



## **Subnational Deterrence: An Information Campaign to Reduce Risks of a Nuclear North Korea**

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## Abstract

RDML Mark Schafer, Commander, Naval Forces Korea, asked CNA to conduct a quick response project to inform planning components for the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO) on challenging changes in the threat environment and to explore an information-based approach to help overcome those challenges. North Korea is increasingly improving its capability to strike targets in the continental US with nuclear weapons and traditional deterrence shows no potential to impact its progress. This study introduces and discusses subregime deterrence as an alternative approach to not only preserve a state of non-conflict, but also to set conditions to affect an individual's or mass's behavior in case intervention into North Korea becomes necessary. This concept paper examines the case study of North Korea and whether a dedicated information campaign can affect the decisions and actions at the subnational level in such a way as to support allied operations. Preliminary findings show there is viability and that further research can be undertaken to develop the layers of a sophisticated subnational deterrence information campaign.

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**Approved by:**



**December 2022**

Jonathan Schroden, Research Program Director  
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## Executive Summary

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This report was developed in response to a request from Commander, Naval Forces Korea for a quick-response effort to inform planning components for the Korean theater of operations (KTO) on challenging changes in the threat environment and to explore non-kinetic approaches to help overcome those challenges. This report assesses the likely effects of ongoing rapid changes in the threat environment on deterrence and the ability of the combined maritime and joint forces to successfully accomplish their wartime missions. It then introduces an alternative, non-kinetic approach termed *subregime deterrence*<sup>1</sup> (referred to as *subnational deterrence* in the previous edition of this report), which the United States–Republic of Korea (US-ROK) alliance (Alliance) could employ to enhance deterrence and ensure a less catastrophic outcome if a conflict were to occur.

As the threat from North Korea evolves, the challenges increase in magnitude, creating significant risk of a military conflict and of escalation within such a conflict. If deterrence fails to prevent a nuclear-armed North Korea from aggressive coercion, the Alliance could be forced into a war that, even if successfully won, is likely to have catastrophic costs. We suggest that subregime deterrence, enabled through a campaign of information and influence, could mitigate some of this risk by deterring a critical mass of key personnel beneath the supreme leader, Kim Jong Un, as well as audiences in the general population from enabling and supporting points of escalation. Based on previous independent work of the authors,<sup>2</sup> CNA hypothesizes that **an information campaign, properly supported with resources and a consistent overarching policy, could set the conditions for a subregime deterrence approach** that supports the US national defense policy goal of integrated deterrence and makes a meaningful difference in the costs and risks of a crisis or conflict in the KTO.

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<sup>1</sup> Subregime deterrence is an emerging concept that the authors have developed to suggest that before a nuclear-armed (authoritarian) adversary can push the US into a situation of unavoidable conflict, there is opportunity to set conditions for a less costly conflict by undermining the reliability of the cadre of elites and military commanders who closely support and enable such authoritarian regimes.

<sup>2</sup> See Fredrick “Skip” Vincenzo, “Appendix B: Subregime Deterrence” in *Preventing Strategic Deterrence Failure on the Korean Peninsula*, Markus V. Garlauskas, Principal Investigator, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council, HDTRA1-21-P-0028, Feb. 2022; and Fredrick “Skip” Vincenzo, *An Information Based Approach to Reduce North Korea’s Increasing Threat—Recommendations for ROK & US Policy Makers*, Center for a New American Security, Oct. 2016, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/an-information-based-strategy-to-reduce-north-koreas-increasing-threat>.

**Preliminary findings:**

- The most dramatic change ongoing in the KTO threat environment is the increasing credibility of North Korea's capability to strike targets in the continental US with nuclear weapons, combined with its apparent steps and rhetoric toward a tactical nuclear capability.
- Subregime deterrence enabled by an information campaign may induce meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviors if a crisis or conflict should occur. Major potential operational risk mitigations include reducing the violence, destruction, and duration of combat; mitigating the factors most likely to bring about significant humanitarian challenges; and lessening the resistance of military and civilian personnel in North Korea in the period after major fighting ceases.
- The contours of a sophisticated information campaign in North Korea include messaging that challenges regime narratives, validates internal doubts, and reduces fear of the outside world.
- The credibility of messaging in the information campaign is a key component in ensuring that the desired operational effects are achieved into the future. The lack of consistent overarching policy regarding information dissemination efforts in North Korea is a current obstruction to this pursuit.
- Timing matters. Information shaping should start pre-crisis. Clear, validated theater military requirements are needed to enable information-shaping efforts aimed at achieving subregime deterrence.

**Recommendations have been redacted from the publicly released version of this report.**

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# Introduction

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## Background

North Korea continues to pose a unique challenge to peace and security in the Northeast Asia region and US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of operations. It sits between the two top strategic competitors of the United States: the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. It also continues to actively develop strategic and conventional capabilities and to strain the extended deterrence commitment between the US and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Although experts debate whether North Korea intends to pursue a coercive strategy, it has previously demonstrated escalatory behavior that could be repeated and lead to crisis or even conflict if a miscalculation were to occur. Additionally, vulnerabilities in North Korea's regime could lead to a governmental collapse,<sup>3</sup> which could also lead to a crisis or conflict if the US, ROK, and PRC attempt to enter North Korea to reestablish stability.

In addition, traditional deterrence has done little to prevent North Korea from continuing to pursue its strategic and tactical nuclear weapons advancement; as a result, another approach is needed. Subregime deterrence in the form of a dedicated information campaign could supplement traditional deterrence and help preserve a state of non-conflict in the Korean theater of operations (KTO). It could also set the conditions to affect the behavior of a critical mass of North Koreans if intervention or conflict become unavoidable.

In this concept paper, we examine whether a dedicated information campaign in North Korea can affect the decisions and actions of North Koreans at the subregime level in a way that supports the operations of the US-ROK (Alliance).<sup>4</sup>

Commander, Naval Forces Korea (CNFK) requested this study, but United States Forces Korea (USFK) staff and theater components, including Special Operations Command, Korea (SOCKOR), will also benefit from the study's findings. The challenges posed by North Korea require a much greater effort than what CNFK alone could achieve and must be addressed at the theater level. Rather than simply focusing on what the Navy could do, this study articulates

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<sup>3</sup> North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un has long had health problems, and his father and grandfather both died of heart conditions. There is also uncertainty of any succession plan following Kim Jong Un; see Chris Steinitz et al., "Does Kim Jong Un Have a Succession Plan?" 38 North (blog), May 1, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/05/csteinitzkgauseeyang050120/>.

<sup>4</sup> In the proposal for the quick response, CNFK—as well as USFK and other theater component planners—specially indicated an interest in exploring options in the information environment.

a theater-level solution. If successful, this solution will assist the US and allied navies in achieving their missions in the KTO and also ensure a more favorable end state in North Korea.

## Subregime deterrence, information, and influence

Subregime deterrence is an emerging concept that the two primary authors have developed to describe an information-based approach to both counter a nuclear-armed state's potential to provoke in the gray zone and reduce the potential for casualties and destruction if conflict occurs. The fear and uncertainty of a conflict—especially in the early phases—will likely create opportunities for the Alliance to launch influence and co-option operations to mitigate factors that are likely to cause significant casualties and damage. An information campaign could maximize the Alliance's ability to influence the actions of political and military elites as well as ordinary citizens and soldiers. To them, the fear of dying in a conflict or suffering in the aftermath will suddenly be a much bigger concern than the fear of punishment from the regime for disloyalty. Ideally, an influence campaign could affect their perspective on their own best interest at this point—leading many to make personal choices that result in less violence or chaos, such as avoiding combat, not employing weapons of mass destruction (WMD), cooperating with Alliance forces, or even choosing to do nothing.

The latest National Defense Strategy (NDS), published in March 2022, promotes two cornerstone concepts: integrated deterrence and campaigning. The Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl explained at the Defense One Outlook 2022 Summit that integrated deterrence is a “new way of approaching deterrence” that is “integrated across domains...conventional, nuclear, cyber, space, informational.”<sup>5</sup> Information has been an underserved part of integrated deterrence, especially in the KTO. Subregime deterrence seeks to address this shortcoming by incorporating operations in the information environment as a subcomponent of the overall approach to deterring North Korea. Subregime deterrence also aligns with the NDS concept of campaigning, which it characterizes as “iterative actions that improve our position and reinforce deterrence while limiting, frustrating, and disrupting competitor activities that seriously affect US interests, especially those carried out in the gray-zone.”<sup>6</sup> By shaping conditions in the KTO to mitigate violence at the outset of a conflict, an information campaign launched during peacetime to enable subregime deterrence is an

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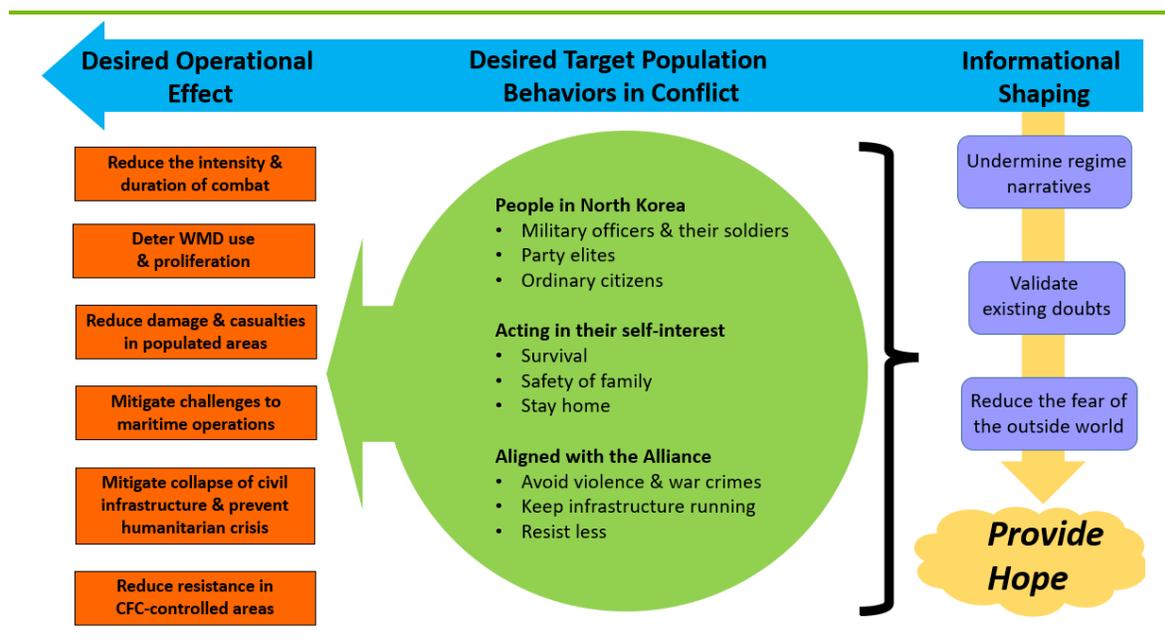
<sup>5</sup> Jim Garamone, “Concept of Integrated Deterrence Will Be Key to National Defense Strategy, DOD Official Says,” DOD News, Dec. 8, 2021, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2866963/concept-of-integrated-deterrence-will-be-key-to-national-defense-strategy-dod/>.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America.”

iterative action that could contribute to limiting, frustrating, and disrupting North Korea’s plans should it take aggressive or coercive actions toward the Alliance.

North Korea is a hard target for a reason. Not only are the pathways inside the regime hidden and difficult to navigate but the population has also been indoctrinated for the last 70 years to accept a narrative in which the regime is their protector and the outside world is a threat. One broader ambition for this paper is to facilitate further analysis of how information shaping can generate desired operational effects among the North Korean population, as shown in the mapping tool in Figure 1. This figure illustrates the progression of how information-shaping operations could influence the behaviors of specific audiences in North Korea, which in turn could generate operational effects that reduce the overall violence and catastrophic costs in a conflict.

Figure 1. How information shaping can generate desired operational effects



Source: CNA.

## Organization

This unclassified primer will discuss the preliminary research for the middle and right side of Figure 1. The paper will first explore changes in the North Korean strategic and operational environments to identify underappreciated risk points that could lead to miscalculation, escalation, and conflict. Then, the paper will discuss the feasibility of a non-kinetic approach: subregime deterrence via an information campaign (depicted in the green, purple, and yellow shapes in the figure). The recommendations this paper makes have been redacted.

## Study Approach

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This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are recent and ongoing changes in the North Korean threat environment affecting stability on the Korean Peninsula and the US-ROK Alliance's ability to deter North Korean aggression?<sup>7</sup>
2. What effects are these changes likely to have on the Alliance's ability to conduct wartime missions?
3. Would a dedicated information campaign affect the decisions and actions of audiences at the subregime level in a way that supports Alliance operations?

To answer the first two research questions, we utilized an “indicators or signposts of change” analytic framework<sup>8</sup> to categorize key threat trends. Using this framework, we examined potentially significant implications that these trends might have on Alliance forces' continued ability to deter North Korean aggression and assessed whether these threat implications might make war more likely. We based this assessment on available open-source and classified reporting, and we supplemented it with insights from one-on-one engagements with military planners (typically at the O-5/O-6 and GS-14/GS-15 levels) from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), and USFK and its components.<sup>9</sup> We asked these planners the following questions to draw insights from their military planning experience both on and off the Korean Peninsula and their understanding of the KTO threat environment:

- What are the challenges and strategic implications of North Korea's precision short-range missiles, and what challenges do they pose beyond North Korea's artillery?

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<sup>7</sup> Although we touched on North Korea's intent for aggression in our discussions, the calculus for aggression/coercion is not discussed in depth in this paper. This paper presents a scenario in which North Korea's increasing capabilities enable aggressive behavior to be undertaken.

<sup>8</sup> This method is one of several structured analytic techniques developed by the US intelligence community and entails creating a list of observable events or trends to track events, monitor targets, spot emerging trends, and warn of unanticipated change. See: US Government, *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis*, Mar. 2009, p. 12, <https://www.cia.gov/static/955180a45afe3f5013772c313b16face/Tradecraft-Primer-apr09.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> We conducted nine engagements with former and current military planners, including a former four-star general who once served as the commander for USFK/CFC and the former head of strategy for USFK. One of the authors is also a former national intelligence officer for North Korea. This assessment is not comprehensive and is not intended to compete with official intelligence community assessments.

- What do you think North Korea might do once it can hold continental US (CONUS) targets at risk? What are the limits to how it might use these capabilities?
- What would drive North Korea to a point of aggression in the future?
- What and where are the areas for potential conflict in the maritime space around the Korean Peninsula?

To understand how Alliance operations would be affected in wartime missions, we reviewed the most recent contingency plans relevant to the KTO, and asked military planners the following:

- What are the likely major risks and costs of a conflict or collapse that we should mitigate?
- What are the objectives of and requirements for information shaping?
- What effects can this information shaping achieve in the early phases of a conflict, and what are the limitations of information shaping?

Based on the insights we gathered regarding research questions 1 and 2, we identified areas of greatest operational risk and considered potential non-kinetic options—particularly an information campaign strategy—that might help mitigate risks.<sup>10</sup> Based on previous independent work of the primary authors,<sup>11</sup> CNA hypothesizes that an information campaign, properly supported with resources and a consistent overarching policy, could set the conditions for a subregime deterrence approach that supports the US national defense policy goal of integrated deterrence and makes a meaningful difference in the costs and risks of a conflict in the KTO, should it occur.

We assessed the feasibility of an information campaign by holding an unclassified working group discussion of North Korea subject matter experts (SMEs) under Chatham House Rule. CNA drew upon the expertise of seasoned US-based “Korea Hands”—current and former senior military officers who have held multiple assignments on the Korean Peninsula and within military information operations, academia, and think tanks. We also drew on the firsthand

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<sup>10</sup> In the proposal for this quick-response study, CNFK—as well as USFK and other theater component planners—indicated a specific interest in exploring options in the information environment.

<sup>11</sup> See Fredrick “Skip” Vincenzo, “Appendix B: Subregime Deterrence” in *Preventing Strategic Deterrence Failure on the Korean Peninsula*, Markus V. Garlauskas, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council, HDTRA1-21-P-0028, Feb. 2022; and Fredrick “Skip” Vincenzo, *An Information Based Approach to Reduce North Korea’s Increasing Threat—Recommendations for ROK & US Policy Makers*, Center for a New American Security, Oct. 2016, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/an-information-based-strategy-to-reduce-north-koreas-increasing-threat>.

experience of North Korean defectors<sup>12</sup> who have settled as US citizens.<sup>13</sup> This working group explored the regime's control mechanisms and vulnerabilities and also discussed the thresholds for personal risk of different audiences in North Korea and their loyalty ties to the regime. In the roundtable discussion, we asked two main questions:

1. Could an information campaign feasibly influence the thinking of the people in North Korea—elites and ordinary citizens—and enable them to anticipate an alternative life in a non-Kim world?<sup>14</sup>
2. If so, will the people's survival instincts be strong enough for them to seize opportunities to act in their own self-interest during a conflict? And would these actions meaningfully reduce the level of violence and enable subregime deterrence?

When necessary, we cite open-source works in this report, but much of this research was inspired by the numerous in-person engagements and the roundtable discussion, as well as the extensive expertise of CNA's in-house Korea team. This team includes two Korean Security Affairs experts who have a combined 40-plus years of relevant military, intelligence community, and civilian experience both on and off the Korean Peninsula.

## Study caveats

The scope of this quick-response study was limited, given the time and resources available. Because the engagement sample size is small, this paper should be understood as exploratory rather than conclusive. In this paper, we identify several significant maritime challenges in the KTO; however, other challenges may exist that are not addressed. This concept paper is meant to be a starting point for this topic and is not inclusive of all related security issues in this area of responsibility. We hope this primer will elicit interest to pursue further research in these areas.

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<sup>12</sup> Note that we do not assume that defector testimonies represent the views, motivations, and perceptions of all North Korean citizens.

<sup>13</sup> This roundtable discussion had 13 North Korea SMEs in attendance in addition to CNA's in-house North Korea expertise.

<sup>14</sup> As long as the current presiding North Korean government—the Kim family regime—is in power, access to information is likely to continue to be restricted, and human rights are likely to continue to be denied.

# Identifying the Hypothesis: Why We Need an Information Campaign

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The rapid advancement of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities threatens the relative stability of the Korean Peninsula and the surrounding area. Although the exact state of these capabilities today is debated within Washington and Seoul, many top outside experts on North Korea's missile programs assess that it already has some ability to reach US cities with nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, North Korea shows no sign of slowing its weapons development despite sanctions and economic hardship. At the last ruling party congress in 2021, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un publicly laid out a detailed and ambitious weapons development agenda, which included strategic and tactical nuclear systems.<sup>16</sup> An accelerated program of weapons testing—including more than 30 launches in just the first half of this year—is showing visible progress toward these milestones.<sup>17</sup> As these capabilities improve, experts in Seoul and Washington are openly expressing concerns that the US may soon have to choose between upholding extended deterrence commitments and ensuring the safety of the US homeland.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Vann H. Van Diepen, "Reliability Is in the Eye of the Beholder: The Value of North Korea's Freeze on Further ICBM Flight Testing," 38 North (blog), July 25, 2019, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2019/07/vvandiepen072519/>; Jeffrey Lewis, "The Game Is Over, and North Korea Has Won," Foreign Policy, Aug. 9, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/09/the-game-is-over-and-north-korea-has-won/>; Anthony Kuhn, "North Korea Tests a New Ballistic Missile Capable of Reaching the US," NPR, Mar. 26, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/26/1088991008/north-korea-tests-a-new-ballistic-missile-capable-of-reaching-the-u-s>.

<sup>16</sup> Author translation of "조선로동당 제 8 차대회에서 하신 경애하는 김정은동지의 보고에 대하여," KCNA, Jan. 9, 2021 in Ruediger Frank, "Key Results of the Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 2 of 2)," 38 North (blog), Jan. 19, 2021, accessed July 16, 2022, [https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-2-of-2/#\\_ftn8](https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-2-of-2/#_ftn8); KCNA Watch Database, [Translated] "On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at 8th Congress of WPK," NK News, Jan. 9, 2021, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1610155111-665078257/on-report-made-by-supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-at-8th-congress-of-wpk/>.

<sup>17</sup> US Department of State Office of the Spokesperson, "US Special Representative to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Sung Kim on Recent DPRK Missile Launches," (Special Briefing, Teleconference, July 7, 2022); Ankit Panda, "Two Unusual Missile Launches Hint at a New Security Crisis in North Korea," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Mar. 15, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/15/two-unusual-missile-launches-hint-at-new-security-crisis-in-north-korea-pub-86642>.

<sup>18</sup> Daehan Lee, "Is South Korean Nuclear Proliferation Inevitable?" National Interest (blog), July 18, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/south-korean-nuclear-proliferation-inevitable->

## North Korea: a “moving target,” not just a “hard target”

North Korea is often understood as a “hard target”—its government cloaks its actions and motivations in denial and deception, making intelligence collection difficult. With its seemingly over-the-top, antiquated, and obsolete propaganda, North Korea is also typically seen as a society trapped in the past. As a result of these perceptions, North Korea’s dynamism is often underestimated. North Korea is not just a hard target, it is also a “moving target” that poses an evolving threat.<sup>19</sup> On the surface, the Korean Peninsula appears to be in stasis strategically; however, it has been experiencing major changes that could have key implications for Alliance military operations in the KTO. In particular, the threat environment in and around the KTO has changed dramatically in recent years and will likely continue to rapidly evolve.

To enable a quick-response analysis of this evolving threat environment, we drew upon a wide range of sources, including published and unpublished US government and open-source analysis, the informal views of international and US experts inside and outside of government, and panel discussions in which the authors participated during a dozen relevant workshops or conferences. Upon review of these sources, we identified trends that were repeatedly raised by these experts and that are relevant to US-ROK Alliance naval forces and US-ROK operations overall in the event of crisis or conflict. We distilled the trends in this dynamic environment into five key overall categories of change:

- The *increasing* credibility of the North Korean nuclear threat to CONUS
- The *growing* North Korean tactical nuclear threat
- The *improving* North Korean niche conventional military capabilities
- The *intensifying* PRC challenge to the US-ROK Alliance
- The *evolving* socio-political-economic environment in North Korea

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203645; Kim Min-seok, “Would United States Risk New York to Protect Seoul?” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 26, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/06/26/opinion/columns/extended-nuclear-deterrence-South-Korea-US/20220626200111690.html>; Brad Roberts, *Living with a Nuclear-Arming North Korea: Deterrence Decisions in a Deteriorating Threat Environment*, Stimson Center, Nov. 2020; Markus Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea’s Advancing Nuclear Threats*, Atlantic Council, 978-1-61977-419-3, Dec. 2021.

<sup>19</sup> See Markus Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea’s Advancing Nuclear Threats*, Atlantic Council, 978-1-61977-419-3, Dec. 2021.

We assess with high confidence that these five trends have been evident for at least the last two years, but we assess with only moderate confidence that all these trends will continue for the next two to four years (the scope of this study).<sup>20</sup>

Applying an “indicators or signposts of change” structured analytic technique to the gathered insights and documents noted above, we identified specific activities (i.e., “signposts”) within these five areas that signal particularly relevant threats to US-ROK operations in crisis, conflict, and stabilization.<sup>21</sup> Some of these signposts have already been reached, others are in question, and some have not yet been reached. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 1 and further explored in the sections that follow.

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<sup>20</sup> These analytic confidence levels mirror those in use by the US intelligence community for decades. A high confidence level generally indicates that the judgment is based on high-quality information or that the circumstances of the analysis enable rendering a solid judgment. A moderate confidence level generally indicates that the information being used in the analysis may be interpreted in various ways, that alternative viewpoints on the significance or meaning of the information exist, or that the information is credible and plausible but is not sufficiently corroborated to warrant a higher level of confidence. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *National Intelligence, A Consumer's Guide*, 2011, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> US Government, *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis*, Mar. 2009, p. 12, <https://www.cia.gov/static/955180a45afe3f5013772c313b16face/Tradecraft-Primer-apr09.pdf>.

Table 1. Five key categories of threat development in North Korea

UNCLASSIFIED

Key Threat Development	Signposts of Threat Development Pathway	Implications
<b>Increasing credibility of North Korean nuclear threat to CONUS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Displays/testing of nuclear warheads for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) (2016–2017)</b></li> <li>- <b>Displays of larger ICBMs, new mobile launchers (2020–2022)</b></li> <li>- <b>ICBM flight tests (2017, 2022)</b></li> <li>- <i>Testing of multiple re-entry vehicle technologies (2022)</i></li> <li>- <b>Display and testing of solid-propellant ICBMs (TBD)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greater risk of nuclear strikes on CONUS in a war</li> <li>- Greater potential to overwhelm US National Missile Defenses</li> <li>- Greater North Korean confidence in ability to deter US responses</li> <li>- Reduced ROK confidence in extended deterrence</li> </ul>
<b>Growing North Korean tactical nuclear threat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Claimed development of tactical nuclear warhead (2021)</b></li> <li>- <b>Test of missile claimed to have tactical nuclear capability (2022)</b></li> <li>- <i>Tactical nuclear warhead test (reportedly in final preparations)</i></li> <li>- <b>Deploying tactical nuclear weapons to units (TBD)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased prospects for North Korean early nuclear use in conflict</li> <li>- Greater North Korean confidence in coercive approaches</li> <li>- Risk of use against US-ROK counteroffensive forces, expeditionary operations</li> </ul>
<b>Improving North Korean niche military capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Testing of more precise mobile solid-propellant missiles (2019–2022)</b></li> <li>- <i>New mobile (anti-ship) cruise missiles and air defense systems</i></li> <li>- <i>Better surveillance: unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), cyber</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased North Korean capability to conduct effective limited strikes with lower risk</li> <li>- Greater capability to detect and disrupt US-ROK expeditionary operations</li> </ul>
<b>Intensifying PRC challenge to US-ROK Alliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Growing PRC intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability to monitor US-ROK military</b></li> <li>- <b>Increased PRC air, surface, and subsurface capability</b></li> <li>- <b>Beijing’s increased willingness to confront US/allies militarily</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased probability and impact of PRC interference, intervention, and influence</li> <li>- PRC assertion of interests in North Korea in opposition to US goals</li> <li>- North Korea exploits PRC posture</li> </ul>

Key Threat Development	Signposts of Threat Development Pathway	Implications
<b>Evolving socio-political-economic environment in North Korea</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Marketization, corruption</b></li> <li>- <b>Greater access to information flow: cell phones, computers</b></li> <li>- <i>Suffering, frustration due to regime handling of COVID-19 and economy</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avenues to inform and shape North Korean elites, civilian population</li> <li>- Pressures building within the North Korean control system</li> <li>- Potential loss of control, rapid population movement in crisis</li> </ul>

Source: CNA drawing from multiple sources including assessments from the Defense Intelligence Agency, Office of the Secretary of Defense, think tanks, North Korea information environment experts, and credible media reporting. More detailed sources are referenced throughout this section and in the references at the end of this paper.

Key: Bold – **Clearly observed development**; Italicized – *Development likely taking place or in preparation based on available information*; Gray – *Plausible upcoming development relevant for planning purposes*.

## The increasing credibility of the North Korean nuclear threat to CONUS

The most dramatic change in the KTO threat environment is the increasing credibility of North Korea's capability to strike targets in the CONUS with nuclear weapons, combined with its apparent steps and rhetoric toward a tactical nuclear capability.<sup>22</sup>

North Korea's weapons testing to date suggests that North Korea has already shown some ability to strike CONUS with nuclear weapons. In 2017, North Korea flight-tested the Hwasong-14 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) twice and the Hwasong-15 ICBM once on highly lofted trajectories that showed the ability to reach CONUS with a payload the size and weight of the nuclear warhead designs that were displayed and claimed to have been successfully tested by North Korea in 2016 and 2017.<sup>23</sup> However, the highly lofted trajectory did not replicate all of the conditions that a re-entry vehicle (RV) would encounter while traveling to CONUS (although the tested RVs may still survive such conditions). In addition, North Korea has tested ICBMs or ICBM technologies several times in 2022 (but, again, apparently not on a

<sup>22</sup> Ankit Panda, "North Korea's Tactical Nuclear Plans Are a Dangerous Proposition," *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 28, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/28/north-korea-tactical-nuclear-plans-dangerous-proposition/>.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Elleman, "The New Hwasong-15 ICBM: A Significant Improvement That May Be Ready as Early as 2018," *38 North* (blog), Nov. 30, 2017, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2017/11/melleman113017/>; Michael Elleman, "North Korea's Hwasong-14 ICBM: New Data Indicates Shorter Range Than Many Thought," Nov. 29, 2018, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.38north.org/2018/11/melleman112918/>.

flight path replicating the type necessary to attack the US).<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, several senior US military leaders have asserted that the US should assume that North Korea is already able to strike the US with an ICBM, but US generals have also expressed high confidence that US national missile defense (NMD) could intercept (at least small numbers) of North Korean ICBMs.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, skepticism remains regarding whether North Korea has truly mastered the technologies necessary to overcome US missile defenses, reliably reach targets in CONUS, and successfully detonate a nuclear warhead.<sup>26</sup> Our assessment, however, is that North Korea may reasonably be assumed to be on the cusp of more clearly demonstrating such a capability in the coming months and years, given the progress North Korea has made to date.<sup>27</sup>

In practical terms, North Korea's growth in this capability means that nuclear strikes with thermonuclear warheads on US cities are possible in the event of a war that escalates out of control. Even as a low-probability event, such nuclear strikes must be considered because of the severity of their consequences—potentially millions of US civilian deaths.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "What Does North Korea's New Monster Ballistic Missile Test Mean?" *Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/25/north-korea-icbm-missile-test/>; William Gallo, "North Korea Launches Longest-Range Missile Since 2017," *Voice of America*, Jan. 29, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korea-launches-biggest-missile-since-2017/6418605.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeff Seldin, "US General '100% Confident' Against North Korean Missiles," *Voice of America*, Jan. 17, 2020, accessed July 16, 2022, [https://www.voanews.com/a/usa\\_us-general-100-confident-against-north-korean-missiles/6182762.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_us-general-100-confident-against-north-korean-missiles/6182762.html); US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Strategic Command Programs*, Apr. 4, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-31\\_04-04-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-31_04-04-17.pdf); Lori J. Robinson, Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, *Statement of General Lori J. Robinson, United States Air Force Commander, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command*, Feb. 15, 2018, accessed July 16, 2022, [https://www.northcom.mil/Portals/28/Robinson\\_02-15-18%20SASC%20Testimony.pdf?ver=2018-02-15-105546-867](https://www.northcom.mil/Portals/28/Robinson_02-15-18%20SASC%20Testimony.pdf?ver=2018-02-15-105546-867); Glen D. VanHerck and Craig S. Faller, "USNORTHCOM-USSOUTHCOM Joint Press Briefing," Mar. 16, 2021, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2539561/usnorthcom-ussouthcom-joint-press-briefing/>.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy W. Martin, "North Korea and Their Nuclear Weapons: What to Know About the ICBM," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 6, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-koreas-missiles-and-nuclear-weapons-everything-you-need-to-know-11610712018>.

<sup>27</sup> Ferris Jabr, "This Is What a Nuclear Bomb Looks Like," *New York Magazine*, June 2018, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/06/what-a-nuclear-attack-in-new-york-would-look-like.html>; Daniel R. DePetris, "1.2 Million Casualties: If North Korea Attacked Los Angeles with a Nuclear Weapon," *National Interest* (blog), accessed July 18, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/12-million-casualties-if-north-korea-attacked-los-angeles-23347>.

<sup>28</sup> Panda, "Two Unusual Missile Launches Hint at a New Security Crisis in North Korea"; Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea's Advancing Nuclear Threats*, pp. 2-9.

Meanwhile, the growth in the overall size of North Korea's mobile ICBM arsenal and its apparent progress in technologies suited to countering missile defenses (including Kim Jong Un's goal of missiles with multiple RVs)<sup>29</sup> mean that US NMD—on its current development path—will likely be insufficient to fully defeat such an attack in the coming years.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, nuclear strikes against CONUS are unlikely to be launched during a conflict except as a last resort or in response to an existential threat. Instead, North Korea is likely to use its nuclear weapons capabilities as a coercive threat to deter interference in its regime, allow it to conduct limited aggression campaigns, and help it avoid a regime-ending response from the US and ROK to its acts of aggression.<sup>31,32</sup> North Korea has already tested a range of systems suitable for delivering a tactical nuclear warhead, and a seventh nuclear test—which many experts assess is imminent—could prove that North Korea has weapons small enough to use tactically and to attach in significant quantities to an ICBM.<sup>33</sup>

If North Korea's capabilities improve in line with the above assessments, Pyongyang will likely believe that it can demonstrate more aggression with less risk of regime-ending retaliation from the US and ROK. Seoul's confidence in US extended deterrence may also be undermined. Signs of Seoul's reduced confidence are already apparent—even pro-US think tank leaders, retired officials, and generals in South Korea are calling for Seoul to have its own nuclear

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<sup>29</sup> Kim Jong Un, "Remarks by Kim Jong Un: 8th Party Congress of the Workers Party of Korea," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Jan. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Credible expert views range widely on the current viability and reliability of US NMD. However, even strong advocates of NMD note that larger numbers of North Korean ICBMs and launchers, as well as North Korean development of ICBMs with multiple re-entry vehicles, maneuverable re-entry vehicles, and missile defense countermeasures, would make it increasingly impractical and cost-prohibitive to defend CONUS by building on legacy NMD systems consisting of interceptor missiles, regardless of improvements in the efficiency of the interceptors or an expansion of the number of interceptors. See Patrick O'Reilly, "Missile Defense: The End of the Interim Solution," Atlantic Council, Dec. 2021; American Physics Society, "Ballistic Missile Defense: Threats and Challenges," Feb. 2022, <https://www.aps.org/policy/reports/popa-reports/missile-defense.cfm>.

<sup>31</sup> In Kim Jong Un's speech on April 25, 2022, celebrating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, he said, "The nuclear forces of our Republic should be fully prepared to fulfil their responsible mission and put their unique deterrent in motion at any time....If any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish an unexpected second mission." Kim Jong Un did not specify what the "second mission" or "fundamental interests" were.

<sup>32</sup> Ankit Panda, "North Korea's Tactical Nuclear Plans Are a Dangerous Proposition"; Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea's Advancing Nuclear Threats*.

<sup>33</sup> Josh Smith, "Analysis: North Korea Could 'Go Small' with Tactical Nukes," Reuters, Apr. 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nkorea-could-go-small-with-tactical-nukes-if-it-resumes-testing-2022-04-22/>; Gabriel Dominguez, "Why North Korea Is Racing to Develop Tactical Nuclear Weapons," *Japan Times*, May 9, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/05/09/asia-pacific/north-korea-weapons-development/>; Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea's Advancing Nuclear Threats*, p. 3.

weapons.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, South Korea's new presidential administration appears to be publicly charting a course to reduce its reliance on US extended deterrence by doubling down on its threats of launching preemptive strikes against North Korea or retaliating against aggressive North Korean actions by "leadership decapitation."<sup>35</sup> This language is more likely to resonate with South Korean audiences seeking reassurance than to serve as a stable deterrent in the relationship with Pyongyang, which bristles at such threats.<sup>36</sup>

The risky patterns already established on the Korean Peninsula are likely to have a destabilizing effect in the event of a crisis. Pyongyang could feel further emboldened because it has largely escaped significant military responses to its repeated acts of lethal aggression over the last decades, even before it established such nuclear and missile capabilities.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Seoul will likely feel pressed to either retaliate unilaterally (as Seoul did with an artillery volley in 2015) or appease an aggressive Pyongyang by meeting its demands (as Seoul did in 2020 when it restricted NGOs from sending leaflet balloons across the DMZ)—with neither possibility conducive to stable deterrence of North Korea.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chun In-bum, "It's Time for South Korea to Embrace Tactical Nuclear Weapons to Defend Itself," *KoreaPro*, May 3, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/its-time-for-south-korea-to-embrace-tactical-nuclear-weapons-to-defend-itself/>; Kim Min-seok, "Would United States Risk New York to Protect Seoul?" *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 26, 2022, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/06/26/opinion/columns/extended-nuclear-deterrence-south-korea-us/20220626200111690.html>; Choe Sang-Hun, "In South Korea, Ukraine War Revives the Nuclear Question," *New York Times*, Apr. 6, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/world/asia/ukraine-south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html>.

<sup>35</sup> "Yoon Orders Military to Mount Strong Response to N. Korea in Event of Provocations," *KBS World*, July 7, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, [http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news\\_view.htm?lang=e&Seq\\_Code=170821](http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=170821); "Yoon Gov't to Bolster Ability to Respond to N. Korean Threats with 3-Pillar System," *KBS World*, May 4, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, [http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news\\_view.htm?lang=e&Seq\\_Code=169428](http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=169428); "Yoon Cites Preemptive Strike as Option to Deal with N.K. Threat," *Yonhap News Agency*, Jan. 11, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220111009200315>.

<sup>36</sup> Hyung-Jin Kim, "Kim's Sister Enraged by Seoul's Preemptive Strike Comments," *Associated Press*, Apr. 3, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-moon-jae-in-kim-yo-jong-south-korea-north-korea-969792db0f11306ece138e5574058364>.

<sup>37</sup> In the nearly 70 years since the armistice concluded formal hostilities, North Korea has repeatedly engaged in violent acts, such as seizing a US vessel, shooting down a US aircraft, sinking ROK vessels, shelling ROK islands, and planting explosives with targets ranging from the South Korean cabinet to soldiers in the demilitarized zone. See database of North Korean provocations, Center for Strategic and International Studies Beyond Parallel, last updated Dec. 20, 2019, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/database-north-korean-provocations/>.

<sup>38</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea and South Korea Trade Fire Across Border, Seoul Says," *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 2015, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/asia/north-korea-and-south-korea-exchange-rocket-and-artillery-fire.html>; Hyonhee Shin, "S.Korea Passes Law to Ban Anti-N.Korea Leaflets Amid Activists' Outcry," *Reuters*, Dec. 14, 2020, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/skorea-passes-law-ban-anti-nkorea-leaflets-amid-activists-outcry-2020-12-14/>.

## Worsening dilemma for the US and ROK

The US-ROK Alliance will likely face an increasingly difficult dilemma if North Korea continues its long-standing pattern of periodic escalation to limited acts of violence to advance its goals. There are no good options to impose costs meaningful to Pyongyang's leadership without running an unacceptable risk of a nuclear exchange. Even a non-nuclear exchange would have heavy costs for the US and its ROK allies.

This dilemma is not new. In 1994, the United States chose not to execute strikes on North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex. US officials serving at the time cited concerns that North Korea could retaliate against Seoul with chemical and conventional artillery.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, during the confrontation over North Korea's weapons testing in 2017, a range of US officials and experts—including then secretary of defense James Mattis and then nominee for US ambassador to Seoul Victor Cha—objected to even the evacuation of US civilians from South Korea as a possible escalatory signal. They cited the potential that evacuations or limited military force could trigger a costly conflict.<sup>40</sup>

This dilemma is only becoming worse as the threat evolves. If Pyongyang is emboldened to push the boundaries of limited escalation, the level of risk (i.e., probability times impact) of an escalation spiral will grow. North Korea has taken advantage of US and ROK cost aversion in the past to take escalatory—even violent—actions as a calculated risk to advance its goals. ROK and US experts are warning that Pyongyang could push much further in the months and years ahead as its capabilities increase (while the PRC also grows more capable and confrontational) because Seoul and Washington will be unwilling to accept the risks and costs of a strong response to coercion and aggression.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, both the probability and consequences of a conflict with North Korea will likely continue to grow in parallel.

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<sup>39</sup> Interview of Ashton Carter in "Examining the Lessons of the 1994 US-North Korea Deal," PBS Frontline, Mar. 3, 2003, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/themes/lessons.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Victor Cha, "Giving North Korea a 'Bloody Nose' Carries a Huge Risk to Americans," *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 2018, accessed July 16, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/victor-cha-giving-north-korea-a-bloody-nose-carries-a-huge-risk-to-americans/2018/01/30/43981c94-05f7-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/victor-cha-giving-north-korea-a-bloody-nose-carries-a-huge-risk-to-americans/2018/01/30/43981c94-05f7-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html); Martin Heinrich, "Heinrich Raises Serious Concerns Over Reports of Preemptive 'Bloody Nose' Strategy Against North Korea," press release, Jan. 12, 2018, <https://www.heinrich.senate.gov/press-releases/heinrich-raises-serious-concerns-over-reports-of-preemptive-bloody-nose-strategy-against-north-korea>; Zachary Cohen, "Trump Advisers Clash Over 'Bloody Nose' Strike on North Korea," CNN, Feb. 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/01/politics/north-korea-trump-bloody-nose-dispute/index.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "Why Is North Korea Launching So Many Missiles?" *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/asia/north-korea-launches-missiles-kim.html>; Cheong Seong-Chang, "Prospects for North Korea's Forward Deployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Implications for

## Factors of a catastrophic outcome

We consulted with experts inside and outside the government who are knowledgeable about the KTO environment and Alliance military planning to determine which factors in a conflict—or collapse of the Kim regime—would lead to the greatest difficulties and cause the most destruction.<sup>42</sup> The following factors stood out as the most severe potential challenges to the US-ROK Alliance’s strategic and operational success, imposing high costs and risks.

**The intensity and duration of combat.** Given the sheer mass of forces, intense combat near heavily populated areas could last for months and lead to massive human, physical, and economic losses in addition to depleting the Alliance’s stockpiles of equipment and munitions.

**Use and proliferation of WMD.** North Korea’s rapidly advancing nuclear and missile capabilities are of particular concern to ROK, regional, and CONUS targets, but North Korea also has a large store of chemical and biological weapons. Such weapons can affect large areas with long-lasting effects. The use or loss of control of these weapons would dramatically add to the costs and risks of a conflict locally and even regionally.

**Damage and casualties in Seoul and other populated areas.** North Korea has thousands of artillery pieces and rockets that could devastate Seoul and other cities, especially if they are used to deliver WMD. Intense fighting in populated areas, often with imprecise weaponry, will also likely cause high civilian losses.

**Significant maritime challenges and risks.** During the opening days of a conflict, the Alliance’s maritime forces will face a range of complex and difficult challenges, likely including the following:

- North Korean attempts to mine ROK ports, sea lines of communication, and coastal approaches to North Korea
- Mobile anti-ship cruise missiles operating from hardened and underground facilities
- Large numbers of North Korean Special Operation infiltration craft and small surface warfare craft of various types

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Revising Its Operational Plan - Evaluation of the 3rd Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central,” Sejong Foundation, July 1, 2022, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://sejong.org/web/board/22/egoread.php?bd=22&itm=&txt=&pg=1&seq=6637>; Roberts, *Living with a Nuclear-Arming North Korea*; Garlauskas, *Proactively Countering North Korea’s Advancing Nuclear Threats*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> An explosive collapse of the Kim regime would probably look a lot like a war in terms of costs. Although the authors do not explicitly include the phase “collapse of the Kim family regime” when discussing the potential costs of a conflict, for the purposes of this study, please consider it included.

- North Korean submarines, including mini-submarines, attack submarines, and likely submarines capable of launching nuclear missiles
- Large numbers of civilian vessels, including craft mobilized by North Korea's military for mining, patrols, and special operations forces insertion but also potentially vessels with defectors and refugees
- Possible attempts to traffic nuclear and missile technology via maritime routes

**Masses of refugees and the collapse of civil infrastructure leading to a humanitarian crisis.** War in North Korea could result in massive human suffering. The movement of large numbers of refugees could significantly affect Alliance operations. Moreover, the destruction of North Korea's civil infrastructure or loss of the expertise to run it would intensify human misery and add to the Alliance's challenges.

**Significant continued resistance in Combined Forces Command (CFC)-controlled areas.** Given the high level of indoctrination, uncertainty, and fear of the outside world that exists in the North Korean population, winning a lasting peace could be as difficult as (or more difficult than) the actual fighting, as was demonstrated in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

**Risk of PRC interference and intervention separate from or in opposition to the US-ROK Alliance's operations and goals.** As noted in Table 1, the PRC has rapidly growing military capabilities and politico-military incentives to interfere or directly intervene in a conflict on the Korean Peninsula in pursuit of its own interests.<sup>43</sup> Such interference would pose serious challenges to US-ROK operations and achievement of theater and component campaign objectives. Even indirect PRC support of North Korean operations and provision of key enablers to Pyongyang such as logistics; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and air defense could fundamentally improve the ability of the North Korean military. In addition, PRC forces threatening or engaging in direct combat against US-ROK forces even in limited areas of the KTO could force major changes to operational concepts and timing, even if the PRC forces are not committed to more open warfare against the US-ROK Alliance. US-ROK

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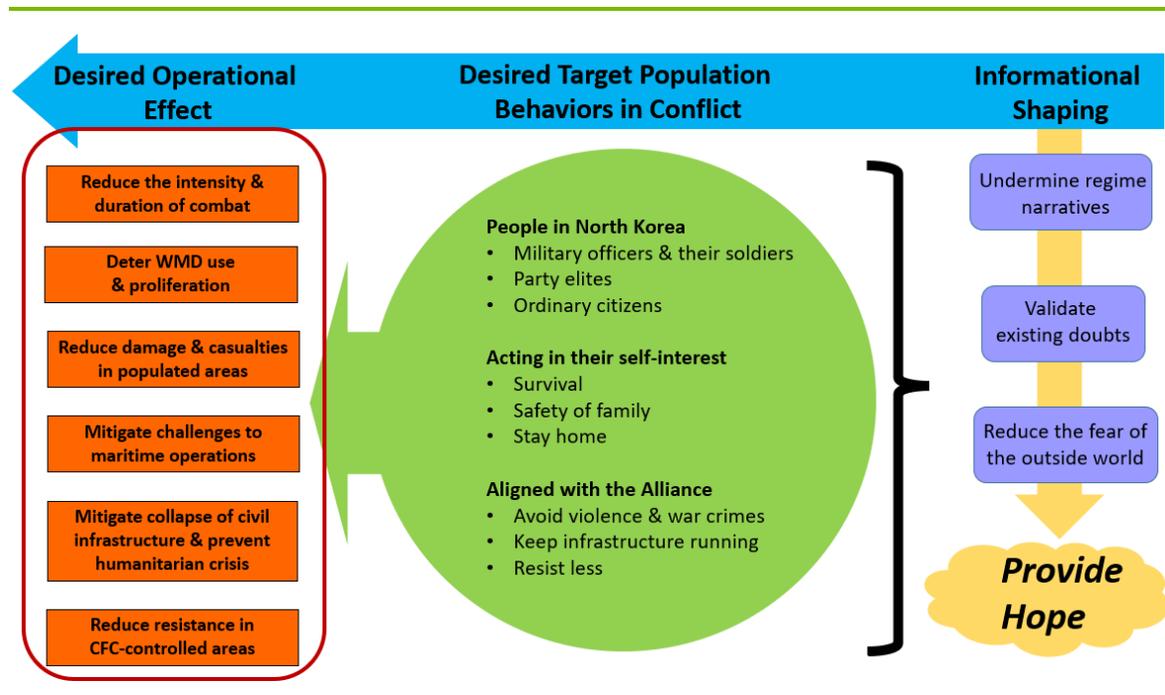
<sup>43</sup> Robert Farley, "Yes, China Would Probably Have to Fight in the Next Korean War," National Interest (blog), Feb. 18, 2020, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/yes-china-would-probably-have-fight-next-korean-war-124386>; Jina Kim, "China and Regional Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula," in *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, ed. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020); Christy Lee, "Former Top US Commander in Korea Urges Allies to Include China in War Plans," *Voice of America*, Jan. 11, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-top-us-commander-in-korea-urges-allies-to-include-china-in-war-plans/6391856.html>.

maritime and air operations in and around the Yellow (West) Sea would be particularly risky and could lead to a larger war if not carefully limited and coordinated.<sup>44</sup>

## Need to mitigate risk

Given North Korea’s rapidly increasing strategic nuclear and tactical capabilities, the US and ROK could be forced into crisis or conflict that would likely be catastrophic even if won. The high costs and catastrophic factors identified in the previous section provide starting points in determining desired operational effects and objectives, as shown boxed in red in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Desired operational effects, circled in red



Source: CNA.

In the next section, we discuss the potential for an information campaign based on subregime deterrence to supplement existing integrated deterrence efforts. We also examine why an informational strategy needs to be enacted prior to a crisis or conflict.

<sup>44</sup> For an example of such a situation and analysis of how North Korea could exploit the PRC’s posture, see Markus V. Garlauskas, *North Korea’s Arena of Asymmetric Advantage: Why We Should Prepare for a Crisis in the Yellow Sea*, CNA, COP-2021-U-030785-Final, Oct. 2021.

## Testing the Hypothesis: Is an Information Campaign Viable?

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The previous section outlined the rapidly evolving threat environment in the KTO and the catastrophic costs if a crisis or conflict with North Korea were to occur. To mitigate some of those costs, we suggest that an information campaign could be effective in influencing the calculus of individual North Koreans at all levels during the lead up to and early stages of conflict. To explore and test this idea, we conducted 17 one-on-one engagements as well as a working group roundtable discussion with a wide range of North Korea SMEs, including those well-versed in North Korean politics, culture, war planning, human rights, and information environment, as well as former North Korean citizens.

From the roundtable discussion, we identified the following baseline themes regarding current information dissemination efforts and the North Korean population's mindset and interest in receiving outside information.

### Understanding the daily lived experiences of people in North Korea

The roundtable SMEs discussed the dichotomy between two narratives within the North Korean population. The first narrative is fear, the lack of opportunity, and the denial of people's basic human rights (such as food and health care), and the second is the significance of nationalism in North Korea. Ultimately, the Kim regime's treatment of its people leaves it vulnerable because its denial of basic human rights starkly contrasts with the way that much of the outside world lives (although the level of dissatisfaction in North Korea may differ per social class). This dichotomy provides an opportunity for the Alliance to counter propaganda from North Korea's government to reduce people's fear of the outside world and potentially of the Alliance itself. Even if people living in North Korea do not recognize what "human rights" are in the way that US and ROK citizens do, themes addressing hunger, health care, fear, restrictions on personal choice, and the lack of opportunities may reinforce a sense of the inequities that they experience daily and increase the desirability of change when the opportunity comes.

The strength of North Korea's *juche* ideology and continued attempts by the current Kim leader to maximize the sense of nationalism still remain critical influences on the North Korean

population.<sup>45</sup> The two North Korean defectors who participated in our roundtable emphasized the importance of undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the regime:

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*“It [a leaflet] contained cartoons of a scared Kim Jong Un and Kim Il Sung being scared of a bomb coming their way. It shocked me. I only ever understood that great leaders are so great. I only had respect for them. Cartoon was funny though! It changed my mind.” – Defector 1*

*“They [the North Korean population] should know that the Kim regime is lying. We must show them he is not a God.” – Defector 2*

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North Korea’s internal security mechanisms are harshly effective at maintaining control over the people, but they still have vulnerabilities.<sup>46</sup> The roundtable discussants noted that weaknesses in the regime’s mechanisms of control via fear and rewards might be exploited, offering these two observations:

**Appearing to be loyal is not the same as being loyal.** From birth, North Koreans are systematically assigned a heredity-based class (known as their *Songbun* class) and corresponding socio-political rank that represents their assessed level of loyalty to the regime.<sup>47</sup> Based on these classifications, each family’s adults are aware of the opportunities that are offered or denied to them.<sup>48</sup> The regime intentionally provides privileges to the elite citizens who are in higher positions of political and social power—typically the higher one’s class, the greater the reward—to incentivize their continued loyalty. Punishments for even the appearance of disloyalty are also unequally applied based on the individual’s classification and at times extended to the individual’s entire family. Through constant indoctrination and harsh punishments, the regime imposes loyalty and obedience through fear. However, the two former North Korean roundtable participants shared that they both felt their fellow North Koreans harbored increasing distrust of the regime, which suggests a potential for an audience whose doubts could be reinforced by more outside information.

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<sup>45</sup> *Juche* roughly translates to “self-reliance,” North Korea’s state ideology that aims to achieve national autonomy through socialist-like values. *Byungjin*, meaning “side by side,” is Kim Jong Un’s established national concept of dual-track development: advancing the economy and military equally, without prioritizing one over the other, which is a departure from his father’s military-first policy.

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed examination of the North Korean police state, see: Ken Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance and Punishment: A Guide to North Korea’s Internal Security Agencies*, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun North Korea’s Social Classification System*, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012, p. 1

<sup>48</sup> Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun*, p. 2.

In another set of in-depth interviews of defectors conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification, a former North Korean interviewee shared that “even though they live in a closed society with little access to information, and even though the state decides and dictates how they should live, the thoughts of the North Korean people cannot be restrained because the people of North Korea nevertheless retain the ability to think.”<sup>49</sup> Understanding these layers of loyalty, motivations, and levels of distrust will be crucial to form the message, timing, and targeting of an information campaign intended to enable individuals to act more favorably toward Alliance forces when presented with the opportunity during a crisis or conflict.

- **Corruption is a critical enabler.** North Koreans have already learned to act in their own interests in matters of day-to-day survival and have become skilled at concealing their activities and intentions. The minor infractions required to “make things work”—despite onerous rules—are accepted practices in North Korea’s system, particularly the earning and spending of money outside of the regime-controlled economy.<sup>50</sup> This type of corruption is generally not viewed as disloyalty. In the words of one expert, it is “the coin of the realm.” In a system more akin to the Mafia than a nation-state, people in positions of power take a cut from their subordinates—this occurs beyond just the black market. Reports also support the assertion that “money talks” in today’s North Korea, with constant bribery of officials being the norm.<sup>51</sup> In matters of loyalty, security officials are reportedly harder, but not impossible, to bribe to avoid punishment—as proven by the existence of the black market economy.

## Ongoing nongovernmental organization efforts to disseminate information

Increasing amounts of information have been entering North Korea from a wide range of sources. Numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) already work to push information to people inside North Korea through various means: balloon drops, memory sticks, pamphlets, defector word-of-mouth, and underground religious networks. Organizations such as the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Action for Korea United, and several

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<sup>49</sup> Soo-Am Kim et al., *A Study on the Access to Information of the North Korean People*, Korea Institute for National Unification, Study Series 21-04, Aug. 2021, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Collins, *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea’s Capital of Human Rights Denial*, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2016, p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Nat Kretchun, “The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls,” 38 North (blog), June 9, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/06/nkretchun060917/>.

smaller NGOs have deep knowledge of, and local insight into, the human rights landscape in North Korea; however, their efforts are limited by the lack of consistent funding and cross-coordination.<sup>52</sup> Beyond being opposed to the Kim regime, these efforts generally lack a common focus and have scattered outcomes. In addition, North Korea is not blind to this threat and actively works to mitigate its effects with rigorous policing.<sup>53</sup>

Both the US and ROK have not clearly and consistently prioritized human rights in their messaging to North Koreans—often in deference to Pyongyang’s sensitivities. South Korea self-censors criticism of human rights in North Korea and has restricted efforts to disseminate leaflets, fliers, or “other items” into North Korea without government permission.<sup>54</sup> As a result, efforts to disseminate information to North Koreans by NGOs and other organizations have been hampered—though it is possible this could change under the new Yoon Administration.

## Shortcomings in existing policies and laws

SMEs from our one-on-one engagements and the unclassified roundtable noted discrepancies in the policy and legal environment that will affect a potential information campaign in North Korea. These discrepancies are evident in both US and ROK policies. Although human rights issues do come up on occasion, US actions still show a tendency to prioritize potential denuclearization negotiations over human rights issues, which is an equal (if not more urgent) value of US democracy. For example, the congressionally mandated position of US Special Representative for North Korean Human Rights has remained vacant for almost six years.<sup>55</sup> In addition, other policies intended to help North Koreans are not being optimally implemented, such as the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. Even though thousands of North Koreans could claim asylum in the United States every year under this law, few do so—partly because the process is so long and arduous. The lack of follow-through for defectors and the insufficient advertising of asylum success cases hinder the credibility of information campaign messaging. In addition, some policies and laws, such as the aforementioned ROK law restricting the distribution of leaflets, directly impede or block informational efforts, creating contention in US-ROK coordination for information dissemination efforts.

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<sup>52</sup> The US Department of State funds some of these programs, but these opportunities are limited.

<sup>53</sup> See Martyn Williams, *Digital Trenches: North Korea’s Information Counter-Offensive*, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> See Amendment to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act, also known as the “anti-leaflet law.” Enacted by then president Moon Jae-in in 2020, the law would stymie any effort by South Korea or a US NGO to promote information in North Korea via South Korea.

<sup>55</sup> The last US special envoy for North Korean human rights was Robert King, whose last day was January 13, 2017.

## Shortcomings in operations in the Information Environment

Based on engagements with USFK and its components, the professional experiences of the authors, and conversations with other North Korea experts, we assess that an effective information strategy designed to shape the Information Environment to help achieve a set of validated theater objectives is currently lacking. This paper suggests that an information-based approach to subregime deterrence is a possible way ahead in information campaign planning.

## Other examples of civil motivations

The peaceful reunification of Germany provides an example of a successful information campaign against an authoritarian regime, enabled by supportive policies. By late fall of 1989, most East Germans no longer strongly believed in their system, and many felt that when the wall came down their lives might get better.<sup>56</sup> This widespread perception was the result of decades of information reaching them (since information moved more slowly in the predigital age) and shaping their perspectives on their situation and on West Germany. By the time West German chancellor Helmut Kohl issued his “Ten Point Plan for German Unification”—which guaranteed that all East Germans would be treated fairly and enjoy full rights in a united Germany if they assisted in a peaceful transition—most East Germans believed his offer was credible, or at least better than the alternatives. As a result, even East Germans in the security services and the border guards refused to use force against their fellow citizens to defend the system, and East Germany simply collapsed without much violence.

Although the circumstances in North Korea are not the same as they were in East Germany,<sup>57</sup> some of the roundtable discussants noted that the example of East Germany provides an admirable model for designing an information campaign credible enough that a critical mass of North Koreans, like the East Germans in 1989, could end up disbelieving in their national system at the point of war and take action counter to supporting the regime’s cause.

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<sup>56</sup> Pierre Gerbet, “The collapse of the German Democratic Republic,” CVC.EU by the University of Luxembourg, last updated Aug. 7, 2016, accessed July 10, 2022, <https://www.cvce.eu/en/collections/unit-content/-/unit/df06517b-babc-451d-baf6-a2d4b19c1c88/084c0f6f-0f4e-4f94-9513-6e0bb867abe1>.

<sup>57</sup> North Korea can arguably be seen as much less vulnerable to outside information than East Germany in the 1980s. Unlike in East Germany, it will largely be up to the people in North Korea to gain access to and internalize external narratives without tipping off the police state. Thus, understanding different types of networks of people in North Korea will be crucial as part of the campaign design.

## Viability of an information campaign

To evaluate and refine the concept of an information campaign enabling subregime deterrence in North Korea, we asked a diverse group of North Korea SMEs two main questions:

1. Could an information campaign feasibly influence the thinking of the people in North Korea—elites and ordinary citizens—and enable them to anticipate an alternative life in a non-Kim world?<sup>58</sup>
2. If so, will the people's survival instincts be strong enough for them to seize opportunities to act in their own self-interest during a conflict? And would these actions meaningfully reduce the level of violence and enable subregime deterrence?

The consensus from the roundtable discussion was yes—for many in North Korea, external information would help validate existing doubts that are secretly harbored. They said that reducing North Koreans' fear of the outside world would have a strong persuasive effect in helping them visualize how their lives would improve under a different system. One expert who studies information dissemination methods and effects in North Korea stated that people in North Korea are curious about the outside world and that the more they are exposed to information about it, the more their perspectives change.

The two defectors mentioned that many, if not most, of their former fellow citizens are highly mistrustful of the regime but do not know what else to believe (though they may not necessarily turn their backs on the regime for something unknown). The US and ROK should take advantage of these seeds of doubt to offer a better alternative. Both defectors also observed that North Koreans' familiarity with China was greater than their familiarity with the US or South Korea before they left. Both defectors mentioned being exposed to pamphlets and radio as means of receiving outside information and said that the elites have greater access to memory sticks or flash drives.

The appetite for outside information is also confirmed by extensive qualitative research studies. For example, Intermedia—a consulting group with expertise in applied research and evaluation—conducted a survey of 250 refugees and travelers from North Korea and found a direct correlation between consuming foreign media and changes in feelings toward the outside world:

Data collected from recent North Korean defectors indicates that those with exposure to outside news or entertainment media are more likely to be favorably disposed toward South Korea and the US. This confirms that outside media exposure positively impacts beliefs and attitudes about the outside

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<sup>58</sup> As long as the current presiding North Korean government—the Kim family regime—is in power, access to information is likely to continue to be restricted, and human rights are likely to continue to be denied.

world. Statistically significant relationships were identified between exposure to outside news media and more favorable beliefs and attitudes about South Korea and the US Entertainment media exposure was also found to have a statistically significant relationship to more favorable beliefs and attitudes toward South Korea and the US.<sup>59</sup>

Another qualitative study of 10 in-depth interviews with North Korean defectors conducted by academic Jieun Baek showed that citizens were “more curious than afraid” of illegal media and outside information.<sup>60</sup> In addition, recently several North Korean youths were sent to a labor camp after being caught listening and dancing to a South Korean “K-pop” band, and Kim Jong Un called K-pop a “vicious cancer” shortly after.<sup>61</sup> Recent crackdowns show the government’s fear of the increasing accessibility and influence of outside information among people in North Korea. Despite the government’s efforts to stop it, consumption of outside media has continued to grow over the past two decades.<sup>62</sup> This assessment is supported not only by the two refugee studies mentioned but also by the experts with whom we met.

In answering the second question, *will their survival instincts be strong enough for them to seize opportunities to act in their own self-interest*, a preponderance of the US-based experts and defectors we interviewed agreed that most people in North Korea would act to ensure their survival and that of their families. One defector shared that if the regime’s control begins to fragment—such as might happen during the chaos of conflict or regime collapse—people would not know what to do. Several participants noted that giving the people in North Korea hope for a post-Kim-regime future would reduce their fear of what comes next. Pre-crisis messaging would help prepare them to recognize and seize opportunities to reduce the violence and chaos of a conflict, in alignment with Alliance objectives.

These conclusions came with one important caveat—overcoming systematic indoctrination, isolation, and fear will take time and consistency to allow the people of North Korea to envision an alternative, better life outside of the Kim regime. At the outset of a conflict, North Koreans must already be mentally prepared to pursue their own interests in ways that naturally align with the Alliance’s goals rather than the Kim regime.

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<sup>59</sup> Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, “A Quiet Opening, North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment,” *Intermedia*, May 2012, p. 53, [http://www.intermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/A\\_Quiet\\_Opening\\_FINAL\\_InterMedia.pdf](http://www.intermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/A_Quiet_Opening_FINAL_InterMedia.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Jieun Baek, *North Korea's Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground Is Transforming a Closed Society*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Jong So Yong, “Three Teenagers in N. Pyongan Province Sent to Reeducation Camp for Listening to S. Korean Music,” *Daily NK*, May 5, 2021; KCNA, June 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Changgyu Ahn, “North Korea Gets Tough with Residents Caught with South Korean Products or Cash,” *Radio Free Asia*, Aug. 25, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/south-korean-products-08252021191802.html>.

## Findings

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The following are our findings regarding this information-based approach, which we based on the implications determined from the signpost analysis of key increasing threats in Table 1 and the baseline themes identified during the roundtable discussion.

### What could subregime deterrence achieve?

1. **Reinforce integrated deterrence—especially during tensions extreme enough for conflict to appear imminent**—either by influencing those beneath Kim to subtly act in ways that slow escalation or by undermining Kim’s confidence that powerful elites and military commanders will carry out his orders.<sup>63</sup> It is reasonable to think that powerful elites close to Kim and the commanders who would launch missiles or otherwise commit acts of violence might choose to not follow orders during a critical moment if they see their particular role as leading to their own destruction and recognize alternatives to following their assumed roles.
2. **Reduce the challenges and costs of a conflict.** Influencing the actions of those who would carry out Kim’s orders—or otherwise act against Alliance interests—and getting them to recognize that it is in their interest to avoid actions that cause violence and chaos could meaningfully reduce the major operational risks and challenges of a conflict.
  - a. Reduce the violence, destruction, and duration of combat by inducing military units not to fight, employ WMDs, or fire artillery into Seoul and other populated areas. Encourage units to surrender or otherwise be co-opted in ways that keep them from violence.
  - b. Mitigate the factors most likely to bring about significant humanitarian challenges, such as preventing masses of refugees and the collapse of an already fragile civil infrastructure.
  - c. Lessen the resistance of military and civilian personnel in the period after the major fighting has stopped. Much like what happened soon after the end of major combat operations were declared in Iraq, reconstruction in North Korea could devolve into violence and chaos. Decades of indoctrination will not disappear overnight, but a peaceful transition can be maintained if increasing numbers of people believe that

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<sup>63</sup> One example of a changed behavior under conflict is exemplified in Vasily Arkhipov, the Soviet naval officer who has been called “the man who saved the world” and helped prevent nuclear conflict between the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War. The circumstances of Arkhipov and North Koreans in influential roles are different, yet he provides a real-world example of a senior officer risking his life to defy orders from higher command.

life can be preferable outside Kim family rule and thus set their expectations in advance.

## Beginning findings

### Designing an information campaign for North Korea

Based on the roundtable discussion, we have identified the following early contours of what a sophisticated information campaign in North Korea might look like:

- **The information campaign should challenge regime narratives.** The North Korean people are indoctrinated from an early age in a specific ideology tied to nationalism likening their leader to a god. Many end up questioning the legitimacy of the national ideology, but they have limited access to outside information and may not know what else to think. Insights from the roundtable and one-on-one engagements suggest that most people in North Korea are curious about the outside world. By highlighting the obvious inconsistencies between the lives they live, the regime's narratives, and the conditions in the outside world, an information campaign can contribute to shifting people's mindsets.
- **The information campaign should validate internal doubts.** During the roundtable, both former North Korean citizens shared that many in North Korea harbor doubts but are unable to have them validated by discussing them with others. As one defector stated, "They learn to smile outward at an early age to hide what they are thinking." Outside information may continue to highlight the inconsistencies of their daily lived experiences, especially if delivered through a trusted source.
- **The information campaign should reduce fear of the outside world.** As part of national indoctrination and ideology, the US and ROK are portrayed as enemy states. If the US or ROK were to intervene in a future state of conflict, it will be crucial for the people of North Korea to have a more accurate perspective of the US and ROK. With this perspective, they will more likely to see cooperation with the US and ROK as beneficial to their own self-interest, which will in turn mitigate the violence and severity of a conflict.
- **The information campaign should have credible messaging.** One of the reasons that the current information operation strategy is fragmented or lacking is that the overarching policy at the diplomatic and military levels is inconsistent. The approach proposed in this paper proposes reaching people in North Korea at deeper levels. Policies that support credible public diplomacy and conversations about the future of North Korean citizens are critical. From their point of view, the outside world has provided little credible assurances that life without Kim would be any better.

- **The information campaign should pursue a wide range of mechanisms** (e.g., pamphlets, radios, memory sticks). Pamphlets seem to have a consistent degree of success in influencing mindset changes, and they risk less severe unintended consequences.<sup>64</sup>

## Using trust networks

One suggested method for inserting information into North Korea is through “trust networks”—information that comes from trusted sources.<sup>65</sup> In this approach, tailored channels would focus on conveying information to particular groups, and this information could compel change over time. A SME shared this example:

Rather than prioritizing self-interest, research on mass movements that achieved their political goals shows that prioritizing the desired end state as a common vision can lead to sustained coalitions that operate with low violence/peacefully. For example, the protests/marches by the mothers of the missing in Chile under Pinochet became a powerful force for peaceful change. Grieving mothers are among the most fearless and powerful forces in a society. Harnessing this force will power a strategy to mobilize a larger population in a manner where there is a reduced level of violence.<sup>66</sup>

Information that North Koreans receive from people they trust, such as friends or family—particularly those fortunate enough to have either served abroad or escaped—can be extremely convincing. Tapping into these trust networks as a means of disseminating information could be effective in further changing people’s mindsets and priming them to consider an alternative narrative counter to the regime’s propaganda and distorted truths.

## Timing matters

An information campaign will be far more effective if it starts long before the moment of crisis or collapse because shifting people’s perspectives takes time. Moreover, the effects will become apparent only when a conflict or collapse is imminent. Before that moment, the regime has enough control mechanisms in place for people to lose too much by defying the regime’s wishes, but during a radical upheaval wrought by conflict, they might reconsider their decisions. If military conflict is imminent or ongoing, the people in North Korea would be

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<sup>64</sup> There are different tiers of punishment for various illegal holdings of foreign information. A former North Korean who worked at the Ministry of State Security shared that getting caught holding a paper leaflet is of less consequence than getting caught listening to the radio. Possession of foreign media video and thumb drives have the highest level of consequences.

<sup>65</sup> Discussion with Dr. John Park, Director of the Korea Project at Harvard University’s Belfer Center, June 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

forced to make critical decisions at a time when the regime's continued control is not guaranteed. From the roundtable discussion, we gathered that one of the biggest concerns for many, if not most, would be the immediate survival and safety of their families and then what their future will look like without the Kim regime. Figure 3 depicts some of the variability discussed during the roundtable of how individual motivations might change from a point of pre-crisis to crisis.

Figure 3. Example set of individual motivations in pre-crisis and crisis



Source: CNA.

Note: Green to red shows variability in the level of motivation.

Roundtable discussants affirmed that information shaping to affect the decisions individuals make at the point of conflict could lead them to act in their own interest if they saw hope in a better future by doing so. An information campaign could seek to create conditions among the North Korean population that would ease the operational challenges for Alliance forces and result in fewer casualties. Even if such a campaign were not fully successful, it has no downsides, given the potentially catastrophic costs of a conflict.

## Areas for future research

What specifically the Alliance might do to achieve these desired effects is beyond the scope of this study. Additional in-depth research and planning will be needed to further develop the layers of an information or subregime deterrence campaign:

- Given the increasing level of North Korea's weapons advancement, a **reexamination of North Korea's escalatory ladder** and where choices for coercion, aggression, and risk are positioned may be helpful to understand the timing of a future crisis or conflict.<sup>67</sup>
- An examination of **ROK and US coordinating mechanisms** should be undertaken to (1) assess the baseline of who conducts the information operation and when, (2)

<sup>67</sup> CNA previously examined North Korea's calculus and execution of provocations in the maritime space up to 2017. An update to that study to encompass North Korea's recent aggressive rhetoric and weapons testing would be useful. See Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Maritime Challenges: Scenarios Along the Escalatory Ladder*, CNA, DOP-2017-U-016143-Final, 2017.

understand the gaps at both the operation-tactical and strategic levels, and (3) determine whether unintended prohibitions or obstructions to conducting a sophisticated information dissemination campaign exist in diplomatic, military, and economic policy.

- **Information-shaping goals should be explored.** The roundtable identified possible objectives for information shaping: undermining regime narratives, providing external validation for internal doubts, and reducing the fear of the outside world. Information-related efforts might explore which of the following factors are the most provocative in designing objectives for optimal desired operational effects:
  - **Motivations.** Although an individual's survival was highlighted as one of the primary motivations during the roundtable discussion, further research should be conducted to broaden the understanding of various motivations (e.g., disbelief in national identity, need to survive, life dissatisfaction) and the level of depth of those motivations.
  - **Target audiences.** North Korea is not a homogenous society. Geographical, cultural, and resource differences are spread across the country, and different segments of the population have differing access to the outside world. Support for the regime's ideological narrative varies. These differences demand a more nuanced information campaign than a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, the pathways inside the regime need to be studied to ensure that information tailored for a particular segment of the population can reach that population uncorrupted.
  - **Threshold of behavior change.** Our exploratory research suggests that outside information has the potential to influence the North Korean people; however, the degree to which this information might cause people to take desired actions during a conflict needs to be further explored. A particular assumption to test is whether people in North Korea—especially those in positions of power—will act in their own self-interests as opposed to remaining loyal to the Kim regime.
- **The human terrain in North Korea should be mapped,** considering social class level, geographical province, and role (elite, military, civilian, etc.), to understand the magnitude of what subregime deterrence effects must achieve and identify priority objectives. (An example overview of North Korea's human terrain is shown in the appendix.) For example, a civilian from one region may hold different partialities than a civilian from another region and be more or less susceptible to external narratives,

even if they are from the same social class. Similarly, within various army corps, some groups have experienced more corruption than others.<sup>68</sup>

- A **comparative analysis of recent information campaigns** that may have relevance to North Korea or the idea of subregime deterrence applications would be useful.

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<sup>68</sup> Myungchul Lee, “North Korean Military Officers Resort to Drug Running to Make Ends Meet,” Radio Free Asia, Dec. 28, 2022, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/kpa-officer-drug-running-12282018103556.html>.

## Conclusion

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North Korea's pursuit of weapons advancement will continue to be concerning as part of the larger challenge of deterring and campaigning against China and Russia. Since traditional deterrence does little to prevent North Korea from continuing to pursue its strategic and tactical nuclear weapons advancement, another approach is needed, especially considering the uncertainty of when North Korea might take more aggressive action once it achieves greater nuclear capabilities. The subregime deterrence approach presents an operational opportunity for the Alliance to take active steps in mitigating catastrophic costs and risks before a crisis or conflict occurs.

The findings from this quick-response effort and the suggested viability of pursuing an information campaign are only starting points. We hope this concept paper contributes to Commander, Naval Forces Korea (CNFK) and USFK planning efforts in North Korea and look forward to further exploring how such an information campaign can help the US achieve its goals over an adversary with asymmetric advantages.

## Appendix: Example Overview of North Korea's Human Terrain

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A key gap identified during the North Korea SME roundtable discussion was the lack of real-time understanding and mapping of North Korea's human terrain. To develop a sophisticated information campaign able to conduct effective subregime deterrence, understanding self-interest points and motivations among the North Korean population is important. In addition, understanding how North Korea's core history and culture are embedded into North Koreans' livelihoods and upbringing is also significant. We provide CNFK with a starting point to build from in this paper.

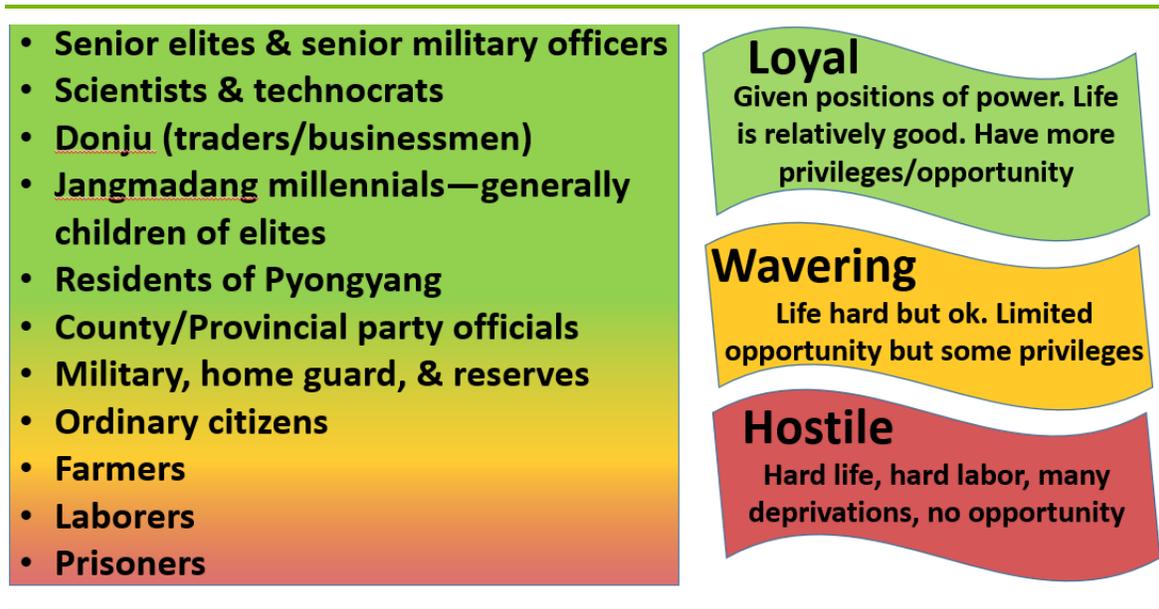
North Korea may be a tightly controlled society, but its people are far from monolithic. As Robert Collins explains in his well-researched book *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System*, the Kim regime segregates people into categories known as *Songbun* based on their assessed loyalty. The 50-plus categories are grouped into three roughly equal-sized population classes: Loyal, Wavering, and Hostile. Although all three are important population segments that need "shaping," the people with higher *Songbun*—being the most trusted—have the most influential positions and more privileges than the other two classes. Shaping how they will act in a conflict will likely have the greatest effects on reducing the level of violence and destruction. On one hand, they are more loyal day-to-day because they have the most to lose, but on the other, they are the best positioned to recognize when a regime-ending confrontation is imminent and what this might mean for their future. As their need for a "lifeboat" grows, they may be the most desperate and most willing to take risks to not only survive but also ensure that they will have a future.

That said, roughly two-thirds of population are in the Wavering and Hostile classes. They—especially the Wavering class—fill many of the important but less influential jobs, such as soldiers, bureaucrats, technicians, and local officials. Although they are not officially powerful, some have become successful in the private markets and have sway as part of the *Donju*—an unofficial term for traders and businesspeople. Shaping what they think about the dangers and opportunities of a conflict is an important informational consideration.

People even the lower on the *Songbun* spectrum will probably have more limited expectations for what comes after a conflict and be more focused on the basics of survival—and maybe (according to the escapees from North Korea whom CNA interviewed) on settling scores with those above who have wronged them. Using information to shape their expectations and guide their actions is still important. Because they are the least secure in terms of food, health care, and almost everything else, they are the most likely to become refugees in search of help and

safety, and to be the most disruptive once the fighting has stopped and generations of frustrations are unleashed.

Figure 4. Snapshot of North Korea's class loyalties



Source: CNA via Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System*, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012.

Note: Understanding the positions, motivations, and influences of the people in these classes may give insights into which themes might resonate with which people.

## Abbreviations

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CFC	Combined Forces Command
CNFK	Commander, Naval Forces Korea
CONUS	continental United States
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
INDOPACOM	US Indo-Pacific Command
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
KTO	Korean theater of operations
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NMD	National Missile Defense
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROK	Republic of Korea
RV	re-entry vehicle
SME	subject matter expert
SOCKOR	Special Operations Command, Korea
US	United States
USFK	United States Forces Korea
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

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