

MONTHLY REPORT Nuclear Risk Assessment

Korean Peninsula 2023/08



Open Nuclear Network

One Earth Future's Open Nuclear Network programme is a non-aligned, non-governmental entity that seeks to increase security for all States by ensuring that nuclear decision makers have access to high quality, shareable open source information which enables them to make the best decisions in the face of escalating conflict.

Nuclear Risk Assessment Report

Nuclear risk can emanate from various factors. These range from the more obvious military developments and incidents that could lead to increased tensions and possibly even nuclear misuse, to the often overlooked domestic and external contexts in which a country perceives its circumstances and, based on those perceptions, makes decisions that have direct or indirect implications for nuclear risk.

In an attempt to more comprehensively assess nuclear risks on and around the Korean Peninsula, this monthly Report examines the DPRK's and the ROK's nuclear and military spheres, as well as activities and policy decisions across main domestic and foreign policy spheres that could impact nuclear risks.

Methodology & Scope

The "ONN Nuclear Risk Assessment Report" strives for objectivity and accuracy through collection, research and analysis of open source information.

The Report focuses on the DPRK and the ROK; other key regional State actors – namely China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – are covered as part of the context in which Pyongyang and Seoul act and make their decisions, but they themselves are not the main objects of this Report's analysis.

The Report consists of three sections: Nuclear, Military and Political.

The **Nuclear section** covers notable developments with direct implications for nuclear capabilities and dynamics on and around the Korean Peninsula. These include the DPRK's nuclear and missile development and tests; military activities related to US extended deterrence to the ROK and in the region; as well as major nuclear policy changes.

The **Military section** covers key military-related developments that may not have direct implications for nuclear capabilities and postures but could lead to heightened nuclear risks. These include the two Koreas' conventional military build-ups or military exercises, or unusual moves by the DPRK's Korean People's Army (KPA) or inter-Korean military conflicts.

The **Political section** addresses key domestic and external factors that could impact Pyongyang's decisions on its nuclear posture. Examples include notable domestic political, economic and social developments, as well as its ROK and foreign policy trends. This section may also address domestic pressures in the ROK or changes in Seoul's foreign policy that could have repercussions for nuclear risk, such as the public discourse in the ROK on acquiring its own nuclear capabilities or significant policy changes related to the ROK-US alliance or inter-Korean relations.

For busy readers, these three sections are preceded by key takeaways from each chapter.

To produce this monthly Report, ONN regularly monitors, collects and analyzes text, satellite imagery and ground photos and videos in publicly and commercially available sources from China, the DPRK, Japan, the ROK, Russia and the United States. Secondary and tertiary sources are used only if primary sources are unavailable. ONN observes a <u>Code of Ethics</u> for collection, research and analysis.

Nuclear Risk Takeaways

Nuclear. Military. Political.



DPRK Military Steps Up "War Preparations", Second Attempt to Launch Reconnaissance Satellite Fails; International Community Remains Divided on DPRK Nuclear Challenges. Citing a deteriorating security situation around the Korean Peninsula and increasingly hostile military activities by the United States and its allies, Kim Jong Un ordered the military to step up war preparations and made two tours inspecting weapon factories. He also oversaw a command drill to examine the capabilities of the KPA to "occupy" the ROK. While the DPRK's second attempt to orbit a reconnaissance satellite was unsuccessful, the launch showed some signs of operational improvements and is likely to be followed by another launch attempt soon. In a further reflection of the current state of relations in the region and beyond, the international community failed to come to any consensus, including on DPRK issues, at a meeting of the Treaty's on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) current review cycle. A joint statement issued by 74 States was condemned by the DPRK. With the announcement of enhanced security and military cooperation and coordination between Japan, the ROK and the United States at a Camp David summit, the DPRK is likely to continue along its current path of accelerated development of its nuclear programme for both strategic deterrence and warfighting purposes.



MILITARY

KPA Continues Navy Modernization, Considers New Navy Response Posture Against US Aircraft; Kim Jong Un Calls for Increased Production of Artillery Rockets With Higher Efficiency. Kim Jong Un inspected a new frigate and ordered further modernization of the navy, highlighting the developmental trajectory of the KPA, which is increasingly centred around nuclear weapons. Prior to Kim's inspection, the KPA announced a plan to counter US reconnaissance aircraft with navy vessels. Additionally, Kim Jong Un also ordered the mass production of conventional precision-guided rockets, which could strike the greater Seoul area with higher efficiency.



POLITICAL

DPRK Border Opening Amid Continued Economic Struggles; Institutionalization of US-ROK-Japan Security Cooperation and Growing DPRK-Russia Ties. In August, the DPRK continued to show signs of a strained domestic economic and agricultural situation, while beginning to reopen its borders to passenger travel after a three-year-long lockdown period, starting with returning citizens stranded abroad. Following a trilateral summit at Camp David, the closer cooperation between Japan, the ROK and the United States on security issues appears to have spurred the DPRK to express even closer alignment with Russia, reflecting a further deepening of divisions between oppositional blocks in the region.



DPRK Military Steps Up "War Preparations", Second Attempt to Launch Reconnaissance Satellite Fails; International Community Remains Divided on DPRK Nuclear Challenges

Citing a deteriorating security situation around the Korean Peninsula and increasingly hostile military activities by the United States and its allies, Kim Jong Un ordered the military to step up war preparations and made two tours inspecting weapon factories. He also oversaw a command drill to examine the capabilities of the KPA to "occupy" the ROK. While the DPRK's second attempt to orbit a reconnaissance satellite was unsuccessful, the launch showed some signs of operational improvements and is likely to be followed by another launch attempt soon. In a further reflection of the current state of relations in the region and beyond, the international community failed to come to any consensus, including on DPRK issues, at a meeting of the Treaty's on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) current review cycle. A joint statement issued by 74 States was condemned by the DPRK. With the announcement of enhanced security and military cooperation and coordination between Japan, the ROK and the United States at a Camp David summit, the DPRK is likely to continue along its current path of accelerated development of its nuclear programme for both strategic deterrence and warfighting purposes.

In early August, a Central Military Commission meeting presided over by Kim Jong Un discussed stepping up war preparations and new guidelines for the enlarged operational sphere of the Korean People's Army (KPA) frontline units. In corresponding moves, Kim Jong Un toured weapon factories and oversaw a command drill to examine the capabilities of the KPA to repel an "armed invasion" and "occupy the whole of ROK" in a counterattack.

- Citing a deteriorating security situation as a result of hostile military activities, the <u>7th Enlarged Meeting of the</u> <u>8th Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK</u>), held on 9 August, discussed issues on strengthening "<u>war preparations</u>", including on the strategic level, to deter "enemy attacks." The Central Military Commission also reportedly issued guidelines applicable to the "enlarged and changed operational sphere of the frontline units of the KPA," which have likely been enabled by the nuclear-capable solid-propellant short-range ballistic missiles introduced to those units in recent years.
- Kim Jong Un reportedly made two tours in <u>early</u> and <u>mid-August</u>, inspecting the production of components for various kinds of weapons, including nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles, transporter erector launchers (TELs) for intercontinental ballistic missiles and cruise missile components (Figure 1). The tours are in line with the 9 August Central Military Commission meeting, which, among other decisions made, ordered the mass production of "<u>various weapons and equipment...to satisfy the operational demand of the KPA</u>."



DPRK Military Steps Up "War Preparations", Second Attempt to Launch Reconnaissance Satellite Fails; International Community Remains Divided on DPRK Nuclear Challenges

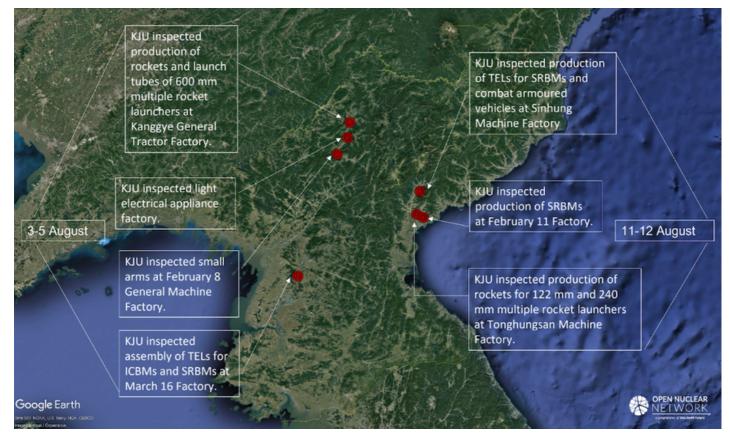


Figure 1. Possible locations visited by Kim Jong Un during his August tours. The location of a cruise missile engine factory inspected by Kim Jong Un during the 3 to 5 August tour is <u>yet to be geolocated</u>. Image: Google Earth

- On 29 August, Kim Jong Un <u>oversaw a command post drill</u> to prepare for "occupying the whole territory" of the ROK by "repelling the enemy's sudden armed invasion and switching over to an all-out counterattack." During the drill, Kim Jong Un stressed that the KPA shall deal heavy blows with overwhelming strategic deterrence to the opponent's "<u>war potential and war command center</u>" at the initial stage of a war.
- On 30 August, one day before the conclusion of the annual ROK-US <u>Ulchi Freedom Shield</u> joint military exercises, the DPRK launched two short-range ballistic missiles, which reportedly flew around <u>360 km</u> from a launch site in Pyongyang into the East Sea/Sea of Japan. The missiles' trajectory covers a range of critical targets, including <u>Gyeryong</u>, headquarters of the ROK armed forces. As such, the launch may have been intended as a demonstration of its nuclear attack capabilities against ROK command centres of the ROK, as instructed by Kim Jong Un earlier when he oversaw the command post drill on 29 August.

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The DPRK <u>announced</u> that its second attempt to put a reconnaissance satellite into orbit failed on 24 August. Information released by Japan and the ROK suggests that the rocket may have experienced anomalies during the second stage flight, while the DPRK maintained that a minor error occurred during the third stage flight and vowed to make a third attempt in October. With each failure, the DPRK moves closer to successfully orbiting its first reconnaissance satellite.

- The DPRK <u>claimed</u> that the first stage and second stage of the Chollima-1 rocket performed normally and that the third stage flight was accidentally terminated by a "malfunction in the emergency explosion system," likely alluding to a self-destruct mechanism. However, ROK defence minister Lee Jong-sup said on 25 August that the second stage flight already "<u>exhibited some abnormalities</u>," without further elaborating.
- According to a <u>graphic</u> released by the Japanese defence ministry, the first stage appears to have slightly overperformed as the spent first stage and payload fairings both landed in waters slightly south of the announced landing zone. The presumed second stage landed in waters northwest of the announced landing zone. The deviations shown in the graphic (Figure 2) seem to support the ROK's assessment that the second stage flight was not entirely successful.

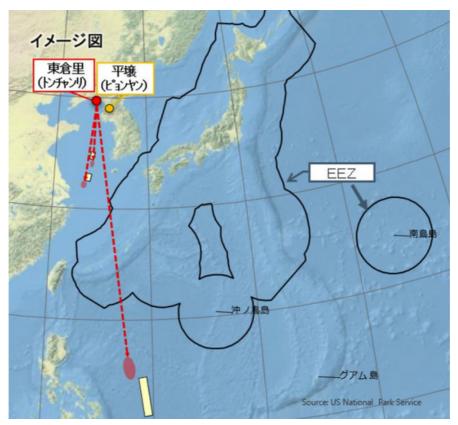


Figure 2. Approximate flight path of the Chollima-1 rocket. Red lines connect the detected landing areas back to the launch site. Yellow boxes are landing zones announced by the DPRK. Image: <u>Japan Ministry of Defense</u>

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The DPRK stated that the error that occurred during the third stage does not concern the reliability of engines
and the overall system, and that a third launch will take place in October. The carrier rocket flew much further
than during its first attempt in <u>late May</u>, during which the second stage failed to ignite. With each failure, the
DPRK moves closer to successfully orbiting its first reconnaissance satellite.

At the recent Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meeting, State Parties failed to agree on any substantive outcomes regarding the DPRK, highlighting enduring divisions within the international community over how to respond to DPRK's nuclear program and noncompliance with the NPT regime.

- During the first meeting of the current review cycle, State Parties to the NPT met in Vienna for the PrepCom
 meeting to review the Treaty and prepare for the 2026 Review Conference. The parties <u>failed</u> to agree on any
 substantive outcome documents, including any language on the DPRK. However, 74 States issued a joint
 <u>statement</u> condemning the DPRK for "undermining regional and international peace and security" and calling for
 the DPRK to return to and comply with the NPT and IAEA safeguards.
- The DPRK, which did not attend the meeting, criticized the joint statement in a <u>press release</u> from its mission in Vienna. The DPRK said the statement ignored challenges posed by the United States through its nuclear sharing and extended deterrence with non-nuclear States. The DPRK also reiterated its position that it had legally withdrawn from the NPT 20 years ago as a "legitimate exercise of sovereignty."
- <u>Plenary discussions</u> at the PrepCom, as well as the joint statement and the DPRK's response, served as a reminder of how divided the international community is at present on how to respond to challenges posed by the DPRK to the nuclear nonproliferation regime. This is also reflected in the <u>current, seemingly enduring divisions</u> within the UN Security Council on how to respond to sanction-violating activities by the DPRK.

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KPA Continues Navy Modernization, Considers New Navy Response Posture Against US Aircraft; Kim Jong Un Calls for Increased Production of Artillery Rockets With Higher Efficiency

Kim Jong Un inspected a new frigate and ordered further modernization of the navy, highlighting the developmental trajectory of the KPA, which is increasingly centred around nuclear weapons. Prior to Kim's inspection, the KPA announced a plan to counter US reconnaissance aircraft with navy vessels. Additionally, Kim Jong Un also ordered the mass production of conventional precision-guided rockets, which could strike the greater Seoul area with higher efficiency.

On 21 August, KCNA reported that Kim Jong Un inspected "Patrol Ship No. 661," also known as the lead ship of the DPRK's <u>Amnok-class corvettes</u> by external observers, on an unspecified date. The corvette, with rudimentary antisubmarine and air defence equipment and reported capability to carry and launch nuclear-capable cruise missiles, represents a decade of KPA Navy's modernization effort (Figure 3). Kim Jong Un's inspection and speech given at the KPA Navy Day on 28 August suggest that the KPA Navy will continue to modernize its fleet and will play a role as one of the components of the DPRK's nuclear deterrence going forward.

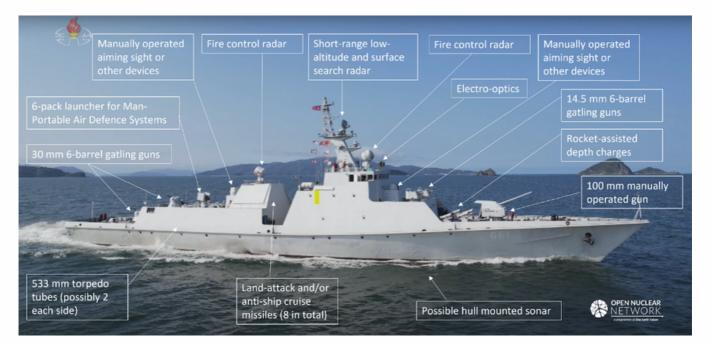


Figure 3. Main sensors and weapons onboard the "Patrol Ship No. 661" of the East Sea Fleet of the KPA Navy. Image: <u>Korean Central Television (KCTV)</u>

 <u>ONN previously assessed</u> that the new corvettes could provide limited cover to the operations of submarines armed with nuclear-capable ballistic or land-attack cruise missiles. However, it appears that the corvettes themselves are intended to perform a nuclear strike role, as "Patrol Ship No. 661" <u>reportedly</u> launched at least one "strategic cruise missile" (which appears to be the <u>same type of cruise missile</u> that the DPRK claimed to be nuclear capable in previous tests) during Kim's inspection. However, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff said that many parts of the DPRK's announcement were "<u>exaggerated and different from facts</u>."

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- The rationale behind the strategy to arm navy vessels with nuclear-capable cruise missiles remains unclear, as KPA Navy vessels are vulnerable against ROK and US pre-emptive strikes due to limited air defence and antisubmarine capabilities, and, more importantly, limited stealth in comparison to its submarines. Irrespective of their limited survivability, the introduction of nuclear-capable frigates might complicate pre-emptive strike planning of an opponent by introducing more platforms, such as surface ships, that have to be considered as potentially nuclear-capable.
- In a <u>speech celebrating the KPA Navy Day</u> on 28 August, Kim Jong Un called for the need to "radically increase the modernity and combat capability of the navy" and stated that the KPA Navy "would become a component of the state nuclear deterrence carrying out the strategic duty." Inclusion of the KPA Navy in the strategic mission is in line with the overall developmental trajectory of the KPA military, which is increasingly centred around nuclear weapons.

The DPRK again warned against what appeared to be normal operations of US reconnaissance aircraft in the region, specifying that it was considering deploying countermeasures. It remains unclear if and how the DPRK would execute these countermeasures as currently the known capabilities of the KPA Navy would not allow it to perform the stated countermeasures.

• The KPA General Staff <u>accused</u> a US reconnaissance aircraft of entering the airspace over its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) before being chased off by KPA fighter jets on 17 August. The KPA General Staff further claimed that it is considering deploying "a ship loaded with new-type anti-aircraft missiles 450 kilometres away from Wonsan as a countermeasure (Figure 4)".

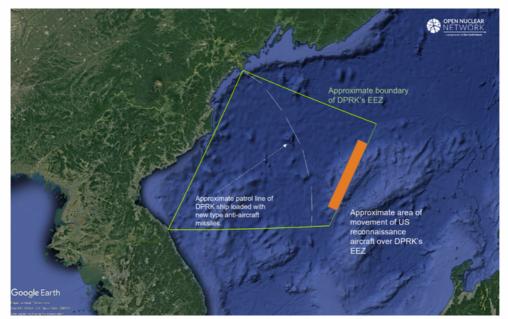


Figure 4. Red line: one possible approximation of the US aircraft movement on 17 August as described by the KPA General Staff. White line: patrol route of DPRK vessels described by the KPA General Staff. Image: Google Earth

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- It remains to be seen if and how the DPRK would execute the stated countermeasure, because the most
 advanced vessels of the KPA Navy are only armed with Man-portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) and small
 caliber guns (Figure 3), which pose no threat to aircraft flying high and/or far away. Currently, there are no signs
 suggesting that the DPRK is constructing new vessels with larger air-defense systems. One short-term measure
 could be, however, to put a complete set of longer-range land-based air defence systems on a civilian ship with
 sufficient space and tonnage. Some other countries have experimented with strapping land-based air defense
 systems to naval ships as an emergency measure before.
- This is <u>the second time</u> the DPRK has made similar accusations against what appeared to be normal operations of US military aircraft, as flights over EEZs are considered <u>a legitimate use of the sea under international law by</u> <u>most states</u>. It is worth noting that the KPA General Staff statement coincided with the Camp David presidential retreat between US, ROK and Japanese leaders on 18 August, which, among other decisions, committed to a <u>real-time data-sharing mechanism on missile warnings and annual multi-domain trilateral military exercises</u>. Judging by the corresponding timing of the two events, the statement may be a form of protest from the DPRK.

Kim Jong Un gave an order to mass produce precision-guided 122 mm and 240 mm rockets for multiple rocket launchers (MRLs). Once deployed, these precision rockets would significantly increase the MRL's combat effectiveness and, in the case of the 240 mm MRL, raise the threat level to the greater Seoul area. Export of precision-guided munitions as a source of income for the DPRK would also violate United Nations sanctions.

- Since its introduction in the 1980s, the 240 mm MRL units have been a mainstay in the KPA artillery troops as
 they could effectively threaten the greater Seoul area from within the territory of the DPRK. During Kim Jong Un's
 11 to 12 August tour to military factories, Kim praised that the precision-guided 122 mm and 240 mm MRL rockets
 are "a crucial change in the preparations for modern warfare" that ensures "maximum defeating efficiency." He
 also ordered an increase in the production of guided MRL rounds "at an exponential rate" to meet the needs of
 the KPA.
- Unguided MRLs are typically effective against area targets. Precision-guided MRLs could in theory be used against point targets such as a bridge or a single vehicle. In such use cases, one or a few such precision-guided rockets can be more effective than a salvo of unguided ones. Thus, the precision rockets of the 240 mm MRLs would strike point targets in the greater Seoul area with higher efficiency.
- The precision-guided rockets are also a potential source of income for the DPRK, which has sold the 240 mm and 122 mm MRLs to a number of countries, such as <u>Iran and Myanmar</u>. Allegedly, the DPRK munition industry has also attempted to sell precision-guided 122 mm MRL rockets <u>in recent years</u>. Arms export of the DPRK violates <u>United</u> <u>Nations sanctions</u>.



Political

DPRK Border Opening Amid Continued Economic Struggles; Institutionalization of US-ROK-Japan Security Cooperation and Growing DPRK-Russia Ties

In August, the DPRK continued to show signs of a strained domestic economic and agricultural situation, while beginning to reopen its borders to passenger travel after a three-year-long lockdown period, starting with returning citizens stranded abroad. Following a trilateral summit at Camp David, the closer cooperation between Japan, ROK and the US on security issues appears to have spurred the DPRK to express even closer alignment with Russia, reflecting a further deepening of divisions between oppositional blocks in the region.

For the first time since 2020, in mid-August, Kim Jong Un conducted three on-site inspections of typhoon-damaged farmland, alongside reports of increased starvation deaths and continued grain shortage. Such inspections are a reflection of the continued precarious state of agriculture in the DPRK. During the inspections, Kim Jong Un's criticism of the Premier and Cabinet for failing to prevent and effectively execute recovery work was unusually harsh. However, it resembles earlier instances of placing the blame for economic failures on officials and indicates continued issues in economic management. Media reporting and Kim Jong Un's statements during inspections placed focus on military developments and the army's central role in typhoon recovery work, indicating a continued emphasis on military accomplishments over economic struggles.

- From <u>14 to 21 August</u>, Kim Jong Un reportedly conducted three separate on-site inspections of farmland damage inflicted by Typhoon Khanun and reiterated the importance of "attaining" grain production goals. The inspections follow an unusually agriculture-centered <u>plenum</u> in February and come alongside a recent <u>increase</u> in grain imports and a reported <u>increase</u> in starvation deaths. The latest US Department of Agriculture crop forecast <u>suggests</u> a continued annual grain shortage of roughly one million tons, or nearly 20% of the amount needed to feed the population.
- Kim Jong Un levied extensive <u>accusations</u> at Premier Kim Tok Hun and the Cabinet for "spoiling all the state economic work" during an inspection, which followed <u>criticism</u> of "irresponsible" local officials. Similar rhetoric appeared at the 8th <u>plenary meeting</u> in June, where the responsibility for economic failures was placed on officials, suggesting the continuation of a trend. Kim Tok Hun's future remains uncertain; while he subsequently <u>reappeared</u> in State media with titles intact, the readouts for the <u>announced</u> September session of the Supreme People's Assembly may clarify whether there has been any impact on his position in the leadership.
- Media coverage of the first inspection signaled precedence of military matters by placing it behind Kim Jong Un's visit to a munitions factory in the Party Daily newspaper. This ranking was further reflected in Kim Jong Un's subsequent <u>praise</u> of the KPA's central role in the typhoon recovery efforts, while criticizing the failures of the Cabinet and local officials in prevention and recovery work. Alongside multiple developments in the military sector this month, it highlights a continued precedence of military matters despite economic struggles.

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The DPRK partially reopened its borders to some limited air, bus and train traffic in late August, returning citizens stranded abroad since the COVID-19 induced border closure in January 2020. The reopening came shortly after the DPRK sent a delegation to Kazakhstan to participate in a sporting competition, signaling a resumption of participation in international events. While no foreign citizens have been confirmed entering the country and some COVID-19 pandemic measures reportedly remain in place, the passage of a new law on tourism suggests that the leadership may consider a broader reopening of its borders in the future.

- On 22 August, a DPRK civilian plane made a <u>return trip</u> from Pyongyang to Beijing, the first such flight since 2020. A day later, Chinese authorities <u>announced</u> the approval of three flights per week, a schedule which has since been <u>maintained</u>. On 25 and 28 August, similar round trips to Vladivostok, Russia, were conducted. Also, on 28 August, <u>buses</u> began to shuttle passengers across the border from Dandong, China.
- The flights took place shortly after the DPRK <u>sent</u> a delegation of athletes by bus through China to participate in the World Taekwondo Championship in Kazakhstan, the first delegation to participate in an international event since the COVID-19 border closure. The delegation <u>reportedly</u> returned home by passenger train, the first such train to operate across the border since January 2020.
- On 26 August, the DPRK State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters <u>announced</u> that DPRK citizens abroad have been allowed to return home, which reflects <u>reporting</u> on planes arriving empty to Beijing and Vladivostok and departing with DPRK citizens. According to the announcement, the returnees are required to quarantine upon arrival in the DPRK for one week, indicating that the DPRK continues to adhere to some epidemic prevention measures.
- While there have been no reports of foreign citizens traveling to the DPRK, on 31 August, the DPRK parliament <u>adopted</u> a new law aimed at "expanding international tourism", indicating that the leadership is considering restarting some tourism activities. Such broader reopening would be expected to be preceded by the rotation of diplomatic staff and expanded economic activity.

In a trilateral summit, the US, ROK and Japan agreed to further enhance and institutionalize trilateral cooperation on countering security threats in the DPRK and beyond. This comes alongside the first UN Security Council discussion in five years on DPRK human rights. Together, they reflect a continued effort to demonstrate enhanced allied coordination on DPRK issues in various forums. For its part, the DPRK responded by highlighting the importance of its ties with Russia, reflecting a further deepening of divisions between oppositional blocks in the region.

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- On 18 August, US President Joe Biden, ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met for a trilateral summit at Camp David, and agreed on a wide set of cooperative measures in the political, economic and security realms, including annual trilateral meetings of leaders, foreign ministers, defense ministers and national security advisors. The summit constitutes an unprecedented attempt at institutionalizing trilateral security cooperation in the region and beyond, enabled by the recent rapid progress in ROK-Japan bilateral ties.
- The summit came alongside the first UN Security Council <u>discussion</u> in five years on DPRK human rights, reflecting a continued effort to demonstrate enhanced coordination on DPRK issues in various forums.
- In response, the DPRK's Defense Minister, Kang Sun Nam, <u>condemned</u> the three countries for expressing their support for Ukraine against Russia at the summit, and stated that the DPRK will "redouble the militant friendship and solidarity with Russia."





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