North Korea Has Supplied 7,000 Containers of Munitions to Russia," Associated Press, March 18, 2024 ~ <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-arms-transfers-ukraine-a37bc290ed3ee59cfbbafdc2a994dc58>.

⁵ Martin Kölling, "As Russia Draws Closer to North Korea, China Is Being Forced to Fight for Influence," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, May 13, 2024 ~ <https://www.nzz.ch/english/north-koreas-ties-with-russia-pose-a-challenge-to-china-ld.1829712>.

⁶ John Bradbury, "Sino-Soviet Competition in North Korea," *China Quarterly*, no. 6 (1961): 15–28.

⁷ Simone McCarthy, "China Is Sending Its Highest-Level Delegation to North Korea since 2019 to Kick Off a 'Friendship Year,'" CNN, April 11, 2024 ~ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/10/china/china-delegation-northkorea-zhao-leji-intl-hnk>.

Balancing or Bandwagoning?

Great-power competition tends to be seen as synonymous with the U.S.-China rivalry. However, strategic competition is much more than a two-player game—other parties play key roles. This includes not just other great powers like Russia but also truculent lesser powers such as North Korea.

North Korea has a severe asymmetry of power in comparison with other more sizeable states. Yet little North Korea has played the game of great-power competition with impressive aplomb. Pyongyang has skillfully played Beijing, Moscow, and Washington off against each other, which raises the question of whether China's behavior vis-à-vis North Korea should be characterized as “balancing” or “bandwagoning.” Normally, it would be the lesser power that balances or bandwagons with the greater power. Arguably, Beijing's relationship with Pyongyang has been anything but normal. Moreover, in this case, it may be more accurate to describe China as bandwagoning with North Korea.⁸ Indeed, if bandwagoning is conceived of as a strategy adopted by a state when the said state perceives itself to be weak or disadvantaged, then this term is entirely apt. China considers itself very vulnerable in Northeast Asia and discerns no good options. The least bad policy option for Beijing is to bandwagon with small but geostrategically important Pyongyang against its great-power rivals and allies. That said, this bandwagoning policy significantly constrains and narrows China's policy options, including meaningful cooperation or coordination on the North Korea issue with other powers, such as the United States, Japan, and South Korea. ◆

⁸ Andrew Scobell, “China Bandwagons with North Korea,” E-International Relations, May 2, 2013 ~ <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/36815>.

Going Tactical: North Korea and Two-State Theory in War Strategy

Hideya Kurata

WMD development by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) corresponds with the “war deterrent strategy” and the “war strategy” laid out by Kim Jong-un in a speech to the plenum conference held by the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in March 2013.¹ The so-called war deterrent strategy is one of minimal deterrence in which the country's nuclear capabilities, consisting of countervalue intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), are sufficient to make the United States hesitate to launch a nuclear attack. The so-called war strategy, meanwhile, envisions a war in which a conventional armed conflict between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) escalates with the intervention of the United States Forces Korea (USFK) on behalf of the South. In such a case, North Korea has indicated that it could employ tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs)—nuclear weapons of limited explosiveness and range—against the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces, and may even do so preemptively. By obtaining weapons that neither South Korea nor the USFK possesses, North Korea alone can gain an advantage—escalation dominance—in preventing the USFK from intervening and escalation in an all-out war.

These two strategies also correspond to North Korea's principles of nuclear use. Since the war deterrent strategy is aimed at deterring nuclear attacks by the United States, ICBMs would not be used first; rather, they constitute second-strike capabilities. When North Korea declares a “no first use” policy for its nuclear weapons, it assumes a war deterrent strategy. In contrast, the war strategy assumes first use, given that it incorporates TNWs

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¹ “Report on the March 2013 Plenary Meeting of the KWP Central Committee,” *Rodong simun*, April 1, 2013. The titles of the articles and quotations from North Korea's printed official organs are hereafter based on the English texts distributed by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) while confirming against the Korean texts. English texts quoted in this essay are available at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>.

that neither South Korea nor the USFK possesses.² As such, North Korea's conflicting public statements about no first use and the preemptive use of nuclear weapons are not necessarily intended to be ambiguous, given that North Korea envisions two kinds of wars with two different strategies.

The Five-Year Plan for Scientific Development of National Defense and Weapon System Development disclosed by Kim Jong-un at the 8th Congress of the WPK in January 2021 included the development of solid-fueled ICBMs, nuclear submarines, and TNWs. Subsequent North Korean weapons development has by and large proceeded according to this plan. Solid-fueled ICBMs were achieved with the Hwasong-18 launched on April 25, 2023. North Korea also claims to have successfully developed small nuclear warheads to be fitted on short-range missiles—TNW—which it tested from an underground silo in March 2023, followed by the launch of a “tactical nuclear attack submarine.”³ Solid-fueled ICBMs serve the war deterrent strategy, whereas TNWs constitute the nuclear forces that would be tapped in the war strategy.

This essay illuminates the DPRK regime's recent thinking on its war strategy and how TNWs fit into its concepts of preemption and escalation, as well as what it means for North Korea to favor entrenchment of a two-state peninsula. This is followed by a section considering the implications for the U.S.-ROK deterrence posture.

The Gravity of the War Strategy: Preemption and Escalation

Statements made by North Korean leaders before Yoon Suk Yeol took office specifically referred to TNWs and the war strategy. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister and vice department director of the WPK Central Committee, stated, “It is the primary mission of the nuclear force to prevent such war before anything else,” but added that “in case of war, its mission will convert into the one of eliminating the enemy's armed forces

² Hideya Kurata, “Formation and Evolution of Kim Jong Un's ‘Nuclear Doctrine’: The Current State of North Korea's ‘Minimum Deterrence’ in Comparison,” in *The Kim Jong Un Regime and the Future Security Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula*, ed. National Institute for Defense Studies (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2017); Hideya Kurata, “North Korea's Nuclear Weapon Capabilities: The Emerging Escalation Ladder,” Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, CSCAP Regional Security Outlook, January 1, 2017, 34–36; and Hideya Kurata, “Kim Jong-un's Nuclear Posture under Transformation: The Source of North Korea's Counterforce Compulsion,” in “North Korea's Security Threats Reexamined,” ed. Hideya Kurata and Jerker Hellström, *Global Security Series*, no. 2 (2019): 5–18.

³ “Nuclear Counterattack Simulation Drill Conducted in DPRK,” *Rodong sinmun*, March 20, 2023; and “Great Event Heralding Arrival of New Era, Turning Point in Bolstering Up Juche-Based Naval Force,” *Rodong sinmun*, September 8, 2023.

at a strike,” declaring that nuclear weapons will be used as a counterforce.⁴ She also claimed that “if South Korea, for any reason...opts for such military action as ‘preemptive strike’...the situation will change. In that case, South Korea itself will become a target.”⁵ Kim Yo-jong’s confutation targeted the remarks on “preemptive strike” made by Suh Wook, the defense minister of the Moon Jae-in administration, just prior to the transition to the Yoon Suk Yeol administration.⁶ Suh referred to the kill chain that forms one axis of the “Three-Axis System” that was envisioned under the conservative Park Geun-hye administration but stalled under the progressive Moon administration. According to the kill chain leg of the strategy, if South Korea detects signs of a North Korean missile launch, it will neutralize it on the latter’s soil. Suh’s statement followed on the heels of Yoon’s call for the activation of the Three-Axis System during the presidential election campaign.⁷

Against this backdrop, Kim Jong-un has reiterated and clarified these two strategies and their conflicting principles regarding nuclear weapon use. In his April 25, 2022, speech on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army, Kim stated: “The fundamental mission of our nuclear forces is to deter a war, but our nukes can never be confined to the single mission of war deterrent even at a time when a situation we are not desirous of at all is created on this land.”⁸ He went on to say that “if any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish [their] unexpected second mission.”⁹

Not long after this exchange of verbal hostilities, in September 2022, Kim called for “expand[ing] the space for the operation of tactical nukes and diversify[ing] their application means on a higher stage” at the 7th

⁴ Kim Yo-jong, “Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong,” *Rodong sinmun*, April 5, 2022.

⁵ Ibid. For further analysis of Kim Yo-jong’s statement, see “Kita-chosen no senjutsu-kaku to yokushi no kouzu: ‘Sensei’ no houfuku to ‘esukareishon dominansu’” [North Korea’s Deployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons and the Composition of Deterrence: Disputed “Preemption” and “Escalation Dominance”], *CISTEC Journal*, no. 201 (2022): 279–80.

⁶ “Buk, misailwihyonbe apdojeoeg daeungyeilryang gubi” [Preparing Overwhelmingly Capabilities to Respond to North’s Missile Threats], *Kukbang ilbo*, April 4, 2022.

⁷ People Power Party, “Gongjeonggwa sangsikeuro mandeuleoganeun daehanminguk je-20-dae daetongryeong seongeo gukminui him jeongchaek gongyakjip” [The People Power Party’s Collection of Policy Pledges for the Republic of Korea’s 20th Presidential Election Made with Fairness and Common Sense], 2022, 211.

⁸ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Speech at Military Parade Held in Celebration of 90th Founding Anniversary of Korean People’s Revolutionary Army,” *Rodong sinmun*, April 26, 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).¹⁰ Following his speech, the SPA promulgated the Law on Nuclear Policy on Nuclear Forces ("Nuclear Use Law"). Article 6 of this law lists the five conditions for nuclear use, characterized by an inclination toward lowering the nuclear threshold: the use of nuclear weapons would be authorized not only in response to a nuclear attack but also when a non-nuclear attack is deemed imminent. The conditions cited apply "in case the need for operation for preventing the *expansion and protraction* of a war and taking the initiative in the war in contingency is inevitably needed."¹¹ This was resonant with Kim Yo-jong's April statement, when she criticized the ROK kill chain strategy and stated that "one's nuclear combat force is mobilized to take initiative at the outset of war," implying prospective deployment of TNWs.¹²

In late December 2023, in a speech at the 9th Enlarged Plenum of the 8th WPK Central Committee, Kim Jong-un called for the Korean People's Army to prepare for "a great event to suppress the whole territory of south Korea by mobilizing all physical means and forces including nuclear forces in contingency."¹³ He soon after also elaborated on DPRK policy regarding the use of force at the 10th Session of the 14th SPA on January 15, 2024. He called attention to his speech referencing nuclear policy on the 90th founding anniversary of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army in April 2022, stating that "I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war," implying TNWs for first use.¹⁴ Although he asserted that the absolute strength North Korea is cultivating is not a means for realizing "reunification by force of arms" and renounced the notion of a preemptive strike, he also included the condition: "if the enemies do not provoke us."¹⁵ Notably, Kim used the Korean term *hwakjeon* (escalation/aggravation of battles) in expressing the coming crisis on the peninsula in both the December

¹⁰ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at Seventh Session of the 14th SPA of DPRK," *Minju choson*, September 9, 2022.

¹¹ "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated," *Minju choson*, September 9, 2022. Emphasis added. See also Hideya Kurata, "North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly Adopts Nuclear Use Law," Japan Institute of International Affairs, Research Report, January 1, 2013 ~< <https://www.jiia.or.jp/en/column/2023/01/korean-peninsula-fy2022-02.html>.

¹² Kim, "Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong."

¹³ "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee," *Rodong sinmun*, December 31, 2023.

¹⁴ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA," *Minju choson*, January 16, 2024.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and January speeches.¹⁶ The war Kim is assuming would be armed conflict between the North and South escalated by the intervention of the USFK. North Korea's use of force would be justified to prevent hwakjeon.

Given North Korea's inferior conventional forces, Kim must be aware that the country cannot survive a conflict that escalates into all-out war with the intervention of the USFK without threatening to use nuclear weapons. Thus, North Korea must prevent escalation by showing readiness to attack the USFK's commands or ROK military facilities when armed conflict is about to escalate. The deployment of TNWs on the Korean Peninsula is seen as means to prevent escalation to all-out conventional warfare owing to the intervention of the USFK. Kim Yo-jong implied as much in her statement in April 2022, and the promulgated Nuclear Use Law guarantees North Korea's nuclear first use. It is in this context that Kim Jong-un stated in his SPA speech, "If the enemies ignite a war, our Republic will resolutely punish the enemies by mobilizing all its military forces including nuclear weapons."¹⁷

Two-State Theory: Shelving Unification

Fueled by Yoon Suk Yeol's citation of North Korea as the "main enemy"¹⁸ and his intention to strengthen U.S.–South Korean security ties, another important plank of North Korea's policy that has recently changed and tilts toward the war strategy is a new emphasis on a two-state peninsula. In July 2023, the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reported a statement by Kim Yo-jong calling South Korea by its official name, the Republic of Korea, in criticism of the ROK's military authority for defending U.S. and ROK air force drills.¹⁹ Her reference to the ROK as a separate state from North Korea was notable. The reference adhered to the customary practice of enclosing the name in quotation marks in KCNA reporting, and neither the *Rodong sinmun* nor *Minju choson*, the official printed news organs, reported them. Such a situation likely indicates some hesitation in positioning South Korea as a separate state and controversies within the WPK regarding North-South relations.

¹⁶ "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee"; and "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA."

¹⁷ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA."

¹⁸ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol Unveils Foreign Policy Goals," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2022.

¹⁹ Kim Yo-jong, "Press Statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK," KCNA, July 10, 2023; and Kim Yo-jong, "Press Statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK," KCNA, July 11, 2023.

During his plenum speech in December 2023, Kim Jong-un stated that “reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities.” Unlike the KCNA’s report of Kim Yo-jong’s statements in July, the *Rodong sinmun* report of Kim Jong-un’s speech dropped the use of quotation marks around the name Republic of Korea. Considering that Kim Jong-un’s own speech at the SPA in late September of the same year was reported with the name enclosed in quotation marks,²⁰ the speech in late December may have been the conclusion to controversies within the WPK.

In his speech at the SPA in January 2024, elaborating on the two-state theory, Kim Jong-un criticized South Korea’s unification formula for bringing about the “collapse of our government” and “unification by absorption.”²¹ He asserted: “The north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogeneous ones anymore.”²² Kim called the maritime boundary line that North Korea declared at the Yellow Sea “the southern border” (*gukgyeongseon*, meaning national border) and directed authorities to take legal steps to define the territorial sphere where the DPRK’s sovereignty is exercised. He also decided to dismantle all the organizations established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification.²³

In the past, North Korea has skillfully reconciled the agreements between the two Koreas and its own unification formula. South Korea’s unification formula, which includes intermediate steps such as a confederation of states, prescribes a “single democratic republican system” as the final form of unification. North Korea’s official unification formula called for “one nation, one state, two systems” as the final form of unification under the “Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo.” The North-South Basic Agreement in February 1992 recognized in its preface that the inter-Korean relationship is “not one between countries but a special one formed temporarily in the process of advancing toward reunification.”²⁴ At the first inter-Korean Summit in June 2000, Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung recognized that “a proposal for federation of lower stage advanced

²⁰ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Speech at 9th Session of 14th SPA,” *Minju choson*, September 28, 2023.

²¹ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA.”

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “North-South Agree on Reconciliation Nonaggression, Cooperation and Exchange,” *Pyongyang Times*, December 21, 1991.

by the north side and a proposal for confederation put forth by the south side for the reunification of the country have elements in common” and “agreed to work for the reunification in this direction in the future.”²⁵ Kim Jong-un’s December 2023 speech implied not only the annulment of these agreements between the two Koreas but also the withdrawal of the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo unification formula. As long as North Korea does not constitutionally define the military demarcation line as a national border, its relations with the ROK will remain a special bilateral relationship, but Kim’s speech betrayed no visible intention to reach an agreement with South Korea to keep such a relationship peaceful.

As implied in Kim Yo-jong’s statement in April 2022, in which she said, “The north and the south of Korea are of the same nation who should not fight against each other...however, that principle could not be carried out due to Suh Wook’s ‘preemptive strike,’” Pyongyang could justify a preemptive strike against the South by not regarding South Korea as part of the same nation as North Korea. As noted above, Kim Jong-un’s December 2023 speech that referred to the Republic of Korea without quotation marks also referenced the possible use of force against the South. Kim also revealed in the speech his will to “suppress the whole territory of south Korea by mobilizing all physical means and forces including nuclear forces in contingency.”²⁶ Since he has declared that North-South relations are no longer “consanguineous or homogeneous,” the regime is attempting to justify the potential use of TNWs without hesitation against the “heterogeneous” South and to seek augmented deterrence for preventing escalation.

Hostile Coexistence by Deterrence

Both the war deterrence strategy and war strategy that Kim Jong-un laid out in his March 2013 speech to the plenum of the WPK constitute North Korea’s entire nuclear posture. Initially, North Korea sought to complete its war deterrence strategy by injecting resources into developing ICBMs capable of striking the U.S. mainland. North Korea may consider such a capability as a deterrent against a direct nuclear attack from the United States, building mutual, albeit asymmetrical, nuclear deterrence between the DPRK and the United States. At the same time, North Korea

²⁵ “North-South Joint Declaration Published,” *Rodong sinmun*, June 15, 2000,

²⁶ “Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee,” *Rodong sinmun*, December 31, 2023.

has also rushed to complete its war strategy and has added increasing weight to this strategy in its nuclear posture—the deployment of TNWs for first use to prevent the escalation of an inter-Korean armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

The potential for the deployment of TNWs spills over into the realm of national unification. When South Korea is the target of an attack, as Kim Yo-jong suggested in her April 2022 statement, it can be justified by the assertion that the South is no longer part of the same nation as the North. Kim Jong-un’s speeches at the December 2023 WPK plenum and the January 2024 SPA session justified the use of TNW because South Korea is no longer a “consanguineous or homogeneous” part of the Korean Peninsula. Although the two-state theory was facilitated by Yoon Suk Yeol’s labeling of North Korea as the “main enemy” and his government’s efforts to strengthen security ties with the United States and Japan, the two-state theory derives from North Korea’s nuclear posture.

Kim Jong-un denies the use of force for unification and preemptive strikes. Therefore, how does he intend to define relations with the South? The two-state theory of a divided Korean nation recalls the two-state theory advocated by Walter Ulbricht, chair of the Council of State of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) early in the Cold War. Ulbricht advocated a two-state theory on the grounds that East Germany, as a proletarian nation-state, was a nation “heterogeneous” to that of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). When West Germany attempted to diplomatically approach Romania in the 1960s, Ulbricht called on the Warsaw bloc countries to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with West Germany until Bonn recognized East Germany as a sovereign state (this became known as the Ulbricht Doctrine).²⁷ Eventually, West German chancellor Willy Brandt recognized inter-German relations as a special form of interstate relations, which institutionalized inter-German relations and paved the way for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975.

Although Ulbricht’s and Kim Jong-un’s two-state theories similarly conceptualize a divided status, Ulbricht’s theory attempted to stabilize inter-German relations and sought to force diplomatic recognition from West Germany. In contrast, Kim’s two-state theory does not hope for the peaceful coexistence between the North and South that was once attempted.

²⁷ See Douglas Selva, “Poland, the GDR, and the ‘Ulbricht Doctrine,’” in *Ideology, Politics, and Diplomacy in East Central Europe*, ed. M.B.B. Biskupski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 227–41.


Kim rejects both inter-Korean agreements and North Korea's official unification formula, the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo. His view of inter-Korean relations was reflected in December when he said, "No one can deny the fact that the two states, the most hostile toward each other, are coexisting in the Korean peninsula."²⁸ The coexistence between the two states of North and South Korea Kim envisions is neither peaceful nor consensual; rather, it may be called hostile coexistence by deterrence.

For Appropriate Deterrence

Through the deployment of TNWs, North Korea is attempting to build a nuclear escalation ladder on the Korean Peninsula. In response, Yoon Suk Yeol, during his presidential election campaign, raised the redeployment of TNWs to the USFK, with a view to "nuclear sharing" like in Europe.²⁹ However, this may not be effective in deterring North Korea from using TNWs. If European-style nuclear sharing were applied to the U.S.-ROK alliance, TNWs would be deployed to U.S. air bases in South Korea and would be under the control of USFK in "peacetime" and loaded onto ROK Air Force fighters and dropped by ROK Air Force pilots in "wartime." Considering the range and accuracy of short-range missiles such as the KN-23 that North Korea flaunted after the second U.S.-North Korea Summit in Hanoi ended without an agreed document, the U.S. Air Force bases in South Korea where the TNWs are to be deployed could become North Korean targets.

Furthermore, the Nuclear Use Law adopted by the SPA in September 2022, as mentioned above, states that the use of nuclear weapons is permissible not only in the event of a nuclear attack but also when a non-nuclear attack is deemed imminent, thereby lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons in an attempt to deter the United States from taking an offensive position itself. In this regard, in case TNWs are deployed at U.S. air bases in South Korea, North Korea will be further tempted to use TNWs before the United States uses them. In other words, the U.S.-ROK side may further lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, raising the risk of North Korea's "early use." At the end of May 2022, immediately after

²⁸ "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee."

²⁹ Park Jun-sang, "Yoon Suk-yeoli kkeonaen oegyo-anbo jeongchaekkeun... 'gukikeul choeuseoneuro dangdanghage'" [The Foreign and Security Policy that Yoon Seok Yeol Brought Out... "Confidently Putting the National Interest First"], *EToday*, September 22, 2021  <https://www.etoday.co.kr/news/view/2063652>.

Yoon Suk Yeol came to power, he dismissed the idea that TNWs would be redeployed to the USFK that he had pledged in his presidential campaign.³⁰

Although the Washington Declaration of April 2023 sets the direction for the United States and South Korea's deterrence posture, whether this is capable of deterring North Korea from using TNWs must be examined. The Washington Declaration determined that the United States would periodically port ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) as "strategic assets" to the ROK.³¹ If the TNW redeployment on the ground could make USFK a target for North Korea's TNWs, when providing "strategic assets" to South Korea surrounded on three sides by sea, there is no choice but to escalate to submarines, which are less vulnerable. Admittedly, there is no operational significance in having SSBNs call at certain ports for visibility, and this measure would be a reassurance to the ROK; however, the Washington Declaration highlighted the symbolism and primacy that submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) aboard SSBNs play in providing extended deterrence to South Korea.

This situation would create an asymmetry in which North Korea's deployment of TNWs is about to extend from the ground to the sea, while the U.S. nuclear capabilities are under the sea. Even though asymmetry in deterrence does not necessarily mean that it is unbalanced, most of the nuclear warheads on the SLBMs (Trident-D5) aboard the Ohio-class SSBN *Kentucky* that called at Busan in July 2023, for example, are not of the tactical variety and are not commensurate with nuclear capabilities for deterring North Korea's TNWs. They could, rather, provoke a medium-range nuclear or greater countervalue attack from North Korea. In this context, it should be pointed out that the Trump administration released a Nuclear Posture Review in February 2018 that stated that low-yield nuclear weapons would be loaded on SLBMs.³² Two years later, in late January 2020, the W76-2, with an explosiveness of approximately five kilotons, was fielded for the SLBM.³³ Although not specifically designed to deter North Korea from using TNWs,

³⁰ Jessie Yeung, Paula Hancocks, and Yoonjung Seo, "Exclusive: South Korea's New Leader Says Age of Appeasing North Korea Is Over," CNN, May 28, 2022 ~ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/23/asia/south-korea-president-exclusive-intl-hnk/index.html>.

³¹ "Washington Declaration," White House, April 26, 2023 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2>.

³² U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington D.C., February 2018), xii.

³³ John Rood, "Statement on the Fielding of the W76-2 Low-Yield Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile Warhead," U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, February 4, 2020 ~

low-yield nuclear weapons deployed on SSBNs should be emphasized as a commensurate nuclear capability to North Korea's TNWs.³⁴

North Korea is trying to build an escalation ladder that starts with TNWs, extends to intermediate-range ballistic missiles targeting Japan, intermediate-long missiles targeting Guam, and ICBMs that could target the U.S. mainland.³⁵ It is debatable whether the United States has a corresponding escalation ladder in place in the region. At the same time as the United States must deter North Korea from using TNWs, it must deter North Korea from using nuclear forces beyond the intermediate range should deterrence fail. Nonetheless, not only U.S. and South Korean defense authorities but even presidents have stated that the regime in Pyongyang would meet its demise if North Korea uses nuclear weapons.³⁶ Whereas a countervalue strike on Pyongyang in response to North Korea's use of TNWs would certainly collapse Kim Jong-un's regime, Kim would retaliate with second-strike capabilities against Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. The Nuclear Use Law stipulates that a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately to destroy the hostile forces, implying that the operation plan has been decided in advance in case the nuclear command and control system is in danger. If that were to happen, the populations of Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington would be undeservingly sacrificed in response to North Korea's use of TNWs.

If deterrence fails to prevent North Korea from using TNWs, is there a U.S. nuclear capability in the region to prevent North Korea from using further nuclear weapons? The Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review stated that the United States would pursue deployment of sea-launched cruise missiles in a manner contrary to the Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review, which stipulated that the Tomahawk would be retired. However, the Biden administration

³⁴ The Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, an affiliate of the WPK, criticized the Nuclear Posture Review when it was released, but the level of criticism was not high, indicating that the W76-2 on SLBMs is not perceived as a low-yield nuclear weapons that would deter North Korea's use of TNWs. See "U.S. '2018 Nuclear Posture Review' Blasted," KCNA, February 10, 2018.

³⁵ Hideya Kurata, "Synchronizing Two Asymmetrical Deals: The Panmunjoem Declaration and the U.S.-DPRK Joint Declaration from Japan's Perspective," *Korean Journal of Security Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 38–39.

³⁶ "Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and South Korean Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-sup Hold a News Conference," U.S. Department of Defense, November 3, 2022 ~ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3209711/secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-and-south-korean-minister-of-national-d>; and "Remarks by President Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea in Joint Press Conference," U.S. Mission Korea, April 27, 2023 ~ <https://kr.usembassy.gov/042723-remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-yoon-suk-yeol-of-the-republic-of-korea-in-joint-press-conference>.

decided to halt this development, and there is no medium-range nuclear weapon on the ground or at sea that could convey the intention to deter North Korea from using a medium-range nuclear weapon. It is imperative that the United States develop an escalation ladder that can respond to North Korean nuclear escalation. ◆

The Korean Peninsula's New Geopolitics: Why North Korea Is Shifting toward an Alliance with Russia

Artyom Lukin

For decades, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula has appeared rather static and stable, despite periodic mini-crises. However, by the early 2020s, significant changes had accumulated on the Korean Peninsula and beyond that are affecting the balance between the two Korean states and may eventually lead to a major destabilization.

Although the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) possesses and is working to perfect nuclear weapons, the overall military balance on the peninsula is developing in a direction that is unfavorable to Pyongyang. This threatens North Korea's security, especially considering the reference to eventual reunification in the constitution of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) and the unpredictability of Seoul's future policies. The DPRK's ability to deal on its own with the emerging external threats and risks is becoming increasingly strained, primarily due to its limited economic and technological base.

The balance-of-power logic and Pyongyang's threat perceptions have pushed North Korea toward forming an alliance with a major power that can help ensure its military security. With China unwilling to extend military collaboration to the North, as well as the trust deficit existing between Pyongyang and Beijing, Russia is the only major player that can act as an ally for the DPRK. The rapid development of DPRK-Russia strategic ties that has been underway since the summer of 2023 culminated in Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June 2024, where he and Kim Jong-un signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty containing a mutual defense clause.

The DPRK and ROK: An Imbalance of Power

North Korea is the prime example of a state that faces the "security versus development" dilemma. This dilemma often afflicts authoritarian and ideologized polities, especially those situated in a perilous geopolitical environment. Governments with such political systems must choose

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between maximizing economic and social development, on the one hand, and minimizing the risks to internal stability, on the other hand.

When he came to power in late 2011, Kim Jong-un seemed inclined to prioritize economic growth, even deploying elements of market-oriented reform. Since around 2019, however, the DPRK has reverted to its well-established pattern of tightening the screws and battening down the hatches. Self-isolation and a high degree of internal control may be good for maintaining social and political stability as well as preserving an ethno-cultural identity, but they come at the expense of economic progress. According to the DPRK's own official estimates, the country's GDP amounted to \$33.5 billion in 2019, whereas the size of South Korea's economy reached nearly \$1.7 trillion the same year.¹ According to UN data, almost 42% of North Koreans suffer from undernourishment.² The country's fertility rate is probably the only basic index where the North is currently performing better than the South, which has one of the world's lowest birthrates.³ Still, the United Nations estimates the DPRK fertility rate for 2023 to be 1.8, which is below the 2.1 replacement level required to keep a nation's population from declining. Some estimates put North Korea's fertility rate even as low as 1.3.⁴

Juche-inspired autarky is not the only reason for the North's stunted economic growth. North Korea remains one of the world's most heavily sanctioned countries, with strangling sanctions banning almost all commercial dealings.⁵

Isolation and economic backwardness cannot but affect the country's military potential. Even though the North is estimated to spend up to 30% of its GDP on the military,⁶ the huge difference in size between the two Korean economies leads to the expanding gap between their military

¹ Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda," UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development Goals, June 2021, 7 ~ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf; and World Bank, GDP (Current US\$)—Korea, Rep. ~ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=KR&view=chart>.

² "Over 40% of N. Koreans Undernourished: UN Report," *Korea Herald*, July 7, 2022 ~ <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220707000306>.

³ Sam Kim, "South Korea Keeps Shattering Its Own Record for World's Lowest Fertility Rate," Bloomberg, February 27, 2024, available at <https://time.com/6835865/south-korea-fertility-rate-2023-record-low>.

⁴ "NK's Total Fertility Rate Estimated at 1.38, Far Lower Than UN Estimate: BOK Report," *Korea Times*, December 29, 2023 ~ https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/103_366006.html.

⁵ Jason Bartlett and Francis Shin, "Sanctions by the Numbers: Spotlight on North Korea," Center for a New American Security, February 8, 2021.

⁶ "Korea, North," Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook, June 18, 2024 ~ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north>.

budgets that favors the South. Another worrying trend for the DPRK is a changed relationship between its military industry and the civilian economy. Armament development and production used to be a sector with few connections to civilian industries. Nowadays, however, major powers demonstrate a fusion between civilian and defense industries, with technological achievements from the civilian sectors converted to military applications. Increasingly, products and services are dual-use. As a consequence, if a state does not have a developed and diversified civilian economy, its military-industrial complex may degrade against its rivals' over time. This trend was visible, for example, in the later years of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union's widening lag with the West in information and electronic technologies began to undermine Soviet strategic-military parity vis-à-vis the United States.

Because of these economic limitations, North Korea's conventional forces are not in ideal condition. The Korean People's Army (KPA) is estimated to be more than one million strong, but its combat readiness is questionable, if only because a substantial part of the manpower is occupied as a labor force at state-run construction sites, in agriculture, and in other nonmilitary sectors. This peaceful orientation of the KPA is occasionally emphasized by Pyongyang, as seen in a recent statement by the Korean Central News Agency that "the DPRK...is mobilizing large-scale military forces into economic construction for the promotion of its people's well-being."⁷ In this case, North Korean propaganda truly aligns with reality.

Being heavily capital-intensive military branches, the North Korean navy and air force are especially affected by acute resource constraints. Although the DPRK faces the sea from two sides, North Korea's navy is quite rudimentary, consisting of mostly obsolete ships only suitable for operations near the coast. Pyongyang's most modern and powerful warships appear to be two Amnok-class corvettes commissioned in the last ten years.⁸ These 2,000-ton vessels are obviously no match against the South Korean navy, let alone the combined might of U.S., South Korean, and Japanese naval assets in Northeast Asia. North Korea's program of building strategic submarines that can carry ballistic and cruise missiles and, potentially, be

⁷ Jeongmin Kim and Lina Park, "North Korea Says Soldiers Are Too Busy to Respond to 'Provocative' U.S.-ROK Drills," NK News, March 5, 2024 ~ <https://www.nknews.org/2024/03/north-korea-says-soldiers-are-too-busy-to-respond-to-provocative-us-rok-drills>.

⁸ Dimitris Mitsopoulos, "North Korea Reveals a New Cruise Missile-Armed Corvette," Naval News, August 23, 2023 ~ <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/08/north-korea-new-cruise-missile-amnok-class-corvette>.

powered with nuclear reactors has shown little advancement.⁹ In September 2023, its “first tactical nuclear attack submarine,” purportedly designed to carry nuclear weapons, was launched with great pomp, but this warship is an old, albeit retrofitted, diesel-electric submarine based on a Soviet design from the 1950s.¹⁰ It is doubtful North Korea will accomplish its ambition to field a modern navy any time soon, given that naval shipbuilding is one of the most expensive and technology-intensive military industries.

North Korea’s air force has likewise been languishing. The DPRK’s newest warplanes are MiG-29s it received from Russia in the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹ Last year North Korea unveiled reconnaissance and strike drones similar in appearance to U.S.-made Global Hawk and Reaper drones. Yet it is very unlikely North Korean copies approach the performance of U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles.¹²

Being a junior ally of the United States, South Korea may be, as Putin once referred to it, a country with “a shortage of sovereignty.”¹³ That said, the ROK has taken maximum advantage of its close integration into the U.S.-led global order. In the 2000s, South Korea became one of the world’s top-ten industrial powers. In 2018, its GDP per capita overtook that of Japan.¹⁴ Through the lens of world-systems theory, South Korea has advanced from the periphery of the global capitalist system to its core. As one sign of Seoul’s rising ambitions, President Yoon Suk Yeol now presents the ROK as a “global pivotal state.”¹⁵

⁹ Vann H. Van Diepen, “Hey, Boomer: What Happened to North Korea’s Ballistic Missile Subs?” 38 North, July 10, 2023 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2023/07/hey-boomer-what-happened-to-north-koreas-ballistic-missile-subs>.

¹⁰ “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Congratulatory Speech at Ceremony for Launching Newly-Built Submarine,” Korean Central News Agency, September 8, 2023 ~ <http://www.kcna.kp/en/article/q/a244151196662609d466a37d1f9ce288.kcmsf>; and Pavel Cherkashyn, “Novy podvodnyy raketonosets KNDR—Chudo-oruzhye ili bespoleznaya igrushka?” [DPRK’s New Missile-Carrier Submarine—A Wonder-Weapon or Worthless Toy?], Asia Risk Research Center, October 3, 2023 ~ <https://asiarisk.org/novosti/354-komentarij-arrc-novyj-podvodnyj-raketonosets-kndr-chudo-oruzhie-ili-bespoleznaya-igrushka>.

¹¹ A.B. Abrams, “How North Korea’s Fighter Fleet Re-emerged from Obscurity,” *Diplomat*, July 12, 2023; and “MiG-29s Reach North Korea for Assembly,” *Flight International*, September 7, 1999, available at *FlightGlobal* ~ <https://www.flightglobal.com/mig-29s-reach-north-korea-for-assembly/28311.article>.

¹² Vann H. Van Diepen, “Imitation Is the Sincerest Form: North Korea Unveils Two Types of Copycat UAVs,” 38 North, August 4, 2023 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2023/08/imitation-is-the-sincerest-form-north-korea-unveils-two-types-of-copycat-uavs>.

¹³ Vladimir Putin, “News Conference following Russian–North Korean Talks,” President of Russia, April 25, 2019 ~ <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/599/events/60370>.

¹⁴ Richard Katz, “South Korea Surpasses Japan in Real GDP Per Capita,” *East Asia Forum*, April 1, 2022 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/04/01/south-korea-surpasses-japan-in-real-gdp-per-capita>.

¹⁵ Yoon Suk Yeol, “South Korea Needs to Step Up,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step>.

The ROK has grown into a formidable military power, boasting impressive ground, naval, and air forces. Its military-industrial complex produces a full range of modern weapons, including self-propelled artillery, tanks, ballistic and cruise missiles, fighter planes and helicopters, reconnaissance satellites, and submarines and surface combatants of various classes. South Korea has been successfully advancing an indigenous space program with military and civilian applications. The ROK has also emerged as a major weapons exporter. It rose from 31st place in 2000 to become one of the world's top-ten defense exporters between 2019 and 2023.¹⁶ Seoul is now determined to “position South Korea among the top-four defense exporters globally by 2027.”¹⁷ South Korea's accomplishments in the defense industry are based on its close collaboration with the United States and other Western partners.¹⁸ The ROK's dependence on Western technology is exemplified by its flagship KF-21 Boramae fighter jet project. Billed as a Korean multirole fighter, South Korean components make up only 65% of the plane.¹⁹ The aircraft's engine is supplied by U.S. company General Electric.²⁰ The other technological partners for the KF-21 include U.S. defense corporations Lockheed Martin, Martin-Baker, United Technologies, Texstars, and Triumph Group; Swedish firm Saab; Israeli company Elta Systems; Spanish corporation Aeronautical Systems; and British firms Cobham and Meggitt.

North Korea's Nuclear Insecurity

North Korea is now a nuclear and missile power in possession of at least several dozen nuclear warheads and a diversified arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles. For Pyongyang, it makes sense to have nuclear weapons as they are the most cost-effective way to ensure a state's basic security in a precarious geopolitical environment.²¹

¹⁶ Shinae Lee, “Global Pivotal State: South Korea's Ascendance in Defense Exports,” Sasakawa Peace Foundation, April 12, 2024 ~ https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/lee_04.html.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wooyeal Paik, “South Korea's Emergence as a Defense Industrial Powerhouse,” Institut français des relations internationales, *Asie.Visions*, no. 139, February 2024 ~ <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/asie-visions/south-koreas-emergence-defense-industrial-powerhouse>.

¹⁹ Song Young-chan, “Kuksan chotton jont'uk'i veil ponnotta...KFX saop 24 jowon saengsan yubal hyogwa” [Unveiling of South Korea's First Indigenous Fighter Jet: KFX Project to Generate 24 Trillion Won in Production Effects], *Hankyung*, March 1, 2021 ~ <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/202102280515i>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 225.

Although North Korea has a nuclear capability that firmly places South Korea and Japan within range and can reach the continental United States, Pyongyang may be feeling increasingly insecure. Compelling military-strategic reasons for this lack of security include the possibility of South Korea's nuclearization, the inherent limitations of using nuclear weapons in warfighting, and the long-term trends in military technology.

To begin, North Korea's current nuclear advantage over the South is temporary and tenuous. Given South Korea's technological and industrial clout, as well as the fact that the ROK has already become one of the world's leaders in civilian atomic energy, the country's nuclearization would be merely a political decision. South Korea has long been a recessed, or virtual, nuclear state. President Yoon is the first ROK leader to publicly float the possibility of South Korea going nuclear,²² and he stated it would take no longer than a year for the South to acquire indigenous nuclear weapons.²³ The idea of South Korea nuclearizing is not a fringe view. It is supported by many politicians, and public opinion surveys show that over 70% of South Koreans support the idea.²⁴ Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, seriously considered a plan to build nuclear-powered submarines,²⁵ which, while technically allowed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, would be a major step toward actual nuclearization. Another of North Korea's adversaries, Japan, is also a virtual nuclear state that may be able to acquire nuclear capabilities even faster than South Korea. If South Korea or Japan loses faith in the United States' extended deterrence, or if Washington itself retracts its alliance obligations to Tokyo and Seoul, their nuclearization will quickly ensue. And would a future U.S. government oppose South Korea's or Japan's nuclearization? Donald Trump has notably already been on record suggesting he would not mind Tokyo and Seoul getting nuclear weapons.²⁶

For all their horrendous destructive power and potent use in deterring large-scale aggression, nuclear weapons have an inherent limitation in that

²² Uk Yang, "Is South Korea Going Nuclear?" 38 North, February 3, 2023 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2023/02/is-south-korea-going-nuclear>.

²³ Shin Ji-hye, "S. Korea Can Develop Nuclear Weapons but Chooses Not To: Yoon," *Korea Herald*, April 29, 2023 ~ <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230429000052>.

²⁴ Hyonhee Shin, "Seoul Mayor Calls for South Korean Nuclear Weapons to Counter Threat from North," Reuters, March 12, 2023 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/seoul-mayor-calls-south-korean-nuclear-weapons-counter-threat-north-2023-03-13>.

²⁵ Park Byong-su, "Is S. Korea Next in Line for Nuclear Submarines?" *Hankyoreh*, October 3, 2021 ~ https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1013643.html.

²⁶ Zack Beauchamp, "Donald Trump: Make America Great Again by Letting More Countries Have Nukes," Vox, March 30, 2016 ~ <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/30/11332074/donald-trump-nuclear-weapons-japan-south-korea-saudi-arabia>.

they have little use in other scenarios. The fact that nuclear weapons have never been employed since August 1945 hints at their inapplicability in armed confrontations. Pyongyang may well use nuclear weapons if faced with a direct threat to the existence of the DPRK or its core leadership, such as a major kinetic attack against the North. Still, it is very unlikely that in the foreseeable future Pyongyang's opponents will attempt a major invasion or a decapitating strike on its leadership. In all other conflict scenarios, nuclear use by Pyongyang is extremely problematic. The most likely kinetic scenario between the North and the South is not an all-out war; rather, it would more likely be a clash in a disputed or gray-zone area similar to the 2010 Yeonpyeong Island incident when both sides fought a brief, albeit deadly, artillery battle in the Yellow Sea over the Northern Limit Line. Given the ROK's general conventional superiority, especially at sea and in the air, North Korea will be severely disadvantaged if it comes to blows with the South in a border clash. If the North's conventional forces are losing on the battlefield in such a conflict, the rulers in Pyongyang will be confronted with an impossible choice: suffer a humiliating and potentially delegitimizing defeat at the hands of Seoul or attempt nuclear escalation with the concurrent risk of inviting a massive response from the alliance that may put an end to the DPRK.

Due to the relative weakness of Pyongyang's non-nuclear forces, North Korea has no freedom to maneuver on the escalation ladder, putting it in an either-or situation in limited, nonexistential clashes, such as those over the Northern Limit Line. This is part of the answer to why Pyongyang has been careful not to cross the threshold beyond which an actual clash with the ROK may ensue. According to U.S. officials in South Korea, "the North Koreans are talking a lot, but they are not doing anything that moves toward conventional military confrontation."²⁷

Finally, nuclear weapons are not eternal Tolkienesque "rings of power." As with any technology, they will become obsolete over time. North Korea's nuclear warheads and missiles remain a reliable deterrent—for now. Will that still be the case in ten or twenty years? We may be in the midst of another revolution in military affairs, characterized by the development of high-precision weapons, artificial intelligence (AI), drones, robotics, and lasers, among other technologies. Unless the DPRK is able to move up to the next level of military-technological progress—a feat that requires

²⁷ Cited in Daniel Snider, "All Quiet, for Now, on the Northern Front," *Oriental Economist*, April 5, 2023 ~ <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/664415>.

an advanced scientific-technological base as well as huge and sustained financial investment—its security will grow increasingly imperiled even if it keeps and expands its nuclear arsenal. Some analysts argue that countries like North Korea could find themselves defenseless against a first strike due to the progress the United States and its allies are making in precision targeting, satellites and other surveillance systems, drones, and AI.²⁸

North Korea is a comparatively small country that lacks strategic depth and is semi-encircled by potential enemies. Its entire territory can be pierced—with remote sensors as well as kinetic strikes—from the south, the Yellow Sea, and the Sea of Japan, where South Korean, U.S., and Japanese naval and air forces especially dominate. The vulnerability of North Korea's nuclear assets is exacerbated by the country's lack of sea and air legs. A viable nuclear triad, or even dyad, is hardly achievable for North Korea because of resource constraints.

Pyongyang cannot ignore the long-term possibility that its adversaries will launch a first strike with high-precision weapons aiming to “decapitate” the DPRK or neutralize its nuclear deterrent. If a fraction of North Korean missiles survive and launch in response, it can be presumed with a high degree of confidence that they will be intercepted by an integrated, multilayered missile defense operated by the United States, South Korea, Japan, Australia, or other U.S. allies. Although such a scenario seems somewhat hypothetical today, it will become increasingly realistic as the United States and its allies continue to improve their existing military technologies and harness new ones. For example, one prospective idea is a permanent “airborne patrol” by U.S. drones in the Sea of Japan that would shoot down North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles while they are in powered flight.²⁹

Pyongyang and Seoul: Status Quo versus Annexation

North Korea has often been portrayed as a destabilizing actor on the Korean Peninsula, while South Korea has been represented as a force for stability and peace. However, it is also possible to see the situation as one in which Pyongyang seeks the preservation of the status quo, and Seoul is the revisionist player.

²⁸ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence,” *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017): 9–49.

²⁹ Theodore Postol, “The Transfer of a Russian ICBM to North Korea?” Center for International and Strategic Studies, *Beyond Parallel*, August 17, 2023 ≈ <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/the-transfer-of-a-russian-icbm-to-north-korea>.

What is the status quo on the Korean Peninsula? It is the division of the peninsula into two sovereign polities. Since late 2023, Pyongyang has moved to reinforce this long-standing status quo, officially abandoning the declaratory policy of reunification with the South. Kim has, in effect, renounced the principle of Korean unification, pronouncing that the DPRK and the ROK are two different entities whose reunification is unlikely to happen. Tellingly, although the announcement was a surprise to many Korea watchers, Kim couched the situation in status quo terms, describing it as something that has been forming over many decades and calling it “an inevitable result of the history of the north-south relations.”³⁰

Pyongyang’s new policy on Korean reunification recognizes the reality that North Korea and South Korea have become completely different societies, not only politically but also culturally. This policy also contains an implicit recognition that any reunification would have only happened on South Korean terms, due to Seoul’s economic, geopolitical, and soft-power preponderance—hence Kim’s accusatory reference to “unification by absorption,” which is Seoul’s de facto stance toward the North.³¹ As one astute observer pointed out, Pyongyang’s new line on Korean reunification is not unlike the policies of the government of East Germany that sought to suppress the discourse of German unity.³² The Communist leadership of the German Democratic Republic had been clear-eyed that West Germany would dominate unification, which was exactly what transpired after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

As Kim moves to cement the two-state reality on the peninsula, South Korean officials have harshly criticized Pyongyang’s position as “anti-unification and anti-historical behavior,” calling it a “two-nation theory.”³³ Yoon has made it abundantly clear that reunification would be based on the destruction of the DPRK as a political entity, painting “the North Korean regime” as tyrannical and repressively evil.³⁴ It is not only Yoon and his fellow

³⁰ Kim Jong-un, cited in “Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee,” *Rodong sinmun*, December 31, 2023 ~ <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?MTVAMjAyMy0xMi0zMSc1IIMDEzQA==>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ruediger Frank, “North Korea’s New Unification Policy: Implications and Pitfalls,” 38 North, January 11, 2024 ~ <https://www.38north.org/2024/01/north-koreas-new-unification-policy-implications-and-pitfalls>.

³³ Kim Yung-ho, cited in “Unification Minister: S. Korea Will Take Lead in Unifying the Korean Peninsula,” *KBS World*, April 5, 2024 ~ https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&id=IK&Seq_Code=184696.

³⁴ Yoon Suk Yeol, “President Yoon Suk Yeol’s Speech on 104th March 1 Independence Movement Day,” *KBS World*, March 1, 2024 ~ https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=183989.

conservatives in the People Power Party who are clamoring for de facto eventual annexation of the North by the South. In one form or another, it is the position shared by the majority of the South Korean political class. Even though the liberal-progressive camp of South Korean politics, currently represented by the Democratic Party of Korea, uses softer rhetoric toward the North, their long-term goal too is absorption of the North by the South.

Seoul's pro-unification stance comes alongside a military strategy which has "become increasingly offensive over the past decade."³⁵ In October 2023, ROK defense minister Shin Won-sik summarized the strategy toward the North as "PISU: Punish Immediately, Strongly, and Until the end."³⁶ Tellingly, "*bisu*, the Korean pronunciation of 'PISU,' means 'dagger' and carries the meaning of stabbing the enemy."³⁷

As the U.S.-ROK alliance is militarily the stronger side on the peninsula, the South may be tempted to assert its dominance over the North. Seoul is unlikely to attempt an outright annexation by force as it would almost certainly trigger a nuclear response from Pyongyang. However, Seoul may well try to take advantage of a future border incident to give Pyongyang a bloody nose in a limited armed confrontation. Although Seoul remains bound by the discipline of the U.S. alliance, there are quite a few examples in the history of international politics when vassals provoked dangerous crises even against the wishes of their patrons. Seoul is more than capable of delivering a strategic surprise.³⁸

Compared to South Korea's electoral democracy, the North Korean system of a de facto hereditary monarchy seems more predictable. To preserve the dynasty and their rule, the Kim family must pursue a hyper-rational and calculating strategy, with the planning horizon at least several decades into the future. Seoul, with its greater level of government turnover, rather than Pyongyang, may be the main source of unpredictability and potential major crises on the peninsula. Can one completely rule out a scenario in which a person comes to power in Seoul who mystically believes in their mission to accomplish national reunification? Just a reminder: one of South Korea's

³⁵ Sungmin Cho, "South Korea's Offensive Military Strategy and Its Dilemma," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 29, 2024 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-offensive-military-strategy-and-its-dilemma>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Air Force Stages Air Exercise to Improve Readiness against N. Korean Missile Threats," KBS World, March 6, 2024 ~ https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=184081.

³⁸ Jeffrey Robertson, "South Korea: The Next Strategic Surprise?" East Asia Security Centre, Middle Power Conference Papers, August 3, 2020 ~ <https://easc.scholasticahq.com/article/14358-south-korea-the-next-strategic-surprise>.

recent presidents was under the heavy influence of persons representing a shamanistic cult.³⁹

The End of North Korea's Strategic Seclusion?

North Korea faces an increasingly precarious situation as the strategic balance on the peninsula shifts in favor of the South. A nuclear deterrent cannot fully guarantee the DPRK's external security, as a state, for example, cannot credibly threaten a nuclear war in a limited border conflict. Perhaps even more alarmingly for Pyongyang, its strategic capability is based on 20th-century military technology such as atomic warheads and missiles, while its adversaries are increasingly wielding 21st-century systems. Another worrying development for the DPRK is the growing political-military integration among the United States, the ROK, and Japan.

For all intents and purposes, the DPRK is a status quo power. Its primary goal is to preserve itself as a sovereign political unit within the 1953 borders. This status quo orientation has been recently emphasized by Kim's de facto abandonment of Korean reunification. The problem, however, is that the ROK is not necessarily a status quo power. Being the stronger side, Seoul seeks eventual reunification—on its terms. South Korea's political system, with its tendency to produce eccentric leaders, is another risk factor. All these factors create fundamental instability in inter-Korean relations.

Since the early 1990s, North Korea has pursued strategic autonomy and has been almost completely self-reliant with regard to military security. The continuation of strategic seclusion may no longer be viable, however. In terms of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, Pyongyang has nearly exhausted the country's capacity for internal balancing. The DPRK's domestic resources, even if mobilized to the maximum, are insufficient to close the widening strategic gap with the U.S.-ROK alliance.

In Waltzian terms, Pyongyang is left with the path of external balancing, that is, forming alliances with other international actors.⁴⁰ If the DPRK wants to be insured against long-term threats, it needs powerful allies. In seeking a great-power ally, the DPRK will follow the same logic that makes Israel and Pakistan—nuclear-armed states that face major

³⁹ David Volodzko, "Cults, Cabals and Corruption in South Korea," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, November 14, 2016 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cults-cabals-corruption-south-korea>.

⁴⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

external threats—maintain de facto alliances with the United States and China, respectively.⁴¹

Who could become Pyongyang's great-power ally? There is the 1961 alliance treaty with China, but it is well-known that there is no meaningful military cooperation between Pyongyang and Beijing. China will likely remain North Korea's main economic partner and benefactor, but there is little reason for Beijing to empower Pyongyang with large-scale military assistance. For one, Beijing does not want to antagonize Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo by transferring weapons and military-related technology to Pyongyang. On a more fundamental level, Beijing's interest in North Korea as a geopolitical ally may be waning. The conventional wisdom that China needs the DPRK as a "buffer" against the United States is outdated. Even if U.S. bases appeared in the northern part of the peninsula, it would only have a marginal effect on the strategic balance between China and the United States. Geoeconomically, too, North Korea's significance for China is negligible.

The only possible political-military ally for the DPRK is Russia. This fully explains Kim's drive to establish close strategic ties with Moscow, leading to the Kim-Putin summit in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024, where the two leaders signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that contains a mutual defense provision in Article 4.⁴² This provision replicates the mutual defense clause of the 1961 Soviet–North Korean alliance treaty, a move most likely intended to emphasize the resurrection of the strategic bond between Moscow and Pyongyang. Another provision of the treaty refers to creating "mechanisms for taking joint measures with the aim of strengthening...defence capabilities."⁴³

Of note, during the joint press conference after the signing, Kim referred to the DPRK-Russia relationship as that of an "alliance," whereas Putin never used this term.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Pyongyang immediately published the full text of the treaty, while the Kremlin had yet to publish it as of the time of this writing. Such details may hint that it is Kim, rather than Putin, who pushed for a treaty featuring an alliance clause.

⁴¹ Israel developed nuclear weapons in the 1960s but maintains a policy of nuclear opacity. See, for example, "Israel," Nuclear Threat Initiative ~ <https://www.nti.org/countries/israel>.

⁴² "DPRK-Russia Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Korean Central News Agency, June 20, 2024 ~ <http://kcna.kp/en/article/q/848b072d48dcc965d89ce5f716e78e71.kcmsf>.


⁴³ *Ibid.*


⁴⁴ "Press Statements following Russia-DPRK Talks," President of Russia, June 19, 2024 ~ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74334>.

While Pyongyang gains prestige and formal security guarantees from a treaty with a great power, what are the possible benefits to Moscow? The new treaty should raise Russia's profile in Northeast Asia, the strategic center of gravity of the Asia-Pacific. Thus, the treaty gives Moscow a new lever over Washington, Tokyo, and especially Seoul. The Kremlin's decision to agree to an alliance with Pyongyang may be partly a response to South Korea's expanding activities in Europe. Seoul has been vigorously exporting armaments to Poland and Romania, Russia's two main adversaries in Eastern Europe. Even worse from Moscow's perspective, in 2023 South Korea provided a large amount of ammunition to Ukraine, albeit indirectly via the United States. The Kremlin must have also taken into account that in recent years both Tokyo and Seoul have grown increasingly close with NATO. Among other things, the Russia-DPRK pact makes it clear that Moscow is not subordinate to Beijing when it comes to Asia-Pacific affairs. Finally, the treaty could make it easier for Russia to draw upon North Korea's defense industrial capacities if needed, even though Russia's own vast military-industrial base is what primarily matters to it, with external sources only playing auxiliary roles.

Apart from formal security guarantees against an external aggression, the new alliance may, as Putin himself suggested, entail transfers by Russia to North Korea of certain non-nuclear weapons.⁴⁵ It is reasonable to expect the collaboration could also involve joint military drills and training, sharing of combat expertise, and intelligence exchange.

Russian assistance would help Pyongyang offset a destabilizing conventional gap with the U.S.-ROK alliance. Not only would this strengthen North Korea's security, but it would also contribute to restoring the balance of military power in the region and hence the overall security of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

The primary strength of an alliance is not in formal obligations written on paper. A mutual defense clause does not mean automatic involvement of the parties in one another's conflicts and wars. During their Cold War-era alliance, Moscow made it clear to Pyongyang that the Soviet Union would not defend the North if a military conflict was provoked by the DPRK itself. It remains to be seen how far and how deep Moscow and Pyongyang will go in their alliance relationship this time—and how committed they will be to each other. 

⁴⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Answers to Questions from Russian Journalists," President of Russia, June 20, 2024  <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74357>.

