

North Korea Has Options

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Published: October 12, 2026

In 2017, two people unknowingly working as proxies for North Korean intelligence approached [Kim Jong Nam](#) at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. In what they thought was a practical joke for a television program, the women took turns wiping Kim's face with a cloth, which was later determined to be laced with a deadly chemical weapon, VX nerve agent. Kim's nervous system began to shut down, and within minutes he was dead. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un, had successfully deployed a dangerous chemical weapon on foreign soil and assassinated his half-brother, deemed by the regime as a political threat. The assassination of Kim Jong Nam confirmed that Pyongyang had weaponized the covert delivery of chemical agents and had no hesitation in using them.

While significant focus is placed on Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, and rightly so, there is inadequate attention to the threat from the regime's chemical and biological weapons programs. North Korea reportedly possesses a variety of [chemical and biological agents](#). Despite decades of sanctions, the regime has proven adept at building and leveraging dual use [industrial infrastructure](#) to produce chemical and biological weapons. This infrastructure allows North Korea to maintain deniability while producing at scale. North Korea can deliver chemical and biological weapons in a variety of ways. Biological weapons can be introduced covertly into vulnerable supply chains. The regime has made plans to send [special forces](#) infected with biological agents into enemy territory. Moreover, conventional weapon systems, such as artillery and rockets, could deliver chemical and biological agents over large areas.

North Korea has multiple pathways to accelerate its biological and chemical weapons programs. Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats ([CRISPR](#)) is one such pathway. CRISPR is a gene-editing technology that modifies DNA sequences to achieve various objectives. For example, an existing biological weapon could be modified to target specific animal, food, or human populations. Another [pathway](#) includes leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to augment gaps in scientific research. AI could both expand the threat from CRISPR or help North Korea develop entirely new weapons. North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia is a third pathway. Russia has decades of [experience](#) developing and testing biological weapons going back to the Cold War, and has demonstrated its willingness to use chemical weapons for [assassination](#) and [allegedly](#) on the battlefield in Ukraine. A lack of consequences has undoubtedly given Moscow and Pyongyang the confidence to further develop these capabilities. Moreover, it is concerning that Russia appears to have few constraints on what knowledge and technology it [transfers](#) to North Korea. If Moscow decides to share its vast knowledge of chemical and biological weapons with Pyongyang, there is little Washington can do.

Beyond ethical considerations, Western military and political observers have long questioned the utility of these weapons on the battlefield. Chemical and biological weapons are sensitive to moisture, temperature, and other environmental factors. Does any of this matter to decisionmakers in Pyongyang? Consider that North Korea would not succeed in causing mass

casualties. It is plausible that the regime would be satisfied with causing mass disruption to military logistics, terrifying civilian populations, and complicating allied calculations and possible responses. In this scenario, Washington's limited theater nuclear options may not credibly deter Pyongyang.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether a President would escalate to nuclear weapons, thereby risking North Korean retaliation against the homeland or elsewhere in the Pacific. This emboldens the regime, giving it confidence to engage in lesser forms of aggression with minimal risk. Kim's confidence is likely to increase as his military capabilities modernize, his nuclear program becomes more sophisticated, and his relationship with Russia expands. Policy analysts and decisionmakers should avoid mirror-imaging and evaluate these issues from Pyongyang's perspective.

North Korea has options. These options provide the regime with coercive leverage and mechanisms to escalate during a crisis or conflict. The evolving relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang, and Moscow's potential role in a future conflict on the Korean Peninsula, is amplifying the danger. Given the rapidly evolving security situation, the United States should reevaluate its theater nuclear posture in the Pacific. However, to address the growing threat from North Korea's chemical and biological weapons, Washington must consider a range of options. These include covert action, including cyber operations, against North Korean industry; strengthening preparedness and response infrastructure at home and abroad; and developing deeper insights into the regime's strategic thinking on these issues through a comprehensive partnership between academia and government. Now is the time for Washington to think about the unthinkable.

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