

**NORTH KOREA IN 2022-23: NUCLEAR  
ARMAMENT AMID SANCTIONS  
AND PANDEMIC IMPACT**

KIM Sung Chull

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## Executive Summary

1. North Korea's numerous missile firings in 2022 and revised nuclear doctrine affected the security of the Korean peninsula and the Asia Pacific more broadly. In response, South Korea has worked to improve its missile systems, while Japan has revised its national security documents and the United States has led bilateral and trilateral joint exercises surrounding the peninsula.
2. Amidst intensified US-China rivalry and US-Russia antagonism in the Ukraine War, China and Russia vetoed adoption of a US-initiated United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that aimed to punish Pyongyang.
3. North Korea's firing of hypersonic missiles, cruise missiles, short and intermediate range ballistic missiles, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) is demonstrative of its improved nuclear capability. North Korea aims to neutralise South Korean forces and US bases in South Korea and Japan and to enhance the ICBM capability to strike US territory.
4. North Korea's missile strategy was paired with Pyongyang's new nuclear doctrine, which allows for first-use of the bombs if the commandship in Pyongyang is in danger. The doctrine, the Law of Nuclear Forces Policy, was adopted by the Supreme People's Assembly in October 2022.
5. Amid international sanctions and the COVID-19 impact, the costly missile launches are financed by (i) cryptocurrency that North Korean hackers stole, (ii) income of North Korean freelancer software groups and (iii) earnings from arms export to Russian military company, Wagner Group. The total cost of missile launch was estimated at US\$1 billion in 2022.
6. South Korea and the United States conducted joint military exercises and increased the level of Washington's security commitment to Seoul.

7. Japan's revision of its National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy and Defence Capability Revision Plan considered North Korea's missile provocations. While Japan regards China as the most dangerous challenger to its security, it views the North Korean threat as more "serious and imminent than ever before".
8. Domestically, the frequent public appearance of Kim Ju-ae, 10-year-old daughter of Kim Jong-un, is remarkable. Whereas it is too early to consider junior Kim as the heir apparent, North Korean official media's spotlighting of her appearances suggest that some power dynamics is going on in the Kim family.
9. North Korea's nuclear armament and related offensive nuclear doctrine brings about a contradiction within North Korean society—the regime's boasting of a "strategic state status" versus the public's hope for real improvement of their living condition.
10. In 2023, North Korea will likely continue its missile launches, and concurrently, Seoul will continue to increase its capability in missile, drone and cyber systems and further press Washington on its commitment to the nuclear umbrella.