

## The Coming Crisis with North Korea

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*Published: July 16, 2026*

Is North Korea winning? Along with the country's expanding nuclear arsenal and delivery systems, North Korea continues to develop and demonstrate expertise in cyber and space warfare that soon may threaten U.S. vital interests and complicate the broader competition between great powers. North Korea's deepening ties with Russia, including valuable lessons gained from its participation in Russia's war against Ukraine, will further embolden an already aggressive regime. While each of these developments has been analyzed individually, their cumulative strategic implications have received far less attention. A comprehensive assessment is overdue. The world needs to understand how North Korea's advancing nuclear, missile, conventional, cyber, and space capabilities, along with its growing strategic partnership with Russia, will influence the regional and global security environment in the coming decades.

North Korea has proven to be adept at using its cyber capabilities to evade or mitigate the effects of economic sanctions. The [theft of cryptocurrency](#) and other assets from financial institutions has evolved into a complex and sustained effort. Pyongyang's strategy now includes penetrating Western firms that unknowingly hire [North Korean IT workers](#). North Korea has been able to generate billions of dollars from these activities, [both through](#) earned income and the theft of intellectual property, and the funds are then used to finance the regime's missile and nuclear programs: a lose-lose proposition for the U.S. and its allies.

At present, Western governments are struggling to respond to these challenges even as [China and Russia](#) continue to provide North Korea with cyber-related training and support. Coordinated cyber operations between these three powers will be a logical outgrowth. Accurate and timely attribution of cyberattacks is already challenging. In a crisis or conflict, North Korea could serve as a proxy for China and Russia to leverage against the U.S.

North Korea has recently shown an interest in developing military capabilities in space. This includes surveillance and so-called "[counterspace capabilities](#)" to inhibit an adversary's assured access to space. Russia is increasingly providing North Korea with space-related [expertise](#), including launch infrastructure and launch assistance. With ongoing Russian support, North Korea could achieve significant technological breakthroughs that typically take other countries decades. It remains uncertain what restrictions Moscow is willing to impose on technology transferred to Pyongyang. Considering North Korea's willingness and [history of proliferation](#), the U.S. might face new threats from other states seeking counterspace capabilities.

The U.S. is dependent on assured access to space for the functioning of its economy and to conduct military operations. Thanks to its missile program, North Korea could seek to develop a capability to knock out U.S. satellites. Additionally, North Korea has shown interest in using nuclear weapons at high altitudes [to generate an electromagnetic pulse](#) (EMP) to negate U.S. technological dominance. Because North Korea does not rely on space as the U.S. does, these developments would give the regime significant leverage in a future confrontation. As in the

cyber domain, China and Russia may leverage North Korea as a deniable proxy actor in space to threaten or attack U.S. interests.

As the U.S. watches from the sidelines, North Korea continues to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as well. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has [stated](#) that the regime has recently added infrastructure at its Yongbyon complex, which will allow it to increase the yearly production of nuclear warheads. North Korea is developing and testing a wide range of missiles, including [hypersonics](#), some of which can hold the U.S. homeland at risk. North Korea is [expected](#) to have 50 intercontinental ballistic missiles by 2035. Worse yet, as North Korea's nuclear-tipped ballistic missile arsenal grows, the existing U.S. missile defense architecture is at risk of being overwhelmed and becoming obsolete. [Golden Dome for America](#) could strengthen homeland defense against North Korea by improving missile detection, tracking, and interception. As Pyongyang expands its missile arsenal, a layered and expanding missile defense architecture could diminish North Korea's nuclear strike credibility and boost U.S. resilience.

While significant emphasis is placed on analyzing North Korea's nuclear weapons program, it is important to highlight that the regime is believed to possess a significant [biological and chemical weapons](#) capability. Biological and chemical weapons provide an adversary with deniability. Continued investment in production and research [infrastructure](#) indicates the regime values these asymmetric capabilities despite international tones and laws. In February 2017, Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un, was [assassinated](#) in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport after being exposed to the VX nerve agent. North Korea's ability to produce biological and chemical weapons at an industrial scale, along with its proliferation history and willingness to employ such weapons, presents significant challenges for the U.S.

For decades, observers have confidently declared that North Korea is on the verge of collapse. Yet, despite years of domestic, economic, and geopolitical sanctions, the regime has not only survived but also thrived in measurable ways. Throughout its history, North Korea has shown a tendency for brinkmanship, coercion, and deception to achieve its goals. Furthermore, Kim Jong Un has integrated the proliferation of military technology, cyber-enabled theft, and sanctions evasion into his broader strategy for sustaining the regime and advancing its military modernization programs. Supported by China and Russia, North Korea has moved from being an isolated rogue state to a dangerous regional power with proxy potential. If Pyongyang effectively combines its growing cyber, space, and WMD capabilities into a coordinated denial and coercion strategy, the U.S. may have limited options during a crisis or conflict. Given the high stakes, Washington must holistically reevaluate its goals, objectives, and means toward Pyongyang before it is too late. The U.S. must ensure that North Korea cannot succeed in coercing the world, threatening the U.S. homeland, or fundamentally altering the strategic balance in Northeast Asia.

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