

NORTH KOREA'S ASCENSION AS A GLOBAL PLAYER: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS AND DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES

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Over the past few years, North Korea has undergone a dramatic transformation from an isolated pariah state to an increasingly influential global actor, reshaping security dynamics in Asia and beyond. Kim Jong Un's international standing, elevated by the Trump summits of 2018–2019 and then again through Pyongyang's deepening alignment with Moscow since 2022, has direct security implications that reach far beyond Northeast Asia. These developments demand that the U.S. and its allies adapt their strategies to counter the growing threat posed by Pyongyang. The structural shift in North Korea's global position carries profound implications, including accelerated North Korean military modernization through Russian support; diminished South Korean leverage in inter-Korean relations; heightened risks of multi-theater great-power conflict involving the U.S., China, and Russia; and increased European exposure to DPRK military activity. To tackle an increasingly emboldened Kim Jong Un, Washington must urgently prioritize getting the North Koreans back to the negotiating table to prevent deeper DPRK-Russia military cooperation and further enhancement of North Korea's nuclear and conventional military capabilities. While this may require the U.S. to "acknowledge" the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state, continuing down the current path could prove far more risky to the U.S. and its allies in the long term.

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Introduction

North Korea has undergone a remarkable strategic transformation since 2022, evolving from an isolated pariah state into a consequential global military actor with unprecedented leverage over major powers. This shift represents one of the

most significant changes in Northeast Asian power dynamics since the Cold War's end, demanding immediate reassessment of regional security strategies and diplomatic approaches. This transformation of North Korea and Kim Jong Un's global image began in earnest with the 2018-2019

summits between the North Korean leader and U.S. President Donald Trump. Although Kim failed to acquire desired concessions from Washington, the very act of meeting in person with the leader of the United States, on multiple occasions, was a significant win for Kim in terms of symbolism and reshaping the world's perception of his country.

Despite the stalemate in U.S.-DPRK diplomacy following the 2019 Hanoi summit and Western predictions¹ of North Korea's potential collapse over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pyongyang instead reaffirmed its resilience to the world. Geopolitical conditions then shifted favorably by 2022, with Kim's early support for Russia's Ukraine invasion opening doors to the rapid deepening of ties with Moscow.²

Since then, three pivotal moments have accelerated North Korea's rise on the world stage. First, the June 2024 Putin-Kim summit in Pyongyang reestablished a mutual defense pact and further legitimized Kim's international standing as a strong statesman through Russia's open courtship.³ Second, North Korea's October 2024 troop deployment to Ukraine transformed the DPRK from a regional concern to a direct NATO adversary while cementing its value as an indispensable partner to Russia.⁴ Finally, Kim's September 2025 appearance at Beijing's military parade alongside Xi Jinping and Putin—the first such trilateral gathering since 1959—symbolically crowned North Korea's ascension to great power partnership status.⁵

Notably, this transformation appears structural rather than tactical. North Korea has acquired enhanced military capabilities through Russian cooperation, gained combat experience in Ukraine, and established enduring partnerships that will outlast current conflicts. The regime now poses expanded threats across multiple theaters while possessing significantly greater leverage in future diplomatic engagements, especially with Washington. Moreover, Europe can also no longer treat North Korean affairs as purely Asian concerns,

given the ongoing presence of North Korean troops on European soil. As such, this new reality demands a comprehensive reassessment of security strategies, diplomatic approaches, and alliance coordination mechanisms across both Asian and European theaters.

Consequences for the Korean Peninsula

North Korea's elevated international status arguably presents South Korea with its most complex security challenge in decades. The traditional dynamics of inter-Korean relations, long characterized by Seoul's economic and diplomatic advantages, have been fundamentally disrupted by Pyongyang's rapid rise in influence and resources.

The immediate security implications for South Korea are multifaceted and deeply concerning. North Korea's military cooperation with Russia has accelerated the modernization of its conventional forces while providing access to advanced weapons systems previously beyond its reach.⁶ Intelligence assessments suggest that Russian assistance has enhanced North Korea's submarine capabilities, improved its missile guidance systems, and potentially advanced its space capabilities.⁷ While many of North Korea's newer weapons and military equipment—including various systems revealed in its October 10 military parade⁸—remain untested, the trend toward rapid military modernization is undeniable. Despite South Korea's conventional military superiority, Kim Jong Un has announced plans to narrow this gap by prioritizing the enhancement of North Korea's conventional capabilities going forward.⁹ Such plans further complicate defense planning across multiple domains for the ROK.

The deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine represents a particularly alarming development from Seoul's perspective. Beyond the immediate concern of DPRK forces gaining combat experience, this deployment establishes a precedent for North Korean military intervention beyond the

Peninsula. The combat experience gained by North Korean forces in Ukraine not only enhances their tactical capabilities but also establishes operational coordination mechanisms with Russian military units that could prove decisive in future Korean Peninsula conflicts. The mutual defense treaty between Moscow and Pyongyang, combined with North Korea's troop commitment to Ukraine, creates a realistic scenario where Russian forces could deploy to support North Korea in a potential conflict with the ROK.

The economic dimensions of this shift are equally problematic for Seoul. North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia provides alternative channels for sanctions evasion, energy supplies, and economic support. Despite South Korea's new leader, Lee Jae-myung, repeatedly expressing interest in restarting inter-Korean cooperation and exchanges, the response from Pyongyang has so far been cold and harsh.¹⁰ Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, made it clear where her country stands with regard to Lee's proposals, stating in August that South Korea "cannot be a diplomatic partner" of North Korea.¹¹

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Given this, Seoul's once attractive offers of aid or joint economic projects with North Korea are no longer seen as desirable by Pyongyang. Beyond serving as a tool to facilitate U.S.-DPRK engagement, South Korea now offers little that North Korea cannot obtain elsewhere, marking a dramatic erosion of Seoul's traditional leverage over its northern neighbor. In particular, North Korea's 2024 constitutional designation of South Korea as its “main enemy” and abandonment of peaceful reunification goals symbolically formalized the complete breakdown of inter-Korean ties, further emphasizing Kim's newly gained confidence in his strengthened international position.¹²

Unless Seoul can successfully bring Trump back into negotiations with Pyongyang, North Korea will likely continue its hostile posture toward the Lee administration while expanding military ties with Moscow, thereby further intensifying the security threat facing South Korea.

Implications for the United States

North Korea's transformation from an isolated rogue state to an increasingly powerful authoritarian power with global reach poses fundamental challenges to American strategic objectives in Northeast Asia and beyond. While Trump has repeatedly expressed interest¹³ in renewed talks with Kim Jong Un, it will take a lot more than kind words to bring the North Korean leader back to the negotiating table, especially after how things ended in Hanoi in 2019.¹⁴

Traditional U.S. strategies of economic pressure and diplomatic isolation have not only failed to compel North Korea to change over the decades but have largely backfired, and North Korea's fundamentally strengthened strategic position today makes such pressure-based approaches even less viable than before.

Both Russia and China have effectively dismantled Western sanctions against North Korea, rendering future economic pressure campaigns largely futile

given these nations' roles as Pyongyang's primary economic lifelines.¹⁵ Kim reaffirmed this stance in September, stating that sanctions had been "a learning experience" and made his country stronger and more resilient, with South Korean President Lee also acknowledging that "the previous approach of sanctions and pressure has not solved the problem; it has worsened it."¹⁶

Most critically, the United States must now account for the possibility that any Korean Peninsula conflict could involve both Chinese and Russian military intervention on North Korea's behalf. While the Peninsula's strategic importance has always risked great power escalation through existing China-DPRK and U.S.-ROK mutual defense commitments, the new Russia-North Korea defense pact now creates the potential for a three-way great power confrontation. This dramatically elevated risk underscores the urgency of pursuing diplomatic solutions, as the costs of military conflict have increased exponentially.

This new reality further raises a set of complex questions regarding enhanced alliance coordination mechanisms and potentially expanded military deployments to maintain credible deterrence. Especially under Trump, U.S. allies in the region are increasingly questioning whether Washington would risk nuclear confrontation with multiple powers simultaneously to defend relatively smaller allies.¹⁷ This credibility gap risks emboldening U.S. adversaries to test American commitments more aggressively, further increasing instability in the region and raising the possibility of accidental clashes that could quickly escalate and lead to broader conflict.

The broader implications for American foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific are equally significant. The potential for greater military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, and even trilateral Pyongyang-Moscow-Beijing cooperation would present further challenges to American foreign policy goals in the region and intensify great-power competition, with potentially

destabilizing consequences for smaller states caught in the middle, including the ROK.

Challenges for Beijing

China's strategic calculations regarding North Korea have also been fundamentally altered by Pyongyang's deepening partnership with Russia. Beijing's traditional role as North Korea's primary patron has been complicated by Moscow's emergence as an alternative source of support and legitimacy for Kim Jong Un's regime. Since 2022, DPRK-China relations have experienced a marked decline in exchanges and cooperation, in direct contrast to North Korea's rapid deepening of ties with Russia. The cooling of Beijing-Pyongyang ties was on full display in 2024, —the "year of China-DPRK friendship" to mark 75 years of diplomatic ties—which came and went with no major celebrations or notable high-level visits between the two sides.¹⁸

The immediate challenge for the Chinese leadership lies in balancing support for North Korea with its broader strategic objectives. China's invitation for Kim Jong Un to attend the September 2025 military parade represented a calculated attempt at bringing Pyongyang back into Beijing's orbit. While Beijing benefits from maintaining influence over North Korea, it seeks to avoid being labeled part of an "Axis of Upheaval" with Moscow and Pyongyang, as this undermines China's ambitions to rival U.S. influence around the world.¹⁹ Recognizing Beijing's self-imposed constraints, Pyongyang has eagerly turned to Moscow as a more willing partner for expanded cooperation in sensitive areas.

The increasingly complex nature of Russia-North Korea cooperation presents China with various challenges. First, North Korea's troop deployment to Ukraine complicates China's strategy of maintaining strategic ambiguity on the conflict while quietly supporting Moscow. This direct DPRK military involvement risks triggering enhanced Western deterrence measures and a

potential increased military presence in Northeast Asia, which would undermine China's regional strategic objectives. Additionally, European perceptions of Chinese influence over North Korea could result in greater pressure on China to do more to keep the DPRK in check, further placing Beijing in an unfavorable position.

The implications of potential military technology transfers from Russia to North Korea also concern China. The stronger the North Korean military becomes, the harder it will be to control or coerce the North Korean leadership into acting in accordance with Chinese interests. Enhanced North Korean capabilities could also embolden Kim Jong Un to take actions that could draw China into unwanted conflicts or force Beijing to choose between supporting an ally and maintaining regional stability.

While the Russia-North Korea partnership will likely remain secondary to Beijing-Pyongyang

ties in the long term,²⁰ China may seek to limit expanded cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang by deepening non-military cooperation with North Korea and increasing high-level diplomatic exchanges to stay in the know of Pyongyang's foreign policy. Despite ongoing U.S.-China rivalry, Beijing would likely support Washington-Pyongyang diplomatic efforts, as this could reduce Russia-DPRK military cooperation while stabilizing regional security.

Beyond Northeast Asia

An emboldened North Korea now presents global challenges extending far beyond Northeast Asia. Its direct military involvement in Ukraine has fundamentally altered international perceptions of its capabilities and willingness to project power beyond the Korean Peninsula, forcing NATO to confront a third nuclear-armed adversary alongside China and Russia as a direct threat to European security.

Besides the growing threat to Europe, the long-term implications for the global illicit arms trade also cannot be overlooked.²¹ North Korea may expand its military involvement in overseas conflicts, particularly in regions such as Africa or the Middle East.²² Having seen Pyongyang's support for Russia through weapons transfers and troop deployments, and with the sanctions regime now effectively defunct, other authoritarian states may now be more willing to pursue military partnerships with the DPRK.²³ Beyond possible financial gains and additional combat experience, this risks fueling global instability and prolonging conflicts, complicating foreign policy strategies worldwide.

Beyond the direct and indirect military threats to Europe and U.S. allies, North Korea also undermines international law and the broader system of norms underpinning the Western-led order. Images of Kim Jong Un standing alongside major world leaders serve as powerful symbols, enhancing the legitimacy of alternative models of international engagement that reject Western liberal

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values while emphasizing absolute sovereignty. This, in turn, could embolden other authoritarian leaders and further fuel Chinese and Russian-led efforts to promote a multipolar world order.

North Korea's Foreign Policy Trajectory

North Korea's current international position has resulted from a carefully calibrated strategy that maximizes benefits from great power competition while maintaining strategic autonomy. Kim Jong Un has demonstrated remarkable skill in leveraging tensions between major powers to enhance his regime's security and international legitimacy while expanding his country's military capabilities and diplomatic clout.

The rapidly expanding DPRK-Russia partnership exemplifies this strategy most dramatically. While troop deployments to Ukraine and arms sales provide North Korea with significant strategic benefits, this partnership also poses risks, including potential over-dependence that could compromise Pyongyang's strategic autonomy and vulnerabilities if Russian fortunes decline. Should Russia's position weaken, North Korea would likely scale back rather than abandon support, potentially shifting to construction personnel deployment, reduced arms sales, and continued cooperation in non-military sectors like education, medicine, tourism, trade, and agriculture.

North Korea's approach to China remains more nuanced and strategic. By diversifying international partnerships, Pyongyang has diminished Chinese leverage while preserving access to economic benefits,²⁴ allowing it to enjoy Beijing's protection without accepting the client-state relationship China might prefer. North Korea will likely maintain this calculated distance from China as long as its military cooperation with Russia remains robust.

Kim likely recognizes China's superior reliability as a partner compared to Russia's more conditional approach, demonstrated historically when China

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sent troops to defend North Korea during the Korean War while the Soviet Union did not,²⁵ and in the post-Cold War era through Beijing's consistent support versus Moscow's tendency toward a more self-interested, conditional approach to ties with Pyongyang.²⁶

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Regarding the United States, Kim's strategy hinges on whether Trump abandons complete denuclearization demands. Kim explicitly stated in late September his openness to talks if the US “drops its hollow obsession with denuclearization and wants to pursue peaceful coexistence with

North Korea based on the recognition of reality.”²⁷ Should Trump accept these conditions, Kim would likely prioritize U.S. diplomacy over Russian ties, as securing American security guarantees remains North Korea’s primary foreign policy objective.

Until then, Pyongyang will continue acquiring military technologies from Russia, expanding global proliferation activities, enhancing conventional capabilities,²⁸ deepening ties with like-minded states,²⁹ and extracting benefits from both Moscow and Beijing, while largely ignoring South Korea and potentially escalating border provocations to defy continued U.S.-ROK military exercises and trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation.

The Need for a Strategic Policy Shift

The transformed geopolitical conditions created by North Korea’s rise in power demand a fundamental reassessment of American and allied policy approaches. Traditional strategies based on isolation and pressure have proven inadequate and are unlikely to yield desirable results against a North Korea with growing access to multiple sources of support and legitimacy. The challenge now lies in developing a comprehensive strategy that acknowledges North Korea’s enhanced bargaining position while creating competitive incentives for responsible behavior and preventing the further growth of North Korea’s (nuclear and conventional) military capabilities.

Although Kim Jong Un has rejected President Lee’s diplomatic overtures, South Korea should maintain an open stance toward inter-Korean cooperation, publicly. Restoring communication channels is also critical to prevent misunderstandings and reduce the risk of military escalation, especially in the wake of North Korean provocations along the border or ROK military exercises near the DMZ. Concerning the latter, South Korea should also limit the scope of such military drills outside of the DMZ area to prevent possible misunderstandings or accidents on either side.

In addition, Seoul should expand diplomatic engagement with Beijing to balance regional relations, while continuing trilateral coordination with the U.S. and Japan for defensive purposes. Above all, Lee’s government should press Washington—particularly President Trump—to re-engage with Pyongyang. While Seoul has diminished leverage compared to the Moon Jae-in era, its treaty ally status ensures Washington cannot easily ignore its concerns, making regular communication essential for keeping North Korea on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

For Europe, North Korea’s role in the Ukraine war demands stronger security ties with Asia. Closer intelligence cooperation with South Korea and Japan could improve early detection of North Korean-Russian coordination. The EU also needs a unified strategy toward Pyongyang, one that goes beyond traditional calls for the improvement of the human rights situation in the country or strongly worded statements condemning the regime. European security is now directly linked to developments on the Korean Peninsula, requiring more proactive efforts toward diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang rather than episodic attention to North Korean affairs or a continued strategy of sanctions and pressure.

For the U.S., the most important priority will be to resume talks with the North Koreans. This need not materialize in a leader-level summit right away, as creating a foundation of trust is necessary to properly understand the demands of both sides as well as to prevent miscalculation and ill-informed drafting of diplomatic agreements. Since Kim has made clear that he will only resume talks if the U.S. drops its demand for denuclearization, Washington will have to carefully consider whether the potential gains associated with such a move would outweigh the risks.

Should dialogue resume, talks should prioritize arms control measures to halt North Korea’s military capability expansion rather than pursuing immediate denuclearization.

It is important to understand that, in reality, the primary threat posed by Pyongyang is not nuclear use—mutual assured destruction has deterred all nuclear powers since 1945—but its demonstrated willingness to engage in foreign conflicts, potential for global arms proliferation, and the risk of conventional war on the Korean Peninsula escalating into great power confrontation. These threats can be addressed without achieving denuclearization. Continued pressure and isolation rather than engagement will only push North Korea deeper into alignment with U.S. adversaries, further amplifying threats to American and allied national security interests worldwide.

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