

## NORTH KOREA: Shockwaves from US strikes on Iran reach Pyongyang

- Pyongyang will have concluded that it can never negotiate away its own nuclear weapons capabilities, or risk inviting a repeat of last month's US airstrikes on Iran on its own territory.
- With Pyongyang's geopolitical environment also becoming more advantageous since 2022, any future negotiations between the US and North Korea will have very different parameters and goals from before.
- Potential outcomes risk widening the cleavage between the US and its two East Asian allies; Trump's expected visit to South Korea in the fall may provide an opportunity to re-engage Kim.

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### Long-range shockwaves

The shockwaves from the fourteen Massive Ordnance Penetrator munitions dropped on Iranian nuclear facilities last month reached North Korea. The Kim regime will have concluded from the US airstrikes that it can never negotiate away its own nuclear weapons capabilities, or it too would face similar strikes. Any remaining hope that Pyongyang could be persuaded to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions has now evaporated. Pyongyang may even be emboldened by the detailed battle damage assessments that will emerge in the coming weeks, if it transpires that Iran's nuclear weapons program has only been set back by months rather than destroyed completely by the US's largest conventional bombs.

From its own perspective, North Korea's geopolitical context has already improved significantly in the past three years. Russia's wartime demand has driven an economic boom for the DPRK's military-industrial sector, and satellite imagery suggests that trade with both Russia and China has surged. Additionally, the 2024 North Korea-Russia mutual defense treaty has provided Pyongyang with advanced military technologies in the near-term and a credible strategic backstop against future military contingencies.

### Parameters and goals

One key implication now is that any future negotiations between the US (and partners) and the DPRK will have very different parameters. Whereas in the past the US aimed at the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of North Korea, future negotiations will now implicitly or explicitly accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons power. The nuclear testing and ICBM programs that the US previously sought to eliminate in talks will now function essentially as negotiation chips. Promises to impose or lift sanctions will no longer be effective to shape North Korean choices, since the UN sanctions regime has been broken by Moscow and Beijing. Summit diplomacy, which was previously reserved as a tactical tool to gain crucial breakthroughs, will become part of the ordinary negotiation process.

The goals of future negotiations will also look very different. No longer realistically able to ask for full denuclearization by the DPRK, an "America First"-motivated Washington would instead be more likely to ask for limited arms-control concessions with direct self-benefits, such as a moratorium on nuclear testing or long-range missiles that threaten US territory, halting the production of fissile material, or ending arms supplies to states like Iran or non-state actors. The complement of over 28,000 US Forces Korea troops that has hitherto formed the backbone of US deterrence on the peninsula may emerge as a bargaining chip, along with the deployment of US strategic assets in the region. The US may also have to offer more substantial economic incentives than the limited humanitarian and energy-related measures offered in the past, such as infrastructure mega-deals.

### Cleavage risk

These changes risk widening the cleavage between the US and the ROK as well as other regional partners like Japan. Any scenario in which North Korea halted further development of its long-range weapons program but faced no restrictions on its short-range missile and artillery capabilities would mean the threats to South Korea and Japan would continue unabated.

South Korean confidence in the reliability of its treaty ally would be significantly weakened by a major reduction in US troop levels on the peninsula, the reorientation of troop posture (e.g. away from the DPRK and towards a Taiwan contingency), or a drawdown of other US assets in the region. Such steps would likely drive further discussions of Seoul developing its own nuclear deterrent capability, and fan doubts in Japan and elsewhere about US dependability in a regional contingency.

The current Trump administration so far has given little public indication of a desire to re-engage with the Kim regime as Donald Trump did repeatedly during his first time, and Washington's foreign policy bandwidth is currently consumed with events in the Middle East and tariff negotiations with multiple partners. But with Trump expected to visit the Korean Peninsula to attend the annual APEC Summit in South Korea this fall, he would have an obvious opportunity to re-engage with Kim Jong-un, perhaps by making another visit to the Panmunjom border facility. Such a meeting could be the catalyst for a fresh round of US-DPRK talks and start a strong push by the Trump administration to achieve some sort of deal, even one that was not welcomed in Seoul and other democratic capitals in the region.

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