

Vol.4 No.3 2026

INSS

Strategic Report

North Korea's External and Inter-Korean Strategies in the Aftermath of the 9th WPK Congress and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly

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I Introduction

- Through the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (February 19–26) and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly (March 22–23), North Korea has entered the “Kim Jong Un 2.0 era” and established its policy direction for the next five years.
 - In proposing Kim Jong Un's renomination as General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, Ri Il-hwan stated that over the past five years, North Korea had “achieved a great victory unprecedented in our five-thousand-year history and clearly distinct even from the seventy-five years since liberation, and ushered in a new era.”¹
 - South Korea's National Intelligence Service assessed the 9th Party Congress as marking the transition to the “Kim Jong Un 2.0 era,”² while the Ministry of Unification concluded North Korea has formally declared the Kim Jong Un era both in name and substance.³

- North Korea articulated its external and inter-Korean perceptions through Chairman Kim Jong Un's Work Review Report⁴ at the 9th Party Congress and Government Policy Speech⁵ at the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly.

1 “Proposal Related to the Election of the General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea,” Korean Central News Agency, February 23, 2026.

2 “NIS: ‘Kim Ju-ae Offered Opinions on Some Policies...Judged to Be at the Stage of Designated Successor’,” Yonhap News Agency, February 12, 2026. <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260212101951001>> (accessed February 13, 2026).

3 “Ministry of Unification: North Korea ‘Declares Kim Jong Un Era’...50% Leadership Reshuffle,” SPN Seoul Pyongyang News, February 27, 2026. <<https://www.spnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=104884>> (accessed February 28, 2026).

4 The source referenced in this report as the “Work Review Report” is: “Let Us Continue the Victories and Glories Advanced through Indomitable Pioneering Struggle as a Sustained Upsurge and Leap on a New Journey: Report on the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea,” Korean Central News Agency, February 26, 2026.

5 The source referenced in this report as the “Government Policy Speech” is: “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Delivered the Government Policy Speech at the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,” Korean Central News Agency, March 24, 2026.

- The Work Review Report was presented in summary form in coverage of the 9th Party Congress, whereas the Government Policy Speech was released in full.
- The Work Review Report addressed inter-Korean affairs within the category of external relations in greater detail, while the Government Policy Speech reduced them to a single sentence.
 - ※ This reflects North Korea's codification of the "hostile two-state relations" in its revised constitution, deliberately adopting a dismissive posture toward South Korea.
- This report analyzes North Korea's external and inter-Korean strategic outlook as presented at the 9th Party Congress and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly, and offers policy considerations for South Korea's North Korea policy.

II North Korea's External Perceptions and Strategic Outlook

1. External Perceptions

- North Korea views the international environment of the past five years as favorable.
- It assesses substantial gains from U.S.–China strategic competition and Russia–Ukraine war–induced “New Cold War and multipolarization dynamics.”
 - Chairman Kim Jong Un noted “favorable conditions for socialist construction were established,”⁶ with the Republic’s security and interests firmly defended and international standing further elevated.⁷
- The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency concurs that “Kim Jong Un is displaying growing confidence in international political legitimacy and regime security, and North Korea is in its strongest strategic position in decades.”⁸
- North Korea perceives the current international situation as a period of “disorder and upheaval” and “unpredictability.”
- Chairman Kim Jong Un characterizes the current international situation as qualitatively different from that of the previous five years, assessing that international relations have entered a “vortex of disorder and upheaval.”
 - ※ “The world today is completely different from five years ago, and international relations have entered the vortex of disorder and upheaval,”⁹ and “unpredictability is the only predictable feature of today’s world.”¹⁰

6 “Opening Address at the 9th Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea,” Korean Central News Agency, February 20, 2026.

7 Work Review Report.

8 Jeffrey Kruse, 2025 Worldwide Threat Assessment (Defense Intelligence Agency, May 11, 2025), p. 20; Choe Yong-hwan, “Analysis of North Korea’s External Strategy and Ways to Improve Inter-Korean Relations,” Exploring New Paradigms for the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Kyungnam University Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 77th Korean Unification Strategy Forum Proceedings (March 26, 2026), p. 108.

9 Work Review Report.

10 Government Policy Speech.

- North Korea also perceives that, alongside growing international instability, threats from South Korea, the United States, Japan, and others have intensified, rendering its external environment increasingly adverse.

※ “The Korean Peninsula and its surrounding areas have also been subjected to a state of constant instability and escalating tension due to the relentless anti-DPRK hostile policies and security-undermining measures of the United States and its vassal forces, and as a result, the international environment of our state remains harsh.”

- *Work Review Report*

- North Korea perceives changes in the international situation as both an “opportunity factor” and a “risk factor.”

- Chairman Kim Jong Un appears to assess that North Korea's strategic space is expanding as U.S.-centered order weakens and multipolarity advances.

- The new Cold War and multipolarity have contributed to the fragmentation and bloc formation of international politics; accordingly, as U.S. hegemony wanes and the spheres of influence of China and Russia expand, North Korea's diplomatic space is also widening.¹¹

- Chairman Kim Jong Un expressed confidence that the “trend toward multipolarity” will strengthen and that North Korea can play a leading role in this process.

※ “Going forward...the building of a multipolar world will be further driven forward, and our state stands at its center.”

- *Work Review Report*

“The building of a multipolar world will be driven forward with greater vigor, and we will willingly take on the historic mission of leading the flow toward global independence.”

- *Government Policy Speech*

11 Choi, Yonghwan, “Analysis of North Korea's External Strategy and Ways to Improve Inter-Korean Relations,” pp. 108-109.

- North Korea is assessed to perceive both the “opportunity” of expanded strategic space amid weakening U.S. hegemony and the “risk” of adverse consequences should it fail to respond effectively to evolving conditions.
 - It simultaneously recognizes opportunities and risks arising from rapidly changing circumstances, including (1) heightened global instability, (2) escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and (3) the possibility of a ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine war.
 - ※ “If we too easily make predictions about today’s existing threats and the outlook for international political trends without sufficient consideration, and design our future without adequate deliberation, that would be the gravest mistake and a reckless gamble.”
 - *Government Policy Speech*

2. External Strategic Outlook

- Kim Jong Un’s direct leadership over external policy
 - In the coverage of the Work Review Report, North Korea referenced “Party Central (Kim Jong Un)” seven times, exceptionally emphasizing Chairman Kim Jong Un’s direct leadership and involvement in external policy.
 - Chairman Kim Jong Un appears to have recognized that changes in the international and Korean Peninsula environment are unpredictable, and that responding effectively to these changes is critically important for North Korea’s survival and development.
 - ※ “Under the current conditions, where the objective environment of the revolution is grave and the international situation is unprecedentedly acute, the direct involvement of Party Central in the state’s external activities is an indispensable requirement.”
 - *Work Review Report*
- North Korea has also expressed the intention to pursue swift and flexible adjustments in external policy under Chairman Kim Jong Un’s leadership, in response to rapidly shifting circumstances.
 - Given the characteristics of the North Korean political system, such flexible policy responses would be difficult for any actor other than Chairman Kim Jong Un himself. The direct leadership of Party Central, therefore, is assessed as reflecting an awareness of this structural constraint.

- **Conducting external activities on the principle of “defending national interests”**
- North Korea announced that “defending national interests” is the guiding principle of its external activities and that it will pursue an independent foreign policy that is most consistent with its national interests.
 - It stated that “the defense of national interests is the unwavering principle of our state’s external activities,”¹² and that it will “be mindful of the worst-case scenario rather than comfort, and give priority to long-term, strategic interests over short-term, visible gains.”¹³
- North Korea’s core national interests can be inferred to include: (1) the security and stability of the regime and government, (2) the consolidation of its status as a nuclear-armed state, and (3) economic development.
 - Based on an assessment of Chairman Kim Jong Un’s Work Review Report, North Korea’s national interest framework appears to place “the security and sovereignty of the state” and its nuclear force as its highest priorities, with expanded external relations and economic gains layered on top of that foundation.
- North Korea’s “national interest-first principle” functions as a mechanism for justifying a shift from the existing “ideology-centered diplomacy” to a more “interest-centered transactional diplomacy” within the boundaries that preserve core interests.
 - Under the U.S.-led unipolar order and the Cold War-New Cold War structure of “ROK-U.S.-Japan versus DPRK-China-Russia,” North Korea’s diplomatic space has been constrained to ideology-centered bloc diplomacy.
 - Amid the trend toward multipolarity as U.S. hegemony weakens, North Korea is expected to break free from past ideological constraints and reconfigure the priorities of its external policy on the basis of national interests.

12 Work Review Report.

13 Government Policy Speech.

※ “In a manner befitting the new era, we will continue to develop and strengthen our state-to-state relations with countries with which we have traditionally friendly relations, while simultaneously placing national interests first and readjusting and redefining diplomatic priorities on the basis of the principle of guaranteeing medium- and long-term, strategic national interests, and implementing them with strategic acumen.”

- *Government Policy Speech*

- Without explicitly stating a formal reorientation, North Korea is expected to pursue a national interest- and pragmatism-centered diplomacy even in its external relations with existing friendly states, including China and Russia.

■ Revitalizing external relations through restructuring and reorganization of the diplomatic chain of command

■ Under Chairman Kim Jong Un's command, it is expected that the spokesperson-and-messenger role will be handled by Kim Yo Jong, Director of the General Affairs Department, while policy implementation will be carried out by Kim Song Nam, International Secretary (in charge of China and socialist states), Choe Son Hui, Foreign Minister (in charge of the United States, Russia, and non-socialist states), Jang Kum Chol, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Director of Workers' Party Department No. 10 (inter-Korean affairs).

- Within the Workers' Party, Kim Song Nam was appointed International Secretary and Director of the International Department, and Jang Kum Chol was appointed Director of Workers' Party Department No. 10, thereby restructuring the international and inter-Korean diplomatic lines.

- As Kim Song Nam concurrently serves as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and Jang Kum Chol concurrently as First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs at the state level, this arrangement helps secure unity in foreign-policy decision-making between the Party and the state.

■ Special attention should be paid to the roles of Cho Yong Won, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly, and Kim Tok Hun, First Vice Premier of the Cabinet, within the diplomatic sphere.

- Cho Yong Won's appointment as Chairman of the Standing Committee is assessed not as a "demotion" but rather as a reassignment reflecting Kim Jong Un's direct oversight of the diplomatic sphere.
 - ※ While his age—approaching seventy (born in 1957)—may be a factor, the judgment appears to be that, given the partial stabilization of the Workers' Party leadership, this reassignment allows him to implement Kim Jong Un's intentions in both the state and diplomatic spheres through the twin roles of Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly and First Vice Chairman of the State Affairs Commission.
- Kim Tok Hun's post of "First Vice Premier of the Cabinet" is a newly established position, and it is expected that he will assume primary responsibility for external economic exchange and cooperation.
 - ※ Kim Tok Hun has also been appointed Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly, and is expected to oversee inter-state economic cooperation, including with China and Russia.
- **Maintaining maximum hardline as the baseline while opening the possibility of "conditional dialogue" toward the United States**
 - While asserting that a maximum-hardline posture will be maintained as the baseline of its policy toward the United States, North Korea has simultaneously opened the possibility of conditional dialogue.
 - North Korea has passed the ball to the United States on DPRK-U.S. relations by declaring that it is "prepared for everything, whether peaceful coexistence or permanent confrontation," and that "the future prospects for DPRK-U.S. relations depend entirely on the attitude of the U.S."¹⁴
 - As conditions for DPRK-U.S. dialogue, North Korea demands that the United States recognize it as a nuclear-armed state and abandon its hostile policy toward the DPRK.
 - Taking into account President Trump's stated willingness to engage in DPRK-U.S. dialogue, North Korea is demanding a change in U.S. policy toward the DPRK while asserting that any improvement in relations will be contingent upon the United States' choice.

14 Work Review Report.

※ “If the United States respects our state’s current status as enshrined in the Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and withdraws its hostile policy toward the DPRK, there is no reason we would be unable to get along well with the United States.”

- *Work Review Report*

■ Transition to a proactive and assertive diplomatic strategy to advance multipolar order

■ North Korea is pursuing a shift from the existing “passive and defensive diplomatic strategy” centered on alliances with China and Russia and other traditional friendly states, to a “proactive and assertive diplomatic strategy” designed to advance the emerging multipolar order.

※ “Sharply and closely monitoring changes in the international relations configuration and mutual relations and circumstances, preparing diverse countermeasures on the basis of accurate analysis and assessment, and employing them proactively.”

- *Work Review Report*

“Breaking free from diplomatic practices that were calibrated to the outdated standards of the past, and employing diplomatic tactics and modes of external engagement befitting our state’s new national standing and prestige.”

- *Government Policy Speech*

■ North Korea is simultaneously pursuing expanded diplomacy toward Global South states while consolidating and deepening relations with traditional friendly states, including China and Russia.

- Without explicitly naming China and Russia, the regime referred to the “vigorous pursuit of political and diplomatic activities and exchange and cooperation to develop and advance the traditional friendly and cooperative relations with neighboring countries to a higher level.”¹⁵

- With regard to Global South states, it emphasized the “vigorous pursuit of political and diplomatic activities and exchange and cooperation to expand and strengthen relations with independent countries opposed to imperialism.”¹⁶

15 Work Review Report.

16 Work Review Report.

The 9th Party Congress: External Perceptions and Strategic Directions

<p>External Perceptions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (International situation) International relations have entered a vortex of disorder and upheaval / The current international situation is moving in an increasingly chaotic direction and is becoming more variable and unpredictable over time. ▶ (Korean Peninsula situation) A state of constant instability and escalating tension, driven by the persistent and anti-DPRK hostile policies and security-undermining measures of the United States and its vassal forces. ▶ (Building a multipolar world) Going forward...the building of a multipolar world will be further driven forward / Our state stands at the very center of it.
<p>Strategic Directions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (Policy baseline toward the U.S.) Maintaining a maximum-hardline posture as the unwavering baseline of our U.S. policy while fully prepared for confrontation with the U.S. / We are prepared for everything, whether peaceful coexistence or permanent confrontation / The future prospects for DPRK-U.S. relations depend entirely on the attitude of the U.S. ▶ (Conditional dialogue with the U.S.) If the United States respects our state's current status as enshrined in the Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and withdraws its hostile policy toward the DPRK, there is no reason we would be unable to get along well with the United States. ▶ (Policy toward China and Russia) We will continuously develop and advance the traditional friendly and cooperative relations with neighboring countries to a higher level. ▶ (Global South policy) Vigorous pursuit of political and diplomatic activities and exchange and cooperation to expand and strengthen relations with independent countries opposed to imperialism. ▶ (National interests defense principle) Conducting all external activities thoroughly on the principle of defending national interests / The defense of national interests is the unwavering principle of our state's external activities. ▶ (Direct leadership of Party Central) Under the current conditions, where the objective environment of the revolution is grave and the international situation is unprecedentedly acute, the direct involvement of Party Central in the state's external activities is an indispensable requirement / All external activities of our state shall be carried out thoroughly under the direct guidance and involvement of Party Central. ▶ (Proactive & assertive diplomatic strategy) Sharply and closely monitoring changes in the international relations configuration and mutual relations and circumstances, preparing diverse countermeasures on the basis of accurate analysis and assessment, and employing them proactively.

The First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly: External Perceptions and Strategic Directions

<p>External Perceptions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (International situation) The current international situation, which is unpredictably complex and multifaceted / If we too easily make predictions about today's existing threats and the outlook for international political trends without sufficient consideration, and design our future without adequate deliberation, that would be the gravest mistake and a reckless gamble. ▶ (Building a multipolar world) The building of a multipolar world will be driven forward with greater vigor / We will willingly take on the historic mission of leading the flow toward global independence.
<p>Strategic Directions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (Policy toward the U.S.) Whether they choose confrontation or peaceful coexistence, that is their choice to make; we are prepared to respond to either choice. ▶ (Policy toward friendly states) In a manner befitting the new era, we will continue to develop and strengthen our state-to-state relations with countries with which we have traditionally friendly relations, while simultaneously placing national interests first and readjusting and redefining diplomatic priorities on the basis of the principle of guaranteeing medium- and long-term, strategic national interests, and implementing them with strategic acumen. ▶ (National interest-defense principle) Making the defense of national interests the foremost principle and implementing an independent external policy most consistent with national interests / Being mindful of the worst-case scenario rather than comfort, and giving priority to long-term, strategic interests over short-term, visible gains. ▶ (Proactive & assertive diplomatic strategy) Breaking free from diplomatic practices that were calibrated to outdated standards and criteria of the past, and employing diplomatic tactics and modes of external engagement befitting our state's new national standing and prestige, so as to be prepared to deal with rapidly changing political flows and unpredictable geopolitical realities.

III North Korea's Perceptions of South Korea and the Inter-Korean Strategic Outlook

1. Perceptions of South Korea

- Reconfirming the position of “hostile two-state relations” between North and South Korea
 - North Korea is assessed to have reconfirmed the characterization of inter-Korean relations as a “hostile two-state relationship” through its highest decision-making bodies—the Party Congress and the Supreme People's Assembly—and to have institutionalized this stance.
 - Through the Work Review Report and the Government Policy Speech, Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed the inter-Korean “hostile two-state” framework and reiterated his intention to manage this as a confrontational structure of “hostile coexistence.”
 - North Korea perceives the South Korean government not as a partner for exchange and reunification, but as a permanent hostile entity to be militarily deterred, threatened, and managed.
 - North Korea asserted that the change in the inter-Korean line “is not a temporary tactical measure” but “a historic choice to guarantee the present and future security of the state and its people.”¹⁷
 - It further asserted that, should the South Korean government “take unnecessary actions that disrupt the current stability,” and all considerations toward South Korea become void, “all use of force applicable to a hostile state—including a preemptive strike as part of the deterrence mandate—becomes possible.”¹⁸
- Reorganizing inter-Korean relations as a sub-category of external relations
 - In the Work Review Report at the 9th Party Congress, Chairman Kim Jong Un did not place inter-Korean affairs as a separate agenda item but subsumed them under external affairs.
 - While North Korea had previously addressed inter-Korean affairs as an independent category at past Party Congresses—“For the Independent Reunification of the

17 Work Review Report.

18 Work Review Report.

Fatherland” (7th Party Congress) and “For the Independent Reunification of the Fatherland and the Development of External Relations” (8th Party Congress)—at the 9th Party Congress, inter-Korean affairs were incorporated under “For the Expansion and Strengthening of External Relations.”

- North Korea is further assessed to have codified inter-Korean relations as diplomatic relations within the Party Rules and the Constitution through the Party Congress and the Supreme People's Assembly.

- Based on Chairman Kim Jong Un's Work Review Report at the Party Congress and Government Policy Speech at the Supreme People's Assembly, it is anticipated that the “hostile two-state relations” has been inscribed in both the Party Rules and the Constitution.

- The fact that Jang Kum Chol, Director of Workers' Party Department No. 10 responsible for inter-Korean affairs, was given the concurrent post of First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs suggests that inter-Korean relations have been solidified as a “state-to-state relationship” to be handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- ※ It is assessed that formal and public inter-Korean relations will be handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while covert and unofficial inter-Korean operations will continue to be conducted by Workers' Party Department No. 10.

■ Distrust of the South Korean government's North Korea policy

- North Korea expressed distrust of the Lee Jae Myung administration's North Korea policy, characterizing it as “a clumsy deception and a botched performance.”¹⁹

- North Korea cited: the intrusion of a civilian drone into North Korean airspace early this year; and attempts to pursue disarmament through denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as grounds for this distrust.

- Regarding previous South Korean governments, North Korea has accused them of having used opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation to spread Korean Wave culture as a means of attempting to subvert the North Korean system.

19 Work Review Report.

2. Inter-Korean Strategic Outlook

- Continued severance of inter-Korean relations based on the “hostile two-state” framework
 - Through the Work Review Report at the Party Congress and the Government Policy Speech at the Supreme People's Assembly, Chairman Kim Jong Un announced that the policy of hostility toward South Korea and the policy of severing inter-Korean relations, reflecting the “hostile two-state” framework, would continue.
 - Asserting that there is “nothing whatsoever to discuss with the Republic of Korea, the most hostile entity,” North Korea stated that it would “deal with it by thoroughly rejecting and ignoring it with the clearest words and actions.”²⁰
 - ※ In line with the “hostile two-state” framework, the electoral district names associated with South Korea—*Hallasan*, *Taebaeksan*, and *Seomjingang*—which had symbolized the reunification mission of armed forces (military, intelligence, and security agencies) in the Supreme People's Assembly through the 13th and 14th terms, were removed.²¹
 - Whereas DPRK-U.S. relations and inter-Korean relations have previously been mutually interconnected, going forward there is a possibility that they will develop along parallel but separate tracks.
 - Even amid DPRK-U.S. dialogue and negotiations, the possibility exists that progress in inter-Korean relations could be difficult in the initial stages; in such a case, the South Korean government would face considerable difficulties in securing momentum for its North Korea policy.
 - However, in the medium to long term, if DPRK-U.S. negotiations advance, the question of compensation will inevitably arise, and the South Korean government's participation—which would need to bear a significant portion of the costs—will be unavoidable.
- Intensifying military pressure through nuclear and conventional weapons
 - North Korea is threatening the use of military force against South Korea under a “nuclear-conventional parallel development policy.”

20 Work Review Report.

21 Kim In-Tae, “Analysis of State Leadership Bodies and Power Elites at the 15th Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea,” Strategic Report, No. 376 (Seoul: Institute for National Security Strategy, 2026), p. 8.

- It asserted that “any action by South Korea that touches our Republic will be made to pay the price mercilessly, without the slightest consideration or hesitation.”²²
- Since the 9th Party Congress, North Korea has demonstrated military threats and capabilities targeting the Korean Peninsula, including, inter alia, a 600-mm multiple rocket launcher test (March 15) and a test launch of the KN-23 (Hwasong-11Ga) with a cluster munitions warhead (April 8).
- In addition, North Korea is applying military pressure on South Korea through threats of nuclear weapons use.
 - By asserting that “now that all considerations toward South Korea have been voided… our military response criteria have fundamentally changed,” and that “the use of all forms of force applicable to a hostile state has been fully realized in both theory and technical capability,”²³ North Korea has implied the possibility of nuclear weapons use.
- Pursuing a strategy to exclude the South Korean government from Korean Peninsula negotiations
 - North Korea is expected to pursue *tongmibongnam*—a strategy of excluding the South Korean government as a negotiating partner on Korean Peninsula issues and dealing directly with the United States.²⁴
 - From the December 2023 Plenary Session of the Party Central Committee, where the “hostile two-state doctrine” was declared, through this year’s Party Congress and Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea has maintained the posture of leaving open the possibility of conditional dialogue with the United States contingent on recognition as a nuclear-armed state, while refusing to enter into any negotiations with South Korea.

22 Work Review Report.

23 Work Review Report.

24 Kim Il Gi, “North Korea’s External and Inter-Korean Strategic Outlook and Policy Considerations,” Strategic Report, No. 356 (Seoul: Institute for National Security Strategy, 2025), p. 10.

- The possibility exists that North Korea will define the South Korean government as "a thoroughly hostile state" rather than a negotiating partner and exclude it from Korean Peninsula discussions, including on the North Korean nuclear issue.
 - In North Korean nuclear negotiations, North Korea is expected to deal exclusively with the United States—thoroughly excluding the South Korean government—in an attempt to obtain recognition of its nuclear-armed state status or sanctions relief.

The 9th Party Congress: Perceptions of South Korea and Strategic Directions

Perceptions of South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (Inter-Korean relations) Pointed out having made the final, momentous decision to establish the relationship with South Korea as a state-to-state relationship of maximum hostility, and proclaimed the Party and government's unwavering principled position. ▶ (ROK government's North Korea policy) The conciliatory posture outwardly represented by ROK's current ruling government is a clumsy deception and a botched performance. ▶ (Previous ROK governments' North Korea policies) They did not genuinely desire reconciliation and solidarity with us; instead, they insidiously used opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation to spread their culture within our society, thereby plotting the transformation of someone, and ultimately attempting to subvert our system. ▶ (Immutability of North Korea's policy toward ROK) The change in the inter-Korean posture is...the most legitimate guideline for the struggle against the enemy, and is not a temporary tactical measure but...a historic choice.
Strategic Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ (Dismissal of South Korea) There is nothing whatsoever to discuss with the Republic of Korea, the most hostile entity, and ROK is permanently excluded from the category of compatriots. ▶ (Use of military force) Now that all considerations toward ROK have been voided, our military response criteria, which have historically been maintained, have fundamentally changed; the use of all forms of force applicable to a hostile state—including the preemptive strike mission of the deterrent forces as governed by the laws of the state—has been fully realized in both theory and technical capability / If destabilizing actions by ROK carried out in the vicinity of a nuclear-armed state are deemed to threaten our security environment, we will initiate any action, and as an extension of that action, the possibility of ROK's complete collapse cannot be excluded. ▶ (Severance of inter-Korean relations) The measures necessary to exclude ROK in line with the principles we hold most sacred—our dignity and rights—will be put in place going forward in an increasingly explicit and practical manner.

**The First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly:
Perceptions of South Korea and Strategic Directions**

Perceptions of South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ (Inter-Korean relations) ROK is officially recognized as the most hostile state.
Strategic Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ (Dismissal of South Korea) ROK will be dealt with by thoroughly rejecting and ignoring it with the clearest words and actions.▶ (Use of military force) Any action by ROK that touches our Republic will be made to pay the price mercilessly, without the slightest consideration or hesitation.

IV Conclusion: Policy Considerations

■ DPRK-U.S. summit unlikely but warrants preparation

- A DPRK-U.S. summit following the China-U.S. summit is assessed as unlikely, yet the South Korean government should nevertheless prepare for the possibility.
 - The arrest of Venezuelan President Maduro and the U.S.-Israel-Iran war have heightened North Korea's wariness toward U.S. President Trump.
 - The likelihood that President Trump will accept the condition of "recognition of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state" is not high, and Chairman Kim Jong Un would also face a significant political burden in proceeding with a summit under circumstances where key preconditions have not been met.
- North Korea is assessed to have conceived a strategy of clearly communicating its conditions for a DPRK-U.S. summit to the United States through the Party Congress and the Supreme People's Assembly prior to the China-U.S. summit (March 31-April 2), and then adopting a waiting posture.
 - The U.S.-Israel-Iran war delayed the China-U.S. summit to mid-May (May 14-15), but from North Korea's perspective, this delay can also be viewed as having provided additional time to wait and prepare.
- North Korea is assessed to be closely monitoring changes in the international situation following the China-U.S. summit planned for mid-May and the Middle East war, in anticipation of new diplomatic space opening in DPRK-U.S. relations.
 - While signaling conditional willingness to engage at the Party Congress and Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea simultaneously minimized provocations toward the United States—refraining from directly criticizing President Trump and restraining ICBM test launches that would directly threaten the United States—thereby sustaining a sense of anticipation regarding DPRK-U.S. dialogue.
 - Should President Trump express a position of accepting North Korea's conditions toward the United States to some degree and strongly press for a DPRK-U.S. summit, the possibility exists that Chairman Kim Jong Un could abruptly agree to a summit.

- Inducing North Korea's return to dialogue by strengthening ROK-U.S. coordination and managing China-Russia relations
- The role of the United States and ROK-U.S. coordination remain the core factor in advancing a strategy of peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.
 - Given that North Korea has left open the possibility of conditional dialogue with the United States, there is a need to strengthen prior coordination between South Korea and the United States to ensure the South Korean government is not excluded from any future phase of DPRK-U.S. engagement.
 - ROK-U.S. policy coordination should be strengthened on key issues including messaging toward North Korea, plans for resuming dialogue, humanitarian cooperation, and discussions on sanctions flexibility.
- It is necessary to create a diplomatic environment conducive to bringing North Korea back to the table by strategically managing relations with China and Russia, on which North Korea relies as a "safety valve for regime stability."
 - Even if direct improvement in ROK-China and ROK-Russia relations does not immediately induce a change in North Korea's attitude, the effect of adjusting the diplomatic environment surrounding North Korea and increasing neighboring countries' receptivity to the South Korean government's North Korea policy can be expected.
- The need for trust-building in preparation for a "window of opportunity" for inter-Korean reconciliation
- The current situation on the Korean Peninsula is one in which opening a breakthrough toward peaceful coexistence is difficult, yet changes in the diplomatic environment could potentially create opportunity factors for change in inter-Korean relations.
 - Changes in the diplomatic landscape—(1) readjustment of U.S.-China relations, (2) the possibility of DPRK-U.S. engagement, and (3) changes in ROK-China and ROK-Russia relations—may not directly drive inter-Korean dialogue but could create new negotiating conditions on the Korean Peninsula.
 - As North Korea has also announced through the 9th Party Congress an emphasis on the "national interest-centered" line in external relations and Kim Jong Un's direct management of diplomacy, the possibility of flexibly adjusting its inter-Korean strategy in response to changes in the diplomatic environment cannot be excluded.

- The need is growing to proactively accumulate confidence-building measures that can expand the independent space of inter-Korean relations in preparation for the possibility of a “diplomatic window” opening around the Korean Peninsula.
 - In a situation where progress in inter-Korean relations cannot be guaranteed following DPRK-U.S. dialogue, securing independent channels of inter-Korean engagement and mechanisms for building trust in advance will enable the South Korean government to secure initiative when circumstances change.
 - The current moment calls for accumulating conditions that can be immediately activated when dialogue becomes possible, rather than placing primacy on achieving a dialogue breakthrough in the near term.

- **Inter-Korean trust-building focused on “risk reduction and restoration of contact points”**
- Inter-Korean trust-building should be pursued with a policy focus placed on reducing military risks and restoring the minimum contact points necessary to resume dialogue.
 - The likelihood that North Korea will respond to the South Korean government’s North Korea-policy proposals in the short term is low, and the posture of distrust toward South Korea is becoming structuralized.
 - The South Korean government should pursue a “risk management-type trust-building” approach that reduces the mutual risk of collision and increases the possibility of contact, rather than a hasty relationship-improvement framework.

- It is necessary to continue pursuing measures that the South Korean government can take to support inter-Korean trust-building and peace on the Korean Peninsula.
 - Since taking office, the Lee Jae Myung administration has proactively taken various measures to reduce military tension between South and North Korea and restore mutual trust, and these efforts need to continue.
 - What is important is to continuously emit and accumulate policy signals that the South Korean government is oriented toward easing hostility and achieving peaceful coexistence, rather than simply waiting for North Korea’s immediate response.
 - Priority should be given to pursuing measures that the South Korean government can independently initiate and that North Korea can accept at a later stage.

- Preparation for the intensification of North–South “intelligence competition” in the international community
- Through the First Session of the 15th Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea renamed the State Security Department to the State Intelligence Agency
 - The State Security Department’s overseas intelligence work had previously been carried out in part through its overseas intelligence-focused departments (the Counter-Intelligence Bureau and the Overseas Cadre Security Bureau). With the renaming to State Intelligence Agency, overseas intelligence collection is expected to become a more explicit and central mission, in addition to domestic intelligence.
 - ※ While the State Security Department had integrated North Korea’s domestic and foreign intelligence operations, performing functions similar to those of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service, it was primarily oriented toward domestic and foreign counterintelligence.
 - This change is also connected to the expansion and reorganization of the Reconnaissance General Bureau—the body under the General Staff Department responsible for collecting inter-Korean and overseas intelligence and conducting operations—into the “Reconnaissance and Intelligence General Bureau” following North Korea’s launch of a military reconnaissance satellite in November 2023.
- North Korea’s renaming to “State Intelligence Agency” is assessed as reflecting the need (1) to respond to an uncertain international situation, (2) to adjust inter-Korean intelligence activities under the “hostile two-state doctrine,” and (3) to adopt a normalized name for inter-agency intelligence exchange and cooperation.²⁵
 - It can be seen as a response to the growing demand for overseas intelligence collection amid the heightened uncertainty of the current international environment.
 - The fact that intelligence agencies that had previously focused on inter-Korean intelligence operations also saw decreased demand for “inter-Korean revolution”-type operations under the “hostile two-state doctrine” has also influenced this reorganization.
 - North Korea, which is pursuing an expansion of external relations, has judged that, for future inter-agency intelligence exchange and cooperation, a name that clearly conveys the mandate of an intelligence agency—as opposed to one that emphasize “system-protection” roles such as the State Security Department—is necessary.

25 Kim Jongwon, “Implications of North Korea’s Renaming to ‘State Intelligence Agency,’” Issue Brief, No. 828 (Seoul: Institute for National Security Strategy, 2026).

- As a result of the name changes incorporating “intelligence” at both the State Security Department and the Reconnaissance General Bureau and the planned expansion of overseas operations, it is expected that intelligence competition between North and South Korea in the international community will intensify going forward, and the South Korean government must prepare countermeasures accordingly.
 - The State Intelligence Agency is expected to conduct comprehensive intelligence activities targeting the international community across military, economic, and industrial domains, not merely counterintelligence activities oriented toward system protection.
 - Furthermore, North Korea is expected to pursue the expansion of its influence in the international community not only through existing DPRK-Russia and DPRK-China intelligence cooperation but also through advancing DPRK-China-Russia trilateral intelligence cooperation.

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Abstract

North Korea's External and Inter-Korean Strategies in the Aftermath of the 9th WPK Congress and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly

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This Strategic Report analyzes North Korea's external and inter-Korean perceptions and strategic outlook as presented at the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea and the First Session of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly, and puts forward policy considerations for the South Korean government's North Korea policy. North Korea appears to perceive the current international order as a period of disorder and upheaval, and to be seeking to leverage this as an opportunity to expand its strategic space. Accordingly, under Kim Jong Un's direct leadership, North Korea has set the "defense of national interests" as the overriding principle of its external activities, while maintaining a maximum-hardline posture toward the United States but leaving open the possibility of conditional dialogue. At the same time, North Korea is likely to pursue an assertive external strategy through strengthening DPRK-Russia cooperation, restoring DPRK-China relations, and expanding diplomacy toward the Global South. In terms of inter-Korean relations, North Korea has redefined the two Koreas as "hostile two-state" relations, and is expected to continue severing inter-Korean ties and maintaining military pressure while pursuing so-called *tongmibongnam*—a strategy of seeking direct dealings with the United States while excluding South Korea. In response, the South Korean government should acknowledge that near-term improvement in inter-Korean relations is unlikely and prioritize a risk management approach that reduces the danger of military conflict and preserves the minimum basis for renewed dialogue, rather than responding in kind to North Korean provocations. South Korea also needs to strengthen ROK-U.S. coordination to ensure it is

not excluded from any future phases of DPRK–U.S. engagement, and to strategically manage ROK–China and ROK–Russia relations in order to stabilize the diplomatic environment surrounding North Korea. Furthermore, in preparation for the possibility that changes in the diplomatic environment may open opportunities for the restoration of inter-Korean relations, South Korea must continue to accumulate confidence-building measures that it can pursue independently.

Keywords: North Korea, external strategy, inter-Korean strategy, 9th Party Congress, Supreme People's Assembly

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

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Strategic Report

Vol. 4 No.3 2026