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Preparing for the Future on the Korean Peninsula: OPCON Transition and Northeast Asia Command

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Abstract

The long-standing bilateral U.S.-South Korean agreement to transition wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces from Washington to Seoul has been constrained by South Korean nationalism and political factionalism as well as conflicting U.S. desire and reluctance to relinquish primary control. More broadly, the U.S. insists that its Indo-Pacific allies assume greater responsibility for their defense to enable U.S. forces to prioritize defense of the first island chain, including Taiwan. This has triggered conflicting recommendations for reorganizing the U.S. military command structure in the Pacific along with concurrent Korean fears of abandonment and entanglement.

Keywords: Operational control, OPCON, USFK, U.S.-South Korea alliance, Northeast Asia Command, Lee Jae Myung

Introduction

The transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces from the United States to South Korea has bedeviled the alliance for decades. The two countries agreed in 2007 to a long-term plan in which South Korea would assume greater responsibility for its own defense. The path has been fraught with South Korean nationalism and political factionalism, concurrent Korean fears of abandonment and entanglement, evolving U.S. objectives to reduce or redirect its overseas security commitments, and conflicting U.S. desire and reluctance to relinquish primary control.

In the United States, the issue is largely unknown outside a small coterie of government officials, alliance managers, and non-government experts. However, OPCON transition resonates strongly with the South Korean government, legislature, and populace. The South Korea quest for OPCON transition surges during progressive administrations and ebbs during conservative governments. Progressives perceive having their nation's military forces under the control of a foreign general as an affront and depict reclaiming OPCON as regaining national sovereignty and

redressing the imbalanced relationship between South Korea and the United States. Conversely, conservatives fear that changes to the alliance structure could weaken the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea and embolden North Korea to act more provocatively.

The United States insists that South Korea fulfill agreed upon conditions for attaining OPCON transition as well as more broadly assuming greater responsibility for its national defense. While consistent with decades of U.S. efforts to transfer security obligations, it also carries the perceived risk that OPCON transition could potentially enable Seoul to drag the U.S. into an unwanted conflict brought on by "adopting a disproportionate retaliatory response" to North Korean provocations.[1]

The concurrent election of progressive Lee Jae Myung as South Korean president and the return of Donald Trump to the White House have created a unique bilateral alignment that makes OPCON transition a greater possibility than ever before. Monitoring South Korean progress toward achieving the agreed-upon military conditions for OPCON transition remains important. However, more significant is the broader context of the Trump administration's notable departure from traditional, bipartisan U.S. views of its overseas security commitments. Trump's transactional and disdainful view of alliances reflect a greater U.S. willingness to transfer alliance security responsibilities with less regard of potential consequences. This is coupled with a willingness to use economic coercion to browbeat America's international partners into greater security responsibilities while promising less U.S. commitment to its allies.

Beyond navigating the rocks and shoals of OPCON transition, Washington and Seoul must also address differences over South Korean defense roles, modernizing the alliance, the level and focus of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula, as well as assess whether the United States should reorganize its command structure in northeast Asia.

Defining Operational Control

The U.S.–South Korea military relationship is the most cohesive command and control structure in the world. The Combined Forces Command (CFC) is an integrated binational command whereby subordinate units are led by either a U.S. commander/South Korean deputy or South Korean commander/U.S. deputy. During armistice (peacetime) conditions, the Chairman of the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) has day-to-day responsibility for defending the country as well as

equipping, training, and maintaining the country's forces. If war on the Korean Peninsula became imminent, the presidents of both countries would approve placing their military forces under the operational control of CFC, which would then become the alliance's warfighting headquarters. The CFC commander would lead combined U.S.–South Korean forces to defend South Korea and defeat the North Korea threat.

Since CFC's inception in 1978, its commander has always been a U.S. four-star general who concurrently serves as commander of United Nations Command (UNC) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). The CFC commander remains subordinate to the Military Committee, including the chairmen of both nations' Joint Chiefs of Staff—which provides strategic guidance, direction, and oversight—as well as the National Command Authorities (NCA) of both countries, including the Secretary/Minister of Defense and both presidents.

After wartime OPCON transition, the CFC commander would be a South Korean general with a U.S. general as deputy commander. The U.S. general would continue to serve as commander of UNC and USFK. The South Korean CFC commander would remain subordinate to the binational Military Committee and the NCA of both countries. As such, contrary to popular misperception of South Korean progressives, Seoul would not have "regained" command of its forces nor national sovereignty since it had not previously ceded either.

Contrary to the fears of South Korean conservatives, OPCON transition does not by itself lead to an "unzipping of the alliance." As part of the existing OPCON agreement, the United States has promised to provide "bridging capabilities" to assist in transition and "enduring capabilities" after OPCON transition. The second-term Trump administration has promised it will continue to provide "critical but more limited support"[2] though without defining how this might differ from previous agreements. Even after OPCON transition, the U.S. remains inexorably connected to the defense of South Korea by remaining a party to the 1953 mutual defense treaty, its continuing responsibilities as Commander of UNC, and the continuing presence of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula.

Operational Control vs. Operational Command

A potentially contentious issue for the American public and the U.S. Congress after OPCON transition would be placing U.S. troops under a foreign commander. However, it should be emphasized that U.S. troops

would be under foreign operational *control*, but not foreign *command*. The seemingly slight difference is significant since the presidents of both countries always retain command of their forces, even if they are placed under operational control of another country. Even today, South Korean forces would not be under U.S. command in wartime, but rather under its operational control and the CFC commander remains subordinate to both the U.S. and South Korean National Command Authorities.

Presidential Decision Directive 25, signed by President Bill Clinton in May 1994, delineated the difference between command and operational control of U.S. forces. The document underscores that the "President retains and will never relinquish command authority over U.S. forces. However, as Commander-in-Chief, the President has the authority to place U.S. forces under the operational control of a foreign commander."[3] The directive explains that command "constitutes the authority to issue orders covering every aspect of military operations and administration…. The chain of command from the President to the lowest U.S. commander in the field remains inviolate." Operational control, on the other hand, is a subset of command. It is "given for a specific time frame or mission and includes the authority to assign tasks to U.S. forces already deployed by the President, and assign tasks to U.S. units led by U.S. officers." However, the foreign commander cannot "change the mission or deploy U.S. forces outside the area of responsibility agreed to by the President, separate units, divide their supplies, administer discipline, promote anyone, or change their internal organization."[4]

U.S. forces have been placed under the operational control of foreign commanders since the Revolutionary War, including in World War I, World War II, Operation Desert Storm, and NATO operations. In all cases, U.S. commanders "maintain[ed] the capability to report separately to higher U.S. military authorities, as well as the UN commander…. The U.S. reserves the right to terminate participation at any time and to take whatever actions it deems necessary to protect U.S. forces if they are endangered."[5]

The Long History of OPCON Transition

U.S. military forces arrived on the Korean Peninsula in September 1945 to accept the Japanese surrender south of the 38th parallel and serve as the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) until 1948. During the time, the U.S. exercised OPCON over the Korean national police, constabulary, and coast guard. In August 1948, after the formal

establishment of South Korea, President Rhee Syngman and the U.S. commander signed an executive agreement "whereby the South Korean government would gradually assume command of their security forces," though the U.S. retained OPCON until the last occupation forces left Korea in 1949. After the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950, Rhee transferred OPCON to the United Nations Command, ending the short period when Seoul had full OPCON over its military forces.[6]

Following the 1953 Armistice, and as a condition for ratifying the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and keeping some U.S. forces in South Korea, Rhee accepted the November 17, 1954 "Agreed Minute" to the treaty. It stated South Korean forces would remain "under the operational control of the United Nations Command while that command has responsibilities for the defense of the Republic of Korea, unless after consultation it is agreed that our mutual and individual interest would best be served by a change."[7] In 1978, the bilateral U.S.-South Korea Combined Forces Command was created and assumed OPCON of South Korean forces from United Nations Command. In 1994, CFC transferred armistice (peacetime) OPCON of South Korean forces to Seoul, while retaining wartime OPCON.

During the 2002 South Korean presidential campaign, Roh Moo-hyun capitalized on prevalent anti-American public sentiment due, in part, to the tragic deaths of two schoolgirls caused by a U.S. military vehicle. As a candidate, Roh declared, "What's wrong with being anti-American?"[8] As president, he pushed for OPCON transition, declaring that the country would become "a truly independent military power" only by reclaiming wartime command.[9] Secretary of Defense Donald Rumseld wrote to subordinates in December 2002 that "rather than pushing back" against Roh's request to review the military relationship "we should accept it as a good idea." Rumsfeld was receptive to the idea of reducing the U.S. military footprint in South Korea and "using the country as a lily pad to reinforce in the event of a conflict initiated by North Korea [or to] have our forces there stop being so Korea-centric and instead be regionally oriented."[10]

Rumsfeld later told Roh, "You are pushing on an open door," which Richard Lawless, Rumsfeld's top official on Korea policy interpreted as, "We are ready tomorrow (for the transfer.)"[11] But Rumsfeld's willingness to reduce U.S. forces in Korea triggered a South Korean backlash due to fears of weakening defenses against North Korea, a reduction of the U.S. security commitment, and even that Washington might reduce its forces

as a prelude to a U.S. attack on North Korea.[12] Roh's prime minister requested Washington not remove its forces until tensions with North Korea over its nuclear forces were resolved."[13]

In 2007, President Roh again requested that the United States return wartime OPCON as a means of regaining South Korean national sovereignty and pride by "overcoming the nation's psychological dependence on the United States."[14] The U.S. accepted Roh's appeal, and both nations agreed to the Strategic Transition Plan that would dissolve the CFC and replace it with two separate, parallel commands—a Korean command under the South Korean JCS and a supporting U.S. Korea Command. After transition of wartime OPCON scheduled for April 2012, the Chairman of the South Korean JCS would command all South Korean forces and be responsible for the country's defense during both peace and war.

The planned dissolution of CFC was dangerously ill-advised because it violated the key military precept of unity of command during hostilities. The ability of a single commander to direct multi-service forces from two countries ensures unity of mission and achievement of objectives. Replacing a single integrated command with two parallel commands risked seriously degrading U.S. and South Korean deterrent and war-fighting capabilities. Delaying or overturning the transition became a quest for conservative South Korean legislators and former military officials, as well as both the subsequent conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations.

The Bush and Obama Administrations sought to maintain the original OPCON plan and assess the situation closer to the deadline. The transition plan included an integrated assessment and certification process to ensure South Korean security was not jeopardized. To allay Korean concerns, Washington pledged that its military capabilities, including air combat and strategic intelligence assets, would remain after the OPCON transition.

In June 2010, the United States acceded to President Lee Myung-bak's request for delaying the planned 2012 reversion of wartime OPCON until December 2015. In April 2014, President Barack Obama and President Park Geun-hye agreed to a second postponement. More significantly, Washington and Seoul agreed to shift from a time-based transition to a conditions-based transition. The 2015 Condition-based Operational Control Transition Plan (COTP) stipulated three primary prerequisites for OPCON transfer:

1. The South Korean armed forces must have acquired requisite military and command means to be able to lead the combined U.S.-South Korean forces;
2. to have sufficiently developed indigenous missile defense and preemptive attack capabilities against North Korean nuclear and missile threats; and
3. the security environment must have improved due to complete or significant North Korean denuclearization.[15]

Progress toward these conditions and the more extensive Combined Mission Essential Task List is to be evaluated in three phases - Initial Operational Capability (IOC), Full Operational Capability (FOC), and Full Mission Capability (FMC). IOC certifies the ability of South Korea to exercise wartime OPCON authority through a South Korean 4-star general. FOC tests the capability of the South Korean commander to manage the bilateral U.S. and South Korean military forces. FMC tests the material conditions of the South Korean military to perform all its possible missions.[16]

The progressive Moon Jae-in administration was largely a replay of Roh Moo-hyun's quest for OPCON transition. Finding a seemingly receptive environment with the first Trump administration's eagerness to transfer security responsibilities to allies, Moon pushed for OPCON transition during his five-year term. The 2017 Trump-Moon post summit communique included an agreement to "expeditiously enable the conditions-based transfer of wartime operational control" and Seoul's commitment to acquire critical capabilities. Subsequent bilateral Security Consultative Meeting statements outlined plans to achieve initial operational capability (IOC) certification in 2019 and Full Operational Capability (FOC) in 2020. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment that "all conditions of the mutually agreed COTP must be fully met before wartime OPCON transition to the F-CFC (Future Combined Forces Command)."[17] The Moon administration overplayed its hand by appearing overly eager to prematurely certify progress towards OPCON transition. U.S. officials worried that necessary conditions would not be met to the detriment of alliance deterrence against North Korea. Despite the Trump administration's interest in Seoul assuming greater defense responsibility, Washington resisted moving forward rashly.

The Biden administration did not share Moon's enthusiasm for rapid OPCON transition nor Trump's downplaying of alliances. Instead, the

Biden administration prioritized greater coordination amongst Indo-Pacific nations to create a "latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions" of flexible, overlapping partnerships amongst like-minded democracies to address regional security, technology, and economic challenges.[18] The election of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration returned a conservative administration wary of any action that risked weakening the alliance in the face of escalating North Korean capabilities and provocative behavior.

Renewed Advocacy for OPCON Transition

The election of a progressive South Korean president coinciding with a second Trump administration has aligned those in both countries who advocate OPCON transition but for vastly different, even contradictory reasons. South Koreans seek greater autonomy from the United States and to be less susceptible to Washington's security demands. Conversely, the Trump administration seeks to reduce U.S. responsibilities and perhaps its military footprint in South Korea while pushing Seoul to acquiesce to integrating itself into American plans to contain and confront Chinese actions against Taiwan.

In 2021, future president Lee Jae Myung echoed his progressive predecessors by asking: "What sovereign nation entrusts wartime command of its military to another country?"[19] Later as president, Lee continued to describe OPCON transition in sovereignty terms, "Self-reliant national defense is the most basic of basics amid the unstable international situation. [South Korea], with the world's fifth-strongest military, cannot be unable to defend itself."[20] In August 2025, the Lee administration released a five-year policy roadmap calling for the return of OPCON by 2030 during Lee's term. The government indicated it would develop an implementation plan in coordination with Washington while enhancing the South Korean military's command and control capabilities.[21]

Joint U.S.-South Korea statements following the Trump-Lee summit in October 2025 and bilateral defense meetings pledged commitment toward OPCON transition with Seoul pledging to "*accelerate* efforts to strengthen its military capabilities necessary to lead the combined conventional defense against [North Korea]."[22] During the November 2025 Security Consultative Meeting, the two sides reaffirmed that OPCON transition should "only occur once all [agreed upon] conditions…are met" but sought to *expedite* efforts for Seoul to acquire

the necessary conditions to "pursue the certification of Full Operational Capability (FOC) of the future Combined Forces Command headquarters in 2026."[23]

General Xavier Brunson, commander of UNC/CFC/USFK, emphasized that adhering to conditions is more important than transferring OPCON during a certain time period, "The main thing here is the conditions. We cannot say we're going to slide away from the conditions just so that we can get this done in time."[24] Yet, General Brunson told Congress that the allies have submitted a road map to the Pentagon to meet the required conditions "not later than the second quarter of fiscal year 2029."[25] However, the Lee administration may find it is pushing on an open door since the Trump administration seems more willing than previous U.S. administrations to lower the conditions-based requirements in order to reduce U.S. responsibilities in Korea. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth commented in May 2026 that, "It's a breath of fresh air for an ally to want to take more control more quickly. That is an instinct we want to continue to incentivize."[26]

Is South Korea Ready for OPCON?

The South Korean military is a highly capable force with advanced weapons and extensive training. South Korean military spending has increased and Seoul has devoted considerable resources and effort to improve its capabilities. However, while substantial progress has been made, significant deficiencies remain in the country's Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), its ability to conduct joint and combined operations, and to push tasking to U.S. or multinational forces. These shortfalls raise doubts about the viability of South Korea receiving wartime OPCON as quickly as President Lee is pressing for.

In July 2025, South Korean military officials told incoming Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back that the South Korean armed forces still fall short of the operational benchmarks needed for full command responsibility—especially in critical areas such as command and control, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Seoul remains heavily reliant on U.S. intelligence assets and battlefield command systems. Military experts assess that the military would need to dramatically increase its munitions stockpile and augment logistical capabilities to conduct autonomous wartime operations.

Tempestuous Time for the Alliance

While the biggest threat to the alliance remains North Korea, the biggest challenge to the alliance now comes from the United States. Donald Trump has long held negative views towards alliances, seeing them in transactional terms rather than the long-standing bipartisan consensus that alliances are in America's strategic interests as security force multipliers. Having bullied Seoul into a disadvantageous trade deal that violated the U.S.-South Korea free trade agreement and the U.S. Constitution, the Trump administration is demanding more and promising less to its security and economic partners. The U.S. pressed South Korea to increase defense expenditures to 5% of its GDP and Trump advocates that South Korea increase its annual payment to offset the cost of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. During Trump's first term, he sought to literally make a profit off American's sons and daughters in uniform stationed in Korea and Japan. More recently, he called for Seoul to increase annual contribution from $1 billion to $10 billion, claiming that South Korea "would be happy to do it."[27]

The U.S. has called for "modernization of the alliance," the new moniker given to the long-standing bilateral debate of "strategic flexibility." [28] Washington promotes a structural realignment of the bilateral defense relationship in which the potential invasion of Taiwan should be given precedence over other dangers in the Indo-Pacific region and that Seoul would assume greater responsibility to counter the North Korea threat. Doing so would enable to the U.S. to reorient the primary mission of U.S. forces in South Korea toward the China threat and reduce U.S. force levels in South Korea.

Growing Doubts of U.S. Credibility as an Ally

The dangers of international security threats that were highlighted in the first Trump term have been muted in the second term in favor of prioritizing economic objectives. Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) described North Korea as a ruthless dictatorship which threatened the American homeland by seeking "the capability to kill millions of Americans with nuclear weapons." [29] The first Trump administration declared that Pyongyang's determination to destabilize regions and threaten Americans and its allies was a global threat that required a global response. Washington vowed to achieve complete denuclearization and respond with overwhelming force to any North Korean aggression.

Gone from the 2025 second-term Trump NSS are the damning description of the heinous nature of the Chinese, Russian, and North Korea regimes and the numerous security threats that they pose to U.S. and allied interests.[30] A media report quoting several administration officials indicated Trump directed the softening of the NSS language of China being a security threat and to adopt a more conciliatory tone.[31] North Korea and the U.S. objective of denuclearization were not mentioned once in the 2025 document, their first omission from an NSS in over a decade. Instead, Trump has repeatedly extolled his "great relationship" with and desire to meet again with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.[32] Similarly, the U.S.-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group joint statement of December 2025 omitted *all* references to North Korea. The NCG statement during the Biden administration warned that any North Korean nuclear attack would be unacceptable and result in the end of the regime, but no such language appeared in the latest version.[33]

To respond to Indo-Pacific security threats, the first Trump administration NSS pledged to redouble its commitment to established alliances and partnerships, seek to expand relationships with new partners that shared U.S. values of respect for sovereignty, fair and reciprocal trade, and the rule of law, and maintain a strong military presence in the region. By contrast, the second-term Trump NSS of November 2025 directed a retrenchment to more narrowly defined American objectives. The document repudiated past American idealism in which the U.S. would sally forth in defense of other nations' democracy and sovereignty. There was no mention of the U.S. defense of treaty ally South Korea. The 2025 NSS accurately highlights the threats to Taiwan and the South China Sea but fails to identify China as the culprit. The concerns are framed as economic and trade challenges rather than as threats to defending the sovereignty of democratic countries that share American values and principles.

To its credit, the 2025 NSS document vowed to "strengthen U.S. and allied capabilities to block attempts to occupy Taiwan by linking maritime security issues along the First Island Chain."[34] However, there is a far greater focus on demanding that allies share and shift the burden of defense, with the statement that "...the American military cannot, and should not have to, do this alone." The document proclaims that "the days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over" and that America's allies and partners must assume primary responsibility

for their regions and contribute far more to collective defense while the U.S. serves as "convener and supporter."[35]

The Trump administration's focus on defending the First Island Chain while neglecting any mention of deterring North Korea or defending South Korea has raised concerns of a repeat of the U.S.-declared Acheson Line, that many believe convinced Stalin to give the green light to Kim Il-sung to invade South Korea, igniting the Korean War.[36] Downplaying the importance of U.S. defense of South Korea is at odds with UNC/CFC/USFK General Xavier Brunson's depiction of South Korea as a vital cog in U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy for deterring and confronting regional threats including China. He used a reoriented Indo-Pacific map placing East at the top to emphasize the strategic geographic location of South Korea and U.S. forces stationed there to conduct military strikes against North Korea, China, and Russia, including China's Northern Theater Army and Northern Fleet as well as the Russian fleet in Vladivostok.[37]

Prioritizers - Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

The prioritizer faction of the Trump administration downplays the importance of the U.S. defense of South Korea. Elbridge Colby, the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, asserted in a 2024 interview prior to returning to government, that the U.S. "shouldn't keep its forces hostage on the Korean Peninsula for a problem that's not central to American interests," adding that the [OPCON] handover should happen "as quickly as possible."[38] Colby emphasized that it would be "an imprudent assumption [that] the United States is going to break its spear fighting North Korea."[39] He argued that South Korea should "take primary, essentially overwhelming, responsibility for its own self-defense [since] the fundamental fact is that North Korea is not a primary threat to the U.S. It would not be rational to lose multiple American cities to just deal with North Korea."[40] Therefore, South Korean security "should not depend on trusting the U.S. to sacrifice five American cities to do something to North Korea."[41]

More broadly, while prioritizers depict their advocacy for downgrading U.S. defense commitments to NATO, South Korea, and other allies in order to enhance the defense of Taiwan, Colby commented that Taiwan "isn't itself of existential importance to America."[42] During his 2025 confirmation hearings, Colby commented, "I believe the costs of explicitly committing to Taiwan's defense outweigh its benefits." To

maintain current policy that the U.S. has deep interests in Taiwan's security "poses serious risks on a number of fronts" such as inflaming relations with Beijing and offering a pretext for military action.[43]

Schrödinger's Alliance

U.S. policy changes during Trump's second term have strained relations with Seoul. There are now strongly divergent assessments of the vitality of the alliance and overall relationship. The aggressive second-term U.S. approach on tariffs alienated U.S. allies and partners who now see Washington as a more immediate threat to their economic well-being than Beijing. The protectionist economic tactics will hinder Washington's strategic objective of rallying an international coalition against China' predatory business practices and security transgressions.

Trump's demands that South Korea and other allies send warships to reopen the Strait of Hormuz followed by harsh invective against Seoul's reluctance to do so exacerbated underlying stresses in the partnership. As a result, allies now perceive a price tag for America's adherence to alliance treaty commitments and severe punishment for any aversion to pay it. The U.S. may have degraded military deterrence by undermining the perception—in the minds of both allies and opponents—that Washington is a dependable security partner. Japanese, [44] South Korean, and Taiwanese [45] public opinion polls show decreased trust in the U.S. commitment to their countries' defense under the Trump administration.

America's War with Iran Exacerbates Indo-Pacific Allied Concerns

Prior to returning to government in the second Trump term, Elbridge Colby argued that the Middle East was a "tertiary region" and that "there was good reason to believe that Washington, Tel Aviv, and their associates can deter Iran from transgressing their vital interests even if Tehran gets a nuclear weapon."[46] Colby recommended that "U.S. forces everywhere in the world need to be prioritized for dealing with China, including in Europe, in the U.S. and U.S. Forces Korea need to be available to assist in that effort."[47]

America' attacks on Iran, like Ukraine's defense against the Russian invasion, underscores the high rate of expenditure of expensive offensive and defensive missiles during modern warfare. The conflicts revealed that U.S. stocks of such missiles are woefully inadequate and that the U.S. ability to produce replacements is severely constrained and will take years to replenish missile magazines.

The United States has been forced to divert military units and critically short munitions from other theaters to support operations in the Middle East. Doing so has weakened deterrence against the North Korean and Chinese threats, signaled a constrained American ability to fight or deter two simultaneous major conflicts, downplayed the prioritization of the Indo-Pacific as the primary U.S. security objective, and eroded the credibility of the U.S. commitment and ability to defend its Indo-Pacific allies. The inability of the world's most powerful military to subjugate a second- or third-tier military force raises serious doubts about the American ability to defend against China.

As a result of military actions against Iran, the United States has stretched its resources and accepted risk to its deterrent posture in the Indo-Pacific:

Indo-Pacific Units Diverted

- The USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier and its strike group were diverted from military exercises in the South China Sea to sail to the Middle East. Last year, the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier had to similarly divert from the Indo-Pacific due to the previous U.S. attack on Iran;[48]
- The USS Tripoli amphibious assault ship and the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit were redeployed from Japan;
- Components of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot systems were moved from South Korea to the Middle East. President Lee Jae Myung said his government had expressed "an opposing view" on moving U.S. assets from Korea but to no avail.[49]

Munitions Stockpiles Depleted

- The Pentagon launched 150 THAAD air-defense missiles in last year's 12-day war against Iran and an additional 150 in this year's conflict out of a total inventory of 534. There have been no new deliveries of THAAD interceptors since August 2023, and none are expected until April 2027;[50]
- The U.S. reportedly used $5.6 billion worth of munitions during the first two days of this year's military assault on Iran;[51]

- In the first few weeks, the U.S. launched over 1,000 Patriot air defense missiles but only purchased 600 last year;[52]
- Washington redeployed almost the entire U.S. inventory of stealthy JASSM-ER air-launched cruise missiles to the Middle East leaving only 425 JASSM-ER (18%) for other contingencies. The U.S. launched more than 1,000 JASSM-ERs during the first four weeks of the war. Lockheed Martin is scheduled to produce only 396 JASSM-ER in 2026;[53]
- The U.S. has fired hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles during the attack on Iran out of a total inventory of 4,000 Tomahawks. RTX Corp. produced 100 new Tomahawk missiles in 2025[54] and only 57 will be going to the Pentagon this fiscal year. At this rate, replacing the depleted stock would take more than five years.[55]
- Japan's $2.35 billion order for 400 Tomahawk missiles could be delayed as the U.S. depletes its stockpiles.[56]

Is OPCON Transition Enough? Conceptualizing Broader Realignment

Successfully resolving the contentious OPCON transition does not necessarily determine the optimum way for the U.S. and its allies to counter not only the North Korean threat, but also the broader China menace to the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps one can take advice from Dwight D. Eisenhower who postulated, "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it," meaning a seemingly intractable problem may be better envisioned in a broader context.

Government officials and outside experts have long recommended reorganizing the single U.S. military command in the Pacific region. Advocates for a new command structure cite the enhanced military capabilities of opponents, increased cooperation amongst the North Korea-China-Russia axis, greater cooperation amongst regional democracies, the potential for simultaneous Korean and Taiwanese conflicts, the tyranny of distance of the vast region, and the span of control problems for a single command whose geographic area of responsibility (AOR) is literally half of the globe.

While there is some expert consensus on the need to merge U.S. Forces Korea and U.S. Forces Japan into a single Northeast Asia Command (NEACOM) for a more efficient U.S. response to the North Korean threat, there are differences over the new command's authorities, geographic AOR, and relationship with U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM).

The new NEACOM could be a new regional sub-unified command that exercises operational control over all forward deployed U.S. forces in Japan and South Korea but would remain subordinate to PACOM.[57] The command would be focused on North Korea. Some experts suggest that creating NEACOM might stimulate discussion to establish additional unified/sub-unified commands to cover the operational flanks in the Southwest Pacific area and South Asia.[58]

Others envision creating a new U.S. NEACOM responsible for the region surrounding the Korean Peninsula as well as a parallel Combined U.S.-South Korea NEACOM that would oversee the warfighting mission of the CFC to defeat North Korea, integrate alliance counter-nuclear and all-domain operations, deter intervention by China or Russia, and coordinate U.S.-South Korean alliance support to PACOM military actions throughout the Asia-Indo-Pacific region. The bilateral NEACOM would be co-chaired by the U.S. commander of NEACOM and the South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. PACOM would remain responsible for the defense of Taiwan and the broader Indo-Pacific (South China Sea, Oceania, South Asia).[59] The U.S. and allied forces in South Korea and Japan, while focused primarily on defending South Korea, could concurrently deter aggression along the First Island Chain and support contingencies involving Japan, Taiwan and key maritime approaches.[60]

Beyond the Korean Peninsula

Others advocate a NEACOM more broadly covering China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan which would not be subordinate to PACOM but rather a separate combatant command with equal status. Proponents argue that northeast Asia hosts "five of the six largest militaries in the world and [is] a subregion too critical to the United States to be subsumed under an umbrella-like regional command including the entire Asian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific."[61]

Even more broadly, the existing PACOM could be divided into two equal theater commands. The newly created command would be based in Japan and, in addition to northeast Asia, would also be responsible for South Asia and the Indian Ocean. PACOM would prioritize contingency plans for Taiwan conflicts and refining mutual defense plans with allies in East Asia.[62]

To address the PACOM span of control problem and fragmented nature of the Indo-Pacific's alliances and security partnerships, others

advocate using a transformed United Nations Command as the means to create a NATO-like structure in the Indo-Pacific. The existing Combined Forces Command would remain the primary entity to combat North Korea. However, it is argued, returning the UNC into a multinational warfighting organization would enable it to "organize free world military and humanitarian contributions, ready to intervene and reinforce the CFC to repel authoritarian aggression and return peace and security to the area." The UNC headquarters could also return to Japan where it originally resided.[63]

In one of the most extensive recommendations, an analyst proposed a new security architecture to synchronize all U.S. and allied forces in the PACOM theater that integrated U.S. allies—including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. Rather than creating a new command, the initiative would develop a comprehensive theater-wide strategy as well as harmonize allied defense-industrial bases into a combined military production plan, including shipbuilding and munitions production. Allies in disparate sub-regions would be integrated as components into a regional alliance network whose combined capabilities would be organized to deter aggression from China and North Korea.[64]

Historic Precedent for Two Commands

Advocates for splitting PACOM highlight that the vast Pacific region was previously divided between military commands, including during World War II when Admiral Chester Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur oversaw two separate commands. After the war, the National Security Act of 1947 and the Unified Command Plan established the U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Far East Command (FECOM), the latter responsible for occupation duties in Japan, Korea below the 38th parallel, and other recently liberated areas throughout East Asia. Pacific Command (PACOM) was also established to maintain security over all other Pacific areas not assigned to FECOM. In 1956, the United States deactivated Far East Command and transferred its missions and responsibilities to U.S. Pacific Command. USFK and U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) were created as sub-unified commands under PACOM the same year.[65]

In 1974, the Chiefs of Staff of the Army and Air Force "proposed disestablishing PACOM, making the Pacific Fleet a specified command, and creating four new unified commands: western Pacific, eastern Asia, northeast Asia, and southwest Pacific." Northeast Asia Command would have been responsible for Japan, Korea, and Okinawa.[66] However,

Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger decided to retain PACOM but, in the event of war, the Secretary could decide whether to activate a separate Northeast Asia Command or other regional commands as necessary.[67] In 1997, USFK proposed to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs the establishment of a unified command responsible for Northeast Asia citing the high tensions in the region and an overtaxed PACOM responsible for an overly expansive area.[68]

Assessing the Proposals

Cumulatively, the proposals provide contradictory recommendations on carving out northeast Asia as a separate command in order to reduce PACOM's span of control limitations, but which runs counter to advocacy for treating North Korea and China as inter-connected threats that cut across sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific.

General Xavier Brunson's 'east-up map' article[69] underscores the geographic proximity of South Korea to North Korea, China, and Russia which enables forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula to conduct military attacks against any or all opponents. Brunson also highlights the need for closer military cooperation amongst South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. As such, would a NEACOM limited to North Korean responsibilities hinder cross-command coordination with PACOM on Taiwan or southeast Asian contingencies?

There is a growing consensus that Korean and Taiwanese contingencies could occur simultaneously, leading to a regional conflagration, requiring the involvement of South Korea, Japan, and other allies and partners in integrated military operations throughout the Pacific region. Both South Korea and Japan are developing greater power projection capabilities and, in recent years, have restored previous bilateral cooperation.

Given those circumstances, should NEACOM also assume responsibility for Taiwan from PACOM? Would creating a separate unified command that is *not* subordinate to PACOM help or hinder coordination on U.S. responses to two concurrent conflicts? Since U.S. forces in Japan, including Okinawa, and Guam would be critical follow-on forces for both Korean and Taiwan contingencies, which command would allocate and prioritize those forces for responding to pending or ongoing crises?

Any command structure will be hindered by the restrictions that Japanese Self-Defense Forces operate under. The U.S. is upgrading USFJ

from an administrative command for peacetime coordination between U.S. and Japanese forces into a joint force headquarters with greater warfighting and operational responsibilities. Similarly, Japan has established a Joint Operations Command to exercise unified command of the ground, air, and naval branches of the Japan Self-Defense Forces.[70] While both are significant improvements to the U.S. and Japanese command structures, there is still no joint combined command of U.S. and Japanese forces as exists in Korea with Combined Forces Command.

Combining U.S. commands in South Korea and Japan, even without incorporating local forces, could be problematic for both allies. Given historic animosities, Seoul would be particularly sensitive to any perceptions of linking its defense to that of Japan or subordinating its national interests to those of Japan, particularly if NEACOM headquarters were in Japan. Both allies may also harbor concerns that subordinating U.S. forward deployed forces stationed in their countries under one command could increase the risk of entrapping them in an unwanted conflict.[71]

Recommendations for Successful OPCON Transition

1. **Maintain conditions-based OPCON transfer.** Returning wartime OPCON to South Korea is a question of when, not if. But prematurely transitioning to a South Korean command of CFC before Seoul has ameliorated deficiencies in C4ISR and joint/combined operations could have detrimental consequences in wartime. Both countries should adhere to fulfilling the necessary military capability conditions and hold the line against politically driven decisions.

2. **Redress deficiencies in military capabilities.** South Korea and the U.S. should have secure communications between their units down to battalion level for ground forces and individual ships and planes for navy and air force units. South Korea should implement sufficient communications across its military services without requiring U.S. communications as an intermediary amongst their own services. Seoul should ensure it has munitions and logistics stocks for the first 60 days of conflict, including offensive and air defense missiles, artillery ammunition and POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants). To assume command of CFC,

the South Korean military should establish communication and coordination means with the militaries of other countries that would be participating under UN Command.

3. **Delineate the respective roles, missions, and authorities of CFC and UNC after OPCON transfer.** The relationship amongst UNC, CFC, and USFK is seamless when the same general commands all three entities. OPCON transfer could lead to uncertainty over the chain of command, particularly of the U.N. sending state forces during wartime.

4. **Define the future of the alliance.** While North Korea must remain the predominant threat focus of the alliance, the allies should also focus on security challenges over the horizon. As South Korea continues to improve its military capabilities, Seoul should be called upon to assume greater responsibilities in regional and global security challenges. South Korea could play a larger role in ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The country's economic vitality is dependent on safe passage of foreign energy supplies, which are threatened by China's expansionary actions.

South Korea Must Look Beyond the Horizon

Through successive Administrations, the United States sought to create coalitions of like-minded Indo–Pacific nations to defend democratic values, uphold international laws, and rebuff Chinese encroachment on the sovereignty of its neighbors. As part of this effort, Washington has long urged South Korea to assume a greater security role beyond the Korean Peninsula, as well as more forthrightly defend the rules-based international order and values common to democracies. When the principles, values, and sovereignty of Indo-Pacific democracies are under attack, one would hope South Korea would, on its own, undertake actions to defend them.

Instead, Seoul resisted U.S. entreaties and sought to remain on the sidelines by refraining from criticizing Chinese actions or doing the minimal amount to satisfy Washington. South Korea pursued a risk-averse hedging policy in which it tried to balance its relations with its security guarantor (the United States) and its largest trading partner (China). This fear of Chinese economic reprisals led to years of South Korean conciliatory policies that avoided confrontation, conflict, and criticism.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

There is a disparity between South Korea's stated aspirations and the actions it is willing to undertake. Seoul seeks the prestige of a global player while avoiding corresponding responsibilities. By self-*isolating,* South Korea self-*marginalized* itself, reacting rather than influencing the regional environment. One must be on the court to be in the game.

South Korea is economically dependent on a free and open Indo–Pacific, including freedom of navigation—99.7 percent of the country's trade volume is transported by sea.[72] Despite this, Seoul repeatedly demurred when asked by the United States to criticize China's expansionism in Southeast Asian waters and bullying tactics against Taiwan.

Seoul Needs to Play a Larger Regional Security Role

While remaining predominantly focused on the North Korean threat, South Korea has a formidable, highly capable military to shoulder greater responsibilities for addressing regional security challenges. Seoul should assess how to contribute to ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as well as potential contingencies in the Taiwan Strait.

South Korea exists today because 70 years ago an international coalition defended it against attack and guaranteed its sovereignty. South Korean reluctance to defend another democracy in Taiwan could have significant repercussions for its alliance with Washington and relationships with UN sending states.

South Korea has global interests and needs to act like it, augmenting its efforts to defend them. Regional security threats require a multi-layered regional response. South Korea and Japan should enlarge their regional security roles, further strengthen trilateral security coordination with the United States, and accelerate efforts for integrating partners into collective regional security networks.

What the U.S. Should Do

South Korea, Japan, the South China Sea, and Taiwan are of vital economic and geopolitical importance to the United States. A defeat in any of those areas would have a devastating effect on U.S. and allied strategic interests and fundamentally alter the regional, if not global, military, diplomatic, and economic balance of power. The Trump Administration's strong criticism of America's allies, emphasis on the cost of deploying U.S. forces overseas, and downplaying of theater-level threats has increased

South Korean trepidation that the U.S. will not fulfill its defense treaty obligations.

Even a perceived degradation in U.S. commitment to defend its allies could have a detrimental effect on regional security and stability by weakening deterrence against the North Korean and Chinese threats, emboldening opponents to test American resolve, and undermining efforts to rally other Asian nations to resist Chinese demands.

That must never happen. The U.S. should make absolutely clear to friend and foe alike that it will defend its allies by continually reaffirming its pledge to respond to any North Korean attack. Washington must maintain the current presidentially and congressionally pledged level of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula as well as sufficient forces in the western Pacific to deter and, if necessary, defeat the Chinese and North Korean threats.

The U.S.–South Korean alliance has been indispensable in achieving Washington's strategic objectives, including maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia. The U.S. security guarantee to Seoul provided the shield behind which South Korea recovered from the devastation of war to eventually become a beacon of democracy and an indispensable global military, diplomatic, and economic partner.

Conclusion

The Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC includes the homage, "Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." It is a fitting reminder that freedom is not free, that it must be defended. To do so, service members from both countries have stood tirelessly on the ramparts of freedom. As Edmund Burke wrote: "People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf."

Since its inception, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has enjoyed both smooth sailing and intense squalls. Our two countries remained shoulder to shoulder, not only out of tradition and honor, but out of necessity. The North Korean threat remains, with even greater weapons of devastation. For over 70 years, the United States has maintained its pledge, including by putting its sons and daughters in uniform in harm's way as a tangible symbol of its commitment. Alliances are not transactional relationships but instead are based on shared values, principals, and strategic objectives. The value of alliances is not measured in dollars and cents.

Washington needs allies and partners to economically compete with and militarily confront the multi-faceted China threat. Instead, through its comments and actions, Washington has alienated potential collaborators and undermined collective action. Worse still, the United States has exacerbated allied fears of abandonment by raising grave doubts as to whether it will uphold its treaty commitments to defend its allies.

America's war with Iran has shown the difficulty of achieving objectives without international support and willing security partners. As Winston Churchill commented, "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them."[73]

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North Korea's Arming of the Revisionist Middle East: How Effective?

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Abstract

Since the United States and Israel went to war with Iran in February 2026, press coverage has largely ignored North Korea's decades-long role in building the capabilities Iran and its proxies have used against the United States, Israel, and Arab states. This article traces that proliferation. It shows how North Korean Scud, No Dong, and Musudan technology evolved into Iran's Qiam, Shahab-3, Emad, Ghadr, and Khorramshahr missiles, and how cooperation on an 80-ton rocket booster tied to the Hwasong-12/14/15 likely gave Tehran advanced IRBM and ICBM technology. It also examines North Korean contributions to Iran's fast attack craft, Ghadir-class mini-submarines, and hardened underground missile and nuclear facilities. The article then follows Pyongyang's support for Iran's "encirclement" strategy against Israel: chemical weapons and Scud missiles for Assad's Syria, tunnel networks for Hezbollah and Hamas, rockets and anti-tank missiles used in the October 7, 2023 attacks, and missiles and conventional arms for the Houthis. It concludes that although the encirclement strategy has proven a military failure, Iran and its surviving proxies will likely turn again to North Korea to rearm, making disruption of Pyongyang's supply networks essential to stability in the Middle East.

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Keywords: North Korea, Iran, ballistic missile proliferation, arms transfers, encirclement strategy, Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, Syria, underground facilities

Introduction

Since the United States and Israel war with Iran began on February 28, 2026, there has been a great deal of spin by various analysts and pundits in the press about the threat Iran presents to the region and to the United States. But when it comes to what we have seen since this conflict started, after a review of the reporting in news outlets in the United States, Europe, and even East Asia, I have been unable to find any mention—zero—of

North Korea's proliferation to Iran over a period of many years and how that has contributed to the capabilities we see Iran using in combat against US forces, Israel, and Iran's Arab neighbors. Thus, I believe it will be important to describe the capabilities that North Korea has proliferated to Iran, and how these capabilities have been used—particularly to present a threat to the US and its allies.

Also important in the conflict with Israel that began on October 7th, 2023 (through Tehran's Hamas proxies) was Iran's "encirclement" strategy. This strategy used Iranian proxy forces to attack Israel. These forces—all of them—were also supplied by North Korea, often by using Iran as a conduit and sometimes receiving arms and training by dealing directly with Pyongyang and/or collaborating with the Iranians to do so. Thus, in this paper I will address not only the role Iran played in combat in the October 7th and post-October 7th violence, but the key role North Korea played with key proxies prosecuting kinetic operations against Israel. These key Iranian proxies included Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. The information I discovered and will now articulate is both telling and compelling.

Iran: What Kind of Missiles did Tehran Launch at Israel?

Perhaps the most important threat from Iran as the war with the United States and Israel has evolved has been the ballistic missiles, launched not only at US facilities and Israeli cities, but also at neighboring Islamic countries. Thus, it is important to consider this capability and where Iran got it. The short-range ballistic missiles that Iran has launched at key US facilities and at neighboring Arab states include a key system—the "Qiam." The Qiam was developed and improved with North Korean assistance. The story goes like this: North Korea first supplied Scud Bs and later Scud Cs to Iran in the late 1980s. The North Koreans had shipped about 200 Scud Cs to Iran by 1994.[1] The Iranians further contracted with Pyongyang to build a Scud C facility. But the facility still needed North Korean missile components and technical assistance. From this facility also came the "upgrade" to the Scud C, called the Qiam—now a widely used Iranian missile against targets within its range (up to 800 kilometers). In addition, according to the *Wisconsin Project*, "North Koreans reportedly helped build a large missile test facility at Emamshahr and a tracking facility at Tabas."[2]

For targets farther away from Iran and out of the range of its SRBMs the Iranians also turned to North Korea. Enter the No Dong. The North

Koreans proliferated around 150 No Dong systems to Iran in the late 1990s.[3] The Iranians were apparently very happy with the missiles the North Koreans provided them, and following the earlier precedent of the Scud C factory, contracted with Pyongyang to build a No Dong facility in Iran.[4] Of course, much like the assemblage of the Scud C (which evolved into the Qiam), North Korean components and North Korean assistance was needed in the process to manufacture the missiles "indigenously" in Iran. The Iranians called this "new" missile the Shahab-3.[5] The Shahab-3 is almost an exact copy of the No Dong. Once the Shahab-3 was up and running, the North Koreans moved forward with the Iranians in improving its range and lethality. With assistance from the North Koreans, the Iranians were then able to produce (at the No Dong facility) the Emad and the Ghadr.[6] The Emad has a range of 1,750 Kilometers and the Ghadr has a range of 1,950 kilometers.[7] The Iranians have used these two systems to target not only Israel, but their Arab neighbors (including US bases located in these countries) throughout the ongoing first stages of this conflict.[8] But wait, there is more…

Thus far I have addressed North Korea's proliferation of its Scud systems to Iran (evolving into the often used Qiam) and the longer range (able to hit Israel) No Dong system (evolving into the Ghadr and Emad)—also often used systems in the recent conflicts with Israel and the United States. But there is another system capable of hitting Israel that has been even more lethal (when it is able to somehow get through BMD) than any of the systems described thus far. This system is called the "Khorramshahr," and the fourth version of this system, appropriately called the "Khorramshahr-4," has been proven to carry a warhead larger than any other in Iran's missile inventory, armed with what appears to be "cluster munitions."[9] But where would such a missile—with a warhead weighing up to two tons—originate? Well, North Korea of course.[10] According to numerous press reports, and perhaps just as importantly, the US State Department on leaked cables published in WikiLeaks, the Iranians purchased 19 Musudan IRBM missiles from the North Koreans that were delivered in 2005.[11] The Musudan has a range of 3,500 to 4,000 kilometers.[12] The Iranian version has a much shorter range. But it also carries a much larger warhead than the original payload on the Musudan. Thus, the reported 2,000-kilometer range. If one is to simply do the physics, a larger warhead (much larger) with the same amount of thrust (the same engine as the Musudan), this equals a missile with a shorter range yet more lethality upon contact.[13] One could legitimately call this missile "son of

Musudan." It was—according to numerous reports—built with North Korean assistance.[14]

To add to the ongoing debate about the Khorramshahr and its use by Iranian forces, on March 20, 2026, the Iranians launched two missiles with IRBM range at Diego Garcia. One of the missiles apparently malfunctioned in flight, while the other missile was shot down by an American SM-3 system from a US warship. While there is debate among analysts and intelligence people about what type of missile was actually launched at Diego Garcia, the Khorramshahr is the only fielded and tested missile that the Iranians have in their inventory that possesses anything close to the range needed to target Diego Garcia.[15] It is important to remember, with a 500-kilogram warhead, most estimates place the maximum range of the Musudan at 4,000 kilometers—which would put Diego Garcia within its range.[16] Thus, using the same physics I used in the previous paragraph, the Iranians already had the missile (the "son of Musudan" if you will) with the range to target something as far away as Diego Garcia. They simply put a lighter warhead on the missile using an engine with the same thrust.

Thus far my text describes three important missile programs currently being used against the United States, Israel, and our Arab allies. These systems have derivatives of the Scud, No Dong, and Musudan systems. One can say that, quite literally, as North Korea has increased its capabilities, it has proliferated its capabilities to Iran. We are seeing these capabilities today as we observe these attacks.

But what of North Korea's ICBM capability? Has this also been passed on to Iran? To answer that question, I will provide an excerpt of my most recent book, *Rogue Allies: The Strategic Partnership between Iran and North Korea.*[17] In 2017, North Korea tested what they called the "Hwasong-12." This missile is an IRBM with a range of forty-five hundred kilometers (or more). It turns out, the Hwasong-12 is powered by a rocket engine reportedly based on an engine procured from the Ukrainians (according to the Ukrainians, illegally, under the table, and unknown to officials, or not at all), known as the RD-250.[18] This engine is reportedly powered by eighty tons of thrust at sea level, thus likely making it the system that was known (for several years) as the "eighty-ton rocket booster" that North Korea collaborated on and proliferated to Iran. Later in 2017, North Korea tested two ICBMs. The first, the "Hwasong-14" is assessed to be capable of hitting Anchorage in Alaska, while the second, the "Hwasong-15," is assessed by many analysts to be capable of hitting

the east coast of the United States. The Hwasong-12 is powered by a large single rocket motor, which, though it appears to be based on the RD-250, is not exactly like it as the RD-250 is powered by two thrusters. The Hwasong-12 appears to be the first stage of the Hwasong-14 two-stage ballistic missile. The Hwasong-15 appears to use a much more powerful engine as its first stage—one that looks very much like the actual RD-250. The first stage of the Hwasong-15 uses what looks like a complete RD-250 rocket motor with two thrusters (instead of the one-thruster unit used by the Hwasong-12/14). This engine has 80 tons of thrust at sea-level.[19] This is probably the system with the 80-ton rocket booster that the North Koreans are collaborating on with the Iranians.

North Korea began to assist Iran with the development of an 80-ton rocket booster (presumably for an ICBM) as early as 2013.[20] In 2015, further developments were revealed in the press, when it was disclosed that several shipments of the aforementioned rocket from North Korea to Iran had occurred even as JCPOA talks were ongoing.[21] In 2016, following the conclusion of the JCPOA talks, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Iranian companies and individuals for violations of sanctions imposed on North Korea. To put a finer point on it, North Korean and Iranian officials had exchanged visits. This was done so that Iran could procure an eighty-ton rocket booster for a missile that North Korea was developing at the time. The names and companies (including front companies) involved are in the actual Treasury Department document.[22]

While not gaining much attention in the American press, other important information has come to light in recent years regarding the North Korea—Iran strategic relationship. In August of 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif welcomed a group of North Korean officials led by Ri Yong-ho. The officials reportedly talked about "bilateral relations and regional issues in the Middle East."[23] According to press reports in 2019 citing the UN Panel of experts, "The presidents of top North Korean regime arms firms, KOMID, which exports equipment for ballistic missiles and other weapons, and Green Pine, which sells conventional arms, recently traveled to Iran, according to air passenger documents cited by the report by the U.N. panel. A U.N. member state informed the panel that the two North Korean arms firms—which are both blacklisted by the United Nations—are 'extremely active in Iran now,' Hugh Griffiths, coordinator of the U.N. panel assessing sanctions on North Korea, told NBC News in an exclusive television interview."[24]

On September 21, 2020, the US Treasury Department sanctioned several entities and individuals active in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Among them was Seid Mir Ahmad Nooshin, who was "key to negotiations with the North Koreans on long-range missile development projects."[25] In related analysis to the aforementioned sanctions by the US Treasury Department, in 2021 it was disclosed that according to the UN Panel of Experts, North Korea had resumed actual shipping of technology and parts to Iran for long-range missile projects. The information in 2021 stated, "Citing information from a member state, the U.N. report noted that the cooperation included "the transfer of critical parts," with the most recent shipment taking place in 2020."[26] It appears that if there was a "lull" in North Korean military cooperation and assistance to Iran, it didn't last for very long. But there is more to this picture. North Korea appears to currently be cooperating with Iran when it comes to both China and Russia.

What does this mean? It almost undoubtedly means North Korea collaborated on and then proliferated a system to Iran that was then tested in 2017—first as an IRBM and then (using the rocket from the first test as the first stage of one of the ICBMs) as two separate ICBM systems. If this is the case—and it most certainly appears that it is—this means that North Korea has proliferated an IRBM (based on the RD-250 engine) to Iran, and if they have also proliferated the associated technology from the Hwasong-14/15, they have now given Iran both an advanced IRBM capability and an ICBM capability.[27] It also means that when it comes to ballistic missile technology, North Korea has now proliferated Scud, No Dong, Musudan, Unha, and Hwasong 12/14/15 technology to Iran—updating Iran's missile capabilities as they update their own.[28]

North Korean Contributions to Naval Capabilities Targeting America's Forces

The almost dizzying amount of proliferation that North Korea has conducted of ballistic missiles with Iran over a period that has lasted more than 40 years is quite compelling. But there are other important aspects of proliferation that Pyongyang has engaged in with Iran. One of them is naval craft. Fast Attack Craft (FAC) have been a major irritant in the waters off the coast of Iran for more than 20 years. According to a publication of the Office of Naval Intelligence published in 2017, "Between 1996 and 2006, the IRGCN received approximately 46 FAC of various classes from China and North Korea. Depending upon the platform, they are equipped with torpedoes, short-range anti-ship cruise missiles

(ASCM), or both, and can reach speeds of 40-50 knots. The North Korean procurement effort included four distinct classes of torpedo boats, two of which are submersible/semisubmersible. Both Chinese classes include short-range ASCMs. Iran has copied the North Korean Peykaap-class boat and is domestically producing it as a missile boat with Nasr (C704) ASCMs."[29]

As most Korea watchers know, a North Korean Yono-class mini-sub sank the South Korean Corvette, *Cheonan*, in 2010. What some may not realize is that North Korea proliferated this same class of submarine to Iran (several of them). The North Koreans then built a fabrication facility ("factory") for the Iranians where they could "indigenously" produce it themselves. By the time the war broke out in March of this year, the Iranians had at least 14 Yono-class submarines—called Ghadir-class craft in Iran.[30] It is unclear how many of the FAC or submarine craft have been sunk since the war with Iran. It is likely that many of them are at the bottom of the sea already. But what is clear is that North Korea proliferated these naval craft to Iran.

North Korea's Contributions to Iran's Underground Facilities

The other military capability related to the current conflict is North Korea's underground complex building capabilities. Pyongyang has—for many years—assisted Iran in building underground complexes. There are two key ways they have done this: 1) underground missile facilities,[31] and 2) underground nuclear facilities—specifically at Natanz and Isfahan. It was because of the skill and expertise with which North Korea built the facilities at Natanz and Isfahan, that it took United States B-2 bombers to take them out.[32] As of the writing of this piece, there are still underground missile facilities that remain active. There is no doubt that the reason these facilities remain such a difficult challenge for both United States and Israeli aircraft is because of the assistance North Korea provided Iran in building them.

Compelling Conclusions on Pyongyang's Military Contributions to Iran

It should be very clear from this piece that North Korea has been knee-deep in providing military capabilities to Iran since the early 1980s. This has been an ongoing effort and in fact it was going on right up until the start of the latest conflict. To quote a scholar from the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, "Ever since June

2025, Iran has been vigorously working to recover the capabilities it lost in those 12 days. The missile industry received new equipment from China, North Korea and perhaps also Russia with which to renew production."[33] Indeed, former UN Panel of Experts member Neil Watts was quoted on an *Iran Watch* podcast in 2021: "Neil describes the 'close working relationship' between Iran and North Korea on ballistic missile development, notably 'leapfrog technologies' from North Korea that have allowed Iran to qualitatively increase its ballistic missile capabilities. From complete missile systems in the 1980s and 1990s, to more recent transfers of subcomponents, software, test data, and technical expertise, these transfers have helped Iran further its goal of self-sufficiency in missile production."[34]

North Korea has been a key strategic ally to Iran in a relationship that has revolved around proliferation. Once Iran's critical systems have been destroyed or rendered non-combat effective, North Korea will lose a key customer. One thing is for sure: An American forces departure from combat operations in Iran without the Theocratic regime going down will mean that North Korea will simply move in re-supply/re-build systems and facilities for Iran. There is precedent for this. It's what happened after the "12-Day War."[35]

What Does Assad's Fall Mean for North Korea?

Since the fall of the Assad regime the Israeli Air Force has launched attacks on numerous strategic military facilities. Included in these facilities are chemical weapons facilities and ballistic missile sites.[36] It is established in open sources that these facilities are for either development and/or weaponization of chemical weapons, or for the matching up of these weapons with their launching platforms—typically Scud missiles or 122mm multiple rocket launchers. What we are not seeing in the press for the most part is the North Korea connection. In fact, Syria would not have the weapons or the missiles or even most of the multiple rocket launchers (in other words both the weapons and the platforms) without one of their key suppliers: the North Koreans.

North Korea began proliferating chemical weapons capabilities to the Syrians at least as early as the early 1990s. In fact, North Korean scientists and technicians assisted the Syrians in developing several of their chemical weapons facilities. In 2005 the Syrians reportedly used North Korean provided Scud missiles to test North Korean provided air-burst chemical weapons.[37] The North Koreans did not stop there. Throughout

the Syrian civil war the North Koreans remained to assist Syria with its chemical weapons procurement, manufacture, and deployment of chemical weapons, and the UN Panel of Experts Report from March of 2018 stated that there were at least 39 illicit shipments from North Korea to Syria between 2012 and 2017—shipments that contained items such as "acid-resistant tiles, valves and pipes."[38] In other words, despite Syria's claims that it ended its chemical weapons program in 2013, it did not. And its chief supplier was North Korea.

Of danger to Israel, many of these weapons remained in Syria after the war subsided (until the recent overwhelming violence that just threw the Assad family out of power) and the Syrians (along with Iranians and North Koreans) were even assisting Hezbollah in the development and storage of these weapons during 2022.[39] Thus, the need for Israel to destroy Syria's chemical weapons facilities now that they had fallen into the hands of a radical and unpredictable government was quite compelling. Immediately following the fall of the Assad government, the Israeli Air Force conducted at least 400 airstrikes against what was described as strategic military targets. In a statement released to the press, the IDF said, "Within the last 48 hours, the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) struck most of the strategic weapons stockpiles in Syria, preventing them from falling into the hands of terrorist elements."[40] The facilities destroyed likely included the ballistic missile and chemical weapons facilities that the North Koreans proliferated to the Assad government.

North Korea began proliferating Scud C missiles to Syria after the first Gulf War in 1991. The North Koreans and the Syrians entered a deal where Pyongyang would deliver at least 150 Scud C missiles for the bargain price of $150 million. The first missiles reportedly arrived in March of 1991 and included launchers. There were other shipments later in the year and the following year and Syria eventually received close to the number of missiles they had paid for from the North Koreans.[41] The North Koreans also built fabrication facilities for the Syrians for Scud C missiles.[42] Of course these facilities could not operate without North Korean parts and North Korean technical assistance.

North Korea also sold Scud D ballistic missiles to Syria. Early tests were detected during 2000, 2005, and 2007. The North Koreans appear to have been at all of the tests, and the testing also included the use of live chemical munitions. The first known use of the Scud D missiles in the Syrian civil war was in 2012 when the Syrian army used it against insurgents.[43] Of note, during the many years of the Syrian civil war, as Iran,

Russia and Hezbollah were assisting the Syrian army, another key way of launching chemical weapons was by using 122mm multiple rocket launchers (improvised for chemical weapons use with the assistance of the North Koreans). This proved successful and thus deadly for opponents of the Syrian army.[44]

It is clear that North Korea supplied, then re-supplied the Syrian military with chemical weapons, the platforms to carry them (Scud C, D, and 122mm multiple rocket launchers), and the necessary materials to maintain an "industry" that could continue to upgrade and produce these weapons. This was happening before the early stages of the civil war and was ongoing until at least 2022. Thus, the necessity of destroying these facilities and weapons systems cannot be doubted. At least the Syrians did not directly attack the Israelis with these systems. With the new government in power in Damascus, there is no such guarantee for Israel's security.

And what does this mean for the North Koreans? Perhaps most importantly, it means the loss of an important consumer of both conventional and unconventional weapons. Syria has been a consumer of North Korean systems since roughly the late 1960s. That is over now. The same might be said for both Hezbollah and Hamas. Both used North Korean weapons against Israel. Both used North Korean assistance to build important underground facilities and tunnels (now largely destroyed). This leads to the question: will these two entities now try to reconstitute themselves with the support of the North Koreans (and others including Iran)? One hopes that can be prevented, but it will take definitive action. With a key consumer of its proliferated military systems gone now that Assad is out, North Korea will once again be looking to "sell its wares" elsewhere in the Middle East.[45]

Perhaps as importantly as anything else, Syria served as a major conduit for arms flowing into Hezbollah from Iran or elsewhere.[46] The Assad government was actively involved in seeing that these arms reached Hezbollah, exacerbating the threat to Israel. While the new government in Damascus is certainly anything but "pro-Israel," it is highly unlikely that it will continue the cozy relationship with Iran and North Korea that not only supplied arms and training, but also used the government in Damascus to funnel systems to Hezbollah that could be used in deadly attacks against Israel. This will be a key factor in future events that impact the region. If Iran's proxies find it difficult to receive the systems that can attack Israel, new methods will have to be used. Thus, the fall of the Assad

government could cause huge ramifications for Iran's "encirclement strategy" and the results of this will rate very important observation and analysis.

North Korea's Hezbollah Connection

As we watched Israel go into Lebanon with ground forces during October of 2024, it is important to understand that this would not be necessary unless Hezbollah had a vast network of tunnels (their second one) that prevented destruction from purely air power. To destroy or degrade Hezbollah's military ability to continue attacking Israel's citizens the IDF had to send in land forces to attack them underground. This military paradigm shift, which started in the 2006 war and was on steroids for the conflict that occurred in 2024, would not exist were it not for the expertise, engineering (to include special equipment), advisors, and technicians of North Korea. Hezbollah paid Pyongyang's Korea Mining Development Corporation (KOMID) $13 million to build this 45-mile-long tunnel network. Now we see it in combat thanks to North Korean military proliferation and Hezbollah's unending appetite for launching rockets into towns in northern Israel.

Numerous reports following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war provides evidence that Hezbollah's underground facilities were constructed under North Korean supervision and advice in 2003-2004. The tunnels constructed contained among other things, dispensaries, arms dumps, and food stocks.[47] This significant tunnel network was far more robust than Israeli forces anticipated as they prosecuted combat operations against Hezbollah in 2006. To quote an article in the Israeli press, "Hizbullah's military bases, armories, bunkers and communications networks were much more extensive than Israel's intelligence services estimated on the eve of the 2006 war."[48] Other reporting based on testimony from a former IRGC officer states, "With the assistance of several Iranian engineers and technicians, as well as North Korean experts, who traveled to Lebanon disguised as servants for the Iranian embassy and its officers, Hezbollah has successfully built a 25km long underground belt, with 12-meter openings along it, the officer added. Every four openings are connected to one another through an easily accessible passageway."[49] But this system Hezbollah used in 2006 was only the beginning.

In 2021 a very important report from the Alma Research Center in Israel revealed Hezbollah had built another larger tunnel system—with the assistance of the North Koreans of course (and the Iranians). Hezbollah

agreed to a $13 million deal with KOMID (North Korea's primary proliferation front company) to build a 45-kilometer tunnel system, reportedly much longer and more sophisticated than the first tunnel system, connecting several key nodes in Lebanon. The North Koreans had already been paid $6 million by 2013, and the tunnel system appears to have been completed by 2021. As the Alma publication articulates in the report, "In our estimation, the cumulative length of all the tunnels in the "Land of the Tunnels" can reach up to hundreds of kilometers. Hezbollah tunnels, like Hamas tunnels, contain underground command and control rooms, weapons and supply depots, field clinics and specified designated shafts used to fire missiles of all types (rockets, surface-to-surface missiles, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft missiles). These shafts are hidden and camouflaged and cannot be detected above ground.[50]

What the evidence presented above shows us is that Hezbollah has been building up in anticipation of its next conflict with Israel. Clearly, they were enabled in this process by support from North Korea and Iran. It is also important to note that these tunnels were a key factor, perhaps the key factor in Israel's decision to bring ground forces into the conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanese territory. The tunnels not only gave Hezbollah longer sustainment, but the ability to move forces and equipment from combat zone to combat zone without being seen by IDF aircraft or other intelligence collection methods. Thus, North Korea has been a key aspect of Hezbollah's military capabilities and logistical flexibility. There was quite simply no other way of going after attacking Hezbollah forces except to take out this extensive and sophisticated tunnel system—and that took ground troops.

This is yet another example of the fact that North Korea's fingerprints are all over the violence in the Middle East that has occurred since October 7, 2023. There is now definitive evidence that North Korea supplied Hamas with F-7 RPGs, 122mm rockets and launchers, and the "Bulsae" anti-tank guided missile system, as well as other small arms.[51] Pyongyang has supplied the Houthis with both conventional weapons and ballistic missiles, and Iran (its biggest customer) with the same—including the genesis of missile systems and engines that attacked Israel throughout 2024.[52]

Despite a plethora of evidence, the United States government has yet to acknowledge the involvement of North Korea in the violence that is ongoing in the Middle East. The reasons for that are almost unexplainable. There has been no hesitation to address North Korea's proliferation to

Russia. But why no discussion of Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah? Unless or until the United States engages in more robust enforcement of existing sanctions and publicly announces North Korea's role in the current violence in the Middle East, Pyongyang will continue to engage in these financially lucrative, sanctions busting activities.[53]

North Korean Proliferation to Hamas

Back in 2021, I wrote a piece for the *National Interest* in which I outlined arms deals that reportedly occurred between North Korea and Hamas, resulting in rockets, upgrades to technology, and other military capabilities.[54] At the time, Hamas was launching thousands of rockets into Israel, but most were destroyed by the Iron Dome system and the Israeli people largely considered themselves safe from attack.

Fast forward to October of 2023. Things had changed. The threat from Hamas had proven to be so horrifying that most agreed it needed to be completely destroyed. The terrorist attacks against civilians and targeting civilian communities in Israel were carried out with a level of brutality rarely seen since medieval times. In the footage the whole world has seen, Hamas "fighters" were seen using weaponry from several sources—but shockingly to some, an analysis of weapons used showed several systems with North Korean origins.

The world first took notice of North Korean arms ending up in the hands of Hamas in 2009, when arms shipments consisting of largely rockets and rocket propelled grenades were interdicted in Thailand and the UAE. The Israeli government at the time stated that these shipments both were probably bound for Hamas and Hezbollah.[55] The go-between for North Korea to these two entities was almost certainly Iran. Since interdicted shipments are often only the tip of the iceberg this is quite disturbing.

According to reporting in *The Telegraph* during July of 2014, North Korea had entered into a deal with Hamas to sell the terrorist organization both rockets and communications gear (more on the "communications" gear later). The deal is said to have been worth several hundred thousand dollars, so it is likely that the deal involved the sale of thousands of North Korean rockets to Hamas. The deal was reportedly brokered through a Lebanese front company with ties to Hamas, located in Beirut. In addition, by the time the article was published, a down payment had already been made,[56] so it is likely that the shipment of rockets and communications gear occurred sometime in late 2014.

In 2018, Fadi al-Batsh, a Palestinian and reported Hamas operative, was assassinated in Malaysia. Malaysia was for many years (including during that time frame) a location that North Korea used to operate many of its front companies for arms deals all over the world, but particularly the Middle East and Africa, as well as to launder the money from those deals. According to press reporting, intelligence officials from the West and the Middle East had evidence Batsh was part of negotiations with the North Koreans for arms deals being run out of Malaysia (as many of Pyongyang's arms deals were at the time), including for communications components used in rocket guidance systems. According to Egyptian officials, a seized shipment of North Korean communications components used for guided munitions that they captured in 2018 was destined for Gaza.[57]

And what of the actual capabilities that North Korea has contributed to Hamas? According to sources within the South Korean JCS, "some of the multiple rocket launchers found near the Israel border that Hamas militants reportedly used had "Bang-122" written in Korean." The official further remarked, "Lately, we have repeatedly detected North Korea exporting various weapons to Middle East countries and militant organizations, including the 122-millimeter multiple rocket launchers found along the border near Israel," said a JCS official. "We believe these weapons were used by Hamas or an organization that supports Hamas." The "F-7" North Korean made RPG has also been photographed in the possession of Hamas fighters attacking Israel on October 7. [58] According to the Associated Press and confirmed by numerous photos, "Hamas propaganda videos and photos previously have shown its fighters with North Korea's Bulsae guided anti-tank missile."[59] The "Bulsae" is a laser-guided ATGM that had the potential to be effective against Israeli armor as it moved through a ground campaign in Gaza. It was also reportedly used by Hamas forces in the attacks on October 7th, 2023.

Also used during the October 7th attack were the Type-58 rifle (the North Korean version of the AK-47) and the Type-73 machine gun (the North Korean version of the SKS). The North Koreans proliferated their own copycat versions of Russian MANPADS to Hamas, and the system was detected attacking Israel a few months after the attack on October 7th. A shipment of MANPADS reportedly bound for Hamas and Hezbollah was interdicted in Thailand in 2009 and further shipments likely put the weapon into the hands of the two terrorist groups soon thereafter. But

North Korean MANPADS were not reported in the initial large-scale attack on October 7th.[60]

Finally, back in 2014 according to reporting from *The Telegraph*, "Israeli military commanders supervising operations against Gaza believe North Korean experts have given Hamas advice on building the extensive network of tunnels in Gaza that has enabled fighters to move weapons without detection by Israeli drones, which maintain a constant monitoring operation over Gaza."[61] These tunnels continue to be a major challenge to the IDF and will continue to be a challenge to a ground campaign in Gaza.

What does all of this mean? First of all, it means North Korea will sell anything to anybody—including terrorist groups. Secondly, it means the governments of Israel and the US must consider North Korea's military proliferation an existential national security threat and more proactive means of thwarting it must immediately commence. Third, it means that North Korea's strong ties to Iran also equate to strong ties to proxy state and non-state actors that Iran supports. Thus, the road to destroying North Korea's illicit arms networks in the Middle East runs through Iran.[62]

North Korean Proliferation to Yemen: Then, Now, and in Relation to October 7th

The situation in Yemen is a confusing one if one is to think about it as it relates to North Korea. The North Koreans have (as evidenced throughout this essay) a long history of backing separatist movements, communist nations and terrorist groups. But it would still come as a surprise to many that North Korea sent sophisticated weapons to the government in Yemen, yet now is a confirmed supplier of weapons and training to the Houthis—who overthrew the previous government and now are locked in an ongoing civil war with no end in sight.

North Korea supplied conventional arms and advisors as well as missiles to the previous government in Yemen going back to the 1990s. In 2002, Yemen took shipments of Scud C missiles from North Korea. In fact, one of the shipments was intercepted by Spanish Marines, and the President of Yemen actually called the White House, to ensure he got back "his missiles." Yemen was allied with the United States in the War on Terror at the time and considered an important ally. But the government in Yemen did make a promise to cease its arms relationship with North Korea (and Yemen got its North Korean missiles back). Thus, during the 1990s and into the early 2000's North Korea provided military support (for a price) to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.[63]

As the civil war in Yemen raged on and ravaged an already very poor country, the tide shifted and the Houthis (a Shiite group backed by Iran) became the dominant force in the country. It was at this point that apparently North Korea decided it would be much more profitable to support them than to support a government that had publicly stated it no longer wanted to work with Pyongyang. In 2015, South Korean intelligence confirmed that North Koreans had supplied missiles that were now being launched into Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials assessed the missiles had been supplied to the Houthis by Iran—which is probably at least partially true.[64] According to a UN Panel of Experts report from 2019, North Korea was in a deal to sell ballistic missiles to the Houthis (likely improved versions with longer ranges than the original Scud C).[65] There is nothing mentioned in any report about North Korean trainers or advisors on the ground assisting the Houthis—but someone would have to do this. Thus, it is likely that the Iranians (as alleged by the Saudis) were playing this role. Iranians have been heavily involved in Houthi decision making.[66] The North Koreans also reportedly have been supplying the Houthis with variety of conventional weapons. To quote *Open Democracy*, an independent, global media association, "the weapons intended for Yemen range from light weapons such as Kalashnikovs through general-purpose machine guns, anti-tank missiles and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles right up to tanks and ballistic missiles. The transit route has been primarily through a Syrian-registered company, the Consulting Bureau for Marketing, headed by a Syrian arms trader, Hussein al-Ali."[67]

North Korea has proven that ideology has little to do with its arms sales and military support. Yemen is an important case study in this.[68] The previous government that Pyongyang provided missiles to was actually an ally of the United States. Pyongyang's current ally in Yemen, the Houthis, are often thought of as a surrogate of Iran.[69] Is Iran paying for the military support that North Korea is supplying to the Houthis? I think that of that there can be no doubt. If not all of it, then a very big portion. In addition, Iranian advisors and North Korean specialists are also likely working on the ground (or have in the recent past) in Yemen. It would be nearly impossible to conduct the missile mission without doing so. Thus, the Houthis are just one more aspect of Iran's hybrid warfare that has been and likely will continue to be supported by the North Koreans.

Conclusion

The results of the "encirclement" strategy that Iran carried out beginning on October 7th, 2023, and largely ending when the 12-Day War came to a conclusion during the summer of 2025 are quite compelling. Iran has—in every way—proven that its military is largely a paper tiger compared to the IDF. The Assad government has fallen in Syria, largely because Iranian and Hezbollah forces could not come to its aid this time as they did during the Syrian civil war. The military power of Hamas and Hezbollah is broken. The Houthis remain defiant but largely subdued (at least for now). Thus, the Iranian strategy, which it has built and implemented since the end of the war with Iraq, has proven to be an abject failure. But the new paradigm that now exists in the Middle East leaves challenges and questions for future military planning and foreign policy.

Despite the fact that Hezbollah's military capabilities have been greatly downgraded, the terrorist group likely remains focused on reconstituting its ability to attack and terrorize Israel. Where would they get these arms and technological support from? Of course, the answer is Iran. Since Iran gets many of its conventional weapons from North Korea, then passes them along to its proxies, this means there is likely going to be an increase in demand for North Korean-made weapons. The challenge for Israel will be to shut down shipment routes and money laundering entities. The challenge for Hezbollah will be the fact that their key conduit in enabling Iranian shipments to their arsenal is now gone (the Assad regime). [70] Thus, monitoring and shutting down illicit proliferation activities relating to Hezbollah will be a real challenge in coming years as the group makes attempts to bring back its military capabilities.

Hamas appears to be largely broken militarily. That could change. But if it does, or if the remnants of Hamas morph into another terrorist organization, they will still need to be supplied with conventional military weaponry and training. Thus, this also bears watching and vigilance. The Houthis are another matter as they continue to exist (thought degraded largely from American and Israeli air attacks) as a relevant and trouble making entity in the region. Shipments and illegal financial transactions are likely to continue as the Houthis don't look like they are going anywhere—at least for now.

And what of the kingpin in all of this planned violence and terrorism—Iran? The culmination of the violence promulgated, planned and financed by Iran that began on October 7, 2023, was the "12-Day War." The results of that war were quite compelling. Fourteen of Iran's key nuclear scientists

were killed; important nuclear facilities were largely destroyed. Natanz, Isfahan, and Fordow look to be so badly damaged that it will take several years to rebuild them and reconstitute nuclear weaponization capabilities. Other centrifuge facilities were also heavily degraded. The IDF has reported that 65 percent of Iran's missile launchers and around 1,000 ballistic missiles have been destroyed.[71] The Israeli air force clearly targeted weapons that could be used against the Jewish state. The ongoing results from the war with America in 2026 have appeared to be even more compelling. Thus, the question to be asked is, is this the end of Iran's nuclear weaponization and terrorism supporting activities? The likely answer is no.

Iran is undoubtedly going to attempt to re-arm both itself and its proxies. Iran is much closer to both Russia and China now more than ever in the history of the "post-shah government." But Russia is very busy with its own munitions industry attempting to subdue Ukraine. In fact, in this effort the Russians have been forced to turn to North Korea for much of their arms effort. This is especially true for artillery, rockets, and ballistic missiles. The same likely holds true for Iran. While China will probably provide them with some (purchased) weaponry, there can be almost no doubt that Iran will once again turn to their proliferator of over 40 years to reconstitute their military capabilities—North Korea. Thus, we must understand that the North Korean proliferation threat in the Middle East over the next few years is likely to be as robust and compelling as it ever has been. Policy makers and strategists would be wise to remember this.

Finally, it must be noted; as the war with America and Israel ends and US forces make a large-scale withdrawal from the Middle East, one thing is for sure. If the theocratic government in Iran remains in power they will need to once again turn to North Korea to rebuild, resupply, and reconstitute their military forces. If America and its allies do not stop North Korea's supply chain to Iran and its proxies, the violence and instability in the Middle East will continue to be enabled by a steady flow of arms generated from the Kim regime.

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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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North Korea's Abduction Apparatus: Intelligence Organizations and Institutional Reorganization[1]

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Abstract

North Korea's abductions of Japanese and South Korean nationals, as well as citizens of other countries, were conducted through an intelligence apparatus involving Workers' Party organizations, military capabilities, and overseas support networks. Drawing on interviews with former North Korean officials and South Korean and U.S. experts, this article examines the institutional responsibilities, operational coordination, and organizational changes associated with these activities. It traces the role of the Korean Workers' Party's Investigations Department, its division into separate intelligence and operational organizations in the mid-1980s, and the incorporation of several intelligence functions into the Reconnaissance General Bureau in 2009. The findings identify distinct but complementary responsibilities for intelligence collection, operational execution, and logistical support, while revealing differences among interviewees regarding military participation and the motivations for institutional reorganization. The article highlights the importance of distinguishing formal organizational structures from effective political control in understanding North Korea's abduction apparatus.

Keywords: North Korea, abductions, intelligence organizations, Korean Workers' Party, Reconnaissance General Bureau, institutional reorganization

Introduction

North Korea's abductions of foreign nationals have long been examined through the experiences of individual victims, their families, and the efforts of governments seeking information about their fate. Yet these operations also raise an important institutional question: which

[1] This article is adapted from a longer study by the author entitled "The Abduction of Japanese and Nationals of Other Countries by North Korea: A Perpetrator-Centered Approach."

North Korean organizations identified prospective targets, carried out abductions, and maintained the clandestine networks necessary to transport victims to North Korea? Interviews with former North Korean officials and intelligence specialists suggest that these activities were conducted through an established intelligence apparatus rather than by individual operatives acting independently.

Understanding the organizational structure of North Korea's abduction apparatus is complicated by overlapping institutional responsibilities, changes in agency names and functions, and the secrecy surrounding intelligence operations. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Korean Workers' Party's Investigations Department played a central role in organizing and executing abductions. Its subsequent division in the mid-1980s separated major intelligence collection and operational functions, while other Party and military organizations provided supporting capabilities. A further reorganization in 2009 incorporated several of these functions into the Reconnaissance General Bureau, raising questions about the relationship between institutional restructuring, operational effectiveness, and political control.

Drawing on interviews conducted with former North Korean operatives, officials, and other experts, this article examines the intelligence organizations responsible for overseas abductions, the coordination of their operational activities, and their subsequent institutional reorganization. Attention is given to the distinction between organizations that executed abductions and those that provided intelligence, logistical assistance, or other forms of support. The article also considers differing explanations for the establishment of the Reconnaissance General Bureau in 2009. By examining these institutional relationships, the study seeks to clarify the organizational machinery behind North Korea's abduction operations and its implications for understanding responsibility and accountability.

Methodology

This article draws on interviews conducted by the author for a broader study of North Korea's abduction operations. Interviewees included a former North Korean diplomat, former operatives of the Foreign Liaison Bureau and Reconnaissance General Bureau, former Bureau 39 officials, a former South Korean intelligence operative, and former U.S. military and intelligence specialists. Particular attention is given to the testimony of Dr. Kim Dong-sik, whose professional experience provides insight into

the organizational structure and operational practices of North Korea's intelligence apparatus.

Drawing on these interviews, the article examines the respective responsibilities of Workers' Party and military intelligence organizations, their roles in planning and conducting overseas abductions, and their subsequent institutional reorganization. The analysis focuses on organizational structures, operational coordination, and changes in command and control rather than individual abduction cases. Given the secrecy surrounding North Korea's intelligence apparatus, some organizational relationships and explanations for institutional changes remain difficult to verify independently.

Intelligence Organizations Responsible for Abductions

North Korea's abductions of foreign nationals are not the result of unauthorized rogue agents or isolated operations. They were part of a state-directed policy authorized and overseen at the highest levels of the regime. Interviews with experts from South Korea and the U.S., as well as former North Korean officials, identified four principal departments of the Secretariat of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) that played roles in these activities: the Research Department (also known as the Investigations Department), the External Coordination Department (Foreign Liaison Bureau), the Operations Department, and the United Front Department (UFD). Their responsibilities encompassed intelligence collection, target identification, operational planning, infiltration, and support for clandestine activities abroad.[1]

Research Department/Investigations Department

According to Dr. Kim Dong-sik, the Investigations Department originally held primary responsibility for abducting Japanese and South Korean nationals. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the department combined intelligence collection and operational functions. One component identified potential targets and gathered intelligence, while another conducted infiltration and abduction missions. The department also maintained specialized capabilities for operations in South Korea and Japan. Dr. Kim attributes major abduction operations during this period, including the kidnapping of South Korean film director Shin Sang-ok and actress Choi Eun-hee in Hong Kong, to the Investigations Department.[2]

This organizational arrangement changed in the mid-1980s, when the Investigations Department was divided into the Operations Department

and the External Intelligence Investigations Department. According to Dr. Kim, the division separated functions that had previously been concentrated within a single organization, although the two successor departments continued to cooperate in conducting overseas operations.[3]

Operations Department

The Operations Department assumed responsibility for the physical execution of many abduction missions. It maintained specially trained infiltration operatives and maritime capabilities used to transport personnel and abductees. Its responsibilities included dispatching operational teams, conducting abductions, and transferring victims to North Korea. Dr. Kim describes its operatives as comparable to naval special operations personnel, equipped to conduct clandestine missions along foreign coastlines.[4]

External Intelligence Investigations Department

Following the mid-1980s reorganization, this department concentrated primarily on intelligence collection and overseas activities. However, according to Dr. Kim, its responsibilities were not restricted to gathering information. Where Operations Department personnel could not readily operate, External Intelligence Investigations Department operatives could conduct abductions directly and subsequently transfer victims to the Operations Department. This division of responsibilities permitted the two organizations to cooperate while maintaining distinct operational functions.[5]

External Coordination Department (Foreign Liaison Bureau)

The External Coordination Department conducted clandestine activities abroad, including the establishment and management of intelligence networks and relationships with pro-North Korean organizations. Its activities included connections with Chongryon, the association of pro-North Korean ethnic Koreans in Japan. These networks facilitated intelligence gathering and provided support for covert overseas operations.[6]

Dr. Kim, who served in the External Coordination Department, distinguishes its responsibilities from those of the departments that executed abductions. According to his account, the department collected information about prospective targets and supplied that intelligence to operational organizations but did not itself carry out the abductions. Its

contribution was therefore principally one of intelligence collection and support rather than the direct execution of kidnapping operations.[7]

United Front Department

The UFD was responsible principally for political influence, propaganda, inter-Korean activities, and relationships with pro-North Korean organizations and individuals abroad. Such networks could support the regime's overseas intelligence activities, including abductions. However, Dr. Kim emphasizes that the UFD did not lead the abduction program. Its role was primarily to manage organizations and individuals whose activities could assist other departments conducting clandestine operations.[8]

Military Reconnaissance and State Security Organizations

Military intelligence organizations also possessed capabilities relevant to overseas operations. Robert Collins identifies the Korean People's Army's Reconnaissance Bureau as a source of logistical support, particularly for maritime infiltration. Dr. Kim, however, maintains that the military Reconnaissance Bureau did not directly conduct abductions, which remained principally the responsibility of the KWP's operational departments.[9]

Interviews also suggest possible involvement by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), formerly the State Security Department, in more recent abduction operations. According to Ko Young-hwan, the ministry has conducted operations targeting North Korean defectors, dissidents, South Korean missionaries, and businesspeople. These accounts suggest a broader evolution in the organizations associated with overseas abductions, although responsibility for particular operations remains difficult to establish independently.[10]

Operational Coordination and Methods

North Korea's overseas abduction operations required coordination among intelligence organizations responsible for gathering information, identifying targets, deploying operatives, and transporting abductees to North Korea. Although the organizational arrangements evolved over time, interviews with former North Korean officials suggest that these activities were conducted within a tightly controlled system intended to limit exposure and preserve operational secrecy.

According to Dr. Kim Dong-sik, the Investigations Department initially combined intelligence collection and abduction operations within a single organization. Following its division in the mid-1980s, the Operations Department and External Intelligence Investigations Department assumed distinct but complementary responsibilities. The External Coordination Department, meanwhile, gathered information about prospective targets and supplied it to the operational departments. Dr. Kim emphasizes that this division of responsibilities enabled cooperation without requiring all participating organizations to engage directly in abductions.[11]

The arrangements varied according to the location and circumstances of individual operations. Dr. Kim describes cases in which External Intelligence Investigations Department operatives could conduct abductions in areas where Operations Department personnel faced difficulties operating directly. In locations such as Hong Kong, these operatives could carry out an abduction and subsequently transfer the victim to Operations Department personnel responsible for transportation to North Korea. This arrangement illustrates how intelligence collection, operational execution, and transportation could be distributed among cooperating organizations.[12]

Overseas networks also played an important supporting role. North Korean agents were sometimes already present in countries where abductions occurred, providing local knowledge and assistance. In Japan, connections with Chongryon, the pro-North Korean association of ethnic Koreans, reportedly facilitated clandestine activities by providing access to established networks and opportunities for concealing operatives' identities. Although the United Front Department managed relationships with pro-North Korean organizations abroad, Dr. Kim distinguishes these supporting functions from the direct execution of abduction missions.[13]

Maritime infiltration and transportation were particularly important to operations involving Japan and South Korea. According to Dr. Kim, North Korean operatives during the 1970s and 1980s commonly used small, high-speed vessels to approach foreign coastlines and transport abductees. He contrasts this practice with accounts emphasizing the use of larger operational vessels and semi-submersibles. Robert Collins, however, describes maritime operations involving specially trained personnel and semi-submersible craft. These accounts indicate that North Korea possessed multiple maritime infiltration capabilities, although the methods

employed in particular operations remain difficult to establish independently.[14]

Interviewees also offer differing assessments of the military's participation. Collins identifies the Korean People's Army's Reconnaissance Bureau as a source of logistical support, particularly for maritime operations. Dr. Kim maintains that the bureau did not directly conduct abductions and emphasizes that the Workers' Party's Operations Department possessed its own specialized personnel and maritime equipment. His account suggests that responsibility for carrying out abductions remained concentrated within designated Party organizations rather than being routinely distributed across the military intelligence apparatus.[15]

The procurement of equipment provides further insight into these operations. According to Dr. Kim, North Korean procurement agents obtained diving equipment and other specialized supplies from Japan. The engines used in high-speed vessels were often American- or German-made and could be acquired through North Korean trading companies operating abroad. Interviewees could not, however, identify the specific manufacturers or companies involved in these purchases.[16]

Former North Korean trade officials Ri Jong-ho and Lee Hyunseung also confirmed the existence of an Operations Department merchant vessel that traveled between Japan and North Korea during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Although the vessel was reportedly used to transport abductees, the interviewees did not have direct knowledge of abduction operations themselves. Their testimony therefore establishes the existence of the vessel but does not independently verify its use in transporting abductees.[17]

These accounts illustrate an abduction apparatus that combined intelligence collection, overseas networks, specialized operational capabilities, and logistical support. They also underscore the difficulty of reconstructing precise lines of operational responsibility within North Korea's secretive intelligence system.

Institutional Reorganization and the Reconnaissance General Bureau

The establishment of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB) in 2009 marked a significant reorganization of North Korea's intelligence apparatus. According to Robert Collins, the Operations Department and External Intelligence Investigations Department were incorporated into the new RGB of the Korean People's Army (KPA), established under the

National Defense Commission. The restructuring consolidated functions previously distributed among Workers' Party intelligence organizations and the military's reconnaissance apparatus. These organizations were formally placed under the RGB's command-and-control structure, although ultimate political oversight remained with the North Korean leadership.[18]

The reasons for this reorganization remain less certain. One possible explanation concerns institutional performance and the desire to improve control over intelligence operations. North Korea's intelligence organizations operated within a system in which performance and fulfillment of assigned objectives influenced institutional standing. The consolidation may therefore have reflected dissatisfaction with existing arrangements or a perceived need for more centralized supervision. Collins suggests that the leadership sought greater control by bringing previously separate organizations under a unified command headed by a four-star general. Kim Yong-chol served as RGB director from 2009 to 2016. However, the available interview evidence does not establish that operational failures or unmet objectives directly prompted the restructuring.[19]

Dr. Kim Dong-sik and a former RGB official offer a different interpretation. In their assessment, the reorganization was not primarily a response to operational failures or deficiencies in coordination. Rather, it occurred as Kim Jong-un was emerging as Kim Jong-il's designated successor. Dr. Kim believes that the restructuring was intended to make the intelligence apparatus easier for Kim Jong-un to command, supervise, and manage. From this perspective, the consolidation reflected the leadership's succession arrangements and preference for more convenient mechanisms of personal control rather than an institutional performance assessment.[20]

The transfer of Workers' Party intelligence organizations into a military command structure was also institutionally unusual. As Dr. Kim explains, Party organizations traditionally occupied a superior position within North Korea's political hierarchy. Their incorporation into a military organization could therefore represent a reduction in institutional status, even as it placed their operational functions within a more centralized structure. This apparent departure from the conventional relationship between Party and military institutions reinforces the interpretation that the reorganization was driven by leadership priorities rather than ordinary bureaucratic considerations.[21]

An additional distinction concerns formal organizational placement versus actual authority. Although the restructuring placed the affected organizations under the military's RGB, some more recent North Korean defectors have maintained that effective command and control remained with the Workers' Party. None of the interviewees, however, could independently verify this claim. The formal transfer to the RGB is therefore clearer than the precise distribution of authority following the reorganization.

The 2009 restructuring illustrates how North Korea's intelligence organizations could be reorganized without necessarily altering the leadership's ultimate control over clandestine operations. It also highlights the difficulty of determining whether institutional changes were intended to improve operational performance, facilitate succession, or consolidate personal authority. The available testimony points toward the importance of leadership control, while leaving the specific motivations for the reorganization open to interpretation.

Conclusion

North Korea's abduction operations were conducted through an institutional apparatus that combined intelligence collection, operational execution, overseas networks, and logistical support. Interviews with former North Korean officials and intelligence specialists indicate that the Korean Workers' Party's Investigations Department initially exercised primary responsibility for these activities. Its division in the mid-1980s redistributed intelligence collection and operational functions among successor organizations, while other Party and military agencies continued to provide supporting capabilities. These arrangements demonstrate that North Korea's abductions were embedded within an organized intelligence system rather than being isolated activities undertaken by individual operatives.

The interview evidence also reveals important distinctions concerning organizational responsibility. While Robert Collins identifies military reconnaissance organizations as providers of logistical support, Dr. Kim Dong-sik emphasizes the central role of Workers' Party departments in executing abductions. Similarly, differing explanations for the establishment of the Reconnaissance General Bureau in 2009 point to the difficulty of distinguishing operational considerations from political and succession-related objectives. Although the reorganization formally

placed several intelligence functions under military command, the extent to which it changed effective lines of political authority remains uncertain.

These findings underscore the importance of examining North Korea's abduction program through its institutional structures and command relationships. The testimony provides valuable insight into the division of responsibilities among intelligence organizations, but the secrecy surrounding these activities limits independent verification of particular operations and decisions. Further investigation of the organizations involved, their records, and the experiences of former personnel may help clarify outstanding questions concerning operational responsibility and the fate of abductees. Understanding the evolution of these institutions remains important to efforts to establish accountability for North Korea's overseas abductions.

Notes:

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[2] Interview with Dr. Kim Dong-sik, who previously served in the External Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party from 1981 to 1995.

[3] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[4] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[5] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[6] Interviews with Kim Dong-sik and Ko Young-hwan, a former North Korean diplomat.

[7] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[8] Interviews with Kim Dong-sik, Robert Collins, and Ko Young-hwan

[9] Interviews with Robert Collins and Kim Dong-sik

[10] Interviews with Robert Collins and Ko Young-hwan

[11] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[12] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[13] Interviews with Robert Collins, Ko Young-hwan, and Kim Dong-sik

[14] Interviews with Kim Dong-sik and Robert Collins

[15] Interviews with Robert Collins and Kim Dong-sik

[16] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[17] Interviews with Ri Jong-ho, a former senior North Korean economic official, and Lee Hyunseung, who graduated from the Pyongyang Foreign Language School in 2002 and served in the Korean People's Army until 2005

[18] Interview with Robert Collins

[19] Interview with Robert Collins

[20] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

[21] Interview with Kim Dong-sik

The (Un)wavering Echo of Patriotism: South Korean Identity and Political Legitimacy in President Yoon's 69th Memorial Day Speech

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Abstract

South Korea's national identity is closely shaped by historical memory and the unresolved conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Yet, presidential speeches remain underexplored as sites where national identity and political legitimacy are actively constructed. Using discourse analysis, this article examines President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech at the 69th Memorial Day in 2024. It argues that while Yoon mobilized historical narratives and patriotic rhetoric to reinforce nationalism, his emotive appeal failed to alleviate domestic political criticism. Instead, the speech exposed the limits of nationalist rhetoric, contributing to Yoon's early transition into a "lame duck" presidency despite substantial remaining time in office.

Keywords: Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea, identity, speech, discourse

Introduction

The existing literature has extensively discussed the formation of South Korea's identity as a sovereign and independent nation. Numerous studies have attempted to analyze how South Korea's identity was shaped, articulated, and maintained, enabling the country to navigate both domestic and global political complexities. For instance, in terms of history, Japanese colonization served as a critical anchor in the construction of South Korea's national identity. While Japanese colonization incited anti-Japanese sentiment, it was also effectively capitalized upon as a powerful tool for unifying the Korean people.[1] Despite the negative sentiment towards Japan, a close ally of the United States, this anti-Japanese fervor became a vigorous catalyst in igniting South Korean nationalism. In a cabinet meeting, for example, former President Moon Jae-in once made a provocative statement with anti-Japanese overtones, declaring, "We will never again lose to Japan."[2] The slogan "No Japan" can be seen as a manifestation of frustration with Japan's actions, which are often perceived as problematic by South Korea. Although the context is no longer rooted in political or military conflicts,

it continues to have a significant impact on trade relations between the two countries, which have fluctuated over time.[3]

North Korea, meanwhile, has undeniably played a critical role in shaping South Korea's national identity. Positioned as South Korea's antagonist, embodying "otherness" and communism, North Korea is consistently perceived as a looming threat that could strike at any moment.[4] The presence of a hostile neighbor, coupled with its advancing nuclear program, has forced South Korea to remain vigilant, constantly aware of the serious threat posed not only to its own security but also to the broader international community. North Korea's nuclear ambitions, in particular, have heightened tensions and reinforced the perception of North Korea as an unpredictable adversary.[5] As a result, rather than fostering any sense of kinship with North Korea, the persistent threat from the North has paradoxically drawn South Korea closer to global powers like the United States (U.S.) and, to some extent, China.[6] The ever-present danger from North Korea has deepened South Korea's reliance on its strategic alliances, particularly with the U.S., while simultaneously shaping a distinct South Korean identity that views the North as an enduring external threat rather than a shared cultural or historical entity.

Indeed, the historical experiences and the division of the Korean Peninsula created a sense of cultural discontinuity, leading South Korean policymakers to prioritize the restoration and reinforcement of national identity through cultural policies. At the heart of South Korea's identity is the concept of *Han minjok*, the idea of a unified Korean nation, which has remained a strong source of cultural nationalism despite the peninsula's division. This sense of unity was mobilized to counter the influence of Japanese colonialism and the perceived threat of Western cultural hegemony, which surged after the Korean War. In response, the South Korean government's cultural policies have focused on both preserving traditional Confucian values, such as morality, propriety, and social harmony, and fostering the growth of the country's cultural industries. From the 1970s onward, successive governments have worked to align cultural policies with broader national goals, such as economic development and political legitimacy. These efforts include promoting the arts, safeguarding Korean heritage, and supporting regional and international cultural exchanges.[7] Since the 1990s, South Korea has also embraced globalization by encouraging the export of Korean culture through the Korean Wave *(Hallyu)*, while simultaneously protecting domestic cultural industries from foreign dominance. In essence, South

Korea's cultural policy serves as both a means of defending and promoting its unique national identity in an increasingly interconnected world.[8] Additionally, the South Korean government has also reinforced nationalism on a massive scale through the glorification of Park Chung-hee, a figure memorialized in various monuments and inscriptions. Despite the numerous controversies surrounding his authoritarian rule, Park is often regarded as a symbol of Korean nationalism due to his pivotal role in the country's rapid economic development and modernization. These commemorations serve not only to highlight his contributions but also to solidify a narrative of national pride and unity, embedding his legacy deeply into the collective consciousness of the nation.[9]

The South Korean government also maintains its national identity through a robust education system and curriculum that emphasizes traditional values, history, and national pride. Schools incorporate key historical events, such as Japanese colonization and the Korean War, into the curriculum to instill a sense of resilience and patriotism. Confucian values like respect for elders, loyalty, and social harmony are also taught, reinforcing Korea's cultural heritage. This educational approach fosters a collective national consciousness, promoting unity and ensuring that future generations retain a strong sense of national identity.[10] The South Korean government has also used its education system to reinforce national identity by incorporating ideological content, particularly anti-communist teachings, during the Cold War. This curriculum aimed to promote unity and national pride by highlighting liberal democracy's values and framing North Korea as a threat. The long-term impact of this approach has been the fostering of collective national identity, although in some cases it has led to shifts in individual political views, showing the complex interaction between education and national ideology.[11]

Certainly, studying South Korea's national identity from a historical perspective is undoubtedly crucial, as is analyzing it through cultural and educational lenses. However, what has often been overlooked is how national identity is strategically articulated through political rhetoric, particularly by presidents. Politicians deliberately use historical memory to evoke nationalism, which in turn is mobilized for broader political purposes. Yoon Suk Yeol's need to emphasize patriotism and foster nationalism during his 69th Memorial Day speech is deeply tied to his political legitimacy. Like many South Korean presidents, Yoon used historical memory and the sacrifices of national heroes to connect emotionally with the public and reinforce a sense of unity, especially in

response to the ongoing threat from North Korea. His strong focus on national security, particularly through the U.S.-ROK alliance, distinguished his leadership in a way that aligned with past presidents but addressed current geopolitical challenges.[12] The question is: "How did President Yoon Suk Yeol use historical narratives and patriotic rhetoric during the 69th Memorial Day speech to reinforce South Korea's identity and political legitimacy?" Therefore, by answering the question, this study aims to fill that gap by critically exploring how South Korean national identity is expressed through presidential speeches, offering a fresh and necessary approach to understanding this complex issue in contemporary Korea. Thus, it is pivotal to understand the national identity discourse and how it influences politics and the country's foreign policy.

Discourse on National Identity

A national identity is shaped by various factors such as values, historical background, religion, ethnicity, and culture. These elements not only form the foundation of a country's identity but also significantly influence its worldview, political system, and even foreign policy decisions. National identity, grounded in shared experiences and cultural traditions, impacts how a nation perceives its role globally and how it interacts with other states. This dynamic reflects the broader interconnection between internal values and a country's external political behavior.[13] In this context, national identity is essentially a constructed concept, shaped by ideas that are later propagated by politicians to consolidate the people.[14] This means that political mobilization is driven by certain sentiments and shared characteristics that form the basis of identity. As a result, what Benedict Anderson refers to as an "imagined community" emerges, where people who have never met each other share a collective identity, unified by common values, history, and experiences. This constructed identity serves to foster national cohesion and collective purpose.[15]

Some countries have their national identity shaped by a combination of ethnic and nationalist sentiments. In nations that tend to be ethnically homogenous, the population can more easily form a cohesive identity due to shared values, customs, and cultural practices. The sense of unity is often stronger in such societies, as people identify with common ethnic roots, traditions, and a collective historical narrative, which fosters a natural bond among citizens and strengthens the sense of national identity and solidarity. Japan is an example of how ethnic homogeneity and

nationalism have served as crucial catalysts for national consolidation, both during wartime and in the post-war era. The concept of *"Kokutai,"* which translates to the "uniqueness of the Japanese people," played a significant role in fostering national pride and unity. This ideology emphasized the distinct ethnic and cultural characteristics of the Japanese, strengthening a sense of belonging and loyalty to the nation. The *Kokutai* doctrine became instrumental in mobilizing the population under a shared national identity, whether during or after the war.[16] Interestingly, Japan's neighbors, China and South Korea, exhibit a similar tendency where ethnic sentiment fuels nationalist fervor, particularly with an anti-Japanese tone. Both countries, having been subjected to Japanese imperialism, have effectively capitalized on anti-imperialist sentiments to drive their nationalist movements. In both China and South Korea, historical grievances stemming from Japanese colonization have been transformed into a unifying narrative, solidifying national identity, fostering internal cohesion, and reinforcing a shared memory of resistance against foreign domination.[17]

Meanwhile, John Mearsheimer argues that nationalism is the strongest ideology on the planet because it taps into people's deep emotional attachment to their nation.[18] Nationalism binds individuals to a collective identity based on shared history, culture, and territory, fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty. Unlike ideologies like communism or liberalism, which may appeal to broader, more abstract ideas, nationalism is rooted in tangible and often personal experiences of identity. It has the power to mobilize populations, drive political movements, and sustain states even in difficult times.[19] On the other hand, strong nationalist sentiments can become disastrous when not properly managed. The outbreak of World War I was largely triggered by extreme nationalism, fueled by political and historical grievances. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, Sukarno's excessive nationalism led to aggressive actions toward Malaysia, ultimately contributing to his downfall. This highlights the potential dangers of unbridled nationalism, which, when left unchecked, can drive nations toward conflict and instability, as seen in both European and Southeast Asian contexts. Excessive nationalism, aimed at asserting national identity, is often articulated through slogans that captivate the public and rally support for governmental actions. For example, phrases like *"For King and Country"* (used in Britain),[20] *"Deutschland über alles"* ("Germany above all," in Germany)[21] during World War I and *"Ganyang Malaysia"* ("Crush Malaysia!" in Indonesia) during Indonesia's

confrontation against Malaysia,[22] were widely employed. These slogans stirred public sentiment and drove aggressive nationalistic policies during pivotal historical moments.

The discourse of such slogans tends to be employed by presidents primarily for agitation and propaganda, aiming to capture public attention and garner support for their policies. These slogans resonate because they reflect the prevailing sentiments of the time.[23] Additionally, leaders often invoke historical memories to remind citizens of past struggles, motivating and mobilizing them to continuously support the nation.[24] In times of war, leaders strive to make the public feel the urgency of the national crisis.[25] For example, the U.S. government has consistently emphasized the necessity of military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and more recently, Ukraine.[26] In Ukraine, leaders like Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko have also invoked the country's involvement in World War II during Victory Day to revive nationalistic pride and highlight Ukraine's strong ties with Europe vis-à-vis Russian threats.[27] Conversely, Russia, through speeches by President Vladimir Putin, has continuously propagated the notion of a real Western threat, a message echoed across the entire Russian government apparatus.[28]

National commemorations are important occasions for strengthening national ideology and identity. They provide opportunities for nations to reflect on shared values and collective goals.[29] A national leader's speech on such an occasion becomes especially significant, as it is an opportunity to address and unite all elements of the nation. Through their words, the president reinforces national pride, commemorates past sacrifices, and mobilizes the public toward future aspirations. Such speeches play a key role in shaping the national consciousness and reinforcing unity. On that day, the president becomes the center of attention and may even be welcomed like a hero.[30] National commemorations also provide a stage for political power where not only the president but also their political party gains popularity and recognition among both their constituents and potential voters. This is evident in national commemorations in various countries, such as the United Kingdom,[31] Singapore,[32] Bangladesh,[33] Thailand,[34] and India,[35] among others. Indeed, these events serve as opportunities for political leadership to showcase their achievements and reinforce their public image.

Discourse on national identity in speeches delivered at national commemorations often focuses on the challenges a country faces. These challenges can include internal and external threats,[36] natural disasters,

and humanitarian crises.[37] For example, several European leaders have expressed their concerns through various speeches regarding the Syrian refugee crisis. These leaders used narratives to emphasize the humanitarian, social, and political challenges posed by the influx of refugees. They highlighted issues such as integration difficulties, the strain on public services, and the need for solidarity among EU member states.[38] During the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders used speeches at national commemorations to address the public health crisis, economic fallout, and the need for national unity.[39] Several countries, such as Indonesia, have used presidential speeches to address the public's concerns during the pandemic. In particular, President Joko Widodo urged the people to share in the national worry over the pandemic's impact, while also expressing his own uncertainty about the effects of COVID-19 on his ambitious mega projects.[40] This means that through their national speeches, leaders aim to rally all elements of society to participate in and support the country's policies, whether during times of peace, disaster, or even war.

There are five key strategies that a nation employs to preserve and maintain its national identity. First, it is essential to continually narrate a shared history and cultural heritage, emphasizing the common threads that bind the nation together. Second, the use of unifying symbols—such as flags, anthems, and monuments—is crucial for creating a sense of collective belonging across all segments of society. Third, defining the rights and responsibilities of citizens in terms of economic, political, legal, and social welfare is necessary to ensure that everyone understands their role within the national framework. Fourth, the creation of a common enemy, whether real or perceived, often serves as a unifying force in times of internal political division. Lastly, civic education is vital for the people to comprehend the nation's identity, encompassing symbols, values, traditions, history, and even the concept of a common enemy.[41] Simultaneously, a people's understanding of its history and national identity greatly influences the depth of its nationalism. However, history is frequently shaped and narrated by politicians and national leaders, who may, at times, be manipulative.[42] Additionally, the use of foreign policy issues by national leaders is not new, particularly when they are faced with challenging domestic situations. When a leader is politically cornered and weakened at home, leveraging foreign policy becomes a strategic exit, offering a way to gain political support or, at the very least, divert the public's attention from internal political crises. This maneuver often serves as a means of reshaping public discourse and shifting the focus from

domestic shortcomings to external engagements.[43] Nonetheless, the narrative of such history is crucial for influencing the people and maintaining national identity.[44] Therefore, analyzing a leader's speeches—such as South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's address during the 69th Memorial Day—becomes an essential exercise in understanding how a nation's identity is constructed and reinforced. Through such commemorations, leaders are able to frame the nation's identity around patriotism, shared sacrifice, and collective memory, thus shaping how the people perceive their place in history and their unity in the present.

Indeed, existing work reveals a recurring narrative in which heads of state often use key moments to deliver speeches to secure public support for their policies, including foreign policy. However, research on the speeches of South Korean presidents, particularly during 69th Memorial Day events, appears to be limited. Therefore, this study offers an alternative approach to critically understanding and analyzing South Korea's national identity through the lens of presidential speeches delivered during Memorial Day celebrations.

Research Design and Methods

This study critically analyzes South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech delivered on June 6, 2024, during the 69th Memorial Day commemoration. Memorial Day is a significant event for South Korea, as it honors the sacrifices of those who defended the nation's freedom, particularly during the Korean War (1950–1953) and other conflicts, including the Vietnam War. It serves as a moment to commemorate fallen soldiers and reinforce national unity, collective memory, and patriotism while underscoring the ongoing importance of national security.[45] However, this moment becomes significant as it is preceded and followed by several events that should be considered when understanding the importance of this analysis in revealing the deeper meaning behind President Yoon's speech. Therefore, the following timeline is presented for context as per Figure 1.

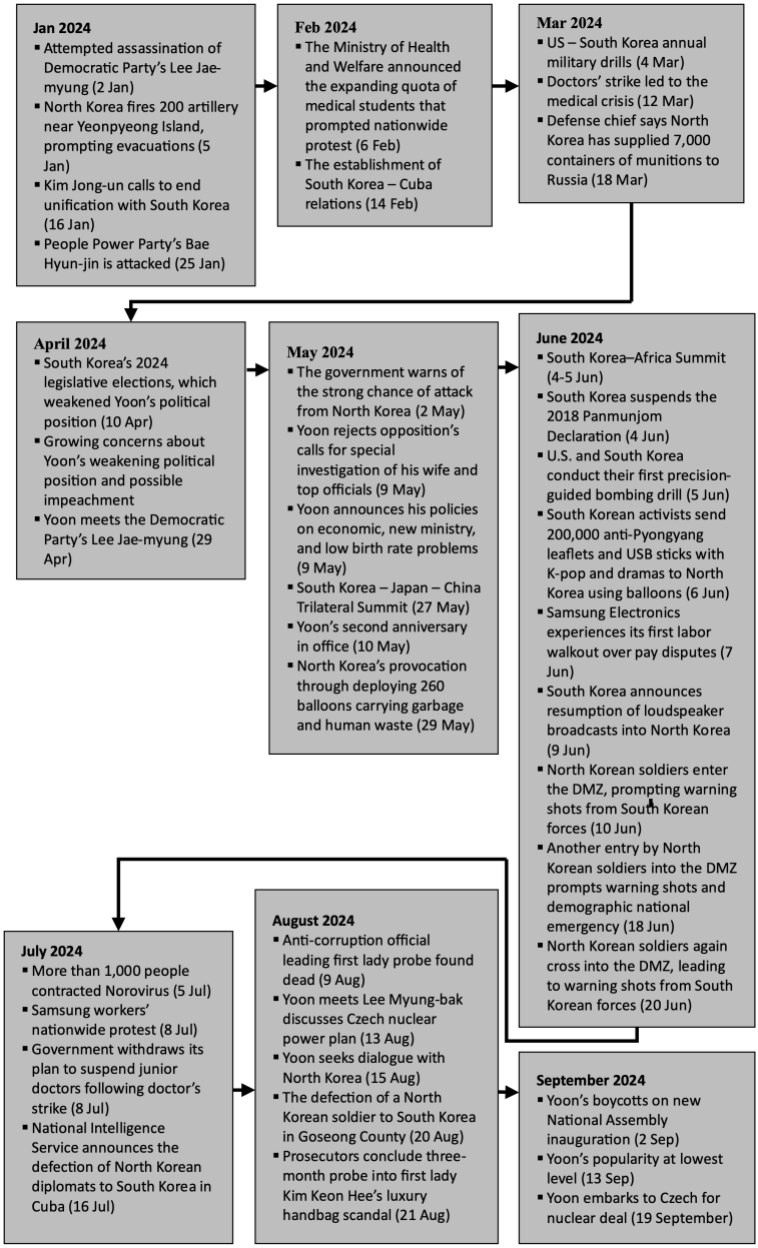


Figure 1. Timeline of key events surrounding President Yoon Suk Yeol's 69th Memorial Day Speech

To examine South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech, the study adopted a qualitative approach, with discourse analysis as the primary method for interpreting the data. This method is suitable for examining the linguistic patterns, rhetorical techniques, and ideological meanings embedded in the speech and its broader sociopolitical context.[46] Simply put, van Dijk offers guidance that by presenting quotes or excerpts, one can uncover the context surrounding a statement, particularly within a speech.[47] This method allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying message and the circumstances in which it was delivered.[48]

The main data source was the speech transcript, accessible online from the Office of the President of the Republic of Korea. Unlike quantitative methods that require large datasets, this qualitative approach centers on a more focused, in-depth analysis[49] of President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech. Although the speech was delivered in Korean, the study analyzed the 812-word English translation provided on the presidential website.[50] To enhance systematic analysis, the study utilizes NVivo 12 Plus (Burlington, Massachusetts), a qualitative research software designed to manage, organize, and analyze unstructured data such as text, video, and social media. NVivo 12 Plus offers several features like coding, querying, and data visualization. However, NVivo 12 Plus software has limitations, such as relying solely on algorithms and the text input it receives, which limits its ability to interpret complex symbols, and implicit meanings often present in political speeches. Additionally, NVivo is expensive and most effective for processing English-language texts, restricting its broader application in multi-lingual research contexts. Therefore, discourse analysis complements NVivo's findings by uncovering the deeper meaning within the speech, offering a more comprehensive understanding. At the very least, NVivo's results help structure the analysis, making it more organized and systematic.[51]

In this research, three key features were applied to analyze speech text: Sentiment Analysis, Word Frequency, and Text Search Query. These tools helped identify patterns, themes, and sentiments in speech data. The findings are presented in two parts: (1) visualizations generated by NVivo 12 Plus, including sentiment analysis, word frequency, and text search query, and (2) a discourse analysis that focuses on key quotes from President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech, examining their implicit meanings. The combined use of these methods is expected to offer deeper insights into the national identity discourse in South Korea. The procedure of data analysis can be depicted in Figure 2.

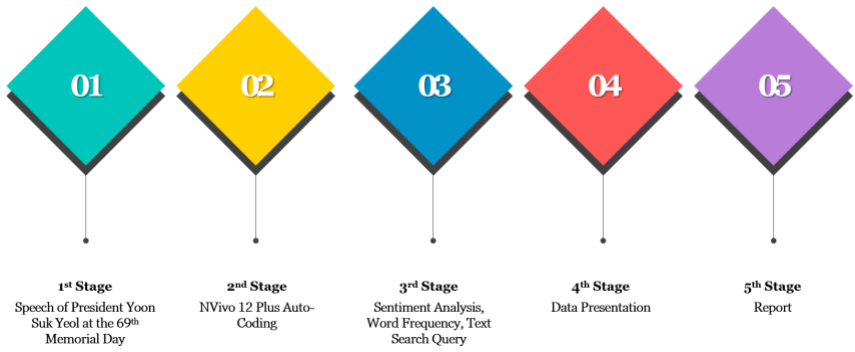


Figure 2. Five-stage procedure for analyzing President Yoon Suk Yeol's 69th Memorial Day speech using NVivo 12 Plus

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of President Yoon's Speech Using NVivo 12 Plus

This section presents the results of three analytical features conducted using NVivo 12 Plus: sentiment analysis, word frequency, and text search query applied to President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech delivered at the 69th Memorial Day commemoration. Sentiment analysis provides analysis of the emotional tone and attitude expressed in the speech, while word frequency highlights key terms that appear most often, revealing core themes and messages. The text search query helps identify specific phrases or topics discussed, offering a more focused exploration of the speech's content. First, sentiment analysis reveals a nuanced emotional tone. As shown in Figure 3, the most prominent sentiment is moderately positive, at 39.61%, indicating an overall hopeful and constructive message. Moderately negative sentiment follows at 31.37%, reflecting underlying concerns or critiques. Additionally, very negative sentiments account for 16.08%, representing stronger expressions of caution or unease. Lastly, very positive sentiments make up 12.94%, highlighting moments of optimism or encouragement. When totaled, the positive sentiments dominate at 52.55%, while the negative ones make up 47.45%. This indicates that despite the speech being delivered in a solemn atmosphere of honoring the fallen heroes who sacrificed on the front lines defending South Korea, the choice of words is marked by a cautious tone. Thus, the

patriotic fervor that President Yoon seeks to ignite is largely expressed with positive undertones, although the significant 47.45% negative sentiment underscores the weight of the concerns and challenges at hand.

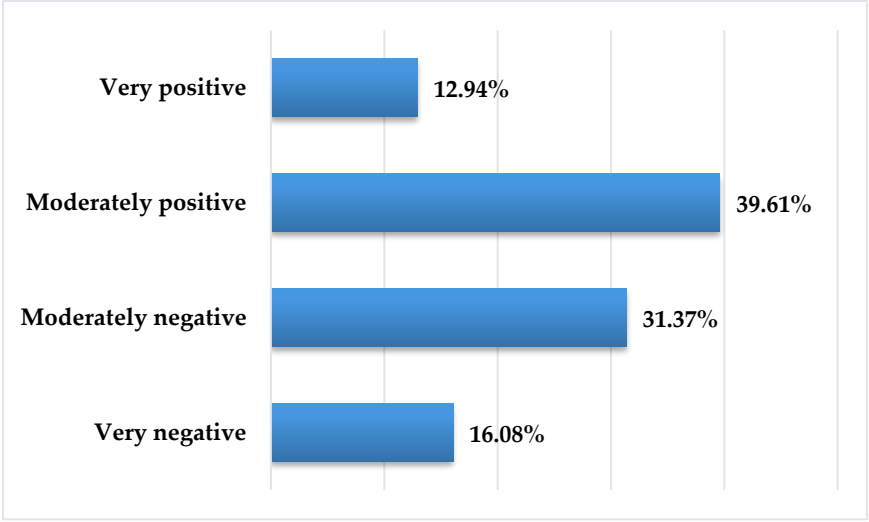


Figure 3. Sentiment analysis of President Yoon's speech

The second is word frequency analysis. As shown in Figure 4, word frequency analysis underscores several key elements of President Yoon Suk Yeol's 69th Memorial Day speech. The five dominant words — "country," "lives," "heroes," "Korea," and "defended" — carry deep symbolic weight within President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech, revealing layers of implicit meaning. "Country" evokes a sense of collective identity, uniting the people under a shared national destiny. "Lives" and "heroes" emphasize the human cost of defending that identity, paying homage to the fallen as embodiments of sacrifice. "Korea" stands as a beacon of sovereignty, while "defended" signals not only past struggles but the ongoing vigilance required to protect the nation's freedom and future. Each word, though direct, resonates with historical echoes, calling the nation to remember its trials and inspire collective resilience. Smaller, yet significant words like "republic," "Korean," "patriots," "north," "rights," and "people" serve as reinforcing elements, subtly strengthening the narrative of unity, perceived threats, and the collective struggle of the nation. The remaining, less prominent words act as subtle undertones,

fortifying the central narrative of honoring heroes who bravely stood at the forefront to defend South Korea's sovereignty and future. Indeed, these terms embody the speech's core themes of patriotism, sacrifice, and national pride.



Figure 4. Word frequency analysis of President Yoon's speech

The third feature is the text search query. Based on the results of the word frequency analysis (Figure 4), five words stand out as the most dominant in President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech during the 69th Memorial Day commemoration: "country," "lives," "heroes," "Korea," and "defended." Upon closer examination, the text search query feature in NVivo 12 Plus, which produces a "word tree" visualization as per Figure 5, reveals an interesting relationship between these five words and other related terms. This connection offers a deeper insight into the deep meaning behind the selection of these particular words, suggesting layers of significance in how they are woven into the broader narrative of national identity, sacrifice, and resilience. The term "country" connects

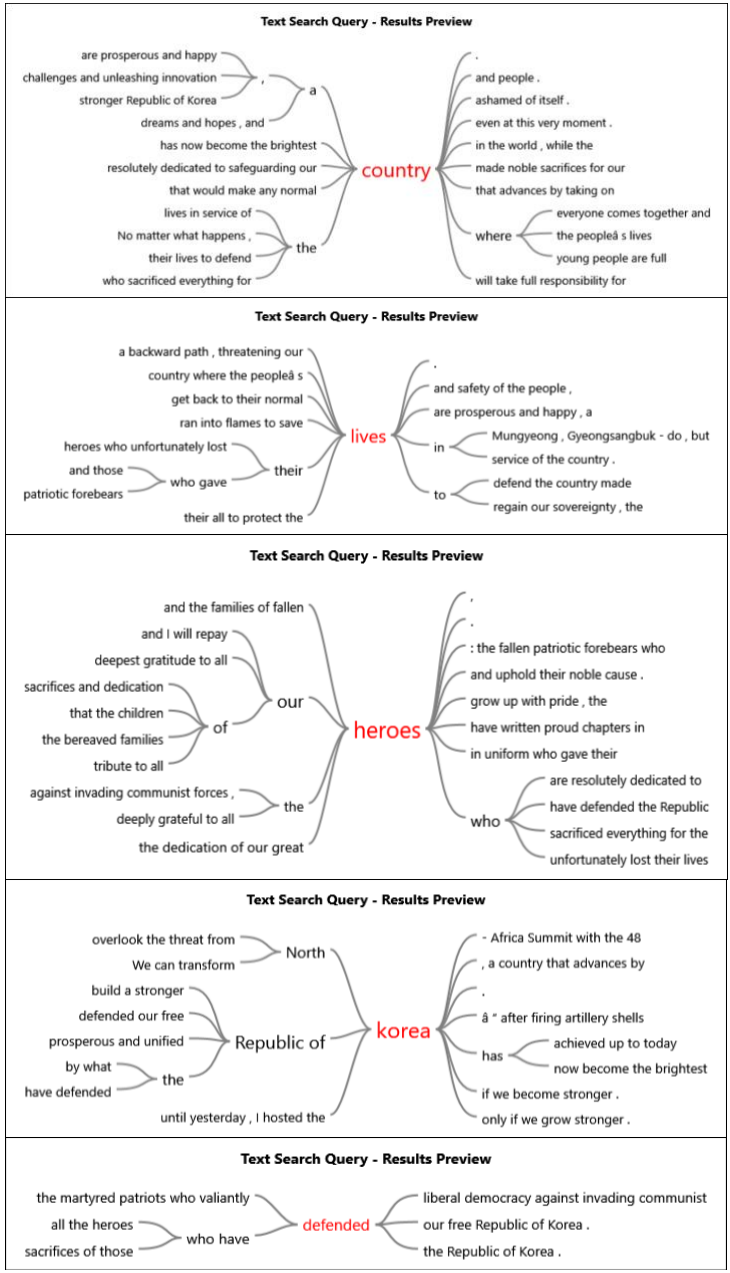


Figure 5. Text search query analysis President Yoon's speech

with ideas of national progress and collective security, emphasizing prosperity and responsibility. "Lives" highlights the sacrifices made by individuals to protect South Korea's sovereignty, while "heroes" underscores gratitude for fallen patriots and their families, positioning them as central to the nation's identity. "Korea" portrays the nation's resilience and strength in the face of external threats, particularly from North Korea, while "defended" focuses on the act of safeguarding the Republic's liberal democracy. Together, these terms create a narrative centered on patriotism, sacrifice, and the ongoing effort to protect and strengthen the country.

Discourse analysis of President Yoon's 69th Memorial Day Speech

This section critically analyzes President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech. Key excerpts are selected and explored based on previous findings to uncover deeper meanings behind them. This approach aims to give readers an implicit understanding of the speech's intent, which aligns with the paper's central theme: understanding South Korea's national identity in the context of the 69th Memorial Day. The speech is arguably infused with patriotic fervor, wrapped in the rhetoric of nationalism, stressing political sentiment grounded in hardline ideals.

> *Excerpt 1:* "We are gathered here to remember and honor the noble sacrifices of those who have defended our free Republic of Korea. With the utmost reverence, I pay heartfelt tribute to all of our heroes: the fallen patriotic forebears who gave their lives to regain our sovereignty, the martyred patriots who valiantly defended liberal democracy against invading communist forces, the heroes in uniform who gave their all to protect the lives and safety of the people, and the United Nations Forces who fought alongside us during the Korean War to defend the Republic of Korea's freedom. I also express my deepest sympathy to the bereaved families who have lived with grief in their hearts."

Excerpt 1 shows how language is utilized to reinforce national identity, evoke collective memory, and enhance political legitimacy. President Yoon's tribute to various groups—fallen soldiers, martyred patriots, and international allies such as the United Nations Forces—serves to construct a national identity rooted in resilience and sacrifice. Through

acknowledging the contributions of both domestic heroes and international forces, the speech positions South Korea not just as a solitary nation but as part of a global community that has fought to uphold freedom and democracy. This blending of domestic and international sacrifice strengthens the nation's identity as one of perseverance, aligning the current political leadership with the values of sovereignty, democracy, and freedom. The speech also leverages emotionally charged language—such as "noble sacrifices" and "heartfelt tribute"—to evoke collective memory and stir feelings of reverence among the audience. The references to "fallen patriotic forebears" and "martyred patriots" tap into South Korea's historical memory of conflict, particularly the Korean War and the fight against communism. These phrases remind citizens of the historical struggles that shaped the nation's identity and encourage continued unity and vigilance. The framing of sacrifices as noble and heroic demonstrates that the speech not only honored the past but also implicitly reinforced the political legitimacy of President Yoon's leadership, positioning it as the protector of these hard-won freedoms. This rhetorical strategy reinforces a sense of collective duty to maintain the nation's identity and sovereignty.

> *Excerpt 2:* "From June 3 until yesterday, I hosted the Korea-Africa Summit with the 48 African countries with which we have diplomatic relations. Among the countries in attendance were several nations that helped us during the Korean War. The African leaders and representatives participating in the summit were amazed by what the Republic of Korea has achieved up to today and expressed their interest in learning from our experiences. Indeed, our past 70 years in themselves represent a miraculous history. And at the foundation of this accomplishment lies the dedication of our great heroes."

In Excerpt 2, President Yoon strategically connects South Korea's present-day achievements with both historical memory and international diplomacy. Referring to the Korea-Africa Summit, President Yoon skillfully weaves past alliances and current global standing together, invoking the participation of African countries that aided South Korea during the Korean War. This creates a narrative of gratitude and mutual respect, reinforcing South Korea's diplomatic relations and exposing how the nation has transformed from a war-torn country into an economic and political success. The phrase "amazed by what the Republic of Korea has

achieved" elevates South Korea's status on the global stage, implying that the nation's development is an example for other countries to follow. Moreover, Yoon frames this progress within a miraculous historical context, attributing it not solely to economic efforts, but to the dedication of great heroes—those who sacrificed for the country's freedom. This framing serves two purposes: first, it underscores the importance of collective national effort and sacrifice, reinforcing the theme of patriotism and national unity; second, it ties South Korea's current accomplishments back to its foundational struggles, emphasizing a strong link and continuity between past sacrifices and present successes. Through this discourse, Yoon elevates the nation's identity, situating it as both a global role model and a product of historical endurance and resilience.

> *Excerpt 3:* "Our fallen patriots and those who gave their lives to defend the country made noble sacrifices for our nation and people, and their sacrifices continue to be passed down generation after generation. On January 31, Fire Sergeant Kim Soo-kwang and Senior Firefighter Park Soo-hoon ran into flames to save lives in Mungyeong, Gyeongsangbuk-do, but never returned to their loved ones. In March, a heartbreaking tragedy occurred; Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Han Jin-ho lost his life during a maritime drill for the protection of our waters. Once again, I pray for the repose of their souls and extend my deepest gratitude to all our heroes who are resolutely dedicated to safeguarding our country even at this very moment. With the utmost respect, the government and I will repay our heroes who sacrificed everything for the country and people. By innovating welfare services for patriots and veterans, we will improve medical care and expand rehabilitation support for persons of national merit. This will provide meticulous assistance to ensure that those injured in the line of duty can get back to their normal lives. No matter what happens, the country will take full responsibility for the bereaved families of our heroes who unfortunately lost their lives in service of the country. To ensure that the children of our heroes grow up with pride, the nation will become their loving and supportive family. We will further expand the "Heroes Family Program" that was initiated last year and take care of each and every child as if they were our own."

In Excerpt 3, President Yoon connects personal sacrifice to national duty, making an emotional appeal and highlighting the state's moral responsibility to honor its heroes. The narrative begins by honoring the sacrifices of fallen patriots, extending this legacy to contemporary examples, such as the tragic losses of Fire Sergeant Kim Soo-kwang, Senior Firefighter Park Soo-hoon, and Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Han Jin-ho. President Yoon attempts to humanize the cost of national security and make abstract notions of heroism tangible, by personalizing these sacrifices. This appeal to pathos not only honors the individuals but also reinforces a collective narrative of duty, suggesting that the sacrifices of past and present heroes are part of a continuing legacy that must be remembered and honored. The President emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of sacrifice, stating that it is passed down from one generation to the next, thus framing national identity as something sustained by ongoing acts of service and sacrifice. Furthermore, Yoon integrates policy commitments into the emotional narrative, promising expanded welfare services, medical care, and rehabilitation support for patriots and veterans. This establishes a direct connection between the sacrifices of heroes and the state's responsibility to care for them and their families, reinforcing a social contract where the government is positioned as a guardian of those who defend the nation. By stating that the nation will become a "loving and supportive family" for the children of fallen heroes, Yoon uses familial imagery to strengthen the sense of national solidarity, portraying the government as not merely an institution but as a moral and protective entity. This reinforces the idea that South Korea is a country that honors its heroes both symbolically and practically, ensuring their sacrifices are neither forgotten nor in vain. Through this discourse, Yoon constructs a vision of South Korean identity rooted in patriotism, sacrifice, and collective responsibility.

> *Excerpt 4:* "The Republic of Korea has now become the brightest country in the world, while the land north of the Military Demarcation Line remains the darkest in the world. Just around 50 kilometers away from here, our compatriots are suffering from starvation with their freedom and human rights brutally deprived. The North Korean regime refuses to accept the progress of history and instead remains on a backward path, threatening our lives. North Korea – after firing artillery shells into the West Sea and launching missiles – recently carried out a despicable provocation

> that would make any normal country ashamed of itself. The government will never overlook the threat from North Korea. We will maintain an ironclad readiness posture and respond to provocations resolutely and overwhelmingly. Building upon the more robust ROK-U.S. alliance and cooperation with the international community, we will firmly safeguard our people's freedom and safety."

In Excerpt 4, President Yoon employs discourse strategies that create a sharp contrast between South Korea and North Korea, both ideologically and morally, emphasizing the polarization between the two nations. By describing South Korea as "the brightest country in the world" and North Korea as the "darkest," Yoon constructs a binary narrative that elevates South Korea's progress and moral standing while simultaneously denouncing the North as a repressive regime trapped in a backward trajectory. This stark dichotomy serves multiple purposes: it reinforces a sense of national pride in South Korea's achievements, freedom, and human rights while invoking a sense of moral urgency regarding the plight of North Korean citizens, depicted as victims of a regime that brutally deprives them of their rights. Yoon's use of emotionally charged language such as "suffering from starvation" and "brutally deprived" taps into collective empathy, encouraging South Koreans to view their Northern counterparts as compatriots in need of liberation. This positions South Korea as not only a beacon of freedom but also a moral protector. Additionally, Yoon frames North Korea's recent military actions as "despicable provocations," invoking righteous indignation and the notion that such actions are unacceptable by global standards, thereby justifying the need for a strong military posture. By emphasizing the ROK-U.S. alliance and international cooperation, Yoon connects South Korea's defense strategy to broader global efforts, portraying it as part of a larger geopolitical framework aimed at maintaining peace and stability. Meanwhile, the phrase "ironclad readiness posture" emphasizes strength and resilience, assuring the South Korean public that the government is prepared to protect their freedoms against North Korean threats. In this discourse, Yoon not only reinforces national security but also elevates South Korea's role as a moral and strategic leader within the international community, highlighting the obvious contrast with its northern neighbor to further cement the nation's identity as a beacon of democracy and human rights.

Excerpt 5: "Peace is maintained through strength, not through submission. We can transform North Korea only if we grow stronger. Ultimately, we will only be able to restore the North Korean people's freedom and human rights and move forward toward a free, prosperous and unified Republic of Korea if we become stronger. We will build a stronger Republic of Korea, a country that advances by taking on challenges and unleashing innovation, a country where the people's lives are prosperous and happy, a country where young people are full of dreams and hopes, and a country where everyone comes together and moves forward into the future. I believe that this is the right way to properly remember the sacrifices and dedication of our heroes and uphold their noble cause. Our great heroes have written proud chapters in our history. The government and I – together with the people – will continue to add to their record. Once more, I am deeply grateful to all the heroes who have defended the Republic of Korea."

Finally, in Excerpt 5, President Yoon uses discourse strategies to present a vision of national strength as a prerequisite for peace, linking it directly to both the unification of Korea and the preservation of freedom and human rights. The statement "peace is maintained through strength, not through submission" sets a firm tone, positioning strength as the ultimate tool for transformation, particularly regarding North Korea. Yoon suggests that only by building a stronger South Korea—one capable of defending its values and fostering innovation—can the nation hope to restore the freedoms and rights of the North Korean people. This idea aligns with the broader discourse of resilience and progress, wherein the country's future is depicted as a prosperous, unified Korea, fueled by the hard-earned lessons of past struggles. Yoon's focus on youth and innovation—terms like "dreams," "hopes," and "advances by taking on challenges"—frames South Korea's strength not merely in military terms, but also in terms of its ability to innovate and ensure a prosperous, happy future for its citizens. This narrative of growth and resilience underscores a national identity deeply connected to progress and collective effort. Furthermore, by stating that this progress is the "right way to properly remember the sacrifices and dedication of our heroes," Yoon ties the country's future success to its historical legacy. The heroes who have

defended South Korea are seen as having paved the way for this strength, and continuing to build a strong, prosperous nation is framed as a way of honoring their sacrifice. The emphasis on collective responsibility— "the government and I, together with the people, will continue to add to their record"—reinforces a sense of national unity in achieving these goals. Yoon uses the discourse of gratitude and duty toward the fallen heroes as a rallying call for national cohesion, suggesting that the future of South Korea depends on its ability to come together as a nation. This discourse places sacrifice, strength, and innovation at the heart of South Korea's path forward, constructing a narrative that blends historical reverence with future ambition.

Discussion

This study presents interesting findings, as reflected in the earlier analysis conducted using NVivo 12 Plus and through a detailed discourse analysis of President Yoon's speech. Firstly, by employing NVivo 12 Plus, the analysis reveals a complex and layered narrative. For instance, the sentiment analysis predominantly highlights a positive tone, balanced with elements of caution and optimism, reflecting both the gravity of national challenges and the desire for unity and resilience. The word frequency analysis further emphasizes key themes such as patriotism, sacrifice, and national identity, with dominant terms like "country," "lives," "heroes," "Korea," and "defended" pointing to the collective effort necessary to safeguard South Korea's sovereignty. Additionally, the text search query uncovers deeper insights into how these central terms are intricately tied to broader concepts of progress, responsibility, and security. Combined, these features construct a cohesive narrative of South Korea's identity, underscoring the importance of honoring past sacrifices while striving for a stronger and more unified future.

Secondly, the discourse analysis of President Yoon's speech highlights the deliberate rhetorical strategies and careful choice of diction. President Yoon clearly aims to encourage the people to reflect on the sacrifices of the martyrs, who gave their lives, blood, and tears for the Republic of Korea. At the same time, he calls upon the nation to be grateful for their achievements while looking forward to the essential values of unity and sacrifice, which have become deeply ingrained in the South Korean spirit. South Korea's prosperity and democracy are inseparable from the ongoing legacy of sacrifice, continued to this day. President Yoon also assures the public that his government remains committed to the

welfare of those who have served the nation and their families. Simultaneously, Yoon warns of the persistent threats from the North, which continue to provoke the South Korean people. However, he reaffirms that his government will not remain idle in the face of such threats. Confident in the nation's strength, bolstered by the solidarity of the people and its strong alliance with the US and the international security community, Yoon asserts that South Korea will successfully overcome these challenges.

In this context, President Yoon seeks to reaffirm South Korea's identity as an advanced nation whose progress is deeply rooted in the sacrifices of its martyrs and heroes. Yoon accomplishes this by invoking historical narratives, using them as a reflective tool to remind the South Korean people of the contributions of past heroes while also reigniting their sense of pride and patriotism.[52] Furthermore, Yoon employs provocative diction in his speech, such as "the darkest in the world" in reference to North Korea's plight, aligning with the strategies of other global leaders who utilize emotional narratives to mobilize support and stir collective sentiment.[53] For Yoon, the heroic and progressive identity of South Korea must be further sharpened by framing North Korea as a common enemy,[54] representing a life of darkness in stark contrast to South Korea's progress. Administratively, Yoon also emphasizes his responsibility in confronting these challenges before the South Korean public, portraying the Memorial Day as an important moment to strengthen national ideology and patriotism. At the same time, he seeks to position himself as a leader who shares the same sacrificial spirit as his predecessors, those willing to make ultimate sacrifices for the good of the nation.[55]

As political rhetoric, President Yoon's fiery speech warrants a deeper examination of its underlying narratives and political context. Domestically, Yoon was facing mounting pressure due to declining public approval. This erosion of public trust was driven by several controversial policies, including the expansion of medical school admissions, which contributed to prolonged tensions within the healthcare sector.[56] In addition, his administration faced growing political challenges arising from economic concerns and legislative deadlock, particularly in the context of an opposition-controlled National Assembly.[57] Furthermore, criticism of his administration's approach toward press freedom, especially regarding media coverage of the government and his family, appeared inconsistent with the democratic values and liberal freedoms that

he emphasized throughout his Memorial Day address. [58] Such discrepancies between rhetoric and practice complicated his political standing and weakened the credibility of his claims to democratic leadership.

Similarly, the speech's strong emphasis on resistance to North Korea reveals another important dimension of Yoon's political rhetoric. While North Korea has long occupied a central place in South Korean political discourse, Yoon's repeated portrayal of the North as an existential threat appears to contrast with previous administrations' efforts to pursue engagement and dialogue.[59] Influenced by the conservative orientation of his administration, this approach tends to prioritize deterrence over reconciliation and places less emphasis on the prospect of Korean unification.[60] Moreover, the symbolic construction of North Korea as a common enemy may also be interpreted as an attempt to direct public attention away from domestic challenges, including declining approval ratings and political controversies surrounding his administration. This interpretation should be considered in light of subsequent public opinion evidence. A survey published in October 2024 indicated that climate change was perceived as a threat comparable to North Korea's nuclear weapons.[61] By September 2024, Yoon's approval rating had fallen to 23 percent, [62] reflecting a substantial erosion of public confidence. In retrospect, this decline foreshadowed the deeper political crisis that would eventually engulf his presidency. In this sense, Yoon's invocation of external threats can be understood as part of a broader strategy to mobilize support and divert attention from domestic political difficulties. [63] Consequently, the speech functioned not only as an expression of collective memory and national identity but also as an instrument for maintaining political legitimacy amid growing vulnerability.

Subsequent political developments provide an important context for reassessing the significance of Yoon's 69th Memorial Day speech. When the speech was delivered in June 2024, President Yoon was already confronting political opposition, growing polarization, and challenges to his public standing. However, the situation deteriorated significantly in the months that followed. In December 2024, Yoon declared martial law, a move that generated intense domestic and international controversy and further deepened political divisions within South Korean society. The crisis eventually culminated in his impeachment by the National Assembly, his removal from office by the Constitutional Court, and subsequent legal proceedings, profoundly altering the trajectory of his presidency. Viewed

retrospectively, Yoon's repeated emphasis on patriotism, national sacrifice, liberal democracy, and external threats appears not merely as an effort to reinforce South Korean national identity but also as an attempt to bolster political legitimacy during a period of mounting political vulnerability. The eventual collapse of his presidency suggests that appeals to nationalism and historical memory, while symbolically powerful and emotionally resonant, were ultimately insufficient to prevent the erosion of his public trust and political support. Consequently, the speech can be interpreted as both a significant articulation of South Korean national identity and a revealing example of the limits of patriotic rhetoric as a strategy for sustaining political legitimacy in contemporary democratic politics.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Implications

Theoretically, the construction of South Korea's national identity is deeply shaped by its colonial experience, the veneration of national heroes, and the prolonged conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The persistent perception of external threats has forced a strong sense of vigilance among South Koreans, reflected in compulsory military service, a robust security alliance with the United States, and a deeply embedded culture of nationalism passed down across generations. Consequently, narratives of sacrifice, patriotism, and national survival have become central components of South Korean political discourse and are frequently invoked during national commemorations such as Memorial Day. However, relatively few studies have examined how South Korean presidents employ such commemorative speeches to construct and reinforce national identity while simultaneously pursuing political legitimacy. By analyzing President Yoon Suk Yeol's 69th Memorial Day speech, this study demonstrates how historical narratives and patriotic rhetoric were strategically mobilized to strengthen national unity, reinforce collective memory, and legitimize political authority amid growing domestic challenges.

Viewed retrospectively, the speech gains additional significance when situated within the broader trajectory of Yoon's presidency. At the time of delivery, Yoon was already confronting declining approval ratings, economic pressures, legislative deadlock, and intensifying political opposition. Subsequent developments—including the declaration of martial law in December 2024, his impeachment by the National Assembly, removal from office, and subsequent legal consequences—

fundamentally altered the political context in which the speech is interpreted. These subsequent developments suggest that Yoon's appeals to patriotism, historical sacrifice, and external threats were insufficient to restore public confidence or sustain his political legitimacy. In hindsight, the speech may be understood not only as an expression of South Korean national identity but also as an effort to consolidate political authority during a period of mounting vulnerability. The end of Yoon's presidency highlights the limitations of nationalist rhetoric when it is not accompanied by effective governance and sustained public trust.

The study, nevertheless, has several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on a single speech delivered during the 69th Memorial Day commemoration in 2024. Second, as a qualitative discourse analysis, it does not incorporate survey-based evidence that could further substantiate its findings. Third, the study relies primarily on English-language materials due to limitations in accessing and analyzing Korean-language sources. Future research would benefit from examining a broader range of presidential speeches, including those delivered by Yoon and his predecessors during different political contexts and national commemorations. Comparative analysis drawing upon government documents, press releases, media reports, public opinion surveys, and social media discourse could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving relationship between nationalism, political legitimacy, and identity construction in South Korea. Such research would be particularly valuable in assessing how political rhetoric functions during periods of crisis, democratic contestation, and leadership transition in contemporary Korean politics.

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