

North Korea searches for a path out of international isolation

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IN BRIEF

North Korea enters 2026 with domestic stability intact but facing a complex external environment. Inter-Korean relations remain frozen under Pyongyang's 'hostile two states' policy, even as restraint reduces the risk of major escalation. Looking ahead, North Korea will seek to consolidate improving ties with China, sustain cooperation with Russia and

remain open to limited engagement with the United States, while uncertainty and unpredictability continue to define its external relations.

2025 was relatively smooth for North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. The party and the military remained firmly loyal to him and the upgrading of the nuclear and missile arsenal enhanced his legitimacy. He successfully convened the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea and his rule remained effective under the banner of 'People First' and the 'Our Country First' ideology.

Relations with South Korea hit rock bottom as Pyongyang pushed for the staunch 'hostile two states' policy and refused to communicate with Seoul. Yet there were some positive signs. Unlike past political transitions in the South, North Korea did not exploit South Korea's domestic turmoil surrounding the December 2024 martial law declaration, the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol or the inauguration of the Lee Jae-myung government.

The North reciprocated Lee's measures banning propaganda leaflet balloons and loudspeaker broadcasting at the front line. Pyongyang also reduced the number of missile tests from 21 in 2024 to only eight in 2025. But it never responded to Seoul's calls for official talks and 2025 was a year of 'total incommunicado'.

The Trump administration expressed strong interest in resuming dialogue with Kim and even proposed a summit during his visit to South Korea by alluding to lifting sanctions. But Pyongyang, likely still cautious after the breakdown of the Hanoi negotiations in 2019, did not reply and the proposed summit was aborted. Resuming summit talks seems inconceivable without the United States formally recognising North Korea as the 9th nuclear weapons state and clear incentives, like diplomatic normalisation and lifting of sanctions in return for a freeze and rollback of its nuclear and missile arsenal.

North Korea–Russian relations were vibrant, especially following the Kim–Putin summit in September 2025. Pyongyang provided Moscow with combat forces, ammunition and construction workers, while benefiting from food and energy assistance from Russia. But

North Korea does not appear to have acquired critical military technologies from Russia related to intercontinental ballistic missile re-entry and multiple-warhead technology, super hypersonic missiles, nuclear-powered submarines or military satellites.

Beijing–Pyongyang ties remained uneasy, partly because of Beijing’s lukewarm economic cooperation and North Korea’s deeper entanglement with Russia. But Kim Jong-un’s participation in China’s Victory Day parade in September 2025 and the subsequent summit between Kim and Chinese President Xi Jinping reversed the trend. Personal exchanges were revitalised and bilateral trade was on the rise as China’s northeastern provincial governments were allowed to engage in trade with North Korea without permission from the central government. Premier Li Qiang’s attendance on the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers’ Party of Korea further signified improved relations.

2026 will be important for North Korea because the 9th Party Congress is likely to be held in February. It also marks the first year of Pyongyang’s new five-year economic development plan. Kim will take advantage of the party congress to strengthen his power under the slogan of ‘a rich and strong’ nation with nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang will adhere to its ‘hostile two states’ policy and North–South relations will likely remain incommunicado throughout 2026. Although public debates in South Korea over constitutional amendments on territory and peaceful unification could, in theory, reopen dialogue, this is unlikely given the political sensitivity of such debates for the Lee government.

Mutual self-restraint may prevent serious escalation, but a seventh nuclear test or an intercontinental ballistic missile test launch cannot be completely ruled out. If the 9th Party Congress embeds the ‘hostile two states’ policy in Workers’ Party of Korea bylaws and later the constitution — defining the Northern Limits Line as a new boundary for its territorial water — the West Sea might turn into a major flash point.

President Donald Trump could hold a summit with Kim before or after his planned visit to Beijing in April 2026. But such a meeting would likely require unprecedented incentives, such as diplomatic normalisation and partial or comprehensive sanctions relief in

exchange for a freeze and rollback of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. While this could catalyse renewed inter-Korean engagement, it is doubtful that Washington would be willing to offer such terms.

North Korea–Russia relations will remain robust as long as the war in Ukraine continues. But if the war ends, Moscow's desperate need to seek economic cooperation with Seoul could lead it to restore Moscow–Seoul ties and dampen its relationship with Pyongyang.

Relations with Beijing will also improve considerably. North Korea will seek normalisation of trade relations and economic assistance from China, while China will attempt to manage conflict escalation on the Korean Peninsula. Both China and Russia are likely to show a more tolerant attitude towards North Korea's nuclear weapons status.

The Kim Jong-un regime will likely enjoy relative stability in 2026 without serious domestic challenges. It will try to win international recognition of its nuclear weapons status while minimising isolation. Pyongyang will intentionally avoid contacting Seoul, even as both sides seek to avoid overt conflict, though accidental clashes, especially in the West Sea, cannot be ruled out. There may be breakthroughs in relations with Washington, but it is too early to predict outcomes. North Korea will make every effort to improve ties with China, Russia and other developing countries.

Yet stability should not be mistaken for predictability, and uncertainty will be a defining feature of 2026.

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