

# Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy: What Everyone Needs to Know



---

## Recommended Citation

A. Mansourov, "Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Doctrine and Strategy: What Everyone Needs to Know", NAPSNet Special Reports, December 16, 2014, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/kim-jong-uns-nuclear-doctrine-and-strategy-what-everyone-needs-to-know/>

---

Alexandre Y. Mansourov, Ph.D.

Senior Associate of Nautilus Institute

North Korea has a small operational nuclear weapons program and a robust ballistic missile development program. The North conducted three small yield nuclear tests to prove its research and

development results, improving the reliability of its designs and learning to further miniaturize its nuclear warheads for ballistic missile delivery, and to publicly demonstrate its acquisition of nuclear power.[1] It has a stockpile of plutonium sufficient to build 4-8 nuclear warheads.[2] Following the restart of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, it can reprocess enough plutonium for the production of one additional nuclear warhead per year. It has a highly-enriched uranium program, but its extent remains unclear. Its nuclear weapons development program is complimented by an active ballistic missile development program. Armed with around 700 short-range SCUD missiles capable of hitting South Korea, 200 Nodong medium-range missiles capable of hitting targets in Japan, and up to a hundred of intermedium range Musudan and KN-08 missiles on mobile platforms that can reach Guam, North Korea continues to work on an intercontinental ballistic missile that will be capable of striking the United States. It still has to overcome at least three technical challenges in order to develop a working and reliable nuclear weapons capability: to weaponize and minituarize a nuclear device to fit it on an ICBM,[3] to develop a dependable guidance system, and to develop a re-entry vehicle that can survive both the launch and re-entry. This will certainly be a time-consuming and costly process, especially in light of intensifying international sanctions. All in all, the Defense Intelligence Agency assessed with moderate confidence that the “North currently has nuclear weapons capable of delivery by ballistic missiles however the reliability will be low.” But, the Obama administration expressed considerable doubt about the efficacy and utility of North Korean nuclear missile capabilities.



*Figure 1. Intermedium-range KN-08 missiles at the military parade in Pyongyang on 15 April 2012.*

Although Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities remain opaque, North Korea’s open source materials allow an astute reader of its official pronouncements to infer its leadership’s nuclear intentions with a moderate degree of confidence because the DPRK’s self-declared nuclear status and ambitions have become an integral part of the country’s national development and domestic politics, national security strategy and national defense policy, military operational planning, as well as its international diplomacy.

North Korea’s nuclear doctrine is a complex intelligence puzzle. Its understanding requires the use

of multiple techniques, each one of which may provide only one piece of the puzzle. Knowing how to put these pieces together to develop a comprehensive, coherent, and well-sourced picture of the origins, evolution, and future directions of the DPRK's nuclear doctrine is part of the art of structured analysis. Careful reading of North Korea's open source materials backed by expert judgment based on time-tested subject matter expertise combined with critical thinking shall allow us to build the DPRK nuclear taxonomy, which is an important step in organizing our knowledge about the DPRK's nuclear doctrine, as well as to develop a list of driving forces behind its development, its main elements and their inter-relationships, variables to be considered, and important players to study. Given the closed totalitarian nature of the North Korean system and the Kim regime's absolute control and manipulation of the DPRK's open sources, it is important to bear in mind the possible influence of the regime's strategic communication and denial and deception campaigns on its coverage of the DPRK's nuclear developments, including those pertinent to its emerging nuclear doctrine.

## **Purpose and Roles of Nuclear Weapons in National Development, Security, and Defense Strategies**

**The principal purpose of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program is to ensure the favorable environment for regime survival and national development** by deterring external threats against the country's sovereignty and leadership and by freeing internal resources for economic growth and individual consumption. The survival of the ruling Kim family is intimately linked to the nuclear weapons development program because nuclear arms help legitimize Kim Jong Un's hereditary rule, keep his foreign foes at bay, and allow the DPRK government to prop up the civilian economy with the additional resources previously spent on conventional military arms. On March 31, 2013, Kim Jong Un said, "Nuclear weapons guarantee peace, economic prosperity, and people's happy life."[\[4\]](#)

- According to the MOFA spokesman statement on 4 October 2014, "The DPRK's nuclear force serves a powerful treasured *sword* to protect the sovereignty of the country and the dignity of the nation and provides a sure *guarantee* for focusing efforts on preserving peace and security, building economy and improving the standard of the people's living."[\[5\]](#)

Despite what many Western analysts believe, development of nuclear weapons does not take precedence over economic development in Kim Jong Un's North Korea. In a visible departure from the military-first policy, as envisioned and practiced by his father Kim Jong Il, the Workers' Party of Korea under Kim Jong Un's leadership adopted at the March 2013 Plenum of its Central Committee the so-called *Pyongjin Line*, i.e. the strategic course on parallel construction of economy and nuclear weapons ([\[6\]](#)). Notwithstanding the *Songun* imperatives, both are regarded as parallel tracks of the overall national development strategy designed to fulfil the supreme interests of the Korean people and Juch'e revolution.

- According to the DPRK foreign ministry spokesman's statement on 4 October 2014, "The DPRK's line of simultaneously developing the two fronts serves as a banner for bolstering nuclear deterrence for self-defence to cope with the reckless nuclear threat and aggression by the U.S. and its followers and, on its basis, winning a decisive victory in building a thriving nation... The DPRK's line of simultaneously pushing forward economic construction and the building of nuclear force is the strategic line which should be permanently maintained to meet the supreme interests of the Korean revolution."[\[7\]](#)

The North Korean government emphasizes the critical role of nuclear weapons in national security



and defense strategies by putting them in the center of its campaign to prevent war and shape peace suitable to Pyongyang and in the foundation of its plans to wage war under the conditions favoring the North. In his speech on 31 March 2013, Kim Jong Un called for increasing the “pivotal role of nuclear weapons in war deterrent strategy and war-waging strategy.”[\[8\]](#)

- According to the DPRK national security doctrine, as part of the overall war deterrent strategy ( ), “the nuclear deterrent enables peaceful development at home and allows North Korea to dictate international trends on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.”
- According to the DPRK military doctrine, as part of the war-waging strategy ( ), the nuclear weapons are designed “to beat back any aggressor troops at one strike.” According to the DPRK law, the nuclear weapons “serve the purpose of deterring and repelling the aggression and attack of the enemy against the DPRK and dealing deadly retaliatory blows at the strongholds of aggression until the world is denuclearized.” This stipulation presupposes that nuclear weapons can be used both on the territory of the DPRK against the attacking enemy forces and on foreign soil against the defending enemy forces.

North Korea’s past behavior demonstrates that during crisis escalation, Pyongyang increases the nuclear threat in a gradual manner in order to deter the U.S.-ROK alliance from taking hostile actions, let alone from attacking. These escalatory moves include: a public or private warning, a demonstration ICBM test and a nuclear test of a small atomic device on its own soil, a threat to use (a) nuclear weapon(s) in self-defense on North Korea’s own soil against the attacking allied forces; and a threat to use (a) nuclear weapon(s) in retaliation against critical but purely military targets on foreign (ROK, Japan, U.S.) soil, probably in thinly populated areas, causing the least collateral damage.

## **Rationale: A Mixture of Self-Defense, Deterrence, and Compellence**

Careful reading of North Korean authoritative media suggests a mixed rationale for the acquisition of nuclear weapons, ranging from self-defense to deterrence, and even compellence. Its defensive aspects are grounded in the North’s victim-centric interpretation of the history of the Korean nation, its analysis of the war and peace record in the nuclear age, Pyongyang’s current threat perceptions, and Kim Jong Un’s domestic political and economic considerations. The process of competitive legitimation and multifaceted confrontation with the South, as well as Pyongyang’s interest in cooperating with and aiding to any country opposed to the United States add an offensive dimension, including a predisposition to proliferate, to the North’s nuclear posture.

The North Korean official media argues that the DPRK was compelled to acquire nuclear arms for self-defense for three reasons: in response to the persistent U.S. nuclear threat; out of fear to fall victim to the outside forces and lose sovereignty and independence again, just like it happened in 1905 when Korea became a colony of Japan; and in order to defend the socialist ideology and system against imperialist encroachments.

- According to the foreign ministry spokesman statement on 4 October 2014, “the DPRK was compelled to make a bold decision to have access to nuclear weapons due to the U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK, nuclear threat and strategy for stifling it for more than half a century.” [\[9\]](#) On 15 April 2012, Kim Jong Un publically declared that “military technological supremacy is not a monopoly of imperialists anymore, and the time has gone forever when the enemies threatened and intimidated us with atomic bombs.”[\[10\]](#) Today, the North Korean officials often reiterate that “

the U.S. and its allies will not be able to threaten the DPRK with nuclear weapons again.”[11]

- Invoking the tragic loss of Korean independence in 1905 due to outside pressure, the North Korean officials express their firm belief that “nuclear weapons will guarantee the DPRK’s sovereignty and independence.”[12] According to the DPRK Law “On Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense,” “Having an independent and just nuclear force, the DPRK put an end to the distress-torn history in which it was subject to outside forces’ aggression and interference and could emerge a socialist power of Juche which no one dares to provoke.”
- The North Korean government officials believe that “Nuclear weapons will help the DPRK defend its socialist system by preventing the U.S.-led international community from interfering into the DPRK’s internal affairs under the pretext of the ‘human rights’.”[13] The WPK CC Plenary Meeting held on 31 March 2013, stated that “Only when the nuclear shield for self-defence is held fast, will it be possible to shatter the U.S. imperialists’ ambition for annexing the Korean Peninsula by force and making the Korean people modern slaves, firmly defend our ideology, social system and all other socialist treasures won at the cost of blood and safeguard the nation's right to existence and its time-honored history and brilliant culture.”[14]

The North Korean military theoreticians also articulated three reasons explaining why nuclear weapons could help deter war. They observed that “No nuclear weapon state has ever suffered a foreign invasion since the introduction of nuclear weapons 70 years ago, despite many small and large wars fought during this time.”[15] They also believe that “nuclear weapons will help DPRK avoid the fate of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria.”[16] And, lastly, they insist that since their country loves peace, it must prepare for war, even a nuclear war in defense of world peace.[17]

Internal political and economic considerations obviously play an important role in providing the domestic rationale for continued development of nuclear weapons. As Kim Jong Un said on a number of occasions, it was the dying wish and eternal legacy of both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il,[18][19] and he would never give it up because it would be tantamount to national treason, the repudiation of his forebearers and their revolutionary inheritance. In addition, Kim asserted that the development of nuclear weapons should help DPRK avoid the costly arms race, reduce military spending and foster economic development.[20]

Intriguing are occasional references to the possible offensive purposes for the nuclear weapons program aimed at effecting the strategic outcomes favoring the North in its relations with the South and the United States. In particular, nuclear weapons should help the North compel the South to accept reunification on the terms agreeable to Pyongyang. Kim Jong Un likes to say that “Nuclear weapons are the sword that advances the cause of Korean reunification.”[21] The North Korean leaders also envision an important role for nuclear weapons in a reunified Korea. In his address to the WPK CC Plenary Meeting held on 31 March 2013, Kim Jong Un said that “The nuclear weapons are a treasure of a reunified country which can never be traded with billions of dollars.”[22] Concerning the United States, Pyongyang sometimes talks about its intention to “advance the anti-U.S. cooperation in the nuclear field,” which raises the question whether this threat means the proliferation of nuclear technology and materials to “all the countries and peace-loving people who are interested in dismembering the U.S. imperialists in all parts of the world,” since its propagandists insist that “The nuclear forces of the DPRK will demonstrate unimaginably tremendous might in effecting worldwide anti-U.S. cooperation.”[23]

The dual (defensive and offensive) purposes of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons are underscored by the Committee for Peaceful Reunification of Fatherland, whose spokesman told KCNA on 11 December 2014: “The nukes ... are nothing but a shield of justice and a powerful treasured sword for defending

the security of the nation from the U.S. and south Korean puppet forces' reckless moves to ignite a nuclear war against the DPRK and for protecting peace on the Korean Peninsula and in other parts of the region."

## Institutionalizing the Nuclear Status

In the past three years, the Kim regime undertook several important steps to institutionalize and elevate the DPRK's nuclear status by revising the country's constitution, passing new laws, and establishing new government organizations with the mandate to advance the nuclear weapons program.

- The Fifth Session of the 12<sup>th</sup> SPA held on April 13, 2012, revised the country's constitution by adding a reference to the DPRK as a "nuclear state" ( ) in the preamble.<sup>[24]</sup> Part of the revised preamble now says "In the face of the collapse of the world socialist system and the vicious offensive of the imperialist allied forces to stifle the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Comrade Kim Jong Il administered Songun politics; thus he safeguarded with honor the achievements of socialism which are the precious legacy of Comrade Kim Il Sung, developed the DPRK into an invincible politico-ideological power, *a nuclear state* and an unchallengeable military power, and opened a broad avenue for the building of a thriving nation."
- The Seventh Session of the 12<sup>th</sup> SPA held on April 1, 2013, codified the development of nuclear weapons in the DPRK law by adopting the "DPRK Law on Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense,"<sup>[25]</sup> the "DPRK Law on Developing Space," and the SPA Decision "On Setting Up the DPRK State Space Development Bureau."
- On April 11, 2013, the DPRK General Bureau for Atomic Energy was upgraded into the full-fledged Ministry of Nuclear Power Industry, in accordance with the SPA Presidium Degree No. 3111 dated on April 11, 2013.

## Rejuvenating and Refocusing the Nuclear Team

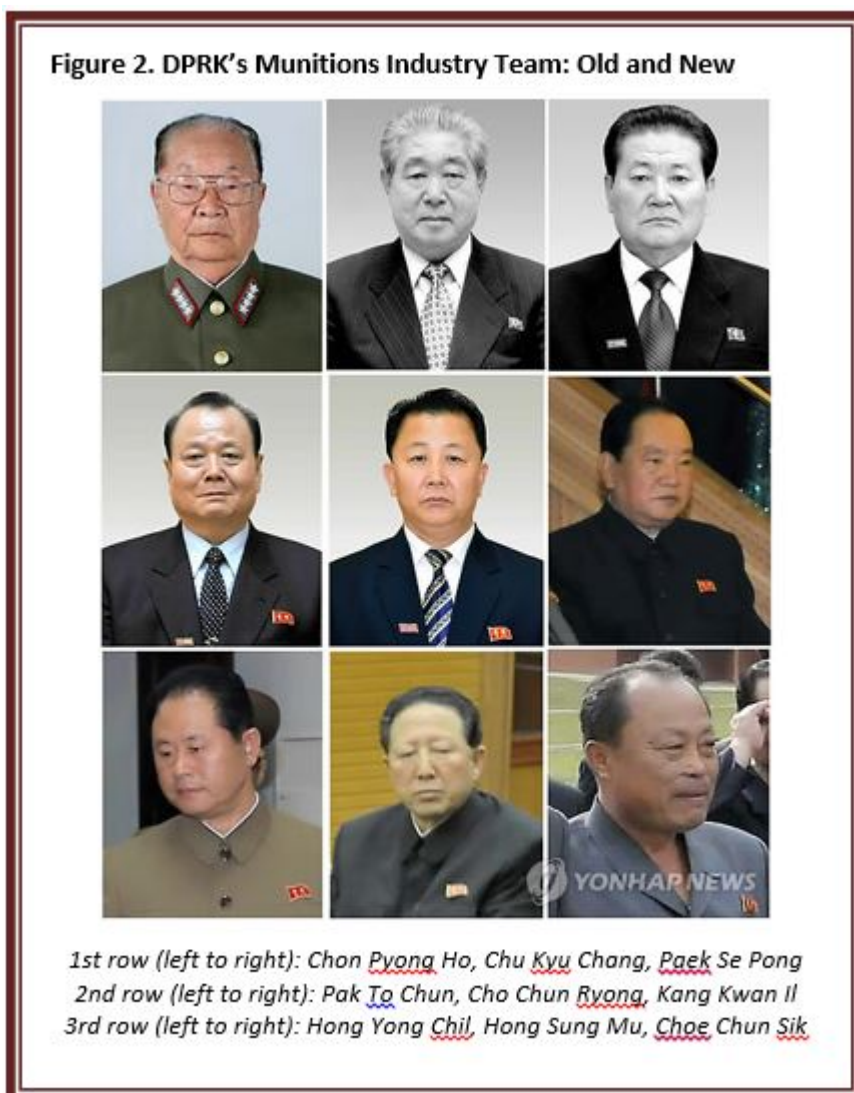
Under Kim Jong Un's rule, North Korea's military industrial establishment underwent some significant changes in terms of who supervises and runs its nuclear weapons and missile development complex and what they actually research, develop, and manufacture. Its leadership became much younger.<sup>[26]</sup> They are now more focused on the production of advanced strategic arms rather than traditional conventional weapons.

The long-time chief supervisor of the North's military industrial complex Chon Pyong Ho, 88, the then party secretary for munitions industry (1986/12 - 2010/09), passed away on July 7, 2014. His long-serving deputies - Paek Se-bong, 76, who served as Chairman of DPRK Second Economic Committee from 2003 for a decade, and Chu Kyu Chang, 81, who served as the first deputy director of WPK CC Machine Industry Department from April 2001 to September 2010 and then as its director - finally retired in 2013 and 2014, respectively.

They were replaced by a new generation of the military industry administrators with technical expertise, who came from the industrial engineering and research and development backgrounds. Jo Chun Ryong, a former director of a munitions factory in his 50s, was appointed as Chairman of DPRK Second Economic Committee in early 2014 and elected as NDC Member at the First Session of the 13<sup>th</sup> SPA held on April 9, 2014. Choe Chun Sik, the rumored head of North Korean space program and organizer of military research and development, was appointed as President of DPRK

Second Academy of Natural Sciences in 2012 and given the military rank of Lt.-General in 2013. Former chief engineer of Yongbyon’s 5 MWt experimental nuclear reactor Hong Sung Mu, former party secretary of Songjin Steel Complex Kang Kwan Il, and former party secretary of Unsan Tools Plant Hong Yong Chil were appointed as vice-directors of WPK CC Machine Industry Department responsible respectively for the nuclear weapons complex, missile development, and conventional armaments.

Following the restructuring of the General Bureau for Atomic Energy into the Ministry of Nuclear Power Industry as part of the March 2013 WPK CC decision to expand the nuclear industry,<sup>[27]</sup> its head Ri Je Son was appointed as the inaugural Minister of Atomic Industry. Ri’s appointment did not surprise anyone since he has been the chief administrator of the DPRK’s nuclear complex for almost two decades. NDC Member Pak To Chun, 70, still stays on the job as party secretary for munitions industry, providing party policy guidance and political oversight to the new team.



In accordance with Kim Jong Un’s strategic priorities, North Korea’s munitions industry appears to be shifting its focus from expanding and modernizing conventional military capabilities, developing short and medium-range ballistic missiles, and selling arms to foreign buyers to the development and production of nuclear weapons, long-range missile delivery systems, cyber weapons, and various asymmetrical warfare capabilities. This change in production requirements was amplified when, in March 2013, the North Korean government adopted the “*Pyongjin line*” of parallel economic construction and nuclear armament as the foundation for the country’s long-term national security strategy. Some Western observers believe that this new emphasis on priority build-up of strategic

arms was facilitated by the reorganization of the WPK CC Munitions Department into Machine Industry Department, which was probably intended to reinforce the party guidance and supervision over all WMD and space-related activities, previously spread across a number of quasi-independent agencies.[\[28\]](#)

## Main Directions in Nuclear Weapons Development

According to the Rodong Sinmun's expert article titled "Making Nuclear Weapons Smaller, Lighter, More Diversified, and More Precise," published on 21 May 2013, the main directions of the nuclear weapons development in the North include: minituarization of nuclear devices ( ), making them lighter ( ), diversification of the types of nuclear weapons ( ), and making nuclear weapons more precise ( ). In his address to the WPK CC Plenary Meeting held on 31 March 2013, Kim Jong Un set forth the requirement to "build more precise and minituarized nuclear weapons, to produce many more types of nuclear weapons delivery vehicles, to constantly develop nuclear weapons technology, and to develop more powerful and sophisticated nuclear weapons."[\[29\]](#)

According to Rodong Sinmun, the main imperatives facing the nuclear weapons developers in the North are to increase the credibility of North Korea's nuclear force and to expand the leadership's options for more flexible response. In addition, they are faced with two auxiliary objectives: to overcome economic and technical constraints and to save money for other national projects.

### A. Minituarization ( )

The North Korean nuclear experts define minituarization as "manufacturing a nuclear weapon with the explosive power under 15 kiloton."[\[30\]](#)

- The North Korean scientists measure nuclear bombs that range from 1,000 tons to 1 million tons in TNT equivalent in kilotons and those above 1 million tons in megatons.[\[31\]](#)
- They classify nuclear bombs under 1kt as super minituarized, from 1 to 15 kiloton as minituarized, from 15 to 100 kt as mid-size nuclear bombs, those from 100 kt to 1 Mt as large-size nuclear bombs, and those above 1 Mt as super-large size nuclear bombs.[\[32\]](#)

They claim that the minituarization of nuclear weapons has two aims:

- To allow the pursuit of a broader variety of political and military objectives in the nuclear weapons use; and
- To raise the economic effectiveness of the nuclear weapons production.[\[33\]](#)

On the one hand, they assert that the greater the explosive power of nuclear weapons, the harder it is to use them: so, it does not necessarily equate with the good thing.[\[34\]](#) For instance, they assert that in the multidimensional modern warfare where the well-defined and hardened lines between the front and rear, and friendly and enemy forces are virtually absent, for all practical purposes, it is difficult to use the nuclear weapons with great explosive power.[\[35\]](#)

On the other hand, they believe that the minituarization of nuclear weapons may allow to overcome serious economic constraints. For instance, if a country manufactures an atomic bomb with only 5 kilograms of uranium or plutonium instead of 50 kg, then the cost of per-unit production is equal to one-tenth, and they can produce ten bombs instead of one.[\[36\]](#)



## B. Making Nuclear Weapons More Light-Weight ( )

Making nuclear weapons lighter refers to the reduction in the overall weight of the nuclear bomb by improving the bomb design and reducing the weight of the outer shell of the atomic bomb ( ).[\[37\]](#)

- They claim that the weight of the outer shell of the atomic bomb is considerably heavy, which makes its handling and practical use very difficult (adverse).[\[38\]](#)
- Hence, the North Korean scientists experiment with various metallurgical technologies to reduce the weight of the outer shell and make the nuclear weapons lighter.[\[39\]](#)

## C. Diversification of Types of Nuclear Weapons ( )

The North Korean nuclear experts define diversification of nuclear weapons as the “manufacturing of various types of nuclear weapons with the aim of successful attainment of a wide range of military objectives.”[\[40\]](#) The North Koreans believe that the more diversified nuclear weapons are the more political and military objectives policymakers can successfully pursue.

The North Korean military planners use several taxonomies to classify nuclear weapons. They are based on the type of the nuclear chain reaction, their destructive power and firing range, where the atomic explosion takes place, as well as the form and intended use of the nuclear device.

First, they classify all nuclear weapons into atomic bombs ( ),[\[41\]](#) hydrogen bombs ( ),[\[42\]](#) and neutron bombs ( ),[\[43\]](#) depending on the type of the nuclear core reaction.[\[44\]](#)

Second, they classify nuclear weapons into strategic weapons ( ), tactical nuclear weapons ( ), and battlefield nuclear weapons ( ), depending on their destructive power and firing range.[\[45\]](#)

- **Strategic nuclear weapons** are made of a nuclear bomb and a delivery system designed to strike the opponent’s large cities, industrial centers, and such strategic targets as central command and nuclear weapons groupings.[\[46\]](#) They are fired by ICBMs ( ), strategic bombers ( ), and nuclear submarines carrying ballistic missiles ( )[\[47\]](#)
- **Tactical nuclear weapons** are made of a nuclear bomb and a delivery system designed for striking the enemy forces and fire power, tanks, battleships, and command posts located at the front or in the operational-tactical concentration areas.[\[48\]](#) Their delivery vehicles include tactical missiles, nuclear artillery shells, fighter bombers, and homing torpedoes.[\[49\]](#)
- **Battlefield nuclear weapons** refer to the nuclear weapons fired with the medium-range delivery systems to strike any target on the tactical battlefield.[\[50\]](#)

Third, depending on where the atomic explosion takes place, the nuclear weapons are classified into the air, land, underground, above water, and underwater nuclear weapons.[\[51\]](#)

- On October 25, 2014, the National Defense Commission issued a statement pronouncing that “The DPRK never hides the fact that the declaration of the most powerful new counter-action of its own style is based on a powerful nuclear force built in every way and various ultramodern striking means deployed in the ground, sea, underwater and air.”[\[52\]](#)
- The KCNA commentary repeated the threat on 14 November 2014 that “the DPRK's declaration of

the strongest new counter-action of its own style will be backed by the fully prepared powerful nuclear force and different type latest strike means operating on the ground and in the seas, under water and in the air.”[53]

Fourth, depending on the form and intended use of the nuclear device, the nuclear weapons are classified into nuclear warhead, nuclear bomb, nuclear artillery shell, nuclear homing torpedo, nuclear mines.[54]

#### **D. Making Nuclear Weapons More Precise ( )**

The requirement of making nuclear weapons more precise has two aims: it refers to the need to calibrate and conduct nuclear explosions with greater precision, and it refers to the task of improving the navigation and guidance so that the nuclear weapon can hit the intended target with maximum precision.[55]

- On the one hand, the North Korean nuclear experts recognize the need to increase the utility rate of the nuclear explosion from the current 10 percent, in order to reduce the waste and save fissile material. They assess their current level of precision to that of the U.S. nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima.[56]
- On the other hand, it is an important requirement to improve the navigation and guidance systems to ensure a greater precision of nuclear strikes and guarantee precise hits against the intended targets. The North Koreans understand that regardless of how powerful the nuclear weapon may be, it will be of no use if it misses its target.[57]

All in all, the North Korean nuclear weapons establishment strives hard to advance the miniaturization, light-weightization, diversification, and precisization of nuclear weapons.[58]

### **Wartime Employment of Nuclear Weapons**

The escalation of nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula in March-April 2013 lifted the veil a little bit over the North Korean thinking about some critical issues concerning the wartime employment of nuclear weapons, including the purposes of nuclear weapons use in wartime, the nuclear weapons chain of command, the possible targets for North Korean nuclear strikes, as well as the self-imposed constraints the North Korean policymakers may face during wartime.

The North Korean military thinkers identified two purposes of the nuclear weapons use in wartime: to repel invasion or attack from a hostile nuclear weapons state, i.e. the United States, on its own territory and to make retaliatory strikes against the enemy’s soil. It appears that Kim Jong Un preserves the right to the first nuclear strike, but it is unclear under what circumstances, according to his remarks at the WPK CC Plenary Meeting held on 29 March 2013.[59]

- One of the circumstances Kim Jong Un alluded to in his March speech was the notion of “imminent threat.” He allegedly said “the United States was testing my self-control and getting on my nerves (in March 2013), but there was no limit to the psychological pressure I could withstand” because “the U.S. threat was not imminent.”

During the nuclear crisis in spring 2013, the DPRK official media alluded to the fact that the North Korean government has already developed a set of standard operating procedures for the authorization of the employment of nuclear weapons in wartime. According to Rodong Sinmun, “the nuclear weapons of the DPRK can be used only by a final order of the Supreme Commander of the

Korean People's Army." The key military officials to be involved in the final decision-making process appear to be Chief of KPA General Staff Department, Director of the KPA General Staff Operations Bureau, Director of General Reconnaissance Bureau, and Commander of Strategic Rocket Forces.



*Figure 3. Kim Jong Un examines the “operational plan of the KPA Strategic Rocket Force for firepower strike” against the United States at an urgent operation meeting held on 29 March 2013 and attended by Hyon Yong Chol (2R), chief of the KPA General Staff, Ri Yong Gil (2L), director of the General Staff Operations Bureau, Kim Yong Chol (1R), director of the General Reconnaissance Bureau, and Kim Rak Gyom (1L), commander of the Strategic Rocket Force.*

Numerous official statements by various representatives of the DPRK government allow us to compose a tentative list of publicly declared targets for the DPRK nuclear strikes. These include:

1. U.S. military bases in South Korea ( )
2. U.S. military bases in the Asia-Pacific operational theater ( )
3. U.S. military bases in Guam ( )
4. U.S. military bases in Hawaii ( )
5. U.S. military bases in the U.S. mainland ( ) (as indicated in the notorious map of the alleged KPA targets on the U.S. mainland)

On October 25, 2014, the National Defense Commission issued a statement declaring that “The revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK had already declared before the world that an operational plan for striking all the bases of the U.S. imperialist aggressor forces in the Pacific targeting the

DPRK and the main cities of the U.S. mainland where war maniacs are stationed was ratified.” [60]

Several characteristics of the above target list are worth mentioning. First, all potential targets are of the U.S. origin, which lends credence to the DPRK public assertion that its nuclear weapons target only the nuclear weapons states threatening the DPRK. Second, the above list does not include any South Korean targets, except U.S. military bases in the South, thereby sending an unambiguous message to Seoul that the North does not plan to employ nuclear weapons against its compatriots in the South, whether they are military or civilian. Third, although some of the targets are clearly located in Japan, the North Koreans never mention Japan by name, making only veiled references to their neighbor, probably because of their sensitivity about Japan’s tragic past experience with the nuclear war.

Furthermore, this tentative target list lends credence to the argument that North Korea may have opted to pursue a counterforce strategy that targets the key military bases of its main adversary in Korea, in the Asia-Pacific, and on its home land (when Pyongyang acquires a credible ICBM capability). This assessment puts in question the earlier conclusion drawn by Terence Roehrig that Pyongyang will likely opt for a countervalue strategy that targets South Korean, Japanese, and U.S. cities and their populations.[61] If we take at face value the declared target list, then we can speculate that, despite the objective economic difficulties, in the long run, the North Korean regime may be contemplating to build the nuclear force much larger than some Western analysts assume. The Kim regime wants to build the nuclear force capable of delivering the first strike in order to disarm an adversary through a counterforce strategy. Generally speaking, this nuclear posture embodies the traditional “*Spirit of the Offensive*” prevailing in the North Korean military doctrine under Kim Jong Un.

North Korea’s decision to field mobile land-based missile launch platforms, construction of a major ICBM launch facility near the border with China, and its interest in the development and deployment of an operational submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) force suggest that Pyongyang wants to increase the survivability of its nuclear forces and acquire the second strike capability that will ensure that at least some of its nuclear units will survive the preemptive attack in order to retaliate. In the future, this may impact the nuclear command and control system and complicate the nuclear weapons use authorization procedures because the KPA Supreme Commander will have to entrust the captain of a submarine or a commander of a road-mobile missile unit with the authority to launch an operational nuclear-armed missile at the time of crisis when they will most likely be cut off from the national leadership.

That said, North Korea does not have an operational second strike capability today. Hence, Kim Jong Un insists that “the KPA must blow up and reduce everything to ashes at a single nuclear strike.”[62] It is not bravado or hubris. It is a reflection of his recognition of the harsh reality that his nuclear force will have no second chance: the KPA will either use all its nukes at once or lose them all on the spot in any confrontation with the United States.

In theory, the North Korean military doctrine identifies an important constraint on the wartime nuclear weapons use: it says “the DPRK shall neither use nukes against the non-nuclear states nor threaten them with those weapons.” But, it makes an exception for those states that “join a hostile nuclear weapons state in its invasion and attack on the DPRK,” which is a veiled reference to the U.S. allies - ROK and Japan.

It is noteworthy that the North Korean military doctrine based on the concepts of preemption and total all-out war implies that the Korean People’s Army not only will use nuclear weapons in a retaliatory strike, but it is also ready to take the lead and use the nuclear weapons first to counter the imminent threat of U.S.- ROK conventional invasion. If the North Korean leadership decides that



the enemies' conventional attack is imminent, it is unlikely to split hairs and deliberate long whether it is a limited action aimed at punishing for some earlier provocation or a precursor to regime change. Pyongyang will likely assume the worst and rush to use the nuclear weapons out of fear of losing them to the allied preemption in the early hours of hostilities. The North Korean government is on the record of threatening to preempt the allied preemption if a military crisis erupts on the Korean peninsula.

## **Peacetime Management of Nuclear Weapons Arsenal**

As part of its strategic communications campaign aimed at securing the international recognition for its nuclear weapons status, the DPRK government seeks to project an image of the responsible nuclear power that understands its obligation to ensure the physical safety and security of its nuclear weapons arsenal. The DPRK Law "On Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense" stipulates that "the DPRK shall strictly observe the rules on safekeeping and management of nukes and ensuring the stability of nuclear tests." It also stipulates that "The DPRK shall establish a mechanism and order for their safekeeping and management so that nukes, their technology, and weapon-grade nuclear substance may not leak out illegally." Lastly, to assuage international fears, the DPRK government stated publicly that it would cooperate in the international efforts for nuclear non-proliferation and safe management of nuclear substance on the principle of mutual respect and equality. The caveat is that such cooperation will "depend on the improvement of relations with hostile nuclear weapons states." This means that if the DPRK-U.S. relations improve, Pyongyang leaves the door open for discussions about its possible participation in the international efforts to curb the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

## **Preconditions for Denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula**

The DPRK government has stated recently that it is willing to return to the nuclear negotiation table without any preconditions. However, careful study of its emerging nuclear doctrine leaves no doubt that North Korea will not relinquish its nuclear weapons even for a meaningful package of credible incentives. Kim Jong Un stated that "our nuclear arsenal is not a bargaining chip and cannot be negotiated away, regardless of the price."

- The WPK CC Plenary Meeting held on 31 March 2013, reiterated that "The nuclear weapons of Songun Korea are not goods for getting the U.S. dollars and they are neither a political bargaining chip nor a thing for economic dealings to be presented to the place of dialogue or be put on the table of negotiations aimed at forcing the DPRK to disarm itself."[\[63\]](#)

According to the DPRK's authoritative pronouncements, in the future, Pyongyang may contemplate peaceful denuclearization on the Korean peninsula only when two preconditions are met:

- The "U.S. hostile policy" is terminated, as evidenced by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, lifting of all sanctions and embargoes, and normalization of bilateral relations.
  - According to the MOFA spokesman statement on 4 October 2014, "The nuclear deterrence of Songun Korea can never be given up and bartered for anything unless the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat are fundamentally terminated."[\[64\]](#)
  - According to the MOFA spokesman statement on 4 October 2014, in the past, the DPRK agreed to work for the denuclearization of the peninsula because the U.S. expressed its will to respect the DPRK's sovereignty, stop the nuclear threat against it and coexist in peace. [\[65\]](#) But now, the discussion of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula will be meaningless as the U.S. is set to bring down the DPRK's state system at any cost.

- 
- “Global nuclear disarmament is achieved,” as evidenced by “the abolition of nuclear weapons worldwide.”[66]

Since neither of the two preconditions are likely to be met, the international community should be ready either to compel the North’s nuclear disarmament or to live with a nuclear North Korea in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, it is important to continue to probe Kim Jong Un’s nuclear intentions, to prod Pyongyang to be more transparent with respect to its nuclear doctrine and plans, and to try to negotiate some caps on North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities, while devising a mutually acceptable formula for the DPRK’s return to the Non-proliferation Treaty and international nuclear safeguards and inspections, encouraging the DPRK government to reaffirm its “no first use” commitment, and deterring Pyongyang from nuclear provocations in crisis situations.

## References and Notes

- [1] North Korea conducted nuclear tests on 9 October 2006, 25 May 2009, and 12 February 2013.
- [2] Because the North Korean government mounted a deception campaign and undertook precautionary measures to properly contain the third nuclear test, the Western allies have had difficulty in learning about the device detonated. At the time, the West failed to detect any change in the levels of radiation or nuclear substances. Therefore, the nature of the nuclear device tested - a plutonium or HEU-based - and how much fissile material was consumed remain unclear.
- [3] The issue of North Korea’s ability to miniaturize and deploy a more sophisticated, miniaturized warhead on a missile remains subject to controversy because outside observers are unable to know the true situation and can assess only the estimated state of North Korea’s progress since their information-gathering capabilities are limited and Pyongyang publicly exaggerates its capabilities to boost its perceived nuclear deterrent.
- [4] Kim Jong Un said: 《  
.》
- [5] “Spokesman for DPRK FM Slams U.S. Frantic Anti-DPRK Campaign,” KCNA, 4 October 2014
- [6] , , , , , Rodong Sinmun, p. 3, May 21, 2013  
[http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterKo/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2013-05-21-0011&chAction=T](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterKo/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-05-21-0011&chAction=T)
- [7] “Spokesman for DPRK FM Slams U.S. Frantic Anti-DPRK Campaign,” KCNA, 4 October 2014
- [8] Kim Jong Un said: “  
(pivotal) (working/ordinary/current) 가  
.”
- [9] “Spokesman for DPRK FM Slams U.S. Frantic Anti-DPRK Campaign,” KCNA, 4 October 2014

[10] Kim Jong Un Speaks at Military Parade, Rodong Sinmun, 16 April 2012, [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterKo/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2012-04-16-0001&chAction=L](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterKo/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2012-04-16-0001&chAction=L)

[11] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

가  
《 60 120 가  
《 》  
가  
가  
.”

[12] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 2 1905

가  
.”

[13] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 《 》 , ... ”

[14] Rodong Sinmun, April 1, 2014, [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005)

[15] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가 70 ”

[16] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가 , ”

[17] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가 ”

[18] According to Rodong Sinmun, Kim Jong Un said: “ ”

[19] According to Rodong Sinmun, Kim Jong Un said: “ 가 ”

[20] According to Rodong Sinmun, Kim Jong Un said: “ ”

[21] According to Rodong Sinmun, Kim Jong Un said: “ 가 가 ”

[22] Rodong Sinmun, April 1, 2014,

[http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005)

[23] "DPRK Will Mercilessly Shatter US and Its Followers' "Human Rights" Campaign," KCNA, 25 October 2014

[24] "N. Korea calls itself 'nuclear-armed state' in revised constitution," Seoul Yonhap in English 1153 GMT 30 May 2012

[25] For details, see “ ”

[26] <北, 가 >, Yonhap, July 9, 2014, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/politics/2014/07/09/0511000000AKR20140709088000014.HTML>

[27]

[28] The Passing of the Nuclear Torch: The Next Generation of WMD Scientists, by Michael Madden, 38 North, September 22, 2014, <http://38north.org/2014/09/mmadden091914/>

[29] On March 31, 2013, Kim Jong Un said: “ , ”

[30] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 1 5 kt ”

[31] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가 1 0 0 0 t 1 0 0 t kt ( ) 1 0 0 t Mt( 가 ) ”

[32] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 1 kt , 1 kt 1 5 kt , 1 5 kt 1 0 0 kt , 1 0 0 kt 1 Mt , 1 Mt ”

[33] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ , ”

[34] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ ”

[35] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ , ”

[36] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 5 kg 가 5 0 kg 가 1 / 1 0 ”

[37] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가 (chain reaction of nuclear fission) 가 (vibration) ” ( ) ”

[38] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ ”

[39] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ ”



.”

[40] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가

.”

[41] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ - 2 3 5 - 2 3 9

.”

[42] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

°C

.”

[43] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

( ) 가 ( ) 가

.”

[44] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[45] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[46] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[47] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ ( 가 6 4 0 0 km

),

.”

[48] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[49] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[50] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[51] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가

.”

[52] “DPRK Will Mercilessly Shatter US and Its Followers’ “Human Rights” Campaign,” KCNA, 25 October 2014

[53] “KCNA Commentary Slams US for Floating Story about DPRK’s Submarines Capable of Launching Missiles,” KCNA, 14 November 2014

[54] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

.”

[55] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

가 . 가 .”

[56] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 1 0 %

가

3 0 kg

2 9 kg

1 kg

.”

[57] According to Rodong Sinmun, “ 가

가

[58] , , , 가 3

[59] According to Rodong Sinmun, “

가

[60] “DPRK Will Mercilessly Shatter US and Its Followers’ “Human Rights” Campaign,” KCNA, 25 October 2014

[61] Roehrig, Terence. “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons: Future Strategy and Doctrine” Policy Brief, Project on

Managing the Atom , Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2013.

[62] “Kim Jong Un Convenes Operation Meeting, Finally Examines and Ratifies Plan for Firepower Strike,” KCNA, 29 March 2013

[63] Report on Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee, Rodong Sinmun, April 1, 2013, [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005)

[64] “Spokesman for DPRK FM Slams U.S. Frantic Anti-DPRK Campaign,” KCNA, 4 October 2014

[65] “Spokesman for DPRK FM Slams U.S. Frantic Anti-DPRK Campaign,” KCNA, 4 October 2014

[66] “U.S Urged to Take Responsible Approach towards Nuclear Issue on Korean Peninsula,” KCNA, 27 May 2012

---

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/kim-jong-uns-nuclear-doctrine-and-strategy-what-everyone-needs-to-know/>

Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)