



IS KIM JONG UN PREPARING FOR WAR?

BY ROBERT CARLIN AND SIEGFRIED
HECKER

Robert L. Carlin is a nonresident scholar at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey and a former chief of the Northeast Asia Division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the US State Department, where he took part in US-North Korean negotiations.

Siegfried S. Hecker is a professor of practice at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, a professor of practice at Texas A&M University, and a former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory and professor emeritus of Stanford University.

This [piece](#) was first published by [38 North](#), a publication of the Henry L. Stimson Center. It is republished with kind permission.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula is more dangerous than it has been at any time since early June 1950. That may sound overly dramatic, but we believe that, like his grandfather in 1950, Kim Jong Un has made a strategic decision to go to war. We do not know when or how Kim plans to pull the trigger, but the danger is already far beyond the routine warnings in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo about Pyongyang's "provocations." In other words, we do not see the war preparation themes in North Korean media appearing since the beginning of last year as typical bluster from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea).

Raising the specter of Pyongyang's decision to go to a military solution—in effect, to give warning of war—in the absence of "hard" evidence is fraught.

Typically, it will be met with the by-now routine argument that Kim Jong Un would not dare take such a step because he "knows" Washington and Seoul would destroy his regime if he does so. If this is what policymakers are thinking, it is the result of a fundamental misreading of Kim's view of history and a grievous failure of imagination that could be leading (on both Kim's and Washington's parts) to a disaster.

Historical

context

A failure to understand the history of North Korean policy over the past 33 years is not simply an academic problem. Getting that history wrong has dangerous implications for grasping the magnitude of what confronts us now. Without grasping in detail what, why, and how North Korean policy retained its central goal of normalizing relations with the United States from 1990 until 2019, there is no way to understand the profound change that has taken place in Pyongyang's thinking since then. This bedrock policy shift by Kim to gird for a war would only come after he concluded all other options had been exhausted, and that the previous strategy shaping North Korean policy since 1990 had irrevocably failed.

Although Pyongyang's decision-making often appears ad hoc and short sighted, in fact, the North Koreans view the world strategically and from a long-term perspective. Beginning with the crucial, strategic decision by Kim Il Sung in 1990, the North pursued a policy centered on the goal of normalizing relations with the United States as a buffer against China and Russia. After initial movement in that direction with the [1994 Agreed Framework](#) and six years of implementation, the prospects for success diminished when—in Pyongyang's eyes—successive US administrations pulled away from engagement and largely ignored North Korean initiatives. Even after the Agreed Framework fell apart in 2002, the North tried to pull the US back into serious talks by giving [unprecedented access](#) to the nuclear center at Yongbyon to one of us (Hecker). During the Barack Obama administration, the North made several attempts that Washington not only failed to probe but, in one case, rejected out of hand. There is much debate in the United States whether the North was ever

serious, and whether dialogue was simply a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

Our view is that argument was seriously flawed at the time, and today, it stands in the way of understanding not simply why things have developed to such a perilous stage, but more importantly, how dangerous the situation actually is. The issue has moved far beyond assigning blame. What is crucially important is to understand how central the goal of improving relations with the United States was to all three of the Kims who led the DPRK, and thus, how the North's completely abandoning that goal has profoundly changed the strategic landscape in and around Korea.

Strategic empathy

The second part of the answer as to why the current danger is being missed is the failure to fully understand how the failed [February 2019 Hanoi summit](#) affected Kim Jong Un's views, and how over the next two years the North reexamined its policy options. The June 2018 Singapore summit with President Donald Trump was to Kim the realization of what his grandfather had envisioned, and his father had attempted but never attained—normalization of relations with the United States. Kim poured his prestige into the second summit in Hanoi. When that failed, it was a traumatic loss of face for Kim. His final letter to President Trump in August 2019 reflects how much Kim felt he had risked and lost. Overcoming that psychological barrier would never have been easy, and it goes a long way in explaining the huge subsequent swing in North Korean policy. This was not a tactical adjustment, not simply pouting on Kim's part, but a fundamentally new approach—the first in over 30 years.

The first obvious signs that a decision had been made and a decisive break with the past was underway came in the summer and autumn of 2021, apparently the result of a reevaluation in Pyongyang of shifts in the international landscape and signs—at least to the North Koreans—that the United States was in global retreat. This shift in perspective provided the foundation for a grand realignment in the North's approach, a strategic reorientation toward China and Russia that was already well underway by the time of

the Putin–Xi summit of February 2022 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There are few signs that relations with China have moved very far, and, in fact, signs of real cooling in China–DPRK relations. However, ties with Russia developed steadily, especially in the military area, as underscored by the visit of the Russian Defense Minister in July and the Putin–Kim summit in the Russian Far East last September.

The North's view that the global tides were running in its favor probably fed into decisions in Pyongyang about both the need and opportunity—and perhaps the timing—toward a military solution to the Korean question. At the start of 2023, the war preparations theme started appearing regularly in high-level North Korean pronouncements for domestic consumption. At one point, Kim Jong Un even [resurrected](#) language calling for “preparations for a revolutionary war for accomplishing...reunification.” Along with that, in March, authoritative articles in the party daily signaled a fundamentally and dangerously new approach to the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), introducing formulations putting South Korea beyond the pale, outside what could be considered the true Korea, and thus, as a legitimate target for the North's military might. At the plenum last month, Kim made that shift crystal clear, [declaring](#) that “north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogenous ones any more.”

Hypnotized by “deterrence”

Washington and Seoul cling to the [belief](#) that their alliance backed by “ironclad” deterrence will keep Kim on the status-quo trajectory, perhaps with some minor provocations. There is a belief, entirely understandable, that more and more frequent symbols of our intent to retaliate will keep the North at bay, as will our oft-stated conviction that if the North attacks, the counterattack will totally destroy the North Korean regime. Yet, in the current situation, clinging to those beliefs may be fatal.

The evidence of the past year opens the real possibility that the situation may have reached the point that we

must seriously consider a worst case—that Pyongyang could be planning to move in ways that completely defy our calculations. Kim and his planners may target the weakest point—psychologically as well as materially—in what the three capitals hope is a watertight US-ROK-Japan military position. The literature on surprise attacks should make us wary of the comfortable assumptions that resonate in Washington’s echo chamber but might not have purchase in Pyongyang. This might seem like madness, but history suggests those who have convinced themselves that they have no good options left will take the view that even the most dangerous game is worth the candle.

North Korea has a large nuclear arsenal, by our estimate of potentially 50 or 60 warheads deliverable on missiles that can reach all of South Korea, virtually all of Japan (including Okinawa) and Guam. If, as we suspect, Kim has convinced himself that after decades of trying, there is no way to engage the United States, his recent words and actions point toward the prospects of a military solution using that arsenal.

If that comes to pass, even an eventual US-ROK victory in the ensuing war will be empty. The wreckage, boundless and bare, will stretch as far as the eye can see.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.