



North Korea's Hostile Policy Toward South Korea and Its Link to Foreign Policy Strategies

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In This Issue Brief analyzes Kim Jong Un's recent assertion of "two Koreas" and his policy of expanding diplomatic ties. By classifying South Korea as a "hostile state," North Korea aims to position itself as an "independent state" and isolate South Korea internationally. North Korea's strategy involves strengthening alliances with China and Russia and engaging directly with the United States and Japan to create divisions among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Additionally, North Korea seeks to justify its status as a "nuclear-armed state" to the Western bloc through propaganda.

Despite this diplomatic push, North Korea is unlikely to replace its provocations with diplomacy immediately. The "expansion of external areas" is seen as preparation for the aftermath of its brinkmanship, with more concrete policy adjustments expected around the 80th anniversary of the Party's founding in October 2025 or the 9th Party Congress in January 2026. Realistic preparations for North Korea's nuclear threats and guarding against its complex provocations are crucial. Additionally, managing trilateral cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan to counter North Korea's divide-and-conquer tactics, securing cooperation from China, and preparing for the potential re-election of Trump, have become even more critical tasks.

1. Evaluation Kim Jong Un's Call to Expand Diplomatic Ties

On December 30, 2023, during a Workers' Party of Korea Plenary Meeting, Kim Jong Un announced strategic and tactical directions for North Korea's external affairs, focusing on developing relations with socialist countries and responding to the United States with an "offensive ultra-hardline policy." In a policy speech at the Supreme People's Assembly on January 15, 2024, he emphasized the need to strategically respond to the changing international landscape to create favorable conditions for the revolution.

Kim Jong Un consistently stressed "expanding the country's external operations" at both the Plenary Meeting and the Supreme People's Assembly. This term was not mentioned in previous meetings but appeared after he visited Russia in September 2023. In his speech on September 26, 2023, he called for the "active development of external activities," suggesting increased confidence from his Russian visit. In his Military Foundation Day speech on February 8, 2024, Kim Jong Un explained the "two Koreas theory," justifying ultra-hardline responses toward South Korea and linking it to proactive foreign policy. He argued that breaking away from "dialogue and cooperation with the South Korean puppets" allowed North Korea to build a strong military and maintain independence, enhancing its national interests on the international stage.

Kim's strategy comprises two main assertions: 1) by framing inter-Korean relations as those between hostile states, he claims it has become advantageous for North Korea to uphold its dignity as a sovereign state. This stance implies an intensification of propaganda efforts on the international stage, arguing that South Korea's antagonistic behavior necessitates North Korea's nuclear armament; 2) by categorizing South Korea as an adversarial state, Kim aims to exclude South Korean interference from international affairs, thereby managing external relations more favorably for North Korea.

2. Factors Influencing North Korea's Alignment with China and Russia and Its Approach to the United States and Japan

A. North Korea-Russia Alignment

The alignment was made possible by their mutual interests: North Korea's prolonged economic difficulties and international isolation, and Russia's need for allies as it enters the third year of the war in Ukraine. North Korea likely sees economic benefits from arms exports to Russia, advancements in nuclear missile technology through the acquisition of advanced military technology from Russia, and the potential for economic and military gains from expanded arms trade with third countries. Externally, leveraging Russia could attract China, aiming to neutralize sanctions through China-Russia support and gain recognition as a nuclear state while keeping in check the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral alliance. However, there are constraints in this alignment, mainly from Russia's side. Due to potential damage to the non-proliferation regime, it is uncertain whether Russia will readily provide North Korea with advanced military technologies. Also, Russia does not have high expectations for economic cooperation beyond labor exports. Unlike China, Russia is not interested in North Korea's export products such as minerals and seafood.

B. North Korea-China Alignment

Currently, North Korea-China relations lag far behind North Korea-Russia relations because there is no urgent need for China to approach North Korea as Russia does, and China's diplomatic focus is on its great power diplomacy. While competing with the U.S., China must cooperate with it at times and maintain friendly relations with European countries that Russia antagonizes. However, China requires a buffer zone and sees the North Korean card as useful in countering U.S. involvement in Taiwan and creating an Asian version of NATO in the Asia-Pacific region.

C. North Korea-China-Russia Alignment

Experts highlight differences between China and Russia-North Korea as a limitation of the North Korea-China-Russia alliance. While Russia and North Korea benefit from the new Cold War and bloc politics, China's calculus is more complex. China worries about increased Russian involvement in the Korean Peninsula and East Asian security, North Korea's excessive military adventurism, and the resultant strengthening of U.S.-Japan security cooperation, as well as heightened U.S. and European pressure on China. Additionally, China assesses that strengthening the North Korea-China-Russia alliance could negatively impact global supply chain stability and exacerbate China's economic difficulties. Therefore, China is likely to maintain a distance from the new Cold War that North Korea desires while seeking improved relations with the U.S. and supporting Russia and North Korea bilaterally.

D. Potential U.S.-North Korea Approach

Even if Trump is re-elected, North Korea might be reluctant to approach the U.S. due to the already solidified South Korea-U.S. nuclear response system, Trump's learning curve in North Korea policy, congressional checks on foreign policy, and the temptation for North Korea to complete its nuclear missile advancements. Some argue that North Korea, having already turned towards China and Russia, might see no need to engage with Trump. Kim Jong Un might view Trump's re-election as favorable and propose a nuclear freeze and restraint from being a rogue state. By supporting Russia militarily and employing brinkmanship tactics, North Korea could propose a compromise with the United States in the form of nuclear freeze negotiations rather than complete denuclearization. At that time, North Korea, considering itself an "independent state" separate from South Korea, would pursue direct dealings with Washington without involving Seoul. Ensuring South Korea's leadership in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue will become a crucial agenda.

E. Approach to Japan

Early this year, North Korea showed signs of approaching Japan when Kim Jong Un sent a condolence letter to the Japanese Prime Minister, and Kim Yo Jong suggested Japan abandon its criticisms to improve relations. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida expressed the need to change the status quo and showed interest in a summit with North Korea. Despite unresolved issues like abductions and nuclear missiles, North Korea might seek reparations and exploit cracks in the ROK-U.S.-Japan alliance. Secret talks and improving relations could benefit both leaders, especially with Kishida facing declining approval ratings and upcoming elections.

3. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

South Korea needs to respond to North Korea's dual tactics and prepare for both brinkmanship and disruption tactics on the international stage. In addition to practical measures against North Korea's nuclear threat, South Korea needs to be vigilant against its multifaceted provocations, diplomatic disruptions, and tactics of discord. To prevent the entrenchment of a standoff between the United States, Japan, and South Korea versus North Korea, it is necessary to strengthen communication with China and Russia and restore a trilateral cooperation mechanism through summit meetings among South Korea, China, and Japan. South Korea should implement institutional measures and continue efforts to develop a future-oriented relationship with Japan. Contacts should be made with Trump's diplomatic and security advisors to convey South Korea's policy goals and directions and to assess various hypothetical scenarios regarding Trump's re-election. Even if Biden is re-elected, there are limitations to creating a positive environment, so it would be more desirable for us to finely tune our vision and policy direction regarding North Korea issues to be ready to lead the United States in resolving the Korean Peninsula issue.

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About Experts



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