



North Korea's Military Behavior in 2024 and Choices for 2025

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At the beginning of 2024, Kim Jong Un abandoned the concept of unification based on nationalism and introduced the two-state theory, raising expectations of intensified offensives against South Korea. Throughout 2024, North Korea continued its offensive against South Korea by mixing strategic provocations with low-intensity provocations; however, the intensity of these provocations fell short of expectations. In the first half of 2024, North Korea carried out numerous strategic provocations, while in the second half, its military activities shifted to focus on low-intensity provocations against South Korea and participation in the Ukraine war. In other words, from the latter half of 2024, North Korea appears to have opted to maintain limited tensions through low-intensity provocations rather than actively creating high levels of tension.

North Korea's Military Activities in 2024 and Outlook for 2025

In 2024, North Korea conducted a total of 22 tests and training launches of strategic weapons. Of these, tactical nuclear delivery systems accounted for a staggering 81%, demonstrating a continued bias toward the development of tactical nuclear capabilities. North Korea unveiled two types of hypersonic medium-range ballistic missiles, including the Hwasong-16n, and the latest solid-fuel ICBM, the Hwasong-19. However, it failed to conduct a reconnaissance satellite launch to verify ICBM technology following a failed attempt in May 2024. Meanwhile, the number of strategic provocations significantly decreased compared to 2023. Instead, North Korea showcased its capabilities for mass-producing nuclear weapons, such as deploying nuclear enrichment facilities and missile launch vehicles in operational settings.

Despite reducing the number of strategic provocations, North Korea emphasized the operational deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and its willingness to use them, continuing its offensive against South Korea through a gray-zone strategy utilizing low-intensity conflict measures. North Korea initiated a new type of provocation by scattering "sewage balloons" and focused on low-intensity provocations, such as GPS jamming and broadcasting propaganda against South Korea. Additionally, North Korea heightened tensions in border areas by destroying inter-Korean roads and rail networks and cutting power lines, thereby reinforcing the division along the inter-Korean boundary. However, these actions appear to reflect an underlying intention to strengthen its defensive posture against South Korea.

The low-intensity provocation strategy employed by North Korea in 2024 appears to be a strategic choice to sustain its hostile policy against South Korea while consolidating strategic capabilities for maximizing provocations in 2025. This consolidation of capabilities is underpinned by closer North Korea-Russia ties. On June 19, Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty. By mid-October, North Korea had evolved into a blood ally of Russia, sending 11,000 troops to the front lines of the Ukraine war. As a result, North Korea has gained access to new weaponry as well as advanced nuclear and missile-related technologies, enabling it to carry out more significant provocations. The outcomes of these developments could potentially be revealed this year.

Policy Implications for South Korea

As 2025 marks the conclusion of North Korea's five-year defense development plan, the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party, and the first year of the Trump administration's second term, North Korea is expected to launch more aggressive offensives against South Korea and the United States than ever before. Similar to the heightened military tensions in 2017 that eventually led to talks in 2018, North Korea will likely aim to provoke maximum tension to set the stage for new negotiations.

Currently, the South Korean government faces several challenges in coordinating alliance diplomacy and security under the re-inaugurated Trump administration. While there are no immediate doubts about the current security posture, caution is necessary to ensure that command and control mechanisms remain robust under the interim leadership structure. The Trump administration is expected to demand increased defense cost-sharing and a potential reduction of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), based on its transactional view of alliances. If clear national leadership fails to make timely decisions in response, the ROK-U.S. alliance may face difficulties in reaching critical agreements. Nevertheless, tasks requiring prompt action and coordination within the alliance must continue to be pursued in accordance with existing policy principles. In these circumstances, the ROK-U.S. alliance must respond to North Korea with a unified and consistent stance. Negotiations involving North Korea, which has also participated in the Ukraine war, could become a significant variable in Trump's potential efforts to negotiate an end to the war. Accordingly, the South Korean government must deliver a clear message to North Korea, firmly grounded in the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance. If government-led actions prove insufficient, parliamentary diplomacy and all other available channels must be mobilized. For those seeking dialogue and negotiation, opportunities for dialogue should be provided, while military deterrence must be applied to forces seeking violence. It is essential to uphold a policy of "principled response" and "peace through strength." Losing this focus on these principles could result in 2025 concluding as a strategic victory for North Korea.

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