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THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF
RECENT IRAN DEVELOPMENTS:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
THE KOREAN PENINSULA

BY ANKIT PANDA



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Ankit Panda is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research interests include nuclear strategy, escalation, missiles and missile defense, space security, and U.S. alliances. He is the author of *The New Nuclear Age: At the Precipice of Armageddon* (Polity, 2025), *Indo-Pacific Missile Arsenals: Avoiding Spirals and Mitigating Risks* (Carnegie, 2023), and *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (Hurst/Oxford, 2020). Panda is co-editor of *New Approaches to Verifying and Monitoring North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal* (Carnegie, 2021).

Panda has consulted for the United Nations in New York and Geneva, and his analysis has been sought by U.S. Strategic Command, Space Command, and Indo-Pacific Command. Panda is among the most highly cited experts worldwide on North Korean nuclear capabilities. He has testified on matters related to South Korea and Japan before the congressionally chartered U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Panda has also testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Strategic Forces. Before joining Carnegie, Panda was an adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists and a journalist covering international security. Panda is a frequent expert commentator in print and broadcast media around the world on nuclear policy and defense matters. His work has appeared in or been featured by the New York Times, the New Yorker, the Economist, the Washington Post, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Atlantic, the New Republic, the South China Morning Post, Politico, and the National Interest. Panda has also published in scholarly journals, including *Survival*, the *Washington Quarterly*, and *India Review*, and has contributed to the IISS Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment and Strategic Survey. He is editor-at-large at the *Diplomat*, where he hosts the Asia Geopolitics podcast, and a contributing editor at *War on the Rocks*, where he hosts *Thinking the Unthinkable with Ankit Panda*, a podcast on nuclear matters.



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최근 이란 정세의 전략적 함의: 한반도를 위한 정책 제언

ANKIT PANDA

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

JUNE 2025

In 2025, both North Korea and Iran remain pressing matters of concern for the United States, as they have been for much of these initial two-and-a-half decades of the twenty-first century. However, while Iran continues to be the most pressing case of near-term nuclear proliferation concern, North Korea has emerged as a capable nuclear adversary of the United States. Since [the expulsion](#) of the International Atomic Energy Agency from North Korea in 2009, the country's nuclear fuel cycle capabilities, ballistic missile development efforts, and nuclear weaponization endeavors have all been effectively unconstrained. The U.S. intelligence community has repeatedly assessed in recent years, [as it did in March](#), that Kim Jong Un, the North Korean leader, "has no intention of negotiating away his strategic weapons programs."

Iran, meanwhile, submitted to intrusive verification provisions under the [2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) but, in the aftermath of the United States' violation of that agreement in 2018 under the first Trump administration, undertook a series of deliberate measures to bring itself closer to a nuclear weapon. Today, the Trump administration, in its second incarnation, seeks to prevent Iran [from acquiring a nuclear weapon](#), prioritizing diplomacy with the specter of possible military action looming in the background.

**이란은 북한과 달리 핵무기를 보유하고
있지는 않지만, '핵 임계점 상태'에 있다고
볼 수 있다. 즉, 이란은 단기간에
구체적으로는 며칠 이내에 핵무기 한 기를
조립할 수 있는 능력을 갖춘 것으로
평가된다**

Iran, unlike North Korea, does not possess nuclear weapons, but enjoys what may be termed nuclear threshold status; its ability to assemble a single nuclear weapon has been best measured in days, not months, following the slow collapse of the previously agreed technical limitations imposed by the 2015 JCPOA.

For the United States, this realization that North Korea and Iran are no longer best taxonomized as problems of the same class has become apparent.

Consider for instance that the Biden administration's [2022 National Defense Strategy](#) categorized both states under the category of "Other Persistent Threats" to the country, subservient to the much larger perceived challenges from China and Russia. This significantly understated the nature of the North Korean challenge, which was severe at the time and has grown worse since. North Korea and Iran, notably, shared this category with "violent extremist organizations," despite the United States' intelligence community having assessed as early as 2017 that Pyongyang [had the ability](#) to deliver nuclear weapons on ballistic missiles.

By 2022, evidence indicated that the United States started reasoning differently about the North Korea problem. In May 2022, U.S. Strategic Command, the U.S. combatant command responsible for global nuclear operations, hosted the first-ever nuclear deterrence symposium [dedicated to North Korea](#)—a distinction only previously afforded to America’s two other nuclear adversaries, Russia and China. In December 2024, the outgoing Biden administration’s unclassified summary of the president’s nuclear employment guidance, meanwhile, [notably classed](#) North Korea alongside Russia and China as part of a complex world of “multiple nuclear competitors.”

Ripple Effects: Shifting Geopolitics and Strained Alliances

While the United States largely now acknowledges North Korea as a nuclear deterrence challenge, this has not come without costs for its broader national interests and strategic goals. Above all, North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities, while they have implicated U.S. national security interests in ways unseen in the past, have also come to apply stress to the country’s alliance with South Korea. Understandably, South Korean threat perceptions have sharply risen, particularly following Kim Jong Un’s [open invocation in January 2021](#) of a strategic directive to seek the development of tactical nuclear weapons that would be used almost exclusively against South Korea-based targets at the Eighth Party Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party that year. As a result, South Korean public support for an [independent nuclear capability](#) and [tougher bargaining](#) with the United States over new measures of allied reassurance have followed.

Under the Biden administration, the United States undertook measures to address these growing sources of anxiety. Most notably, in April 2023, the United States and South Korea announced the Washington Declaration, [a leader-level endorsement](#) of a new Nuclear Consultative Group within the alliance to address nuclear scenarios involving North Korea and a new leadership communication mechanism modeled on NATO’s 1962 Athens Guidelines. These were largely “software” solutions to the new stresses on extended deterrence that emerged due to North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities.

In the Middle East today, the North Korean experience should be a reminder of the far-flung costs of successful Iranian proliferation and weaponization. A decision by Iran to leave the Nonproliferation Treaty and deploy nuclear weapons would undermine U.S. security interests in the broader region, including with non-treaty-based partners, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

With Saudi Arabia, the prospect of follow-on proliferation would loom as well; Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman [has repeatedly stated](#), on record, that his country would seek the bomb if Iran were to successfully proliferate. As the North Korea experience has shown in Northeast Asia, nuclear proliferation, for the United States, is not a strictly bilateral matter; the ripple effects shift regional geopolitics and strain alliances.

**이란이 핵확산금지조약(NPT)에서
탈퇴하고 핵무기를 배치하기로
결정한다면, 이는 이스라엘과
사우디아라비아처럼 조약 비가입국을
포함한 광범위한 지역에서 미국의
안보 이익을 심각하게 위협할 것이다**

Domestic U.S. Politics and Credible Commitments

최근 몇 년간의 미국내 정치의 급격한 변화는 미국이 이란과 북한 두 국가와 관련하여 자국의 국가 이익을 성공적으로 추구하는 능력에 심각한 영향을 미쳤다

Beyond this, however, the recent history of both North Korea and Iran policy does contain an unsettling takeaway for future U.S. efforts on both fronts. Fundamentally, swings in domestic politics in recent years have deeply affected the United States' ability to successfully pursue its national interests with regard to both countries. These problems are not fundamentally

new—for instance, North Korea saw during the course of the [implementation of the 1994 Agreed Framework](#) how U.S. lawmakers could frustrate the timely delivery of promised concessions—but have grown worse as political polarization has deepened in the United States. The first Trump administration, for instance, placed the United States in violation of its commitments under the 2015 JCPOA despite a lack of evidence that Iran, at the time of the May 2018 decision, [was in compliance](#) with the agreement. What mattered more for the administration was that the agreement had been negotiated by his predecessor, Barack Obama. As Trump, now back for a second non-consecutive term, seeks to renegotiate an agreement with Iran, he will almost certainly reach a deal that is inferior in intrusiveness, thoroughness, and technical depth than the 160-page JCPOA.

This observation, sadly, also dovetails with the U.S. diplomatic experience over decades in engaging North Korea. While no diplomatic engagement between the two countries has

taken place since a working-level meeting in October 2019, up until that point, each time Washington and Pyongyang returned to the negotiating table, North Korea's leverage in talks was greater. For instance, [the February 2019 Hanoi summit meeting collapsed](#) largely due to what the United States perceived to be an audacious North Korean demand for disproportionate relief from international sanctions in exchange for just part of its weapons-grade nuclear material production capability. While North Korea currently expresses no interest in reengaging the United States, the shared experiences with both Tehran and Pyongyang suggest that future diplomacy will be limited in the types of concessions it might extract. Next time, the United States might find itself, for instance, contemplating sanctions relief after all—and only in exchange, potentially, for a moratorium by North Korea on long-range missile and nuclear test, something Kim was willing to [unilaterally offer up](#) in April 2018.

비연속적인 두 번째 임기를 시작한 트럼프 대통령은 이란과의 핵 협정 재협상을 추진할 것으로 보이며, 그 결과로 도출될 협상안은 160 쪽 분량의 포괄적공동행동계획 (JCPOA)에 비해 검증 체계의 강도, 이행의 엄밀성, 기술적 정교성 측면에서 상대적으로 낮은 수준에 머무를 가능성이 높다

Lessons Learned

Despite this grim history, there are lessons from the experience of the last few decades that the United States should be willing to draw on as it seeks to orient its policies toward the Korean Peninsula for the future. First, Washington will have to anticipate that its adversarial diplomatic counterparties, North Korea included, are likely to seek what might be termed a political risk premium in their negotiations with Washington.

In a world where successive U.S. administrations were willing to respect agreements negotiated by their predecessors, including those from an opposing party, this would be unnecessary. However, as Iran has insisted in its engagements with the Biden and second Trump administrations, U.S. domestic politics do now impinge on the ability of the United States to offer credible commitments in a negotiation.

**워싱턴은 북한을 포함한 외교적
대립국들이 향후 협상에서 일종의
정치적 불확실성에 대한 보상을
요구할 가능성이 높다는 점을
예상해야 할 것이다**

With North Korea, in particular, this will mean that a Trump administration may find yet another hurdle to engagement, despite the president's [stated belief](#) in a strong personal relationship with Kim Jong Un. Additionally, with far greater diplomatic leverage now than in the past due to his growing nuclear capabilities and a [growing alliance with Russia](#), Kim will drive a tougher bargain than in the past if he chooses to engage. A particular risk is that Trump's determination to change the U.S. security paradigm with North Korea could lead him to entirely bypass [South Korean concerns](#), doing harm to the alliance and raising the risk of South Korean proliferation, too. Such an outcome would no doubt draw sharp criticism from Democrats, who may then seek to disrupt or reverse engagement to repair the alliance.

**트럼프의 김정은과의 재접촉 시도는
그가 이란과의 외교적 접근에서
어떤 성과를 거두느냐에 따라 영향을
받을 수 있다**

The feasibility of Trump's bid to reengage Kim Jong Un, however, could be affected by the fate of his outreach to Iran. While Kim likely understands that Trump views their personal relationship differently than the predicament the United States faces with Iran, Trump can demonstrate that the demise of the Hanoi Summit would not be repeated. Similarly, Trump's May 2025 historic encounter in Damascus, Syria, with the new Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa may have shown Kim that during this second term, Trump is willing to undertake bold overtures, unconstrained by his advisors. Kim, however, has more options than he did in 2019, particularly due to the sharply improved relationship he enjoys today with Russia. The administration's bid to reengage North Korea will need to acknowledge these new realities.

Despite this, the United States should fundamentally seek to reconcile its newfound recognition of the nuclear deterrence dynamics with North Korea with its enduring grand strategic interest in nonproliferation, including as it pursues risk reduction with Pyongyang.

The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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