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Assessing North Korea's 2024 Provocations Against South Korea

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This article analyzes and evaluates North Korea's provocations against South Korea in the first half of 2024 and assesses the likelihood of further provocations in the second half of the year. As of July 18, North Korea has threatened further provocations, including additional trash balloon launches, indicating that provocations will intensify in the second half of the year. Likely provocations could occur around three time periods: (1) the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) ROK-U.S. combined military exercises in August; (2) the declaration of North Korea's own "maritime border" through constitutional amendments in the Supreme People's Assembly in September; and (3) the U.S. presidential election in November.

North Korea's objective is likely to focus on steering international public opinion in favor of recognizing North Korea as a "nuclear weapons state." North Korea's provocations might escalate from conventional to nuclear threats against South Korea. This could potentially include additional nuclear tests and the launch of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). However, as North Korea focuses more on severing relations with the South, and seeks to resume dialogue with a potential second Trump administration while undertaking many internal tasks, the incentives for provocations are expected to decrease compared to previous years. Nevertheless, the possibility of gray zone provocations remains.

1. Missile Tests in the First Half of the Year

In the first half of this year, North Korea continued missile tests, showing a pattern similar to last year. However, unlike last year, when it focused on showcasing various missile threats from anywhere at any time, this year saw fewer mass launches and more frequent tests for developing new weapons.

Figure 1. DPRK Missile (Rocket) Test Launches (January-July 2024)

Date	Missile/Rocket Test Launch	Date	Missile/Rocket Test Launch
January 14	1 Hypersonic Medium-Range Ballistic Missile	January 24	New Strategic Cruise Missile “Pulhwasal-3-31”
January 28	Submarine-Launched Strategic Cruise Missile	January 30	Cruise Missiles “Hwasal-2”
February 02	Multiple Cruise Missiles	February 14	Land-to-Sea Missile “Sea Eagle-6” Verification
March 18	At Least 3 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles	April 2	1 Medium-Range Ballistic Missile
April 19	Strategic Cruise Missiles, New Surface-to-Air Missiles	April 22	Multiple SRBMs (Nuclear Counterattack Simulation Training)
April 25	240mm Rocket Artillery Test Firing	May 10	Rocket Artillery Test Firing
May 17	Tactical Ballistic Missile with New Guidance Technology	May 27	Military Reconnaissance Satellite Launch (Failure)
May 30	600mm Super-Large Rocket Artillery Firing Drill	June 27	“Multiple-Warhead Missile” Test Launch (Exploded in the air)
July 1	4.5t Super-Large Warhead Missile (suspected deception)		

2. Development of Provocations Against South Korea in the First Half of the Year

This year, North Korea’s provocations against the South started with the launch of a new military reconnaissance satellite on the night of May 27. The following day, North Korea began launching trash balloons toward South Korea. On May 29, North Korea started GPS jamming attacks, and on May 30, it launched 18 super-large multiple rocket launchers. On June 2, North Korea declared a temporary suspension of the distribution of trash balloons. During this process, the South Korean government suspended the entire September 19 inter-Korean military agreement on June 4. From June onwards, North Korea resumed the release of trash balloons toward the South.

2.1 Provocation Warning: Politburo Meeting (May 24) and Vice Minister of Defense’s Statement (May 26)

Since the end of May, North Korea’s provocations against the South were decided at the May 24 Workers’ Party Politburo meeting, included responses to perceived sovereignty infringements. On May 25th, the Rodong Sinmun reported that the Political Bureau meeting “listened to a comprehensive report from the General Staff of the Army on the recent military situation” and “presented the ‘immediate military activity tasks’ of the

Republic's armed forces to safeguard the state's sovereignty and security interests." The next day, North Korea's Vice Defense Minister Kim Kang Il vowed to scatter "mounds of wastepaper and filth" over the inter-Korean border areas in retaliation against anti-Pyongyang leaflets.

2.2 Satellite Launch (May 27) and Mass Rocket Launch (May 30)

The satellite launch coincided with a ROK-Japan-China trilateral summit. North Korea condemned this and called it "wanton interference" in North Korea's internal affairs. On May 27, North Korea launched a military reconnaissance satellite, which failed. Kim Jong Un encouraged continued efforts despite the failure and criticized South Korea's military drills. On May 30, North Korea conducted a "600mm super-large multiple rocket launcher" demonstration targeting South Korea.

2.3 Dispatch of Trash Balloons and GPS Jamming (May 28-June 2)

Between May 28 and June 2, North Korea sent about 1,000 trash balloons to South Korea in response to South Korean defector groups releasing balloons and as a broader effort to pressure South Korea. Concurrently, North Korea engaged in GPS jamming attacks, totaling around 1,500 incidents affecting South Korean signal monitoring systems.

2.4 Resumption of Trash Balloon Dispatchment and Threat of "New Response" (June 8-July 18)

After defector groups resumed dispersing anti-North Korean leaflets, North Korea responded by sending trash balloons to South Korea from June 8-9. North Korea threatened to send 'a hundred times the amount of trash' if leaflet dispersal continued. In response, South Korea reactivated loudspeaker broadcasts on June 9. Kim Yo Jong warned of a new response if both leaflets and broadcasts continued, but the escalation remained limited to additional balloon dispersals. North Korea's stance showed a defensive posture, possibly due to upcoming diplomatic events and South Korea's flexible response. Balloon dispersals continued intermittently, with eight instances reported by July 18.

Table 2. North Korean Provocations Against South Korea (May 24–July 18, 2024)

Date	Type of Provocation
May 24	Politburo meeting; instructed its army to “take offensive action against the enemy’s provocative encroachment upon the sovereignty of North Korea.”
May 26	Ministry of Defense announces planned countermeasures against South Korean aerial and maritime surveillance and leaflet distribution.
May 27	Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemns the ROK-Japan-China Summit; “Denuclearization” Mention at ROK-Japan-China Summit as “Violent Internal Interference.”
May 27, 22:44	Launch of military reconnaissance satellite (Manryong 1-1); explodes 2 minutes later →failure reported at 00:22.
May 28	Kim Jong Un visits the Academy of Defence Sciences; acknowledges satellite failure and criticizes South Korea’s response.
May 28-29	Launch of over 260 trash balloons into South Korea.
May 29, early morning	GPS signal jamming attacks on South Korea.
May 29, 21:00	Kim Yo Jong’s statement claims trash balloons represent North Korean people’s freedom of expression.
May 30, 06:14	Launch of 18 large-calibre rockets in a show of force.
May 30-31	Continued GPS signal jamming attacks in the North-western islands.
June 1-2	Re-dispersal of over 720 trash balloons into South Korea’s metropolitan area.
June 2	North Korea announces temporary halt to trash balloon dispersal; warns of resumption if leaflets are found.
June 4	South Korean government declares complete suspension of the September 19 military agreement with North Korea.
June 6-7	South Korean civilian groups distribute leaflets to North Korea.
June 8-9	North Korea resumes trash balloon dispersal (about 330 balloons); South Korea responds with a 2-hour loudspeaker broadcast.
June 9	Kim Yo Jong threatens new responses if leaflet distribution and loudspeaker broadcasts continue.
June 9 night-June 10 morning	North Korea disperses about 310 trash balloons (fourth round).
June 21	Kim Yo Jong states, “Trouble is coming because they did again what they had been urged not to do.”
June 24-26	North Korea disperses trash balloons in a three-day consecutive operation (fifth to seventh rounds).
July 14	Kim Yo Jong warns of harsh retaliation for found leaflets.
July 16	Kim Yo Jong again threatens severe consequences for leaflet discoveries.
July 18	North Korea resumes trash balloon dispersal (eight rounds).
July 18 night-July 19	South Korea resumes loudspeaker broadcasts aimed at North Korea.

2.5 Characteristics of North Korea’s Provocations in the First Half of the Year

First, North Korea’s provocations toward South Korea have somewhat decreased in intensity. While last year’s first half featured aggressive demonstrations of nuclear capabilities, this year saw a focus on new weapon development with occasional large-scale artillery tests. Second, provocations after late May fall into two categories: (1) a week-long series of complex provocations from May 27 and June 2 aimed at pressuring South Korea, and; (2) a “balloon war” from June 6 to July 18. Both categories involve a “balloon war”, but they differ in nature. The former was a hybrid of military and non-military tactics, while the latter was a tit-for-tat response. Third, the main provocation method in the first half involved typical North Korean gray zone tactics, GPS signal jamming and trash balloon dispersal are typical examples of North Korea’s gray zone strategies. Although these might seem less severe than nuclear tests or ballistic missile launches, their psychological and moral impact on the public and military can be significant.

3. Outlook for Provocations against South Korea in the Second Half of the Year

3.1. Motivation for Provocations

North Korea will likely conduct a military drill in response to the upcoming ROK-U.S. joint exercises Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS) in August. The UFS is scheduled to include military measures simulating a North Korean nuclear attack, marking the first time nuclear operation exercises will be conducted, which will likely cause North Korea to react more sensitively. Provocations against the South in the Northern Limit Line (NLL) area also seem inevitable if North Korea changes its constitution to define its own maritime border. In addition, if Trump, unlike his first term, focuses on pressure rather than engagement with North Korea, Kim Jong Un might retaliate with provocations, but this possibility does not seem very high. However, if Trump’s North Korea policy remains centered on “denuclearization,” North Korea might seek to transition to nuclear arms reduction talks by demonstrating its capabilities through nuclear missile provocations.

3.2. Level and Type of Provocations

North Korea will likely hold South Korea as a nuclear hostage to foster public opinion in the U.S. that supports managing North Korea (nuclear freeze) rather than denuclearization. If North Korea seeks to change the status quo through provocations, it will engage in an escalating pattern of complex provocations, starting from low intensity and moving to high

intensity. South Korea must prepare for the possibility of North Korea's maximum provocations. The maximum level of provocations could involve "MDL/NLL gun and artillery provocations → declaration of a quasi-state of war + threat of missile strikes on Guam against the U.S. → additional nuclear tests + ICBM/SLBM launches." There is also the possibility of a seventh nuclear test.

3.3. Factors for Restraint in Provocations

In a situation where improvement in relations with China is necessary, there would be no reason for North Korea to unnecessarily escalate and create tension. North Korea is likely to continue gray zone provocations against South Korea but will refrain from high-intensity provocations targeting the U.S. Another burden for provocations is the numerous internal issues North Korea needs to address.

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This year, North Korea's internal and external policy directions have fluctuated significantly. Several incidents of provocations against South Korea are anticipated in the latter half of the year. However, the likelihood of Kim Jong Un undertaking reckless, high-intensity provocations seems reduced compared to the past. This is because the North Korean authorities have been focusing on numerous internal tasks—including constitutional amendments, regional industrial development—and external tasks—such as strengthening ties with Russia, gaining recognition as a nuclear state—which makes provocations appear secondary. Certain levels of provocations are inevitable, especially during the ROK-U.S. UFS (Ulchi Freedom Shield) exercises. However, determining whether such provocations are aimed at severing relations or merely a responsive measure will reveal Kim Jong Un's true intentions regarding his policy shift towards South Korea.

In addition, even though Kim Jong Un stated that North and South Korea were no longer the same people, South Korea should seek policies that embrace North Korea as one people. While it is important to inform the closed North Korean society with objective facts, it should also be cautious of actions that could escalate tensions unnecessarily. It is doubtful whether emotionally charged leaflets slandering the regime will have desirable effects.

Finally, in addition to managing immediate provocations, South Korea should focus on long-term strategies that address both internal and external challenges. This includes preparing for potential chemical and biological threats from North Korea through comprehensive civil

evacuation drills and public education. Only when the people and the government are prepared to face war can any provocation from North Korea be thwarted.

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