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Executive Summary

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North Korea's Evolving Maritime Strategy: Possibilities for the Emergence of a North Korean Version of an Indo-Pacific Strategy

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North Korea is turning toward the maritime domain. Backed by deepening strategic alignment with China and Russia and the rapid advancement of its military capabilities, Pyongyang has redefined the maritime domain as a multidimensional strategic space essential for regime survival and national development. It is now pursuing a systematic evolution of its maritime strategy that moves far beyond its traditional role as a coastal navy. The recent construction of large surface combatants, the unveiling of both conventional and nuclear-powered submarine equipped with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and the launch of a new destroyer reflect an active push to modernize its naval forces. In parallel, Pyongyang has begun promoting new concepts such as “maritime sovereignty,” “blue-water navy,” and “intermediate waters,” signaling a clear intent to reshape the maritime status quo.

These shifts represent more than mere force enhancement; they reveal North Korea's intention to utilize the maritime domain as a platform for its nuclear force projection, a channel for expanding external partnerships, and a tool for reinforcing internal cohesion. Structurally, the regime's maritime strategy is dual-tracked, encompassing short-term survival objectives and long-term development goals. In the short term, sanctions-evading maritime activities, the sale of fishing rights, and access to foreign currency continue to serve as critical economic lifelines. Over the longer term, Pyongyang seeks to expand nuclear force employment options, strengthen trilateral ties with China and Russia, develop maritime tourism zones, and expand its fisheries sector. Within the broader DPRK–China–Russia strategic coalition, North Korea may increasingly position itself as a maritime partner aligned with China's counter-Indo-Pacific strategy, a development that could heighten instability in the Northeast Asian maritime security environment.

In this context, South Korea must respond to North Korea's strengthening maritime domain awareness (MDA). **First**, Seoul should reinforce integrated maritime surveillance and early-warning capabilities through enhanced cooperation between the Navy and the Coast Guard to detect and respond to Pyongyang's expanding blue-water capabilities and potential maritime provocations. **Second**, ROK-US-Japan trilateral naval cooperation should be strengthened, with emphasis on missile defense integration and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) interoperability to establish a naval-centered collective security framework. **Third**, South Korea should concretize its Indo-Pacific strategy—particularly its emphasis on defending the international order—to mitigate the regional security risks posed by North Korea's expanding maritime strategy.

The Meaning of the Maritime Domain on the Korean Peninsula

As U.S.-China strategic competition has intensified, the maritime domain has reemerged as a central arena of geopolitical rivalry. In the Indo-Pacific region, the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), MDA, and naval capability enhancement have become shared priorities among major states. South Korea has also joined this trend. North Korea, too, has reevaluated the strategic value of the maritime domain amid changing external dynamics. In particular, deepening the DPRK–China–Russia strategic axis has strengthened the structural conditions enabling Pyongyang to use the maritime domain as a tangible diplomatic and security asset. The joint appearance of the three leaders at China's Victory Day parade in September symbolically demonstrated the consolidation of this alignment. As maritime exchanges and points of contact between North Korea, China, and Russia increase, the maritime domain is emerging as a key channel through which North Korea can expand its functional role within the trilateral alignment.

North Korea's Maritime Conflicts and Cooperation

North Korea borders South Korea, China, and Russia across the East and West Seas, and the patterns of conflict and cooperation with these states illustrate that the maritime domain is simultaneously an area of survival and a flashpoint for conflict.

1. Inter-Korean Maritime Conflict and Cooperation

Maritime conflict between the two Koreas has persisted since the signing of the Armistice Agreement. During the Cold War, North Korea repeatedly conducted infiltration operations by land and sea. Under Kim Jong Un, the frequency and intensity of provocations—particularly around the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the West Sea—have increased. More recently, Pyongyang has denied the legal basis of the NLL by labeling it a “ghost line,” advanced the concept of an “intermediate waters,” and emphasized “blue-water navy,”

signaling a structural challenge to the existing maritime order. These developments indicate a heightened potential for future maritime escalation.

At the same time, periods of improved inter-Korean relations have turned the East and West Seas into channels of exchange and cooperation. In the late 1990s, the Sunshine Policy and expanded economic engagement led to a surge in maritime trade. Although such exchanges have largely ceased following strengthened sanctions and South Korea's May 24 Measures in 2010, these experiences illustrate the feasibility of maritime cooperation. In 2018, the Moon Jae-in administration sought to utilize maritime corridors as part of its new economic map—known as the “H-Belt”—to expand inter-Korean cooperation, though progress stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a change in government.

More recently, President Lee Jae Myung has proposed the “END Initiative” (Exchange, Normalization, Denuclearization) as a new framework for addressing inter-Korean peace, signaling a renewed willingness to explore avenues for dialogue and cooperation.

2. Maritime Conflict and Cooperation with China and Russia

North Korea and China have long maintained close political, military, and economic relations. In 2024, North Korea's foreign trade volume reached USD 2,696 billion, with China accounting for 98 percent—underscoring Beijing's overwhelming economic influence. Although North Korea historically relied more on overland routes for border trade, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent border closures prompted Pyongyang to resume and expand maritime trade earlier than land-based exchanges, likely due to easier disease control and monitoring. This trend has persisted as North Korea implements its provincial development policy and relies on maritime transport for material inflow.

North Korea's cooperation with Russia has also deepened since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. In 2024, Pyongyang reportedly transferred approximately nine million artillery shells and rockets to Russia via cargo ships. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in June 2024, North Korea dispatched an estimated 20,000 troops to Russia, while Moscow appears to be offering economic support and potentially weapons and military technologies in return.

North Korea continues to circumvent international sanctions through illicit maritime activities, including clandestine transfers of petroleum from Chinese and Russian vessels, the export of iron ore, and arms transactions. Notably, sites of illicit ship-to-ship transfers have shifted from the South and East China Seas to the West Sea off North Korea, with similar activity increasingly observed in the East Sea amid the intensifying North Korea–Russia strategic cooperation. If trilateral cooperation continues to expand following the Victory Day events, joint maritime or air force drills could emerge—further elevating the maritime domain as a key locus of the North Korea–China–Russia trilateral strategic alignment.

Nevertheless, maritime friction also exists among the three states, largely due to illegal fishing. North Korea, despite asserting maritime sovereignty, has sold fishing rights to China as a means of acquiring foreign currency—revealing a contradictory reality and underscoring the underdevelopment of its maritime domain awareness.

Strategic Implications of North Korea's Maritime Domain

For North Korea, maritime domain is not merely a geographical setting but a strategic space essential for survival under international sanctions and for long-term national development. Throughout decades of isolation, Pyongyang has exploited the maritime domain in various ways, but under Kim Jong Un, its strategic utilization has expanded to an unprecedented degree. This demonstrates a shift from survival-oriented, defensive maritime behavior toward an expansionary and offensive maritime strategy that will significantly affect regional maritime security.

1. The Strategic Value of the Maritime Domain

North Korea's maritime domain encompasses intertwined economic, socio-cultural, political, and security functions.

- **Economically**, Pyongyang seeks foreign currency through illicit maritime activities, the sale of fishing rights, and the development of maritime tourism zones.
- **Socio-culturally**, the regime employs maritime narratives—such as “defending maritime sovereignty,” the “Jumunjin spirit,” and the “West Sea spirit”—to strengthen internal cohesion and reinforce ideological loyalty.
- **Politically and militarily**, North Korea is developing the maritime domain as an arena for power projection. Kim Jong Un has increasingly emphasized the sea as a strategic platform for nuclear force deployment, enabling diversification of nuclear delivery methods and the enhancement of second-strike capability. Simultaneously, Pyongyang exploits the ambiguity of maritime boundaries to increase leverage in negotiations through provocations such as NLL incursions or ballistic missile launches over the East Sea.

Recent developments—including the launch of a 5,000-ton destroyer and SLBM test-firing—underscore North Korea's intention to utilize the maritime domain as a forward base for nuclear operations. By declaring its ambition to acquire a blue-water navy, Pyongyang is signaling a transition from coastal defense toward ocean-going naval power. This shift seeks not only to expand operational range but also to enhance its political-military presence in international waters and explore maritime military cooperation with China and Russia.

2. A Dual-Track Maritime Strategy for Survival and Development

North Korea's maritime strategy can be conceptualized as a **dual-track model** that simultaneously pursues short-term survival and long-term development.

- **Survival Strategy:**
Pyongyang uses maritime routes to bypass sanctions and border closures—particularly during COVID-19—while employing maritime sovereignty narratives to maintain internal stability and regime legitimacy.
- **Development Strategy:**
North Korea aims to reposition the maritime domain as a pillar of its future national strategy, leveraging it for nuclear force deployment, military power projection, expanded DPRK–China–Russia cooperation, and potential participation in China's counter–Indo-Pacific strategic initiatives. It also views maritime domain as a tool for diversifying external relations and driving economic development, including fisheries and coastal infrastructure.

Future Outlook and Policy Recommendations

North Korea's strengthened confidence as a nuclear-armed state will likely translate into more assertive attempts to redraw maritime boundaries in its favor, expand naval cooperation with China and Russia, and increase maritime trade, which will include continued evasion of international sanctions. Pyongyang is also expected to expand maritime infrastructure such as ports, fisheries, and coastal tourism zones as part of its long-term economic strategy. As the maritime sector grows in strategic importance, North Korea's maritime domain awareness will likely deepen, further reinforcing an expansionary maritime posture.

In response, the South Korean government must adhere to principled, consistent policies while prioritizing deterrence and crisis prevention. Although previous administrations have sometimes adopted conciliatory approaches toward defectors or repatriation to create diplomatic momentum, Seoul must ensure that humanitarian standards and legal principles remain firm so that North Korea cannot unilaterally manipulate maritime boundaries or exploit dialogue channels.

South Korea's strategic responses to North Korea's strengthening MDA should include:

1. **Enhancing maritime surveillance and early-warning capabilities** through integrated Navy–Coast Guard cooperation to detect and counter North Korea's expanding blue-water operations and potential maritime provocations.
2. **Strengthening trilateral naval cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan**, particularly in missile defense integration and anti-submarine warfare, to build a naval-centered collective security framework.

3. **Operationalizing South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy** to mitigate the regional impact of North Korea's expanding maritime strategy and reinforce the rules-based international order.

About the Author

As an expert in military strategy and weapons systems, **Dr. Yang Uk** has been active in the defense industry and private military enterprises for over 20 years, and founded and operated IntelEdge Inc., one of the first private military companies in Korea. Since leaving the company, he has commented on various military issues and international conflicts through broadcasting and news media, and has written various writings on weapon systems and military history. He obtained a doctorate in military strategy from Korea National Defense University (KNDU), and has analyzed North Korea's military strategy and WMD programs as a senior research fellow and the director of the WMD Center at the Korea Defense Security Forum (KODEF). He has been an active member of the policy advisory committee of Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Joint Chief of Staff, Ministry of National Defense, and Office of National Security. Currently, he continues his research and advisory activities to each military service and government agency, teaching military revolution and modern conflicts at Korea Military Academy and Graduate School of National Defense Strategy of Hannam University.

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