

MONTHLY REPORT

Nuclear Risk Assessment

Korean Peninsula
2023/10



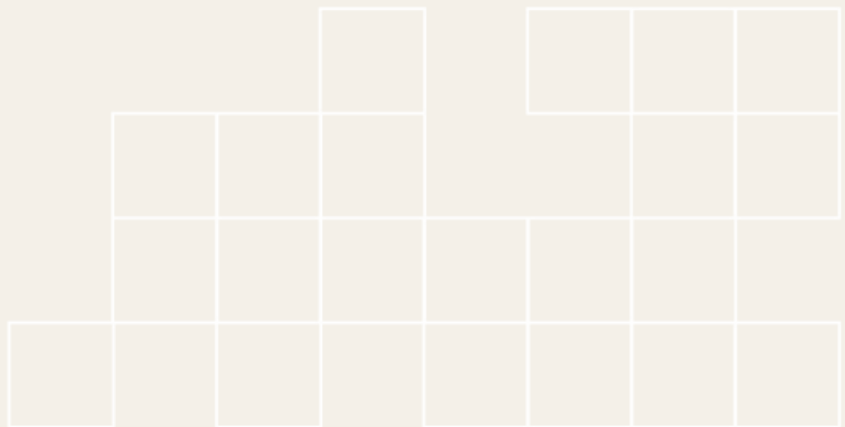
Open Nuclear Network

One Earth Future's Open Nuclear Network programme is a non-aligned, non-governmental entity that seeks to increase security for all States by ensuring that nuclear decision makers have access to high quality, shareable open source information which enables them to make the best decisions in the face of escalating conflict.

Nuclear Risk Assessment Report

Nuclear risk can emanate from various factors. These range from the more obvious military developments and incidents that could lead to increased tensions and possibly even nuclear misuse, to the often overlooked domestic and external contexts in which a country perceives its circumstances and, based on those perceptions, makes decisions that have direct or indirect implications for nuclear risk.

In an attempt to more comprehensively assess nuclear risks on and around the Korean Peninsula, this monthly Report examines the DPRK's and the ROK's nuclear and military spheres, as well as activities and policy decisions across main domestic and foreign policy spheres that could impact nuclear risks.



Methodology & Scope

The “ONN Nuclear Risk Assessment Report” strives for objectivity and accuracy through collection, research and analysis of open source information.

The Report focuses on the DPRK and the ROK; other key regional State actors – namely China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – are covered as part of the context in which Pyongyang and Seoul act and make their decisions, but they themselves are not the main objects of this Report’s analysis.

The Report consists of three sections: Nuclear, Military and Political.

The **Nuclear section** covers notable developments with direct implications for nuclear capabilities and dynamics on and around the Korean Peninsula. These include the DPRK’s nuclear and missile development and tests; military activities related to US extended deterrence to the ROK and in the region; as well as major nuclear policy changes.

The **Military section** covers key military-related developments that may not have direct implications for nuclear capabilities and postures but could lead to heightened nuclear risks. These include the two Koreas’ conventional military build-ups or military exercises, or unusual moves by the DPRK’s Korean People’s Army (KPA) or inter-Korean military conflicts.

The **Political section** addresses key domestic and external factors that could impact Pyongyang’s decisions on its nuclear posture. Examples include notable domestic political, economic and social developments, as well as its ROK and foreign policy trends. This section may also address domestic pressures in the ROK or changes in Seoul’s foreign policy that could have repercussions for nuclear risk, such as the public discourse in the ROK on acquiring its own nuclear capabilities or significant policy changes related to the ROK-US alliance or inter-Korean relations.

For busy readers, these three sections are preceded by key takeaways from each chapter.

To produce this monthly Report, ONN regularly monitors, collects and analyzes text, satellite imagery and ground photos and videos in publicly and commercially available sources from China, the DPRK, Japan, the ROK, Russia and the United States. Secondary and tertiary sources are used only if primary sources are unavailable. ONN observes a [Code of Ethics](#) for collection, research and analysis.

Nuclear Risk Takeaways

Nuclear. Military. Political.



NUCLEAR

The DPRK did not attempt to launch its reconnaissance satellite in October as previously pledged and future plans for the launch are unknown at this time. Japan, the ROK and the United States conducted numerous trilateral maritime and air exercises in October. The deployment of US strategic assets for those exercises is in line with the ROK-US Washington Declaration commitment to enhance the “regular visibility” of US strategic assets to both provide more tangible deterrence assurances to the ROK as well as enhance interoperability and joint planning capabilities in the region.



MILITARY

Japan, the ROK and the United States alleged that several arms transfers were made from the DPRK to Russia and expressed concerns about potential reciprocal military technology transfers from Russia to the DPRK. The DPRK dismissed the allegations but stated that it is ready to further elevate the DPRK-Russian relationship. Bilateral cooperation in political, economic and possibly military fields between Russia and the DPRK is anticipated in the future. In light of Hamas’ surprise attack against Israel, as well as the alleged failure of the DPRK to honor the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), the ROK military stressed the need to raise its combat readiness level and suspend the CMA. The risk of military conflict along the DPRK-ROK border may be increased if the CMA is suspended.



POLITICAL

The visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the DPRK in October to discuss the agreements made at the September Kim-Putin summit signals a further deepening of political cooperation, with Lavrov expressing “complete support” for the DPRK regime. Reports of large-scale trade, potentially including military materials, indicate that some agreements may be under practical implementation, while DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui’s reference to the relationship as a “powerful strategic stability element” in the region suggests further alignment in the military sphere. Despite friction over the alleged repatriation of DPRK citizens held in detention in China, developments in the political sphere indicate that the situation has not negatively impacted Sino-ROK relations, although the issue may cause further tension in the coming months.



Nuclear

DPRK Misses Self-imposed Deadline to Launch Reconnaissance Satellite; Japan, ROK, US Conduct Trilateral Maritime, Air Exercises

The DPRK did not attempt to launch its reconnaissance satellite in October as previously pledged and future plans for the launch are unknown at this time. Japan, the ROK and the United States conducted numerous trilateral maritime and air exercises in October. The deployment of US strategic assets for those exercises is in line with the ROK-US Washington Declaration commitment to enhance the “regular visibility” of US strategic assets to both provide more tangible deterrence assurances to the ROK as well as enhance interoperability and joint planning capabilities in the region.

The DPRK failed to deliver on its pledge to launch its reconnaissance satellite in October. It remains unclear whether the September summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin influenced the launch schedule or when the launch attempt will occur.

- Following a second unsuccessful launch in August, Pyongyang [announced](#) its intent to make a third effort to place the Malligyong-1 reconnaissance satellite in orbit in October. The initial launch attempt [occurred](#) in May without success.
- The [Kim-Putin summit](#) in September has [raised concerns](#) regarding potential collaborations in the field of space technologies between the two States. Lee Sung-jun, spokesperson for the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, [refrained](#) from disclosing specifics when questioned about the possibility of the DPRK delaying the launch to incorporate potential technology transfers from Russia.
- The DPRK [previously](#) put two Earth observation satellites, the Kwangmyongsong-3-2 and the Kwangmyongsong-4, into orbit in 2012 and 2016, respectively; however, the [Malligyong-1](#) would be the State’s first military reconnaissance satellite. After examining the satellite wreckage retrieved from the sea following the failed launch in May 2023, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff [claimed](#) that the Malligyong-1 has “no military utility as a reconnaissance satellite.” Despite this claim, even a satellite with limited capabilities may modestly improve the DPRK’s situational awareness.

Japan, the ROK and the United States conducted trilateral maritime and air exercises in line with the Camp David summit’s commitment to regularly hold joint exercises. The deployment of US strategic assets in those exercises underscored US extended deterrence to Japan and the ROK and an increase in trilateral security cooperation. This deployment is also in line with the ROK-US Washington Declaration commitment to enhance the “regular visibility” of US strategic assets to both provide more tangible deterrence assurances to the ROK as well as enhance interoperability and joint planning capabilities.

- Japan, the ROK and the United States conducted trilateral joint air exercises on [22 October](#), which included a US B-52H nuclear-capable bomber. This came after the three States conducted joint maritime interdiction exercises for the first time in seven years on [9-10 October](#), which included the deployment of the nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier. These latest exercises came after the three countries agreed to strengthen security cooperation and hold “annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises” during their [Camp David summit](#) in August.



Nuclear (cont.)

DPRK Misses Self-imposed Deadline to Launch Reconnaissance Satellite; Japan, ROK, US Conduct Trilateral Maritime, Air Exercises

- The deployment of US strategic assets in those exercises underscored the strengthened US extended deterrence to Japan and the ROK and increased trilateral security cooperation.
- The deployed B-52H bomber also landed at an ROK airbase on [19 October](#), marking the first known time that a nuclear-capable bomber landed in the ROK. The deployed USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier also visited Busan, which was the second aircraft carrier to visit the ROK in 2023 after the USS Nimitz in [March](#). Foreign minister Park Jin toured the USS Ronald Reagan on [15 October](#) and stated that “the enhanced regular visibility of the U.S. strategic assets will greatly strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance.”
- A Korean Central News Agency commentary on [20 October](#) criticized the deployment of strategic assets as threatening a “preemptive nuclear attack aimed at physical removal of the DPRK” and that such assets would “become the first target to be destroyed.” However, these deployments are in line with the commitment by the ROK and the United States to enhance the “regular visibility” of US strategic assets as stated in the [Washington Declaration](#) signed by Presidents Yoon and Biden in April 2023. Thus, it should be expected that these deployments will continue to become more routine and visible to provide more tangible deterrence assurances to the ROK, as well as to further enhance interoperability and joint planning capabilities.



Military

Japan, ROK, US Alledge DPRK of Arms Transfers to Russia; ROK Military Calls for Increased Military Readiness Against the DPRK, Suspension of Comprehensive Military Agreement

Japan, the ROK and the United States alleged that several arms transfers were made from the DPRK to Russia and expressed concerns about potential reciprocal military technology transfers from Russia to the DPRK. The DPRK dismissed the allegations but stated that it is ready to further elevate the DPRK-Russian relationship. Bilateral cooperation in political, economic and possibly military fields between Russia and the DPRK is anticipated in the future. In light of Hamas' surprise attack against Israel, as well as the alleged failure of the DPRK to honor the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), the ROK military stressed the need to raise its combat readiness level and suspend the CMA. The risk of military conflict along the DPRK-ROK border may be increased if the CMA is suspended.

Japan, the ROK and the United States have collectively condemned the alleged transfer of arms by the DPRK to Russia for use against Ukraine. The three States also expressed concerns about the possibility of reciprocal military technology transfers from Russia to the DPRK. The DPRK, however, has dismissed this joint statement and expressed its commitment to elevate the DPRK-Russian relationship to a "new, higher phase." While the DPRK did not confirm the allegations made by Japan, the ROK and the US, the alignment between the DPRK and Russia has grown closer since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Bilateral cooperation in political, economic and possibly military fields is anticipated in the future.

- On 13 October, the US government [reported](#) that the DPRK provided Russia with over 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions (Figure 1) in recent weeks. US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko and Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Park Jin issued a joint statement on the 25 October [affirming](#) the completion of several such weapon deliveries.



Figure 1. Alleged DPRK munitions transfer routes into Russia. Image: [US Mission to the UN](#).



Military (cont.)

Japan, ROK, US Alledge DPRK of Arms Transfers to Russia; ROK Military Calls for Increased Military Readiness Against the DPRK, Suspension of Comprehensive Military Agreement

- The joint statement [contends](#) that in exchange for its support to Russia, the DPRK is seeking military assistance to enhance its own military capabilities. Additionally, the three States have [voiced](#) concerns regarding the potential transfer of nuclear- or ballistic-missile-related technology to the DPRK.
- DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui has [dismissed](#) the joint statement as "the most politicized document that seriously distorted the friendly and cooperative relations" between the DPRK and Russia. She [emphasized](#) that the "traditional and strategic DPRK-Russia relations of friendship, cooperation, and good neighborliness will enter a new, elevated phase." While the DPRK did not confirm the allegations made by Japan, the ROK and the US, the alignment between the DPRK and Russia has grown closer since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Continued bilateral cooperation in political, economic and possibly military fields is anticipated in the future.

The ROK's Defense Minister has renewed calls to suspend the 2018 [Comprehensive Military Agreement](#) (CMA) in order to bolster the combat readiness of frontline troops. The risk of military conflict along the DPRK-ROK border may be increased in the future due to the possible reduction of the CMA's confidence building measures. In the wake of Hamas' surprise attack against Israel on 7 October, the ROK military has pledged to strengthen its own capabilities to defend against missile threats and asymmetrical warfare tactics.

- On 23 October, ROK Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [reiterated](#) his call to suspend the CMA while visiting Yeonpyeong Island in the Yellow Sea. During another parliamentary audit session on 27 October, Shin [disclosed](#) that the DPRK has violated the CMA multiple times in the western maritime buffer zone, once more urging the suspension of the CMA to improve military readiness. Shin also [mentioned](#) that the State audit agency is presently reviewing the CMA to determine if an inspection is necessary; it would be the first time an inspection would be conducted.
- [According](#) to Shin, the DPRK fired artillery shells in the western maritime buffer zone approximately 110 times, and left the gun barrels and portholes open 3,400 times since the signing of the CMA in 2018. Shin [estimated](#) that there have been close to 3,600 CMA violations in total over the past five years. Under the [CMA](#), the DPRK and the ROK agreed to establish buffer zones and cease hostile activities along the border.
- During a parliamentary audit session on 23 October, Army Chief of Staff General Park Jeong-hwan [stated](#) that "North Korea's enhanced nuclear and missile capabilities, coupled with Hamas' surprise attacks on Israel, serve as a stark reminder that North Korea could provoke at any moment." In late October, the ROK and US military [conducted](#) several live-fire exercises to counter potential "Hamas-style surprise artillery attacks" by the DPRK. Additionally, Defense Minister Shin Won-sik also referenced the Hamas-Israel war to [criticize](#) the CMA, which hinders the ROK from fully utilizing its air surveillance assets to monitor the DPRK.
- While the alleged failures of the DPRK to honor the CMA and its negative impact on the ROK military's readiness may constitute legitimate security concerns, a suspension may lower the threshold for military altercations at the border and make it more difficult to maintain escalation control following a military incident.



Political

Intensification of DPRK-Russia Political, Military Cooperation; China-ROK Relations Stable Despite DPRK Repatriations

The visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to the DPRK in October to discuss the agreements made at the September Kim-Putin summit signals a further deepening of political cooperation, with Lavrov expressing “complete support” for the DPRK regime. Reports of large-scale trade, potentially including military materials, indicate that some agreements may be under practical implementation, while DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui’s reference to the relationship as a “powerful strategic stability element” in the region suggests further alignment in the military sphere. Despite friction over the alleged repatriation of DPRK citizens held in detention in China, developments in the political sphere indicate that the situation has not negatively impacted Sino-ROK relations, although the issue may cause further tension in the coming months.

In a sign of continued intensification of bilateral ties, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited the DPRK in mid-October to discuss the implementation of unspecified agreements made at the [September summit](#), expressing Russia’s “complete support” for the Kim Jong Un regime while ensuring the continued expansion of its diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. Alongside an unprecedented number of high-level statements in defense of Russia and DPRK-Russian relations in State media, DPRK Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui explicitly referred to bilateral relations as a “strategic stability element” in the region with the potential to “contain” Japan-ROK-US. Meanwhile, reports released in October indicate a rapid increase in bilateral DPRK-Russian trade levels over the past months, potentially including military material.

- On 18–19 October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited the DPRK and held [talks](#) with Kim Jong Un and Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui. During a reception, Lavrov [referred](#) to the bilateral relations as a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with a “convergence” of approaches to global issues and expressed Russia’s “complete support” for the aspirations of the DPRK in upholding its independence. His visit reportedly constituted an opportunity to review agreements made at the September summit and concluded with the [signing](#) of a “2024–2025 exchange plan”. It remains unknown what the agreement encompasses, however, the meeting featured discussion on “all fields including the economy, culture and advanced science and technology.”
- Nine Russian embassy staff [reportedly](#) accompanied the Foreign Minister on his flight to Pyongyang as part of the second staff rotation since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than doubling the staff numbers that shrank tenfold during the pandemic isolation. The increase is in line with [comments](#) made by Russian Ambassador to the DPRK Matsegora in August and may continue to expand beyond pre-pandemic levels due to the intensification of bilateral cooperation.
- In late October, DPRK Foreign Minister Choe released a [statement](#) declaring that should Japan-ROK-US cooperation endanger peace and security in the region, the DPRK and Russia “will act as a powerful strategic stability element to contain such situation.” Her statement followed several other high-level statements [defending](#) DPRK-Russian relations against US criticism, [supporting](#) the war in Ukraine, [opposing](#) US weaponry provisions to Ukraine and [defending](#) Russia in relation to the Nordstrom Pipeline incident.



Political (cont.)

Intensification of DPRK-Russia Political, Military Cooperation; China-ROK Relations Stable Despite DPRK Repatriations

- Satellite imagery from 5 October of the Tumangang Rail Facility at the border with Russia [showed](#) a tripling of railcars compared to the busiest day in the past five years. Ongoing construction signifies further expansion of the facility, indicating a potential continued increase of trade levels in the future. Satellite imagery analysis released in October also [shows](#) vessels shipping cargo from the DPRK port of Rajin to the Russian facility at Dunai starting from August. The nature of the trade remains unverified, but reports suggest it may include artillery rounds and rockets.

The continued relaxation of DPRK borders appears to have facilitated the return of a potentially large number of DPRK citizens detained in China for the first time since before the COVID-19 pandemic, despite multiple requests by the ROK for China to refrain from repatriation due to their protected status under the ROK constitution. Continued developments in Sino-ROK cooperation indicate the situation has not negatively impacted bilateral relations. However, the EU is considering including these repatriations in its UNGA resolution on North Korean human rights, which could potentially cause further tension as the resolution is co-sponsored by the ROK.

- On 13 October, the ROK Ministry of Unification [confirmed](#) that North Koreans detained in China appeared to have been repatriated to the DPRK, although the numbers and their reasons for entering China remain unclear. This statement followed a [report](#) on 11 October by ROK media stating that over 600 North Koreans had been transported simultaneously across the border from different areas in China on 9 October in the first large-scale repatriation since before the COVID-19 pandemic. China has not confirmed the repatriations and has [reiterated](#) its stance that North Koreans who cross the border are unlawful economic immigrants ineligible for protection.
- The ROK has [requested](#) that China refrain from repatriation on various occasions in the past months through different diplomatic levels, including during ROK Prime Minister Han Deok-Soo's [meeting](#) with Xi Jinping in September, and recently through the ROK Vice-Defense Minister on the [margins](#) of the Chinese Xiangshan Forum. Under the ROK constitution, the rights of DPRK defectors are protected and citizenship is granted upon arrival.
- Despite tension, recent events indicate the situation has not adversely affected continued developments in Sino-ROK cooperation. In September, senior diplomats of China, Japan and the ROK [agreed](#) to a trilateral summit at the "earliest convenient time". At the October Xiangshan Forum, the ROK Vice-Defense Minister met with deputy chief of staff of China's Joint Staff Department Lt. Gen. Jing Jianfeng and [agreed](#) to resume personnel exchanges and cooperation halted during the pandemic.
- The reported return of DPRK citizens has been met with international [opposition](#), and the EU has [communicated](#) that it is considering updating its yearly UN Third Committee resolution on the human rights situation in the DPRK, which the ROK co-sponsors, to include language on the repatriations. The previous year, the resolution [avoided](#) explicitly referencing China in relation to the repatriations, a wording which could be challenged in the draft resolution set for submission in December.



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NETWORK**
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