

South Korea's Three-Axis Defence System: Impact on Regional Security

Mashaal Shahnawaz

Abstract

South Korea's Three-Axis (3K) Defence System is a conventional framework designed to resist North Korea's nuclear threat but risks destabilising the Korean Peninsula. This paper examines the system's evolution, its impact on North Korean security, and the potential for a regional arms race. Using a mixed-methods approach, it assesses South Korean military acquisitions, arms buildup trends, and their implications for regional security. The study concludes with policy recommendations, emphasising diplomatic engagement and arms control to ensure peace in the region.

Keywords: Three-Axis Defence System, 3K, Regional Security, South Korea, North Korea, Arms Race, Nuclear Escalation.

Introduction

The Korean Peninsula remains one of the most volatile security environments in the world, where historical animosities, nuclear brinkmanship, and shifting alliance patterns continue to challenge regional stability. The intensification of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme underscored by its 2003 withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its first nuclear test in 2006 has reshaped South Korea's defence posture.¹ In response to growing public insecurity and repeated provocations from Pyongyang, Seoul introduced the Three-Axis (3K) Defence System following North Korea's fifth nuclear test in 2016.² The 3K System, composed of Kill Chain and Korea Air and Missile Defence (KAMD), and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR), represents a significant departure from earlier deterrence strategies, relying on conventional military capabilities to counter a nuclear-armed adversary.

Despite increasing attention to military modernisation in the region, scholarly literature often centres on the broader United States (US)-China strategic rivalry or North Korea's proliferation trajectory, leaving a gap in the analysis of how new conventional defence frameworks like the 3K System reshape regional security dynamics. This study addresses that gap by assessing the evolving security architecture of the Korean Peninsula, focusing specifically on how the 3K System affects deterrence, arms competition, and alliance behaviour. Drawing on Andrew Cottey and Alyson J.K. Bailes' conception of regional security, which stresses the role of geographic proximity, shared identities, and institutionalised cooperation, this paper situates South Korea's defence posture within a context where no robust regional security regime or security community exists within the Korean Peninsula.³ This institutional vacuum heightens the risk of escalation, especially as military cooperation deepens between South Korea, Japan, and the US, which North Korea interprets as an existential threat.

¹ "Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: North Korea," Arms Control Association, last modified June 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/arms-control-and-proliferation-profile-north-korea>.

² Doyeong Jung, "Revitalized South Korean 'Three-Axis' System," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-koreas-revitalized-three-axis-system>.

³ Alyson J.K. Bailes and Andrew Cottey, "Regional Security and Cooperation in the Early 21st Century," *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, 2006, Accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/YB06ch04.pdf>.

By exploring these intersecting dynamics, this paper contributes to the emerging literature on East Asian security architecture. It underscores the importance of understanding how conventional force build-ups, in the absence of strong regional norms and institutions, may inadvertently fuel strategic instability in already fragile environments. This concern has become more pronounced as South Korea moved ahead with plans to establish a Strategic Command in 2024, consolidating operational control over its 3K system (pre-emptive strike, missile defence, and massive retaliation). At the same time, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un not only codified the country's nuclear posture⁴ into its constitution but has also escalated rhetoric in 2025, calling for enhanced war preparedness and expanded weapons testing. Taken together, these parallel trajectories heighten the danger of miscalculation, where the reinforcement of conventional and nuclear capabilities on both sides deepens the security dilemma and undermines prospects for de-escalation.

Research Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative information. Primary data sources, such as official government statements and policy addresses, along with secondary materials including scholarly books, research papers, journal articles, and interviews, were analysed to explore the evolving security dynamics surrounding the Korean Peninsula and South Korea's 3K System. Quantitative analysis targeted the quantity of traditional military forces, military mobilisations over time, and South Korean defence expenditures prior to and after the system's implementation. Contextual and narrative analyses were undertaken to explore how past social, and cultural variables, propaganda, and language in official documents influenced perceptions of the two Koreas.

⁴ Jung, "Revitalized South Korean 'Three-Axis' System."; Reuters, "Kim Jong Un North Korean Leader Orders Heightened War Preparations, says KCNA," March 7, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-leader-kim-jong-un-orders-heightened-war-preparations-kcna-says-2024-03-06/>.

Theoretical Framework

Offensive Realism

Offensive realism, advocated by scholars like John J. Mearsheimer, posits that states harbour revisionist tendencies and seek to maximise power to ensure their survival. States believe that the accumulation of power reduces vulnerability and deters external threats. When benefits outweigh the risks, states are likely to adopt expansionist and aggressive policies. North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons, offensive military doctrines, and defiance of US interests in the region exemplify this behaviour.

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism, as supported by theorists like Robert Jervis, argues that states primarily aim to ensure security rather than maximise power. States favour maintaining the status quo through alliances, diplomatic engagement, and moderate defensive buildups. Cooperation enhances security and reduces conflict risks. South Korea's defensive posture, emphasis on alliances with the US and Japan, and development of the 3K System for deterrence illustrate defensive realist behaviour.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Formulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) argues that states within a region have deeply intertwined security dynamics. Actions by one state—political, economic, or military—directly impact the security of others. The theory's concepts of securitisation and de-securitisation explain how states frame threats and manage them. The Korean Peninsula's fragile regional security illustrates how South Korea's 3K System creates a security dilemma for North Korea due to this interconnectedness.

Analysis

The South Korean 3K System has been launched to rival North Korea's growing military and nuclear arsenals. As a member of the NPT, South Korea cannot develop nuclear weapons of its own and has also been granted extended nuclear deterrence by its ally, the USA, as a security guarantee. Moreover, the 3K Defence System with its three different components is set to be a conventional defence system against a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). However, there are chances that it could negatively impact the regional stability of the Korean Peninsula once fully operational.

Evolution of South Korea's Three-Axis System

In the aftermath of North Korea's fifth nuclear test in 2016, the South Korean government under then-President Park Geun-hye introduced the 'Three-Axis Defence System', aimed to resist North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. Another reason for the introduction of the defence strategy was to satiate the growing restlessness and feelings of insecurity felt by South Koreans. 71% of whom are of the view that South Korea should also manufacture its own nuclear weapons to combat the North's threat.⁵ Commonly known as the '3K System', it employs a three-pronged conventional strategy utilising non-nuclear weaponry and tactics aimed at countering North Korea's nuclear arsenal. This strategy will employ all three branches of the South Korean military to retaliate to any threats posed by the North, therefore the full triad, i.e., Army, Navy and the Air Force will be employed for this purpose.⁶

After the Park Geun-hye regime, the next President, Moon Jae-in had a different approach to the North Korean nuclear threat. His government relied more on non-nuclear diplomacy and negotiations with North Korean Premier Kim Jong Un to ease tensions. It was during his term that the historic Korean Summit between the two Koreas took place in 2018, where a peace treaty was signed between the two sides. The Hanoi summit between US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un aiming to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula also took place during President Moon's presidency.⁷ Due to President Moon's liberal policies, and resolve for peace between the two Koreas, developments on the 3K Defence System remained largely stalled during his tenure. His successor and the recently impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on the other hand has had a conservative and hardliner stance towards North Korea. During his term in office, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND) announced that they will be introducing a separate Strategic Command to administer the 3K System.⁸ Previously, different branches of the military controlled various weapon systems separately by issuing separate orders for weapon operation. Under a unified

⁵ Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, *Thinking Nuclear: Attitudes of South Korea on Nuclear Weapons* (The Chicago Council on Public Affairs, 2022), <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Fuchs, "The Second Trump-Kim Summit Perspectives from Japan, United States, and South Korea," *Centre for American Progress*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/events/second-trump-kim-summit/>.

⁸ Joe Saballa, "'Three-Axis' Defense System Strategic Command to be Created by S. Korea," *Defense Post*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/07/07/south-korea-defense-system/>.

Strategic Command, the tri-services will formulate a joint mechanism for giving orders and weapons deployment under the combined leadership of the three service chiefs within one unified unit. This will now make the execution of the defence system smoother and more efficient. President Yoon's tenure also saw greater weapons acquisition and partnership with the US in the military and technological domain. According to South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), 6.99 trillion Korean Won (KRW) (approximately USD 5.27 billion) were allocated for the 3K System in FY2024, marking a 12% rise compared to 2023.⁹ It included a total of 57 projects under the 3K System that included the second batch of KDX-III Sejong Daewang class destroyers, KSS-III Dosan Ahn Changho class series of diesel-electric attack and ballistic missile submarines, and a new Low-Altitude Missile Defence (LAMD) system.¹⁰ The latter entered formal development in January 2025.¹¹

Technology Developed under the 3K System

The 3K System consists of 3Ks: Kill Chain, Korea Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) and Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR).¹² The Kill Chain pre-emptive strike mechanism involves launching a precision attack aimed at neutralising North Korean ballistic or nuclear missile threats before they can be deployed. Supported by advanced detection, identification, and semi-autonomous decision-making systems, the Kill Chain aims to strike North Korean assets, including missile silos, within thirty minutes of threat detection.¹³ However, the Kill Chain system does face a dilemma that under US-imposed missile restriction guidelines of 1979, South Korea cannot manufacture nor acquire rocket systems that have the capability to carry out geospatial intelligence activities.¹⁴ Prior to 2021, the country relied on US military assets to monitor any North Korean movement or deployment. During President Moon's 2021 visit to the White house, these restrictions were scrapped, allowing South Korea to develop long-range ballistic missiles with a range greater than 800km and carry out reconnaissance

⁹ Jon Grevatt, "Funding by South Korea Increased for Three-axis Plan in 2024," *Janes*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/south-korea-increases-funding-for-three-axis-plan-in-2024>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Chae Yun-hwan, "S. Korea to Develop Iron Dome-like Interceptor Against N.K. Artillery by 2028," *Yonhap News Agency*, January 20, 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250120003500315>.

¹² Kim Eun-jung, "S. Korea Vows to Enhance Defense System Against N. Korean Missile Threat," *Yonhap News Agency*, October 23, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231023003400315>.

¹³ Jung, "Revitalized South Korean 'Three-Axis' System."

¹⁴ Ibid.

missions.¹⁵ To enhance the Kill Chain's capabilities, South Korea has partnered with US-based SpaceX to deploy five surveillance satellites, with two already successfully launched into orbit.¹⁶ These surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities will now allow the country to carry out precise, pre-emptive strikes against North Korean targets.

South Korea has also manufactured its indigenous 'Hyunmoo' series of ballistic and cruise missiles, featuring several variants such as the Hyunmoo-2B surface-to-surface ballistic missile with a range of 500 km and the Hyunmoo-4 low flying cruise missile with a range of 800 km.¹⁷ Due to the 3K System being a combined forces strategy, the Kill Chain will also include the Republic of Korea Air Force (RoKAF)'s indigenous Cheongung II medium-range surface-to-air missile (M-SAM) system (maximum engagement range of around 40 km and altitude interception up to 15 km) and the Navy's KDX-III Aegis destroyer-based SM-2 missiles.¹⁸

The KAMD system constitutes a multilayered shield built to neutralise incoming North Korean missile attacks in case the Kill Chain pre-emptive strike component fails. Under a defensive KAMD, missiles can be launched at various altitudes to intercept incoming weapons. Patriot (PAC-2/PAC-3), developed in collaboration with the US, can intercept missiles in the lower altitude range suitable for terminal-phase interception. The Cheongung M-SAM/KM-SAM serves as a middle-tier defence with Block-1 intercepting at altitudes up to 15 km, and the Block-2 extending capability to 20 km. The L-SAM, a domestically developed upper-tier system, is designed for high-altitude interceptions around 40-60 km, filling the gap between SAM systems and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The US-deployed THAAD is supposed to cover the highest altitude layer (exceeding 100 km), intercepting missiles that penetrate lower tiers.¹⁹ Together, these layers embody the principle of deterrence by denial, aiming to render enemy missile strikes highly unlikely to succeed by intercepting them at multiple stages.

¹⁵ Sang-Min Kim, "Missile Limits on South Korea lifted by U.S.," *Arms Control Association*, June 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-06/news/us-lifts-missile-limits-south-korea>.

¹⁶ NBC News, "Second South Korean Spy Satellite Launched by SpaceX Amid Race with North," April 8, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/spacex-launches-south-koreas-second-spy-satellite-race-north-rcna146792>.

¹⁷ Clint Work, "Navigation of South Korea's Plan for Preemption," *War on the Rocks*, June 9, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/south-koreas-plan-for-preemption/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jung, "Revitalized South Korean 'Three-Axis' System."

The KMPR strategy functions as a decapitation-oriented counterforce strike to neutralise key North Korean leadership and command structures in response to any nuclear or non-nuclear first strike.²⁰ This falls under the concept of 'deterrence by punishment' or threatening severe consequences if any attack occurs to raise the cost of any offensive strike. In 2022, South Korea unveiled its Hyunmoo-V ballistic missile.²¹ This is the centrepiece of the KMPR framework, intended as a massive retaliation asset targeting critical North Korean infrastructure. While estimates of its maximum range vary, some suggest it could reach up to 5,000 km with a lighter warhead. As part of the KMPR, multiple rocket launchers (K239 Chunmoo MLRS); the US Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) with a range of 300 km; GBU-28 bunker busters with a penetration range of 6 metres of concrete; and air-to-surface missile (AGM-84H/K SLAM-ER) with a range of 280 km; may also be utilised.²² The 3K System will also utilise cyber warfare capabilities, space-based military capabilities, special forces units, together with US-provided military manpower and support, once fully integrated under South Korea's Strategic Command.²³

North Korean Response to the 3K Defence System

On the other side, North Korean Premier Kim Jong Un has enshrined the country's nuclear policy in the official constitution. In a policy address delivered in January 2024, he asserted that South Korea should be regarded not as kin but as a foreign adversary and the number one enemy in case a nuclear war breaks out in the Korean Peninsula. He also declared that unification with the South was now no longer a viable policy option.²⁴ North Korea also tested a nuclear-capable underwater attack drone and carried out multiple cruise missile tests by firing the Pulhwasal-3-31 into the Sea of Japan.²⁵ The country tested its new surface-to-sea

²⁰ Jung, "Revitalized South Korean 'Three-Axis' System."

²¹ Kwon Mee-yoo, "New Hyunmoo Missile Able to Destroy NK's Underground Facilities: Experts," *Korea Times*, October 4, 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/05/113_337198.html.

²² Ibid.

²³ Work, "Navigation of South Korea's Plan for Preemption."

²⁴ Hyunsu Yim, "North Korea's Kim Calls for South to be Seen As "Primary Foe", Warns of War," *Reuters*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-calls-change-status-south-warns-war-2024-01-15/>.

²⁵ "North Korea Announces 'Underwater Nuclear Weapons System', Blasts US Drills," *Al Jazeera*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/19/north-korea-touts-underwater-nuclear-weapon-system-blasts-us-drills>.

missile, the Padasuri-6, in February²⁶ and a month later conducted a hypersonic missile capable of attacking distant US targets.²⁷ In response to ROK's satellite programme with SpaceX, Pyongyang also launched its second surveillance satellite in May 2024 which was not successful and exploded mid-flight.²⁸ The satellite launch may have signalled Pyongyang's displeasure with Beijing, as Kim Jong Un pursues a 'new Cold War' strategy by strengthening ties with China and Russia, viewing Beijing's diplomacy with Seoul and Tokyo as potentially unsettling following the trilateral summit in Seoul – the first such meeting in more than four years.²⁹ These developments indicate that North Korea perceives the 3K Defence System as a significant threat to its security and even more so by the interplay of the US in the region and its support for the southern counterpart. Owing to the prevailing situation, there are high chances that any further South Korean advancements under the 3K System has the potential to instigate an arms race in the region.

Kim Jong Un might be prepared to go to any lengths to respond to his country's security needs and to defend it against any threats. Since this is a stance that the country has adopted many times before such as during the Yeonpyeongdo Island artillery bombing and the sinking of the Cheonan class torpedo boat. These incidents were claimed by South Korea to have been conducted by the North to protest against joint US-South Korea live military drills in the region.³⁰ Historical precedents suggest that North Korea is likely to pursue increased arms acquisition to counter South Korea's growing military capabilities. As of 2021, North Korea had the 4th largest military in the world and spent a quarter of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on its military. In comparison, South Korea's military is only half the size of the North, with 600,000 troops but it also hosts American troops on bases close to the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) at Camp Casey and Camp Humphreys.

²⁶ "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Oversees Test of New Surface-to-Sea Missiles," *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/15/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-oversees-test-of-new-surface-to-sea-missiles>.

²⁷ "North Korea Announces 'Underwater Nuclear Weapons System', Blasts US Drills."

²⁸ Hyung-Jin Kim, Mari Yamaguchi, and Kim Tong-Hyung, "North Korean Rocket Carrying Its 2nd Spy Satellite Combusts Shortly After Launch," *AP News*, May 28, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-missile-japan-28efd0f15318594fdcf5ec8f416c196b>.

²⁹ Hyung-Jin Kim and Huizhong Wu, "China Premier Agrees on Cooperation with Seoul, Tokyo but Issues Veiled Rebuke Against Their US Ties," *AP News*, May 27, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-china-japan-trilateral-6afe4c3e280995a7fc16696edbd0a345>.

³⁰ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "The Yeonpyeong Island Incident, November 23, 2010," 38 *North*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2011/01/the-yeonpyeong-island-incident/>.

Under the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), South Korea contributes USD 1 billion annually to support the stationing of US forces and related military assistance.

Historically, South Korea has maintained a smaller military force compared to North Korea, both in terms of troop numbers and military hardware.³¹ However, this dynamic is shifting as South Korea, following the lifting of US-imposed missile restrictions, rapidly expands its missile arsenal, acquires more reconnaissance satellites, missile interceptor systems, electromagnetic pulse weapons and submarines. It also increased its defence budget by 4.5% in 2024, allocating 30% of the total budget for force modernisation, a separate budget has also been set aside for the 3K System.³² This rapid force acquisition and modernisation is likely to deepen North Korea's security dilemma, as South Korea's expanding military capabilities and its strengthening alliance with the US and its allies is perceived as a direct threat in Pyongyang. The North could then respond by amping up its own arsenals, leading to an arms race and increasing mistrust, tensions and volatility in the Korean Peninsula. There are chances that the North may also look towards Russia to help increase its military capabilities. It is important to note that Pyongyang has already forged an arms deal with Moscow, supplying drones and missiles for its war in Ukraine, so mutual arms transfer under this deal is an option that cannot be ruled out.³³

Nuclear Escalation Risks due to 3K System

South Korea's deployment of the 3K System significantly influences North Korea's nuclear strategy. By enhancing its capabilities to detect, pre-empt, and intercept North Korean missile threats, Seoul directly challenges the credibility of Pyongyang's nuclear deterrent. This dynamic has the potential to lower North Korea's nuclear threshold, as Pyongyang may perceive its strategic assets to be increasingly vulnerable to neutralisation. In response, North Korea could pursue

³¹ Mohammed H. Chughtai, "Infographic: North Korea, South Korea Missile Programmes Compared," *Al Jazeera*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/16/infographic-missile-programmes-north-korea-v-south-korea-interactive>.

³² Daniel Darling, "4.5 Percent Rise for 2024 Defense Budget Planned by South Korean Government," *Defense Security Monitor*, September 1, 2023, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/2023/08/29/south-korea-government-plans-4-5-percent-rise-for-2024-defense-budget/>.

³³ Kanishka Singh, "US, Partners Carry Condemnation of Arms Transfers between North Korea and Russia," *Reuters*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-partners-condemn-arms-transfers-between-north-korea-russia-2024-01-09/>.

vertical proliferation by expanding its Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), nuclear warheads, and nuclear armed submarines. Such advancements would accelerate efforts to operationalise a credible nuclear triad and secure assured second-strike capabilities, thereby counterbalancing the South's strengthening extended nuclear deterrence through its alliance with the US. This increase in the North's nuclear arsenal which is already considered a 'rouge' state could lead to miscalculations and mistrust in the Korean Peninsula. Any military drills, coupled with the North's already ambiguous nuclear policy has the tendency to be misinterpreted by South Korea, US, Japan and its allies.

This heightened sense of vulnerability on both sides undermines regional stability and increases the risk of nuclear escalation. Additionally, the integration of both offensive and defensive elements within the 3K System introduces strategic ambiguity. North Korea might not be able to accurately determine the South's intentions in a state of crisis, increasing the risks of accidental or pre-emptive use of force. Lastly, in order to offset South Korea's technologically advanced 3K System, the economically inferior North Korea might opt for asymmetric warfare tactics including cyber warfare and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. This would make the strategic environment even more complex since the source of cyber-attacks are difficult to pinpoint leading to confusion and such attacks can impact a state's command and control (C2) structure as well as civilian infrastructure. The deployment of the 3K System increases the risk of nuclear escalation by keeping both Koreas in a persistent state of military alert.

Great Power Competition in the Korean Peninsula

After the culmination of the Korean War in 1953 and division of the two Koreas along the 38th parallel, major powers have maintained both direct and indirect influence on the Peninsula. Their continued presence has been aimed at reinforcing alliances with either the North or the South while managing tensions and preventing potential regional flare-ups.

North Korea continues to receive substantial support from Russia and China, with Iran increasingly involved, prompting some analysts to refer to this alignment as a new 'Axis of Evil 2.0' or the 'Axis of Upheaval'.³⁴ China and Russia remain North Korea's principal trading partners, with China contributing over 90% of the

³⁴ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-kendall-taylor-fontaine>.

country's trade volume.³⁵ China and Russia have both contributed to strengthening North Korea's military capabilities. Beijing's mutual defence treaty with Pyongyang provides political cover and potential military backing, while Moscow's arms trade agreement has deepened cooperation, with North Korea supplying weapons and even troops to support Russia's war in Ukraine.³⁶

On the other hand, South Korea and Japan are supported by the US and its NATO allies. Both countries fall under the US' nuclear umbrella and Washington maintains active military presence in both countries with 28,500 US troops stationed in South Korea since 2023 to date.³⁷ All three countries as well as other members of NATO and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) have engaged in arms transfers, joint military exercises and drills in the East and South China Sea as well as the larger Pacific and Indian Oceans. While such activities are largely aimed at countering China, North Korea interprets South Korea's expanding military partnerships as a direct threat to its own security. It is perhaps for this reason that the North claimed its nuclear weapons to be US-centric until recently when in 2024 Kim Jong Un stated that re-unification with the South was no longer possible and that the constitution should be amended to name South Korea the North's principal enemy instead.³⁸

The US, being South Korea's long-standing ally has largely supported the 3K System and it is with their help that South Korea is creating a separate Strategic Command for the conventional defence system. Apart from North Korea, the US also faces another contender in the East Asian region - China. It is likely that in the future as South Korea develops the 3K System, both great powers clash over their support for their allies in the Korean Peninsula all the while juggling their own security threats that they face from each other.

China's role cannot be reduced to simply propping up North Korea as a counterweight. Beijing has its own security concerns regarding South Korea's 3K System, which it perceives as an encroachment near its borders and a potential tool for the US in any future US-China confrontation. The South's geographically proximate and technologically advanced missile defence capabilities heighten

³⁵ Kendall-Taylor and Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval."

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Emma Chanlett-Avery, Caitlin Campbell, and Christina L. Arabia, *Issues for Congress: South Korea-US Alliance*, (Congressional Research Service, 2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11388>.

³⁸ Al Jazeera, "As Tensions Rise North Korea Warns US of Nuclear Retaliation," July 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/20/north-korea-warns-us-of-nuclear-retaliation-amid-escalating-tensions>.

Beijing's sense of vulnerability, reinforcing its opposition to such deployments. As a result, China's calculus is shaped not only by its commitment to prevent North Korea's isolation but also by its strategic imperative to counter US military influence in Northeast Asia.

It is, however, unlikely that Russia will actively engage in providing diplomatic or military support to North Korea as a proxy against the US and its allies. Since the country is already engaged in a war with Ukraine and might not have the financial and military resources to support North Korea. Together, these pressures risk transforming the Korean Peninsula into a theatre of intensified great-power competition, further destabilising an already fragile regional security environment.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is evident that while South Korea's Three-Axis (3K) Defence System addresses its security needs, it simultaneously increases the likelihood of regional instability, arms race dynamics, and nuclear escalation. Therefore, the first step towards maintaining long-term peace must be a structured return to inter-Korean diplomatic engagement. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) such as reactivating military hotlines is important to reduce miscalculations.

Some CBMs are showing signs of revival: South Korea's President has committed to restore the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement designed to suspend provocative activity.³⁹ Reopening joint economic initiatives like the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tourism zone (once emblematic of cross-Korean linkages) could reintroduce economic interdependence, thus dampening aggressive posturing.

This paper finds that North Korea's perception of an existential threat is intensified not only by the 3K System's capabilities, but by the growing US-South Korea-Japan military/security nexus. If these countries continue to integrate their missile defence, satellite, and command systems, the North is likely to further expand its nuclear and cyber arsenals. Future scenarios may include greater reliance on asymmetric warfare, or the institutionalisation of crisis-response protocols between China and North Korea, drawing new security lines in East Asia.

To preempt such escalatory trajectories, the US and its allies must reassess the cost-effectiveness of prolonged isolation and pressure strategies. As this study

³⁹ "South Korea's Lee to Restore Pact Halting Military Activity on North Korean Border," *Reuters*, August 15, 2025.

indicates, North Korea tends to respond to isolation with provocation, not restraint. Resuming multilateral nuclear negotiations, possibly through a revised Six-Party Talks mechanism could provide an off-ramp from nuclear competition.⁴⁰ A future scenario involving incremental arms control, mutual non-aggression guarantees, and phased sanctions relief, though ambitious, remains preferable to enduring standoffs or accidental war.

China, Russia, and the US will remain critical to determining the region's strategic equilibrium. Their actions in the Korean Peninsula will increasingly intersect with broader great power competition. To reduce regional volatility, these actors must pursue trilateral channels of communication and prevent the militarisation of Korean affairs from becoming a proxy for their own rivalry. A failure to do so risks turning Northeast Asia into a theatre of sustained confrontation.

By addressing both the structural causes of insecurity and the misperceptions fuelling threat escalation, the region can move towards strategic stability. Without such coordinated efforts, the continued development and deployment of systems like the 3K System will lock the Korean Peninsula and the broader Asia-Pacific into a cycle of provocation, and possible conflict.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 3K Defence System reflects South Korea's evolving response to the growing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. While it enhances deterrence through layered conventional capabilities, its deployment risks triggering unintended consequences such as regional arms races, strategic misperceptions, and destabilising military buildups. This dual impact underscores the complexity of security planning in a region where threat perceptions are deeply embedded and historically conditioned.

The analysis demonstrates that through the lens of offensive realism, North Korea's armament and reactive posture are consistent with efforts to maximise power for regime survival. Conversely, South Korea's 3K strategy aligns more closely with defensive realism emphasising deterrence and alliance-based security. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) further explains how tightly interwoven the actions and reactions of these states are, and how

⁴⁰ Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, "North Korea's Nuclear Program and the Six Party Talks," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>.

Mashaal Shahnawaz

South Korea's Three-Axis Defence System:

Impact on Regional Security

conventional military advancements can produce spirals of insecurity in the absence of regional institutions or mutual trust.

Ultimately, sustaining peace in the Korean Peninsula will require a shift from unilateral military solutions to coordinated diplomatic mechanisms that address underlying insecurities rather than amplify them.

***Mashaal Shahnawaz is a scholar of Strategic Studies at the National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad. Her research interests include emerging technologies and warfare, and nuclear security issues.
Email: <shahnawazmashaal@gmail.com>.***