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North Korea's Foreign Policy at the 9th Party Congress:
Assessment and Outlook

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Abstract

At the 9th Party Congress, North Korea assessed that despite a deteriorating international environment over the past five years, its correct policies—particularly the irreversible consolidation of nuclear-armed status—strengthened national security and created favorable conditions for socialist construction. Pyongyang indicated it would maintain existing policies rather than introduce new foreign policy directions. Key elements include: (1) sustaining the hardest-line posture toward the United States while conditionally preserving potential for improved relations if Washington recognizes North Korea's nuclear status and abandons hostile policy; (2) deepening ties with China and Russia; and (3) expanding relations with anti-imperialist and independent states. While maintaining core foreign policy orientations, North Korea signaled shifts in the principles and methods governing policy implementation: ideological anti-imperialist solidarity has yielded to explicit national interest prioritization, with foreign policy under direct Party Center (Kim Jong Un) oversight—indicating Chairman Kim's intent to retain personal diplomatic control for rapid decisions and tactical flexibility toward the United States. This conditional U.S. opening raises DPRK-U.S. dialogue prospects, though recent U.S. strikes eliminating Iran's Supreme Leader render near-term summits unlikely.

Keywords

Kim Jong Un, DPRK foreign policy, DPRK-U.S. relations, DPRK-U.S. dialogue, multipolar world, national interest

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Claiming Achievements While Reaffirming Existing Foreign Policy

At the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (February 19-25, 2026), North Korea repeatedly expressed satisfaction with its five-year achievements and "optimism and confidence" about future prospects. This evaluation shaped its external relations assessment and policy directions. Chairman Kim Jong Un (General Secretary) stated in his opening address that "by irreversibly consolidating the state's status, great changes have been brought about in the geopolitical landscape... and favorable conditions have been created for vigorously advancing socialist construction." The Review of the Work of the WPK Central Committee similarly assessed strengthened security, protected interests, and elevated international standing.

North Korea attributes these gains not to improved objective conditions but to successful nuclear consolidation. Without naming the Trump administration, Chairman Kim criticized U.S. "America First" policies and military interventions destabilizing the international order. Despite this adverse security environment—exacerbated by U.S. hostility—Pyongyang claims enhanced security through irreversible nuclear status, nuclear capability improvements, war deterrence, and regional stabilization.

Chairman Kim also highlighted growing "aspirations of progressive humanity to oppose domination and subordination and to achieve independence, equality, and autonomy" against U.S. hegemony, crediting North Korea's strengthened cooperation with countries opposing U.S. hegemony for its diplomatic and security achievements. Confident in having elevated its standing despite adversity, North Korea reaffirmed existing orientations: hardest-line U.S. posture (with conditional dialogue potential), China-Russia ties, anti-imperialist state relations, and multipolarity advocacy.

Hardest-Line U.S. Posture with Tactical Flexibility

Chairman Kim declared North Korea would "be fully prepared for confrontation with the United States and firmly maintain the hardest-line posture" given America's inherent aggression, reaffirming the "Hardest-Line Response Strategy Toward the United States" established at the 11th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee in late 2024. However, confirming a "hardest-line" label does not preclude flexible U.S. policy in practice. Following President Trump's reelection, North Korea has adopted this strategy but has restrained its inflammatory rhetoric and has not increased its missile activity to avoid escalation. After deeming negotiations futile in November 2024—claiming North Korea had "gone as far as it could go in the direction of negotiation"—Chairman Kim conditionally accepted dialogue by September 2025, stating that "there is no reason we cannot stand face to face with the United States" if Washington abandons its denuclearization obsession. At the 9th Party Congress, he articulated conditions for improved relations: U.S. recognition of North Korea's nuclear-state status and abandonment of hostile policy. Thus, North Korea formally maintained a hard-line stance while preserving room for variable, flexible diplomacy toward the United States.

North Korea's statement that foreign activities would be conducted under direct Party Central (Kim Jong Un) involvement signals intent to maximize diplomatic flexibility toward the United States. Chairman Kim linked his personal oversight to two objectives: keeping adversaries uncertain by obscuring North Korea's plans; and conducting strategic and tactical foreign activities to suppress adversaries while seizing diplomatic initiative. This indicates North Korea's policy of supreme leader control—enabling swift decisions and tactical adjustments in DPRK-U.S. relations as circumstances require.

National Interest over Ideology

North Korea pledged to elevate "traditional ties of friendship and cooperation with neighboring states" (China, Russia). Its assessment of a favorable environment for socialist construction reflects two developments: sustained close ties with Russia since the Ukraine invasion (with the "Russia windfall"); and improved China relations from 2025 onward, including Chairman Kim's visit. North Korea thus reaffirmed its intent to further develop relations with China and Russia to secure an international environment conducive to economic construction.

North Korea is committed to expanding relations with anti-imperialist and independent states through active diplomatic engagement. Countering U.S.-led imperialism through solidarity with anti-imperialist and self-reliant forces has long been a core foreign policy orientation, traditionally centered on socialist states and parties despite encompassing broader Global South engagement. The 7th Party Congress called for "revolutionary parties and organizations and progressive states" to unite against imperialists; the 8th

Congress emphasized developing relations with socialist states and strengthening solidarity with "revolutionary and progressive parties." At the 9th Party Congress, however, ideological framing faded—no calls for solidarity with socialist or revolutionary forces appeared in reports on the Review of the Work.

National interest has replaced ideology as the guiding principle. The Review of the Work of the 9th Party Congress mandated that all foreign activities strictly protect national interest—"the standard of thought and perspective in approaching international relations"—before calling for cooperation with neighbors and anti-imperialist states. North Korea thus frames China-Russia ties and anti-U.S. solidarity as national interest imperatives, not ideological imperatives.

This shift—initially signaled at the 14th Supreme People's Assembly's 10th Session (January 2024) and 8th Central Committee's 11th Plenary (late 2024)—was clearly articulated at the 9th Congress. The shift may have been influenced by the fact that Russia, the closest ally, abandoned socialism a long time ago, that China, a major socialist power, is participating in sanctions against North Korea, and that Cuba, once regarded as a fraternal socialist state, has established diplomatic relations with South Korea.

Central Actor in Multipolar World Construction

North Korea proclaimed its intent to emerge as a central actor in constructing a multipolar world at the 9th Party Congress. In the Review of the Work, Chairman Kim stated that "the forces of independence will continue to grow stronger, and through their progressive struggle, the building of a fair and just multipolar world

will be further propelled," positioning North Korea "at the very center of that effort." Pyongyang frames the U.S-centric unipolar order as an unjust system enabling American diktat, while presenting the multipolar world as an equitable alternative "free from domination and subordination, hegemony and coercion."

Beyond anti-hegemonic rhetoric, this positioning reflects strategic national interest calculations. North Korea seems to favor multipolarity over unipolarity or bipolarity (U.S.-China), as only a multipolar system enables alignment with China and Russia against the United States while minimizing China's leverage. North Korea seeks to strengthen its position among states dissatisfied with the U.S.-centered order by leading multipolar advocacy. At the 8th Central Committee's 11th Plenary (late 2024), Chairman Kim claimed North Korea had "firmly secured the international standing of a representative and powerful independent force that vigorously drives the construction of a multipolar world."

North Korea has never explicitly declared intent to become one of the poles in a multipolar world. However, given its stated intent to lead the realization of a multipolar world, its leadership rhetoric suggests such ambitions. Efforts to reframe U.S. relations as those between equal nuclear powers, rather than between a threatener and the threatened, and to portray its ties with China and Russia as great-power partnerships rather than relationships between large and small countries, further support this inference.

Avoiding Escalation of Tensions with the United States

North Korea's conditional reference at the 9th Party Congress to improved U.S. relations constitutes a positive signal for potential

DPRK-U.S. dialogue resumption. Chairman Kim's commitment to personally oversee foreign activities—including adversary state relations—and shape international affairs trajectories further raises prospects for a DPRK-U.S. summit. Nevertheless, dialogue appears unlikely during President Trump's planned May visit to China. Following the January arrest of Venezuelan President Maduro and his wife, the United States—together with Israel—conducted large-scale operations against Iran, including the decapitation of Supreme Leader Khamenei's family. Given the success of these successive U.S. decapitation strikes, North Korea will likely observe Iranian developments and recalibrate its U.S. strategy rather than rushing into dialogue.

Regardless of DPRK-U.S. dialogue prospects, North Korea will likely avoid U.S. provocations so as to prevent an escalation of tensions between the two countries. Despite “hardest-line” rhetoric, Pyongyang's restraint reflects observation of U.S. military interventions and economic stabilization needs after years of growth following prolonged stagnation. Stable international conditions remain essential for achieving Congress goals: sustained economic growth and tangible livelihood improvements.

Strengthening China-Russia Ties and Global South Engagement

North Korea will prioritize deepening China-Russia ties as proclaimed at the 9th Party Congress. Anticipating a potential Russia-Ukraine war termination, Pyongyang seeks to institutionalize Moscow relations through postwar reconstruction labor deployments and broad people-to-people exchanges to sustain Russian technology transfers. Despite Beijing's continued sanctions and its expanding ties with South Korea, North Korea is likely to pursue

economic cooperation with China, leveraging the rise in DPRK-China trade since Chairman Kim's attendance at the September Victory Day celebrations and targeting Chinese tourists to develop its tourism sector.

Having pledged to expand relations with anti-imperialist and independent states and lead multipolar world construction, North Korea is also expected to strengthen Global South engagement. Previously constrained by finances—leading to embassy closures—Pyongyang now benefits from Russia windfall gains. Consistent with the 9th Party Congress emphasis on national interest over ideology, North Korea will strengthen exchanges with diverse anti-imperialist and independent states while positioning itself as a central actor in building a multipolar world.

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