



# DPRK's Evolving Provocation Tactics: Features and Implications of the DPRK-Russia Treaty

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## I. Introduction

Since the beginning of 2024, North Korea (DPRK) has continued strategic provocations, starting with the launch of short-range ballistic missiles and progressing to the recent launch of military reconnaissance satellites and hypersonic missile tests. In response to the South Korean (ROK) non-governmental organizations' leaflet campaigns, North Korea has deployed over 2,000 trash-filled balloons into ROK territory on six occasions over the past month. During this period, DPRK also conducted GPS jamming attacks on ROK's northwestern border islands for five consecutive days, launched 18 KN-25 missiles, and falsely claimed the success of its first multiple warhead test following a failed launch. Moreover, since April, various forms of military operations, including creating barren zones, laying mines, reinforcing tactical roads, and installing barriers, have been ongoing in multiple locations along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

In response to North Korea's simultaneous strategic and non-military provocations, ROK announced on June 4 the complete suspension of the 9.19 Inter-Korean Military Agreement, a move that now enables the resumption of loudspeaker broadcasts. Following further provocations from North Korea including the renewed trash balloon campaigns, South Korea reactivated its loudspeaker broadcasts for about two hours, marking the first instance in nearly six years. Subsequently, Kim Yo Jong issued a warning that if leaflet campaigns and loudspeaker broadcasts continue simultaneously, "[ROK] will undoubtedly witness the new response of the DPRK" (KCNA 2024a). On June 20, North Korea disclosed its Treaty of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (hereafter referred to as the "Treaty") with Russia, even before its official ratification.

By assessing the purposes and intentions behind North Korea's escalation from strategic to complex provocations, this analysis aims to provide a brief overview of the potential directions of North Korea's actions following the signing of a new treaty with Russia on June 19, 2024.

## II. 3 Characteristics and Objectives of DPRK's Complex Provocations

North Korea's trash balloon campaigns and GPS jamming along the border areas are classic examples of gray zone provocations, and they are not new. However, there are three notable characteristics that distinguish these recent actions from previous instances. Firstly, the intervals between the repeated trash balloon launches have significantly shortened. Secondly, there is increased simultaneity, with various types of provocations occurring concurrently. Lastly, regardless of the form of provocation, there is an increasing sense of anxiety and fatigue in South Korea due to the repetition and the persistence of these actions. DPRK's shift from traditional strategic provocations to a diverse array of gray zone provocations, characterized by increased repetition, simultaneity, and heightened anxiety and fatigue, serves at least three purposes.

First, this approach is a supplementary measure to enhance the effectiveness of nuclear coercion. Kim Jong Un's era is marked by a significant increase in strategic provocations compared to his predecessors. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of nuclear coercion towards South Korea has been limited. Despite adopting the Nuclear Forces Policy Law in 2022 and unveiling the tactical nuclear warhead "Hwasan-31" and its comprehensive "nuclear trigger" management system in 2023, the desired effects of nuclear coercion towards South Korea have not been achieved. ROK and U.S. have responded to North Korea's nuclear threats through the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) under their integrated extended deterrence, with the speed and scope of ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation accelerating. Consequently, North Korea is combining gray zone provocations with military provocations to enhance its strategic stability, thereby intensifying nuclear apprehensions through its gray zone activities.

Second, North Korea seeks to exert direct and indirect influence on ROK government's policies and responses towards the North by maximizing public anxiety within South Korea. This strategy leverages the win-set concept from Robert Putnam's (1988) Two-Level Game Theory to influence the adversary's government. The large-scale trash balloon campaigns, GPS jamming near the northern islands of the West Sea, and various military activities along the MDL are forms of psychological and public opinion warfare designed to elicit criticism of hardline policies and the rise of moderate approaches within South Korean society. The repetition, simultaneity, and persistence of these complex provocations have the potential to exacerbate internal conflicts within ROK. Unlike those in dictatorial regimes, citizens in liberal democracies tend to concentrate more on their own government's response strategies and policies rather than on the provocations and threats themselves, especially as fatigue and crisis levels rise. Therefore, it is highly likely that North Korea will continue its complex provocations aimed at influencing public opinion in South Korea.

Third, the DPRK regime aims to strengthen internal unity and control through these provocations. One facet of North Korea's 'new path' after the breakdown the Hanoi summit in 2019 involves the rapid advancement of nuclear and missile capabilities, while the other focuses on strengthening aggressive foreign policies. While the 2020 New Year's address announced a policy of "goodwill for goodwill, power for power" (KCNA 2021), since the 8th Party Congress, North Korea has consistently adopted a stance of "power for power and head-on contest" (KCNA 2022), effectively ruling out the adoption of any softer policy approaches. In 2022, it labeled South Korea as an

“undoubted enemy” (*KCNA* 2023a) and enacted three laws that curtailed the basic rights of its people: the “Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act” in 2020, “Youth Education Guarantee Act” in 2021, and “Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act” in 2023. Subsequently, at the 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th Central committee, DPRK described inter-Korean relations as “most hostile toward each other” (*KCNA* 2023b), effectively dismissing the special nature of inter-Korean relations. This approach is designed to solidify a hostile view of the enemy, thereby rallying North Korean citizens to support these complex provocations. In this context, North Korea’s actions reflect Kim Jong Un’s fear and anxiety stemming from the regime’s instability and weakened resilience. These concerns have prompted the implementation of stricter control and surveillance measures, alongside a more pronounced hostile posture towards South Korea.

### III. Evolving “Complex Provocations” after DPRK-Russia Treaty

If Article 4 of the Treaty implies automatic war intervention, Articles 3 and 8 establish a basis for North Korea to request military assistance and cooperation from Russia during peacetime. Consequently, to maximize DPRK-Russia military cooperation and assistance, North Korea will likely seek to leverage Article 3, which addresses “a direct threat of armed invasion...against either side,” and Article 8, which stipulates that the two sides “shall provide mechanisms for taking joint measures with the aim of strengthening defense capabilities to prevent war and ensure regional and global peace and security” (*KCNA* 2024b).

Last June, DPRK Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam condemned Ukraine’s attack on Crimea, claiming that “[North Korea] will always be on the side of the Russian army and people all out in the war of justice for defending the national sovereign rights and security” (Kang 2024). Additionally, North Korea criticized the inaugural ROK-U.S.-Japan joint exercise held from June 27 to 29 as the “NATO of Asian Version” (External Policy Office 2024). Both statements aim to strengthen military cooperation and solidarity between North Korea and Russia, based on Articles 3 and 8 of the Treaty.

As such, North Korea is expected to highlight instability on the Korean Peninsula and in nearby regions to secure essential nuclear and missile technologies, as well as military cooperation from Russia. Article 4 of the Treaty states that if either party is in a state of war, “the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay.” Therefore, the two parties are more likely to attempt to exhaust South Korea rather than significantly escalating tensions on the Peninsula.

In particular, during the Ulji Freedom Shield (UFS) exercise in August, which is based on scenarios involving DPRK’s nuclear use, and with the U.S. presidential election scheduled for November, North Korea is highly likely to engage in simultaneous strategic and gray zone provocations in the latter half of 2024. The gray zone provocations could take various forms, including the announcement of a new maritime boundary, drone incursions, GPS jamming, fishing boat seizures, false defections, and assassinations. In other words, rather than rapidly escalating the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, DPRK will likely focus on sustaining military fatigue and public anxiety through the three characteristics of complex provocations: repetitiveness, simultaneity, and persistence.

Therefore, the South Korean government should aim to disrupt the frequency and persistence of North Korean provocations and minimize their impact by demonstrating flexibility and adaptability in the level and intensity of its responses. Furthermore, the government must ensure that there are no gaps in responses to any form of complex provocations by coordinating tailored responses across political, diplomatic, military, economic, and informational dimensions in collaboration with allies and the international community.

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