

# 5. North Korean Non-Nuclear Threats to Stability

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## Introduction

Since the armistice of 1953, North Korea has used non-nuclear tools, including limited acts of violence and both explicit and implicit threats, to calibrate international and domestic perceptions of the level of instability on the Korean peninsula.<sup>236</sup> The Kim regime benefits from a perception that accommodating the regime is the best means to maintain the current state of fragile stability. Such stability, however tenuous, is preferable to the violence and chaos that could result from a resumption of war or even just the regime's collapse. Pyongyang uses threats, posturing, and limited acts of aggression to not only preserve the overall stability of the strategic stalemate on the Korean peninsula but also to set and reinforce red lines, intimidate adversaries into caution, signal interest for dialogue, gain leverage in negotiations, manage internal politics, enhance diplomatic maneuvering space, and justify economic assistance.<sup>237</sup>

Pyongyang often has been masterful in ratcheting the perceived level of tension up or down and careful to calibrate its actions and justifications to suit the moment. Though the Kim regime has not always effectively anticipated or managed the second order effects of its actions, it has always managed to avoid triggering international responses strong enough to directly endanger regime survival.<sup>238</sup> Pyongyang has effectively exploited the preference of the other key players for uneasy stability over the risks of conflict or a collapse of the North Korean state. Neither Washington nor Seoul are eager to fight a bloody, expensive war and neither Beijing nor Moscow want a destabilizing military conflict or chaos on their strategic doorstep. The Kim regime's approach of relying on the restraint of the United

States-Republic of Korea (US-ROK) alliance and the protection of China and Russia is inherently risky, however. Miscalculation, misperception, or unanticipated actions by lower-level individuals could lead a crisis of Pyongyang's own making to spin out of control in ways that threaten not only regional stability but the regime's very survival.

Most policy makers correctly focus on the strategic impact of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, but time and attention need to remain on North Korea's other means for threatening peace and stability on the peninsula—particularly as North Korea may perceive it has more room for escalation as its nuclear deterrent grows more credible. North Korea's varied non-nuclear threats have a higher probability of coming into play, and could have severe strategic consequences, even if the resulting crisis never crosses the threshold of nuclear use.

North Korea will continue to place primacy on actual or threatened use of non-nuclear acts of coercion, provocation, and violence to, paradoxically, maintain strategic stability and regime survival. This analysis identifies primary North Korea tactics and tools, the risks they pose to peace and stability on the peninsula, as well as the geo-strategic risks they pose to the United States, China, and Japan. The United States, Republic of Korea, Japan, and other partners will need to practice vigilance and perseverance in response to Pyongyang's tactics.

This chapter focuses on such limited actions from Pyongyang. Additional analysis related to the long-term growth in the North Korean threat, to include its nuclear capabilities, and the risks of large-scale military conflict are covered in the previous chapter of this report by Markus Garlauskas.

## Actions and Reactions: Playing the Field

North Korean actions to foment instability impact regional and global actors in different ways. Sometimes the actions benefit one or more states in the great game of regional

236 US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *North Korea's Sea of Fire: Bullying, Brinkmanship and Blackmail: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 112th Congress, 1st Session (Washington DC, March 10, 2011), <https://tinyurl.com/y5gzqjh5>.

237 Dr. Jung H. Pak, "Kim Jong-un's tools of coercion," Institute for European Studies Korea Chair, June 2018, [https://www.korea-chair.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/KFVUB\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_2018-6\\_JungPak.pdf](https://www.korea-chair.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/KFVUB_Policy_Brief_2018-6_JungPak.pdf).

238 The United States seriously contemplated attacking North Korea's nuclear production plant at Yongbyon in 1994, which could have triggered major war because it could have threatened DPRK regime survival. See: Barbara Demick, "Q&A: Former Defense Secretary William Perry on why we didn't go to war with North Korea," *LA Times*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-fg-perry-north-korea-20170414-story.html>.

and/or global politics. Other times they pose a direct threat to the national security interests of one or more states and compel placating responses by different states to ratchet down the tension.

Similarly, when North Korea perceives a challenge to its interests from a ROK or US statement or action, it will often react with threats or actions that present the risk of a destabilizing escalation to conflict, and even impose direct costs on the “offender.” In this way, Pyongyang attempts to condition the ROK and US governments, as well as ROK and US private and nonprofit sector organizations and persons, to avoid potentially threatening the regime’s interests due to the potential risk of a destabilizing reaction from Pyongyang. In essence, Pyongyang wants every ROK and US decisionmaker to ask themselves “Is this worth the risk of provoking the North Koreans?” before directly criticizing the regime or acting against its interests.

From Pyongyang’s perspective, making small escalatory steps in one direction or another often is a win-win proposition, such as when it uses a provocation to drive a wedge between the United States and Republic of Korea or between Japan and the Republic of Korea. China can be a beneficiary of these wedges, given Beijing’s strategic desire to see Japan isolated and the US presence in the region further diminished. China, however, has its limits with North Korean behavior, as its interests can be harmed if North Korean actions go too far and trigger US, ROK, or Japanese responses that run counter to Beijing’s broader interests.

Some North Korean provocations have caused at least near-term negative impacts on its ties with China, North Korea’s primary backer, however. For example, North Korea’s nuclear test in January 2016, followed by a space launch and missile tests, led the US-ROK alliance to begin consultations in February 2016, and decide in July that a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense battery should be deployed to the Republic of Korea.<sup>239</sup> China had long opposed the potential deployment of a THAAD battery to the Republic of Korea, for varying reasons under the overall umbrella of a “threat” to China’s interests and to regional stability.<sup>240</sup> Though Beijing was clearly unhappy with Pyongyang for these actions having increased the

justification for a THAAD deployment (recognizing relations were already in a strained state, with the two countries’ leaders having never met in the over four years since Kim Jong Un took power). These actions, and other weapons tests that followed were almost certainly a factor in China’s willingness to agree at the UN Security Council to impose sweeping new sanctions on North Korea.<sup>241</sup>

In the end, however, China also punished the Republic of Korea economically for accepting the THAAD battery, making it probably the single largest source of strain in Beijing-Seoul relations at the time.<sup>242</sup> Since Xi and Kim appear to have later mended fences in the summits of 2018, while THAAD remains an irritant in PRC-ROK relations, the outcome may seem at least ambiguous from Pyongyang’s perspective.<sup>243</sup> This example illustrates that even when North Korea’s actions provoke a strong reaction, disagreements over the appropriate reaction can lead to further exacerbation of the existing fissures between the members of the international community who would otherwise be united in opposing North Korea’s potentially destabilizing actions.

## Means of Non-nuclear Escalation: Tricks of the Trade

Though North Korea’s nuclear tests can be part of its tactics to threaten stability for its advantage, as noted in the example above, North Korea has a range of non-nuclear means to escalate tension and threaten the status quo. Some means are long-standing tools that remain valid, others rely on techniques and technology that have been more recently developed by North Korea—all have their own unique strengths and weaknesses. Some are meant to be explicit and directly menacing, others to be more subtle and indirect—with some even conducted in ways that provide “plausible deniability” to North Korea.<sup>244</sup> North Korea has options for disrupting stability on the peninsula, more widely across the region, and even globally. Some measures are of more or less importance to China, Japan, the United States, or the Republic of Korea. Pyongyang has generally been careful in choosing its target and means of disruption, based on context and objective.

239 “US to Deploy THAAD Missile Battery to South Korea,” *US Department of Defense*, July 8, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/831630/us-to-deploy-thaad-missile-battery-to-south-korea/>; Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on South Korea’s Deployment of THAAD,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 1 (2017): 1, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm52ms.pdf>.

240 Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on South Korea’s Deployment of THAAD,” 3.

241 *Resolution 2270*, United Nations Security Council, March 2, 2016, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2270\(2016\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2270(2016)).

242 Darren J. Lim and Victor Ferguson, “Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute,” *The Asan Forum*, December 28, 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute/>.

243 “Xi and Kim hail ‘immortal’ China-North Korea relationship,” *Channel News Asia*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/xi-jinping-kim-jong-un-immortal-china-north-korea-relationship-11973904>; Reuters staff, “China says opposes US THAAD defence system in South Korea,” Reuters, May 29, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ptzbsmu2>.

244 Mark E. Caprio, “Plausible Denial? Reviewing the Evidence of DPRK Culpability for the Cheonan Warship Incident,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 8, issue 30, no 4 (July 26, 2010), <https://apjif.org/Mark-Caprio/3390/article.html>.

The military power of the Korean People's Army (KPA)—the official term for North Korea's entire armed forces—has served as the foundation of North Korea's ability to threaten, coerce, and provoke. Its capability, minus nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, has largely stagnated since the loss of Soviet support with the end of the Cold War, particularly relative to the growing capability of the ROK military. The KPA has declined in qualitative terms relative to the ROK military, but it still outnumbers ROK conventional forces by a wide margin, according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.<sup>245</sup> The KPA maintains nearly 1.3 million active duty personnel, or more than two times the nearly 600,000 active duty personnel that the ROK Armed Forces field.

### *Threatening Artillery and Rockets*

North Korean artillery have long played a key role in its threats short of war, and has even occasionally been used in limited strikes on the Republic of Korea, such as in the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010.<sup>246</sup> North Korea has a vast arsenal of conventional rocket and cannon artillery. It has over 21,600 artillery systems, including 8,600 self-propelled (122mm, 130mm, 152mm, 170mm) and towed (122mm, 130mm, 152mm) artillery pieces; 5,500 multiple rocket launchers (107mm, 122mm, 200mm, 240mm, 300mm); and 7,500 mortars (82mm, 120mm, 160mm) according to International Institute for Strategic Studies data.<sup>247</sup> North Korea has multiple options to strike the South with its conventional artillery, which can reach a range of ROK population centers, including Seoul. Much of the KPA's artillery is located in hardened artillery sites surrounded by air defenses, making rapid air strikes and counter-battery fire to knock out this artillery a challenge for US-ROK alliance forces.<sup>248</sup>

For purposes of threats and intimidation short of war, the most strategically useful weapons in this arsenal are the "long-range artillery"—which include 170mm guns, as well as the 240mm and 300mm multiple rocket launchers—that can potentially hold the Republic of Korea's capital city of Seoul hostage to a massive barrage of shells and

rockets from firing positions north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).<sup>249</sup> Periodically since 1994 and as recently as June 2020, North Korea has used variations on the phrase "sea of fire" to describe what North Korean artillery could do to Seoul if North Korea is provoked.<sup>250</sup> Such rhetoric, though exaggerated, gains credibility from Seoul's relative proximity to the DMZ combined with its tremendous concentration of population, government buildings, and economic activity—leading to a perception of great vulnerability.

The RAND Corporation notes in a recent study that 50 percent of the Republic of Korea's population and 70 percent of its economic activity are in the Seoul metropolitan area, and assessed that this population density means that the Republic of Korea could suffer tens of thousands of civilian casualties from North Korean artillery—hundreds of thousands if chemical munitions are employed—before alliance forces could knock them out.<sup>251</sup> Other analysts put forward a much lower figure, even presuming North Korea would choose to use its limited amount of long-range artillery to conduct mass murder of civilians as quickly as possible rather than using normal North Korean artillery doctrine.<sup>252</sup> Regardless, as the RAND Corporation noted, even if the KPA conducted a limited artillery strike in populated areas, the potential amount of death and destruction caused to ROK civilians and the damage to the ROK economy would be significant.<sup>253</sup>

North Korean shelling of Seoul would be an extraordinarily escalatory and probably self-defeating act, so this tool is of limited benefit in all but the most extreme of circumstances, but the threat that it could do so if provoked is useful and frequently referenced by Pyongyang. The symbolism of being able to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" at moment's notice, even if the claim is exaggerated, sustains fear and unease—which is beneficial to North Korea when it wants to appear dangerous and unpredictable to give its adversaries pause. Back in 2011, for example, North Korea threatened early and late in the year to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" if provoked.<sup>254</sup>

245 Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, *Korea Net Assessment 2020: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 18, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/18/state-of-north-korean-military-pub-81232>.

246 Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "The Yeonpyeong Island Incident," *38 North Special Report* 11, no 1 (July 2011), <https://tinyurl.com/3fnl3fye>.

247 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019*, IISS, <https://tinyurl.com/csr0j38n>.

248 D. Sean Barnett, et al., *North Korean Conventional Artillery: A Means to Retaliate, Coerce, Deter, or Terrorize Populations*, RAND Corporation, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR619-1.html/](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR619-1.html/).

249 Michael J. Mazarr, et al., *The Korean Peninsula: Three Dangerous Scenarios*, RAND Corporation, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE262/RAND\\_PE262.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE262/RAND_PE262.pdf).

250 "N. Korea Pulls out Old Rhetoric of "Sea of Fire" against S. Korea," *KBS World*, June 17, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/55gvczty>.

251 Mazarr, et al., "The Korean Peninsula."

252 Kyle Mizokami, "North Korea Can't Really Turn Seoul Into a 'Sea of Fire,'" *Atlantic Sentinel*, June 28, 2012, <https://atlanticsentinel.com/2012/06/north-korea-cant-really-turn-seoul-into-a-sea-of-fire/>.

253 Barnett, et al., *North Korean Conventional Artillery*.

254 Mark Willacy, "North Korea threatens Seoul with 'sea of fire,'" *ABC News*, February 27, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/3kc9t4o8>; CNN Wire staff, "North Korea threatens 'a sea of fire' upon South Korea," *CNN*, November 25, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/11/24/world/asia/north-korea-sea-of-fire/index.html>.

North Korea's arsenal of artillery and rockets also serves as a lethal deterrent against those contemplating limited war against the North. Prior to the establishment of a credible nuclear deterrent capability, preventive action against North Korea's nuclear facilities was largely deterred by the belief that North Korea could inflict hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties through bombarding Seoul in response—regardless of whether that belief was well-founded.<sup>255</sup>

Live-fire artillery exercises conducted near the Republic of Korea also provide a way to underscore the threat and attempt to intimidate the Republic of Korea. On November 25, 2019, Kim Jong Un personally oversaw coastal artillery live-fire training from an island along the disputed waters near the Northern Limit Line off Korea's west coast, in an event prominently covered by North Korea's media. The incident, which was a violation of a 2018 inter-Korean military agreement, occurred as Pyongyang's self-declared year-end deadline for the United States to make concessions was nearing.<sup>256</sup>

### *Provocations at and Near the DMZ*

Beyond projecting power from its artillery and rockets, North Korea has employed means to keep the DMZ appear violent and unstable. Keeping the situation on the DMZ apparently tenuous injects fear and urgency to engage, make concessions and reduce tension. Of course, this fear can only be maintained if there is a minimal level of provocation or at least awareness of the potential for provocation.

Though the DMZ was frequently the scene of firefights and ambushes in the 1960s, activity has been far more subdued since. The most dramatic and lengthy escalation along the DMZ was the confrontation of August 2015. The confrontation began with the maiming of two ROK soldiers by land mines later found to have been planted by North Koreans infiltrating into the south side of the DMZ. The Republic of Korea responded by reactivating propaganda loudspeakers on its side of the DMZ, which led to escalating threats from

North Korea. After the Republic of Korea responded to reports of North Korean firing across the DMZ with a heavy artillery barrage into the northern part of the DMZ, there were worries that this could escalate further. Marathon inter-Korean talks at the Joint Security Area in the DMZ finally de-escalated the situation.<sup>257</sup>

Smaller incidents also help to maintain the sense that the situation on the DMZ could get out of control if caution and restraint are not exercised by the Republic of Korea. On May 2, 2020, a brief burst of machine gun fire from North Korea impacted at a ROK guard post in the central border town of Chorwon, provoking delayed return fire from the ROK Army.<sup>258</sup> Though it is not clear that this was not just a simple accident, it did occur just twenty-four hours after Kim Jong Un made his first public appearance after a weeks-long absence from public view that fueled speculations about his well-being. As with many North Korean actions, such ambiguity only adds to the uncertainty and the difficulty in determining the appropriate response.

More recently, North Korea announced a cessation of dialogue with the South on June 9, 2020, claiming this was ordered by senior official Kim Yong Chol and Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, because the Republic of Korea was again not preventing another wave of offensive leaflet filled balloons from being launched into North Korean airspace.<sup>259</sup> As the rhetoric escalated, North Korea then dramatically destroyed the South-North liaison office at the now-shuttered inter-Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex on June 16 and threatened further action.<sup>260</sup> Given that the facility was in North Korea and no ROK lives were threatened, the risk of a strong ROK reaction was minimal, but the destruction—shown in video by state media—sent the unmistakable message that the North was again prepared to undermine stability and resort to violence unless its concerns were satisfied. When the Moon administration responded in a manner that apparently met with Pyongyang's satisfaction, Kim Jong Un ultimately "suspended" the further escalatory measures.<sup>261</sup>

255 Mizokami, "North Korea."

256 Christy Lee, "North Korean Artillery Drill Seen as Start of Stepped-up Pressure Campaign," *VOA News*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/north-korean-artillery-drill-seen-start-stepped-pressure-campaign>.

257 Choe Sang-Hun, "Koreas Agree on Deal to Defuse Tensions," *New York Times*, August 24, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y7ds9kep>.

258 Laura Bicker, "North and South Korea in gunfire exchange after Kim Jong-un reappears," *BBC News*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52518844>; Shim Kyu-Seok, "South's response to gunfire from North took over 30 minutes," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, May 13, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/05/13/defense/guard-post-south-korea-military/20200513172100242.html>; Geun-pyoung Lee, "Korona Tgeoridugit-ga Bulleoon Choejeonbangui Gojang Chonggi" [Frontline guns dysfunctional due to COVID-19 social distancing], *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 15, 2020, <https://news.joins.com/article/23777844>.

259 Joshua Berlinger and Jake Kwon, "North Korea isn't talking to the South anymore. Experts say it could be trying to manufacture a crisis," *CNN*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/09/asia/north-korea-south-korea-communications-intl-hnk/index.html>.

260 Min Joo Kim, "North Korea blows up joint liaison office, dramatically raising tensions with South," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/north-korea-liaison-office-kaesong-explosion-demolish-dmz/2020/06/16/7c7a2dc0-af9d-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-liaison-office-kaesong-explosion-demolish-dmz/2020/06/16/7c7a2dc0-af9d-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html).

261 Shim Kyu-Seok, "Kim Jong-un calls off threats directed at South," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 24, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/06/24/national/northKorea/north-korea-kim-jongun-suspension/20200624163400289.html>.



### *Incidents at Sea*

North Korea's military poses a significant localized threat in the waters between the North and South. Maritime provocations have many advantages for North Korea. Fault can be blurred or denied as international and territorial waters often are violated knowingly or unknowingly because maritime lines of demarcation can seem opaque. Incursions need not be done by official navies or even coastal patrol elements to upend quiet. Fisherman, traders, and smugglers can be used for indirect provocation.

The Republic of Korea is essentially an "island" with over 2,400 kilometers of coastline and no overland lines of communication with Asia via North Korea. Over the years, the Republic of Korea's most deadly maritime challenge has been the disputed boundary with North Korea in the Yellow Sea known as the Northern Limit Line (NLL). Negotiations settled on a land ceasefire line and the DMZ, but the two sides did not agree on maritime boundaries. The NLL was later drawn by the UN Command after the conclusion of the Korean War armistice as a "temporary" control measure to prevent an unintentional clash in these disputed waters, rather than as a plan for a de facto maritime boundary that would last for over a half-century and be fought over several times. Despite Pyongyang apparently grudgingly accepting the line, North Korean vessels have challenged it on occasion, often with violent consequences.

Violent incidents have occurred along the NLL for decades, with the first two major incidents of bloody, extended engagements between patrol boats in 1999 and 2002, known as the first and second battles of Yeonpyeong Island. In November 2009, a North Korean naval vessel crossed the NLL and exchanged fire with ROK warships near the Republic of Korea's Daecheong Island, days after Pyongyang sent a high-level delegation to the South and agreed to hold a second round of high-level talks.<sup>262</sup> A North Korean mini-submarine torpedoed a ROK Navy corvette in the Yellow Sea on March 26, 2010, killing forty-six sailors and injuring fifty-six more—though North Korea denied responsibility at the time and it took an international investigation to determine the cause of the sinking.<sup>263</sup> In

November 2010, North Korean artillery bombarded military installations and killed civilians on the Republic of Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, claiming that the Republic of Korea had provoked the response by conducting live fire exercises in disputed waters.<sup>264</sup> On October 7, 2014, a North Korea patrol boat crossed into ROK territorial waters leading to an exchange of fire with an ROK guided-missile patrol boat.<sup>265</sup>

Despite the 2018 signing of the South-North Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), which was in part intended to create a maritime buffer zone between the two states, incidents at sea continue. Most recently, a ROK official was killed and his body burned by the crew of a North Korean patrol boat.<sup>266</sup> Though Kim Jong Un expressed regret for the incident, it is a strong reminder of the continuing potential for violence at sea.

### *Chemical and Biological Weapons*

A North Korean threat to use chemical or biological weapons in a mass casualty attack is only of limited value because such an event could trigger a response that would threaten regime survival. Nevertheless, retaining a stockpile of chemical and possibly biological weapons reinforces strategic stability because it deters strikes against the North, and it also helps to add to the credibility of threats to inflict massive civilian casualties in the Republic of Korea.

North Korea is believed to have the world's third largest stockpile of chemical weapons, after the United States and Russia. The Republic of Korea's 2018 Defense White Paper states that the North possesses between 2,500 and 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons.<sup>267</sup> North Korea is believed to have produced nerve agents such as Sarin and VX.<sup>268</sup> Its likely delivery means include field artillery, rockets, missiles, aircraft, and unconventional means. North Korea is suspected of maintaining an ongoing biological weapons (BW) program in violation of its international commitments, but there is no definitive information about the program's status.<sup>269</sup>

Some of these weapons are well suited for limited acts of terror that could be difficult to quickly and unequivocally attribute back to North Korea. North Korean officials arranged

262 Kyodo, "South, North Korea patrol boats exchange fire at disputed sea border," *South China Morning Post*, October 7, 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1611253/south-north-korea-ships-exchange-fire-disputed-sea-border>.

263 "Official Investigation says North Korean torpedo sank Cheonan," *Maritime Executive*, January 17, 2011, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/official-investigation-says-north-korean-torpedo-sank-cheonan>.

264 Bermudez, "The Yeonpyeong Island Incident."

265 "Koreas exchange fire near western sea border," *the Korea Herald*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20141007000564>.

266 Hyung-Jin Kim, "Seoul: North Korea kills S. Korean official, burns his body," *ABC News*, September 24, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/seoul-north-korea-fired-korean-burned-body-73210057>.

267 *2018 Defense White Paper*, Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2018, [http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mnd/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK\\_201907110548253080.pdf](http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mnd/upload/pblicitn/PBLICTNEBOOK_201907110548253080.pdf).

268 Lee Yoon-Geol, "bukan, haengmankeum museoun saenghwahangmugi 5 cheon boyu [North Korea has 5,000 Tons of Chemical Weapons as Scary as Nuclear Weapons]," *Sisa Journal*, no. 1121 (April 13, 2011), [www.sisapress.com](http://www.sisapress.com).

269 "Glossary: Biological Weapon," Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), accessed November 2020, <https://www.nti.org/learn/glossary/biological-weapon-bw/>.

for the assassination of Kim Jong Un's older half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, with VX nerve agent in February 2017, using an Indonesian woman and a Vietnamese woman as the assassins.<sup>270</sup>

**Cyber threats.** Like many small powers, North Korea has invested and employed a host of digital tools to reach inside larger more powerful adversary nations, engage in criminal activity, and disrupt global order. Pyongyang has been investing in its cyber capabilities since at least the mid-1990s and cyberwarfare has become much more prominent in Kim Jong Un's strategy.<sup>271</sup> North Korea's cyber capabilities give it alternative options to achieve its national objectives below the threshold of lethal actions.<sup>272</sup>

North Korean nefarious cyber activities have fallen into four large categories: 1) financially motivated operations; 2) defense/intelligence activities; 3) ideological/influence operations; and 4) destructive attacks, each of which serve different purposes but all support the national objective of promoting the appearance of strength, material gain, and the ability to influence other states.<sup>273</sup>

In October 2018, North Korea hacked into a server of ROK's Defense Acquisition Program Administration—part of the ROK Defense Ministry—and stole information related to ROK's arms procurement plans.<sup>274</sup> In September 2016, it hacked into ROK's Defense Integrated Data Center and stole 235 gigabytes of classified military plans, including how the Republic of Korea would respond to North Korean commando attacks.<sup>275</sup> North Korea struck inside the United States in 2014 when it hacked into Sony Pictures Entertainment to steal and destroy business files, and release incriminating personal information—in response to a Sony movie release Pyongyang deemed offensive.<sup>276</sup>

For further information on North Korea's growing cyber capability, see the previous chapter of this report.

### UAV

North Korea has been developing Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) since at least the late 1980s, when it reportedly acquired its first fleet from China.<sup>277</sup> It is believed to possess around 300 UAVs, some of which are manufactured in several versions, including both attack and reconnaissance drones.<sup>278</sup>

North Korea's development and use of UAVs is "relatively unsophisticated at present," but already presents a security challenge for ROK and US forces on the Korean peninsula, according to Joseph S. Bermudez, a longtime researcher and author on North Korea's military.<sup>279</sup> UAVs pose a unique threat to stability on the peninsula, especially use of small UAVs that fly below radar. Small, low-flying UAVs can be used to demonstrate the vulnerability of ROK airspace or even to deliver small ordinance packages to military targets, or to conduct terror attacks on crowded sporting events, political ceremonies, industrial parks, or urban areas.

The North has used its UAVs for reconnaissance and surveillance missions around the inter-Korean border and to overfly ROK military facilities; several North Korean drones have crashed in ROK territory.<sup>280</sup> A North Korean drone that was taking photos of the US THAAD missile defense system site in Seongju County, Gyeongsang Province, crashed and was captured by the ROK authorities in 2017.<sup>281</sup>

These are but a few of North Korea's non-nuclear tools for sustaining instability and compelling assistance. Some will almost certainly be employed going forward when words

270 "Chemical," North Korea, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), accessed November 2020, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/chemical/>; Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Benjamin Haas, "How North Korea got away with the assassination of Kim Jong-nam," *the Guardian*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/how-north-korea-got-away-with-the-assassination-of-kim-jong-nam>.

271 Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrant, *North Korea's Illicit Cyber Operations: What Can Be Done?*, Stimson Center, February 2020, [https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/2020-0228\\_SKA\\_NK-Cyber-Operations.pdf](https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/2020-0228_SKA_NK-Cyber-Operations.pdf).

272 Kleine-Ahlbrant, *North Korea's Illicit Cyber Operations*, 1.

273 Robert Potter, "Toward a Better Understanding of North Korea's Cyber Operations," *38 North*, Stimson Center, August 5, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/08/rpotter080519/>.

274 Catalin Cimpanu, "Hackers breach and steal data from South Korea's Defense Ministry," *ZDNet*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/hackers-breach-and-steal-data-from-south-koreas-defense-ministry/>.

275 Christine Kim, "North Korea hackers stole South Korea-US military plans to wipe out North Korea leadership: lawmaker," *Reuters*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-cybercrime-southkorea/north-korea-hackers-stole-south-korea-u-s-military-plans-to-wipe-out-north-korea-leadership-lawmaker-idUSKBN1CF1WT>.

276 Todd M. Rosenblum, "Opinion: Obama needs a cyberwar cabinet," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 11, 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Passcode/Passcode-Voices/2015/0311/Opinion-Obama-needs-a-cyberwar-cabinet>.

277 Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "North Korea Drones On: Redux," *38 North*, Stimson Center, January 19, 2016, <https://www.38north.org/2016/01/jbermudez011916/>.

278 *Ibid.*

279 *Ibid.*

280 *Ibid.*

281 Yuna Park, Ju-min Park, and Jack Kim, "Suspected North Korea drone spied on US anti-missile system: South Korea officials," *Reuters*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-idUSKBN1940J8>.

alone do not change the unfavorable status quo, from North Korea's perspective.

## Recommendations for the Alliance—Coordination and Perseverance

North Korea has many advantages in fomenting instability. It is a single actor up against a multitude of nations, each with its own interests, rivalries, and historic fissures. It has a wide range of means to bluster, cajole, or and achieve tactical surprise with harmful actions at various levels.

The United States and the Republic of Korea can both take steps to reduce the impact of North Korea non-nuclear provocations. At the strategic level, Seoul and Washington can visibly and demonstrably re-solidify the US-ROK security alliance and ensure international support for alliance responses to North Korean actions. At the operational and tactical level, preparedness, jointness, and resiliency reduce the potential effectiveness of North Korea's non-nuclear options.

### *Resume and Enhance Exercises Focused on Countering Limited North Korean Aggression*

Historically, the US-ROK has conducted robust bilateral military exercises on a regularly scheduled basis. These were put on hold during the diplomatic thaw surrounding the Olympics in the Spring of 2018, and then dramatically scaled back by the White House in the aftermath of the Singapore Summit.<sup>282</sup> Though some bilateral military training has continued, the scope and scale of the pre-2018 exercise program has not returned, leading some experts to question how much readiness is being lost in exchange for very little or nothing from Pyongyang.<sup>283</sup> The former commander of Combined Forces Command, which leads these exercises, the now-retired General Vincent Brooks, remarked at an Atlantic Council event in October 2020, that combined military readiness is probably being affected, and the time had come to return to an exercise program that was not restrained by diplomatic considerations.<sup>284</sup>

Fully resuming these exercises—even without including the deployment of strategic military assets that could be exploited by Pyongyang as a justification for weapons testing—would be valuable for wartime preparedness, which is vital for credible deterrence. Such exercises would also provide

practical benefits for deterring and dealing with more limited forms of North Korean aggression. First and foremost, they would signal that the US-ROK security alliance is strong. In a practical sense, they could be used to improve the preparedness of the alliance to respond quickly and effectively to North Korean limited aggression or other scenarios short of war. Large combined exercises facilitate improved crisis management by bringing together senior military officers of the two countries in a practical training environment, fostering US-ROK military cooperation at multiple levels of the chain of command, and focusing policy officials on exploring key matters that could arise in a crisis. Responsible training exercises are diplomacy by other means.

### *Bolster Maritime Training and Patrols*

The US Navy conducted joint drills with the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Australia in the Western Pacific on May 23, 2019. This major exercise, formally known as Pacific Vanguard, was a positive effort to be applauded. More tailored exercises should be done, especially those involving the ROK Coast Guard focused on the protection of ROK territorial waters. Few alliance maritime exercises have taken place in or near Korean waters since the 2018 scaling back of US military exercises in Korea. Enhanced exercises and coastal presence activities will strengthen the alliance. As discussed above, North Korea has a history of provocations and attacks in the area of the Northern Limit Line and the Northwest Islands, including the 2010 torpedoing of the ROK warship Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, the two most violent North Korean provocations since the 1980s. As a result, preparedness and deterrence in the maritime domain could be key to either deterring or responding to North Korea's next violent provocation.

### *Leverage Multinational Support Through the United Nations Command*

One of the most effective methods to counter North Korea's tactics of playing nations off against each other and of dodging responsibility for its actions is with the credible involvement of a range of international personnel representing countries pledged to support the defense of the Republic of Korea from North Korea through the United Nations Command (UNC).<sup>285</sup> UNC and its associated Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC) provide a multilateral mechanism to credibly investigate, consult upon and communicate the response to North Korea incursions, threats,

282 Emily Shugerman, "US and South Korea suspend more joint military exercises following Singapore summit," *Independent*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/us-south-korea-suspend-military-exercises-north-korea-pentagon-singapore-summit-a8412671.html>.

283 Andrew Jeong, "US-South Korea Military Exercises Stay Digital, as North Korean Threat Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-south-korea-military-exercises-stay-digital-as-north-korean-threat-grows-11596720083>.

284 "North Korea's strategic weapons: An informed conversation," Atlantic Council, October 2, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/north-koreas-strategic-weapons/>.

285 United Nations Command, <https://www.unc.mil/>.

and actions of violence that may violate the Armistice of 1953.<sup>286</sup> The presence of Swiss and Swedish military observers facilitated by UNCMAC as part of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission allows for internationally respected neutral observers to provide objective, credible, and truthful information to the international community, which can counter North Korean false narratives and lend legitimacy to alliance responses.<sup>287</sup>

Though ROK citizens have understandable concerns about the potential for UNC to impinge upon ROK sovereignty,

such concerns have been exaggerated in the past, often based on misunderstandings.<sup>288</sup> When the alliance considers larger political-military questions like the transfer of wartime Operational Control (OPCON) and a potential peace treaty, it is important that the advantages provided by the multinational participants of UNC are not lost, even if UNC itself is transformed or phased out.<sup>289</sup> A mechanism for multinational support for the defense of the Republic of Korea and for neutral observers should be maintained in some form as long as North Korea threatens stability on the peninsula.

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286 "Military Armistice Commission – Secretariat," United Nations Command, accessed November 2020, <https://www.unc.mil/Organization/UNCMAC-S/>.

287 "NNSC," Swiss Armed Forces, accessed November 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/3fehgbz>.

288 "UNC rebuts media reports on its DMZ responsibilities as 'inaccurate,'" *Yonhap News Agency*, October 23, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/jxax5dy0>.

289 Ltj. In-Bum Chun, "The Future of the UN Command," *38 North*, Stimson Center, September 12, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/09/ibchun091217/>.