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POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH  
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

## STRATEGIC FILE

NO. 5 (113), MAY 2022 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski, Patrycja Sasnal, Wojciech Lorenz

### Kim Jong Un's First Decade

Oskar Pietrewicz

The first decade of Kim Jong Un's rule was aimed at consolidating his power and ensuring the survival of the regime. Kim's policy led to the development of North Korea's military potential and deepened the country's dependence on China. The North's continued strengthening of nuclear deterrence and diversification of its missile arsenal will pose an increasingly serious challenge to the security of the U.S. and its allies in Asia, and to the non-proliferation regime. Despite attempts at reform, North Korea is still struggling with serious economic problems, which will be the main challenge for the Kim regime in the coming years.

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## The Father's Legacy

Kim Jong Un took power in December 2011 following the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, who ruled North Korea from July 1994. After being proclaimed the “great successor”, Kim Jong Un gradually seized power in key areas, becoming the supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army and assuming the most important party and state positions. That Kim Jong Un would take over was not surprising. He was his father’s designated heir after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008. In 2009-2010, Kim Jong Un increasingly appeared in public with the leader and took up successive positions.<sup>1</sup> Unlike his father, who in turn was chosen by his father, Kim Il Sung, as his successor in 1974, Kim Jong Un did not have much time to prepare himself to perform the most important functions in the party apparatus and the state structures. That led to opinions that such an inexperienced and young leader may not be able to cope with the many challenges of running the state.<sup>2</sup>

Kim Jong Un inherited from his father a regime that functioned from the mid-1990s on the basis of a “military-first” policy (*songun*), which prioritised the Korean People’s Army (KPA) not only in foreign policy but also in domestic and economic affairs.<sup>3</sup> Kim was thus faced with the task of both continuing to develop the nuclear and missile arsenal to ensure the survival of the regime and building up its position in the military-dominated system. A separate challenge was meeting the socio-economic problems that resulted from the transformations of the North Korean economy since the 1990s when there was a deep recession and mass hunger.<sup>4</sup> The inefficiency of the centrally planned economy, visible in the collapse of the public food distribution system, prompted citizens to stock up on basic goods at local markets (*jangmadang*), which stimulated market activity in the shadow economy.<sup>5</sup> Although the North Korean economic situation had begun to improve from the beginning of

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the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to South Korean estimates<sup>6</sup> in the years 2006-2010 North Korea recorded negative economic growth stemming from, among other things, the government’s actions to suppress market activity.<sup>7</sup> Stability was ensured by deepening trade ties between North Korea and China in the last years of Kim Jong Il’s rule. However, this led to an increasing economic dependence on China, the share of which in North Korea’s foreign trade in 2011 amounted to 89.1%.<sup>8</sup>

Kim Jong Un also inherited from his father a difficult foreign policy situation. North Korea’s relations with the majority of participants in the six-party talks on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula (2003-2008) were tense. Numerous missile tests and two nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 led to the adoption of three resolutions by the UN Security Council (UNSC) imposing sanctions

<sup>1</sup> “North Korean Succession and the Risks of Instability,” *Crisis Group Asia Report*, No. 230, International Crisis Group, 25 July 2012, pp. 2-3, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org).

<sup>2</sup> Kim Jin-Ha, “North Korea’s Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook,” *Online Series*, No. CO 10-40, Korea Institute for National Unification, 2 November 2010, [www.kinu.or.kr](http://www.kinu.or.kr); V. Cha, “China’s Newest Province?,” *The New York Times*, 19 December 2011, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com); R. Frank, “North Korea after Kim Jong Il: The Risks of Improvisation,” *38 North*, 12 January 2012, [www.38north.org](http://www.38north.org).

<sup>3</sup> H.S. Park, “Military-First Politics (Songun): Understanding Kim Jong-il’s North Korea,” *Academic Paper Series*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (September 2007), Korea Economic Institute, <https://keia.org>.

<sup>4</sup> V. Koen, J. Beom, “North Korea: The Last Transition Economy?,” *Economics Department Working Papers*, No. 1607, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 25 November 2020, p. 7, [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org).

<sup>5</sup> A. Lankov, “The Resurgence of a Market Economy in North Korea,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, January 2016, pp. 6-9, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the lack of statistics published by North Korea, the data are based on the estimates of South Korean institutions such as the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and the Bank of Korea.

<sup>7</sup> Jo Dongho, “Kim Jong Un’s Economic Opening and Reform: Opportunities, Constraints and Prospects,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 2021), p. 76, [www.globalasia.org](http://www.globalasia.org).

<sup>8</sup> Data: KOTRA, [www.kotra.or.kr](http://www.kotra.or.kr).

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on North Korea and increasingly isolating it politically. The North's continued confrontational stance led to an exacerbation of relations with the U.S. during President Barack Obama's time in office (2009-2017), although bilateral talks were resumed in the last months of Kim Jong Il's tenure. Inter-Korean relations remained tense, and after Lee Myung-bak became president of South Korea in 2008, North Korea adopted an almost hostile stance towards its southern neighbour, which was manifested by the sinking of the South Korean corvette *ROKS Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong island in 2010. Against this background, North Korea's relations with China stood out. In the last years of Kim Jong Il's rule the North deepened its political dialogue and economic cooperation with China. The North Korea-China rapprochement was also supposed to guarantee the Chinese authorities' support for the power succession in North Korea.

Upon assuming power, Kim Jong Un faced the difficult task of consolidating power and strengthening the regime. He carried it out in four interplaying dimensions: 1) political and ideological; 2) military; 3) foreign policy; 4) socio-economic.

## The Political and Ideological Dimension

### *Control over the Elite*

Kim undertook a reconstruction of the power apparatus: instead of relying solely on the elite of Kim Jong-Il's times, he created his own base. On the one hand, he offered privileges, especially economic ones, to those members of the elite who showed loyalty to the new leader. On the other, Kim Jong Un pursued a policy of purges with strong support from the security services. He removed key members—depriving them of positions and sometimes executing them—of the guardianship system,

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which consisted of his father's close associates who aided the young leader's succession. During the first five years of Kim Jong Un's rule, the purges affected about 260 senior representatives of the party, state institutions, and the army.<sup>9</sup> The actions against the military, which was the dominant group in the times of Kim Jong Il, were particularly important.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Kim Jong Un removed old officials from the party structures.<sup>11</sup> It is also

believed that in February 2017, North Korean security services assassinated Kim Jong Nam, the leader's half-brother. These actions were to show that the new leader had subjugated the elite and that any resistance to his rule would not be tolerated. The frequency and scale of the rotations among officials, which were much greater than in Kim Jong Il's rule, also served to build the elite's loyalty to the leader.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Oh Gyeong-Seob, Kim Jin-Ha, "Sectoral Assessment of Kim Jong-un's Decade in Power: The Creation and Stabilization of the Kim Jong-un Regime's Monolithic Rule," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021), p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> For example, by 2016, the minister of defence was replaced six times and the chief of the General Staff five times. See *ibid*, p. 128-130.

<sup>11</sup> More than half (54.9%) of the members of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea elected at the 7<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress in 2016 were new. See Park Young-Ja, "Assessment and Prospect of the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea: Leadership System and Elite Group," *Online Series*, No. CO-16-13, Korea Institute for National Unification, 13 May 2016, p. 3, [www.kinu.or.kr](http://www.kinu.or.kr).

<sup>12</sup> Lee Ho-Ryung, "North Korean Political Elite Change and Characteristics in the Kim Jong-Un Era," *KIDA Brief*, No. 2021-15, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, pp. 2-5, [www.kida.re.kr](http://www.kida.re.kr).

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## ***Building up His Position***

To strengthen his legitimacy, Kim Jong Un pushed political slogans that both highlighted the continuity of the Kim dynasty and distinguished the young leader from his father and grandfather. Particularly at the beginning of his tenure, Kim emphasised the achievements of his predecessors, recognising *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* as the guiding ideology of the state. State propaganda also portrayed the young leader as similar to his grandfather, both physically and in terms of his image in North Korean mass media.

Kim was building an image of a “people’s leader”.<sup>13</sup> In his first public appearance in April 2012 on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth, he stated that North Koreans “would never have to tighten their belts again”.<sup>14</sup> Putting more emphasis on socio-economic issues, he nevertheless was still committed to building the nuclear potential. This was expressed in the *byungjin* line announced in March 2013: a policy of the parallel development of the economy and nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> According to this policy, economic development was to serve not only to strengthen the stability of the regime but also to secure the funds needed to build the nuclear arsenal, which in turn was to ensure the security of North Korea from external threats. The announcement of the *byungjin* line suggested a departure from the dominant military primacy under Kim Jong Il.<sup>16</sup> This confirmed the strengthening of the position of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) and state institutions in the government apparatus. Kim returned to organising party events, such as congresses (in May 2016, the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the WPK was held, the first party congress in 36 years; the next one was held in January 2021) and emphasised the greater role of the cabinet as the superior institution governing the economy. In place of the National Defence Commission, which was dominant under Kim Jong Il, a State Affairs Commission, headed by Kim Jong Un directly, was established as the highest governing institution of the country.<sup>17</sup> Although the role of the army in the apparatus of government decreased relatively, it did not mean marginalization. It remained an influential elite, thanks to which the development of the nuclear and missile programmes was possible.<sup>18</sup>

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## **Military Dimension**

Under Kim Jong Un’s rule, North Korea increased its military potential, focusing primarily on building a credible nuclear deterrence. It was to be based on the ability to strike U.S. bases in the region or U.S. territory in response to an American nuclear or conventional attack on North Korea’s territory. Its aim was to have both a sufficiently strong nuclear arsenal: thermonuclear warheads and the means of delivery, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching targets in

<sup>13</sup> Oh Gyeong-Seob, Kim Jin-Ha, “Sectoral Assessment...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 139-144.

<sup>14</sup> Kim Jong Un, “Let Us March Forward Dynamically Towards Final Victory, Holding High the Banner of Songun. Speech delivered at the Military Parade Held in Celebration of the Centenary of the Birth of Generalissimo Kim Il Sung,” 15 April 2012, p. 9, [www.korean-books.com.kp](http://www.korean-books.com.kp).

<sup>15</sup> “Report on Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee,” *Korean Central News Agency*, 31 March 2013, [www.kcna.co.jp](http://www.kcna.co.jp).

<sup>16</sup> R. Frank, “Can North Korea Prioritize Nukes and the Economy at the Same Time?,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 2014), p. 38-39, [www.globalasia.org](http://www.globalasia.org); S.A. Snyder, “The Motivations Behind North Korea’s Pursuit of Simultaneous Economic and Nuclear Development,” *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations, 20 November 2013, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

<sup>17</sup> Suh Jae-Jung, “Half Full or Half Empty? North Korea after the 7th Party Congress,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 14, Issue 14, No. 9 (July 2016), <https://apjif.org>.

<sup>18</sup> P. Ward, “Restoring Central Control: Kim Jong Un’s Domestic Policy Record,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 21 December 2021, [www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it).

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the U.S. In 2012-2021, Kim Jong Un's North Korea conducted four nuclear tests (compared to two during Kim Jong Il's rule)—one in 2013, two in 2016, and one in 2017. From December 2011 to December 2021, it also conducted 129 tests of various types of missiles (31 during the time of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il).<sup>19</sup> Based on development criteria of the North's nuclear and missile arsenal, the decade of Kim's rule can be divided into three periods: construction (2012-2015), increasing credibility (2016-2018), and improvement of nuclear deterrence (2019-2021).

## **Construction (2012-2015)**

From the very beginning, the Kim Jong Un regime aimed at consolidating the North's nuclear and missile potential in state policy. In addition to embedding it in the country's development strategy (*byungjin*), in 2012 North Korea amended its constitution, describing itself as a "nuclear weapon state", and established a new type of armed force: the Strategic Rocket Force (Strategic Force since 2014).<sup>20</sup> In 2013, it adopted a law that has the features of a nuclear doctrine. According to it, North Korea envisages using nuclear weapons in response to an attack on its territory by a nuclear state, without, however, distinguishing between nuclear and conventional attacks. While the North excludes the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, it makes an exception for states that would support a nuclear aggressor in an

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attack on North Korea.<sup>21</sup> The development of military potential was also served by the expansion of the scientific base: Kim regularly pointed to the contribution of scientists and engineers in strengthening North Korea's international position.<sup>22</sup> The North's nuclear programme in 2012-2015 was aimed at expanding and modernising the facilities for the production of more powerful miniaturised nuclear warheads. In February 2013, North Korea conducted a nuclear test, and in the following months the Yongbyon graphite reactor resumed operations to produce plutonium from spent fuel rods. Most likely afterwards the North also started producing tritium for a thermonuclear weapon. The North Korean missile programme involved the development of primarily long-range ballistic missile components under the pretext of developing a civilian space programme. In December 2012, it put a satellite into orbit using a Unha-3 rocket. North Korea also presented models of new ICBM missiles (Hwasong-13) during subsequent military parades.<sup>23</sup>

## **Increasing Credibility (2016-2018)**

In 2016-2017, North Korea demonstrated its nuclear potential, increasing the credibility of deterrence. This was evidenced by three nuclear tests, especially one with a thermonuclear weapon in September 2017, and the dynamic development of missile technologies.<sup>24</sup> In May 2017, the North successfully tested the Hwasong-12 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), which has a range of 4,500 km, capable of striking the U.S. base in Guam. In the following months, it tested the Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 ICBMs, which have a range of greater than 10,000 km, capable of strikes on the

<sup>19</sup> Data: Nuclear Threat Initiative, [www.nti.org](http://www.nti.org).

<sup>20</sup> "The DPRK's Nuclear Constitution," *NAPSNet Policy Forum*, 13 June 2012, <https://nautilus.org>.

<sup>21</sup> "Law on Consolidating Position of Nuclear Weapons State Adopted," *Korean Central News Agency*, 1 April 2013, <https://kcnawatch.org>. See L. Allard, M. Duchâtel, F. Godement, "Pre-empting Defeat: In Search of North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine," *Policy Brief*, No. 237, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2017, [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu).

<sup>22</sup> A. Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), pp. 18-21.

<sup>23</sup> Lee Choong-Koo, "A General Assessment of 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime: In the Areas of the Military and Security," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021), p. 63-65.

<sup>24</sup> M.A. Piotrowski, "Significance of North Korea's Latest Nuclear Test," *PISM Spotlight*, 4 September 2017, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

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continental U.S. To further strengthen deterrence, North Korea also developed its second-strike capability, successfully testing submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and solid fuel propulsion, increasing both the ability to withstand an enemy attack and the combat readiness of the rocket systems, making them less vulnerable to pre-emptive strikes. Following the success of the thermonuclear weapon and Hwasong-15 tests, Kim declared that North Korea's nuclear deterrent was complete. As a goodwill gesture before negotiations with South Korea and the U.S., in April 2018 North Korea imposed a moratorium on tests of its nuclear weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles. In the following months, it also blew up the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and committed to shutting down the Tongchang-ri missile facility. During the 2018-2019 diplomatic opening, North Korea ceased testing, but there were reports of continued operations at the Yongbyon nuclear complex and the secret Kangson uranium enrichment facility.<sup>25</sup>

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## **Improving (2019-2021)**

After the failure of the talks with the U.S. in Hanoi in February 2019, North Korea took steps to diversify its missile arsenal and improve nuclear deterrence. From 2019, North Korea returned to missile tests, but on a smaller scale than in 2017: it tested 27 missiles in 2019, nine in 2020, and six in 2021.<sup>26</sup> North Korea also tested improved SLBMs and missiles fired from a rail-mobile missile launch platform, complicating targeting by the enemy and increasing the survivability of its nuclear and missile capabilities. In addition, in December 2019, it twice tested a new solid-fuel rocket engine for an ICBM.<sup>27</sup> In early 2020, North Korea declared that it would not be bound by the April 2018 moratorium and vowed to step up development of nuclear deterrence.<sup>28</sup> At a military parade in 2020, a model of a new, larger ICBM (Hwasong-17) was visible.<sup>29</sup> In January 2021, Kim Jong Un announced a 5-year plan for the further development and diversification of the country's military potential, including tactical nuclear weapons, hypersonic gliding vehicles, missiles capable of carrying multiple warheads, solid fuel ICBMs and SLBMs, and a nuclear-powered submarine.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, North Korea signalled the need to increase its capability to both withstand an attack and respond to it, requiring the defeat of U.S. anti-missile defence systems. The declared development of tactical nuclear weapons could suggest readiness to use them against South Korean and U.S. forces during a conventional conflict.<sup>31</sup> Part of the implementation of the plan was a test of the Hwasong-8 missile, which has hypersonic technologies, in September 2021.<sup>32</sup> The International Atomic Energy Agency

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<sup>25</sup> F.V. Pabian, J.S. Bermudez Jr., J. Liu, "Infrastructure Improvements at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Facility," *38 North*, 26 June 2018, [www.38north.org](http://www.38north.org); A. Panda, "Exclusive: Revealing Kangson, North Korea's First Covert Uranium Enrichment Site," *The Diplomat*, 13 July 2018, <https://thediplomat.com>.

<sup>26</sup> The tested arsenal included in particular short-range solid-fuel missile systems, including KN-23. See M. Elleman, "North Korea's New Short-Range Missiles: A Technical Evaluation," *38 North*, 9 October 2019, [www.38north.org](http://www.38north.org).

<sup>27</sup> A. Panda, "North Korea Announces 'Crucial' Test at Sohae, Says Will Benefit 'Strategic Nuclear Deterrent'," *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2019, <https://thediplomat.com>.

<sup>28</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Changes in North Korea's Policy," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 17 (1949), 5 February 2020, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>29</sup> M. Hanham, M. Frank, Xu Tianran, K. Furukawa, "North Korea's New ICBM and Transport Truck," *Open Nuclear Network*, 16 October 2020, <https://oneearthfuture.org>.

<sup>30</sup> K. Furukawa, "The 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (1)," *Open Nuclear Network*, 9 February 2021, p. 8-12, <https://oneearthfuture.org>.

<sup>31</sup> H. Kurata, "The Current Stage of North Korea's "Tactical Nuclear Weapons" Development - The Utility of the KN-23 Missile and Diversification," *Research Reports*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, 29 March 2022, [www.jiia.or.jp](http://www.jiia.or.jp).

<sup>32</sup> V.H. Van Diepen, "Six Takeaways From North Korea's "Hypersonic Missile" Announcement," *38 North*, 13 October 2021, [www.38north.org](http://www.38north.org).

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and analytical institutions also pointed to the resumption of work at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities.<sup>33</sup>

## Foreign Policy Dimension

During the decade of Kim Jong Un's rule, in its foreign policy North Korea pursued three basic goals: ensuring state security, improving its economic situation (by reducing sanctions pressure), and seeking international recognition as a nuclear power.<sup>34</sup> North Korean diplomatic activities were directly related to the development of nuclear deterrence. With this in mind, North Korea's foreign policy under Kim Jong Un can be divided into the three periods: confrontation and preparation (2012-2017); diplomatic offensive (2018-2019); withdrawal and return to confrontation (2020-2021).

### ***Confrontation and Preparation (2012-2017)***

In the first six years, North Korea had limited international contacts, and the North Korean leader did not leave the country. This was because Kim's priority was to consolidate power at home and develop the North's nuclear and missile programmes, which led to tensions in relations with other countries but also served to strengthen Kim's negotiating position in future talks.<sup>35</sup>

In the first weeks of 2012, North Korea showed an apparent openness to dialogue, continuing the talks with the U.S. initiated in the last months of Kim Jong Il's rule. However, the February 2012 agreement was quickly upended by the North Korean missile tests and nuclear test.<sup>36</sup> Until the end of the Obama administration, North Korea maintained a hostile attitude towards the U.S., which, after the failure of the 2012 deal, forced an approach by the West of "strategic patience", which boils down to exerting sanctions pressure on the authorities in Pyongyang.<sup>37</sup> In the first year of the Donald Trump administration, North Korea's relations with the U.S. were openly confrontational, which was influenced by the intensification of the North Korean missile tests and the harsh rhetoric of the new U.S. president. In addition, following the North Korean missile and nuclear tests in 2016-2017, the UNSC, on the urging of the U.S., unanimously adopted five resolutions imposing increasingly severe sanctions on North Korea.<sup>38</sup>

Inter-Korean relations were tense during this period. In 2013, the North made numerous threats against the South, announcing, among others, nullification of the Korean War armistice.<sup>39</sup> It kept up the appearances of dialogue, manifested in the ultimately fruitless visit of representatives of the North Korean leadership to South Korea in October 2014 on the occasion of the Asian Games in Incheon. Inter-Korean relations entered a confrontational period in 2016, when President Park Geun-

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<sup>33</sup> M. Shin, "Why Did North Korea Restart Its Nuclear Reactor?," *The Diplomat*, 2 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com>.

<sup>34</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Assumptions and Main Directions of North Korea's Foreign Policy," PISM Bulletin, No. 148 (1721), 30 October 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>35</sup> Hwang Ildo, "Foreign Policy of Kim Jong Un's 10 Years: Relentless Maneuvering among Options," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021), pp. 31-33.

<sup>36</sup> In the Leap Day deal, North Korea pledged to halt nuclear and ICBM testing, and to stop work at nuclear facilities in exchange for U.S. food support. Just a few weeks later, a North Korean satellite launch test failed, followed by another (successful) one in December, and a nuclear test in February 2013, breaking the agreement. See A. Quinn, "Insight: Obama's North Korean leap of faith falls short," *Reuters*, 30 March 2012, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com); A. Panda, "A Great Leap to Nowhere: Remembering the US-North Korea 'Leap Day' Deal," *The Diplomat*, 29 February 2016, <https://thediplomat.com>.

<sup>37</sup> J. Delury, "The Disappointments of Disengagement: Assessing Obama's North Korea Policy," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2013), pp. 149-182.

<sup>38</sup> *UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea*, Arms Control Association, April 2018, [www.armscontrol.org](http://www.armscontrol.org).

<sup>39</sup> D. Meoli, "North Korea's Top 5 Threats of 2013," *The Diplomat*, 9 January 2014, <https://thediplomat.com>.

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Myeong's administration withdrew from the joint industrial complex in Kaesong in response to the January nuclear test of the North, severing the recently formed economic ties between the Korean states.

For the first few years of Kim's rule, North Korea also maintained tense relations with China. This was out of the leader's efforts to establish his own position in the regime distinct from Chinese influence.<sup>40</sup> In 2013, Jang Song Thaek, the leader's uncle, who advocated deepening cooperation with China, was executed. In response to successive North Korean missile and nuclear tests, China not only supported the UNSC resolutions but also implemented the sanctions imposed on North Korea in 2016-2017. Even then, both countries tried to maintain diplomatic dialogue. One of the few examples of Kim Jong Un's meeting with representatives of other countries was the visit of Liu Yunshan, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee, to Pyongyang in October 2015.<sup>41</sup>

## ***Diplomatic Offensive (2018-2019)***

During the period of diplomatic activity, North Korea opened up to the highest-level dialogue with South Korea and the U.S. This was due to North Korea's belief that progress in its nuclear and missile programmes in 2016-2017 had given it a sufficiently strong negotiating position to start talks.

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Openness to dialogue also served to reduce the international isolation and sanctions imposed by the U.S.

In 2018-2019, the North Korean and U.S. leaders met three times, marking a special moment in North Korea's foreign policy towards the U.S. To meet the U.S. expectations, among which denuclearisation is the priority, North Korea expressed its readiness to negotiate on its nuclear programme. On the pretext of talks on denuclearisation, North Korea actually strived for easing sanctions, normalising relations with the U.S., *de facto* recognition of its nuclear status, and weakening the U.S. alliance with South Korea. The first-ever meeting of a North Korean leader with the incumbent U.S. president in June 2018 in Singapore was a success for North Korean diplomacy. It strengthened the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un, broke the political isolation of the North and did not oblige it to take specific actions on denuclearisation. Trump also announced the suspension of U.S.-South Korean drills, which met the North Korean expectations.<sup>42</sup> Another summit, in February 2019 in Hanoi, ended with no outcome and was a failure of North Korean diplomacy. The lack of agreement was due to the overreliance on the formula of summit meetings without prior agreements at the working level, and the divergence of positions between the sides, which additionally forced maximalist demands with no room for compromise. From the U.S. perspective, North Korea offered too little (a formal moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests, permanent closure of the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, but without the offer to close other secret facilities, including at Kangson) and expected too much (lifting the sanctions imposed on it by UNSC after 2016).<sup>43</sup> The positions of the parties were irreconcilable. Despite the meeting of Kim and Trump in Panmunjom in June 2019 and working talks in October 2019 in Stockholm, North Korea abandoned further negotiations.

<sup>40</sup> For example, during the 7<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress, Kim Jong Un criticised China's policy of reform and opening up. See R. Frank, "The 7th Party Congress in North Korea: An Analysis of Kim Jong Un's Report," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 14, Issue 14, No. 8 (July 2016), p. 5, <https://apjif.org>.

<sup>41</sup> A. Cathcart, "The New Normal: Liu Yunshan in Pyongyang," *Sino-NK*, 18 October 2015, <https://sinonk.com>.

<sup>42</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Kim-Trump Summit: Success for North Korea," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 42/2018, 13 June 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>43</sup> A. Panda, V. Narang, "The Hanoi Summit Was Doomed From the Start," *Foreign Affairs*, 5 March 2019, [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com); O. Pietrewicz, "Prospects for Breaking the Deadlock in the North Korea-U.S. Dialogue," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 70 (1818), 28 May 2019, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).



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In inter-Korean relations, North Korea utilised the conciliatory attitude of the Moon Jae-in administration, for which dialogue with the North was a foreign policy priority, and the Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang in February 2018, which turned out to be a catalyst for inter-Korean talks.<sup>44</sup> Between April and September 2018, the leaders of the two Koreas met three times: twice in Panmunjom and once in Pyongyang.<sup>45</sup> Dialogue with South Korea served to restore inter-Korean cooperation on the North's terms (especially to resume economic cooperation), the use of the government in Seoul as a channel of communication with the U.S., and as a wedge between South Korea and the U.S. on their policy towards the North. The first goal was not achieved due to the inability to conduct economic cooperation because of the strict sanctions imposed on North Korea. On the other hand, the second and third goals were partially achieved. This was evidenced by the significant involvement of Moon in bringing about the Kim-Trump summit and the regular South Korea-U.S. disputes on sanctions against the North.

During the period of diplomatic opening, North Korea improved its relations with China. In March 2018, Kim Jong Un paid his first foreign visit to Beijing, where he met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Over the next 15 months, the leaders met five times. The culmination was Xi's visit to Pyongyang in June 2019, making the first visit of a Chinese president to North Korea in 14 years.<sup>46</sup> The Sino-North Korean rapprochement strengthened North Korea's negotiating position in talks with South Korea and the U.S. and provided it with economic support from China, which began to less-restrictively enforce the sanctions and advocate to ease them. North Korea moved closer to China, taking advantage of the growing rivalry between the U.S. and China, which wanted to keep North Korea as a buffer state separating it from South Korea and maintain the impression that the Chinese can cooperate with the U.S. on the North.<sup>47</sup>

During the period of diplomatic opening, North Korea improved its relations with China.

To show that it was not isolated, North Korea pursued a diplomatic campaign in other directions as well. During the meetings with Trump in Singapore and Vietnam, Kim held courtesy meetings with the leaders of some countries. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel was the first Cuban leader in 32 years to pay a visit to Pyongyang (November 2018), and in April 2019 Kim travelled to Vladivostok where he met Vladimir Putin.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, due to the limited nature of North Korea's relations with these partners, the single meetings in 2018-2019 failed to diversify the North's foreign policy, the key element of which remained relations with China. In the context of the talks with the U.S., North Korea also used European channels of communication, being open to expert exchange through 1.5-track diplomacy.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "The Winter Olympics and Paralympics in South Korea and the Development of the Inter-Korean Dialogue," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 54 (1627), 12 April 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>45</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Inter-Korean Summit: Still Waiting for a Breakthrough," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 31/2018, 30 April 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl); O. Pietrewicz, "The Kim-Moon Summit in Pyongyang: Impetus for U.S.-North Korea Dialogue," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 66/2018, 24 September 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>46</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Xi Jinping's Visit to North Korea," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 34/2019, 25 June 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>47</sup> Cho Sungmin, "China and North Korea: A New Peak of Comradeship," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 21 December 2021, [www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it).

<sup>48</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "Putin-Kim Meeting in Vladivostok: A Summit with Limitations," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 22/2019, 30 April 2019, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>49</sup> E.J. Ballbach, "Socialization on a Second Track? European Track 1.5 Initiatives with North Korea," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2020), pp. 77-105.

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## ***Withdrawal and Return to Confrontation (2020-2021)***

A period of diplomatic withdrawal followed the post-Hanoi stalemate in relations with the U.S., which induced North Korea to reorient its foreign policy assumptions. In the January 2020 report from the plenum of the Central Committee of the PPK, it was recognised that the North's relations

**A period of diplomatic withdrawal followed the post-Hanoi stalemate in relations with the U.S., which induced North Korea to reorient its foreign policy assumptions.**

with the U.S. would be characterised by a long-lasting confrontation. North Korea ruled out continuing talks with the U.S. on the current terms and accused it of pursuing a "hostile policy".<sup>50</sup> The North maintained this position in relations with the Biden administration. In addition, the nuclear deterrence development plan presented at the beginning of 2021 and the missile tests carried out in autumn 2021 served to strengthen North Korea's negotiating position

before talks with the new U.S. administration and convinced it that the negotiations should cover topics other than denuclearisation, such as arms control.<sup>51</sup> The price for negotiating arms control mechanisms would be to accept North Korea's nuclear status, which would mean the recognition of its policy of *fait accompli*.

From 2019, North Korea began to question the sense of further talks between the two Koreas. As South Korea failed to resume inter-Korean economic cooperation and urged the U.S. to ease sanctions, the North cut off all communication lines with the South in June 2020, and then blew up the liaison office in Kaesong.<sup>52</sup> In 2021, North Korea alternately tightened and relaxed its policy towards South Korea, for example, by closing and opening communication channels and maintaining an ambiguous position on South Korean offers of dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

In the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean international contacts were radically limited. The scale of restrictions introduced by the North Korean authorities prompted most diplomatic missions in Pyongyang to leave the country.<sup>54</sup> Against this background, North Korea's relations with China stood out: in July 2021, both countries extended their 1961 Mutual Defence Treaty for another 20 years, consolidating the rapprochement of recent years.<sup>55</sup>

## **Socio-Economic Dimension**

During the rule of Kim Jong Un, the party-state apparatus has tried to manage socio-economic processes, guided by the logic of the regime's survival. The consolidation of the economic system, called by researchers "party-state capitalism" or "market Leninism",<sup>56</sup> consisted of both regulating market practices existing since the 1990s and strengthening the state's

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<sup>50</sup> "Report on 5th Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK," Korean Central News Agency, 1 January 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org>.

<sup>51</sup> M. Richey, R. York, "US-Korea Relations: Peninsular Inertia," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (January 2022), pp. 50-51.

<sup>52</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "North-South Korea Tensions Increase," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 42/2020, 17 June 2020, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>53</sup> O. Pietrewicz, "North Korea's Foreign Policy Towards South Korea and the U.S.," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 200 (2398), 25 November 2021, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>54</sup> As of March 2022, in Pyongyang there were only embassies of eight countries: China, Egypt, Cuba, Laos, Mongolia, Russia, Syria and Vietnam.

<sup>55</sup> Khang Vu, "Why China and North Korea decided to renew a 60-year-old treaty," *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, 30 July 2021, [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org).

<sup>56</sup> S.C. Greitens, B. Katzeff Silberstein, "Toward Market Leninism in North Korea: Assessing Kim Jong Un's First Decade," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 62, No. 2, (2022), pp. 211-239.

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control over socio-economic processes. The first of these measures, marking reforms but not named as such by the authorities, dominated at the beginning of Kim Jong Un's rule (until 2016). The latter, focused on tightening control, have been present throughout the entire period of his rule, but gained importance after the failure of the negotiations with the U.S. (so, after 2019).

## ***Limited Reforms (2012-2016)***

From the beginning of his rule, Kim Jong Un has placed greater emphasis than his father on socio-economic issues. This was confirmed by the five-year economic development strategy announced in 2016, which indicated the strengthening of the civilian economy, an increase in the productivity of agriculture and light industry, as well as the diversification of foreign trade and attracting foreign investments. It also approved the reform packages introduced fragmentarily from 2012.<sup>57</sup> They had the character of partial decentralisation and marketisation in the management of state-owned enterprises (for example, ensuring greater autonomy of companies in terms of setting wages, investing, and importing goods from abroad) and agriculture (for example, reducing the size of collective farm work teams and the scale of compulsory deliveries and allowing farmers to keep 30-40% of their harvest).<sup>58</sup> The regime also regulated the functioning of markets. To increase its influence on market processes and secure a source of revenue, the regime issued permits for market trading and collected taxes and fees on that activity. The changes promoted by the authorities served a privileged class of entrepreneurs (*donju*) who benefited economically while remaining politically loyal.<sup>59</sup>

The average growth rate of the North Korean economy in 2012-2016 was 1.2% per year.<sup>60</sup> It was influenced by the growing market activity, which could account for 30-50% of the country's GDP. According to other estimates, in 2018 there were more than 400 bazaars in North Korea and about 70% of the income of North Koreans was generated by market activity.<sup>61</sup> Apart from limited internal reforms, the economic situation in 2012-2016 was improved by the dynamics of North Korea's trade with China. Already in 2010-2011, the North's foreign trade almost doubled, which resulted from China's increased demand for North Korean raw materials.<sup>62</sup> In 2016, North Korean trade with China amounted to \$6 billion (exports \$2.6 billion, imports \$3.4 billion), and China's share in North Korea's foreign trade increased to 92.7%.<sup>63</sup>

## ***Deterioration and Tightening Control (2017-2021)***

As of 2017, the economic situation of North Korea began to deteriorate, mainly due to sanctions. Beginning with Resolution 2270 of March 2016, the UNSC imposed sanctions that covered over 90% of North Korea's exports, as well as a ban on investing in the country, an order to return North

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<sup>57</sup> Some of the solutions were modelled on the reforms of 2002, from which the Kim Jong-Il regime quickly abandoned. See M. Ernst, E. Kim, "Economic Development Under Kim Jong-un: The added Value of Traffic Data and Established Indicators in the Study of North Korea's Economy," *North Korean Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2020), p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> Kim Suk-Jin, "The Limits of Economic Reform in North Korea under the Kim Jong-un Regime: Lessons from Chinese Experiences," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021), pp. 4-18.

<sup>59</sup> S.C. Greitens, B. Katzeff Silberstein, "Toward Market..." *op. cit.*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>60</sup> Data: Bank of Korea, [www.bok.or.kr](http://www.bok.or.kr).

<sup>61</sup> V. Cha, L. Collins, "The Markets: Private Economy and Capitalism in North Korea?," *Beyond Parallel*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 August 2018, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org>; M. Ernst, E. Kim, "Economic Development..." *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Kim Dawool, "Evaluating the Second Half of the Kim Jong-Un Era: Evidence from Nighttime Light," *KIEP Opinions*, 3 January 2022, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, p. 2, [www.kiep.go.kr](http://www.kiep.go.kr).

<sup>63</sup> Data: KOTRA, [www.kotra.or.kr](http://www.kotra.or.kr).

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Korean workers working abroad, and limits on oil imports.<sup>64</sup> As late as April 2018, Kim Jong Un indicated that after achieving nuclear deterrence, North Korea intended to focus on economic development.<sup>65</sup> This reflected the expectations of the North Korean authorities that negotiations with the U.S. would lead to the easing of sanctions, which hampered development. The failure of the Hanoi talks in 2019 and the deteriorating economic situation prompted the North Korean authorities to abandon these assumptions and increase control over the economy. The decisions of the 8<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress of January 2021 confirmed the choice to pursue the direction of “self-reliance”.<sup>66</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic was another challenge in response to which North Korea closed its borders and introduced restrictions. This had a negative impact on both market activity and foreign trade. In 2017-2020, North Korean trade turnover decreased by 85%, which translated into a shortage of basic goods.<sup>67</sup> The increase in state control over the economy particularly hit entrepreneurs who trade with China. As a result, North Korea’s average economic growth in 2017-2020 was -4.5% per year.<sup>68</sup> The strengthening of control by the party-state apparatus under Kim Jong Un’s rule went beyond regulating economic activity. It also covered anti-corruption measures, tightening grassroots social control, and ideological campaigns, especially among young people, rejecting “reactionary ideology and culture.”<sup>69</sup> From the beginning of Kim’s tenure, North Korea also strengthened border control, which translated into a decrease in the number of refugees going to South Korea. In 2011, their number amounted to 2,706 people, 1,047 in 2019, and 63 in 2021.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusions and Perspectives

Kim Jong Un’s greatest success in his 10 years of rule has been the consolidation of power and control over the elite. Despite little experience, he has turned out to be a very effective authoritarian leader, using all the tools of a totalitarian state and skilfully managing relations between the main groups of interest: the party, the army, and the security services. In the ideological dimension, Kim maintained a balance between recognising the achievements of his predecessors and promoting his concepts, but in the last year he showed a greater tendency to form his own ideology.<sup>71</sup> Taking into account the degree of consolidation of Kim’s power, opposition to the leader is very unlikely to be seen.

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<sup>64</sup> O. Pietrewicz, “Limitations of the Sanctions Policy towards North Korea,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 36 (1609), 27 February 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>65</sup> R. Frank, “North Korea’s Economic Policy in 2018 and Beyond: Reforms Inevitable, Delays Possible,” *38 North*, 8 August 2018, [www.38north.org](http://www.38north.org).

<sup>66</sup> Kim Suk-Jin, “The Limits...,” *op. cit.*, p. 21; Go Myong-Hyun, “North Korea’s New Byungjin: Nuclear Development and Economic Retrenchment,” *Issue Brief*, No. 2021-03, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 8 March 2021, <http://en.asaninst.org>.

<sup>67</sup> Data: KOTRA, [www.kotra.or.kr](http://www.kotra.or.kr).

<sup>68</sup> Data: Bank of Korea, [www.bok.or.kr](http://www.bok.or.kr).

<sup>69</sup> S.C. Greitens, B. Katzeff Silberstein, “Toward Market...,” *op. cit.*, pp. 226-227; Oh Gyeong-Seob, Kim Jin-Ha, “Sectoral Assessment...,” *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>70</sup> Data: Ministry of Unification, [www.unikorea.go.kr](http://www.unikorea.go.kr).

<sup>71</sup> Ji Da-gyum, “What’s behind the emergence of Kim Jong-un-ism?,” *The Korea Herald*, 9 November 2021, [www.koreaherald.com](http://www.koreaherald.com); Kim Kap-Sik, Jang Cheol-wun, “‘Kim-Jong-un-ism’? Or ‘Kim Jong-un Thought’?,” *Online Series*, no. CO 21-31, Korea Institute for National Unification, 16 December 2021, [www.kinu.or.kr](http://www.kinu.or.kr).

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North Korea under Kim Jong Un's rule achieved the most spectacular successes in the military dimension. It currently has 20 to 60 nuclear warheads and a diverse arsenal of missiles of various ranges.<sup>72</sup> The development of nuclear and missile capabilities has increased the credibility of nuclear deterrence, reducing the likelihood of an attack by the U.S. and thus enhancing the regime's survivability. Military successes strengthened Kim's legitimacy and constituted a tool in North Korea's foreign policy. However, this military development required the regime to allocate enormous resources, forcing cuts in other areas of state activity,<sup>73</sup> also associated with the imposition of increasingly severe sanctions. Regardless of the costs, the North will continue to develop its nuclear and missile arsenals, as evidenced by the missile tests in the first quarter of 2022.<sup>74</sup> The scale of military endeavours mentioned by Kim in 2021 indicates that over the coming year North Korea will improve its nuclear deterrence and diversify its missile arsenal. This will pose an increasing challenge to the U.S. missile defence systems, its Asian allies, and the global non-proliferation regime.

The focus on military development negatively verified Kim Jong Un's announcements regarding the improvement of the economic situation. The reforms turned out to be limited due to internal obstacles (maintaining the political and ideological framework in the economy) and unfavourable international environment (sanctions, pandemic effects). In response to problems related to sanctions, the regime opted for a policy of self-reliance and stronger internal control, which called into question earlier reforms.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, because market practices are so entrenched and beneficial to the authorities themselves, the state of "reform without opening" is likely to continue.<sup>76</sup> However, this will not allow the economic situation to improve, for which it will be necessary to ease sanctions and introduce structural changes, such as guaranteeing the functioning of market entities.<sup>77</sup> An additional challenge for North Korea will be dealing with the pandemic after it confirmed the country's first COVID-19 case in May this year.

The focus on military development negatively verified Kim Jong Un's announcements regarding the improvement of the economic situation.

The diplomatic activity of 2018-2019 did not bring about the changes desired by North Korea: diversification of foreign policy directions, easing of sanctions, normalising of relations with the U.S., or a weakening of the American alliance with South Korea. Due to the maintenance of the sanctions regime, the North remains largely isolated, and the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to establish contacts with it. Rapprochement with China was essential to the survival of the Pyongyang regime, but at the cost of an increase in dependence on the Chinese. Although, from the point of view of the development needs of the North, dialogue with South Korea and the U.S. seems to be a necessity, its resumption is unlikely in the short term. North Korea will focus in particular on military development, assuming that further progress in this area will induce the U.S. to make more concessions, including starting talks on arms control rather than denuclearisation.<sup>78</sup> In the worst-case scenario, North Korea, based on the experience of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, may develop its nuclear

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<sup>72</sup> M. Korda, "Nuclear Weapons and Delivery Systems That Might Be Implicated in Nuclear Use Involving the Korean Peninsula," *NAPSNet Special Reports*, 20 January 2022, <https://nautilus.org>.

<sup>73</sup> It is estimated that North Korea spends around 20-30% of its GDP on military. See Jo Haena, "North Korea: sidelining economic development to prioritise strategic weapons?" *Military Balance Blog*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 10 July 2020, [www.iiss.org](http://www.iiss.org).

<sup>74</sup> In January 2022, North Korea fired a record number of missiles. See Xu Tianran, "January 2022: Missile Tests of the DPRK," *Open Nuclear Network*, 1 February 2022, <https://oneearthfuture.org>. In March 2022, the North also launched its first ICBM test since November 2017. See M. Shin, "Seoul Says North Korea Didn't Test Hwasong-17 ICBM After All," *The Diplomat*, 30 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com>.

<sup>75</sup> Kim Suk-Jin, "The Limits..." *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>76</sup> A. Lankov, "North Korea under Kim Jong-un: Reforms without Openness?," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 6 June 2018, [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

<sup>77</sup> P. Ward, "Restoring Central Control..." *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Lee Sangsoo, "North Korea Is Preparing to Confront the US in 2022," *The Diplomat*, 29 January 2022, <https://thediplomat.com>.

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deterrence potential for conventional offensive actions against South Korea. This would serve to increase the ability to manipulate the risk of a conventional attack against South Korea. The North Korean actions may take the form of limited border clashes, including in the Yellow Sea, to test the reaction of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. A moderate reaction from the U.S. government could be perceived by North Korea as weak and lead to further actions, including an increased threat of armed conflict and, in the long run, serving to subjugate South Korea politically under the slogan of the “reunification of Korea”.

**The past failures of the negotiations with North Korea may prompt the U.S. and South Korea to primarily strengthen their own defence capabilities in response to the North Korean armaments rather than making another attempt at dialogue.**

The past failures of the negotiations with North Korea may prompt the U.S. and South Korea to primarily strengthen their own defence capabilities in response to the North Korean armaments rather than making another attempt at dialogue. This trend seems to be promoted by Yoon Suk-yeol, the new conservative president of South Korea. While talks with North Korea are not a priority for the Biden administration, the development of North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities poses an increasingly serious threat to U.S. security. For this reason, the U.S.

authorities may be interested in negotiations with North Korea on a freeze and gradual reduction of its nuclear and missile weapons, assuming that denuclearisation remains the ultimate goal. However, persuading the North to enter into talks by exerting pressure may not be effective. North Korea will rely on the support of China and Russia, both permanent members of the UNSC and rivals of the U.S.<sup>79</sup> Economic assistance from China will be of particular importance as it treats the Korean Peninsula as one of the areas of its rivalry with the U.S. and therefore keeps North Korea as a buffer state separating China from South Korea.

While North Korea manipulates the risk of nuclear escalation for political ends, it does not seem to be interested in provoking a nuclear conflict. An additional measure to reduce the risk of unintended escalation and the use of nuclear weapons could be the establishment of a crisis communication mechanism between the militaries of the opposing parties.<sup>80</sup> European countries maintaining political relations and expert dialogue with North Korea could serve as communication channels in talks with the North, working to develop mechanisms to de-escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula and to strengthen allied and partner cooperation with the U.S. and South Korea.

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<sup>79</sup> O. Pietrewicz, “North Korea’s Support for Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine,” *PISM Bulletin*, No. 45, 23 March 2022, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>80</sup> W. Wan, “Nuclear Risk Reduction: A Framework for Analysis,” *United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research*, 28 June 2019, [www.unidir.org](http://www.unidir.org); V. Jackson, “How to Engage the Enemy: the Case for National Security Diplomacy with North Korea,” *Special Report*, No. 479, September 2020, United States Institute of Peace, [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org).