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Political ice age

Rearmament and war rhetoric: what does North Korea want to achieve with its shift in foreign and security policy?

Kim Jong Un ushered in 2024 with a radical policy change: ending the goal of Korean reunification, naming South Korea as the main enemy and, in doing so, breaking with the policies of his grandfather, North Korea's 'eternal president' Kim Il Sung. Corresponding adjustments to internal party organs, propaganda and the constitution followed. War rhetoric and artillery exercises along the disputed maritime border were a reminder of the *de facto* state of war on the Korean peninsula.

North Korea's military modernisation and belligerent rhetoric should not, however, be confused with preparations for an offensive, but seen rather as an expression of an ongoing change in tactics that began with the failed Hanoi summit in 2019. This view is supported by the absence of signs of planning for such an offensive, like corresponding preparations along the highly militarised border area with South Korea. The repeated arms deliveries to Russia and the – albeit limited – reopening for tourism also stand in the way of an offensive.

All of this tells us that there has been no fundamental change in the primary goal and strategy of maintaining the regime: the central focus remains on expanding military capabilities and increasing war preparedness, among other things to deter attempts to overthrow the regime, to hold the population together and to keep the country economically functioning. North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programmes are playing increasingly central roles in the escalatory deterrence strategy — on the one hand for achieving regime acceptance and on the other as a source of income. However, active warfare on the Korean peninsula, with its potential of fundamentally jeopardising the regime's survival, is to be avoided.

A change in tactics

Instead, we are now seeing the results of a change in tactics that is

intended to force forward this strategy: until further notice, North Korea will rely primarily on its partnership with China and Russia, no longer on options with South Korea and the US. While the failed summit diplomacy with the US and South Korea between 2018 and 2019 sparked this rethink, the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the worsening US-China conflict provided conducive circumstances. At the same time, domestic political disagreements in the US and South Korea continue to result in an incoherent and ineffective policy towards Pyongyang.

The summit meeting between US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un in Hanoi in February 2019 was accompanied by the hope of a diplomatic resolution of the long-simmering conflict over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. But the summit was unable to reach an agreement and ultimately failed on the question of shaping the denuclearisation process. North Korea was calling for a gradual process by which the country would stop parts of its nuclear programme and reduce them in exchange for concrete countermeasures such as sanctions relief. The Trump administration, however, insisted on a comprehensive deal and immediate disarmament.

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Additionally, the failure to support summit diplomacy with robust working-level discussions ultimately led to the premature breaking off of the Hanoi summit and the failure of the negotiation process. Despite the personal dimension, the summit illustrated the enduring mistrust and fundamental conflict of interests that for 30 years now have prevented a diplomatic approach to North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Trump and Kim Jong Un's second summit was more than a failed political initiative. In retrospect, it was a critical juncture that brought about a long-term tactical change in North Korea's foreign and security policy. This is characterised by the (at least temporary) abandonment of the goal of normalising relations with the US through denuclearisation talks and the use of the associated economic opportunities, such as the lightening of sanctions. Instead of the hoped-for rapprochement, Pyongyang ended its 17-month missile test moratorium, initiated the ongoing escalation spiral with South Korea and has since relied on cooperation with China and Russia.

Domestically, this change in tactics was facilitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since January 2020, North Korea has used this as a

justification for a strict national lockdown, restricting border traffic and mobility inside the country (including for international missions) and making humanitarian and civil society exchange more difficult. The movement of goods across the national borders to China and Russia was not resumed until 2022, and direct trading with Beijing and Moscow restarted only in 2023.

Fears of an escalatory deterrence doctrine

In January 2021, Kim Jong Un also announced a comprehensive military buildup and capability strengthening following the five-year plan. The highest number of missile tests to date followed in 2022. The five-year plan sets out the past and future development and deployment of a range of nuclear weapons systems capable of reaching targets in South Korea, Japan, Guam, Hawaii and on the US mainland. North Korea first tested intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2017 and added new models to its arsenal in 2022 and 2023.

Since 2019, Pyongyang has also presented various medium-range missile systems that can be stored on ships or submarines and fired from them. According to Kim Jong Un's statements in 2023, the 'nuclearisation' of the navy could receive special attention in the further implementation of the capacity strengthening plan. Not only have short-range missile systems been extensively tested and developed, but they have also been prioritised in North Korea's production increase, along with appropriate nuclear warheads and intermediate-range missile systems.

Kim Jong Un also mentioned 'tactical nuclear weapons' for the first time in January 2021, thereby underpinning fears of an escalatory deterrence doctrine. The 2022 Nuclear Law clearly illustrates both the low threshold and the readiness to employ nuclear weapons as well as the threat of a 'pre-emptive' first strike at the first signs of an impending enemy attack. However, this nuclear strategy requires extensive military reconnaissance capabilities, which North Korea is trying to improve by expanding its drone and satellite programmes. But even with potential support from Russia, serious space surveillance capabilities remain a long way off for Pyongyang. Conversely, such capabilities could even have a stabilising effect by reliably informing North Korea which military activities by South Korea and the US represent preparations for war and which do not.

A partnership with Russia and China

The change in North Korea's foreign and security policy tactics is also significantly favoured by the country's increased strategic importance for Russia and China, as well as the associated greater scope for manoeuvre in foreign policy. For example, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine offers North Korea unprecedented opportunities for expanded and public cooperation. The sale of artillery pieces, short-range ballistic missiles and launch vehicles brings Pyongyang not only important revenue, but also information about the use of its systems on the battlefield. In addition, closer cooperation with Moscow could also help North Korea address chronic food and energy shortages and, in the future, mitigate the excessive economic dependence on China.

Beijing and Pyongyang, on the other hand, have party-political and economic ties. China remains North Korea's largest trading partner while remaining wary of any moves by Pyongyang that could destabilise the country or draw more US troops to the region. While Beijing, together with Moscow, supported the adoption of far-reaching sanctions in 2017, the United Nations Security Council has been blocked since then and implementation of the sanctions regime has been patchy. North Korea's sanctions evasion, especially at sea and in cyberspace, is becoming increasingly extensive.

Eight decades after the Korean War, inter-Korean relations are at a historic low point.

In addition to the call for war readiness in 2019 and the accelerated military modernisation since 2021, Kim Jong Un has also put his country's decades-long policy towards South Korea on a new basis since the beginning of the year. According to Kim Jong Un, North Korea no longer seeks reconciliation and reunification with the South, but will classify the country as an 'eternal enemy'. In the event of war, the goal would be to occupy, suppress, reconquer and subjugate the Republic of Korea. Eight decades after the Korean War, which began as Kim Il Sung's attempt to achieve reunification, inter-Korean relations are at a historic low point.

This political decision will bring far-reaching consequences, especially for the diplomacy-based North Korea policy of South Korea's liberal forces, who are keen to win the presidency again in 2027. At the same time, the fact remains that, in the past, inter-Korean relations have always been directly determined by US-North Korea relations. The fundamental question is therefore whether North Korea actually wants to abandon the

goal of improved relations with the US in the long term and, in doing so, opt for geopolitical dependence on China and Russia — or whether this goal will simply be postponed until the 'completion' of the five-year military plan. By then, the factors that had favoured the change in tactics, such as Russia's conduct of the war in Ukraine, could have changed fundamentally.

In the meantime, it remains to be seen how South Korea will react to the intensified confrontation with North Korea after the parliamentary elections in April, as will the US after the presidential elections in November. It also remains unclear whether North Korea will press ahead with its decoupling from the international community or whether the restrictions on diplomatic and humanitarian work in the country will be reduced and official and unofficial contacts at the international level will be resumed. However, the current political ice age, Pyongyang's capacity strengthening plan and the prioritisation of Beijing and Moscow leave little hope for a foreseeable detente. Instead, they fuel the risks of an unwanted, misunderstood escalation — especially when reliable communication channels with North Korea are absent.



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