



# Korean Peninsula Update

Korean Peninsula Update is issued on a regular basis by the Asia Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).



#3 2026-05-29

## North Korea's Evolving Toolbox: Battlefield Lessons, Nuclear Expansion, and a Widening Alliance Network

The last couple of months saw a burst of military and diplomatic activity in North Korea. In the weeks spanning late March and April, Pyongyang conducted four ballistic missile launches and tested weapons from its newest destroyer – all within the first three weeks of the month. It also drew fresh warnings from the nuclear watchdog of the United Nations (UN), deepened its institutional ties with Moscow, and broadened its diplomatic reach among Moscow-aligned partners.

During April 7 to 8, multiple KN-23 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) fitted with cluster munitions warheads were fired from the Wonsan area toward the East Sea, with North Korean state media KCNA claiming each warhead capable of blanketing 6.5 to 7 hectares. Four days later, Kim Jong Un, leader of North Korea, observed the test-firing of two strategic cruise missiles and three anti-warship missiles from the destroyer *Choe Hyun*. These tests signal a deliberate effort to diversify North Korea's strike capabilities, threatening ground targets and surface vessels simultaneously.

Following the tests, Kim declared his country's commitment to the limitless expansion of the North's nuclear forces, consistent with its doctrine of emphasising deterrence and regime security. A further salvo of five Hwasong-11D SRBMs armed with cluster munitions was launched from the Sinpo area on April 19, prompting South Korea's National Security Council (NSC) to convene an emergency meeting. The South's NSC condemned the launches as a clear violation of UN Security Council resolutions and urged Pyongyang to halt further tests immediately. The launches continued through the spring. On May 26, North Korea also launched several "close-range" ballistic missiles toward the West Sea, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The scale of these tests took on added significance in light of concurrent warnings from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). On April 15, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated in Seoul that the agency had confirmed a rapid increase in operations across North Korea's nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, including its 5-megawatt reactor, reprocessing unit, and light-water reactor, all pointing to a serious increase in the country's nuclear weapons production capabilities. Satellite imagery of the site shows a new building at Yongbyon equipped with generators, fuel storage tanks, and cooling units. The building is now externally complete and widely assessed as a probable additional uranium enrichment facility with internal construction ongoing. If confirmed, the facility would not represent a qualitative leap in North Korea's nuclear capabilities as Pyongyang has long possessed uranium enrichment capacity. Rather, it would mark a quantitative expansion, increasing its output of weapons-grade uranium and the pace of its arsenal growth.

North Korea's accelerating weapons programme is matched by a concerted effort to deepen its external partnerships. Its relationship with Russia, in particular, is becoming increasingly visible both symbolically and operationally. On April 26, North Korea inaugurated the Memorial Museum of Combat Feats at the Overseas Military Operations in Pyongyang, honouring troops killed fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine. Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov and State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin attended the ceremony alongside Kim Jong Un, according to KCNA. Belousov stated that the two sides had agreed to place military cooperation on a sustainable long-term footing, with a formal cooperation plan for 2027 to 2031 to be signed this year.

According to South Korean local media reports, South Korea's National Intelligence Service estimates that approximately 2,000 of the roughly 15,000 North Korean troops deployed to Russia's Kursk region were killed in action. A BBC investigation based on KCNA imagery of the memorial further estimated that approximately 2,300 North Korean troops had been killed in action. Meanwhile, new satellite images show a new road bridge linking North Korea and Russia almost completed, likely to facilitate logistics. While the specific contents of the 2027-2031 military cooperation plan remain undisclosed, the agreement signals a deliberate move to institutionalise the relationship on a long-term footing beyond the current wartime cooperation.

North Korea is also strengthening ties with others. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan recently visited Pyongyang to enhance bilateral relations. While North Korea was encouraged to keep channels for dialogue open and engage with the region, the Minister noted after the visit that Pyongyang is not yet prepared to resume dialogue with Washington or Seoul. Earlier developments this spring suggest that North Korea prioritises deepening ties with like-minded states. North Korea and Belarus signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation during Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's first-ever state visit to Pyongyang on March 25 to 26. Lukashenko is only the fifth world leader Kim has hosted in Pyongyang since assuming power in December 2011.

For North Korea, the partnership serves multiple purposes: it deepens ties with a Moscow-aligned state, opens additional channels for circumventing international sanctions, and advances Pyongyang's broader effort to build legitimacy as a recognised state. For Belarus, closer ties with North Korea offer a rare opportunity to demonstrate a degree of diplomatic autonomy while aligning with a partner that directly supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine. South Korea's Unification Ministry spokesperson assessed the summit as reinforcing three-way coordination among North Korea, Russia, and Belarus, consistent with Pyongyang's support for a multipolar order and anti-Western solidarity. Viewed from Stockholm, this closer cooperation is significant. It reinforces an alignment of revisionist states along NATO's eastern perimeter, with North Korea's military capabilities lending additional weight to that alignment.

The picture that emerges from late March and April is of a regime combining weapons modernisation while deepening engagement with external partners. North Korea's growing entanglement in a network stretching from Pyongyang to Moscow to Minsk, carries direct implications for Euro-Atlantic security, Sweden, and its European partners. North Korea's military cooperation with Russia sustains Moscow's

war effort in Ukraine, while Russian transfers of advanced military technology to Pyongyang in return risk strengthening North Korea's advanced missile capabilities. As the consolidation of a Pyongyang-Moscow-Minsk alignment signals the emergence of a revisionist network that now presses against NATO's eastern perimeter from multiple directions, these developments warrant close and sustained attention from Stockholm and its partners. North Korea's military sophistication is demonstrably increasing but what role Pyongyang envisions for itself within this network, and what Moscow and Minsk expect from it in return, remains opaque.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Shin' with a stylized flourish at the end.

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