



North Korea and the Implications of Operation Epic Fury

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US-led Operation Epic Fury (Operation Roaring Lion in Israel), co-conducted with Israeli military forces (IDF), provided North Korea with useful lessons about America's capability to attack a state with limited deterrent capabilities. For Pyongyang, it was a test case that illustrated what might happen if President Donald Trump ever decided to attack North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities and its leadership. The war between the US, Israel, and Iran will likely force Kim Jong-un to reevaluate North Korea's security policies.

Operation Epic Fury/Roaring Lion provided North Korea with a host of important insights about its own political and military position. Pyongyang is likely to draw several conclusions from Iran's experience about its ability to withstand a similar attack, and to take steps to prepare for such a scenario. These conclusions stem from the following matters.

Iran's failure to deter the United States and Israel: The airstrikes on Iran by the American and Israeli air forces demonstrated the failure of both Tehran and Iran's proxies to deter them. Over a period of many years, Iran spent billions of dollars on militant proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen. These proxies were meant to constitute an expanded deterrence layer that would prevent an attack on the Iranian homeland. The proxies had the capacity to attack Israel, US allies, and US interests in the region, and that capacity was meant to serve as a shield that would deter Iran's enemies from launching an attack on Iran itself. This effort proved a failure, as Iran was attacked despite the proxies' deterrence capabilities.

Kim Jong-un's main conclusion from Iran's failure to deter the US and Israel is likely this: that the decision by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il to develop nuclear weapons was wise, as it provided North Korea with a sufficiently powerful deterrent against attack. Kim Jong-un will likely wish to strengthen his country's nuclear deterrent and project its capabilities to quash any doubt about North Korea's nuclear credibility.

The war with Iran will strengthen Kim Jong-un's statement that the nuclear issue is no longer up for negotiation. Pyongyang will not negotiate with Washington on the dismantling of its nuclear and missile capabilities. These capabilities are perceived by Pyongyang as essential for North Korea's national security, especially after the war with Iran.

The failure of Russia and China to assist Iran: Iran expected Moscow and Beijing to react more strenuously to the US and Israeli attacks on the Iranian homeland. They did not expect them to start a global war against US forces, but they did expect them to take a more active role than they did. Had they done so, Iran would have had more capacity to balance the pressure being exerted upon it by Trump.

North Korea's extended deterrence is similarly built on its relations with Moscow and Beijing. Their lack of military or other active support for Iran raised questions about the degree of support North Korea might receive should it be attacked by the US. Pyongyang will likely strengthen its Juche ideology to prepare itself in the event of very limited support from its allies. North Korea is selling ammunition to Russia and has deployed North Korean soldiers to assist Russia in its war on Ukraine, but should bear in mind that the Ukraine war will limit Russia's ability to assist Pyongyang in the event that war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula.

Failure of Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean weapons: Iran built up a substantial military arsenal over the years to deter Israel and the United States and prepare itself for war. That arsenal consisted of Iranian, Russian, Chinese, and North Korean military equipment. Much of that equipment was destroyed during the 12-day war with Israel and the US in June 2025, but Iran had sufficient time to rebuild that capacity before the 2026 conflict erupted. Iran's reconstituted air defense systems failed to stop the US and Israeli air forces from achieving aerial superiority. Its missiles and drones, however, were able to cause damage to Israel, US bases in the Gulf, and US allies in the region despite the American and Israeli attempts to destroy the launchers and intercept the armaments.

North Korea understands that the US and its allies have military superiority in specific fields like aerial superiority and missile defense. That is why North

Korea's deterrent shield is built on nuclear weapons. North Korea spends more than 20% of its GNP on defense, but knows it can't compete with Washington's military might in terms of conventional deterrence. Pyongyang develops and manufactures less expensive military equipment in part to deter the US, but also to sell to allies. This equipment includes drones, sold to Russia and Iran, that can attack US and South Korean forces; artillery along the DMZ and missiles that threaten Seoul; and middle-range missiles that can target US bases in the region.

The failure of Iranian intelligence: Iranian intelligence failed to anticipate the February 2026 attack. Iran's inability to thwart either the killing of its political and military leadership or the destruction of many of its strategic sites demonstrated its vulnerability to Israeli and US counterintelligence.

The penetrability of Iranian intelligence is one of Pyongyang's biggest concerns. The loopholes that allowed US and Israeli military forces to attack with such precision are one of the biggest threats to the security of North Korea. Should US, South Korean, and Japanese counterintelligence gain access to the location of Kim Jong-un and his political and military milieu, they would be able to eliminate the North Korean chain of command. To avert this threat, Pyongyang is likely to increase its control over internet access. It will also likely expand its cybersecurity efforts to prepare for the new cyber battlefield.

Vulnerability of the chain of command: The surprise blitz on the first day of the war, during which the US and Israeli air forces wiped out Iran's civilian and military leadership, demonstrated the vulnerability of Iran's political and military leadership. The attack raised serious questions in Tehran about how US and Israeli intelligence had managed to penetrate its security shield. It also showed how defenseless Iran was against the special bombs used in the attack. Iran quickly named new political and military leaders to replace those killed, but they too were subject to attack; some were assassinated a few days later.

The attack on the Iranian leadership appeared to justify North Korean paranoia over the years. Their biggest fear has long been that Washington will consider pursuing regime change by attacking the head of state. These concerns were raised during the Kim Jong-il era, when Pyongyang believed Washington had such a plan in mind. After the killing of the Iranian leadership, these concerns were raised once again under Kim Jong-un. While Iran was able to choose new political leaders, the North Korean leadership is centralized under Kim. Decentralizing his control might be seen as a potential threat to his leadership. His successors include Kim Ju-ae (his daughter) and Kim Yo-jong (his sister). An attack on the ruling family, as occurred in Iran, would threaten North Korea's stability. North Korean

political and military institutions are not built to choose alternative leadership. The US and Israeli surprise attack on the Iranian leadership was a wake-up call for the North Korean leadership to reevaluate its traditional leadership policy.

North Korea's role in Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons: The end of the war with Iran might raise the question of whether Tehran should change its policy from that of a threshold nuclear state to that of a nuclear state to prevent another attack on its soil. Will Iran develop its own nuclear bomb and incur severe economic sanctions and/or new military attacks on its nuclear facilities, or will it acquire a nuclear bomb from one of its allies? If the latter, North Korea is a possible choice.

North Korea and Iran have cooperated over the years on the development of unconventional weapons. One example was the Dier al-Zor nuclear project in Syria. Would it serve North Korea's interests to sell nuclear bombs to Iran now? While doing so would boost North Korea's foreign income, it also might lead to harsher sanctions imposed upon it by Washington. But the capture of Venezuelan president Maduro and the attack on Iran show that President Trump is unpredictable. Kim Jong-un can't be sure that Trump will not perceive the sale of nuclear bombs to Iran as sufficiently worrisome to order either an attack on North Korea or the elimination of the ruling dynasty. Kim Jong-un could use the potential sale of nuclear bombs to Iran as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Trump in an attempt to convince him to lift the sanctions – but he might find himself facing a Trump who believes he can use his country's military capabilities to pursue regime change in North Korea.

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