

North Korea's Game of Appearances: How to Read Signals from Pyongyang

In mid-October, unconfirmed rumors of Kim Jong Un's death circulated in international media¹. At the same time, North Korea decided to deploy propaganda loudspeakers along the Demilitarized Zone and further intensify the militarization of its border with the Republic of Korea². These developments coincided with recurring reports of military cooperation between the Russian Federation and North Korea in Ukraine³. Should the world be concerned, or should it follow events calmly, on a business-as-usual basis?

A Dynamic Equilibrium

For most Europeans interested in international affairs, the Korean Peninsula is most often associated with two types of news. The first concerns recurring cycles of escalation and de-escalation along the inter-Korean border, usually linked to military provocations by the North. The second involves speculation about the succession of power in North Korea, generally prompted by reports of tensions within the country's ruling elite or questions about the health of its leader, Kim Jong Un. For those who follow the Peninsula's strategic situation only occasionally, such stories can seem sensational. For those who monitor regional developments more regularly, they have largely been repetitive and predictable, though.

Let us begin with North Korean military provocations. In the post-Cold War era, these have generally coincided with domestic challenges, particularly economic ones, and have served primarily to consolidate the regime and to extract international assistance to support internal stability. Crucially, however, such provocations have never crossed the threshold that would compel a forceful response from the United States—the Kim regime's archetypal adversary—or exhaust the patience of the People's Republic of China (PRC), until recently North Korea's only meaningful ally and its most important economic partner. The situation has therefore remained relatively predictable, despite being deeply frustrating for South Koreans who, since the Korean War, have lived in the shadow of great-power interests. Both powers have preferred to preserve the status quo on the Peninsula rather than risk a change whose consequences would be difficult to predict and potentially costly. US military bases in South Korea have been an important component of America's ability to project power in Asia. For China, meanwhile, North Korea has served as an effective geopolitical buffer between Chinese territory and US allies. In the interests of maintaining the status quo, both Washington and Beijing have been prepared to tolerate North Korean provocations, while ensuring that these do not become transformative for the region. In short, the United States and the PRC have shared an unwritten understanding: to accept the costs of occasional tensions in exchange for avoiding a fundamental change in the geopolitical landscape.

Reports about the health of North Korean leaders and the related question of succession in Pyongyang have been similarly predictable. It is worth stating plainly that we know as much about the health of North Korea's leaders as we do about the dynamics at the top of the

country's power structure—which is to say, very little. Most information available to the wider public is a product of two sources: intelligence findings that have become public, and analysis based on North Korean media, which are subject to strict censorship. It should therefore come as no surprise that repeated rumors of Kim Jong Un's death have gone unconfirmed. Reports in recent weeks, like those in 2014, when he was said to have died of undisclosed health reasons, or in 2020 and in 2025, when a cerebral hemorrhage or heart attack allegedly killed him, were overtaken within days by media footage showing him apparently in good health⁴. Similar rumors circulated about his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, who was said to have been assassinated in 1986, and his father, Kim Jong Il, whose death from a stroke was reported in 2008⁵. The crucial difference is that, in the cases of the both predecessors, their actual deaths were announced by official North Korean media with a delay of just one or two days, at a time fully controlled by the regime. Observers could therefore be relatively confident that official North Korean channels were the only authoritative source of information on the matter.

So What Has Changed?

Against this backdrop, the latest media reports of Kim Jong Un's death, as well as the earlier reports of heightened tensions along the inter-Korean border following the injuries sustained by the Republic of Korea soldiers who entered an area mined by the North while on patrol, might have been expected to trigger another cycle of sensational stories about North Korea's ruling elite and subsequent denials - or another escalation that most experts would regard as temporary. Unfortunately, a new variable has entered the equation of interests on the Korean Peninsula. It may not be an immediate cause for concern, but it could become one in the future: military cooperation and the resulting rapprochement between the Russian Federation and North Korea.

Reports of Russian - North Korean cooperation have appeared almost since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although such reports initially seemed largely unconfirmed, as the war dragged, the availability of North Korean personnel, ammunition and equipment created an opportunity to revive ties that had lain dormant since the Cold War between the two countries. As we now know, this relationship has been particularly advantageous for North Korea. In return for supporting Russia, Pyongyang has gained an opportunity to overcome a technological impasse caused both by international sanctions and by its own autarkic policies. There are multiple indications of this shift. According to Ukrainian military sources, Ukraine has become a testing ground for North Korea's KN-23 and KN-24 tactical ballistic missiles. The KN-23, in particular, had a poor reputation for accuracy, with an alleged deviation of one to three kilometers from its target. Within a few months, this reportedly improved to between 50 and 100 meters⁶. Another significant development is the reported transfer by Russia of technologies that could enable North Korea to build nuclear-powered submarines⁷. Taken together, these developments suggest that, over the course of four years of war in Ukraine, North Korea has acquired technical capabilities that could substantially expand

the scope of its military provocations. In practical terms, this could mean that Pyongyang may in future hold more than just Seoul hostage to its provocations, while Washington's and Beijing's ability to influence the Kim regime could become more limited than it is today.

These developments are often interpreted as the beginnings of a new trilateral alliance involving Russia, North Korea and the People's Republic of China. Support for this interpretation includes China's economic backing for both Russia and North Korea, as well as the consistently critical rhetoric these states direct at the West more broadly. While cooperation among governments opposed to the West is concerning, it is important to remember that relations among all three countries are strongly shaped by immediate calculations of national interest. Nor are these states invariably loyal to one another. Until now, it has been reasonable to describe China as Russia's economic senior partner, while North Korea would have little chance of surviving over the long term without support from the PRC. However, the Russian - North Korean cooperation does more than partially reduce Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing. It also gives the Russian regime an opportunity to develop a better understanding of North Korea's domestic politics and to build influence within the country. Over time, this could translate into Russia's ability to initiate provocations or escalate tensions independently in a region that both countries have traditionally regarded as part of China's sphere of influence. The history of relations between Russia or Soviet Union and their neighbors makes such scenarios plausible. Perhaps not today, but in the foreseeable future, these dynamics could introduce even greater uncertainty into an already difficult geopolitical situation on the Korean Peninsula.

A False Note in North Korea's Familiar Refrain

In continental Europe, it is often said that history repeats itself. In the Anglosphere, the preferred formulation is that events do not happen twice, but they often rhyme. Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inter-Korean relations often seemed to follow familiar, recurring patterns: unsettling, but recognizable to those watching and therefore relatively predictable. Russia's aggression in Ukraine, however, is now producing troubling echoes on the Korean Peninsula as well. The deepening military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang could alter the Peninsula's strategic dynamics in the years ahead, giving the North Korean regime greater room for geopolitical maneuver, or giving Vladimir Putin's regime an opportunity to destabilize East Asia in pursuit of its own interests.

¹ BBC, *North Korea publishes photos of Kim Jong Un - why do rumours of his death keep coming back?*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cmv6qy1jdydo>, 10.23.2026.

² Reuters, *North Korea to activate anti-South loudspeakers along border*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korean-army-chief-inspects-border-with-south-korea-says-troops-must-act-if-2026-10-21/>, 10.23.2026.

³ Atlantic Council, *North Korea may be the biggest winner of Russia's war in Ukraine*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/north-korea-may-be-the-biggest-winner-of-russias-war-in-ukraine/>, 10.23.2026.

⁴ Reuters, *Exclusive: China sent team including medical experts to advise on North Korea's Kim – sources*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-china-sent-team-including-medical-experts-to-advise-on-north-koreas-idUSKCN2263DZ/>, 10.23.2026.

⁵ Reuters, *Timeline: 17 years of Kim's rule*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/timeline-17-years-of-kims-rule-idUSTRE7BIOVQ/>, 10.23.2026.

⁶ 38 North, *The KN-23 Goes to War: Has It Improved North Korea's Missiles?*, https://www.38north.org/2026/08/the-kn-23-goes-to-war-has-it-improved-north-koreas-missiles/#_ftn3, 10.23.2026.

⁷ 38 North, *Tracing Russian Linkages in North Korea's Expanding Nuclear Complex*, <https://www.38north.org/2026/05/tracing-russian-linkages-in-north-koreas-expanding-nuclear-complex/>, 10.23.2026.