

## Analysis on the Shifts in North Korea's Nuclear Strategy

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### 1. Introduction

In June 2020, North Korea declared a hostile relationship toward South Korea after abandoning the September 19 military agreement. In addition, on December 30, 2023, Kim Jong-un stated at the Workers' Party Plenary that "North-South relations are no longer a relationship of kinship and homogeneity, but have completely stuck to the relationship of two hostile countries and two belligerents at war." This paper aims to analyze the causes of this change in North Korea's policy towards South Korea from both internal and external environments and to diagnose the increasing level of hostile policy towards South Korea. In particular, we will examine the evolution of North Korea's nuclear policy and predict future changes.

### 2. Background

North Korea is currently facing a variety of challenges, both internally and externally. North Korea's ruling ideologies are Juche, Sun-gun, and Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-ilism, which can be summarized as economic independence and self-defense. In particular, the Juche ideology of self-defense is a core ruling ideology, with preferential policies for the military, even during economic hardships. To achieve the dual goals of economic independence and self-defense, North Korea advocated the financial and nuclear path in 2013 and demonstrated its intention to continue nuclear development. It also made new efforts to revive the economy by allowing market economic activities (so-called Jangmadang activities) and growing the "Donju," the leading force in Jangmadang. However, as Kim Jong-un acknowledged at the 8th Party Congress in January 2021, these economic revitalization policies have failed. [1] The economic and nuclear path forward has also led to the isolation of the country, which has been subjected to various economic sanctions from the international community due to its multiple nuclear tests and armed provocations and to a state of total deficit. Kim Jong-un continues to engage in forceful demonstrations, including nuclear provocations, as a means to stabilize his regime, which is in danger of becoming unstable, and his nuclear strategy to utilize nuclear weapons is continuously being advanced.

### 3. Nuclear Strategy (or posture)

North Korea, which recognizes nuclear weapons as a means of maintaining its regime, has continued to expand its nuclear capabilities despite international pressure. However, obtaining relevant information is difficult due to its closed diplomatic activities. Hence existing literature consists of only theoretical study on North Korea's nuclear strategy and posture. The following table analyzes the theories that deal with the nuclear strategy of regional states, including North Korea, by categorizing them according to their level of nuclear strategy.

Table I: Vipin Narang's Nuclear Strategy Analysis [2]

	Catalytic	Assured Retaliation	Asymmetric Escalation
<i>Primary Envisioned Employment</i>	Breakout capabilities to accelerate third-party assistance	Nuclear retaliation following significant damage	Nuclear first use, primarily on conventional forces in denial mission
<i>Capabilities</i>	Ability to assemble a handful of nuclear weapons	Survivable second-strike forces	First-use capabilities
<i>Management</i>	Recessed and opaque	Assertive political control	Delegative (assets and authority integrated into military forces and doctrine)
<i>Level of Transparency</i>	Ambiguous capability and deployment	Unambiguous capability; ambiguous deployment	Unambiguous capability and deployment
<i>Empirical Codings</i>	Israel (1967–1990) South Africa (1979–1991) Pakistan (1986–1997)	China (1964–present) India (1974–present) Israel (1991–present)	France (1960–present) Pakistan (1998–present)

Table II: Shane Smith's Nuclear Strategy Analysis [3]

ALTERNATIVE DPRK NUCLEAR STRATEGIES AT A GLANCE: MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR FOUR MODELS					
Nuclear Model	Primary Goal	Relative Transparency	Relative Arsenal Size/Diversity	Operational Complexity	Problems
Political/Diplomatic	Extortion/blackmail/bargaining	Lowest - Demonstrate technical elements of a weapons program	None	None	Diminishing margin of return on investments
Catalytic	Internationalize a conflict and "catalyze" third-party assistance or intervention	Low - Demonstrate technical means for weapons but not necessarily operational capability	Small - Handful of crude weapons on standby	Low - Central authority - Weapons do not need to be assembled	Relies on adversary calculations about third-party intentions
Assured Strategic Retaliation	Deter regime-threatening attacks and coercion	Medium - Demonstrate survivable second-strike capabilities	Medium - Enough counter-value weapons to threaten unacceptable retaliatory costs	Medium - Central or delegated authority - Weapons may or may not be assembled - Prepared for crisis operations	Credibility gap against conventional threats
War-fighting Strategy	Deter or defeat a broad range of threats, including conventional attacks	High - Demonstrate survivable second-strike and first-strike capabilities/will	High - Large, diverse arsenal (counter force and counter value) for first use in a range of scenarios with reserve of second-strike forces	High - Prepared for pre-delegation and rapid deployment during crises - Planning integrated into military doctrine - High-alert status	Expensive and significant pressure on command and control that could lead to inadvertent escalation

Table III: John V. Parachini's Nuclear Strategy Analysis [4]

Doctrine	Minimum Deterrence	Catalytic	Massive Preemption	Assured Retaliation	Asymmetric Escalation
Basic concept	Create existential risk of nuclear escalation to ensure regime survival	Use potential for nuclear development to lock in support from third-party sponsor	Facing attack, launch whole force in one preemptive blow to cripple U.S. power	Threaten survivable second strike to deter nuclear aggression	Multiple nuclear options with various delivery systems; aim for escalation dominance
Targeting policy	Minimal: Often implied or unstated; presumed countervalue	Minimal: Often implied or unstated; presumed countervalue	Extensive: U.S. and allied military bases throughout Asia and, if reachable, continental United States	Flexible: Could be either counterforce or countervalue	Variable: Extensive across range of tactical and strategic targets; some counterforce capabilities
Posture requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimal: Handful of weapons, no elaborate delivery systems</li> <li>Testing of weapons proves potential</li> <li>C2 systems rudimentary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moderate: Same as minimum deterrent but with more signals of additional development to spark sponsor reaction</li> <li>Basic C2 systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moderate: 20-30 or more warheads and intermediate-range delivery systems of crude accuracy</li> <li>Proven capabilities in weapons and missiles</li> <li>Basic C2 systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moderate: Dozens of weapons deployed on survivable platforms; mobile or concealed ICBMs and SLBMs</li> <li>Complex and survivable C2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extensive: Dozens, possibly close to 100 weapons of various types mounted on wide range of delivery systems.</li> <li>Sophisticated and survivable C2</li> </ul>
Possible conditions for nuclear use	Imminent regime collapse or large-scale conventional attack	Regime collapse or conventional attack	U.S. attack in course of conflict or expectation of imminent U.S. attack	Limited or large-scale nuclear strikes; on verge of regime collapse	Multiple, in response to many potential escalation scenarios, some sparked by North Korea

Table IV: Tae Hyun Kim's Nuclear Strategy Analysis [5]

Regime objectives	Maintain borders			Expand borders
Military objectives	Inhibition-Force-Repel			Attack
Determining factors	n+L+C	N+L+C	N+L+c	N+L+C
Nuclear strategy	selective retaliation	assured retaliation	asymmetric escalation	nuclear preemptive strike
Categories	No-nuke strategy		Nuke strategy	
N : High nuclear capability / n : Low nuclear capability L : Strong leadership / l : Weak leadership C : Strong conventional armament / c : Limited conventional armament				

Since the end of the Cold War and the advent of the second nuclear age, nuclear-armed states with military capabilities, such as North Korea and Pakistan, have emerged. These regional powers shifted their strategy toward the actual use of nuclear weapons, such as the strategy of conducting nuclear warfare. Regional states, which are economically and militarily much more vulnerable than the great powers, have recognized the need to use nuclear weapons not only for military purposes but also as a political and diplomatic tool. A standardized model is presented below to summarize the commonalities among these theories.

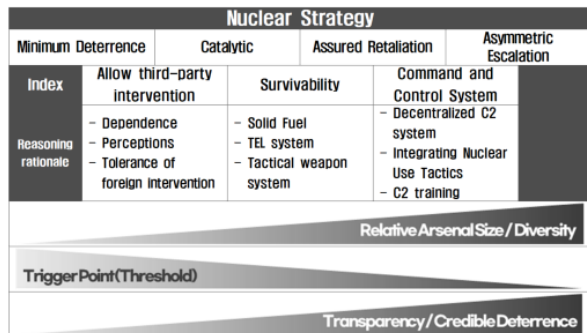


Fig. 1. Proposed Nuclear Strategy Standardization Model

#### 4. North Korea's Evolving Nuclear Strategy

As illustrated in Figure 1, there is a basis for judgment to infer a transition to a more advanced nuclear strategy. Based on these judgments, we summarize North Korea's evolving nuclear strategy trends, as shown in Figure 2, based on its past behavior

since its nuclear development claims.

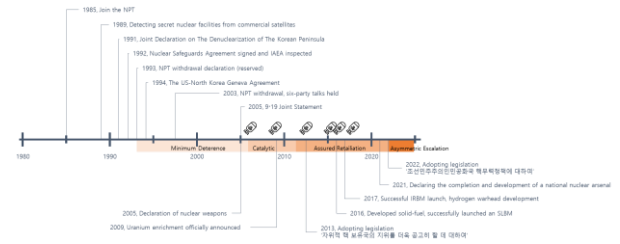


Fig. 2. Key events in nuclear development and changes in nuclear strategy

In terms of significant changes in its nuclear strategy, North Korea has maintained ambiguity about its nuclear development since 1993, when it explicitly signaled its intention to develop nuclear weapons to the international community, and then conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, formalizing to the international community that it had succeeded in developing nuclear weapons.

However, until the second nuclear test, North Korea should have shown consultative behavior with neighboring countries by disclosing signs of nuclear tests in advance. With the advent of Kim Jong-un's regime in 2012, North Korea has shifted to an assertive retaliatory strategy by conducting nuclear tests without any prior warning and adopting a decree in 2013, "law on consolidating the position of nuclear weapons state<sup>1</sup>," which explicitly lays out the motives and principles of nuclear development and the final approval authority. [6] North Korea also seeks to secure requirements for an assertive retaliatory strategy by developing solid fuel and advanced missile systems.

However, with the adoption of the decree "law on the state policy on nuclear forces<sup>2</sup>" in April 2022, North Korea's nuclear strategy has been transformed into a strategy of non-confirmatory deterrence, including the establishment of a command and control system and the expansion of the authority to use nuclear weapons under the condition of preemptive use of nuclear weapons. North Korea has been preparing for the change in its nuclear strategy by conducting drills on the use of nuclear force and the command and control system. [7]

In the context of these changes, North Korea's behavior can be characterized as follows.

- 1) Quantitative growth of its nuclear arsenal
- 2) Demonstration tests of standardized nuclear weapons
- 3) Completion of an advanced missile system (including re-entry technology) [8]

However, given the solid economic sanctions it has faced from the U.N. Security Council and the U.S. for attempting strong force provocations such as nuclear tests, North Korea is unlikely to publicize the

<sup>1</sup> 자위적 핵 보유국 지위를 더욱 공고히 할 데 대하여

<sup>2</sup> 조선민주주의인민공화국 핵무력정책에 대하여

completion of its nuclear arsenal through nuclear tests amidst internal and external difficulties.

## 5. Conclusion

North Korea is currently taking a harder line against South Korea than ever before. Amidst the escalating crisis, concerns about a nuclear test have also increased. The internal and external crisis that North Korea is facing makes the possibility of further nuclear tests unlikely. However, North Korea's nuclear strategy is clearly showing signs of increasing sophistication, and it has ample incentives to carry out a strong provocation, including strengthening regime cohesion and preparing the conditions for a power transfer. A continued analysis of North Korea's policies is necessary to maintain thorough preparedness and raise security awareness.

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