



CSCAP — NUKES, DISINFO, DPRK

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President Vladimir V. Putin and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, in Pyongyang on June 2024. Source: Kristina Kormilitsyna/Agence France-Presse—Getty Images

The cloud hanging over the annual CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Indo-Pacific, held in Thailand in August, was Russia's veto of the UN Panel of Experts (PoE) mandate extension, the body responsible for keeping the sanctions regime against North Korea accountable — now obsolete. Sanctions have been one of the primary ways to deal with the Kim family's nuclear passion project since its first test in 2006. Besides the obvious lack of sanctions enforcement accountability, this move speaks greater about the developments of the Russia-North Korea relationship and the Russia-

China-Iran-North Korea “axis of evil” at large. Russia's emboldening of North Korea's nuclear program is arguably part of a greater information campaign, one that aims to irritate the West and scare their adversaries into appeasement.

It's no surprise that the recent arms transfers to fuel Russia's doomed war machine might have something to do with this new development. But an overlooked aspect in the nonproliferation and disarmament game is at play in this dangerous splitting off from international nuclear norms, and it lives in the information space. Disinformation and other moves to manipulate public perception can play a serious role at the negotiating table and in the acceptance of norms.

But first, let's not forget that Russia has not always maintained this cozy attitude toward the DPRK and measures that would escalate nuclear tensions. No matter how consistently opposed to the West Russia might have been on other security issues since the nonproliferation conversation began at the end of WWII, Russia actively supported the sanctions regime against North Korea, largely voted with the United States at the UNSC level, and shared an interest in keeping the spread of weapons at bay. Despite some exceptions around counterproliferation when it came to U.S. allies, the norm of avoiding mutually assured destruction persisted.

To understand the Russian divergence further into nuclear hostility, we must first understand Russia's perception of itself in the current global order. Russia has more or less been isolated from the global community since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and is on a search to find allies (and weapons) in anyone. The expanded engagement with North Korea, marked in part by Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June — the first since 2000 — is evidence of this desperation.

The Russian narrative similarly blames isolation by the international community (read: United States) for making North Korea the way it is, both in terms of its horrible living conditions and in spurring its hostile nuclear behavior. North Korea had no choice, Russia wants you to believe, to turn out this way, thanks of course to the United States and the West. Given the

current geopolitical timing and Russia's isolation by sanctions, this narrative mimics Russia's projection of herself as the victim. Russia's decision-making in regard to this vote can be explained by drawing parallels to how they themselves have been treated by the international community.

From the North Korean side, the Kim regime wants to project a position of strength. Arguably, the public relations aspect is the reason the Kim family conducts their missile tests and keeps up its nuclear arsenal — to project power. Even in a traditional security topic like nuclear proliferation, perception is as equally important as the science.

How Russia conceptualizes its place in nuclear Asia is another indicator of the direction their nuclear decision making might take. Russia has nuclear cooperation with almost every country in Southeast Asia, with Rosatom regional headquarters stationed in Hanoi. To the Indo-Pacific, Russia is aiming to manufacture a perception that its nuclear arsenal is modernized and that they are a worthy partner for peaceful use. Countries like Vietnam, for instance, are exploring the possibility of a Russian partnership for the development of a floating nuclear power plant. As the only country that has achieved this feat, Russia represents the obvious choice for partnership.

These examples demonstrate that chaos created in the information space can then be used at the negotiating table. Right now, it's being utilized by Russia and North Korea to instill fear in a growing alliance of the Kremlin's "military powerhouse" and a nuclear-ready DPRK.

So, how do we pull the delicate strings of this issue to draw these states toward our mutual goals of deterrence and stability? We can all agree, as expressed multiple times throughout the CSCAP, that we are living in dangerous and unpredictable times. And, as is likely said at every year's conference, "This year is the most alarming! Things have never been this bad!" One key to managing Russia's growing influence in nuclear Asia is to play the game of managing perceptions. If Russian actions toward North Korea's nuclear program are perceived as problematic to Southeast Asian prospective partners

and fumbles deals for Rosatom, Russia could change its posture toward North Korea and once again support accountability measures. This will require an active information campaign by like-minded states to raise awareness on the hostility of Russian actions via leniency on North Korea and the consequences this might have on the region. This will be particularly effective on countries seeking to expand their nuclear programs solely for peaceful use, which happens to be every country in Southeast Asia on Russia's business docket as evidenced by the South East Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ). The cards are in the favor of like-minded states working to keep the North Korean threat at bay — they just have to play them.

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