

# Will North Korea Join Russia and China in a Combined Military Exercise? A Game Changer for Northeast Asian Security Architecture

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## Abstract

*Under North Korea's nuclear and missile development, trilateral security and military cooperation between the Republic of Korea, the U.S., and Japan seems unavoidable but the only security option against North Korea's threats. Threat assessments have focused much on existing threats like North Korean nuclear and missiles as well as new technology threats like artificial intelligence, cyber, drone, and cyberwarfare capabilities; they rarely focus on North Korean military cooperation with China and Russia. Interestingly, since the end of the Korean War and the withdrawal of the Chinese Volunteer Forces (CVFs) in the late 1950s, there has been no single combined military exercises between the Korean People's Army (KPA), People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Russian Army over the seven decades. In 2018, the VOSTOK exercise was the first combined exercise between the Russian Army and the PLA in history, which drew a strong reaction from the Western communities. Now it is naturally a time for North Korea to join Russia and Chinese in a military exercise against the trilateral security partnership on the other side; yet, there has been no research on this possible scenario and has only focused on an independent North Korean threat. The possibility of the KPA joining a combined military exercise between the PLA and the Russian Army is under-researched but a very important forgotten topic and a game changer for Northeast Asian Security Architecture rather than many nuclear and missile tests of North Korea. This paper examines why North Korea never had a combined military exercise with the PLA or the Russian Army in the past, why now this could be a possible scenario, and how the ROK-US alliance should prepare for the dire scenario. This research hopes to educate policy makers about this under-researched topic and render policy implications for further development of the trilateral security partnership near future.*

## **Introduction**

North Korea's nuclear and missiles have been three-decade global security issues. Since the 1990s, South Korean and the U.S. administrations tried to solve North Korea's nuclear issues with a range of measures from strategic patience and international sanctions to Six-Party Talks and the Korean Peninsula Peace Process. Inter-Korea relations and the US-DPRK relations were sometimes good and mostly bad. However, an outcome after three-decade denuclearization efforts is unfortunately North Korea with more nuclear weapons and longer missiles. Now many experts and intelligence agencies have expected the seventh nuclear weapon test and tactical nuclear weapons in North Korea after the failure of the Hanoi Summit. Over the years, the security environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula has been a climax of the worst situations such as the US-China strategic competition, the arms race in Northeast Asia, and North Korea's continuous provocation. Because of this security environment, the Republic of Korea's government tries to strengthen the ROK-US combined military exercise, extended deterrence, the trilateral security partnership that includes Japan, and cooperation with NATO countries to prevent any potential physical conflict and deter North Korea's provocation. In addition, because of the Russia-Ukraine War, Trump's legacy, and the rise of Chinese military capabilities, there has been growing concern about the self-defense capabilities of South Korea. To that end, South Korea's nuclear armament has been considered, but it remains controversial in Seoul and Washington.

In this situation, strengthening ROK-US combined exercise and trilateral security partnership is an unavoidable security option for South Korea. Many security and regional experts have focused on North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and the Taiwan crisis. However, one game-changeable issue is still missing on the table of experts and government officials regarding Northeast Asia security issues – the possibility of North Korea joining Russia and China's military exercises and cooperation realm. In 2018, the US and Europe were surprised by Russia and China's combined military exercise during the VOSTOK exercise in the Far Eastern area because it was the significantly large-scale combined military exercise between Russia and China in history. Interestingly, most of the public did not know that there had been no meaningful large-scale combined military exercise between Russia and China – the long-term Cold War partners against the West. There had only been a few small-scale maritime or ground forces cooperations recently. Even during the Cold War, Russia and China had no major-scale combined military exercises but casualties between the two because of the Russia-Sino split. Thus, the 2018 VOSTOK exercise was a shock to security experts in the West and, at that time, many experts still interpreted it as a political symbol, not an actual practical level of military cooperation. However, as the new Cold War situation became more serious, the two countries had more large-scale combined military

exercises and a more practical level of military cooperation. India even joined these combined exercises. This military cooperation is not only a psychological burden to the West but also an actual military threat. This Russia-China military cooperation has widely been considered a security issue of European, Eurasian, and Chinese regions, not relating to the North Korea issue. As far as North Korea is concerned, nuclear weapons and missiles are the most dominant issue. Yet, this possible scenario of North Korea joining Russia and China's military cooperation is a fundamental game changer for the Northeast Asian security architecture and is still largely under-researched and overlooked. This study examines why North Korea never had any combined military exercises with her old allies, Russia and China, and demonstrates why North Korea now considers military cooperation with Russia and China. This is a new, understudied but very important topic for Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula security.

## Literature Review

Many security experts on the Korean Peninsula are largely divided into two – the Nuclear Nonproliferation expert group and the Regionalist Group. Because the North Korean nuclear problem and the ROK-US alliance issues have been main topics for the Korean Peninsula security over the seven decades, since the 1990s, many nuclear nonproliferation experts take part in the Korean Peninsula security studies. For instance, in the policy community and academia located in Washington, D.C., traditional elites were regionalists who understand Asian issues, including political scientists, International Relations scholars, journalists, diplomats, military, think tanks policy experts, and historians. A stellar group of first-generation experts on the Korean Peninsula includes Don Oberdorfer, the author of *Two Koreas*; Bruce Cumings, a historian and author of *The Origins of the Korean War*; Selig Harrison, the author of *Korean Endgame*; Gregory Henderson, the author of *Korea: The Politics of Vortex*; Robert A. Scalapino, the author of *Communism in Korea*; and Suh Dae-Sook, the author of *Kim Il Sung*.

This group has few Korean experts because Korea was not a main topic as opposed to China and Japan, and their studies largely focused on the Korean War, Korean history, and Cold War studies.<sup>1)</sup> Since the 1990s, the North Korean nuclear

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1) Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, Volume 1: *Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); *The Origins of the Korean War*, Volume 2: *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*(New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); *The Korean War: A History*(New York: Modern Library, 2011); Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea: Part 1, The Movement*(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972); Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea: Part 2: The Society*(Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972); Suh, Dae-Sook, *The Korean*

issue became one of the nonproliferation issues, many nuclear nonproliferation experts and former foreign policy veterans joined regionalists on the Korean Peninsula studies. These include regionalist scholars –historians, sociologists, political scientists, and International Relations scholars –, journalists, and think tank policy experts.<sup>2)</sup>—Their research largely focused on North Korea’s nuclear or human rights issues like American foreign policy towards the two Koreas, denuclearization, extended deterrence, nuclear and missile capabilities, human rights, sanctions regime, famine, human rights, and the Korean Peninsula security.<sup>3)</sup> Their research

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*Communism Movement, 1918-1948*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Suh, Dae-Sook, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*(New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex*(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*(New York: Basic Books, 2013); Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002)

- 2) Bruce Bennett, Victor Cha, Charles K. Armstrong, Andrei Lankov, Gilber F. Rozman, Scott A. Snyder, David C. Kang, Bruce Klinger, Sue Mi Terry, Frank Aum, Andrew Yeo, Youngjun Kim, Jung Park, Jessica Lee, Lee Ji Young, Van Jackson, Patrick Cronin, Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., Jean Lee, Immanuel Kim, Suzy Kim, Gregg A. Brazinsky, David Shin and others as well as nuclear nonproliferation experts, human rights activists and foreign policy veterans such as Sig Hecker, Robert Karlin, Robert Gallucci, Joel Wit, Kathleen Stephens, Joseph Yun, Toby Dalton, Greg Scarlatoui, Sandra Fahy, Ankit Panda, Scott Sagan, Eric Brewer, Jeffery Lewis, Mark W. Lippert, Adam Mount, Jenny Town, Christopher R. Hill, and others.
- 3) Bruce W. Benett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*(Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013); Bruce W. Benett and Jenifer Lind, “The Collapse of North Korea: Military Mission and Requirements” *International Security*36(2) (Fall 2011): 84-119.; Victor D. Cha, *Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*(New York: Ecco, 2012); *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia*(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Victor D. Cha and Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *Korea: A New History of South and North*(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023); Scott Snyder, *North Korea’s Foreign Policy*(New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022); *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Jung H. Park, *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer’s Insights into North Korea’s Enigmatic Young Dictator*(New York: Ballantine Books, 2020); Ankit Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); David Shin, *Rationality in the North Korean Regime: Understanding the Kim’s Strategy of Provocation*(New York: Lexington, 2020); Andrew Yeo, *Activists, Alliances and Anti U.S. Base Protests*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *State, Society and Markets in Politics and Society in East Asia*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); *Asia’s Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century*(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Ji-Young Lee, *China’s Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Immanuel Kim, *Laughing North Koreans: The Culture of Comedy Films*(New York: Lexington Books, 2020); *Rewriting Revolution: Women, Sexuality and Memory in North Korean Fiction*(Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2022); Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Oneman and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*(Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim and the Threat of Nuclear War*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); *Pacific Power Paradox: American*

and policy reports also focus on the history of the two Koreas and the Korean War, analysis of North Korean state, society and regime, policy solutions against North Korean nuclear and missile threats and for denuclearization of North Korea as well as American foreign policy in East Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, and the ROK-US alliance issues.

However, there is no single study on the possibility of military cooperation between North Korea and China/Russia, perhaps, because it has not occurred, and no one has investigated why it has not occurred. In this research, I will examine why North Korea has not had any military exercises with China and Russia and why today North Korea may consider forming military cooperation and joining combined exercises of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Russian Army.

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*Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace*(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023); Sandra Fahy, *Dying for Rights: Putting North Korea's Human Rights Abuses on the Record*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy*(Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War*(Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*(New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., *North Korean Military Proliferation in the Middle East and Africa: Enabling Violence and Instability*(Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2018); *The Last Days of Kim Jong-il: The North Korean Threat in a Changing Era*(Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2013); *Red Rogue: The Persistent Challenge of North Korea*(Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2007); Gilbert Rozman, Sue Mi Terry and Eun A Jo, *South Korea's Wild Ride : The Big Shifts in Foreign Policy from 2013 to 2022*(London: Routledge, 2023); Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Triangles Reshaping International Relations in East Asia*(London: Routledge, 2022); Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: The People's Army and the Korean War*(London: Routledge, 2017); "Why did Stalin not support a Quick Victory for the Korean People's Army? Stalin's Unspoken Global Security Strategy for the Korean War" *The Korean Journal of International Studies*17(1) (April 2019): 79-102; Toby Dalton and Youngjun Kim, "Negotiating Nuclear Arms Control with North Korea: Why and How?" *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*33(1) (March 2021): 1-21.; Charles K. Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950*(Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Andrei Lankov, *From Stalin to Kim Il Sung: The Formation of North Korea, 1945-1960*(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956*(Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); *Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

## **Main Factors for Why Not**

There have been almost no academic and policy studies on why the Korean People's Army has never had combined exercises with the People's Liberation Army of China and the Russian Army during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period. It is probably because of the widespread perception that North Korea and China were bloody brothers during the Korean War, which remains intact. Since the withdrawal of the Chinese Volunteer Forces in the late 1950s because of failed efforts to remove Kim Il Sung by a pro-Chinese faction in 1956, there has not been military cooperation between North Korea and China, nor have there been foreign liaison officers in the KPA. So far, North Korea has maintained diplomatic and economic relations with China and Russia, not military relations except for some logistic and military equipment trade.

Because of the development of the Republic of Korea and the U.S. combined exercise, military cooperation, and United States Forces in Korea for the last seven decades, natural reactions of North Korea would have been similar actions such as combined military exercises with her allies, China and Russia, or military bases of the PLA or the Russian Army in North Korea. Since there are neither foreign troops in North Korea nor combined exercises between the KPA and foreign troops, an intriguing question that academic and policy experts, intelligence agencies, and military and government departments of the ROK and the U.S. concerning North Korea might ask would be why North Korea does not consider these options. However, a myth of North Korea and China / Russia (the Soviet Union) as alliances has been never asked. So far, scholars, experts, journalists, intelligence agencies, military, diplomats, and other government officials did not raise this simple question and overlooked the importance of looking into the question. A myth and stereotype have hindered many important questions from being asked and led policy towards North Korea in the wrong direction. This is one of the many question that have not been asked, which experts, policymakers, and their advisors must consider for better policy design and making.

There have been various reasons why North Korea has not had foreign troops in North Korea and never had a combined exercise with China and Russia despite its counterparts strengthening the trilateral security and military partnership against North Korea. In this study, I will provide a number of reasons why North Korea did not have a military exercise with the PLA and the Russian Army by exploring North Korean history, domestic politics, collective trauma, and psychological elements throughout history as well as its nationalism – so-called Juche Ideology.

## The Korean War Legacy and a Search for the Juche's Army

The Korean War is an important factor in understanding the nature of the North Korean state. Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was founded in 1948. Throughout the Korean War, DPRK became a garrison state because of a strong legacy of the Korean War. Through the Korean War, Kim's regime and the North Korean people learned two important lessons: they should never believe foreign countries, and they must defend themselves.

After the end of the Cold War, many classified documents, including those of China and Russia, became declassified and available to the public. Based on these primary sources, many post-revisionist historians on the Korean War interpreted the Korean War from a new perspective. For instance, Shen Zhihua argued that because of the Sino-Soviet relations, Stalin approved Kim's plan to invade the South. The Sino-Soviet relations were very complicated at the initial stage and never went well according to newly declassified Chinese primary sources.<sup>4)</sup> Based on primary sources from Russia, Kathryn Weathersby pointed out that the Soviet Union deeply supported and engaged in the initial planning stage of North Korea's invasion of South Korea, including telegrams between Stalin and Kim Il Sung.<sup>5)</sup>

According to Youngjun Kim, Kim Il Sung was very humiliated during the Korean War not just by its main enemies, the U.S. and South Korea but also because of its senior partners, the Soviet Union and China, which only cared about their national interests but not the costs of North Korean people throughout the Korean War. Kim never believed in dependency on foreign troops for the destiny of North Korea and strongly believed that North Korea must defend itself.<sup>6)</sup> During the Korean War, the Soviet Union sent an advisory group that assisted North Korea with an invasion plan at the initial stage. However, when the KPA was in a crisis after the Incheon Landing operation, the Soviet Union advised Kim Il Sung to give up the war

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4) Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*(London: Routledge, 2012)

5) Kathryn Weathersby, "Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: New evidence from the Russian Archives." *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*8. (November. 1993.) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.; "New Evidence on the Korean War" *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*6/7 (1995) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars., 30-125.; "To Attack or Not Attack? Stalin, Kim Il Sung, and Prelude to War" *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*Vol. 5. (1995) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.; "Should We Fear This? Stalin and the Danger of War with America." *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*. No. 39. (2002) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.; "New Evidence on North Korea" *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*14/15 (2003) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 5-138.

6) Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: The People's Army and the Korean War*(London: Routledge, 2017)

and flee to Manchuria while Chinese Volunteer Forces Leader Peng Dehuai ignored Kim Il Sung and commanded the CVF without listening to Kim Il Sung during the war. In the end, Stalin and Mao did not want an armistice but delayed the war as long as possible for their own interests by ignoring the casualties of North Korean people who were attacked by air bombing campaigns in North Korea for the last two years.<sup>7)</sup>

After the Korean War, Kim Il Sung and the North Korean people appreciated China's help and support that helped North Korea to survive. However, the stronger sentiment was that they would never get any military and defense engagement from China and the Soviet Union for their survival again and they must defend themselves.<sup>8)</sup> After the 1956 crisis and a withdrawal of the CVFs from North Korea, North Korea has continuously searched for self-defense capability based on Juche Ideology (Self Reliance theory), and nuclear weapons was a magic solution to achieve this goal without depending on foreign troops. Before becoming the leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung and his group were experienced guerilla forces who worked with Chinese guerillas against the Japanese Army and then became the Soviet Army 88th Reconnaissance Brigade.<sup>9)</sup> These experiences convinced Kim Il Sung that self-defense capability would be the only tool in guaranteeing independence and maintaining political power. During the Soviet-Sino split in the 1960s, North Korea used balanced diplomacy between the two giant countries – the Soviet Union and China. Détente was a shock to Kim Il Sung because China never talked to North Korea before a surprising meeting between Mao and Nixon in the 1970s.<sup>10)</sup>

This intricate international environment led North Korea to seek an independent position and self-defense capability without dependency on foreign troops. Its

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7) Youngjun Kim, “Why Did Stalin Not Support a Quick Victory for the Korean People’s Army? Stalin’s Unspoken Global Security Strategy for the Korean War” *The Korean Journal of International Studies*17(1) (April 2019): 79-102.; Kim Donggil, “Stalin’s Korean U-Turn: The USSR’s Evolving Security Strategy and the Origins of the Korean War.” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*24(1) (June 2011): 89-114.; Kathryn Weathersby and Kang Gyu-hyong, “Puk-Chung-So Samgakkwan’gyega 6.25 Chonjaeng Kwajonggwa Chonhu Puk’anoegyo Haengt’ae Mich’in Yonghyang: KimirhaejemunSORUL Chungshimuro (Influence of Triangle Relations among North Korea, China and the Soviet Union and the Korean War on North Korean Foreign Policy: Based on Declassified Documents.” *Chongshin Munhwa Yon’gu (Studies on Spiritual Culture)*33(3): 117-142.

8) Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: The People’s Army and the Korean War* (London: Routledge, 2017), 230-237.

9) *Ibid*, 35-85.; Suh, Dae-Sook, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader*(New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Bruce Cumings, “Corporatism in North Korea” *The Journal of Korean Studies*4 (1982-1983): 269-294.

10) Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, *After Learning to One Side: China and Its Allies in the Cold War*(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959*. (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2015); Shen Zhihua and Xia Yafeng, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976*.(New York: Columbia University Press, 2020)

dependency on one side – the Soviet Union or China – was not an option for North Korea and was even dangerous for North Korea. The Korean War legacy convinced North Korea that self-defense capability without the support of foreign troops would be the only tool for its survival, and a complicated Cold War situation made North Korea believe this more and more. A search for the Juche's Army as a small nation natural led to a search for a magic weapon – nuclear weapons. In this context, nuclear weapons are not only a sword against their main enemies, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea, but also a shield against influences of bigger neighboring countries, China and Russia.

### **A Fear of Domestic Political Rivals**

To Kim's regime, external threats have been South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, and internal domestic rivals were pro-Chinese factions. In the early days of North Korea, Kim Il Sung's group was the smallest faction but was supported by the Soviet Union. The largest group was composed of domestic communists led by Park Hon-yong, the first foreign minister of North Korea and legendary activist on communism during the Japanese colonial period. The elite group favored China, the so-called Yeonan group that welcomed political and military elites such as Kim Tu-bong, Pang Ho-san, Nam Il, and Mu Chong. In particular, the pro-China group influenced the KPA because many veterans of former Korean Chinese soldiers joined the KPA from China between 1949 and 1950.

On the eve of the Korean War, the former Korean Volunteer Army (KVA) and former Maoist Army against the Chinese Nationalists during the Chinese Civil War dominated most of the key positions of the KPA, including about 95 percent of political commissar posts and about 50 percent of generals. Kim Il Sung's group was working with China, not as a regular army of the Maoist Army, but as guerilla forces before they went to the Soviet Union in 1941. Thus, the pro-China group naturally had strong personal relations with the elites of the Chinese Communist Party. During the Korean War, Kim Il Sung feared a rise of the pro-China group when the CVFs dominated the war under the leadership of Peng Dehui, the leader of the CVFs.<sup>11)</sup> Kim Il Sung purged Park Hon-yong during the Korean War. However, at the time, the pro-China group increased its influence thanks to Chinese support. The 1956 Crisis led by the pro-China group, a failed attempt to remove Kim Il Sung, was at a climax. Kim Il Sung decided to expel CVFs for minimizing Chinese influence.<sup>12)</sup>

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11) Youngjun Kim, *Origins of the North Korean Garrison State: The People's Army and the Korean War* (London: Routledge, 2017), 146,168.; Yi Chongsok, *Puk'an Chungguk Kwan'gye, 1945-2000 (Sino-North Korean Relations, 1945-2000)* (Seoul: Joongsim, 2000)

12) Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); James F. Person, "We Need Help from Outside: The North

When the Cold War ended in 1991, the Soviet Union stopped to support North Korea, and, in turn, North Korea's dependency on China was largely increased. Kim Jong Il feared a rise of Chinese influence because of economic dependency on China and gambled a new way to build relations with South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Kim Jong Il invited South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and U.S. State Secretary Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang. Had Al Gore won the Presidential Election against George W. Bush, Kim Jong Il's new adventure would have been successful. However, the new Bush Administration defined North Korea as a rogue state and axis of evil. When Kim Jong Il faced massive famine, he focused on developing nuclear weapons. An intriguing and unsolved question is why Kim Jong Il's North Korea survived after millions of deaths but did not ask for massive Chinese support to feed North Korean people. Since 1991, North Korea's economic dependency on China radically increased and today more than 95 or 99 percent of North Korea's total trade is with China only. During the 1990s, Kim Jong Il only focused on nuclear weapons development and did not seek a combined military exercise with China's PLA or reintroduction of Chinese forces against the ROK-US combined exercise and military cooperation as well as USFK in South Korea.

Kim Jong Un became a leader, purged pro-Chinese political rivals, Jang Sung Taek and Kim Jong Nam, and gambled a new adventure with the Moon administration and the Trump administration with nuclear weapons. After a failed Hanoi Summit, Kim Jong Un focused to develop nuclear and missile capabilities and back to its old friends, China and Russia. Over the seven decades, North Korea searched for nuclear and missile capabilities against the ROK-US alliance, but its relations with China and Russia have been maintained on the diplomatic and economic level, not the military level. The ROK-US military alliance has been strong against North Korea; the USFK is one of the largest scales of the US forces in foreign countries. Only nuclear weapons and missile are not enough for North Korea in terms of military capabilities, but North Korea never took part in any combined exercise and asked China or Russia for any troops. This study argues that the Korean War legacy, a search for the Juche Army, and a fear of domestic political rivals are the main reasons why North Korea has not considered its military cooperation with either China or Russia as a viable option for over decades.<sup>13)</sup>

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Korean Opposition Movement of 1956" *Cold War International History Project Working Paper#52* (August 2006) The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

13) Youngjun Kim, "North Korea's Relations with China and Russia in the Security Realm" in Jaewoo Choo, Youngjun Kim, Artyom Lukin, and Elizabeth Wishnick, *The China-Russia Entente and the Korean Peninsula. NBR Special Report* no. 78. March 29, 2019. The National Bureau of Asian Research.

## Main Factors for Why Now

Over the decades, North Korea has focused on nuclear and missile development, not military exercise with foreign troops, and emphasized Juche Ideology and nuclear power armed state. International environments characterized by the Russian Ukraine War and the US-China strategic competition made the world more like Machiavelli's world, and liberal institutionalism's world, the post-1945 world system, has been weakened. In this situation, the US wants to save liberal internationalism by cooperating with like-minded countries in Europe and Indo Pacific region. Revisionist and authoritarian states such as China and Russia are the main threats to liberal international order and the US led a strong network against this challenge. In Indo Pacific region, the Republic of Korea and Japan are key countries along with Australia, India, and New Zealand as well as Southeast Asia against China while NATO countries are key countries against Russia. In this environment, the Republic of Korea and Japan have chosen to enhance their security and military partnership with the US against North Korean threats and the rise of China. For North Korea, nuclear weapons and missiles are not enough against this global partnership, and it needs more options to increase its security and guarantee its survival. Thus, now, it seems reasonable to expect North Korea to seek more possible options for enhanced security.

## The New Cold War

The rise of China has changed many aspects of the world politics. China will surpass the US in the economy in the near future and its influence in foreign policy and military capability becomes more dominant beyond the Chinese mainland. Taiwan contingency has been a main concern of the world community and many experts and military expect that China will invade Taiwan sometime soon like 2027.<sup>14)</sup> The rise of the Chinese military was double edge sword for North Korea. A stronger PLA is good for North Korea as combined efforts against the US, Japan, and the ROK. But, at the same time, too strong and too powerful China has always been a fear of North Korea because of Chinese political influence and a rise of pro-China domestic rivals. Nonetheless, strong China as one team is generally a good environment for the survival of North Korea. Recently, an important shift started in this region – Russia-China combined military exercise. In 2018, the Russia-China combined military exercise took place in the Far Eastern area of Russia during the 2018 Vostok

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14) Eldridge Colby, "America Must Prepare for a War over Taiwan: Being Ready is the Best Way to Prevent a Fight with China" August 10, 2022. *Foreign Affairs.*; Amy Hawkins, "Taiwan foreign minister warns of conflict with China in 2027" *The Guardian.* April 21, 2023.

exercise. It became an international sensation because of its possible impacts on international security. Many experts expected that it was only a diplomatic gesture and political symbol against the West because Russia and China were still strategic competitors. However, as time went by, Russia and China's combined military exercises increased their scale, depth, and details between the Russian Army and the PLA.

Today, many experts, including Richard Weitz of the Hudson Institute, consider Russia and China's combined military exercise as long-term military cooperation, not a short-term event.<sup>15)</sup> So far, North Korea does not engage in any actions like military exercise with the PLA and the Russian Army. However, during the Vietnam War, North Korea deployed a small number of the KPA in Vietnam, and recently a rise of the trilateral security and military partnership among the US, ROK, and Japan has concerned North Korea. There is no evidence of how North Korea will react to the Taiwan contingency or possible conflicts between the US and China. However, different from inter-Korea conflicts, great power competitions are not controlled by small nations, and North Korea closely watches a series of possible conflicts in Northeast Asia. In particular, the Taiwan contingency will make the Korean Peninsula engage in a conflict because of a possible deployment of USFK toward a conflict zone. Two Koreas cannot be not related in the issues of the US and China strategic competition if the US and China fight near Taiwan or the South China Sea. Because of the complexity of regional conflict, the US, ROK, and Japan have maintained communication channels and shared intelligence and information. North Korea naturally is not avoidable to cooperate with the Chinese PLA for its survival and preparing any type of scenario which will impact its survival. During the Obama Administration, the North Korean contingency and collapse scenario was a main concern and topic that the ROK and the US should prepare for. Now, the Taiwan contingent situation is the most likely and dangerous scenario in the region and the two Koreas cannot avoid its deep engagement in this conflict because of the USFK and deep partnership with its allies.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China were not friendly. During détente, China was with the U.S. In the New Cold War, Russia and China strongly stand together and the Russia-Ukraine War and the Taiwan contingency made them more closely against the West. During the Cold War, North Korea maintained double diplomacy between the Soviet Union and China, but now North Korea needs to choose defense alone or work with the PLA and the Russian Army against the stronger counterpart military partnership. To North Korea, it is a time to work with the PLA and the Russian Army. Nuclear weapons and missiles are not enough for North Korea's survival in the new Cold War conflicts that might be triggered by the Taiwan contingency. As opposed to the nuclear weaponry and missiles of China, Russia, and

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15) Richard Weitz, *Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends*. (July 2021) Center for Strategic and International Studies.

the US, North Korea's nuclear weaponry and missile capabilities are small and weak and do not guarantee its survival. The KPA was too weak, too small, and too outdated with no logistics, no supplies, and no ammunition against the ROK, US, and Japan's combined military capabilities. North Korea's military engagement with the PLA and the Russian Army is not a choice but only a survival option. The only important thing is when North Korea will join Russia and China's military partnership and what types of areas North Korea will cooperate in with the PLA and the Russian Army. It will be difficult for North Korea to receive the PLA and the Russian soldiers stationed in North Korea sometime soon, but sending a small number of KPA soldiers and units and collaborating on cyber, information, propaganda and psychological war are the easiest way to start soon. To prepare for a possible conflict on the Korean Peninsula, a nuclear-armed KPA is a possible deterrence tool, but beyond the Korean Peninsula, the KPA without the PLA and the Russian Army is too weak against the US, ROK, and Japan's combined military capabilities.

## The Trump Legacy

Trump left strong legacies to the world communities and Trumpism is still strong in US politics. South Korea's nuclear armament debate is not just because of the North Korean threats and the Russia-Ukraine War but also a fundamental fear of Trump again. North Korea also learned many lessons from the Trump era. A failed denuclearization summit was clear but Trump's unconventional approach to international politics and alliances made a strong impression. Weaken alliances and peace treaty negotiations were welcome by North Korea, but at the same time, the uncertainty of Trump's unconventional foreign policy caused strategic instability in the region. For instance, Trump mentioned a possible nuclear development of South Korea and Japan by reducing US forces in Korea and Japan while maintaining a strong stance on China. The bigger nuclear button and Fire and Fury comments were also unforgettable to North Korea. Trump's national security staff's memoirs and interviews show that a nuclear war was most likely in 2017.<sup>16)</sup> Trump's unconventional, unpredictable foreign policy was an opportunity and a threat to North Korea.

The more important thing is that Trump has not gone away and Trumpism is

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16) John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Mike Pompeo, *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the American I Love*(New York: Broadside Books, 2023); Van Jackson, *On the Blink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*(New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2018); Bob Woodward, *Fear : Trump in the White House*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Bob Woodward, *Rage*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020)

getting stronger in American Politics. American people's support for the America First policy has been stronger now than during the Trump era. Foreign policy elites of Democrats and Republicans are not very different and similar. However, the America First policy is a complex problem not only for allied nations but also counterparts such as North Korea. Strategic instability makes the nation seek stronger deterrence capability beyond the status quo. More nukes and longer missiles are not different from the status quo to North Korea's survival capability. Self-defense capability works in an era of strategic stability during the Cold War and post-Cold War. However, during the Trump era, no nation feels more security but more insecure and fear of uncertainty. Because of the America First policy, if Trump is back or someone with a similar outlook comes to power, allied nations will seek more deterrence capabilities like European countries did during the Trump era or develop their own nuclear weapons rather than extended deterrence. Because of the arms race and security dilemma, not only allied nations of the US but also North Korea will seek more deterrence capabilities and stronger security options. In this context, more nukes, smaller nukes like TNW, longer ICBM, and hidden SLBM are not options for stronger deterrence, but a stronger military partnership with China and Russia could be a game changer that will enhance North Korea's survival capability and stronger combined deterrence capabilities against the US, ROK, and Japan. Therefore, the Trump factor and Trumpism could be one main factor for North Korea to seek non-considerable security options like military engagement with the PLA and the Russian Army.

### **Russian and Chinese Perspectives on North Korea as a Military Partner**

It is important to understand Russian and Chinese perspectives on North Korea as military partners. Russian and Chinese open diplomatic positions are supportive of diplomatic solutions and peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, according to China's long tradition of the PLA's principles regarding external relations, the PLA will not have military bases in oversea countries except the Peace Keeping Forces. And China will not have a military alliance with the Third World countries. Thus, the Russian and Chinese position for peace on the Korean Peninsula never changed openly and the PLA's principles had been continued. However, recently, the US, ROK, and Japan's trilateral security partnership has been growing. Since the 2018 VOSTOK exercise, Russia and China have developed a stronger military partnership than ever. Because of the changes in regional and international situations, although the PLA does not have military bases in Russian territory, the PLA and the Russian Army have had larger and bigger scale combined military exercises in Russian and Chinese territories since 2018. In different situations, the PLA's principles could be changed at any time. So far, there has been no significant

military cooperation between Russia/China and North Korea. However, there will be growing possibilities of a joint military partnership between these three countries against a growing military partnership between the US, Japan, and the ROK. Tradition or principles will not apply to the future PLA, Russian Army and the KPA's military cooperation and partnership. The three countries' military partnerships are both reactive against their counterparts and proactive against the possible development of their counterpart military partnership. In this context, all scenarios are possible and open for future PLA, Russian Army, and the KPA military partnership. The following scenarios are feasible in the future.

### **Possible Scenarios and Policy Implications**

If North Korea joins Russia and China's combined military exercise or deep military engagement, it will be a nightmare scenario for the Republic of Korea, the U.S., and Japan, and its potential impact will be much larger than additional nuclear weapons and missile tests. Hundreds of thousands of the KPA soldiers in the Russian Far Eastern area or Manchuria or hundreds of thousands of the PLA and the Russian soldiers near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or a combined naval exercises sea near Wonsan area or Northern Limited Line (NLL) will be a disaster for the ROK security as well as Northeast Asian strategic stability. North Korea may also join information, psychological, propaganda, and cyber warfare with China and Russia. Moreover, China and Russia can deploy their tactical nuclear weapons and missiles and install radar system in North Korea. In the situation room of the KPA, the PLA, and the Russian Army during a combined military exercise, Seoul could be a target of nuclear weapons, missiles, and artilleries of the PLA and the Russian Army in their operational action plans.

All of these possible scenarios have been never considerable scenarios, but no one can stop any of these scenarios because all scenarios would be possible scenario because all scenarios would be decided by their sovereignties. There is not a single logical reason to blame North Korea, China and Russia if any of the scenarios happen. All will be much more like a security dilemma and arms race situation toward a possible Third World War. To prevent these worst scenarios, a road towards the Third World War, from happening, I propose the following suggestions.

First, the ROK, the US, Japan, and all like-minded countries including Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asian countries, and NATO countries have to pay attention to possible military cooperation between North Korea, China, and Russia and all these countries have to strengthen their military partnership and efforts together. The creation of NATO in the Indo-Pacific will be one option. The United Nations Command (UNC) was created for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, the UNC countries could use the UNC as a foundation for NATO in the Indo-Pacific

region. More cooperation of all these countries in cyber, sea, space, and other domains are needed.

Secondly, to minimize the chance of military cooperation between North Korea and China/Russia, a decoupling strategy between North Korea and them should be considered. North Korea wants a peace treaty and security guarantee by nuclear negotiation with the US. Some sanction release is also a request of North Korea to give up some capabilities of nuclear weapons and missiles. So far, CVID or FFVE, namely all or nothing approach, has been adopted in North Korea's case over the three decades. This approach includes 1) asking North Korea to give up all nuclear weapons, including nuclear facilities and materials, based on verification and 2) offering North Korea rewards such as sanction release, normalization of the US-North Korea relations, and a peace treaty. However, over the three decades, this strategy has repeatedly failed, leading to denuclearization efforts only in theory, not in action.

Thus, the next step should be decoupling between North Korea and China. After all, North Korea's two grand strategic goals are a security guarantee of the North Korean regime and economic and political independence from China economically and politically because North Korea has been economically colonized by China since 1991. Threat reduction approach, tension reduction approach, step-by-step approach, and nuclear arms control approach are now mainstream approaches in Washington DC policy communities for decoupling strategy aiming at North Korea and China complex relation because reducing nuclear threats are much better than doing nothing and only saying CVID. Recent studies undertaken by the following experts, including Toby Dalton, Ankit Panda, Youngjun Kim, Sharon Squasooni, Eric Brewer, Jeffery Lewis, Adam Mount, Van Jackson, Frank Aum, Jenny Town, Joseph Yun, Jessica Lee, and others suggest these approaches after the failed Hanoi Summit in 2019.<sup>17)</sup> A goal of this practical approach is exactly same as CVID and FFVD – Nuclear Zeron in the end, but these experts consider a realistic and pragmatic approach. These realistic and pragmatic approaches will ensure strategic

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17) Toby Dalton and Youngjun Kim, "Negotiating Nuclear Arms Control with North Korea: Why and How?" *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 33(1) (March 2021), 1-21.; Jeffrey Lewis, "It's Time to Accept That North Korea Has Nuclear Weapons" *The New York Times*. October 13, 2022.; Eric Brewer and Sue Mi Terry, "It Is Time for a Realistic Bargain With North Korea: Denuclearization Is Probably Out of Reach for Now - but It Might Be Possible to Reduce the Nuclear Threat" *Foreign Affairs*. March 25, 2021.; Sharon Squassoni, *Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula: An Arms Control Framework*, November 18, 2022.; Frank Aum and Jessica J. Lee, "Beyond Deterrence: A Peace Game Exercise for the Korean Peninsula" *Quincy Brief* No. 20. February 14, 2022. Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.; Van Jackson, "Risk Realism: The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy. September 24, 2019. Center for New American Security.; Jina Kim, Toby Dalton, and Youngjun Kim, "Korean Peninsula Conventional and Nuclear Arms Control Linkage" *2021 International Joint Research Project* (Seoul: Research Institute of National Security Affairs of the Korea National Defense University, 2021), 1-46.

stability on the Korean Peninsula and enable North Korea to be independent militarily from China or Russia – foreign troops – and keep its Juche Ideology. This could reduce the likelihood of the worst scenario – North Korea joining Russia and China’s military cooperation and combined exercise.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines why North Korea did not have any combined military exercises and foreign troops in North Korea over the seven decades since the withdrawal of the CVFs in the late 1950s and why North Korea is able to consider all of them today. The main question of this research has been never asked and never answered. The New Cold War situation made the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia a more dangerous place and a possible place for the Third World War near future. Many experts consider Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula as the most likely war places for the New Cold War. In this situation, more military partnerships between the ROK, the US, and Japan are needed and unavoidable because of the rise of China and Russia-China military cooperation as well as North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats. In other words, North Korea needs more security options than its nuclear weapons and missiles. Russia and China’s combined military exercises and military cooperation have continued and will be strengthened. Naturally, North Korea will consider strengthening a military partnership with China and Russia. All these situations will lead to strategic instability, security dilemma, and arms race. This will be a road towards the Third World War. In this study, I propose two policy suggestions. More military and security partnerships between like-minded countries are needed, and a new realistic and pragmatic approach toward North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles should be adopted to minimize a likelihood of North Korea joining China and Russia’s military cooperation. This study provides a foundation for further research and policy implications for policymakers.

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