



# Implications of the Iran War for Security on the Korean Peninsula

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*By Chung-in Moon*

### SYNOPSIS

*The US-Israel war against Iran has implications for security on the Korean Peninsula – both positive and negative. The good news is that North Korea is unlikely to be the next target of US military action. The bad news is that North Korea's defences have become much more hardened, and a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue has become more difficult. Urgent tasks for the South Korean government include reducing tension, building confidence and accelerating peaceful coexistence with the North. In doing so, resuming dialogue with the North is essential.*

### COMMENTARY

The United States and Israel launched a surprise attack on Iran named Operation Epic Fury on February 28, 2026. Despite President Donald Trump's claim of a quick victory, the war continues with no signs of an immediate end. Although the war is taking place far away, it has profound implications for security on the Korean Peninsula – both positive and negative.

The good news is that despite the concerns of some pundits, [North Korea is unlikely to be the next target of American military action.](#) The US lacks the capacity to fight two major wars, either simultaneously or in succession, in the Persian Gulf and on the Korean Peninsula. Overstretched military capabilities, the mounting burden of defence costs and waning public support will pose formidable barriers to Trump launching another war targeting North Korea. This is especially the case because the Iran war has not formally ended; the current ceasefire might continue for some time, or hostilities could resume. Cuba might be an easy next target, but North Korea is not.

Even if the US has the capability and the intention, a preemptive strike on North Korea would not be an easy task. Pyongyang possesses nuclear weapons and a wide range of ballistic missiles for retaliation. It has acquired the capability to strike American military bases in Japan and South Korea, either preemptively or in retaliation. Moreover, it has an ICBM capability that puts the US mainland at risk. Its deterrent capabilities would be sufficient to prevent the US from launching a surprise attack on North Korea.

The US and Israel's military action against Iran was driven in part by the belief that eliminating Iran's leadership through military strikes could lead to regime change through a mass uprising by the Iranian people. But North Korea is not Iran. As the recent 9th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea demonstrated, President Kim Jong Un's power and leadership are firmly entrenched, and there are no signs of domestic unrest and internal division. If anything, American-style blustering and pressure campaigns would only reinforce Kim's domestic support and legitimacy.

There's another factor: Trump has a high degree of distrust of the Iranian leadership, and the US has taken the radical step of launching military strikes during negotiations. On the other hand, Trump has worked to maintain a personal relationship with Kim over the years and has repeatedly emphasised his willingness to reopen negotiations without preconditions, leaving room for dialogue and diplomacy.

As many US government officials and analysts have asserted, Iran did not pose any imminent threat to Israel or America. Yet, the US joined Israel in undertaking military action against Iran, partly because of pressure from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the influence of the Israeli Lobby in the US. Many critics saw Israel as one of the prime movers behind the war against Iran. But when it comes to North Korea, no country comparable to Israel has influence over the US government. Also, a powerful lobby inside the US pushing for regime change in North Korea does not exist.

The Lee Jae Myung government in South Korea calls for peaceful co-existence and opposes any unilateral American military action against North Korea. It is inconceivable that the US would launch any offensive military operation against the North without prior consultation and cooperation with the South. The Lee government is thus an effective deterrent to any US military action against North Korea.

Finally, differences in the geopolitical environment also matter. Iran is in a grave geopolitical bind as it faces a powerful security-based alignment comprising Sunni Arab states in the region, Israel and the United States. Although China and Russia are friendly with Iran, they did not provide active military support as they were concerned about US retaliation.

North Korea is in a very different position. Russia and China would respond differently to hostile US action against North Korea. Russia has a de facto military alliance with North Korea following the signing of a new treaty in June 2024, and North Korea maintains a friendship treaty with China. So, if the US were to attack

North Korea with the aim of overthrowing the Kim regime, China and Russia would almost certainly intervene militarily.

The bad news is that since the Iran war, North Korea's defence position has hardened significantly, and a negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear problem has become more difficult.

The Iran war has reinforced Pyongyang's long-held view of the US and the current international order, as the 9th party congress averred: "Since the international order is dominated by the gangster-like logic of jungle law that strength respects strength, North Korea should arm itself with such powerful force as nuclear weapons. That is the only means capable of putting an end to the imperialist ambition for aggression."

For Pyongyang, Washington is prepared to use military force against North Korea and even seeks to decapitate its leaders when it is deemed necessary. Thus, nuclear weapons are the only answer to a changing international order and US military aggression. For Kim Jong Un, the lesson is unmistakable: the country's nuclear status is not something to surrender, nor is it up for negotiation.

The 12-Day War against Iran last June and the latest conflict have also sharply eroded North Korea's trust in the US. In both cases, from Pyongyang's perspective, Washington unilaterally derailed talks and attacked Iran while diplomacy was still underway, and reportedly even making progress. Kim's personal ties with Trump notwithstanding, such US behaviour towards Iran will have deepened Pyongyang's distrust of Washington.

North Korea should have [learned other lessons too](#): Iran's intelligence failure to detect the American and Israeli surprise attack, the subsequent vulnerability of its command-and-control system, major flaws in its air defence system and in Chinese and Russian weapons systems, the danger of decapitation and its impact on decision-making systems, the lack of military support from China and Russia, and increased doubt about extended nuclear deterrence. Learning from Iran's failures can help overcome these shortcomings and improve North Korea's war preparations.

More worrisome is North Korea's hardened and bolder strategic posture. Having learned that signs of weakness and appeasement can invite more pressure and aggression from the US, Pyongyang will maintain a much tougher military stance. To assure its deterrence against the US, Pyongyang will likely enhance its ability to conduct preemptive strikes on American military bases in Pyongtaek and Osan, as well as those in Japan, using its short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, while boasting of its ICBM capabilities to threaten the US mainland and keep the US military at bay.

Finally, Kim Jong Un will have realised the critical importance of internal cohesion and consolidation of power, as any signs of domestic instability can serve as a pretext for foreign political and military intervention. North Korea's leadership will further tighten its grip on domestic actors. Kim will also make every effort to strengthen North Korea's traditional ties with Russia and China, without which its deterrent capability could be easily compromised.

While the good news relieves Seoul of anxiety about “the coming war with North Korea,” Pyongyang’s tougher military posture complicates the security equation on the Korean Peninsula. Urgent tasks for the Lee Jae Myung government include reducing tension, building confidence and accelerating peaceful coexistence with the North. In doing so, resuming dialogue with the North seems essential.

To revive dialogue and negotiation, a paradigm shift is needed. Calls for denuclearisation will be a non-starter. Both Seoul and Washington should be prepared for dialogue with a nuclear North Korea. A freeze on nuclear and missile activities, non-proliferation, and a reduction of the nuclear and missile arsenals, not denuclearisation, should be the agenda for dialogue and negotiation. The US and South Korea should prepare for step-by-step, groundbreaking incentives that the North cannot refuse.

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