

# Issue Brief

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Status-Quo or Revisionism:  
Decoding North Korea's "Hostile Two-State" via USFK

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## Abstract

This paper examines whether North Korea's "hostile two-state doctrine" reflects a status quo or revisionist orientation by analyzing whether and if so, why Pyongyang's position on the presence of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) has changed. The analysis finds that the doctrine aligns more closely with a status-quo orientation and may be interpreted as a de facto official acknowledgment of a position long articulated only in closed-door discussions: that North Korea tolerates the continued presence of USFK. Although the doctrine is not unrelated to North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities, interpreting it as evidence of a revisionist orientation conflates national strategy with military strategy. From this perspective, strengthening deterrence against North Korea at the military-strategic level and pursuing peaceful coexistence at the national-strategic level are not inherently contradictory within South Korea's policy toward North Korea.

### Keywords

hostile two-state doctrine, status quo, revisionism, USFK presence

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## A Gap in the Discourse

It has now been two years since North Korea declared inter-Korean relations to constitute "hostile two-state relations." Following Kim Jong Un's December 2023 declaration of "two states in belligerence," North Korea's public documents and official statements have consistently referred to South Korea not as "South Joseon" but as the "Republic of Korea," recasting inter-Korean relations as relations between two states. Over this period, Pyongyang has systematically dismantled the institutional, policy, ideological, and cultural foundations constructed since 1945 on the premise of eventual unification—a process that continues today.

South Korean academic and policy communities have engaged in extensive debate over how to interpret the "hostile two-state doctrine." Yet, given the magnitude of what may be the most significant shift in North Korea's inter-Korean and foreign policy in decades, it is difficult to argue that the issue has been sufficiently examined. One critical gap remains largely unexplored: whether North Korea's position on USFK has changed in the wake of the doctrine, and if so, how. This question serves as a key litmus test for determining whether the doctrine reflects a status quo or revisionist orientation. Only after addressing this issue can a meaningful discussion of the prospects for peaceful coexistence under the doctrine begin.

## Three Hypotheses

Three main hypotheses have been advanced to explain North Korea's motivations for adopting the "hostile two-state doctrine": the "defensive separation hypothesis," which interprets the move as a response to defeat in systemic competition with South Korea; the "structural bypassing hypothesis," which posits that Pyongyang seeks to exploit the emerging new Cold War and a multipolar order; and the "offensive separation hypothesis," which argues that North Korea aims to enhance the strategic and operational utility of its nuclear capabilities.<sup>1)</sup>

The defensive separation and structural bypassing hypotheses both interpret the doctrine as consistent with a status-quo orientation—the former emphasizing domestic political imperatives, the latter focusing on adaptation to a changing international structure. Together, they suggest that North Korea required a complete severance of inter-Korean relations to preserve regime stability, and that the evolving international environment provided a conducive opportunity to implement this shift. At the same time, fully leveraging this environment may have required abandoning the constraints associated with the notion of a "special national relationship."

In contrast, the offensive separation hypothesis frames the doctrine as revisionist. From this perspective, North Korea seeks to dismantle

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1) Kim Jin-ha et al., *Analysis of the Kim Jong-un Regime's Strategic Shift in Its Inter-Korean Policy* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2024); Hwang Il-do, "Reinterpreting North Korea's 'Hostile Two-State Doctrine,'" *Analysis of Major International Issues 2024-19* (2024); Mo Chun-heung, "North Korea's 'Hostile Two-State Doctrine' and Media Propaganda and Agitation," *Regional Development Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2025); Yi Jung-gu, "North Korea's 'Hostile Two-State Doctrine' and Prospects for Inter-Korean Relations," *Unification Policy Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2024); Han Ki-bum, "North Korea's Hostile Inter-Korean Policy and Its Linkage to Foreign Policy," *Asan Institute for Policy Studies Issue Brief 2024-10* (2024); Jeon Gyeong-ju, "South Korea's North Korea Strategy after the 'Hostile Two-State Doctrine,'" *Defense Studies*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2025).

the political and psychological constraints that might hinder military action against South Korea as a nuclear-armed state. North Korea's Law on Nuclear Forces Policy (September 2022) explicitly allows for nuclear use in pursuit of territorial objectives, marking a departure from the Law on Nuclear Possession (April 2013) by including preemptive use and wartime deterrence as justifications.<sup>2)</sup> Under this interpretation, abandoning the normative commitment to unification paradoxically facilitates the possibility of forcible unification. Even short of such an outcome, concerns persist that North Korea may consider the threatened or actual use of nuclear weapons to alter the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

### **The "Offensive Separation Hypothesis" and "Offensive Military Purpose Hypothesis"**

A key indicator for assessing whether the hostile two-state doctrine is status-quo-oriented or revisionist is whether North Korea's position on USFK has shifted. From a military-strategic perspective, the withdrawal of USFK would be a necessary precondition for any attempt by North Korea to alter the status quo through nuclear-backed coercion or force. The presence of USFK functions as a tripwire, ensuring immediate and automatic U.S. involvement in the event of conflict and thereby rendering such scenarios highly risky for Pyongyang. In contrast, the absence of USFK could create a window in which North Korea might attempt to delay or complicate U.S. intervention using its nuclear deterrent. This logic underpins the revisionist interpretation advanced by the offensive separation hypothesis.

These concerns are not new. Since the early 1990s, analysts have

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2) The full titles of the two laws are as follows. Law on Nuclear Possession: Law on Consolidating the Status as a Self-Defensive Nuclear State (Supreme People's Assembly Decree, April 1, 2013). Law on Nuclear Forces Policy: Supreme People's Assembly Decree on the Nuclear Forces Policy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (September 9, 2022).

raised similar arguments under the “offensive military purpose hypothesis” regarding North Korea’s nuclear development.<sup>3)</sup> What has changed, however, is the qualitative and quantitative advancement of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, which now more credibly support such scenarios than in the past.

### **The Hostile Two-State Doctrine and USFK Presence**

Has North Korea's position on USFK presence in South Korea actually changed? Pyongyang has consistently demanded the withdrawal of foreign forces since the 1954 Geneva Conference (April 26–June 15, 1954) following the Korean War, framing it as a prerequisite for unification and peace. However, in the post-Cold War period, North Korea has simultaneously maintained this public position while privately signaling a willingness to tolerate a continued U.S. presence—provided its role shifted away from deterrence against North Korea toward broader regional stabilization functions, both during and after a potential unification process.

This position has been reflected in multiple high-level interactions, first by Kim Yong-sun, then International Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, in his January 1992 meeting with U.S. Under Secretary of State Arnold Kanter. Kim argued that a phased USFK withdrawal—meaning toleration of its presence for a defined period—could be considered even after unification, given the need for regional stability and, in light of the Japanese threat. A series of similar statements followed: Foreign Ministry Adviser Ri Sam-ro (June 1992), Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam (September 1995), Ri Chan-bok, Commander of the Korean People's Army Panmunjom Mission (September 1995), and Ri Jong-hyok, Vice Chairman of the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (April 1996). President Kim Dae-jung

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3) For discussion of the offensive military purpose hypothesis, see Su-ho Lim, "Existential Deterrence and Proliferation through Negotiation: North Korea's Nuclear Policy and Coercive Diplomacy (1989-2006)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Seoul National University, 2007), pp. 37-63.

relayed that Chairman Kim Jong Il made remarks along similar lines at the 2000 inter-Korean summit. During the Six-Party Talks, North Korean representative Kim Gye-gwan linked USFK to containment of China, and at the time of Secretary of State Pompeo's 2018 visit to Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un similarly reportedly remarked that USFK was needed to manage the Chinese threat.<sup>4)</sup>

It remains possible to argue that these statements were merely tactical deception to gain leverage in negotiations with the United States and South Korea, and that there is insufficient basis to conclude that North Korea's strategic position on USFK withdrawal had genuinely changed. One could reason as follows: if Pyongyang first set aside its withdrawal demands and used the resulting concessions to resolve the nuclear issue, improved U.S.-DPRK and inter-Korean relations, together with a newly established peace regime, would naturally erode the rationale for continued U.S. presence. North Korea could then resume a full-throated push for USFK withdrawal under those changed conditions.

If that interpretation is correct, North Korea would have maintained its strategic position on USFK withdrawal throughout the post-Cold War era while employing tactical deception. The problem, however, is that the two-state doctrine also reduces the scope for such tactical maneuvering. The doctrine amounts to abandoning unification—one of the two rationales (unification and peace) underpinning demands for USFK withdrawal. Moreover, if a peace regime were established on North Korea's terms, the remaining justification for demanding USFK withdrawal would also diminish. In this sense, the doctrine can be interpreted as a *de facto* acknowledgment of tolerance for USFK presence.

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4) Su-ho Lim, "Historical Experience and Key Issues in the Discourse on a Korean Peninsula Peace Regime," *Korean Politics Research*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2009), pp. 80-81; Kim Jin-myeong, "Pompeo: 'Kim Jong Un Said He Needs USFK to Protect Himself from China,'" *Chosun Ilbo* (December 28, 2023).

Empirical evidence further supports this interpretation. A comprehensive survey of 709 official statements, press releases, and responses issued by North Korean institutions to overseas audiences since the death of Kim Jong Il reveals a striking pattern.<sup>5)</sup> North Korea had issued statements or press releases calling for USFK withdrawal around September 7 each year, in addition to further statements as events warranted. Such official statements disappeared entirely after the Foreign Ministry spokesperson's press statement of September 7, 2016. Notably, just prior to the emergence of the two-state doctrine, Kim Yo Jong issued a statement in July 2023 declaring that a USFK withdrawal would make no difference to North Korea.<sup>6)</sup>

This trajectory is consistent with a broader post-Cold War pattern. Since the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, North Korea has simultaneously indicated in closed-door discussions its conditional toleration of USFK, while shifting its criticism away from USFK itself toward joint military exercises and the deployment of strategic assets. This tendency has grown more

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5) This survey covers all statements, press releases, and responses (to questions posed by Korean Central News Agency reporters) issued by state, party, and military institutions at all levels—institutional, spokesperson, and key official—and published by the Korean Central News Agency from December 25, 2011 to January 9, 2026. State institutions surveyed include: the Government, National Defense Commission, State Affairs Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of People's Armed Forces, People's Armed Forces Department, National Aerospace Development Administration, General Bureau of Aerospace Technology, General Bureau of Civil Aviation, Space Technology Committee, Ministry of Atomic Energy Industry, General Bureau of Atomic Energy, Academy of Defense Science, and the Northern Delegation to Inter-Korean High-Level Contacts. Party institutions include: the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, Central Military Commission, United Front Department, International Department, Propaganda and Agitation Department, and the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country. Military institutions include: the Korean People's Army Supreme Command, General Staff Department, Strategic Forces, and Panmunjom Mission.

6) Kim Yo Jong statement (July 17, 2023): "Even if the United States were to deploy a strategic deception such as withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea and pulling all its troops and equipment out entirely, we are not unaware that it would take no more than about two weeks for U.S. military forces stationed overseas to return and transform the 'Republic of Korea' into a military strongpoint." Korean Central News Agency (July 17, 2023).

pronounced as North Korea has advanced its nuclear capabilities, and Kim Yo Jong's July 2023 statement can be seen as its definitive confirmation.

Since the two-state doctrine was advanced—and, looking further back, since Washington adopted a posture of strategic flexibility in the mid-2000s—Pyongyang has increasingly framed USFK not as a direct threat but as a source of regional instability. Rather than directly demanding USFK withdrawal, Pyongyang has pivoted toward emphasizing the regional instability caused by USFK activities as a way of courting Chinese and Russian support.<sup>7)</sup> This too reflects a status-quo orientation—one of riding the currents of the new Cold War and multipolar international order rather than seeking to overturn the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

## Implications

The analysis suggests that the "hostile two-state doctrine" is better understood as reflecting a status-quo orientation rather than a revisionist one. This does not invalidate concerns associated with the offensive separation hypothesis, nor does it diminish the need for continued vigilance. However, it does underscore the importance of distinguishing between national-strategic and military-strategic levels of analysis.

In this context, South Korea's recent emphasis on peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula should not be seen as inconsistent with maintaining robust deterrence. Rather, these approaches operate at different analytical levels and can be pursued in parallel.

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7) Jeon Gyeong-ju, "Has North Korea's Negotiating Logic Regarding USFK Weakened after the 'Hostile Two-State Doctrine'?" INSS Internal Seminar Presentation (February 3, 2026).

From an academic perspective, the debate surrounding the doctrine highlights the need for greater theoretical integration in North Korea studies. While diverse hypotheses are valuable, cumulative progress requires a shared analytical framework—whether neorealist, liberal, or second-image-reversed—within which competing explanations can be systematically evaluated. As inter-Korean relations increasingly resemble conventional inter-state relations, future research must move beyond the “special relationship” paradigm and engage more directly with broader international relations theory.

*The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.*