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Executive Summary

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Assessing North Korea's Domestic and Foreign Policies in 2025: The Risks of North Korea's Version of a "Normal State"

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At the China-South Korea summit held in Beijing on January 5, the leaders of the two countries agreed to continue seeking “creative approaches” to building peace on the Korean Peninsula. After returning home, President Lee Jae Myung expressed his hopes for restoring inter-Korean dialogue, exchange, and cooperation. However, achieving so requires an accurate understanding of North Korea’s vision for inter-Korean relations and the international order. When the U.S.-North Korea Summit was held in Singapore in June 2018, one of the key issues was the possibility of North Korea’s “normalization.” This concept likely encompassed expectations such as denuclearization, adherence to international norms, a shift toward economic development in place of the parallel pursuit of nuclear weapons and the economy, a relaxation of domestic controls, and the pursuit of coexistence, co-prosperity, and peaceful reunification between North and South Korea.

However, an analysis of North Korea’s domestic and foreign policies throughout 2025 makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that such expectations were either excessive or fundamentally misguided. North Korea repeatedly made clear that it had no intention of considering any U.S.-North Korea dialogue centered on denuclearization during 2025, instead intensifying efforts to present its status as a de facto nuclear-armed state. Through the deployment of forces to the Ukraine war, North Korea has demonstrated its willingness to intervene in regional conflicts and is likely to continue instigating of one-man rule and hereditary succession, which will likewise be promoted for international acceptance through solidarity with China, Russia, and other socialist states, alongside the forced ideological indoctrination of the population.

Economically, rather than pursuing conventional growth, North Korea's regime is expected to propagate a North Korean-style development model that frames survival under low growth based on "self-reliance" (*jagang*) as a legitimate path forward. The so-called "hostile two-state relationship" should also be understood not as a temporary phenomenon, but as a structural condition that will persist unless South Korea recognizes North Korea's strategic superiority and nuclear armament and abandons any pursuit of regime change in inter-Korean relations.

In light of these considerations, South Korea's policy toward North Korea and unification must also shift away from waiting for change within North Korea itself or for its transformation into a conventional "normal state," and instead adopt a posture aimed at responding to the "normalization of abnormality." Above all, South Korea should reconsider the wishful thinking that inter-Korean relations can advance if reconciliation and cooperation are restored under a conciliatory approach toward North Korea and if Pyongyang's perceived concerns are adequately addressed.

To prevent a situation in which North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons is tacitly overlooked or effectively accepted, the ROK-U.S. deterrence and response posture against North Korea's nuclear threat must be further strengthened, and punitive deterrence measures, such as the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, should be concretely developed. In addition, bilateral and multilateral mechanisms must be enhanced to prevent North Korea, in coordination with China and Russia, from intervening in regional conflicts. At the same time, efforts to induce change within North Korea through the inflow of external information should also be resumed.

North Korea's "Normalization": Expectations and Reality

Following three inter-Korean summits in 2018 and the U.S.–DPRK Singapore Summit, one of the central questions was whether North Korea was moving toward becoming a "normal state." During this period, Kim Jong Un was often portrayed not as a reckless dictator pursuing nuclear weapons in defiance of international norms, but as a pragmatic and courteous negotiating partner. His remarks acknowledging North Korea's economic hardship and infrastructure limitations, as well as positive assessments by Moon Jae-in, reinforced perceptions of moderation. Similar expectations emerged around Kim's engagement with Donald Trump at the Singapore Summit, where Kim's repeated diplomatic gestures and correspondence suggested rational leadership rather than impulsive behavior.

These interactions led to broader hopes that North Korea was seeking "normalization," a concept not used by Pyongyang itself but widely applied by external observers. Such expectations rested on several assumptions: that North Korea might eventually abandon nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief and security assurances; that increased exposure to the international community would encourage compliance with global norms and

a more peace-oriented foreign policy; that economic development would take precedence over nuclear weapons, leading to a shift away from excessive investment in the military economy toward civilian growth; and that political normalization—including reduced authoritarianism and hereditary rule—might follow. Ultimately, these assumptions culminated in the belief that North Korea’s voluntary transformation would enable stable coexistence, inter-Korean cooperation, and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

To date, none of the expectations placed on North Korea have been met. Its nuclear and missile capabilities continue to advance, and Pyongyang has expanded its involvement beyond the Korean Peninsula into international conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, while openly aligning itself with China and Russia as part of an anti-U.S. and anti-Western bloc. Although North Korea claims that its “self-reliance” policies are producing economic success, underlying indicators point to stagnation in the people’s economy, creating latent sources of internal instability. There are no signs of power dispersion under Kim Jong Un, and hereditary succession remains implied through the public emergence of Kim Ju-ae.

A more serious concern is that North Korea may exploit external expectations of its “normalization” to legitimize its own narratives, which, if accepted, could seriously undermine South Korea’s North Korea and unification policies. Pyongyang has long justified its nuclear development by citing alleged ROK-U.S. hostility and “nuclear war threats,” a claim echoed by China and Russia under the banner of North Korea’s “legitimate security concerns.” Similarly, North Korea shifts responsibility for its economic hardship from policy failures to international sanctions, potentially redirecting popular resentment toward external actors.

Accepting North Korea’s claims, whether in sanctions relief or negotiations, risks strategic miscalculation, weakening ROK-U.S. coordination, and fostering the illusion that concessions will stabilize relations. This logic fuels wishful thinking that understanding North Korea’s security concerns or formalizing a “two states” framework could open a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and even contribute to peaceful unification.

However, South Korea has long defined inter-Korean relations as a “special relationship in the process toward unification,” a framework that already recognizes North Korea as a de facto state-level actor. The failure to uphold norms of peaceful coexistence has been North Korea’s, not South Korea’s. No clear explanation has been offered as to how adopting Pyongyang’s preferred “two states” approach would improve relations.

Recent domestic debates and official remarks risk shifting responsibility for rising tensions inward and downplaying North Korea’s aggressive policies. Such narratives may unintentionally reinforce Pyongyang’s belief that its cognitive and information warfare is effective, encouraging more assertive and deceptive behavior, ultimately producing outcomes opposite to the intended goal of improving inter-Korean relations.

Characteristics of North Korea’s Version of “Normalization”

North Korea’s behavior in 2025 demonstrates that its conception of becoming a “normal state” diverges fundamentally from the expectations held by South Korea and the international community. What Pyongyang seeks is not integration into the existing international order, but the normalization of a system built on fundamentally different premises. The key characteristics of this North Korean version of “normalization” are as follows.

First, North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapon state: North Korea has steadily advanced its nuclear capabilities since Kim Jong Un’s 2023 declaration that the arsenal would expand “exponentially.” The testing and display of increasingly powerful intercontinental ballistic missiles, alongside the development of conventional naval forces and nuclear-capable maritime platforms, indicate an effort to institutionalize nuclear weapons as the core of its military identity and second-strike capability. Pyongyang has made it unequivocally clear that denuclearization will not be a subject of future negotiations. Rather, it seeks international acceptance of its irreversible status as a nuclear-armed state. Under Kim Jong Un, a “normal state” is defined not by denuclearization, but by possession of nuclear weapons.

Second, active participation in anti-U.S. and anti-Western alignment and international conflicts: North Korea increasingly presents itself as a global actor confronting U.S. power rather than a marginal regional state. Its rhetorical attacks on U.S. actions in the Middle East, military support for Russia in the Ukraine war, and high-profile alignment with China and Russia signal an ambition to embed itself within a broader anti-U.S./anti-Western bloc. Pyongyang is likely to continue justifying future interventions in regional conflicts under the banner of defending sovereignty and peace.

Third, the legitimization of supreme-leader dictatorship and hereditary succession: Historically, North Korea’s one-man rule and hereditary succession distinguished it even within the socialist bloc. However, as long-term rule by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin has become normalized, political similarities among North Korea, China, and Russia have increased. In this environment, dynastic succession in North Korea no longer appears anomalous. The public appearances of Kim Ju-ae alongside Kim Jong Un suggest that hereditary rule is being reframed as a legitimate, even ordinary, feature of authoritarian governance rather than an ideological deviation.

Fourth, the equation of “self-reliance” (juche/jagang) with economic development
Contrary to expectations that normalization would entail reform and opening, Kim Jong Un’s economic policies have prioritized control over market expansion. Although North Korea has reported modest growth since 2023, continued heavy investment in nuclear and conventional military capabilities limits any meaningful improvement in living standards. As a result,

Pyongyang appears likely to redefine “economic development” not as improved livelihoods, but as the strengthening of self-reliant industrial and military foundations while maintaining basic subsistence under low-growth conditions.

Fifth, the construction of an inter-Korean relationship based on North Korea’s absolute dominance: North Korea’s vision of normalized inter-Korean relations presupposes acceptance of its nuclear status and sustained strategic superiority over South Korea. From this perspective, the weakening or dismantling of the ROK-U.S. alliance, combined military exercises, and the U.S. military presence on the Peninsula are seen as inevitable. Pyongyang has explicitly rejected engagement policies regardless of South Korea’s domestic political orientation, framing both conservative and progressive governments as equally hostile. Consequently, even conciliatory policies are interpreted as threats if they seek to induce change in the North.

Taken together, North Korea’s concept of “hostile two-state relations” should not be understood as a temporary tactic, but as a structural condition. Unless South Korea accepts North Korea’s nuclear status, strategic dominance, and the permanence of its regime, this antagonistic framework is likely to persist. What Pyongyang demands is not normalization in the conventional sense, but acquiescence to an asymmetric and coercive relationship, one closer to subordination than to mutual recognition between sovereign states.

South Korea’s Responses

Taken together, North Korea’s current trajectory is not a transition toward the “normal state” long anticipated by South Korea and the international community, but rather the normalization of abnormality. Accordingly, South Korea’s North Korea and unification policy must move away from wishful thinking that assumes Pyongyang’s voluntary normalization or good faith, and instead focus on shaping an environment in which North Korea is compelled to change by actively responding to its abnormal behavior.

First, the goal of the complete denuclearization of North Korea must be consistently upheld and repeatedly reaffirmed at the ROK-U.S. level to prevent the de facto acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear status. This includes close coordination with Washington to ensure that denuclearization remains explicitly reflected in joint statements and strategic documents, alongside the concrete implementation of extended deterrence to signal that North Korea’s nuclear weapons may be deterred—but will never be tolerated. Such clarity is also essential to prevent future U.S.–DPRK negotiations from drifting toward implicit nuclear acceptance.

Second, South Korea should strengthen bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to deter North Korea’s involvement in regional conflicts through its alignment with China and Russia. By leveraging relations with Beijing and Moscow, Seoul should underscore that North Korea’s destabilizing behavior ultimately damages their regional and global interests and accelerates

the strengthening of the ROK-U.S. alliance. At the same time, cooperation among like-minded regional states should be expanded, including efforts to develop Asia-based multilateral security frameworks and deeper coordination with NATO members. In this context, resuming IP4 participation at the NATO Summit in 2026 should be treated as a strategic priority.

Third, efforts to induce internal change in North Korea must continue consistently, regardless of Pyongyang's reactions. This does not require overt regime confrontation, but rather the resumption of information inflows that allow North Korean residents to recognize their own reality. At the same time, South Korea must avoid overly conciliatory responses to provocations, as these risks reinforce North Korean miscalculation. A calm but firm posture—clearly identifying past provocations and warning against future escalation—should accompany preparedness for potential North Korean actions in 2026. Finally, ROK-U.S. joint military exercises should be understood not as bargaining chips for negotiation, but as essential instruments for deterrence and for shaping conditions that may ultimately compel North Korean change.

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Dr. Cha Du Hyeogn is a North Korea Study expert who has shown various research performances on North Korean Politics and Military, U.S.-ROK Alliance, and National Crisis Management, etc. He is the Principal Fellow of Asan Institute for Policy Studies, holding an additional post as Visiting Professor of Graduate Institute of Peace Studies in Kyung Hee University. He also has served as Adjunct Professor of University of North Korean Studies (2017~2019), Senior Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Governor of GyeongGi Provincial Government (2015~2018), Visiting Scholar of Korea Institute for National Unification (2015-2017), the Executive Vice President of the Korea Foundation (2011~2014). Before these careers, he was also a Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA, 1989~2012) and the Acting Secretary for Crisis Information to the ROK President Lee Myung Bak (2008). He has worked more than 20 years in KIDA as various positions including Director of Defense Issues Task force (2005~2006), Director of Arms Control Researches (2007), Director of North Korea Studies (2009). Dr. Cha received his M.A. and Ph.D. degree of Political Science from Yonsei University. He has written more than 100 research papers and co-authored books on diverse fields of security and International relations. He has advised for various governmental organizations.

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