North Korea: The End of Strategic Seclusion?

Artyom L. Lukin

Artyom L. Lukin, PhD in Political Science
Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia
Oriental Institute-School of Regional and International Studies
Department of International Relations
Associate Professor

SPIN-RSCI: 7567-8692,
ORCID: 0000-0001-7252-9905
Scopus AuthorID: 55184886100

E-mail: artlukin@mail.ru
Address: 690922 FEFU Campus, 10 Ajax Bay, Russky Island, Vladivostok

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has been quite static and stable in its own way despite periodic mini-crises. A lonely but unbroken North Korea stands up against the South Korean-U.S. alliance, playing diplomatic overtures in between crises and skillfully using contradictions between other actors in Northeast Asia.

However, the balance of power on the peninsula and the international system as a whole has changed enough to date to transform the mode of confrontation between the two Koreas. Although North Korea has nuclear weapons, the military balance on and around the peninsula is not developing to Pyongyang's advantage. This puts North Korea's security at risk, especially due to the unpredictability of Seoul's future policy. In terms of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, North Korea's ability to balance the mounting strategic risks internally by mobilizing its own resources is extremely limited. This leaves the option of external balancing through alliance with strong military powers. The theory of structural realism remains relevant and helps to better understand the ongoing rapprochement between Pyongyang and Moscow.

Keywords: North Korea, Korean Peninsula, security, nuclear weapons, structural realism, internal and external balancing.

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However, the balance of power on the peninsula and the international system as a whole has changed enough to date to transform the mode of confrontation between the two Koreas. Although North Korea has nuclear weapons, the military balance on and around the peninsula is not developing to Pyongyang's advantage. This puts North Korea's security at risk, especially due to the unpredictability of Seoul's future policy. In terms of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, North Korea's ability to balance mounting strategic risks internally by mobilizing its own resources is extremely limited. This leaves the option of external balancing through alliances with strong military powers.

The recent intensification of North Korea-Russia relations, including the meeting between President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in September 2023, may indicate that Pyongyang is ready to end a long period of strategic seclusion and resume allied relations with Moscow interrupted more than three decades ago.

Because of the cautious position assumed by Beijing, which does not want to unnecessarily antagonize Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, it would be premature to talk about the emergence of a "northern alliance" between Russia, North Korea, and China. But it may materialize later, if Beijing finally loses the hope of reaching acceptable agreements with the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

NORTH KOREA: SECURITY OR DEVELOPMENT?

North Korea is the most vivid example of a state facing a "security or development" dilemma. This dilemma is inherent in many authoritarian and ideologized states, especially those existing in an unfavorable geopolitical environment. Such political systems have to choose between maximizing the economic and social development of the country and minimizing the risks of domestic political instability.

In the first two-thirds of his term, Kim Jong-un apparently intended to prioritize economic growth and social development, including by introducing market mechanisms. However, since around 2019, security concerns seem to have prevailed over economic growth plans.

Fencing itself off from the outside world, which has always been characteristic of North Korea one way or another throughout its history, may be useful for maintaining socio-political stability. But it comes at an inevitable price in the form of slower economic development. While until the end of the 1960s, North Korea was ahead of South Korea in terms of economic growth, the situation reversed in the 1970s. According to the North Korean government, the country's GDP in 2019 was $33.5 billion (Voluntary National Review, 2021, p. 7), while the South Korean economy in the same year was estimated at $1.7 trillion—the gap is more than 4,900 percent. Nearly 42% of North Koreans suffer from malnutrition, according to the UN (Korea Herald, 2022).

North Korea's economic backwardness is not only due to the peculiarities of the Stalinist command and administrative system, the ideology of Juche autarky, and the desire to preserve the ideological purity of the population by minimizing contacts with the outside world. A significant negative role is played by international sanctions initiated mainly by the United States, South Korea, and Japan to strangle North Korea economically. North Korea is the world's most heavily sanctioned country. Under the current sanctions, almost any commercial interaction with North Korea is prohibited.

The isolation and growing economic backwardness cannot but affect the development of North Korea's military capabilities. According to various estimates, it invests about 20-25% of GDP in

developing and maintaining its military, while the share of defense spending in South Korea is about 2.5-3% (World Factbook, 2023). A huge difference in the size of the economies of the two Korean states causes an increasingly growing gap between their military budgets. In addition, the relationship between the defense and civilian sectors has changed worldwide in recent decades. While earlier the development and production of weapons was a relatively autonomous business, which was barely connected with civilian industries, now the military-industrial complex in the leading countries is getting closely integrated with the civilian economy. The defense industry used to be an important source of technological innovation for the civilian economy, but now the opposite trend prevails: technological achievements in the civilian sector are converted into military R&D. More and more products and services in the modern world serve a dual purpose. As a result, if a state does not have a sufficiently developed and large-scale civilian economy, its military-industrial complex begins to degrade and lose to competitors. This trend already manifested itself during the late Cold War: the widening gap between the USSR and the West in general-purpose electronic and information technologies threatened to undermine the military-strategic parity that Moscow had reached with such difficulty by the 1970s.

Owing to the talents of its scientists, engineers, and intelligence officers, as well as its ability to mobilize resources to achieve priorities, North Korea has managed to become a nuclear-weapon state. North Korea currently has at least a few dozen nuclear warheads and a wide range of their carriers such as liquid and solid-fuel ballistic missiles of various ranges as well as cruise missiles.

In November 2017, North Korea successfully tested its Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), after which Kim Jong-un announced that North Korea had "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force" (CNN, 2017), meaning that Pyongyang now had a means of retaliation against the U.S. However, the Hwasong-15 was not the end of the North Korean nuclear missile program. In 2022 alone, the country carried out about 70 missile launches—a record number in the history of the North Korean

missile program. In particular, in 2022 and 2023, North Korea tested a Hwasong-17 super-heavy ICBM and a Hwasong-18 solid-fuel ICBM.

Obviously, Pyongyang has more than enough nuclear missile capabilities to deter potential adversaries, including the United States, from aggression against North Korea. But why does Pyongyang continue to increase its missile arsenal quantitatively and qualitatively, making it obviously redundant from the military point of view? Most likely, this missile race exposes North Korea's weakness and vulnerability rather than strength. North Korea keeps moving along the trodden nuclear missile path largely because it is exorbitantly difficult and costly for the country to master new military technologies. The acute shortage of resources forces North Korea to focus on the development of nuclear weapons and missiles to the detriment of most other defense industry segments.

It is no secret that nuclear weapons are the most cost-effective way to ensure the military security of a state facing serious external threats; it is much cheaper than creating and maintaining conventional armed forces with comparable striking power. The first state to adopt this strategy was the United States. In the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower, guided largely by fiscal austerity reasons, initiated the New Look doctrine, which focused on a massive nuclear response to the Soviet Union's conventional land forces.

North Korea's conventional (non-nuclear) forces are not in good shape. Despite its impressive size—the Korean People's Army (KPA) has more than a million personnel—its combat effectiveness raises questions, if only due to the fact that a significant part of KPA members is not engaged in military training but is used by the government as labor at construction sites, in agriculture, etc.

Although North Korea is surrounded on both sides by the sea, its military consists mainly of land forces. North Korea has little to no air and sea power. This is most likely due to a lack of funding, as these military branches are quite costly. The North Korean Air Force has, according to various estimates, from 400 to 800 aircraft (Korea Times, 2023), but almost all of them are morally and technically obsolete. The newest aircraft are MiG-29 fighters received from the Soviet Union in

the 1980s. In tune with the global trend, Pyongyang is making efforts to build its own drones. It has recently shown unmanned aerial vehicles that look very similar to the U.S. flagship reconnaissance and strike drones Global Hawk and Reaper. However, despite external similarities, it is unlikely that North Korean devices are approaching American systems in tactical and technical efficiency (Van Diepen, 2023).

The KPA Navy has not been upgraded for a long time and consists mainly of obsolete ships, suitable only for operations off the peninsula's coast. North Korea's most modern and powerful surface ships now are probably two Amnok-class corvettes adopted in the past ten years (Ryabov, 2023). These relatively small ships with a displacement of 1,500-2,000 tons are unlikely to effectively fight American, Japanese or South Korean navies.

There is no significant progress in the North Korean program to build strategic submarines capable of carrying ballistic missiles (and nuclear-powered in the future). In September 2023, North Korea launched its "first tactical nuclear attack submarine," which is claimed to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons (KCNA, 2023a). However, apparently it is a converted old diesel-electric submarine based on a Soviet project from the 1950s (Cherkashin, 2023). Modern submarines are in many ways even more sophisticated than missiles and nuclear warheads. Military shipbuilding is one of the most resource-intensive industries. A modern submarine requires thousands of tons of expensive metal and other special materials.

Given the technological, financial, and resource constraints, North Korea is unlikely to be able to create a fleet of strategic surface ships and submarines in the foreseeable future. The same can be said of many other critical aspects of the modern military. For example, North Korea, apparently, has nothing to boast about in the development of network-centric combat control systems, which are crucial for effective large-scale combat operations today.

The comparative weakness and backwardness of North Korea's conventional forces leaves Pyongyang no freedom of maneuver on the escalation ladder. In other words, if a serious military conflict breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea has extremely limited

possibilities to keep it from going nuclear. Since the North Korean conventional forces are inferior to those of the U.S.-South Korean alliance (plus Japan) by an order of magnitude, a war without the use of nuclear weapons will most likely lead to a rapid defeat of North Korea. If in a bid to make up for the shortage of conventional power, Pyongyang uses nuclear weapons, this will, with a high degree of probability, entail a retaliatory nuclear strike and the end of North Korea's existence as a state. Should war start on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will face an agonizing choice between losing a conventional conflict and putting itself on the brink of total destruction by nuclear escalation.

North Korea's economic weakness and isolation makes it increasingly dependent on China. This, in turn, limits the development of North Korea's military capabilities even in its trademark sectors. Why has it not carried out the seventh nuclear test, which was expected first in 2022 and then in 2023, and which is supposedly necessary for the further miniaturization of its warheads? (Reuters, 2022). It is possible that North Korea has no urgent need to carry out new nuclear tests, because it obtained all the necessary data during the previous six explosions. But it is also possible that Beijing has strongly advised Pyongyang against resuming nuclear testing. First of all, the North Korean Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility is located just 90 kilometers from the border with China's Jilin Province, and the nuclear detonations at the test site create obvious risks for the surrounding areas. Secondly, and more importantly, Beijing may be worrying that North Korea's nuclear tests will exacerbate the risk of further militarization and even nuclearization of Northeast Asia, which may prompt South Korea and/or Japan to acquire nuclear status. China accounts for more than 90% of North Korea's foreign trade. China is also the main provider of economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea. For this reason, Pyongyang cannot but listen to Beijing's admonitions.

There is yet another external factor that does not play into Pyongyang's hands. It is the evolving structure of the international system. On the one hand, tension is rising in global politics between the great powers, which works in North Korea's favor, allowing it to play its favorite game using contradictions between the great powers.

But things are not so simple, because the modern international system is becoming increasingly bipolar, with the United States and China being the main centers of power. In the classic bipolar world, the significance of all other players except the two superpowers is minimal. Superpowers are so ahead of all others in their strength and might that the transition of one state from the camp of one superpower to neutrality or even its defection to the other side, as a rule, cannot significantly affect the overall balance of power in the system (Waltz, 1964). Does this not largely explain the loss of Washington's interest in playing games with North Korea? Several years ago, quite a few U.S. politicians and experts entertained a view that North Korea should be torn away from China to make it a quasi-partner of the United States, somewhat similar to the Vietnamese scenario. No one is talking about that today. Washington has probably come to realize that North Korea's hypothetical transition into the category of American friends is unlikely to affect the confrontation with China. The outcome of the rivalry between the two superpowers will be decided regardless of Pyongyang's position.

SOUTH KOREA: A GLOBAL PLAYER WITH LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY

Despite North Korea's nuclear arsenal, the main agent of change on the Korean Peninsula will most likely be Seoul rather than Pyongyang. South Korea's economic and technological potential, coupled with its integration into the global system, gives it a number of serious advantages over North Korea.

There is no doubt that South Korea is a junior ally of the United States. In this sense, South Korea, as Vladimir Putin has rightly noted, "lacks sovereignty" (News Conference, 2019). However, Seoul has managed to effectively convert its status of an American ally into tangible economic and technological benefits. In the 2000s, South Korea became one of the top ten industrial powers in the world. It passed a symbolic milestone in 2018 when it outdid Japan in terms of GDP per capita (Katz, 2022).

In terms of world-systems theory, the Republic of Korea has moved since its founding from the periphery of the world capitalist system

to its core. South Korean presidents are invited as special guests to the G7 summits, and the country may become a full member of this club of leading Western economies in the near future. Seoul's growing ambitions are also evidenced by the fact that during Yoon Suk Yeol's presidency, South Korea has begun to position itself not just as a "middle power," but as a "global pivotal state."

South Korea has impressive military capabilities. Its military-industrial complex produces an almost complete range of modern combat materiel, including tanks and armored vehicles, artillery, ballistic and cruise missiles, aircraft and helicopters, reconnaissance satellites, surface ships of various classes, and submarines.

South Korea has become a major arms exporter. In 2022, its arms export contracts reached a record amount of $17.3 billion. South Korean systems are more and more often purchased by developed and rich countries such as Australia, Poland, the UAE, and Norway. The South Korean government has set the task of becoming one of the top four arms exporters in the world. In developing arms and military equipment, South Korea places special emphasis on space-related and digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and robots (KoreaPro, 2023).

The only strategic area where South Korea falls behind North Korea is nuclear weapons. However, given South Korea's scientific, technological, and industrial potential, and the fact that the country is one of the world's leaders in civilian nuclear power engineering, all it needs to create nuclear weapons is make an appropriate political decision. As President Yoon Suk Yeol has noted, South Korea has the technological capabilities to quickly (within a year) create a nuclear bomb (Korea Herald, 2023). Shortly before that, in January 2023, Yoon publicly stated that the growing threat from North Korea could force his country to create its own nuclear weapons (Yang, 2023). So for the first time in the history of South Korea, its top leader has mentioned the possibility for his country to acquire nuclear status. But Yoon is not the only South Korean politician to flirt with the idea of nuclearization. The incumbent Seoul mayor and a potential candidate from the ruling People Power Party in the next presidential election, Oh Se-hoon, has also urged South Korea to build its own

nuclear weapons. Opinion polls show that up to 70% of South Koreans support this idea (Reuters, 2023).

Another indicator of South Korea's strategic ambitions is its intention to start building its own nuclear-powered submarines. This decision was made by the previous administration led by Moon Jae-in, but the project was put on hold under Yoon Suk Yeol. Building a nuclear submarine is a feasible task for South Korea, which is one of the world's leaders in both shipbuilding and nuclear power engineering. The creation, in September 2021, of the Australian-UK-U.S. bloc AUKUS, whose main mission, among others, is to transfer nuclear submarine technology to Australia, albeit without nuclear warheads, set a precedent increasing the likelihood that South Korea will sooner or later build its own nuclear submarine fleet (Song, 2023).

South Korea's successes, including in the military-industrial complex, are largely based on close cooperation with the United States and other Western countries. So far, this cooperation is asymmetric, with Seoul being mainly a recipient of Western technology. A case in point is the KF-21 Boramae multirole fighter aircraft. Only 65% of its components come from South Korea. The engine is supplied by the American company General Electric (Hankyung.com, 2021). Other technological partners are the American companies Lockheed Martin, Martin-Baker, United Technologies, Texstars, and Triumph Group, Swedish Saab, Israeli Elta Systems, Spanish Aeronautical Systems, British Cobham and Meggitt, and a number of other Western manufacturers (Wikipedia).

South Korea's economic and military strengthening makes one wonder whether changes in its geostrategic orientation can be expected. Significant changes in Seoul's foreign policy are unlikely in the next five to seven years. Its geostrategy will still be geared towards an alliance with the United States, in which South Korea plays a junior role. There is no reason for Seoul to give up its ties with the United States, given its technological and military dependence on the West. In addition, decades of allied relations with the United States forged a firm belief in the South Korean consciousness, both among ordinary people and elites, that the Republic of Korea cannot survive without protection and support from the United States.

The most Seoul can afford is to evade being drawn into Washington's military-political arrangements that serve America's geopolitical interests but pose substantial risks to South Korea. It was this kind of policy that Seoul pursued under left-wing Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in, trying to maneuver between the United States and China. Current President Yoon Suk Yeol, however, is clearly committed to an even closer strategic relationship with the United States as borne out by the creation of a trilateral quasi-alliance between the United States, Japan, and South Korea (Vorontsov, 2023), which was long promoted by Washington but until recently held back by Seoul's unwillingness to reconciliate with Tokyo and quarrel with Beijing.

CONCLUSIONS AND FORECAST: FROM INTERNAL TO EXTERNAL BALANCING?

For 75 years, there have been two coexisting states on the Korean Peninsula—North Korea and South Korea—each of which claims to be the sole representative of the entire Korean nation. Throughout this time, the balance of power shifted between the two Koreas. Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, North Korea was stronger militarily and industrially. Then South Korea moved ahead, having taken full advantage of allied relations with the United States and integration into the global capitalist system. In the 1990s, North Korea found itself in a dire crisis but held out. In the 2000s and 2010s, North Korea achieved some success in economic development and at the same time acquired nuclear status, thereby partially compensating for its lagging behind the southern neighbor and creating prerequisites for equal dialogue with it.

Today, the balance of power between the two Korean polities is changing again. Pyongyang seems to have made its choice against market reforms and openness. The North Korean leadership has apparently realized that even controlled and gradual transformations by the Chinese or Vietnamese model would carry too many risks for the political system. There is logic to this: even if North Korea starts massive reforms, it is unlikely to come anywhere close to South Korea in terms of economic development in the foreseeable future. At

the same time, this scenario entails significant risks of socio-political destabilization in North Korea, especially since the other Korean state with an alternative ideology is nearby (Lankov, 2013). A considerable part of the South Korean elites is waiting for an opportunity to destroy the North Korean state. President Yoon Suk Yeol, who does not hide his dislike for North Korea, is one of them. It is not surprising that Pyongyang has decided to preserve the model of an autarkic fortress state. That this model is quite effective has been proved by the survival of the DPRK not only during the Arduous March in the 1990s, but also in recent years, when North Korea was hit twice, at first by almost blanket economic sanctions and then by a coronavirus pandemic.

One of the unconditional advantages of the Juche model is that it gives North Korea a high degree of political independence. North Korea is one of the few states in the world with genuine, not nominal, sovereignty. The main disadvantage of North Korean autarky is slow economic development, which has resulted in a massive material gap between the South and the North.

North Korea's economic and technological lagging behind South Korea affects the balance of power between the two states. Thanks to its industrial potential and military-technical cooperation with the United States and other Western countries, South Korea has become one of the leading military powers in the world. It surpasses North Korea in military strength by most parameters. North Korea's nuclear missiles are designed to make up for this difference. But Pyongyang's nuclear advantage is, in a sense, provisional and will only work until Seoul decides to go nuclear, which its technical capabilities allow it to do.

In addition, nuclear weapons have a very limited range of application. This is an effective means of deterring aggression, but otherwise it can hardly be of any use. The fact that nuclear weapons have never been used since August 1945 reflects not so much some moral and political "nuclear taboo" but the understanding that nuclear weapons are inapplicable in the vast majority of international conflicts. As a matter of fact, it was this understanding that made President John F. Kennedy abandon the doctrine of massive retaliation in favor of the Flexible Response policy, which shifted the emphasis to the need

to supplement the nuclear arsenal with a wide range of non-nuclear means to respond to crisis scenarios of varying scale and intensity.

North Korea cannot afford to acquire a full range of non-nuclear capabilities to develop its own version of the Flexible Response doctrine. At the same time, Pyongyang is aware that nuclear escalation on its part will lead to a massive retaliatory strike from the U.S.-South Korean alliance (and, possibly, Japan), which is likely to put an end to the existence of North Korea. This is why the North Korean leaders will only use nuclear weapons as a last resort when there is a direct and deadly threat to the existence of the state and its leadership. However, most military conflict scenarios between the two Koreas do not reach the level of existential threat, thus excluding the use of nuclear weapons. Such clashes involve non-nuclear weapons, in most of which North Korea is significantly behind the South Korea-U.S. alliance.

Without belittling North Korea's nuclear weapon achievements, these technologies date back to more than half a century ago, approximately matching the Soviet and American capabilities of the 1960s and early 1970s. For all its colossal power, classic nuclear weapons are not the magic ring of power. Like any technology, they gradually become obsolete and lose their power in the face of continuous scientific and technological progress. For the time being, North Korea's nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles remain an effective deterrent. But how effective will they be in ten or twenty years from now?

Since the end of the last century, a new revolution has been going on in military affairs (RMA) worldwide, characterized by the extensive use of precision weapons, information and computer technologies, drones, autonomous systems, robots, missile defense systems, etc. Weapons based on new physical principles are around the corner (RIA Novosti, 2023). Will North Korea have enough financial, scientific, and technological resources to take part in the new RMA? If North Korea fails to move to the next stage of military-technological progress, its security will become increasingly vulnerable even despite its nuclear arsenal. Some analysts believe that the progress made by the United States and its allies in creating new precision weapons, space and other surveillance systems, artificial intelligence, and drones may leave

North Korea practically defenseless against a first strike (Lieber and Press, 2017).

North Korea is a comparatively small country devoid of strategic depth and surrounded by potential adversaries. Its territory is in full view and exposed to enemy fire from the south (from South Korea) as well as from the southwest and east, where the warships and aircraft of the United States, South Korea, and Japan control the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, respectively. What makes things even worse for North Korea's nuclear forces is that they lack air and sea components, as all of their delivery systems are land-based and stationed inside the country. Creating a nuclear triad or at least a dyad (with strategic submarines added to ground-based ICBMs) is an almost impossible task for North Korea.

Pyongyang cannot but keep in mind the scenario under which adversaries launch a massive first strike with precision weapons on North Korea in order to eliminate the country's leadership and cripple its strategic military potential. Even if some North Korean nuclear missiles survive and retaliate, they will most likely be intercepted by the multilayered integrated missile defense system created by the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Today, this scenario looks rather hypothetical, but its feasibility will increase as the United States and its allies upgrade existing technologies and create new ones. For example, one of the promising ways to neutralize Pyongyang's deterrent forces is the proposed Airborne Patrol against North Korean missiles that will be shot down in their boost phase by drones constantly hanging along North Korea's maritime borders (Postol, 2023).

The North Korean top leadership is certainly well aware of the military-technological gap with a potential enemy and its own increasing vulnerability, as this gap will most likely grow wider. Based on a sober assessment of the situation, Pyongyang is trying to avoid situations that could lead to an armed conflict with South Korea. Pyongyang regularly uses belligerent rhetoric and holds exercises that simulate strikes on South Korea and American military facilities in Japan, including with the use of nuclear weapons (KCNA, 2023b). However, all these actions should be viewed as a show of determination to respond to a large-scale attack against North Korea rather than as evidence of Pyongyang's

aggressiveness or readiness to strike first. Despite periodic crises on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea actually behaves very carefully, avoiding crossing the line and provoking an actual clash.

It is noteworthy that the last significant military incident between the two Koreas took place a long time ago, in November 2010, when, in response to South Korean military exercises, North Korea opened artillery fire on the South Korean-controlled Yeonpyeong Island in the disputed area of the Yellow Sea, and South Korean artillery immediately fired back. There have been no military clashes on the Korean Peninsula since then. According to American officials in South Korea, "The North Koreans are talking a lot, but they are not doing anything that moves towards conventional military confrontation" (Sneider, 2023).

Another indication that Pyongyang has no offensive intentions is a change in official terminology regarding South Korea. Abandoning the practice established more than 70 years ago, North Korean officials and the media have recently begun to refer to the neighboring state by its official name—the Republic of Korea. In addition, terms related to the unification of the country and emphasizing the national unity of the two Koreas are more and more seldom found in North Korean publications. In all likelihood, changes in official discourse indicate that the North Korean leadership has scrapped the idea of unification with South Korea altogether (Asia Risk Research Center, 2023).

One can confidently say that North Korea will hunker down in the years to come, seeking to maintain the status quo. The main task is to survive as a sovereign political unit. The main impetus for change in the geopolitical situation on the peninsula will come from Seoul rather than Pyongyang. Since South Korea is stronger, it may be tempted to break the status quo and unite the country by annexing the North. So the risks to stability on the Korean Peninsula come from the south, not the north.

In the foreseeable future, South Korea is likely to remain a U.S. junior ally with limited sovereignty. But this does not mean that Seoul cannot play its own game. There are many examples in the history of international relations when junior allies provoked serious crises contrary to their patron's wishes. It cannot be ruled out that one day

South Korea will be ruled by people who consider it the right moment to do away with North Korea.

As Australian researcher Jeffrey Robertson, stationed in South Korea, notes, Seoul may make a "strategic surprise." It should also be borne in mind that a big role in the South Korean political system is played by the personal factor and individual characteristics of its leaders (Robertson, 2020). If an authoritarian leader harboring messianic ideas comes to power in South Korea, he/she can unleash a new Korean war. Compared to South Korean electoral democracy, the North Korean political system of a virtually hereditary monarchy appears to be far more predictable and less prone to surprises. In order to survive and retain power for generations to come, the Kim dynasty must pursue an extremely rational and calculated policy with a long planning horizon. And this is exactly how Pyongyang acts, by and large.

Since the early 1990s, North Korea has been in a situation that can be described as strategic loneliness. At first, it was a forced loneliness, because North Korea had lost its main allies, with Moscow turning its back on Pyongyang, and Beijing, while formally observing the 1961 bilateral treaty, distancing itself from North Korea in favor of interaction with an economically more attractive South Korea. However, North Korea eventually adapted to the new strategic situation and even felt quite comfortable in it. On the one hand, nuclear weapons boosted the newfound sense of confidence. On the other hand, North Korea had learned to skillfully maneuver and play on contradictions between the main centers of power in Northeast Asia—China, the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Russia.

In all likelihood, Pyongyang's strategic solitude is coming to an end. As argued above, given the ongoing revolution in military affairs, North Korea's nuclear arsenal can no longer be considered a completely effective long-term security guarantee, since nuclear weapons are generally useless in most crisis scenarios. North Korea's ability to independently reduce the growing gap in non-nuclear military capabilities with its potential adversaries is limited by the meager size of its economy and technological backwardness in key sectors. In terms of structural realism, North Korea has practically used up the possibilities for internal balancing. The only

option available to Pyongyang is external balancing, that is, building alliances with other international actors that can effectively help it ensure military security (on internal and external balancing, see Waltz, 1979). If Pyongyang wants to be protected from the threat posed by the growing U.S.-South Korean-Japanese alliance, it must renew military-political cooperation with Beijing and/or Moscow.

The bipolarization of the international system and the deepening confrontation between its main centers—the United States and China—have made Pyongyang's favorite game of balancing between great powers extremely difficult, especially since Washington seems to have lost interest in the idea of luring North Korea to its side. At the same time, amid a growing standoff with the United States and its allies, Beijing and Moscow, which a few years ago voted in the UN Security Council for tough sanctions against Pyongyang, are now increasingly interested in having North Korea on their side. All of the above pushes Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing towards each other, although it is not quite clear yet how exactly it will all play out.

It can be assumed that in the coming years Russia will become North Korea's main military partner, and China will be its main economic partner and diplomatic protector. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang in July 2023, a meeting between Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in September of the same year, and Kim's further tour of the Russian Far East with a focus on military facilities provide a clear clue about Pyongyang and Moscow's intentions to significantly step up military cooperation. A return to the Soviet-North Korean treaty of 1961 is unlikely, but the practice of modern international relations indicates that a formal alliance agreement, or lack thereof, does not always determine the real level of military-political cooperation between states. The supply of certain (non-nuclear) Russian weapons and technologies, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing can significantly help strengthen North Korea's security and allow Pyongyang to feel more confident vis-à-vis Seoul.

Unlike Russia, China is hardly prepared for large-scale military and military-technical cooperation with North Korea. One reason is that Beijing, apparently, is not yet ready to go too far in its confrontation with

Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, which will inevitably happen if China begins active military cooperation with North Korea. Moscow, however, has practically nothing to lose in relations with the quasi-NATO troika in Northeast Asia, as the United States, Japan, and South Korea actively support Ukraine and have imposed tough sanctions on Russia.

Given Beijing's cautious position, it would be premature to talk about a northern continental alliance between Russia, North Korea, and China against the U.S.-Japan-South Korea maritime trio in the south. But it may materialize a little later if Beijing finally loses the hope of reaching acceptable agreements with Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul.

However, Pyongyang itself may not want too close military-political rapprochement with Beijing, given the historical role of China as Korea's imperial suzerain and Pyongyang's strained relations with Beijing in the modern era. Russia, on the other hand, appears to be a politically equal and, therefore, more comfortable partner for North Korea.

The strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula and around it is obviously on the verge of some major changes. The only question is whether these transformations will be gradual and stretched in time, or they will happen quickly and dramatically.

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