

This column by PCI Board Member, Glyn Ford, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Thursday, February 1, 2024.



*Opinion*

## With Pyongyang on war footing, US must quickly defuse nuclear flashpoints



- As a paranoid Pyongyang embraces its nuclear programme, disowns South Korea and redraws its boundaries, flashpoints are growing
- The US must move to defuse the situation – more dangerous than in Ukraine or Gaza – or risk a pyrrhic victory in a nuclear war

[Glyn Ford](#)

Published: 5:30am, 1 Feb, 2024



Illustration: Craig Stephens

North Korea's nuclear programme is a symptom of weakness, not strength. The reality is that it is comprehensively outspent, outgunned and out-resourced by the South.

Seoul's military budget dwarfs Pyongyang's by at least a factor of 11. Bundle together Washington, Tokyo and Seoul and it's more than 250 times. South Korea's 10.33 per cent increase in its 2021 military budget exceeded the North's annual military expenditure. And President Yoon Suk-yeol has plans for South Korea to be the world's [fourth largest arms exporter](#) by around 2030.

While there is a premium for Pyongyang in being a nuclear weapon state, it has little option. The regime faces external and internal threats. The external military threat is clearly being countered with nuclear deterrence. The internal threat is less a "magnolia revolution", more a court quarrel. Kim Jong-un needs to keep the people who matter happy by providing bread and circuses! The circuses are there, but the bread requires economic growth.

The key growth restraints are energy and manpower. The nuclear programme answers both questions.

Firstly, civil nuclear power is in prospect. North Korea has a self-sufficient nuclear fuel cycle with light-water reactors. This was likely why, at the [2019 Hanoi talks](#) with the US, Kim was determined to retain its uranium enrichment complex. It was also likely why he was happy with the [Singapore Declaration's](#) talk of a denuclearised peninsula, which allowed, as far as Pyongyang was concerned, for a civil nuclear programme.

Secondly, nuclear deterrence could free North Korea from maintaining such a large army. A standing army of close to 1.4 million could free more than 100,000 men just by cutting conscription by a year. The North has an unfashionable notion of drivers of growth, essentially massive factories and mines. Yet it just might work, drawing on its enormous pool of cheap skilled labour.

In a [major speech](#) in December, Kim made public the long-held elite belief that early reunification would only mean assimilation by South Korea because of the economic damage inflicted on North Korea by America's hostile policy.

Senior North Korean officials previously believed the economy could grow, like other "[Asian tigers](#)", by as much as 10-15 per cent a year if the US only got off its back. This would mean that by a generation or two, North and South Korea would be in the same economic league and reunification would be back on the table.

Now peaceful unification [appears to be off](#), with Kim in effect disowning the people of the South. Why? This is about war and a sense of nuclear inevitability – such blunt weapons would not allow even a rough sifting of friend from foe in the South.

The late Kim Il-sung made a strategic choice after the Soviet Union collapsed and the opportunity to play Beijing against Moscow ended. He decided to normalise relations with Washington. This policy was followed by his son and grandson. It came closest to fulfilment in February 2019. But in Hanoi, all of Kim's hopes were [dashed](#).

The subversion and sabotage of Donald Trump's unparalleled policy of engagement by his subalterns and subordinates seem to have convinced Kim there was no pathway to a peaceful coexistence. This, coupled with the US "defeat" in [Afghanistan](#) and [dithering over Ukraine](#), appear to have led him to favour confrontation over conciliation.

With the ebbing of American hegemony, he has chosen to put the country on a war footing, maintaining [links with Beijing](#) and rebuilding them with Moscow. Pyongyang is betting bloc politics will return.

Recently, analysts in the US, notably Robert Carlin and Siegfried Hecker, have suggested Kim is preparing for war. I'm more sanguine. I don't think Kim is intent on the military option but will fight if necessary. He will be emboldened only if Russian President Vladimir [Putin visits Pyongyang](#) with a new Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.

Meanwhile, Kim continues to produce, refine and deploy his nuclear arsenal and his intermediate and intercontinental [ballistic missiles](#) (ICBM). The reference in December to "super powerful" weapons can only allude to the [hydrogen bomb project](#), which experts believe is uncompleted.

The combination of Yoon's [escalatory threats](#) and Kim's determination to assert himself is an explosive mixture and the area of greatest concern must be around the Northern Limit Line, an arbitrary maritime border Kim has rejected.



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When Kim, as promised, [delineates](#) the North's maritime borders, there will be thousands of square kilometres of sea claimed by both the North and South. Accidental war is more likely than a surprise attack, for Pyongyang's escalatory ladder has only two rungs.

Some close to the US administration are talking of a pre-emptive attack while a paranoid Pyongyang plans its response. The prophecy risks becoming self-fulfilling. Washington would win any fight, but it could be the ultimate pyrrhic victory.

While Washington is understandably distracted by [Ukraine](#) and [Gaza](#), the situation in the Korean peninsula is more dangerous for now. As Washington is far stronger than North Korea, it needs to make

the first move. No one expects anything that costs credibility. The sanctions will stay even when they no longer serve any real purpose.

Yet there are steps that can be taken. First, the US can publicly restrain Yoon's [military adventurism](#).

Second, it should offer de facto recognition of Pyongyang as a nuclear weapons state, like India, Pakistan and Israel.

Third, engage with Beijing to encourage restraint by Pyongyang against further adventures in nuclear weapons and missile technology – in hydrogen bomb, miniaturisation and ICBM re-entry and guidance technologies.

Fourth, encourage those whom Pyongyang is willing to talk to, to engage.

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