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North Korea, the evolution of a nuclear state

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On September 28, in an address to the Supreme People's Assembly, the North Korean leader declared a significant shift, stating that “[t]he DPRK’s nuclear force-building policy has been made permanent as the basic law of the state”. Emphasizing the imperative to “push ahead with the work for exponentially boosting the production of nuclear weapons and diversifying the nuclear strike means and deploying them in different services”, Kim Jong Un laid out an ambitious nuclear agenda.

This pronouncement garnered widespread international media coverage, with headlines echoing the integration of North Korea’s nuclear status into its Constitution¹. Remarkably, Pyongyang managed to capture Western attention without making any truly new announcements, showcasing its adept communication strategy.

North Korea stands out as a unique entity, being the sole state to conduct nuclear tests in the 21st century, the only non-nuclear-weapon state to develop nuclear armament after joining the NPT, and the only nation to declare its withdrawal from the NPT. The country boasts a considerable arsenal of nuclear fuel plants, reactors, reprocessing facilities and research establishments, possibly possessing several dozen nuclear weapons.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief history of North Korea’s nuclear program, highlighting key dates and recent developments. This contextualization aims to offer insights for understanding and analyzing the ongoing proliferation crisis amid international condemnations and sanctions, especially in the face of looming concerns about a potential seventh nuclear test on the Korean peninsula.

North Korea initiated its nuclear and ballistic missile programs in the 1960s², gaining significant global attention in 1992 when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) uncovered the extent of its nuclear activities during inspections at seven declared nuclear sites.

Having joined the IAEA in 1974 and signed a safeguards agreement in 1977, North Korea acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985, under pressure from the Soviet Union. In 1992, revelations by the IAEA led to North Korea’s withdrawal from the agency and threats to exit the NPT, sparking the first North Korean nuclear crisis³.

To avert withdrawal, a framework agreement was reached in 1994 between North Korea and the United States. This agreement required North Korea to freeze its nuclear activities, grant access to IAEA inspectors, and, in return, receive light water reactors and energy aid. However, the agreement collapsed in 2002 when the United States disclosed North Korea’s secret pursuit of an enrichment program, supported by a nuclear proliferation network originating in Pakistan.

The second nuclear crisis materialized when North Korea unilaterally withdrew from the NPT in January 2003, asserting that its withdrawal would “automatically and immediately enter into force”. In February 2005, the regime officially declared its active production of nuclear weapons, then announced in May that it had successfully completed unloading 8,000 spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon reactor⁴.

In a joint declaration during the Six-Party Talks on September 19, 2005, involving China, the United States, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, and Japan, Pyongyang committed “to abandon all

¹ « La Corée du Nord inscrit son statut d’État nucléaire dans sa Constitution », Le Monde avec AFP, 28 septembre 2023.

² Pollack Jonathan, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, Routledge, 2017.

³ Wit Joel S., Poneman Daniel B., Gallucci Robert L., *Going critical: The first North Korean nuclear crisis*, Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

⁴ Arms Control Association, “Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy, 1985-2022”, April 2022.

*nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and return, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards*⁵.

Despite these commitments, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006⁶, then a second in May 2009. In November 2010, the regime disclosed a uranium enrichment program to a group of American academics and experts⁷. Even the Leap Day Deal of February 2012, a bilateral agreement between Pyongyang and Washington, failed to halt North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programs.

Since then, North Korea has conducted four additional nuclear tests in 2012 and two more in 2016 and 2017. The development of nuclear weapons became integral to a national strategy called the "Byungjin line" announced in March 2013, aiming to "simultaneously lead the construction of the economy and nuclear forces". Officially ending in April 2018, it did not signal the suspension of the nuclear program⁸.

Under Kim Jong Un's leadership, nuclear weapons have become ingrained in North Korea's institutional framework. In April 2012, the Supreme People's Assembly revised the country's Constitution, officially designating North Korea as a "nuclear weapons state". This distinctive move positions North Korea as the sole nation to enshrine the possession of nuclear weapons within its constitutional framework. Subsequently, on April 1, 2013, a law solidifying North Korea's nuclear state status was enacted, becoming the foundational document guiding the country's nuclear doctrine.

On November 29, 2017, North Korea boldly declared it had "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force"⁹, a commitment made by Kim Jong Un earlier the same year. In January 2018, a decree from the North Korean leader emphasized the imperative for the nuclear weapons research sector and the rocket industry to mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles¹⁰.

Despite a series of negotiations marked by three historic meetings with a sitting US President in 2018 and 2019, along with a commitment in Singapore to work towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's intentions remain explicit and unwavering in its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the fortification of its deterrent capabilities¹¹.

In January 2021, amidst the pandemic and during a presentation at the Seventh Central Committee of the Eighth Party Congress, Kim Jong Un announced the acquisition of a "perfect nuclear shield", boasting achievements such as "miniaturizing, lightening, and standardizing nuclear weapons" into tactical ones, along with the completion of a super-large hydrogen bomb. He emphasized the ongoing need to elevate nuclear technology to "a higher level" and make nuclear weapons "smaller and lighter for more tactical uses"¹².

In 2022, a new law delineating the country's nuclear policy and deterrence doctrine was enacted¹³, removing uncertainties and offering a clearer understanding of North Korea's doctrine, including details on the arsenal's missions, the command and control system for nuclear forces, and pre-emptive strikes. During the presentation, the North Korean leader reiterated the irreversibility

⁵ "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing", September 19, 2005.

⁶ Pritchard Charles L., *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb*, Brookings Institution Press, 2007.

⁷ Hecker Siegfried S., « Extraordinary Visits: Lessons Learned from Engaging with North Korea », *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 18, n° 2, 2011.

⁸ Hecker Siegfried S., Carlin Robert L., Serbin Elliot A., « A Comprehensive History of North Korea's Nuclear Program », CSIS, 2018.

⁹ The New York Times, "North Korea Says It's Now a Nuclear State. Could That Mean It's Ready to Talk?", November 29, 2017.

¹⁰ National Committee on North Korea, Kim Jong Un's 2018 new year's address, January 1, 2018.

¹¹ Bondaz Antoine, "Corée du Nord : au-delà de la crise nucléaire", *Politique internationale*, n° 159, hiver 2018; Bondaz Antoine, "Corée du Nord/États-Unis : jusqu'où ira la confrontation ?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 82, n° 4, Winter 2017-2018.

¹² "On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK", *KCNA*, January 9, 2021.

¹³ Bondaz Antoine, "Nouvelle loi sur le nucléaire en Corée du Nord", *Observatoire de la dissuasion*, FRS, n° 103, November 2022.

of North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons possessor, categorically stating there would “*never be a declaration of the abandonment of nuclear weapons or denuclearization*”.

Hence, Kim Jong Un's declaration in September 2023 at the 9th Session of the Supreme People's Assembly does not come as a surprise. North Korea not only institutionalized the possession of nuclear weapons, but its leader consistently advocates for an increased nuclear arsenal while emphasizing modernization. In January, he called for an “*exponential increase of the country's nuclear arsenal*”¹⁴, then, in April, for “*expanding more practically and offensively*” the country's deterrent capabilities¹⁵.

It is crucial to underscore the extraordinary consistency with which the North Korean regime has acquired, developed, and conceptualized the possession of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the previous prevailing misconception abroad, North Korea's nuclear arsenal is not merely seen as a bargaining chip for negotiations involving security guarantees and economic benefits. Instead, these weapons are viewed as integral to the regime's survival strategy, manifesting a dual role – in both external and internal contexts¹⁶.

Externally, these weapons serve as a linchpin in the regime's security posture against external threats. Nuclear weapons provide North Korea with an asymmetrical deterrent against the United States and neighboring states. Recent developments, such as the explicit focus on tactical nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems aimed at South Korea, furnish North Korea with additional tools to manage military escalation, attempt to weaken the alliance between Washington and Seoul, and directly challenge its neighbor's security.

Internally, North Korea's security strategy is intricately tied to the consolidation and concentration of power within the regime. Nuclear weapons, viewed as political instruments, bolster the legitimacy of Kim Jong Un and his regime. They contribute to fostering a North Korean version of techno-nationalism and draw on one of the nation's rare successes, thereby legitimizing the sacrifices imposed on the population.

The institutionalization of nuclear weapons transcends mere possession; they have become an inseparable part of North Korea's identity, rendering their abandonment in the short term virtually impossible. Moreover, all facets of North Korea's nuclear weapons program remain active, encompassing endeavors to further miniaturize nuclear warheads and enhance their deliverability, reliability, safety, and security.

While Kim Jong Un's September statement is notable, it aligns with a discernible North Korean strategy that, unfortunately, the international community has yet to effectively counter.

¹⁴ “Report on 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee”, KCNA, January 1, 2023.

¹⁵ “Kim Jong Un reviews ‘attack plans’ on South Korea at top military meeting”, NK News, April 11, 2023.

¹⁶ Bondaz Antoine, “From critical engagement to credible commitments: a renewed EU strategy for the North Korean proliferation crisis”, *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers*, EU Consortium on non-proliferation and disarmament, n° 67, February 2020.

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