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THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN 2026

Korean Peninsula Update

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North Korea's 2026 Strategy: Hostility and Calculated Diplomacy

As 2026 begins, Pyongyang is pivoting from proving its nuclear capabilities to increasing production and developing an advanced nuclear triad. This trajectory aims to transition North Korea into an active industrial-scale nuclear power – fundamentally altering Northeast Asia's security architecture. For Northern European stakeholders, this is no longer a distant concern; the functional collapse of the United Nation's sanctions regime due to Russian obstruction and military alignment with Russia directly integrates North Korean capabilities into the European theatre. The Ninth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) will likely serve as the ultimate mechanism to declare this "second era of nation-building."

Moving beyond the 2023 constitutional amendment – which codified nuclear possession into the supreme law – Kim Jong Un, the autocratic leader of North Korea, is anticipated to deliver a full-scale declaration of "nuclear completion." Rather than mere rhetoric, this signals a transition from a testing phase to a stage of mass-industrial production and operational deployment. By declaring its deterrent "complete," Pyongyang may strategically signal a moratorium on major tests to stabilise the domestic economy and lower tensions ahead of a potential U.S. summit, while clandestinely expanding its arsenal.

The regime's new five-year plan may likely reinforce this shift by prioritising the survivability of the arsenal over mere range. Unlike older liquid-fuel missiles that require visible, hours-long preparation, solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) like the Hwasong-19 and the new Hwasong-20 are "instant-action" weapons that significantly reduce the response time for U.S. and allied intelligence. Simultaneously, Pyongyang is moving its deterrent to the sea with the expected deployment of an 8,700-ton nuclear-powered submarine. Reportedly accelerated by Russian reactor and turbine modules, this

vessel provides a mobile, “second-strike” capability that ensures retaliation even if land-based assets are neutralised. Nordic analysts remain concerned that munitions supplied to Moscow are being repaid with high-resolution sensor and Satellite launch vehicle (SLV) engine technology. The barter model represents the functional collapse of UN sanctions, as Russia now acts as a primary facilitator of North Korean trade rather than an enforcer, effectively normalising Pyongyang’s status as a nuclear state. The evolving military capability informs a foreign policy defined by leader-led, “top-down” engagement.

Pyongyang’s approach is driven not only by North Korea’s centralised system but also by U.S. President Donald Trump’s “businessman-style” leadership, which favours direct deal-making over protracted working-level negotiations. Just as this synergy defined the U.S.-North Korea summits in 2018 and 2019, Pyongyang expects that a personalised diplomatic track can bypass bureaucratic hurdles in Washington to secure high-stakes breakthroughs.

In this context, Sweden – which re-established its diplomatic presence in Pyongyang in September 2024 – remains a vital “protecting power” to facilitate these high-level communications. In contrast, the strategy towards Seoul is one of institutionalised hostility. Despite South Korean President Lee Jae-myung’s pragmatic peace initiatives, Pyongyang has labelled the South its “principal enemy” and shifted towards a doctrine of territorial subjugation. Tensions are particularly high near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), where the regime is exploiting the January 2026 drone incursion allegations in Kaesong as a pretext for tactical strikes.

Pyongyang frames this latest crisis as a response to a cycle of provocations that began with its own December 2022 drone breach of Seoul’s airspace and escalated through the October 2024 Pyongyang drone incident, which nearly triggered a full-scale conflict. By surfacing these 2026 allegations now, Kim Jong Un is constructing a narrative of “reciprocal sovereignty violation.” This allows him to justify more aggressive enforcement of his unilaterally declared maritime border as a defensive measure against what he calls “persistent Southern provocations” inherited from the previous administration.

Ultimately, while the North Korea-Russia bond provides a vital military “bonus,” China remains Pyongyang’s indispensable economic lifeline. China accounts for over 90% of North Korea’s trade, providing the structural baseline for its survival, whereas Russia’s contribution – estimated at less than 5% – is limited to specific munitions-linked barter such as grain and fuel. Beijing’s massive economic scale allows it to act as a latent check on Pyongyang’s most extreme actions, a reality Kim Jong Un cannot ignore despite his tactical tilt towards Moscow. For Stockholm and other European partners, 2026 requires navigating this “institutionalised aggression” by monitoring the proliferation of North Korean technology into the European theatre while seeking diplomatic openings for risk reduction and humanitarian access.



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