



NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL

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# NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

January 2023

NIE 2023-00262-B


[REDACTED] **North  
Korea: Scenarios for Leveraging  
Nuclear Weapons Through 2030**




*(U) This IC coordinated National Intelligence Estimate was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) for North Korea. It was drafted by the National Intelligence Council.*

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## North Korea Scenarios: Definitions and Drivers

This NIE considers three scenarios for how Pyongyang could perceive the value and purpose of a growing nuclear arsenal through 2030. North Korea most likely will continue to use its nuclear weapons status to support coercive diplomacy, and almost certainly will consider increasingly risky coercive actions as the quality and quantity of its nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal grows.

		High	Medium high	Medium	Medium Low	Low
		COERCIVE	OFFENSIVE	DEFENSIVE		
	Likelihood Scenario Will Occur	High	Medium Low	Low		
	Level of Risk to the United States and Allies	Medium Low	High	Low		

 COERCIVE PURPOSE	 OFFENSIVE PURPOSE	 DEFENSIVE PURPOSE
<p>North Korean leader Kim Jong Un employs threats—including nuclear threats—and possibly limited use of military force to achieve some political objectives while maintaining escalation control and trying to minimize the risk of regime-threatening retaliation. The North’s nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent to a US–South Korea response to such actions.</p>	<p>A revisionist Kim seeks to fundamentally shift the balance of power on the Peninsula through the use of force. Nuclear weapons serve as an offensive option through use or the threat of use to dominate the South, achieve a decisive advantage in determining the future of the Korean Peninsula, or compel other desired outcomes.</p>	<p>A responsible Kim adopts a nuclear doctrine that emphasizes defense, abandons coercion as a diplomatic tool, and possibly engages in sincere confidence-building measures. Kim maintains nuclear weapons solely as a deterrent.</p>

COERCIVE DRIVERS	OFFENSIVE DRIVERS	DEFENSIVE DRIVERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confident coercion will yield political, economic, or military benefits</li> <li>• Confident diplomatic, economic blow-back is manageable</li> <li>• Confident military escalation risk is containable</li> <li>• Resigned to few external lifelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Underlying interest in revising peninsula’s status quo</li> <li>• Confident in the conventional balance of power</li> <li>• Empowered by fully demonstrated battlefield and strategic nuclear missile capability</li> <li>• “Now or never” crisis</li> <li>• Confident Beijing and Moscow will not oppose</li> <li>• Confident that the United States and its allies have been deterred</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of offensive ambitions</li> <li>• Satisfaction with nuclear deterrent</li> <li>• Confidence in regime resilience</li> <li>• Willingness to discuss arms control</li> <li>• Desire for greater integration into the international community</li> <li>• Intent for economic opportunity</li> </ul>



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## (U) Key Takeaway

During the period of this estimate, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un most likely will employ a variety of coercive methods and threats of aggression to try to make progress toward achieving his national security priorities. He may be willing to take greater conventional military risks, believing that nuclear weapons will deter an unacceptably strong US or South Korean response. The IC continues to assess that North Korea is unlikely to use nuclear weapons unless Kim believes his regime is in peril, and that he cannot achieve his strategic goals using conventional or chemical means. We judge it to be much less likely that Kim will choose an offensive pathway in which he seeks to use force, including the possible use of nuclear weapons, to split the US–South Korea alliance and establish clear political and military dominance on the Peninsula. We also judge it to be very unlikely that Kim will seek to use his nuclear arsenal solely as a deterrent and will refrain from coercive threats or aggressive behavior.

**Key Judgment 1:** We assess that through 2030, Kim Jong Un most likely will continue to pursue a strategy of coercion, potentially including non-nuclear lethal attacks, aimed at advancing the North’s goals of intimidating its neighbors, extracting concessions, and bolstering the regime’s military credentials domestically. Kim, who has relied largely on non-lethal coercive measures throughout his rule, probably will employ targeted diplomatic and covert actions and may use limited military force to raise tensions as a means to press key foreign governments into adopting positions favorable to his objectives, confident that his growing nuclear capabilities will deter any unacceptable retaliation or consequences.

**Key Judgment 2:** We assess that an offensive strategy that seeks to seize territory and achieve political dominance over the Peninsula through the use of force, including the use of nuclear weapons, will be much less likely than the strategy of coercion. An offensive strategy would become more likely if Kim believed he could overmatch South Korea’s military while deterring US intervention and maintaining China’s support, or if he concluded that a domestic or international crisis presented a last chance to accomplish revisionist goals.

**Key Judgment 3:** We assess that it also will be very unlikely that North Korea will follow a defensive strategy—characterized by forgoing both nuclear-backed coercion and more escalatory aggressive actions, such as kinetic attacks—during the period of this estimate. A defensive-focused North Korea would still continue to test, produce, and field missiles and nuclear weapons. In such a scenario, we might also see a sustained lessening of tensions on the Peninsula.

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