



***IS NORTH KOREA UNDERGOING A
FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT, OR MORE OF
THE SAME?***

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I have always followed Robert Carlin’s and Siegfried Hecker’s meticulous work with a keen interest and admiration. I share their belief that engaging with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is necessary, and I also think that, as they state in [their article](#) “Is Kim Jong Un preparing for war?” “a failure to understand the history of North Korean policy...has dangerous implications for grasping the magnitude of what confronts us now.” However, my understanding of Pyongyang’s policy of the last one or two decades is quite different.

There is one core statement in Carlin’s and Hecker’s article that I agree with: the danger of a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula has been growing for some time—and it keeps growing. Apart from that, however, I mainly diverge.

The authors argue that from 1990 to 2019, the DPRK “pursued a policy centered on the goal of normalizing relations with the United States as a buffer against China and Russia.” I assume that they talk about a security buffer, not an economic one, as most parts of the world, at least during Kim Jong Il’s time, would have welcomed stronger economic interchanges with North Korea, and some, including the US, even offered incentives. But the idea of Pyongyang wanting to rely on Washington security-wise, seems far-fetched indeed. Never have I encountered any indication of this. On the contrary: hostility towards the US is one of the core tenets of North Korea’s ideology of self-reliance; it serves as justification not only for its overspending on the military, but also for the regime’s other deficiencies.

The authors claim that North Korea “tried to pull the US back into serious talks by giving unprecedented access to the nuclear center at Yongbyon to one of us” (for clarity: during the time of Hecker’s visit in January 2004, the Six-Party-Talks (6PT) had been on-going for half a year). I do not know how much reticence there had been in Washington before agreeing to a resumption of talks with Pyongyang. But in any case, the authors do not mention that it was Pyongyang that proved to be not willing to comply with the agreements reached in the course of the negotiations (mainly the [September 2005 agreement](#), and in big part because of verification issues) and that it was Pyongyang that finally, in 2009, pulled out of the 6PT altogether. This is a one-sided summary of the 6PT by the authors, at best.

The authors claim that because of the failure of the Hanoi summit in 2019, Pyongyang reoriented its policy away from seeking a “buffer” arrangement with Washington toward China and Russia and toward “a military solution to the Korean question.” They note that from 2023 on, war preparedness was repeatedly mentioned in the official media, that “at one point, Kim Jong Un even resurrected language calling for ‘preparations for a revolutionary war for accomplishing...reunification,’” and they correctly mention that the recent shift in Pyongyang’s South Korea policy has made South Korea a “legitimate” military target. They do not explain, however, why the

consequence of a breakdown of talks with the US would necessarily have to be war with the South.

I agree that the international conditions (war in Ukraine, tensions because of Taiwan, etc.) are favorable to North Korea and that Pyongyang has been trying to increase tensions for some time. However, this process did not start after Hanoi, but much earlier, around the beginning of Kim Jong Un's reign with e.g., the breakdown of the Leap Day Agreement, a new military doctrine and the *byungjin* policy ("parallel" development of the economy and nuclear arms which, however, in fact, meant a further increase of military funding, as even high officials privately admitted to me in those years). At about the same time, the official language became more aggressive as well. Threats about a "holy war of reunification," implicitly or openly, including the use of nuclear bombs even against South Korea, were repeatedly made well before Hanoi.

Some examples: In 2013, a couple of days after the American and South Korean Defense Ministers had agreed on a "Tailored Deterrence Strategy Against North Korea Nuclear and Other WMD Threats," the North Korean General Staff [declared](#) that Pyongyang would counter US-ROK plans to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons by preemptive measures such as a first strike at the slightest sign of such preparations. In July 2014, Hwang Pyong So, Head of the General Political Bureau of the Armed Forces, [threatened](#) nuclear strikes against the White House and the US military bases scattered across the Pacific.

In 2015, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland [stated](#):

...The DPRK's access to smaller, precision and diversified nuclear strike means was designed to conclude the final battle with the US in its mainland. But we do not hide that if the south [sic] Korean warmongers offer cannon fodder for US war of aggression against the DPRK, south Korea will also be the target of our retaliatory strikes.

Or, in 2016, in the [words](#) of the Chief of the General Staff:

If the US imperialists and the south Korean puppet warmongers persistently stage nuclear provocation...the powerful revolutionary Paektusan army will launch a preemptive strike of severest punishment in the sky, land, seas and underwater without any restriction and without any warning and prior notice...until the historic cause of national reunification is accomplished and the root cause of aggression and evil is totally eliminated.

In July of the same year, according to the North Korean media, the country conducted ballistic missile tests to [prepare](#) for the preemptive strike of the ports and airports in South Korea from which it was assumed the US would use nuclear weapons against North Korea. And in 2017, Hwang Pyong So [threatened](#) to destroy "the strongholds of aggression through merciless preemptive strikes of Korean style and accomplish the historic cause of national reunification." At times, however, Pyongyang has also said that it would "never" use nuclear weapons against South Korea.

So basically, there is nothing new in Pyongyang, but—and here, I agree with the authors—recently, there has been an increase in this kind of violent language.

This recent propaganda increase has nothing to do with a policy shift after Hanoi, but the timing is related to the coming US presidential elections. In the run-up to Hanoi, the North Koreans had hoped that President Trump—whom they considered the weakest link—would give in to their requests. Although they did their best to minimize the State Department's influence on Trump (see Stephen Biegun's [interview](#) with Arms Control in 2021, at that time, Trump did not agree to their demands. I do not think Pyongyang believes it can influence the outcome of the US presidential elections. But it surely believes that a Republican victory (preferably with Trump, but even with some of the other Republican contenders) would give North Korea a second chance to further its objectives. I thus believe that Pyongyang (following a well-established negotiating pattern employed, e.g. in the run-up to the Olympic Winter Games of 2018) will continue to increase tensions

until after the US elections, but that at the height of tensions, it will finally be willing to re-engage with a Republican Administration in the hope to get sanctions relief, some sort of acceptance of their nuclear program, and—as main objective—a reduction or even complete withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula.

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