

# The Challenges of North Korea's Nuclear Program and International Cooperation

Sung-Yoon Chung et al.

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# **The Challenges of North Korea's Nuclear Program and International Cooperation**

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# 1

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## Introduction



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The main purposes of this study are to identify the challenges of the North Korean nuclear problem and propose possible responses. This study is motivated by the following contexts. First, the North Korean nuclear problem has significantly worsened since 2022. Moreover, the nature of the problem is highly likely to change, and the implications of such change are expected to be substantial. Second, the new policy for denuclearization of North Korea that South Korea will choose to adopt is more critical than ever given North Korea's advancement of its nuclear capabilities and the greater level of threat that it consequently poses. Given the seriousness of the current situation and the need for further research, this study seeks to present indicators that the new Yoon Suk Yeol administration, inaugurated in May 2022, can utilize to evaluate the strategic environment from the early stages of the administration's term and propose policy recommendations accordingly.

To effectively pursue these goals, this study adopts a collaborative research system encompassing policy-makers, academia, and experts between Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), research institutes affiliated with universities, and academic councils. The study conducted an opinion survey of relevant experts in order to analyze the policy environment. The respondents of the expert opinion survey included academics specializing in this field as well as former high-ranking officials that worked on the North Korean nuclear problem. The fundamental objective of the expert opinion survey was to determine the main challenges of the North Korean nuclear problem that the South Korean government will likely face until 2023. This was achieved by asking experts their views on a variety of issues related to the

strategic environment of the North Korean nuclear problem, the strategic relationships among key states, assessments of major issues, and suggested policies for the South Korean government.

Based on the expert opinion survey, this study attempts to categorize challenges associated with the North Korean nuclear problem into alliance-level, regional-level, and global-level challenges. For each of these categories, the causes, contents, and implications of the challenges identified are explored. Based on this analysis, the study proposes an effective response system to counter the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons at all three levels. In addition, the study concludes by suggesting the direction and measures of effective international cooperation for the denuclearization of North Korea at each level. This study highlights the fact that the denuclearization of North Korea must be achieved through strategic cooperation among South Korea, major powers in the region, and the broader international community.

# 2

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## The Current State of the North Korean Nuclear Problem and Its Assessment

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The gravest challenges confronting the Yoon administration early in its term are North Korea's provocations and its advancement of nuclear and missile capabilities. North Korea resumed its testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on March 24, 2022, not long after the inauguration of the Yoon administration. This was North Korea's first test in 4.5 years after the test launch of the Hwasong-15 missile on November 29, 2017. Since then, North Korea has engaged in more than 30 provocations by test launching short-, mid-, and long-range ballistic missiles in 2022, including two test launches of new types of ICBMs. As a result, North Korea has clearly violated the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that prohibits the testing of ballistic missiles. In addition, North Korea's missile provocations have officially nullified the moratorium on nuclear and missile tests that Kim Jong-un himself announced in 2018.

In addition to advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities, North Korea has also codified its nuclear doctrine. During the second day of the 7<sup>th</sup> session of the 14<sup>th</sup> term of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) held on September 8, 2022, North Korea promulgated new legislation titled the 'Law on the State Policy of the Nuclear Forces.' Through this piece of legislation on top of the 'Law on Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State' issued on April 1, 2013, North Korea further detailed its guidelines for the command, control, and use of nuclear weapons as well as the regime's strategic position, codifying them into domestic law. In particular, North Korea sought to bolster its nuclear deterrent against the U.S. through this promulgation by lowering the conditions for the aggressive and preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

The law that North Korea promulgated in September 2022 consists of 11 Articles regarding the following areas; the mission of nuclear forces, the composition of nuclear forces, command and control of nuclear forces, execution of the decision to use nuclear weapons, principles of nuclear weapons use, conditions for nuclear weapons use, normal deployment of nuclear forces, safe maintenance and protection of nuclear weapons, qualitative advancements and updates of nuclear forces, prevention of proliferation, etc. In Article 6, North Korea specifies the following five conditions allowed for the use of nuclear weapons: first, when judged that an attack by nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has been launched or is imminent; second, when judged that a nuclear or non-nuclear attack by hostile forces against the state leadership and the command organization of the state's nuclear forces has been launched or is imminent; third, when judged that a fatal military attack against important strategic objects of the state has been launched or is imminent; fourth, when a nuclear attack is unavoidably deemed necessary to prevent the expansion and protraction of war as well as to seize the dominance during the war; and fifth, when hit by a catastrophic crisis that threatens the existence of the state and the safety of the people that unavoidably requires a response through the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>1)</sup> As North Korea has advanced its nuclear and missile capabilities through continued provocations and has codified an aggressive nuclear posture into domestic law,

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<sup>1)</sup> Seong-chang Cheong, "Evaluation of Changes in North Korea's Nuclear Command and Control System and Conditions for Using Nuclear Weapons: Focusing on the Sep. 8 Act on Nuclear Forces Policy," *Sejong Commentary*, No. 2022-06 (September 14, 2022), <<https://sejong.org/web/boad/22/egor-ead.php?bd=22&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=6747>> (accessed February 10, 2023)

the situation on the Korean peninsula has effectively deteriorated back to the 2017 competition of ‘responding to power with power.’<sup>2)</sup>

Under such conditions, what challenges will South Korea face due to the North Korean nuclear problem? It is clear that these challenges will arise from South Korea’s strategic environment. There is also a wide range of factors that will determine the circumstances surrounding the North Korean problem for South Korea. As such, major factors and policy conditions that will affect the North Korea policy of the Yoon administration and its strategy for the denuclearization of North Korea can be viewed as follows: North Korea’s capabilities and strategy, America’s North Korea policy and U.S.-China relations, and the ramifications of geopolitical crises. Therefore, challenges facing the North Korean problem that may arise due to changes to these policy-related factors need to be identified.

First of all, the most important factors are North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities and its nuclear strategy. The degree to which the environment for the denuclearization of North Korea would deteriorate is correlated with North Korea’s advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities. North Korea will expect

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<sup>2)</sup> On September 7, the day before the promulgation of the ‘Law on the State Policy of the Nuclear Forces,’ Kim Jong-un claimed that the law had bolstered the legal significance of nuclear weapons. In his address to the SPA, Kim Jong-un declared that “the Law on the State Policy of the Nuclear Forces has significant meaning as it draws a clear line beyond which there will be no retreat where we can no longer bargain with our nuclear weapons.” This can be interpreted as indication that North Korea will have no interest in engaging in negotiations on denuclearization for the time being. See, Ji-heon Kim, “North Korea Adopts Aggressive ‘Law on Nuclear Weapons’ ... Automatic Use of Nuclear Weapons in the Event of an Attack against the Leadership (in Korean),” *Yonhap News*, September 9, 2022, <<https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20220909018800504>> (accessed February 1, 2023).



concessions commensurate with its enhanced nuclear and missile capabilities. Conversely, this means that the costs of denuclearization will increase in accordance with North Korea's emboldened capabilities as North Korea will likely demand more. Moreover, the North Korean leadership may become blindly fixated on an aggressive strategy as its nuclear capabilities improve, instead of adopting a restrained strategy based on careful calculations. Whether second-strike capabilities can be secured and tactical nuclear weapons be actively deployed in the field<sup>3)</sup> are likely to be anchors (a reference point) that determine North Korea's strategic thinking.<sup>4)</sup>

In particular, if North Korea can simultaneously possess both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, its range of military and diplomatic options will expand while strategic pressure on South Korea will substantially increase. This is due to this clear fact that the target of North Korea's tactical nuclear weapons will be South Korea and the areas adjacent to the Korean peninsula. The test launching of both an ICBM and a short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) on May 25, 2022 that was simultaneously intended for both the U.S. and South Korea is an example that illustrates North

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<sup>3)</sup> North Korea will try to possess and actively deploy in the field a diverse set of tactical nuclear weapons as soon as possible. This is due to North Korea's need to counter South Korea's advanced conventional capabilities as well as the need to effectively prevent unwanted escalations (from North Korea's perspective).

<sup>4)</sup> By applying insights from theories on anchoring effects, it is clear that the North Korean leadership will continue to try to simultaneously acquire both second-strike capabilities against the U.S. and the ability to leverage tactical nuclear weapons against South Korea. It is unlikely that the North Korean leadership would consider the option of deliberately reducing these capabilities before they are fully obtained. This is because North Korea likely assesses that acquiring both of these capabilities will place them in a domain where the strategic and tactical benefits are exponentially greater.

Korea's intended strategy for nuclear weapons. Furthermore, South Korea must caution against the likelihood of strategically challenging situations that are difficult to anticipate if North Korea is able to diversify its nuclear capabilities.

Second, the second set of important strategic factors that the Yoon administration may need to address is America's North Korea policy and U.S.-China relations. America's North Korea policy directly impacts North Korea's advancement of nuclear and missile capabilities. A passive North Korea policy adopted by the U.S. will provide an environment in which North Korea may misinterpret and miscalculate America's resolve and policies. Additionally, it also creates incentives for North Korea to heighten tensions on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia through various provocations in order to draw the attention of the U.S. This, in turn, will impact America's North Korea policy, thereby creating a vicious cycle.

On the other hand, a more active North Korea policy by the U.S. is expected to create a more conducive environment for the denuclearization of North Korea as it will make the situation surrounding North Korea's denuclearization issue more dynamic. For example, a dramatic strengthening of America's extended deterrence posture will, by itself, deny any benefits from advancements to its nuclear and missile capabilities that North Korea wishes to achieve. In addition, how the U.S. chooses to address the North Korea problem within the context of America's relationship with China is also an important factor. If the U.S. is determined to compel Chinese cooperation regarding the adoption of a UN resolution on sanctions against North Korea, and if the U.S. has the ability to actively counter-coerce unjustified coercion

of South Korea by China, South Korea's diplomatic and security environment will improve significantly.

Third, changes to the global strategic environment, instigated by the war in Ukraine, can have a meaningful impact on the North Korean nuclear problem. First, as the world has become more focused on the war in Ukraine, the international community has paid less attention to the North Korean nuclear problem. The U.S. considers the war in Ukraine as a major threat to its global leadership and therefore has concentrated its assets to counter the war. This may mean that the U.S. is less attentive to managing the North Korean nuclear problem. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the U.S. may strongly request South Korea's cooperation on European and global issues. This consequently may mean that the North Korean nuclear problem no longer remains the top priority for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Above all, the war in Ukraine will pose various challenges to North Korea. North Korea will likely focus on how to utilize the strategic vacuum created by America's immediate attention in Europe. North Korea's recent consecutive ICBM provocations are likely to be carried out considering this dynamic. North Korea will conclude that Ukraine failed to deter an invasion by Russia because it abandoned its nuclear capabilities. In particular, North Korea will closely follow the situation on the ground in a war between a weak state, Ukraine, and a superpower, Russia. It will be a relief if North Korea pays attention to the reality that Russia is unable to use nuclear weapons despite military advantages. However, the war in Ukraine will worsen the North Korean nuclear problem if the war makes North Korea become captivated by the delusion that defeating the U.S. may be possible.

As noted above, the circumstances of the North Korean nuclear problem were extremely unstable during the first year of the Yoon administration, and the South Korean government is very likely to face extremely difficult challenges in the near future given various factors that affect the issue. In particular, considering North Korea's rapid advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities and high level of resolve, the North Korean nuclear problem is expected to remain extremely volatile by the latter half of 2024, until the remaining terms of President Yoon and President Biden. If North Korea is able to effectively complete the advancement of its nuclear arsenal by then, it is possible that the North Korea policy of the Biden administration will differ during the latter stages of the Biden administration's term from what it is today. In other words, unpredictable and drastic shifts to the U.S.-North Korea relationship observed under the Trump administration may return, posing yet another challenges to South Korea.

Given the seriousness of the situation, South Korea needs to respond with more realistic and effective policies that differ from the past. To begin such efforts, the Yoon administration needs to identify the various challenges that may arise from the new strategic environment before they occur, thereby reacting to the North Korean nuclear problem in a preemptive, proactive, and initiative-taking manner from the early stage of the administration's term. In other words, because it appears that North Korea is entering the final stages of advancement of its nuclear capabilities and deployment, the Yoon administration must exert every effort to counter the North Korean nuclear problem from the beginning.

In particular, South Korea must proactively manage the North Korean nuclear problem and establish a system of cooperation

within the U.S.-ROK alliance. This is necessary not only to prevent the Biden administration from reverting to 'strategic patience' for domestic and international reasons but also to ensure that the U.S. concludes that a dramatic strengthening of U.S. extended deterrence is unavoidable. Moreover, the South Korean government must also actively and boldly impact the calculus of the North Korean leadership so that North Korea is compelled to reconsider its strategic assessments about the possession and abandonment of nuclear capabilities.

Hence, it is essential for South Korea to strengthen its initiative for the denuclearization and establishment of peace on the Korean peninsula. This means that the South Korean government needs to effectively prevent foreign interference and other obstacles on the one hand, while also actively pursuing mechanisms for international cooperation that create opportunities for cooperation with the international community on the other. In other words, South Korea needs to not only emphasize how the North Korean nuclear problem is an agenda for peace on the Korean peninsula as well as the region and the world, but also assume an active role in presenting and implementing agendas for cooperation to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. In particular, establishing firm principles and maintaining a consistent position on various challenges will be essential for the South Korean government to strengthen its initiative. Furthermore, effort needs to be made to enhance the international community's understanding and acceptance of South Korea's positions and policies. This can be achieved by including measures to secure and strengthen international cooperation within the framework of the South Korean government's strategic design and operating principles.

# 3

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## Challenges to the North Korean Nuclear Problem and International Cooperation

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The main findings of the expert opinion survey are as follows. First, experts believed that while the likelihood that North Korea will abandon its nuclear weapons is extremely low, negotiations on denuclearization may resume under certain conditions. Second, experts generally viewed that an active policy on the denuclearization of North Korea by the U.S. is needed, but think China's influence on North Korea is not very strong. Third, most experts replied that external factors such as worsening relations between the U.S. and China as well as the war in Ukraine will have a negative impact on the pursuit of denuclearization of North Korea, and that China may cease cooperation on such denuclearization issue depending on how the situation would unfold. Fourth, experts concluded that issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the supply of energy, and the global supply chain are not likely to precipitate drastic changes to the North Korean system though they will negatively impact the human rights of the North Korean people. Lastly, experts agreed that cooperation between the U.S. and China is crucial to solving the North Korean nuclear problem, and that there is a need to primarily consider partial disarmament of North Korea's nuclear arsenal prior to complete denuclearization.

Based on thorough analysis and assessment of the results of the expert opinion survey, this study identifies the following eight challenges that the South Korean government will face by the latter half of 2023; ① North Korea's repeated high intensity provocations, including nuclear tests, ② Biden administration's return to "strategic patience" for its North Korea policy, ③ highlighted areas for cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea on the North Korean nuclear problem, ④ increasing



negative effects of the U.S.-China strategic competition, ⑤ North Korea's increased economic dependence on China, ⑥ consolidation of the dynamics of confrontation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan on one side and North Korea, China, and Russia on the other, ⑦ the drastic emergence of global emerging security issues that encompass areas such as health, energy, food, cyber, and human security, and ⑧ changes to the international order and global norms.

These eight issues at the alliance-, regional-, and global-level will each exhibit its own set of features and have diverse implications. North Korea's intensifying provocations as well as the passive North Korea policy of the Biden administration suggest that an environment conducive to negotiations on denuclearization will be difficult to foster for the foreseeable future. American passivity conversely means that the need for the South Korean government to take the initiative to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem is greater. It further suggests that there is a need for the South Korean government to take the initiative to design, propose, consult, and agree on the agenda for cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea to solve the North Korean nuclear problem. Above all, it is evident that a long-term strategy to address the North Korean problem and to manage the situation on the Korean peninsula is required to prepare for structural factors such as U.S.-China relations as well as the emergence of new regional and global orders. Establishing cooperation with not only the great powers but also the broader international community that are prompting changes to the international order and structure is more crucial than ever.

Within this context, this study proposes a system of responses

to the alliance-, regional-, and global-level challenges identified by the expert opinion survey. This study attempts to further detail the relationship between ‘challenges and responses’ that existing studies adopt by specifying policy objectives, available methods, and the process between objectives and methods - the mechanisms involved. The differences that exist across the details of each of the different levels of challenges notwithstanding, the ultimate goal of the system of responses that this study proposes is to ‘actively deter the threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and foster a strategic environment for negotiations on denuclearization.’

**Table III-1 Response Objectives and Expected Outcomes**

<b>Response Goals/Period</b>	<b>Contents</b>	<b>Expected Outcomes</b>
Short-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deny North Korea's benefits of advancing nuclear and missile capabilities</li> <li>- Foster conditions for the resumption of negotiations on denuclearization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Convey a consistent message on North Korea policy</li> <li>- Cultivate conditions for the normalization of inter-Korean relations</li> <li>- Create a stable security environment on the Korean peninsula</li> </ul>
Mid-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Persuade North Korea toward denuclearization</li> <li>- Pursue substantive measures of denuclearization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Restore South Korea's initiative on policies toward North Korea and denuclearization</li> <li>- Cease North Korea's advancement of nuclear and missile capabilities</li> <li>- Foster an environment to craft and pursue economic and development cooperation with North Korea</li> </ul>
Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Secure the sustainability of North Korea's irreversible measures for denuclearization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Normalize inter-Korean relations through the active implementation of the 'Audacious Initiative'</li> <li>- Implement the agreement between South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. (and China) on the denuclearization roadmap and measures to normalize relations between the U.S. and North Korea</li> </ul>

Source: written by the author.

This study focuses on ‘strengthening international cooperation’ as the most important policy effort for the South Korean government. There is a wide range of policies and strategies to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea. But it is safe to say that none of these policies and strategies can be accomplished through South Korea’s efforts alone. In other words, whether it is through coercion, persuasion with dialogue, or by altering North Korea’s calculus so that North Korea chooses to denuclearize, each of these processes requires close cooperation and acceptance by major great powers as well as the broader international community. Given this, the key policies for international cooperation to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea are as follows: dramatically strengthening the U.S. extended deterrence, enhancing international cooperation on sanctions against North Korea, establishing the roadmap for North Korea’s denuclearization, creating a system of cooperation among great powers, and strengthening the ability to set the global agenda on issues related to the Korean peninsula.

**Table III-2    Response Policies**

Level	Objective	Main Policy Contents
Alliance	Strengthen cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthen the U.S. extended deterrence against North Korea</li> <li>- Enhance cooperation on sanctions against North Korea</li> <li>- Design a roadmap for denuclearization through coordination between the U.S. and South Korea</li> <li>- Convince the U.S. to adopt a more active North Korea policy</li> </ul>
Regional	Establish a system of cooperation among great powers in the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthen trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan</li> <li>- Prompt Chinese and Russian cooperation</li> </ul>

Level	Objective	Main Policy Contents
Global	Strengthen initiative on global cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish the agenda for cooperation on issues related to the Korean peninsula</li> <li>- Maintain and strengthen the international sanctions regime on North Korea</li> <li>- Promote the enhancement of human rights and humanitarian conditions in North Korea</li> </ul>

Source: written by the author.

Currently, North Korea is extremely adamant to possess nuclear weapons and advance its nuclear capabilities. It is unlikely that North Korea will voluntarily change such preferences in the short term. Realistically, the direct and effective method of deterring North Korean provocations under these circumstances is to show North Korea our capabilities that can timely deny any benefit that it seeks to achieve through the advancement of its nuclear arsenal while enhancing the credibility of these countermeasures. For example, if South Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance respond to North Korea's diversified missile capabilities by establishing a missile defense system, the benefits that North Korea seeks to achieve by advancing its capabilities will immediately be denied. In addition, the conditions for strengthening the deterrence will be met when the North Korean leadership rationally deduces the likelihood of retaliation accompanied by their provocations.

As such, establishing mechanisms that 'deny' the benefits sought by North Korea through nuclear and missile provocations can be an effective way of deterring North Korean provocations. However, this alone is not a sufficient condition that guarantees North Korea's determination and execution of denuclearization. Therefore, the South Korean government must simultaneously

consider policy mechanisms related to fostering an environment in which the North Korean leadership can undertake substantive denuclearization measures. The mechanism of denying the benefits of North Korean provocations is more efficient in achieving short-term goals. Therefore, policy mechanisms that are better suited to achieve mid- to long-term goals must also be considered.

**Table III-3    Response Mechanisms**

Objective	Mechanism	Policy Direction
Detering North Korean nuclear and missile provocations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Denying the benefits of advancing nuclear and missile capabilities</li> <li>· Changing the social and economic order within the North Korean system</li> </ul>	Strengthening the South Korean government's initiative
Fostering an environment for the resumption of negotiations on denuclearization		Enhancing deterrence against North Korea
Prompting and coercing substantive denuclearization measures by North Korea		Strategically managing sanctions against North Korea

Source: written by the author.

Based on these objectives, methods/policies, and mechanisms, this study subsequently proposes ways of strengthening international cooperation to address the challenges posed to solving the North Korean nuclear problem. The reason why this study specifically emphasizes ‘international cooperation’ over independent policies is that this approach better aligns with the results of the expert opinion survey, the characteristics of the challenges that the survey identifies, and the proactive response to the North Korean nuclear problem during the early stages of the new Yoon administration — the main goal of this study. The common characteristics and implications of the challenges

identified in this study imply that establishing and strengthening cooperation with the U.S. as an ally, with Japan and China as regional powers, and with the broader international community is a necessary condition for the South Korean government's effective response to the various challenges in the future. This direction of research also incorporates the goal of the Yoon administration to become an agenda-setter that not only cooperates on international issues but also actively proposes and creates agendas for cooperation. Furthermore, it closely aligns with the Yoon administration's national vision of becoming a 'global pivotal state.'

Given this direction of research, the main recommendations that this study proposes as ways to strengthen international cooperation at the alliance-, regional-, and global-levels, respectively, are as follows. First, for the alliance-level, closer cooperation to form a tailored U.S.-ROK deterrence strategy is needed. In particular, South Korea needs to lead cooperation with the U.S. by designing a roadmap for North Korea's denuclearization that closely aligns with the Yoon administration's 'Audacious Initiative.' In addition, this study concludes that enhancing the level of cooperation with the U.S. Congress needs to be a priority based on a practical assessment of recent domestic political dynamics in the U.S. In other words, this study argues that there needs to be a strategy for cooperation within the alliance that considers the current and future parties in control of the White House and Congress.

Second, the study also recommends strategies for cooperation on the North Korean nuclear problem that addresses challenges that could arise regionally in Northeast Asia. The study primarily recommends the practical establishment of a system of multilateral

security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Multilateral security cooperation between these three countries is not only important for regional cooperation but also for the alliance-level. This is because cooperation will be based on America's assessment and consideration of allies as partners for its Indo-Pacific strategy. Additionally, efforts need to be made to preemptively and fundamentally prevent the strategic competition between the U.S. and China from negatively impacting the North Korean nuclear problem. The conventional strategic decisions made based on the dichotomous logic that distinguishes security from the economy no longer reflect the realities of international politics today. Therefore, a clear regional strategy that considers South Korea's values and national interests needs to be established. To do so, various regional security cooperation initiatives that the South Korean governments had pursued in the 1990s need to be revisited.

Third, this study proposes responses to global-level challenges by distinguishing between global cooperation on emerging security issues on the one hand, and the international order and global norms on the other. Both sets of recommendations each related to these two aspects are expected to heighten North Korea's sensitivity and vulnerability regarding strategic choices on nuclear capabilities. In terms of emerging security issues, the global energy crisis and cyber security threats were chosen as key agendas for cooperation. As for global norms, addressing the North Korean nuclear problem through international organizations and the international community's response to North Korean human rights was suggested as such agenda items. International cooperation needs to be strengthened on each of these four aspects not only

because they reflect new global realities but also because they are 'weak spots' in the sense that they demand a direct and substantive response from North Korea. In this regard, there is a need to consider efforts to address North Korea's energy supply problem as a possible reward for denuclearization measures by establishing a mechanism for cooperation on natural gas. Moreover, there is also a need to take the initiative in creating an international coalition against North Korea's cyber capabilities to not only prepare against the cyber threat posed by North Korea but also more actively respond to international cybercrime.





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## Conclusion

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This study has highlighted responding to the North Korean nuclear problem as the top priority facing the new Yoon administration inaugurated in 2022. This is because the situation regarding the North Korean problem is expected to deteriorate due to various factors, and also because the repercussions of a worsening situation will likely be concerning. This study anticipated the North Korea problem to worsen mainly because of the following four reasons: 1) North Korea's own strategic decisions, 2) North Korea's assessment of the regional and global environment and how it seeks to utilize such conditions, 3) North Korea's need to step up nuclear coercion directed at South Korea and the U.S., and 4) North Korea's domestic political needs. This study further argues that the diplomatic and security environment both on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia will significantly worsen if North Korea continues to engage in nuclear and missile provocations to pursue these goals. This is because not only are nuclear, ICBM, and SLBM provocations technologically and strategically necessary for North Korea but also because they are likely to harm the vital national interests of great powers in the region.

The results of the expert opinion survey conducted by this study suggest that different from the past, the challenges that South Korea will face regarding the North Korean nuclear problem will be very diverse. In other words, the South Korean government will likely face a very difficult policy environment in which it needs to consider responding to direct provocations by North Korea, pursue the denuclearization of North Korea, and prepare for both indirect and direct consequences of North Korea's nuclear weapons. What is evident is that none of these challenges can be solved by

improved inter-Korean relations alone. Put differently, the North Korean nuclear problem has become a regional and global security issue that extends beyond the Korean peninsula. Therefore, establishing cooperative relations with the international community has become essential for the process of responding to the North Korean problem. It has now become almost impossible to expect that the North Korean problem will be resolved without international cooperation.

Given the seriousness of the situation, this study has identified challenges to the North Korean nuclear problem, outlined policy objectives to address this issue, and proposed policy methods and response mechanisms by gathering the opinions of a wide group of experts. Based on the analysis, this study proposes the following methods of strengthening international cooperation that the South Korean government must consider. First, there is a need to strengthen cooperation to craft a tailored deterrence strategy for South Korea and the U.S. In particular, the South Korean government needs to take the initiative in cooperation with the U.S. by crafting a roadmap for the denuclearization of North Korea that closely aligns with the contents of the ‘Audacious Initiative.’ Second, a system of trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan needs to be strengthened to counter North Korea’s nuclear coercion and enhance deterrence. Third, South Korea needs to actively take the lead in establishing cooperation on issues such as the global energy crisis, cyber threats, and human rights in North Korea through cooperation with not only great powers but also international organizations.

# The Challenges of North Korea's Nuclear Program and International Cooperation

