China, the United States, and the Two Koreas

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Abstract

China, by various stratagems, made sure North Korea developed nuclear weapons, thereby frustrating the United States. President Trump, in his first term, hoped to separate Pyongyang from Beijing but failed. It appears he will try again, perhaps by again offering a nuclear freeze. In the meantime, a bold North Korea has merchandised missiles to Iran, perhaps providing all the components for an intercontinental ballistic missile. South Korea's leftist president, Lee Jae Myung, has made fresh overtures to Pyongyang, but Kim Jong Un is turning them down. Korean issues will almost certainly be discussed in talks between Trump and Xi Jinping.

Keywords: China, North Korea, South Korea, United States, Iran, Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, Kim Jong Il, Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Jae Myung, Vladimir Putin, nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, proliferation, Sunshine Policy, denuclearization

Introduction

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to Pyongyang in early April 2026 to lay the groundwork for a state visit by Xi Jinping. "Analysts," the *Wall Street Journal* reported that month, "say the trip is a signal to the White House that Beijing remains indispensable in any potential negotiations regarding North Korea's nuclear program and regional security."[1] President Donald Trump wants to talk to Kim Jong Un. Some think the American leader and Kim will meet sometime in his second term. There was, as the Stimson Center's Joel Wit reported, even speculation that the pair would sit down in Beijing in the middle of May 2026.[2]

In his first term, Trump created history by meeting a North Korean leader, Mr. Kim, in June 2018 in Singapore and stepping onto North Korean soil, at Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone, in 2019. Ultimately, neither Trump nor Kim got what he wanted from their series of negotiations, a failure evident at the February 2019 meeting in Hanoi and during the aftermath of their "made-for-TV spectacle"—the characterization of the *New York Times*[3]—or "mesmerizing reality

show"—Joel Wit's words[4]—at their "snap summit" at the DMZ in June 2019.

Because America and North Korea have not—perhaps cannot—come to terms by themselves, is China's assistance necessary for a reconciliation between the United States of America and the DPRK, as the North Korean regime calls itself?

China Is Not the Answer

The answer is no. China, despite what its diplomats constantly maintain, is almost certainly an obstacle to such an accommodation. We need context. China for decades maintained that Pyongyang could not develop nuclear weapons. Beijing has always played the older brother role and had enormous leverage over the Kimist regime. Yet North Korea developed a nuclear arsenal, nonetheless.

It is not hard to see how that happened. The Chinese regime helped the North Korean one build the bomb by, among other things, permitting the transfer of technology, materials, and equipment. For instance, in the spring of 2016 David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security reported that North Korea was sourcing cylinders of uranium hexafluoride, vacuum pumps, and valves from China for use in its nuclear program.[5] Moreover, a Chinese company, Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development, late in 2016 was implicated in a scheme to sell to North Korea chemicals, including aluminum oxide, used in processing fuel for nuclear devices.[6]

The flow of materials from China to North Korea had continued for decades and was the result of Beijing's policy. If there is such a thing as "managed proliferation," the Chinese are its masters, and they skillfully played "the proliferation card," their most powerful tool for accomplishing their most important strategic objectives. "There is a circle of countries that want nuclear weapons," said Richard Fisher, a China military analyst at the International Assessment and Strategy Center, in the first decade of this century, "and in the center of that circle of evil is China."[7]

By now, China has stopped proliferating not because it has become a responsible actor but because it has already transferred everything the North Koreans needed to build an atomic device. As much as the world would like to think otherwise, the Chinese were willing to risk nuclear winter to get their way in the world.

Moreover, the Chinese regime used its diplomatic weight to protect North Korea while it was developing the bomb. During the Six-Party Talks

in the early years of this century, for example, Beijing disappointed the Bush administration by repeatedly taking the North's side.

Since then, Beijing has continued to frustrate Washington. China, at sea and at land crossings, is facilitating commerce that clearly violates U.N. Security Council sanctions on North Korea. Beijing is also interfering in sanctions-enforcement activity in its peripheral seas. China's Hong Kong, due to Beijing's policies, has become a major hub of proliferant activities. China has done its best to disrupt the work of the U.N.'s Panel of Experts.[8] China, in short, protected the Kim regime as it developed the world's most destructive weapons. Moreover, it is still shielding Pyongyang as it enlarges and improves its arsenal.

Trump in his first term tried to separate North Korea from China, and he is, from all appearances, attempting the same thing now. Although it has been quiet in the "cockpit of Asia" in the last several years, there is at this moment a great need to defang the Kim regime. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in April 2026, the North is "quickly advancing its ability to expand its nuclear arsenal." It is, among other things, completing construction of what appears to be another uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon, its main nuclear site. The regime already possesses an estimated 50 nuclear weapons—Trump in August 2026 declared the North possessed 57 of them[9]—and fissile material that can produce 40 more.[10] The armed-up regime is now intransigent. In March 2026, Mr. Kim "expressed no regret over the breakdown in nuclear-disarmament talks with Trump more than seven years ago."[11]

Freeze for Nuclear Recognition Is Back on the Table

Seven years ago, the Trump administration considered a nuclear freeze. The move would have been historic. American policy, since the beginning of the nuclear era in 1945, has opposed the spread of nuclear weapons. The freeze idea, however, went nowhere at the time.[12] Ultimately, it never became official policy, and Trump officials, such as National Security Advisor John Bolton, denied they were pursuing the concept.[13]

In any event, Pyongyang rejected such an arrangement. "Kim has suspended all meaningful dialogue with the U.S. and South Korea since the collapse of his diplomacy with Trump in 2019," reported the Associated Press in April 2026. "Kim has since taken a hard-line stance toward South Korea, which he now defines as his 'most hostile' adversary, and rejected U.S. offers to resume talks, calling on Washington to drop its demand for North Korea's denuclearization as a precondition."[14]

Now, the idea of a freeze leading to some recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state is back on the table in Washington. Trump's National Security Strategy, released in December 2025, includes no reference to denuclearization of the DPRK, a goal that has been in every such document since 2003. His 2017 strategy blueprint, for example, emphasized North Korea as a threat. The omission in the 2025 version, Reuters reported, has sparked "speculation that Washington may be angling to boost the chances of a diplomatic breakthrough with Pyongyang in 2026."[15]

The Risks of Recognizing a Proliferator

Some say a recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapons state is inevitable. The North announced its withdrawal from the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in January 2003 and detonated an atomic device in October 2006, thought to be its first test of such a weapon. North Korea thereby joined a small club. There are at present nine states possessing nukes. Kim Jong Un is now taking advantage of Trump's apparent change of decades-old nuclear strategy. "The concept of 'denuclearization' has already lost its meaning," the North Korean leader said in September 2025. "I say 'denuclearization' is the last, last thing to expect from us."[16]

Kim in February 2026 at the Ninth Congress of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea offered an olive branch of sorts: "We have no reason not to get along with the United States if it respects our country's current status, as defined in the constitution, and drops its hostile policy."[17] North Korea has amended its constitution on various occasions, most recently in 2023, to enshrine its possession of nuclear weapons.[18] "If the United States, freeing itself from its absurd pursuit of others' denuclearization and recognizing the reality, wants genuine peaceful coexistence with us, there is no reason for us not to come face to face with it," Kim said in December 2025.[19]

In the "second nuclear age," as Yale's Paul Bracken calls the post-Cold War period,[20] Trump's approach is certainly more realistic, as Kim's comments suggest, but a recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons power could convince other states, at this turbulent moment, to seek nuclear arsenals of their own.

North Korea poses another problem: It merchandises its arsenals. The DPRK sold equipment for Syria's Al Kibar reactor and perhaps nuclear components to Libya in the first decade of this century. The Kim regime, Mark Fitzpatrick states, has not transferred nuclear weapons equipment,

materials, or tech since then.[21] That assessment appears correct, at least from all that we know. Yet the North has been merchandising the means to deliver nuclear warheads, something that became evident during the ongoing Iran war. On March 20, 2026, Iran launched two intermediate-range ballistic missiles from its territory to Diego Garcia, the joint U.K.-U.S. military base in the Indian Ocean.[22]

Analysts were surprised that Tehran's regime possessed a missile that could reach the isolated facility, more than 2,000 miles off its coast. After all, in 2017 then Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei imposed a limit of 2,000 kilometers on the range of the country's missiles.[23] It appears the Iranians launched a Musudan, a North Korean intermediate-range ballistic missile.[24] "Tehran calls it a Khorramshahr, but it's really a 'Son of Musudan,'" Bruce Bechtol, coauthor of *Rogue Allies: The Strategic Partnership Between Iran and North Korea*, stated, referring to Iran obtaining this missile from North Korea in 2005.[25]

After the attempt on Diego Garcia, there is now concern that Iran can hit most of the capitals of Europe. Analysts do not think that Iran's missiles can go much further, however. For instance, Iain Boyd of the University of Colorado, in a piece issued after the attack on Diego Garcia, stated "there's no evidence that Iran has developed a new type of missile or that it can otherwise hit targets at the longer range."[26]

Boyd's view is fully supported by the American intelligence community. The Defense Intelligence Agency in a 2025 unclassified assessment stated that Iran could "develop a militarily viable ICBM by 2035 should Tehran decide to pursue the capability."[27] CNN reported in February 2026 that sources were saying that "there was no intelligence to suggest that Iran is pursuing an intercontinental ballistic missile program to hit the U.S. at this time."[28]

There is substantial evidence to suggest the consensus view is wrong, however. Bechtol, a professor at Angelo State University, believes that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea began to help the Islamic Republic of Iran develop an 80-ton rocket booster—almost certainly for an intercontinental ballistic missile—as early as 2013.[29] It appears that the booster came from North Korea's Hwasong-15. A Hwasong-15 has a range of 8,100 miles, and if launched from Iran could deliver a payload to any part of the continental United States. Iran may not have assembled all the components for such a missile, but it probably has all the necessary pieces.

In 2016, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned the North for the proliferation to Iran of an 80-ton booster.[30] Treasury in 2020 imposed a new set of sanctions targeting a party involved in "long-range missile development projects."[31] A U.N. Panel of Experts report also noted North Korea had been transferring "critical parts."[32] Bechtol believes that North Korea has been assisting Iran on missiles since 1983.[33]

Pyongyang has now sold to Iran the Scud, Nodong, Musudan, Unha, and Hwasong missiles.[34] "Assistance has been continuous and routine and was ongoing right up to the beginning of the current war," Bechtol says. "As North Korea has advanced its missile capabilities over the past 43 years, it has proliferated that capability to Iran."[35] North Korea, in short, has made Iran a real threat to more than just its neighbors.

North Korea for decades has been a missile powerhouse. And it has substantially raised the stakes in America's current war with Iran. "My worry: If we allow the current Iranian regime to continue to exist, the North Koreans will go right back in and re-arm them as soon as the war is over," Bechtol, the North Korea military and proliferation analyst, says. "It's what they did after the Twelve-Day War. I am hopeful that our decision makers will keep that in mind moving forward."[36]

Patrons and Profits: Why Kim Doesn't Need Trump

The picture is complicated by China's transfers of military equipment to North Korea. In 2012 American satellites first detected the transfer of 16-wheel TELs—transporter-erector-launchers—from China's state-owned China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp. to North Korea. These transfers provided the North with the means to transport—in other words, hide—intercontinental ballistic missiles that could reach the American homeland. Unfortunately, the U.S. did nothing effective to stop these equipment transfers from China to North Korea, either in 2012 or any time after. Washington eventually sanctioned Wuhan Sanjiang Import and Export Co. in October 2017 for the transfer of TELs,[37] but that was long after the fact. "This is both an overdue warning and a stunning illustration of U.S. government dysfunction," said Richard Fisher, referring to America's failure to sanction China earlier.[38]

Washington is not learning, however. In July 2024, Treasury imposed financial sanctions on five Chinese entities and six Chinese individuals for providing missile and space-related products to North Korea.[39] "Critics say the action is a rare and belated acknowledgement by the U.S. government that the North Korean nuclear missiles threatening U.S. cities

were built with Chinese technology and components," wrote Bill Gertz of the *Washington Times*. The measures, he points out, "are largely symbolic since they block all property and funds of the Chinese entities in the United States. Most of the companies and people linked to the missile proliferation are unlikely to have assets here."[40]

Moreover, North Korea has obtained valuable missile technology from Russia, in exchange for keeping Russia in the fight in Ukraine by providing artillery shells, short-range ballistic missiles, and soldiers to Vladimir Putin's forces.[41] Cash-strapped Moscow probably paid in kind, including information permitting the North to improve its missiles.[42]

As it has obtained technology from China and Russia, North Korea has tightened bonds with both regimes. Pyongyang and Beijing in 2021 extended their 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance for 20 years.[43] After locking in the People's Republic of China, the North enlisted the Russian Federation. Putin traveled to Pyongyang in June 2024 and signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which also contains a mutual defense provision. Now, two large powers have obligated themselves to protect the belligerent North Korean state.

Many scholars downplay the sustainability of the relationships among the three regimes, but as James Fanell of the Geneva Center for Security Policy pointed out in the middle of 2024, "China, Russia, and North Korea are more aligned today than at any time since the Korean War."[44] Fanell's assessment is even truer today.

All these moves have strengthened the Kim regime's economy. In 2025, gross domestic product grew 3.5% according to the Bank of Korea, South Korea's central bank.[45] That strong performance followed growth of 3.7% in 2024 and 3.1% in 2023. This three-year uptick followed three years of contraction and was largely attributable to weapons and other military sales. Now with cash from Russia and Iran—Bechtol estimates that Tehran has been paying the North about $3 billion a year for weapons and other assistance[46]—Kim has been able to stabilize his regime. For instance, the additional cash helps Kim buy the loyalty of elites, the so-called "gift politics" that has been an effective Kim family tactic for decades.

These developments make it difficult for President Trump to come to terms with North Korea should he pursue diplomacy at this time. The recovery of the North Korean economy, for instance, takes away the attractiveness of any Trump offer of economic assistance. The North's nuclear arsenal takes away the threat of force. "The entire United States is

within range of our nuclear weapons, and a nuclear button is always on my desk," Kim Jong Un graphically said in January 2018. "This is reality, not a threat."[47] The North's bigger arsenal has boosted Kim Jong Un's sense of power. He has, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "emerged more confident and defiant."[48] That confidence and defiance make him an even more difficult partner for Trump.

Kim, therefore, knows he does not particularly need Trump. His possession of nuclear weapons has even made the North Korean leader bold: He has threatened to use nuclear weapons pre-emptively. In April 2022, Kim stated that his regime's nuclear weapons would "never be confined to the single mission of war deterrent."[49] Moreover, a Trump offer to Kim of lasting friendship has limited value these days. The three generations of Kim rulers have always played two great powers, China and Russia, off against each other. The presence of a third great power does not give Kim Jong Un much more leverage, and it certainly complicates his calculations. In any event, Kim has to understand that, however much Trump may want to embrace his regime, that president will be out of office no later than January 2029 and that his successor will almost certainly be less willing to maintain robust ties with a despised North Korea.

Why Pyongyang Fears Seoul's Embrace

The one complicating factor is the other Korean state. At least on the surface, the Republic of Korea is creating a benign environment for Pyongyang. South Korea is now governed by President Lee Jae Myung of the Democratic Party of Korea, and from the time he took office in June 2025 Lee has tried to reach out to Kim Jong Un with various overtures, including his "three major goals."[50]

In March 2026, Lee unveiled his "Korean Peninsula Peace Package." This effort coincided with his proposal of a "'peace declaration' that reflects the political will to end the Korean War and kick off discussions for the establishment of a peace regime, including the signing of a peace treaty."[51] A July 1953 armistice ended three years of fighting in that conflict, but the combatants—the United Nations Command led by the U.S., China, and the two Koreas—have not signed a formal treaty ending the war. South Korea has not even signed the armistice.

Kim Jong Un, as is the nature of his family, has not reciprocated the South's offers. In February 2026, at the Ninth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, the North's ruling organization rejected all dialogue and engagement with the South. In March at the first session of the 15th

Supreme People's Assembly, he declared South Korea to be the country's "most hostile state."[52] Kim Jong Un had earlier signaled this stance: In 2024 he called the other Korea the "primary foe and invariable principal enemy."[53] North Korea, consequently, is not a willing partner in peace at a time that South Korea's government is trying to build bridges.

For various reasons, Kim rulers have been afraid of the South's overtures, reacting more negatively to leftist South Korean presidents who have tried to placate Pyongyang than overtly hostile conservative ones. Seoul's appeasement swung into high gear when Kim Dae-jung, the long-time opponent of Seoul's military regimes, became president in 1998 and immediately promoted his Sunshine Policy, named after the Aesop fable in which the Sun is able to persuade a man to take off his coat after the North Wind fails to do so.

The North did not react well at first to Kim Dae Jung's new direction. Critics called the president's new policy asymmetrical, non-simultaneous, and unbalanced—and ineffective in reducing tensions. The critics were right. The soft South Korean approach did not decrease military tensions; indeed, the DPRK even increased infiltrations and incursions.[54] Kim Dae-jung's Pollyannaish diplomacy with the North weakened ties with the South's protector, Washington, and Pyongyang just took Seoul's cash and continued developing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

Why? Pyongyang feared the much-criticized Sunshine Policy as fundamentally threatening. As North Korea watcher Selig Harrison noted, this strategy, in the eyes of the DPRK's leaders, was "more dangerous" than previous attempts at subversion "precisely because it was more subtle."[55] By making the North dependent on the South's generous assistance and one-way concessions, Kim Dae-jung, as Pyongyang saw it, was enticing Kim Jong Il into a trap, making him beholden to Seoul—and thereby paving the way for the ultimate elimination of the Kim Il Sung nation. North Korea, the state founded on the concept of self-reliance embodied in the concept of *Juche*, is deeply anxious about dependence on others but especially archenemy South Korea.

Nothing much has changed since then, unfortunately. The core problem is that the two Koreas are fundamentally different and are founded on beliefs that are irreconcilable. Kim rulers have always needed an enemy, even overtly friendly South Korean presidents. Therefore, the Kim family has made every one of them an enemy. More important, the North Korean regime can survive only if it is isolated. During the 1950s and 1960s, Kim Il Sung's system was producing growth and the South's

economy had not yet recovered from the Korean War. Yet the South under President Park Chung-hee blossomed and now is a prosperous society while the North has lagged. Unfortunately for Kim rulers, North Koreans question why the other Koreans—those south of the DMZ—are prospering while they are not.

Kim Jong Un can only defend his legitimacy if he gives his subjects a reason for their relative poverty. The reason is glorification of Kim-style socialism and the expulsion of foreigners from the peninsula. That means he has no choice but to maintain a hostile posture to the world, both friends and foes alike. For all these reasons, a "peace declaration" of the type proposed by South Korea's Lee is dangerous for the North Korean regime. That danger vastly complicates American diplomacy.

The Ultimate Complication: China

The ultimate complication for the Trump administration policy on Korea, however, is China. In short, China's Korea policy is to ensure that North Korea remains a threat to the United States and to woo South Korea from the United States. These goals are inconsistent with American objectives of maintaining peace and stability in North Asia.

Lee Jae Myung is certainly more friendly to Beijing than his predecessor, Yoon Suk Yeol. In substance so far, Lee's general foreign policy orientation resembles that of another progressive—leftist—president, Roh Moo-hyun, who governed from 2003 to 2008. President Roh once offered to "mediate" between Washington and Pyongyang as if his nation were a neutral bystander and had no stake in the outcome.[56] Roh also believed that his South Korea should play a "balancing role," switching sides on an issue-by-issue basis between the "northern alliance" of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang and the "southern alliance" of Washington and Tokyo. "The power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices we make," he said with just a touch of arrogance that was characteristic of South Korean society at the time.[57]

Ultimately, Lee's choices will be constrained by a China and United States that see each other as adversaries, if not enemies. Now, both sides believe the stakes are high. That is especially true of Xi Jinping's China. Beijing's words, carried on propaganda organs, are more than just propaganda. They are signals to Chinese leaders and officials that they must stridently oppose America. In May 2019, a landmark editorial in *People's Daily*, the self-described mouthpiece of the Communist Party and therefore China's most authoritative publication, declared a "people's war"

against America.[58] In March 2023, PLA Daily, the main propaganda organ of the People's Liberation Army, described that term as "total war."[59]

The two powers are in fact fighting a real war at the moment in Iran, where they are combatants on opposite sides. China has provided Iran with diplomatic support, propaganda support, financial support, targeting information,[60] and weapons; everything except combat personnel: soldiers, sailors, and pilots.

Conclusion

So, what will happen between China and the U.S. on the Korean peninsula? The two powers confront each other on a wide range of issues, and there is always horse-trading affecting all of them, including the Korean ones. Even if the Korean issues are not at the forefront of discussions, the ultimate result—a warm embrace or breakdown—between Beijing and Washington is bound to affect how they view Korea.

Koreans call their country "the shrimp among whales." Now the two biggest whales are engaged in a zero-sum contest. The South is long past the balancing role that Roh Moo-hyun enunciated and Lee Jae Myung would evidently like to pursue. Ultimately, South Korea will have to pick a side as it is unlikely that either Beijing or Washington will leave Seoul alone. As the stakes in Asia rise, President Lee will have far less room for maneuver.

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