Old Assumptions, New Realities

RETHINKING US-KOREA POLICIES



EDITED BY

James Park

WITH ESSAYS BY

Ankit Panda
So Jin Lee
Jenny Town
Sangsin Lee
John Delury
Kyuri Park
Jaewoo Jun
Jeffrey Robertson

QUINCY INSTITUTE FOR RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

© 2026 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in these essays do not necessarily represent those of the Quincy Institute, its staff, or its board members.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the explicit written permission of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Please direct inquires to:

2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
7th floor
Washington, DC 20006
+1 202-800-4662
info@quincyinst.org
www.quincyinst.org

You can download this publication at no cost at quincyinst.org/program-areas/east-asia/.

Old Assumptions, New Realities

RETHINKING US-KOREA POLICIES

EDITED BY

James Park

WITH ESSAYS BY

Ankit Panda
So Jin Lee
Jenny Town
Sangsin Lee
John Delury
Kyuri Park
Jaewoo Jun
Jeffrey Robertson

NOVEMBER 2026

QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT

Contents

Introduction 1
James Park

Part I. Living with a Nuclear North Korea 5

1. The Third Nuclear Deterrence Relationship 6
   Ankit Panda
2. Beyond Pressure: Rethinking Carrots and Sticks in North Korea Policy 14
   So Jin Lee
3. A Nuclear North Does Not Mean a Nuclear South 22
   Jenny Town
4. Beyond the Unification Dream: Navigating Coexistence and New Paths for Peace 29
   Sangsin Lee

Part II. Creating a More Inclusive Security Environment in Northeast Asia 39

5. Reviving Regional Diplomacy for Korean Peace 40
   John Delury
6. Security Cooperation with China Is Back on South Korea's Table 47
   Kyuri Park

Part III. Rethinking the US–South Korea Alliance 57

7. Sheathing the Dagger: The Case for a Narrower US Role in Korea 58
   Jaewoo Jun
8. Thinking Beyond the Comfort Zone 69
   Jeffrey Robertson

About the Authors 78
Acknowledgments 81
About the Quincy Institute 82

Introduction

Eight years ago, Washington and Pyongyang, with Seoul's mediation, were engaged in active talks to address North Korea's nuclear program and build a more durable peace on the Korean Peninsula. The June 2018 Singapore summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump opened the possibility of a transformation in US–North Korea relations and paved the way for a second summit in Hanoi the following February. At the time, North Korea's traditional partners, China and Russia, also supported denuclearization as a shared objective and cooperated with the international sanctions regime against Pyongyang.

The strategic landscape today could hardly be more different. Pyongyang has repudiated the prospect of exchanging its nuclear weapons for diplomatic concessions, declared its nuclear status irreversible, and ruled out talks so long as Washington continues to insist on denuclearization. Inter–Korean relations have deteriorated to their lowest point in many years. Pyongyang has rejected any dialogue with Seoul and abandoned the long-standing mutual understanding of the two Koreas as temporarily divided states seeking peaceful unification, instead institutionalizing a conception of inter–Korean relations as being between two completely separate and hostile states.

> **"The challenge now is to find pragmatic paths to mitigate tensions, manage risks, and make the Korean Peninsula relatively more peaceful and stable than it is today.**

North Korean denuclearization and inter–Korean reconciliation toward eventual peaceful unification may remain desirable goals, but it is increasingly clear that they no longer provide a viable starting point. The challenge now is to find pragmatic paths to mitigate tensions, manage risks, and make the Korean Peninsula relatively more peaceful and stable than it is today.

The destabilizing trend on the Korean Peninsula, however, is not confined to the peninsula itself; it is part of a broader and fundamental shift in Northeast Asia's security environment. Intensifying US–China strategic rivalry and Russia's war against Ukraine have accelerated the formation of competing, increasingly exclusive security networks. As the United States, Japan, and South Korea have deepened their strategic ties and cooperation, China, Russia, and North Korea have likewise drawn closer together. Beijing has become much more reluctant to pressure Pyongyang, while Russia has significantly elevated its military ties with North Korea and now openly supports the Kim regime's nuclear buildup.

The growing polarization in Northeast Asia has made multilateral diplomacy both more difficult and more necessary. The need for regular, region-wide dialogue in Northeast

Asia is greater than ever amid rising tensions and an increasing risk of conflict. Such dialogue may not resolve disputes, but it would create opportunities to manage them that cooperation among like-minded allies alone cannot.

This broader regional polarization is also exposing a deeper dilemma within the US–South Korea alliance itself. Over the years, the two allies' perceptions of the alliance's strategic purpose have gradually diverged. South Korea's overriding concern remains dealing with North Korea's expanding nuclear threat. The United States, however, increasingly views the alliance as part of a broader regional strategy to counter and perhaps confront China. How to manage this divergence is a crucial question in emerging debates over alliance modernization and has consequential implications for the alliance's future.

> **"Washington and Seoul need to question old shibboleths and start new conversations about alternatives that may better reflect the strategic environment they now face.**

Taken together, these developments point to a fundamental challenge: The policy frameworks and strategic assumptions that have guided Washington and Seoul for many years are out of step with the realities they now confront. As existing approaches reach an impasse, Washington and Seoul need to question old shibboleths and start new conversations about alternatives that may better reflect the strategic environment they now face.

This special volume aims to advance those conversations. The essays that follow offer alternative perspectives on three interconnected challenges: how to manage a nuclear-armed North Korea, how to restore inclusive dialogue and cooperation in Northeast Asia, and how the US–South Korea alliance should adapt to a fundamentally changing strategic environment.

Part I, "Living with a Nuclear North Korea," includes essays by Ankit Panda, So Jin Lee, Jenny Town, and Sangsin Lee.

Ankit Panda argues that Washington should approach Pyongyang as a long-term nuclear deterrence relationship, rather than continuing to treat it as a denuclearization problem. Pursuing denuclearization impedes diplomacy with North Korea while leaving escalation risks dangerously elevated. Panda proposes that the United States and its allies drop denuclearization as their immediate objective and instead adopt a strategy centered on risk reduction and stable coexistence. Denuclearization could remain a long-term aspiration without being an official policy goal. This approach would create greater space for dialogue and negotiation, reduce the risks of nuclear escalation, and strengthen the credibility of US extended deterrence.

Similarly, So Jin Lee argues that US and South Korean policy should move beyond the long-standing emphasis on denuclearization and reconsider what goals existing tools can realistically achieve. Observing that three decades of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military pressure have failed to achieve their central objectives, Lee advocates modest yet concrete efforts to engage with Pyongyang, including humanitarian initiatives, targeted sanctions relief, and limited economic cooperation. Such measures could test North Korean reciprocity while preserving deterrence and alliance coordination.

A common fear in Washington and Seoul is that pursuing diplomacy with Pyongyang without denuclearization as a precondition would legitimize North Korea's arsenal, undermine the global nonproliferation regime, and drive South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons. Jenny Town challenges that framework. While North Korea represents a rare case of a state withdrawing from the nonproliferation regime and successfully acquiring nuclear weapons, its experience demonstrates the extraordinary costs of doing so. South Korea would likewise face economic, diplomatic, and alliance costs from nuclearization that would be extremely hard to tolerate. Ultimately, Seoul's proliferation calculus may depend less on whether Washington maintains its commitment to Pyongyang's denuclearization than on whether South Korea remains confident in US extended deterrence.

Part I concludes with an essay by Sangsin Lee, examining the viability of South Korea's long-standing unification policy. As South Korea remains constitutionally committed to peaceful unification, there is a growing mismatch between the constitutional framework and the realities of inter–Korean relations. North Korea has formally abandoned unification and redefined South Korea as a separate, hostile state. South Korean public opinion has also increasingly favored coexistence over unification. In light of these trends, Lee argues that peaceful coexistence between two separate Koreas may ultimately need to replace peaceful unification as South Korea's organizing principle for inter–Korean policy, while leaving open the former as an eventual possibility.

Part II, "Creating a More Inclusive Security Environment in Northeast Asia," features essays by John Delury and Kyuri Park.

John Delury observes that Northeast Asia is increasingly vulnerable to conflict, as the region lacks durable institutions for security dialogue and relies heavily on deterrence and competing alliances. Previous diplomatic frameworks such as the Six-Party Talks have collapsed. To address this dilemma, Delury proposes establishing a new Northeast Asia Peace and Security Dialogue, or NAPSD, an inclusive regional forum bringing together China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, and South Korea, with the United States and Russia as dialogue partners. Rather than conditioning participation on outcomes such as denuclearization, an NAPSD would prioritize sustained diplomatic interaction and crisis-management channels. Such an institution could provide regular channels for both inter–Korean and broader regional engagement.

While reviving regional dialogue in Northeast Asia would be meaningful in itself, dialogue alone may not be sufficient for sustainable confidence-building. A further question is whether actors in Northeast Asia can actually cooperate on regional security and develop a sense of shared security.

In her essay, Kyuri Park explores this question, with her case for using maritime search-and-rescue exercises, or SAREX, between South Korea and China as a way to strengthen confidence-building in the military/security sphere. Park observes that, although Asia is increasingly under pressure from zero-sum rivalry between the United States and China, most regional actors have refused to choose exclusively between the two great powers, and many of them—including traditional US partners—have pursued practical security cooperation with China. Park argues that South Korea's optimal regional strategy

is to follow the broader regional trend: maintaining stable ties with China through practical cooperation, reassurance, and confidence-building, even as it pursues alliance cooperation with the United States.

Part III, "Rethinking the US–South Korea Alliance," comprises essays by Jaewoo Jun and Jeffrey Robertson.

Jaewoo Jun examines the implications of diverging security priorities between the United States and South Korea. As Washington increasingly prioritizes Beijing, and Seoul remains preoccupied with Pyongyang, the US–South Korea alliance's Combined Forces Command is being pulled between two divergent sets of priorities. Jun argues that such a structure is counterproductive, costing Washington operational speed, risking entrapment for Seoul, creating friction in the alliance, and fueling South Korea's nuclear debate. He proposes replacing the Combined Forces Command with parallel national commands: South Korea leading conventional defense after transferring operational control and the United States concentrating narrowly on nuclear extended deterrence. Critically, Jun points out that this idea is not new; it is in fact, an American one, proposed in 2006. The redesign would give Washington greater strategic latitude, settle the alliance's simmering strategic flexibility dispute, reduce proliferation pressures on Seoul, and ground the US presence in South Korea in shared interests.

Lastly, Jeffrey Robertson examines a different but equally important challenge: Adapting to a changing world requires new ways of thinking. At a moment when old frameworks are increasingly incapable of producing outcomes, the most consequential step may be to question them and their underlying assumptions. The challenge, however, is that the US–South Korea alliance—particularly among policymakers in Washington—is locked in unsound analytical assumptions and suffers from deeply embedded habits of linear thinking, imaginative failure, mirror-imaging, groupthink, and motivated reasoning. To improve the alliance's ability to prepare for future strategic developments and surprises, Robertson calls on policy communities in Washington and Seoul to engage in more creative, systematic exploration of unconventional strategic scenarios.

A common conclusion that emerges from these essays is that Washington and Seoul desperately need to expand the range of choices available to them. The challenges confronting the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia cannot be addressed by simply preserving existing policies. Exploring new possibilities will be uncomfortable and uncertain, but uncertainty is not a reason to stay bound to familiar choices. It is a reason to think more creatively—and radically—about what comes next.

Audiences in Washington and Seoul may agree or disagree with the arguments and prescriptions in these essays. However, there is no doubt that we are in the midst of an era of profound geopolitical uncertainty and change. Conventional wisdom from years past is simply inadequate. This volume is meant to broaden the scope of debate in Washington and Seoul at a time when doing so is more urgent than ever.

—James Park
East Asia program, Quincy Institute

PART I

Living with a Nuclear North Korea

CHAPTER 1

The Third Nuclear Deterrence Relationship

ANKIT PANDA

This June, North Korean state media released photographs of Chairman Kim Jong Un touring a newly inaugurated uranium enrichment facility. The facility marked the third time that Pyongyang has publicly disclosed an enrichment site.[1] The first such disclosure, in 2010, was a calculated revelation to the United States at a time when engagement with Washington still seemed like a good idea. This latest disclosure—as with the second, in 2024—of a long-suspected covert site was altogether different: it was the sort of thing a state does when it is showing off the basis of its sustained plans to retain its nuclear weapons rather than auctioning them off in negotiations.

That difference summarizes the story of the past decade and the arrival of a fundamentally new period in the US–North Korea relationship. Kim's milestone in 2017—the first flight of North Korea's Hwasong–15 intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM—was that of a minimally viable nuclear deterrent: compact warheads and missiles to deliver them to all relevant targets, including the US homeland. With that year's three ICBM tests and a thermonuclear demonstration, North Korea became the third country (following Russia and China) with historically adversarial relations with the United States to credibly hold the American homeland at risk with nuclear weapons. But questions lingered about reliability, and the force behind the declaration was thin enough that US war planners assumed an ICBM inventory in the low single digits.[2]

All of that has changed in the ensuing years. What Kim commands today is an increasingly fleshed-out nuclear force. North Korea now flight-tests large solid-propellant ICBMs—missiles that can be stored already fueled, wheeled out of concealment, and fired with little warning—alongside the liquid-fueled behemoths of the 2017 breakout. It fields a family of shorter-range, lower-yield systems, explicitly assigned tactical nuclear missions against South Korea and Japan, alongside long-range cruise missiles and even claimed underwater nuclear-armed torpedoes. North Korean nuclear units exercise regularly,

1 Grant Christopher, Hailey Wingo, and Jaewoo Shin, "Analysis of a New DPRK Enrichment Facility," VERTIC, June 11, 2026, https://www.vertic.org/2026/06/analysis-of-a-new-dprk-enrichment-facility.

2 Ankit Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 222–24.

rehearsing "counterattack" drills, and Pyongyang's shifting command-and-control approaches have been more publicized than ever before. North Korea's doctrine, updated and codified in a 2022 law and reinforced by a 2023 constitutional amendment, privileges the early—and even preemptive—use of nuclear weapons and provides for "automatic" retaliation, should the leadership come under attack. Article 89 of North Korea's updated constitution, meanwhile, clarifies for the first time that Kim "may delegate authority" over the use of nuclear weapons to others.[3] Alongside these ominous shifts, the picture of fissile material has darkened accordingly. With two additional enrichment sites disclosed since 2024 and the new Yongbyon annex poised to add substantially to annual output, North Korea can be reasonably estimated to possess roughly 50 assembled warheads and material for at least 90–100 today. In short, North Korea is no longer the new nuclear kid on the block; it is maturing.[4]

The world surrounding Kim's arsenal, meanwhile, has changed as much as the arsenal itself. In 2017, the United Nations Security Council answered North Korea's ICBM and thermonuclear tests with three unanimous sanctions resolutions; Beijing and Moscow voted for every single one.[5] It is almost inconceivable that either of Pyongyang's great-power neighbors would authorize any meaningful punishment today.

"North Korea is no longer a nonproliferation problem sitting at the periphery of US strategy; it is a deterrence problem embedded in the most dangerous nuclear environment the United States has confronted since the height of the Cold War.

Russia, now bound to North Korea by a mutual defense treaty, has welcomed North Korean troops to fight on its soil against Ukraine, vetoed the renewal of the UN panel that monitored sanctions, and become a source of technology, energy, and political cover.[6] Meanwhile, New START, the last remaining strategic arms control agreement between Moscow and Washington, has lapsed without a successor, leaving the US and Russian arsenals unconstrained by negotiated limits for the first time in half a century.

China is engaged in the fastest nuclear buildup of any state since the Cold War. The United States, for its part, now explicitly plans to deter three nuclear-armed adversaries at once. North Korea is no longer a nonproliferation problem sitting at the periphery of US strategy; it is a deterrence problem embedded in the most dangerous nuclear environment the United States has confronted since the height of the Cold War.

3 "DPRK Constitution 2026," North Korea Leadership Watch, accessed June 12, 2026, https://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/dprk-constitution-2026.

4 Vann H. Van Diepen, "Is North Korea Pursuing a 'Juche–Oriented' Nuclear Triad?" *38 North*, July 16, 2026, https://www.38north.org/2026/07/is-north-korea-pursuing-a-juche-oriented-nuclear-triad.

5 Associated Press, "UN Security Council Imposes Tough New Sanctions on North Korea," NBC News, Dec. 23, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/north-korea/un-security-council-imposes-tough-new-sanctions-north-korea-n832261.

6 Anthony V. Rinna, "The North Korea–Russia Strategic Partnership and Moscow–Washington Great Power Rivalry in a Regional Security Context," *North Korean Review* 21, no. 2 (2025): 64–77; Ankit Panda, "The Russia–North Korea Nexus Is a Rising Global Threat," Macdonald–Laurier Institute, June 25, 2025, https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/the-russia-north-korea-nexus-is-a-rising-global-threat-ankit-panda-for-inside-policy.

A Less Controversial Reality Now

Not long ago, even as late as 2021, stating that the United States and North Korea were in a nuclear deterrence relationship was treated in Washington as a minor heresy—as if describing this fact conceded something major to Pyongyang. Today, the proposition is far less controversial.

By 2022, the Nuclear Posture Review was acknowledging the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities.[7] The 2023 Washington Declaration and the ensuing establishment of the US–South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group were substantive responses to a worsening nuclear environment on the Korean Peninsula.[8] The Biden administration's 2024 presidential nuclear weapons employment guidance then placed North Korea alongside Russia and China as part of a more dangerous nuclear environment requiring the United States to deter multiple nuclear-armed adversaries simultaneously.[9] US policy, in other words, had already begun to treat North Korea as a nuclear power in substance years ago, even as its declaratory framing has remained tethered to the fiction of seeking "denuclearization."

US policy is long overdue to be brought into alignment with what has now, for some years, been a silent acceptance of North Korea's nuclear weapons. Under the second Trump administration, perhaps that silence has become deafening: The president himself has called North Korea a "nuclear power" and never once uttered the word "denuclearization" in the context of North Korea.[10] Still, this persistent gap between posture and policy produces incoherence: Washington pursues an outcome—the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—that its own intelligence community has assessed for years to be vanishingly improbable.[11] Sticking to that goal forecloses diplomacy, because Pyongyang has made clear that it will not sit at any table where the ultimate guarantor of its sovereignty, its nuclear weapons, is the price of admission.[12] Moreover, it cedes the initiative to Kim, who labors under no comparable contradiction: His policy and his

7 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), https://s3.amazonaws.com/uploads.fas.org/2022/10/27113658/2022-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf.

8 Ankit Panda, "The Washington Declaration Is a Software Upgrade for the US–South Korea Alliance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 1, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/05/the-washington-declaration-is-a-software-upgrade-for-the-us-south-korea-alliance.

9 "Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States, Submitted Pursuant to 491(a) of Title 10, US Code," Department of Defense, Nov. 7, 2024, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF.

10 Stella Kim and Mithil Aggarwal, "Trump Calls North Korea a 'Nuclear Power,' Drawing a Rebuke from Seoul," NBC News, Jan. 21, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-calls-north-korea-nuclear-power-drawing-rebuke-seoul-rcna188490.

11 *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, April 9, 2021* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021), 15–16, available on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at https://web.archive.org/web/20210413144639/https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf; *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, February 5, 2024* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2024), 21–23, https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf.

12 Chung Yeong-gyo, "Pyongyang Issues Sharp but Restrained Critique of South Korea–US Joint Documents," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Nov. 18, 2025, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/12149819.

posture point in the same direction. Russia and China, having now effectively accepted this, have each embraced new types of relationships with North Korea.

Acceptance is descriptive rather than normative. North Korea will never be recognized as a nuclear weapons state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, the only legal benchmark that matters. It will persist in a sui generis category—partly alongside India, Pakistan, and Israel—but still special as the sole erstwhile nonnuclear weapon state to have left the NPT. Acknowledging a deterrence relationship that exists as a matter of fact confers no status and legitimizes nothing; it merely permits US policy to operate in the world as it is.

The incoherence between simultaneously seeking denuclearization and failing to center nuclear deterrence has unnecessarily allowed risks to accrue. Crucially, this deterrence relationship is a dyad unlike any other that the United States manages. Three features distinguish it.

First, it is deeply asymmetric, both qualitatively and quantitatively, with the closest analogs being the UK–Russia and France–Russia deterrence relationships, neither of which provides a suitable guidebook for managing risks. The United States fields several thousand nuclear warheads across a triad of delivery systems, backed by missile defenses, overwhelming conventional power, and two capable Northeast Asian allies; North Korea fields dozens of warheads atop a missile force of uneven reliability. Asymmetry of this kind can be destabilizing. A leadership that fears a disarming first strike or decapitation has every incentive to use their weapons early in a crisis (as North Korea does), to pre-delegate launch authority (as North Korea has), and to adopt fail-deadly arrangements (as North Korea also has). In short, the weaker side's fears become the stronger side's problem.

Second, the relationship is entirely unconstrained by any agreement formalizing arms limits or even regular communications. With Russia, even now, the United States retains the residue of five decades of treaties and crisis communication habits; even in the post–New START era, so-called indefinite duration agreements on notifying the other of major missile launches and military exercises persist.[13] With China, there have at least been episodic strategic stability talks and sustained contact between nongovernmental expert communities to foment some shared understanding of risks.[14] With North Korea, there are no agreements, no functioning crisis channels, no military-to-military contact outside of a UN Command hotline, and, since Oct. 2019, the longest absence of official dialogue since senior-level talks began in 1992.

13 "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Notifications of Launches of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and Submarine–Launched Ballistic Missiles (Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement)," US Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, May 31, 1988, available via the Department of State archive at https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/187150.htm.

14 David Santoro, *Track–2 and Track–1.5 US–China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward* (Seoul: Asia–Pacific Leadership Network, 2022), https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/David-Santoro-US-China-Strategic-Nuclear-Dialogues.pdf.

Third, the relationship remains fast-changing. Both sides are changing their forces and postures simultaneously: North Korea, according to its five-year defense plans promulgated at the Ninth Party Congress earlier this year and the Jan. 2021 Eighth Party Congress; and the United States, through homeland missile defense expansion, new conventional strike capabilities, and intensified alliance nuclear consultations.[15] North Korea's plans should be read less as aspirations than as procurement schedules: Nearly every priority that Kim listed in 2021—hypersonic glide vehicles, a large solid-fuel ICBM, tactical nuclear weapons, and reconnaissance satellites—has since been flight-tested or fielded.[16]

The newest plan augurs worse. It gestures at multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, or MIRVs, which Pyongyang has pursued since at least 2022 and would considerably raise demands on US homeland missile defense even if North Korea's launcher count grows only modestly. The new plan also calls for "special assets for attacking enemy satellites"—a formulation that admits the alarming possibility of a nuclear-armed counterspace weapon, the crudest such attack available to a state with almost nothing of its own to lose in orbit. Both are Kim's answers to the Golden Dome, whose promise of space-based missile defense Pyongyang must take at face value even if skeptical American experts do not, and Russia's deepening partnership with North Korea threatens to lower every technical barrier along the way.[17]

These three factors create a recipe for intensifying fears in Pyongyang and for the risks of miscalculation in a crisis to grow.

The Self-Interest Case for Engagement

The case for engaging North Korea is routinely framed and dismissed as a reward for bad behavior or an altruistic giveaway to a regime that has earned no goodwill.[18] This framing has it backward and misreads US strategic interests in a more dangerous and demanding nuclear age. The United States has a strong self-interested case for seeking to stabilize and reduce risks in this third nuclear deterrence relationship, and that case begins, not incidentally, with the security of its allies.

South Korean and Japanese threat perceptions are well founded, and nothing in the argument for engagement requires pretending otherwise. North Korea has formally designated South Korea its "principal enemy," abandoned seven decades of unification

15 Panda, "The Washington Declaration Is a Software Upgrade."

16 Ankit Panda, "What to Make of the Hwasong–20, North Korea's Puzzling New Nuclear Missile," *NK PRO*, Oct. 12, 2025, https://www.nknews.org/pro/?p=2222676.

17 Ankit Panda, "North Korea Is Getting Serious about Space Weapons," *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 4, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/09/north-korea-nuclear-space-weapon-missile-defense-golden-dome.

18 Yong-sup Han, "North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine: Implications and Strategic Countermeasures for the US–ROK Alliance," *38 North*, July 23, 2026, https://www.38north.org/2026/07/north-koreas-nuclear-doctrine-implications-and-strategic-countermeasures-for-the-us-rok-alliance; Olivia Gazis, "Trump's Rushed Diplomacy with North Korea Could Trigger Regional Arms Race, Says Korea Expert," CBS News, Feb. 20, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trumps-rushed-diplomacy-with-north-korea-could-trigger-regional-arms-race-says-korea-expert.

policy, and fielded tactical nuclear weapons whose only plausible targets sit on allied territory.[19] Pyongyang's doctrine of early nuclear use means that an ordinary skirmish, whether along the Northern Limit Line or over drone incursions, carries escalatory potential unprecedented in the post–Korean War armistice era. Given North Korea's enduring inferiority in conventional weapons, a regime losing a conventional fight is a regime with incentives to reach for its nuclear weapons early. The first US interest at stake, shared in full with South Korea and Japan, is the avoidance of a catastrophic nuclear war in Northeast Asia. Simultaneously, reducing these risks would improve the credibility of US extended deterrence guarantees in the long run, staunching the growing interest in independent nuclear capabilities.

The second American interest concerns priorities. Washington has identified strategic competition with China and, at least under the Biden administration, the management of a revanchist Russia as the organizing challenges of its national security policy; contests that will likely intensify. The demands of deterrence and assurance in Northeast Asia—expressed through bomber rotations to the Korean Peninsula, carrier strike group dispatches, and new missile defense requirements to cope with a growing North Korean missile force—represent claims on finite capacity committed against an adversary that Washington itself views as peripheral to more pressing challenges.

A Korean Peninsula at a lower boil renders US deterrence and defense requirements there more modest and more credible. In a hypothetical US–China conflict over Taiwan, an unconstrained, hair-triggered North Korea, now treaty-bound to Russia, is a second front waiting to open. Engagement with North Korea also offers the United States its only available means of shaping, even at the margins, the most dangerous forms of Moscow–Pyongyang cooperation, such as sustained, long-term defense-industrial cooperation.

A Framework for the Next Decade

What would a US policy adequate to the next phase of this deterrence relationship look like? Six elements stand out.

First, Washington should reframe the end state it seeks on the Korean Peninsula away from denuclearization toward one more compatible with contemporary realities and nuclear deterrence. Stable coexistence with North Korea—lower hostility, regularized engagement, and tangible risk reduction, with nuclear and conventional deterrence maintained throughout—should displace denuclearization as the organizing near-term goal of US policy.

Overtly resetting the agenda for possible engagement may encourage North Korean reciprocation. Denuclearization need not be abandoned; it should be retained as a private,

19 Ankit Panda, "A Call to Arms: Kim Jong Un and the Tactical Bomb," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2021): 7–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1969089; Robert King, "North Korea's New Constitution Buries the Reunification Project," Korea Economic Institute of America, May 21, 2026, https://keia.org/analysis/north-koreas-new-constitution-buries-the-reunification-project; Reuters, "US Envoy to UN Urges Russia and China Not to 'Reward' North Korea's Bad Behavior," NBC News, April 17, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-linda-thomas-greenfield-china-russia-rcna148135.

long-term aspiration, much as the United States retains the aspiration of a world without nuclear weapons while managing deterrence with Russia and China in the interim. Public emphasis on denuclearization is a surefire way to hear silence on the other end of the phone in Pyongyang.

Second, the United States should seize an opening that is, for the first time in years, visibly ajar; and Chairman Kim himself has described its terms. In 2025, Kim stated that, if the United States abandoned what he called its absurd pursuit of denuclearization and instead sought "genuine peaceful coexistence," there would be no reason for the two countries not to meet.[20] The coexistence framing is not Pyongyang's alone. South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has invoked peaceful coexistence with the North in his 2025 inaugural address; and US President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly voiced interest in meeting Kim, has the political latitude that eluded his predecessors.[21]

What stands in the way of a spark that could draw Pyongyang is a credible, formal signal of a change in the US perspective. Off-the-cuff remarks and private letters from Trump that Pyongyang declines to accept will not move Kim, who sees himself as having been burned at the 2019 Hanoi Summit and has hardened his terms since. A deliberate, highly visible statement of a new desired end state for US–North Korea relations, delivered in a formal presidential address and framed around coexistence, would make it easier for Kim to say yes.

Third, renewed leader-level engagement, which has been the only channel that has reliably moved Pyongyang in the Kim Jong Un era, should be paired with the working-level and military-to-military ballast, the absence of which doomed the last round of leader-to-leader talks. One lesson from the 2019 Hanoi encounter between Trump and Kim is that summitry without infrastructure collapses under the weight of all-or-nothing bargaining. A standing channel between the Korean People's Army and the US Department of Defense, which was never attempted despite the army's centrality to Pyongyang's decision-making, should be an early objective, as should an exploratory dialogue on strategic stability.

Fourth, Washington should undertake unilateral but reciprocal risk-reduction steps that cost it little and do not degrade deterrence: It can adjust the tempo of strategic asset deployments to the peninsula, shift the scope and signaling of joint exercises to focus on defense rather than preemption, and communicate these steps clearly as invitations to reciprocity. North Korea has described its operating principle as "power for power and goodwill for goodwill"; the stronger party can better afford to test the second half of that proposition.[22]

20 Gavin Butler and Jake Kwon, "North Korea Could 'Get Along' with US, Says Kim Jong Un," BBC, Feb. 26, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q3747jvnwo.

21 "Full Text: Lee Jae Myung's Inaugural Address," *Korea Herald*, June 4, 2025, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10502281.

22 Tom O'Connor, "North Korea to Talk to Biden on Own Terms: 'Power for Power, Goodwill for Goodwill'," *Newsweek*, Mar. 17, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/1576984.

Fifth, the United States should manage this deterrence relationship with the same prudential principles that it applies to Russia and China. That means forgoing declared threats to North Korea's nuclear command and control; "left-of-launch" postures that, by stoking Kim's fear of losing control of his forces, incentivize pre-delegation and early use. These invite unnecessary risks of catastrophic deterrence failure in a crisis. On balance, Washington should treat Pyongyang much as it used to treat Beijing when it was a "lesser included case" of the nuclear deterrence relationship with Moscow.[23] This means calibrating declaratory policy for deterrence credibility and embracing calculated ambiguity rather than incredible certainty about ending the North Korean regime.

Sixth, the United States must bring its allies along rather than leaving them to discover the policy in the press. Seoul and Tokyo will be instinctively wary of any move away from denuclearization, and their concerns about status, precedent, and proliferation deserve engagement rather than dismissal. But the moment is unusually favorable: The Lee government has itself embraced coexistence, drawing reciprocal interest from Kim. Risk reduction and assurance are complements. Most ambitiously, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo will need to work to institutionalize a coexistence-oriented approach—in consultation mechanisms, planning, and declaratory practice—deeply enough that it can survive political transitions in all three capitals.

Shifting Trajectories

A decade after declaring his nuclear deterrent complete, Kim is overseeing what appears to be a healthy and humming nuclear force. He will arrive at the 10–year mark of that fateful initial flight of the Hwasong–15 ICBM with new enrichment halls, new missiles, and possibly initial MIRVs and counterspace weapons; all rendered more sustainable by a treaty alliance with Moscow. The United States, on its current course, can stick to the old denuclearization formula and watch a bad situation get far worse, or it can finally take the necessary steps to begin shaping a more sustainable trajectory that advances its interests.

"The United States, on its current course, can stick to the old denuclearization formula and watch a bad situation get far worse, or it can finally take the necessary steps to begin shaping a more sustainable trajectory that advances its interests.

The six aforementioned steps will not immediately eliminate dangers, but they will provide the foundation for a realistic US orientation toward North Korea. The next phase of the US–North Korean relationship will unfold either way; the trend lines all point toward more warheads and more North Korean capabilities pointed at Washington and its allies. But trend lines are not destiny; they are the accumulation of choices, and some of the most consequential choices at this point belong to Washington. The door to a different trajectory is, by Kim's own account, slightly ajar. It would be a mistake, after a decade of pushing on doors long shut tight, to not at least knock.

23 Brian Radzinsky, "Chinese Views of the Changing Nuclear Balance," *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 22, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/chinese-views-of-the-changing-nuclear-balance.

CHAPTER 2

Beyond Pressure: Rethinking Carrots and Sticks in North Korea Policy

SO JIN LEE

In Dec. 2025, the Trump administration released a new National Security Strategy that, for the first time in the post–Cold War era, made no mention of North Korea. Every US National Security Strategy since Pyongyang's weapons program emerged in the early 2000s had named the goal of denuclearization explicitly. Its absence, let alone the discussion of North Korea, was conspicuous enough to draw notice in Seoul and Tokyo and pointed enough that a pro–Pyongyang newspaper based in Japan, *Choson Shinbo*, suggested the omission amounted to Washington admitting policy failure.[1] A few months later, at Pyongyang's ruling Workers' Party of Korea Congress, Chairman Kim Jong Un offered his own answer to the question the document seemed to be asking: North Korea, he said, was ready for "peaceful coexistence or permanent confrontation," and the choice was not his to make.[2]

Neither the US nor the North Korean government has said what exactly comes next. But the drift in Washington's own language is revealing. For three decades, US policy toward North Korea has mostly rested on a familiar formula: sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and periodic shows of military force. These had been deployed in service of an unambiguous goal: the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. That goal has not been achieved. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have expanded through every US administration's pressure campaign, and, since 2023, Pyongyang has had its nuclear status codified into its constitution.[3] If the tools have not

1 Park Boram, "Pro–Pyongyang Paper Takes Note of Omission of N. Korea from US Security Strategy Report," Yonhap News Agency, Dec. 18, 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251218001800315.

2 Gavin Butler and Jake Kwon, "North Korea Could 'Get Along' with US, Says Kim Jong Un," BBC, Feb. 26, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q3747jvnwo.

3 Soo-Hyang Choi and Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Amends Constitution on Nuclear Policy, Cites US Provocations," Reuters, Sept. 28, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-parliament-amends-constitution-enshrine-nuclear-policy-kcna-2023-09-27; Jessie Yeung and Gawon Bae, "North Korea Amends Constitution to Bolster Nuclear Power Status, Calls US and Allies 'Worst Threat'," CNN, Sept. 28, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/27/asia/north-korea-nuclear-law-constitution-intl-hnk.

produced the outcome, policymakers face a choice: Intensify the tools, abandon the goal, or reconsider whether the two were ever well matched in the first place.

This essay makes the case for a third option. It does not argue that sanctions simply should be abandoned or that engagement will succeed. Instead, it argues that the North Korea debate has been organized around the wrong question. The choice policymakers face is not sanctions versus inducements; it is whether the tools in use can achieve the objective actually being pursued and whether Washington and Seoul have been honest with themselves about what that objective now is.

Washington's retreat from denuclearization as an explicitly stated goal, without any corresponding change in the toolkit built to pursue it, is exactly the kind of mismatch this essay examines. A strategy that no longer names disarmament as its aim but continues to rely on sanctions, secondary enforcement, and diplomatic isolation designed to force disarmament is not a strategy so much as an unresolved argument with itself; the hope that the way each administration uses the same tools will produce a different outcome. Clarifying the actual objective—whether that is renewed denuclearization talks, risk reduction, crisis stability, or some form of managed coexistence—is not a preliminary step before choosing the right tools; it should be the precondition for choosing them at all.

The Limits of Pressure

Sanctions have not been without effect. They have raised the cost of North Korea's weapons programs, constrained specific procurement and financial networks, and signaled sustained international disapproval of Pyongyang's conduct, to name just some successes.[4] These are not trivial achievements. But when measured against the objective they were designed to serve—reversing North Korea's nuclear development—they have fallen well short. Pyongyang's arsenal is larger, more diversified, and more survivable today than at any point since sanctions became the centerpiece of Washington's policy. Chairman Kim has overseen the introduction of a nuclear-powered submarine program, sea-based and underwater nuclear delivery systems, and a stated ambition to expand warhead numbers further.[5]

Several structural features of the Pyongyang regime may help explain this persistence. North Korean leadership has consistently prioritized regime security over economic growth; it has shown a willingness to absorb sustained economic pain rather than

4 Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, Hard Target: Sanctions, Inducements, and the Case of North Korea (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2017); King Mallory et al., North Korea's Black Knights and Dark Networks: Toward the Disruption and Typology of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Sanctions-Evasion Networks (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2025), https://www.rand.org/t/RRA3413-1.html; "Treasury Targets Arms Trafficking Network and Financial Facilitators for DPRK Weapons Programs," US Department of the Treasury, Sept. 25, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0264.

5 Hyung-Jin Kim, "North Korea Unveils Nuclear-Powered Submarine for the First Time," Associated Press, March 8, 2025, https://apnews.com/183cde96a36844fdce559081551fc0a7; Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Unveils the Completed Hull of What It Calls a Nuclear Submarine," New York Times, Dec. 25, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/25/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-submarine.html.

trade away the deterrent it now treats as existential and, since 2023, as a matter of constitutional status. China and Russia, whose cooperation is essential to comprehensive enforcement, have limited incentive to squeeze North Korea into crisis, particularly as Pyongyang's relationship with Moscow has deepened through military and economic cooperation tied to the war in Ukraine. Sanctions regimes also degrade over time, as targeted states develop adaptation strategies, alternative financial channels, and work-around trade routes that outlast any individual sanctions package. And there is a more fundamental problem: Pressure alone gives a target little affirmative reason to negotiate. It can make the status quo painful, but it does not create an attractive alternative to the status quo by itself. A regime convinced that its survival depends on a completed deterrent will treat even severe economic cost as a price worth paying, not a signal to change course.

This is not a new observation, but it has become harder to avoid as the policy record has lengthened. The Agreed Framework of 1994 collapsed amid mutual accusations of noncompliance. The Six-Party Talks that followed produced periodic agreements and periodic breakdowns before dissolving altogether. The 2018 Singapore Summit and 2019 Hanoi Summit raised hopes and expectations of an opening, but both ended in impasses over the sequencing of sanctions relief and dismantlement. Each cycle left North Korea's nuclear program further advanced than the one before it. A policy that repeats the same basic formula while watching the underlying trend move steadily in the wrong direction is not simply unlucky. At some point, the pattern itself becomes the evidence.

"A policy that repeats the same basic formula while watching the underlying trend move steadily in the wrong direction is not simply unlucky. At some point, the pattern itself becomes the evidence.

The US and Israeli attacks against Iran in 2025 and 2026 offered North Korea an unwelcome but clarifying lesson in this dynamic as well. When strikes targeted Iran's nuclear infrastructure, the near-universal reading in North Korean state media was not that nuclear ambition invites unacceptable risk but the opposite: that the absence of a completed deterrent had left Iran exposed in a way that a nuclear-armed state would not be.

None of this means sanctions and other punitive measures in the "stick" category have no place in North Korea policy. It means that pressure, applied on its own, has a ceiling. Pressure can raise costs, but it has not created the political incentive for compromise that a change in North Korean behavior would require.

What Carrots Can Offer

The debate over engagement is often conducted as though the only question is whether inducements "work": whether offering something to Pyongyang will produce reciprocal restraint. That framing misunderstands what carrots are for or, at least, can be. They are not only rewards extended in the hope of good behavior; they are instruments and, like sanctions, their value depends on what they are being used to accomplish.

Different inducements serve different purposes. Targeted sanctions relief, calibrated to specific and verifiable steps, functions as a signal that incremental cooperation will be met with incremental reciprocity. This logic structured, though imperfectly, both the 1994 Agreed Framework and the diplomacy that produced the 2018 Singapore Summit. Humanitarian engagement, including the aid exemptions the Trump administration negotiated at the United Nations Security Council earlier this year, serves narrower but still valuable functions: maintaining channels of contact, reducing mutual threat perception, and separating the question of human welfare from the broader strategic standoff. Economic cooperation, phased and reversible, aims at something longer-term: raising the opportunity cost of confrontation by giving North Korea's leadership something to lose.

None of these tools, individually or combined, guarantee a change in North Korean strategic behavior. Their value lies in testing whether reciprocal cooperation remains possible at all. This remains an open question after Pyongyang's rejection of even humanitarian assistance since the Covid–19 pandemic and its formal renunciation of both denuclearization and inter–Korean unification as objectives.[6] That uncertainty is a reason to calibrate inducements carefully. It is not a reason to withhold them altogether, since the alternative—continuing a pressure-forward approach that has already run for three decades without producing the desired result—is obviously not the safer bet.

It is also worth being specific about what each tool can plausibly deliver, because vague inducements are easy for critics to dismiss and for Pyongyang to pocket without reciprocating. A narrowly targeted exemption for medical or food aid, of the kind negotiated at the United Nations this year, does not require North Korea to concede anything about its weapons program. Instead, the purpose of such an exemption is to keep a channel open and separate humanitarian concerns from strategic ones, not to buy leverage. A modest, reversible easing of financial restrictions tied to a specific and verifiable step, such as a moratorium on missile or nuclear tests, asks for something concrete in exchange for something concrete and can be unwound immediately if North Korea does not deliver. Broader economic cooperation, the kind that would meaningfully

6 On the rejection of aid, see Timothy W. Martin, "North Korea Rejects Covid–19 Vaccine Doses," Wall Street Journal, Sept. 1, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/north-korea-rejects-covid-19-vaccine-doses-11630492709; Seung-Yeon Chung, "State Media Review: North Korea Rejects Humanitarian Aid as 'Poison Candy,'" NK News, Feb. 23, 2023, https://www.nknews.org/pro/state-media-review-north-korea-rejects-humanitarian-aid-as-poison-candy; Christy Lee, "North Korea Shuns International Aid Workers amid Severe Flooding," VOA, Aug. 1, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/7727020.html. On the abandonment of unification as objectives, see Daniel Wertz, "The US, North Korea, and Nuclear Diplomacy," National Committee on North Korea, Oct. 2018 (updated by Ankit Panda, April 2026), https://ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/u.s.-north-korea-and-nuclear-diplomacy; Robert King, "North Korea's New Constitution Buries the Reunification Project," Korea Economic Institute, May 21, 2026, https://keia.org/analysis/north-koreas-new-constitution-buries-the-reunification-project. On the abandonment of denuclearization as objectives, see Ellen Kim, "North Korea States It Will Never Give Up Nuclear Weapons," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Sept. 9, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korea-states-it-will-never-give-nuclear-weapons; Yoonjung Seo, Larry Register, and Heather Chen, "North Korea Declares Itself a Nuclear Weapons State, in 'Irreversible' Move," CNN, Sept. 9, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/09/asia/north-korea-kim-nuclear-weapons-state-law-intl-hnk.

raise the Kim regime's stake in stability, is the highest-risk and highest-reward category but probably the least realistic in the near term, given the current state of trust on both sides. Treating all types as interchangeable expressions of engagement makes the debate less precise than it needs to be.

Reframing the Objective

This is where the question of objectives becomes unavoidable. If the goal of US policy toward North Korea remains complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization on the traditional model, no combination of carrots currently on offer is likely to produce it. Pyongyang has said, repeatedly and through multiple administrations, that its arsenal is not negotiable.[7] But denuclearization is not the only plausible objective, and the 2025 US National Security Strategy's silence on the subject suggests Washington may already sense this. If the actual objective is reducing the risk of miscalculation, slowing the rate of qualitative weapons advances, reopening channels of communication in a crisis, or simply managing a nuclear-armed North Korea more safely than the current trajectory allows, then engagement tools like humanitarian channels, crisis communication mechanisms, and even modest and reversible economic openings have a role that pressure alone cannot fill. South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's own framework of "exchange, normalization, denuclearization," or END, illustrates the difficulty of straddling this line. It gestures toward engagement while still anchoring itself to denuclearization and unification; two goals that Pyongyang has already and explicitly rejected.[8]

The question worth asking, in other words, is not whether to use carrots or sticks. Rather, which combination of tools best serves the objective actually being pursued? That question cannot be answered honestly until policymakers in Washington and Seoul are willing to say, out loud, what that objective is.

The Risks of Inducements Are Real Yet Manageable

None of this should obscure the risks that come with inducements. Carrots can "reward" behavior that should not be rewarded, particularly if offered without verification or reciprocal steps attached. They can also weaken deterrence signaling, which may be crucial at moments when North Korea's conventional and nuclear postures are both advancing; signal to third-party states that Washington and Seoul are easy extortion targets; and produce friction within the US–South Korea alliance, particularly if Washington and Seoul disagree about sequencing or about how much to concede for

7 Colin Zwirko and Jeongmin Kim, "Kim Jong Un Says He Will Never Give Up Nuclear Weapons, Rejects Future Talks," NK News, Sept. 9, 2025, https://www.nknews.org/2022/09/kim-jong-un-says-he-will-never-give-up-nuclear-weapons-rejects-future-talks; "North Korea Tells UN: We Will Never Give Up Nuclear Program," Reuters, Sept. 29, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-tells-un-we-will-never-give-up-nuclear-program-2025-09-29.

8 "Address by His Excellency Lee Jae Myung, President of the Republic of Korea: General Debate, 80th Session of the UN General Assembly," Republic of Korea, Sept. 23, 2025, https://en.president.go.kr/president/statements-remarks/0D50qCKn.

how little in return. Pyongyang has a documented record of accepting concessions (aid, sanctions relief, diplomatic recognition, etc.) without delivering commensurate steps of its own, and any renewed engagement strategy will have to contend with the well-founded expectation that history could repeat itself.[9] Verification, in a state as closed as North Korea, remains a serious and largely unsolved problem.

But these are not reasons to dismiss engagement; they are reasons to design it carefully. Inducements that are reversible, tied to specific and verifiable steps, and implemented in phases carry far less risk than open-ended concessions offered in the hope of unlocking broader cooperation. The outcome-based failures of the Agreed Framework and the Six-Party Talks are frequently cited as evidence that engagement cannot work; they are better read as evidence of what happens when engagement is pursued without adequate verification, sequencing, or allied coordination. That may be a design failure, not necessarily proof that carrots are inherently unworkable.

“Inducements that are reversible, tied to specific and verifiable steps, and implemented in phases carry far less risk than open-ended concessions offered in the hope of unlocking broader cooperation.

The alliance-management risk deserves more attention before any North Korea policy gets pushed forward from either side. Seoul and Washington do not always share threat perceptions, domestic political timelines, or tolerance for risk, and a policy mismatch between the two allies can be as damaging as a mismatch between tools and objectives, undermining the coordination a calibrated inducement strategy depends on and giving Pyongyang room to play one ally off the other. President Lee’s domestic political incentives favor visible movement and progress in inter–Korean relations. Meanwhile, a Washington administration weighing a summit has different incentives, tied more to demonstrating a foreign policy win than to the specifics of inter–Korean dynamics. Any calibrated inducement strategy has to be negotiated between the allies as carefully as it is negotiated with Pyongyang. If not, the credibility of the alliance itself could suffer, weakening both deterrence and any future diplomatic effort that depends on Washington and Seoul speaking with one voice.

None of this means the United States and South Korea need to fully resolve their differences before acting or that friction itself is a failure to be avoided at all costs. Washington and Seoul have disagreed openly about Pyongyang policy before: Presidents George W. Bush and Roh Moo Hyun clashed for years over issues like sanctions and missile defense, but that friction did not prevent the Six-Party Talks from producing the most substantive multilateral agreement reached with North Korea to date.[10] Treating allied unanimity as a precondition for action may risk the opposite of caution: paralysis

9 “Negotiating North Korea’s Nukes: Backgrounder,” Institute for Security and Development Policy, updated June 20, 2019, https://www.isdp.eu/publication/negotiating-north-koreas-nukes; Jack Kim, “Factbox: History of Failed Nuclear Agreements with North Korea,” Reuters, Feb. 29, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE81S1PG.

10 David Stout, “Bush and Roh Play Down Differences on North Korea,” New York Times, June 11, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/11/world/americas/bush-and-roh-play-down-differences-on-north-korea.html.

in the name of consensus. Some degree of disagreement between allies with different threat perceptions and domestic constraints may be an inevitable feature of any renewed engagement, and one both governments should be prepared to accept as the price of testing whether engagement is possible at all, rather than a problem to be fully solved before engagement can begin.

Toward an Uncomfortable, Honest Conversation

North Korea may never reciprocate a generous offer. It may continue to reject engagement outright, as it has rejected humanitarian assistance for years. But three decades of relying primarily on pressure has also failed to achieve its most ambitious aim, and Pyongyang's arsenal is larger and more sophisticated for the effort. For the United States to continue a deterrence approach that has not worked, on the assumption that persistence alone will eventually change the outcome, is itself a gamble; one made more consequential by the fact that Washington's own strategy documents now seem uncertain about what is being bet on.

The "quiet" disappearance of denuclearization from the 2025 US National Security Strategy may prove to be nothing more than an oversight or a negotiating tactic ahead of a prospective meeting between Chairman Kim and President Donald Trump. But it may also be the first honest signal in years that the stated objective of US policy has quietly diverged from the objective actually being pursued. If so, the responsible course of action is not to restore the old language and change nothing else; it is to decide, deliberately and publicly, what a sustainable North Korea policy is meant to achieve, including, but not limited to, risk reduction, crisis stability, or managed coexistence, as much as disarmament, and to build a tool kit, combining pressure and inducement, capable of reaching that goal.

What would this look like in practice? Not a comprehensive settlement and not a repeat of the sequencing disputes (dismantlement or relief first) that contributed to the sinking of the Agreed Framework and the Singapore/Hanoi process. A more modest starting point would treat the current opening—Trump's stated willingness to meet Kim, Lee's END initiative, and Kim's own gesture toward "peaceful coexistence"—as a chance to test reciprocity on a small scale before either side commits to more. Bilaterally, that could mean a reversible easing of financial restrictions with a verifiable moratorium on missile and nuclear tests: an "unfreeze-for-freeze" arrangement narrower than any comprehensive deal, designed to be unwound if either side reneges.

On the inter–Korean track, the "exchange" pillar of the END framework could be operationalized immediately and independent of the "denuclearization" pillar that Pyongyang has already rejected. This would decouple family reunification, public health cooperation, and the reopening of humanitarian channels from the unification language that Pyongyang now treats as provocation. Washington and Seoul would need to agree in advance on a list of reciprocal actions, specifying which inducements are tied to which verifiable steps, so Pyongyang cannot pocket concessions without reciprocating. None of this requires resolving in advance whether the longer-term objective is renewed

denuclearization talks or managed coexistence; it requires only that Washington and Seoul test, relatively cheaply and reversibly, whether Pyongyang will reciprocate anything at all before either of the former stakes more on the answer.

This will not be a comfortable conversation in any way. Naming risk reduction or coexistence as a legitimate objective, alongside or in place of denuclearization, will draw accusations of accommodating a nuclear-armed dictatorship, and those accusations will not be entirely unfair. But the alternative—of continuing to state an objective the policy has not achieved in 30 years, while declining to say what, short of that objective, might actually be attainable—is not caution; it is a way of avoiding the argument rather than resolving it. Whether or not a Trump–Kim meeting materializes this year or next, Washington and Seoul must be prepared to ask a harder question than how to get Pyongyang to disarm. Namely, what is actually achievable, and what are the tools currently in use capable of achieving it? The challenge is not choosing between carrots and sticks; it is admitting that pressure alone was never going to produce North Korea's disarmament. The United States and South Korea should assemble a calibrated mix of tools suited to what is actually achievable—renewed talks, reduced risk, or a more stable, managed rivalry—rather than continuing to reach for those fit for a goal that the policy itself may no longer be pursuing.

"The United States and South Korea should assemble a calibrated mix of tools suited to what is actually achievable, rather than continuing to reach for those fit for a goal that the policy itself may no longer be pursuing.

CHAPTER 3

A Nuclear North Does Not Mean a Nuclear South

JENNY TOWN

North Korea's 2003 withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT, and its determined push to build a credible nuclear deterrent have often fueled concerns that other states might eventually do the same. Certainly, North Korea's efforts have been remarkably successful. What began as a small and uncertain nuclear capability has evolved into an increasingly sophisticated arsenal. North Korea is currently estimated to possess roughly 60 nuclear warheads, with the capacity to produce more.[1] It has developed an increasingly diverse array of nuclear-capable delivery systems spanning short, medium, intermediate, and intercontinental ranges, giving it options for both tactical nuclear use on the Korean Peninsula and strategic strikes against more distant targets, including the United States.

Whether North Korea truly intended to denuclearize during past negotiations is uncertain.[2] Since 2022, however, Pyongyang has declared it is no longer willing to give up its nuclear weapons or negotiate over their elimination; a position subsequently institutionalized in its laws and constitution.[3] Given this reality, a growing number of analysts have argued that denuclearization should no longer serve as the overriding objective of US policy. Instead, proposals increasingly emphasize risk reduction, arms control, and some form of "cold

1 *SIPRI Yearbook 2026: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), ch. 6. See also Hans Kristensen et al., "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, March 26, 2025, https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces.

2 "Why Will It Take at Least Ten Years for North Korea to Abandon Its Nuclear Program? Q&A with Dr. Siegfried Hecker," Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Dec. 19, 2018, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/why-will-it-take-least-ten-years-north-korea-abandon-its-nuclear-program-qa-dr-siegfried-hecker.

3 Kim Jong Un, "Policy Speech at the Seventh Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK," Sept. 8, 2022, via the Kim Il Sung–Kim Jong Il Foundation at https://kkfonline.com/2022/09/09/policy-speech-at-the-seventh-session-of-the-14th-supreme-peoples-assembly-of-the-democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea. See also "Law on DPRK's Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated," Korean Central News Agency, Sept. 9, 2022, via *Global Security* at https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2022/dprk-220909-kcna01.htm.

peace" or "stable coexistence" with a nuclear-armed North Korea.[4] Such approaches do not necessarily require formal recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, but they do require accepting the uncomfortable reality that North Korea will retain its nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future.

That said, the historical record suggests that a shift toward managing rather than eliminating North Korea's nuclear capabilities is unlikely, on its own, to trigger the proliferation cascade long feared. North Korea's success in building a credible nuclear deterrent may influence how other states assess their own security options, particularly those facing serious external threats. But after nearly two decades of living with a nuclear-armed North Korea, its example has yet to prove compelling enough for other NPT members to follow suit. Whether that changes will depend on a broader set of strategic, economic, and security considerations beyond how the international community ultimately chooses to deal with the reality of North Korea's nuclear achievements.

"After nearly two decades of living with a nuclear-armed North Korea, its example has yet to prove compelling enough for other NPT members to follow suit.

The Pressure Test

The NPT entered into force in March 1970. Among the member states, five countries—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China—were ultimately recognized under the treaty as nuclear-weapon states; a category limited to those that had manufactured and tested a nuclear explosive device before 1967. All others committed to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons while retaining the right to pursue peaceful uses of nuclear energy.[5] Over time, the NPT became the foundation of the global nonproliferation regime and one of the most widely accepted international agreements. More than 190 countries have joined the treaty to date, including many with the technological and industrial capacity to develop nuclear weapons. Yet North Korea remains the only country to have joined, withdrawn, and built a nuclear deterrent capability, challenging the resilience of the nonproliferation regime.

After all, the system was never universal. India, Pakistan, and Israel have remained outside the NPT and developed nuclear weapons on separate trajectories. Israel is widely believed to have crossed the nuclear threshold by the late 1960s, although it has maintained a long-standing policy of nuclear opacity. India conducted its first nuclear explosive test

4 Frank Aum and Ankit Panda, *Pursuing Stable Coexistence: A Reorientation of US Policy toward North Korea* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025), https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/pursuing-stable-coexistence-a-reorientation-of-us-policy-toward-north-korea; Victor Cha, "North Korea as It Is: The Case for a Cold Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-korea/north-korea-it-victor-cha.

5 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, July 1, 1968, 729 U.N.T.S. 161, arts. II, IV, IX. Under Article IX, the treaty defines a nuclear-weapon state as one that "manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967." France and China did not accede to the NPT until 1992. For text and details, see the page on the NPT at the United Nations Treaty Collection at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002801d56c5.

in 1974 and declared itself a nuclear weapons state following additional tests in 1998. Pakistan, whose weapons program developed largely in response to India's growing nuclear capabilities, conducted its own nuclear tests weeks later.[6]

That only nine states would possess sovereign nuclear weapons programs today was hardly assured when the nonproliferation regime was taking shape. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy warned that, without stronger efforts to prevent proliferation, a future US president could confront a world in which "15 or 20 or 25 nations" possess nuclear weapons.[7] Concerns about the continued spread of nuclear weapons helped drive international efforts to establish the NPT later that decade. More than half a century later, the proliferation cascade once feared has largely failed to materialize.

An Exorbitant Toll

North Korea is seeming proof that a determined state can withdraw from the NPT and successfully acquire a nuclear deterrent. That observation is correct but incomplete. The emphasis on North Korea's eventual success obscures the extraordinary toll it paid to achieve it.

Over three decades, increasingly restrictive sanctions were imposed on North Korea for its nuclear pursuits, culminating in one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes ever imposed on a single state.[8] Economic isolation, diplomatic estrangement, and the loss of access to international markets became defining features of its strategic choices. These costs further exacerbated an already weak socioeconomic system, compounding burdens on the North Korean people.[9]

As conventional avenues for trade, finance, and international commerce narrowed, North Korea increasingly relied on illicit activities—from counterfeiting to drug smuggling to cyber-enabled theft—to mitigate the impact of sanctions while forging ahead with its nuclear ambitions.[10] These adaptations helped generate revenue for the state, offsetting the economic losses of its deteriorating relations with the outside world. But they also deepened North Korea's political and economic isolation, reinforced its reputation as a persistent violator of international law, and elicited additional punitive measures. Even

6 George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Feroz H. Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2012); Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

7 "News Conference 52," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, March 21, 1963, https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-52.

8 Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., *North Korea: US Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation*, CRS Report R41259 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018). See also Dianne E. Rennack, *North Korea: Legislative Basis for US Sanctions*, CRS Report R41438 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023).

9 For discussions of some of these unintended humanitarian impacts, see UN Security Council, Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 1874 (2009), S/2024/215 (March 7, 2024), sec. VII, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041323.

10 For the first report on North Korea from the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, see UN Security Council, Letter Dated 29 May 2025, S/2025/340 (June 3, 2025), https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4083743.

after acquiring a credible nuclear deterrent, Pyongyang continues to manage chronic economic constraints, military pressures, and many of the burdens accumulated along the way.

Costs alone do not explain why North Korea remains an exception. Many governments have endured sanctions, military pressure, and economic hardship. However, few possess a political system capable of absorbing those pressures over decades while maintaining strategic continuity. North Korea's highly centralized political system, extensive coercive apparatus, and ability to suppress domestic opposition has allowed the Kim regime to sustain policies that would have proven extraordinarily difficult for most governments. Moreover, North Korea's integration into the international community, especially global financial systems, was already limited, creating low stakes for growing ostracization. These unique conditions gave it the ability to exercise options amid increasing constraints that most states would have found unbearable.

North Korea has also benefited from an external environment that affords it the time and space to persevere through hardships. South Korea, its principal strategic rival, has remained committed to resolving the nuclear issue through peaceful means and preventing another war on the Korean Peninsula. That commitment was tested during the 1994 nuclear crisis, when the Clinton administration considered military strikes against North Korea's nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. South Korean President Kim Young Sam strongly opposed the plan, warning that renewed conflict would inflict enormous casualties and devastate his country's economy. Successive governments in Seoul drew similar conclusions, rejecting military counterproliferation as an option despite Pyongyang's nuclear advancements.[11] This enabled North Korea to navigate its nuclear path at its own pace, however difficult, without the threat of armed counterproliferation faced by other would-be proliferators.

Pressure without Proliferation

If North Korea's nuclear status were likely to drive another state toward nuclear weapons, South Korea would be the most likely to follow suit. The Korean Peninsula remains the world's longest-running unresolved military confrontation, and the North and South remain strategic rivals with distinctly different political and socioeconomic systems. South Korea has built one of the world's most capable conventional militaries and continues to rely on the United States for extended nuclear deterrence. Yet it now confronts a North Korea with a growing and increasingly sophisticated nuclear arsenal capable of holding both South Korean territory and the US homeland at risk.

Not surprisingly, these developments have intensified South Korea's own nuclear debate. Then–President Yoon Suk Yeol publicly raised the possibility of developing nuclear weapons in 2023, while other prominent conservative politicians have called for an independent deterrent or for South Korea to develop the capability to build nuclear

11 Pyung Hwa Park and Uri Kidron, "Why North Korea Got the Bomb (And Iran Did Not, for Now)," *38 North*, June 22, 2026, https://www.38north.org/2026/06/why-north-korea-got-the-bomb-and-iran-did-not-for-now.

weapons quickly if necessary.[12] Moreover, public opinion in South Korea is becoming ever more acceptant of a nuclear future. In 2025, an Asan Institute survey found that 76.2 percent of South Koreans supported acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability, the highest level recorded since the institute began asking the question in 2010. By 2026, this support had reached 80.0 percent.[13] The pressure created by North Korea's advancing capabilities is real, and there is little reason to assume the debate will simply fade away.

But growing support for nuclear armament does not make it inevitable. After all, South Korea is not North Korea; it is a prosperous democracy deeply integrated into the international economy, dependent on global trade and technology flows, and embedded in an extensive network of security and economic partnerships. Choosing nuclear weapons would require Seoul to place considerably more at risk than Pyongyang did when it chose the nuclear path.

Some of those costs would be particularly acute for South Korea's nuclear energy sector. South Korea relies on nuclear power for roughly one-third of its electricity but depends on international cooperation for access to uranium, fabricated nuclear fuel, and other materials required to operate its reactor fleet. It has also spent decades developing one of the world's leading civilian nuclear industries and is seeking to expand its role as a global reactor supplier. Withdrawal from the NPT and pursuit of nuclear weapons could jeopardize those relationships, disrupt nuclear fuel supplies, and undermine the international confidence that its nuclear export ambitions depend on.[14]

But consequences would extend well beyond the nuclear industry. An independent weapons program could expose South Korea to international sanctions, restrictions on technology and defense cooperation, and potentially profound changes in its relationship with the United States. For an export-oriented economy deeply integrated into global supply chains and defense industry cooperation, those risks would be difficult to dismiss. Public support may also shift if the government moves from an abstract ambition to implementation. Survey data suggests that South Korean support for nuclear armament declines when respondents are confronted with concrete potential consequences, particularly prolonged economic sanctions, changes to the alliance with the United States, and the possible withdrawal of US forces.[15] Moreover, the siting of sensitive defense and nuclear facilities has often faced formidable pushback from the South Korean public, with prolonged protests against the placement of such assets as the terminal high-altitude area defense, or THAAD, battery as well as radioactive waste and spent fuel storage

12 See Kim Seung-yeon, "Deepening Russia–NK Ties Reignite Debate over S. Korea's Nuclear Options," Yonhap News Agency, June 26, 2024, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240626005000315.

13 *South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025* (Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2025), 18; *South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2026* (Seoul: Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2026), 17.

14 "Power Reactor Information System (PRIS): Korea, Republic of," International Atomic Energy Agency, https://pris-stats.iaea.org/country-statistics/KR.

15 *South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025*, Asan.

facilities.[16] Siting facilities associated with an indigenous nuclear weapons program would likely prove even more contentious, considering the heightened security risks, political sensitivity, and potential for surrounding communities to become targets in a conflict.

Given the considerable costs of nuclearization, Seoul has so far chosen to stay within the NPT regime. But as North Korea's nuclear threat grows, so do South Korea's demands for stronger assurances from the United States. The signing of the April 2023 Washington Declaration, for instance, reflected both heightened South Korean demands for deeper nuclear cooperation and a US willingness to respond. It established a bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group in order to give Seoul more insight into Washington's nuclear and strategic planning and called for greater information sharing, joint planning for South Korean conventional support to US nuclear operations, expanded exercises and simulations, and more visible deployments of US strategic assets to and around the Korean Peninsula.[17] Notably, these initiatives were paired with an explicit reaffirmation of South Korea's commitment to the NPT and continued reliance on the US nuclear deterrent.

Bilateral nuclear cooperation has continued to grow since then, expanding work on conventional-nuclear integration, nuclear contingency planning, training and exercises, crisis consultations, and information sharing.[18] Yet South Korea seeks arrangements that go further still, including increasing calls for a nuclear sharing agreement in the style of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.[19]

South Korea's choices demonstrate that, while North Korea's nuclear status is consequential, Seoul still has agency in how it responds. Despite the temptation to follow North Korea's nuclear path, South Korea continues to weigh the costs of nuclearization against the benefits of remaining within the nonproliferation regime and the security assurances available without an independent deterrent. To date, Seoul has chosen to deepen alliance cooperation rather than abandon the NPT. That balance is not absolute, but the case for remaining nonnuclear has so far remained compelling.

16 See "Seongju Residents Hold Rally in Seoul to Oppose THAAD Deployment," Yonhap News Agency, July 21, 2016, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160721005300315; Soo-Jang Lee, "고준위 방폐장 입지 선정의 공론화 기초 연구" ["Laying the Siting of High-Level Radioactive Waste in Public Opinion"], *Journal of Environmental Policy* 7, no. 4 (2008): 105–34, https://doi.org/10.17330/joep.7.4.200812.105.

17 "Korea, US Adopt Joint Declaration, Form Nuclear Consultative Group," Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 26, 2023, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=320808.

18 "56th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique," US Department of Defense, Oct. 30, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3951794; "The United States of America–Republic of Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG)," US Department of State, Jan. 10, 2025, https://2021-2025.state.gov/office-of-the-spokesperson/releases/2025/01/the-united-states-of-america-republic-of-korea-nuclear-consultative-group-ncg.

19 Chung Mong Joon, "Welcoming Remarks at the Asan Plenum 2026," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, April 8, 2026, https://www.asaninst.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=plenum_s4_1&wr_id=41&syear=2026; Victor Cha, Choi Kang, and Katrin Fraser Katz, *The United States–Republic of Korea Alliance: Strengthening Extended Nuclear Deterrence in a Shifting Strategic Landscape* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026); *South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2026*, Asan, 20.

Conclusion

North Korea has demonstrated that the NPT is not infallible, yet it remains the only state to have withdrawn from the treaty to pursue nuclear weapons. Its increasingly capable nuclear deterrent has been a reality for nearly two decades and is unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future. Adopting policies that more accurately reflect the situation would be politically uncomfortable for the United States and South Korea, but there is little reason to assume that acknowledgment alone would produce the proliferation cascade long feared from accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea.

South Korea provides perhaps the strongest evidence. North Korea's expanding capabilities have unquestionably intensified the nuclear debate in Seoul, but they have not made South Korean nuclearization inevitable. Seoul's choices remain shaped by the considerable economic, political, and diplomatic costs of acquiring nuclear weapons, the benefits it derives from the existing nonproliferation regime, and the security alternatives available through its alliance with the United States. North Korea's experience therefore matters, but it is only one variable in a much broader calculation. How the international community describes or deals with Pyongyang's nuclear status is unlikely to fundamentally change that equation.

“There is little reason to assume that nuclear acknowledgment alone would produce the proliferation cascade long feared from accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea.

That does not mean, however, that the possibility of future proliferation can be dismissed. How states like South Korea assess their security alternatives will help determine what costs they are willing to bear to acquire nuclear weapons. Should US nuclear extended deterrence commitments weaken or confidence in US alliance commitments erode more broadly, South Korea's nuclear calculus could change. Living with a nuclear North Korea may not unravel the nonproliferation regime. However, confronting a nuclear North Korea without the credible security assurances that have enabled states to remain nonnuclear presents a considerably more difficult test.

CHAPTER 4

Beyond the Unification Dream: Navigating Coexistence and New Paths for Peace

SANGSIN LEE

Peace on the Korean Peninsula is not merely an issue confined to Northeast Asia; it profoundly impacts the entire world. Consider, for instance, the following counterfactual: Had Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un reached an agreement in Hanoi in 2019, what kind of world would we be living in today? Would North Korea and Russia still have formed a de facto alliance, and would North Korean troops be fighting in Ukraine?

Instead, we live in a world shaped by the aftermath of the failed Hanoi Summit. The fallout of that failure has culminated in North Korea's explicit rejection of unification. This March, North Korea amended its constitution to make it unequivocally clear that unification is no longer a national goal.[1] This is a monumental shift that shakes the very foundation of inter–Korean relations. Ever since separate governments were established in South and North Korea in 1948, both sides, regardless of how much their methods and intentions differed, had shared a consensus on a single principle: The South and the North must unify to restore the "national community" (*minjok gongdongche*) that existed prior to the division. Yet, the repercussions of the Hanoi Summit's failure are now destroying even this foundational principle of unification.

What is surprising, however, is that this radical shift in North Korea's stance is not having a particularly significant impact on public opinion in South Korea. No one appears to be in a state of major shock. The South's Lee Jae Myung administration is calmly pursuing a policy of peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula. Public sentiment toward North Korea has not undergone any drastic changes either. This lack of volatility stems from the fact that Northern leader Kim Jong Un's proposition of "two independent sovereign states on the Korean Peninsula" has long been psychologically accepted by the South

1 Yonhap News Agency, "N. Korea Removes 'Unification' Reference from Constitution," *Korea Herald*, May 6, 2026, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10732099.

Korean public. While South Koreans do not oppose unification, there is a consensus that unification is a means rather than an end and that what matters in the short term is maintaining peace and strengthening cooperation between South and North Korea without military conflict. Ultimately, this attitude leads to the fundamental question: What should unification be? This is a question of national identity; specifically, a debate over whether the definitions of the state and unification stipulated in the constitutions of South and North Korea ought to be revised.

Two States, Two Constitutions, and Two Koreas

In a Dec. 2023 speech that served as the catalyst for the "two hostile states" policy, Chairman Kim argued that South Korea views North Korea and its people as "territory and population … to be reclaimed," explicitly citing the territorial clause of the constitution of South Korea as evidence. He further criticized successive South Korean administrations, liberal and conservative alike, for pursuing regime "collapse" and "unification by absorption," declaring that inter–Korean relations are no longer a consanguineous relationship but have hardened into a relationship between two hostile states and belligerents.[2]

Furthermore, employing typical North Korean hyperbolic rhetoric, Kim concluded:

> The puppet forces' sinister ambition to destroy our social system and regime has remained unchanged even a bit whether they advocated "democracy" or disguised themselves as "conservatism." …The general conclusion drawn by our Party, looking back upon the long-standing North–South relations is that reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities that defined "unification by absorption" and "unification under liberal democracy" as their state policy, which is in sharp distinction with our line of national reunification based on one nation and one state with two systems.[3]

Here, Kim was already referencing South Korea's official name—ROK, short for Republic of Korea—implicitly recognizing the South as an independent state and not as territory to be reincorporated into the North.

South Korea's perceived intention of "unification by absorption" through regime change in the North, as Kim pointed out, refers to Articles 3 and 4 of the South Korean constitution. The former article, last revised in 1987, defines South Korea's territory, while the latter mandates unification as a national goal and duty. However, legal, political, and academic debates have persisted for decades over whether these clauses inherently imply "unification by absorption" predicated on the collapse of the North Korean regime.

Article 3 stipulates that "[t]he territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands," thereby explicitly defining the North Korean region

2 Quoted in "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee," *Rodong Sinmun*, Dec. 31, 2023, available via KCNA Watch at https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1704027054-512008976/report-on-9th-enlarged-plenum-of-8th-wpk-central-committee.

3 "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum," *Rodong Sinmun*.

as eventual ROK territory. Meanwhile, Article 4 states that "[t]he Republic of Korea shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the basic free and democratic order," clearly identifying the political and ideological orientation of a unified state.[4]

The combination of these two articles has sparked serious debates over the "unification by absorption" framework within South Korean legal academia and political circles for decades. According to a strict legalistic interpretation, under Article 3, the North Korean regime is merely an anti-state organization unlawfully occupying a portion of ROK territory; consequently, unification becomes a process of reclaiming lost territory. Moreover, because the "peaceful unification [will be] based on the basic free and democratic order," Article 4 ultimately excludes North Korea's socialist system and demands incorporation into the South's capitalist and democratic system. It can thus be interpreted as practically prescribing South Korean–led unification by absorption as a constitutional mandate.

Of course, counterarguments exist. Critics argue that Articles 3 and 4 do not necessarily mandate unification by absorption.[5] Nevertheless, given that the constitutional framework fundamentally refuses to recognize North Korea as an equal state entity, it is undeniable that an inherent contradiction and tension have existed between actual policies toward North Korea, which pursue mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, and constitutional norms.

North Korea has thus weaponized the unification discourse of the South Korean constitution as a rationale for a fundamental shift in its policy toward the South. The core of this strategic pivot lies in the North Korean leadership's perception that both progressive and conservative governments in South Korea are ultimately plotting regime change in the North. Also, North Korea has regarded "unification based on the basic free and democratic order," as stipulated in Article 4, as a direct threat to the survival of its own regime. Accordingly, it has officially abandoned national unification as a state objective, designated South Korea as the "principal enemy," and taken the hard-line measure of establishing a new territorial clause in its own constitution.

Following Kim's Dec. 2023 speech, North Korea swiftly moved to institutionalize the two hostile states policy. All North Korean government organizations related to economic cooperation or diplomatic negotiations with South Korea were either abolished or reorganized, and even the achievements of Kim's predecessors, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, regarding inter–Korean dialogue have begun being erased from the record.[6] As the final

4 Constitution of the Republic of Korea, amended Oct. 29, 1987, art. III–IV, available via the Korea Legislation Research Institute at https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=1&lang=ENG.

5 Ji Sung Ryu, "북한의 '적대적 2국가론'에 대한 헌법적 평가" ["A constitutional assessment of North Korea's 'hostile two-state theory'"], *Law Journal* 93 (2026): 37–74.

6 Associated Press, "North Korea Scraps Agencies Managing Relations with South as Kim Jong Un Cites Hostility with Rival," *PBS*, Jan. 16, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/north-korea-scraps-agencies-managing-relations-with-south-as-kim-jong-un-cites-hostility-with-rival; Brad Lendon and Gawon Bae, "North Korea's Kim Vows to Dismantle Father's Unification Arch as He Declares South Korea 'Principal Enemy'," CNN, Jan. 16, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/asia/north-korea-kim-unification-arch-intl-hnk/index.html.

stage of these efforts, North Korea amended its constitution this March. Although the new constitution has yet to be published, due to North Korea's infamous opacity, the South Korean government acquired it in May and announced its contents. It was confirmed that the new constitution fundamentally discards inter–Korean relations—which were previously framed as a provisional, special relationship within one nation aiming for unification—and legally solidifies the two hostile states policy, defining South Korea as a completely separate, foreign, and adversarial country sharing a border.[7]

This transformation of the North Korean constitution reflects the strategic intention of the Northern leadership to abandon the past ideological necessity of unification and pursue a complete severance from South Korea in order to ensure regime survival and secure diplomatic autonomy. The specific articles in the revised Northern constitution that redefine relations with South Korea, and their core changes, are as follows.

First, prior to the revision, the North Korean constitution contained no clauses regarding territory.[8] However, Article 2 of the revised constitution explicitly designates South Korea as a foreign country and delineates its physical borders. Using North Korea's official name, this article states: "[t]he territory of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea consists of the land, territorial waters, and airspace defined on the basis of territory bordering the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation to the north, and the Republic of Korea to the south."[9]

In this article, as with Kim's Dec. 2023 speech, it is significant that South Korea is referred to by its official name and is clearly defined as a neighboring and separate country. This completely discards the once prevailing perspective that regarded the entire Korean Peninsula as a single territory or viewed the South and the North as partners to be eventually integrated. Instead, through a legal and physical re-bordering, it writes the reality that the two Koreas are separate states into the constitution itself. Furthermore, the latter part of the article states, "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea shall never permit any encroachment upon its territory," implicitly revealing a perception that guards against South Korea as a hostile state subject to constant border disputes and military confrontation.[10]

Second, the new North Korean constitution completely removed core clauses related to "national reunification" and the "nation" (*minjok*), which had outlined the goals of past inter–Korean relations. For example, Article 9 of the pre-revision constitution set unification as a state mission, stating: "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea shall

7 Ha Chae-lim and Kwon Su-hyun, "'남으로 韓과 접해'…北, 영토조항 신설·통일삭제 '2국가' 개헌(종합)" ['Bordering the ROK to the South': North Korea adds a territorial clause and deletes unification in a 'two-state' constitutional amendment"], Yonhap News Agency, May 6, 2026, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260506093751504.

8 For text of the 2019 North Korean constitution, see "DPRK Constitution (2019)," via the National Committee on North Korea at https://ncnk.org/resources/publications/dprk-constitution-2019.pdf/file_view.

9 "DPRK Constitution 2026," art. II, via North Korea Leadership Watch at https://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/dprk-constitution-2026. This is an unofficial version, as North Korea has not published the official document. For more on the South Korean government's release of the text, see "N. Korea's Revised Constitution Defines Territory," *Korea Times*.

10 "DPRK Constitution (2019)," art. II.

strive to complete the victory of socialism in the north half of Korea … and reunify the country on the principles of independence, peaceful reunification, and great national unity."[11] However, in the revised constitution, the relevant clause was moved to the preamble, and the phrases that had been the foundation of inter–Korean unification discourse since the July 4 Joint Communiqué of 1972—"north half" and "to reunify the country based on the principle of independence, peaceful reunification, and great national unity"—were all excised from the text.

Coupled with the territorial clause in Article 2, the deletion of the phrase "north half" is interpreted as North Korea's intention to define itself no longer as an incomplete unified state or the northern half of the Korean Peninsula but as a complete and independent sovereign state system in its own right. Moreover, erasing the principles of national unification from the constitution is a measure that legally finalizes Chairman Kim 's two hostile states policy, officially discarding shared ethnic consciousness and nationalistic unification from state goals, and no longer regarding reconciliation, cooperation, or unification with the South as an ideal.

> **"North Korea has defined South Korea as a disparate and hostile foreign country that can never unite with it.**

In conclusion, the revised North Korean constitution completely negates, at a constitutional level, the framework of the 1991 Inter–Korean Basic Agreement, which viewed the South and the North as having a provisional, special relationship aiming for unification.[12] It can be concluded that North Korea, through its revised constitution, has defined South Korea as a disparate and hostile foreign country that can never unite with it. Based on this, the structural framework to legitimize North Korea's severance from the South and its military/security threats has been completed.

Not Very Impressed

North Korea's two hostile states policy, however, has failed to deal a significant shock to South Korea. Since Kim's Dec. 2023 speech, South Korea has held three national elections. These included the National Assembly elections of 2024, the presidential election in 2025, and local elections this year. Yet, in none of these elections did the two hostile states policy emerge as a major campaign issue. Furthermore, since 2014, the Korea Institute for National Unification, or KINU, has conducted the KINU Unification Survey, an annual poll designed to measure South Koreans' attitudes toward unification and North Korea. When KINU asked respondents in 2025 how interested they were in the two hostile states policy, 42.4 percent responded that they were not interested—4.9 percent "not at all interested"

11 "DPRK Constitution (2019)," art. IX.

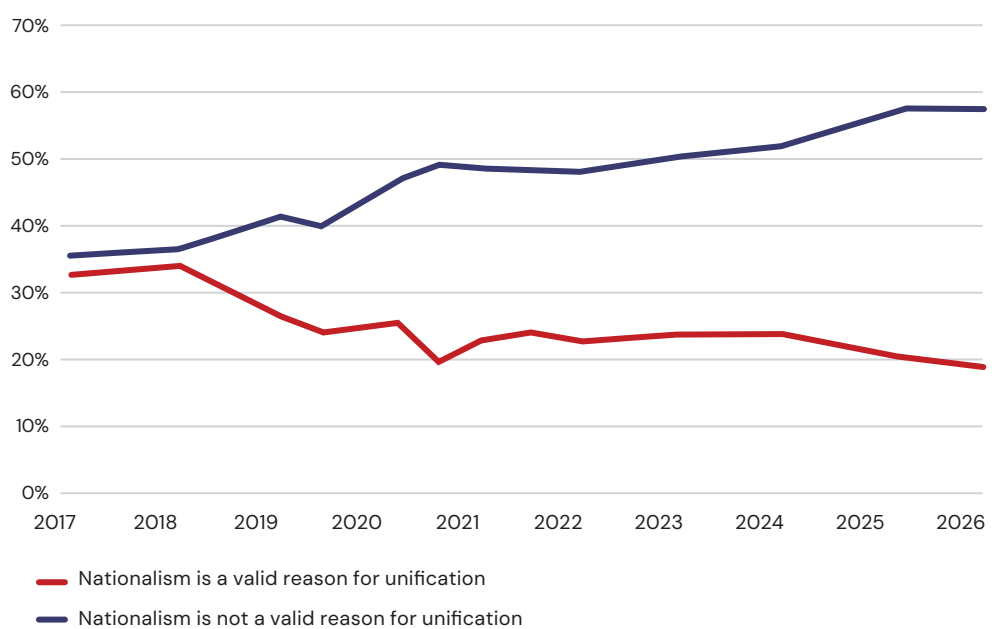
12 "Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between South and North Korea," CD/1147 (Dec. 13, 1991), https://docs.un.org/en/cd/1147.

and 37.5 percent "not very interested"—while 14.6 percent answered that they had never heard of it.[13]

The underlying reason for this indifference among South Koreans is that Kim's sudden declaration was merely a confirmation of a reality that they had already tacitly agreed to. A majority of South Koreans already believed that unification was either unnecessary or, at the very least, that pursuing it based on nationalism was outdated.

Since 2017, the KINU Unification Survey has included the statement "Just because North and South Koreans are one people does not mean they must form one country" and asked respondents if they agree or disagree in order to gauge attitudes toward nationalistic unification. As can be tracked in Figure 1, the responses clearly demonstrate that South Koreans' attitudes toward unification have been undergoing a fundamental transformation. In this year's survey, 57.5 percent of respondents believed that nationalism is not a valid reason for unification. Conversely, those who still hold a traditional view of unification rooted in nationalism accounted for a mere 18.8 percent.[14]

FIGURE 1. ATTITUDES TOWARD NATIONALISTIC UNIFICATION (%)

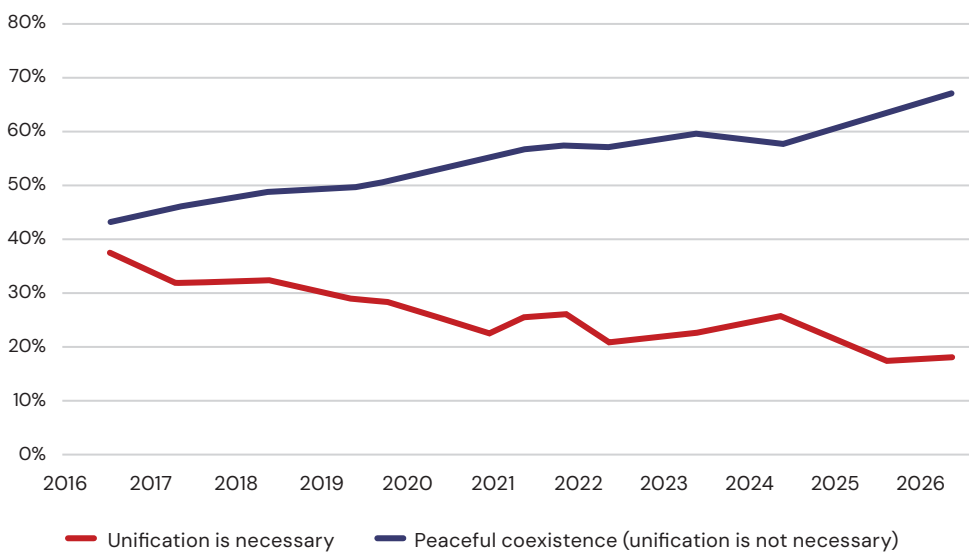


13 Author's calculations from the *KINU Unification Survey 2025*, fielded July 2025 through face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 South Korean adults aged 18 and over (margin of error ±3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level).

14 Author's calculations.

South Koreans are also raising profound questions about the necessity of unification itself. According to this year's survey, only 48.2 percent of respondents stated that unification is necessary.[15] This represents the lowest figure recorded since the survey was created in 2014. Moreover, when accounting for potential acquiescence and social desirability biases, even this figure is almost certainly inflated. For comparison, the survey also asks respondents if they agreed with the statement "If South and North can peacefully coexist without war, unification is not necessary," and, this year, those who disagreed (i.e., those who firmly believe that unification remains absolutely essential) were a mere 17.9 percent. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of all respondents now agree with the proposition that unification is not necessary, which, within the traditional sociopolitical context of South Korea, has long been regarded as quite radical.

FIGURE 2. UNIFICATION VS. PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE (%)



These empirical findings reveal a rather uncomfortable truth regarding the changing attitudes toward unification in South Korea: A clear majority of South Koreans do not desire unification or, at the very least, they do not desire a unification predicated on ethnic nationalism. To be sure, generational cleavages persist. Older cohorts exhibit higher rates of endorsement for both nationalistic unification and the general necessity of unifying the peninsula. Conversely, younger South Koreans overwhelmingly tend to

15 *KINU Unification Survey 2026*, fielded in April through face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,003 South Korean adults aged 18 and over, sampled by quota on sex, age, and region. This survey has not yet been released as a published report; all figures from this year cited in this essay are the author's calculations from the survey data.

> **The South Korean public increasingly views the traditional model of unification, firmly rooted in ethnic nationalism, as having entirely outlived its utility.**

view unification as an impossible dream and, furthermore, an unnecessary one.[16]

Crucially, however, this generational gap is not as wide as conventionally assumed. Even among South Koreans in their 60s and older, the proportion of those skeptical of unification has become predominant.[17] Furthermore, there is virtually no statistically significant difference between progressive and conservative South Koreans on this issue.[18] In conclusion, contrary to conventional wisdom, the South Korean public increasingly views the traditional model of unification, firmly rooted in ethnic nationalism, as having entirely outlived its utility.

Conclusion: Beyond the Unification Dream

North Korea's radical policy shift, the structural constraints of the South Korean constitution, and the cooling attitude of the South Korean public toward unification collectively leave the South Korean government with few options. Under these circumstances, in order to dispel North Korea's anxieties regarding unification by absorption, the Lee administration has presented its "Policy of Peaceful Coexistence on the Korean Peninsula," which is predicated on three core principles: "respect for the North Korean regime, non-pursuit of any form of unification by absorption, and the cessation of hostile acts." This represents a pivot toward a pragmatic realism that temporarily suspends the outdated imperative of a single-state unification model and recognizes the reality of the two existing states.

In this year's annual white paper by South Korea's Ministry of Unification, the concept of "two peaceful states aiming for unification" was proposed to counter North Korea's two hostile states policy. This aims to "alleviate the distrust and sense of threat felt by North Korea through the mitigation of inter–Korean tensions and to institutionalize peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula by transforming 'hostility' into 'peace.'"[19]

16 In this year's survey, the share saying unification is necessary rises steadily with age: 32.2 percent among respondents aged 18–29, 39.7 percent among those in their thirties, 42.9 percent in their forties, 51.5 percent in their fifties, and 59.4 percent among those aged 60 and over. The nationalism item follows the same pattern: The share rejecting the proposition that being one people does not require forming one country—that is, those retaining a nationalist rationale for unification—runs from 8.1 percent among respondents aged 18–29 to 25.1 percent among those aged 60 and over.

17 Among respondents aged 60 and over in this year's survey, 62.6 percent agreed that unification is unnecessary, provided that the two Koreas can coexist peacefully without war, against 23.4 percent who disagreed; 54.4 percent rejected ethnic nationalism as a rationale for unification, against 25.1 percent who endorsed it.

18 In this year's survey, none of the progressive/conservative differences reaches conventional levels of statistical significance: unification is necessary, 47.1 versus 53.3 percent ($\chi^2 = 2.10$, $p = .147$); rejection of nationalistic unification, 54.7 versus 54.7 percent ($\chi^2 = 0.00$, $p = 1.000$); peaceful coexistence rather than unification, 66.5 versus 64.7 percent ($\chi^2 = 0.14$, $p = .707$). N = 331 progressives and 289 conservatives.

19 *White Paper on Korean Unification* (Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2026), 22, https://unikorea.go.kr/ebook/whitepaper/white_2026/index.html#p=1.

In other words, while affirming the realistic limitation that the South and the North exist as two de facto states, this approach can be interpreted as managing this reality, not as a permanent division but as a transitional, provisional system to achieve peaceful coexistence and long-term integration.

However, as long as Articles 3 and 4 of the South Korean constitution are interpreted as aiming for the collapse of North Korea and unification by absorption, Pyongyang will continue to regard any proposal for peaceful coexistence or effort toward exchange and cooperation by Seoul as a deceptive tactic.

Consequently, the South Korean government and public must make a decision on whether it is necessary to revise the official consensus regarding what unification is and why it is needed. Currently, unification is a fundamentally retrospective concept in South Korea, aimed at restoring the pre-division status of 1945. Today, virtually no one remains who actually remembers the pre-division era of 81 years ago. Moreover, the younger generation, in particular, is highly negative about the costs that South Korea would have to bear to achieve that restoration.

“The South Korean government and public must make a decision on whether it is necessary to revise the official consensus regarding what unification is and why it is needed.

The South Korean constitution is the very obstacle preventing alternative perspectives on unification, embraced long ago by the country’s public opinion, from manifesting into policy changes and evolving in a fresh, progressive direction. A constitution is not absolute truth but, rather, a modifiable national consensus. The current South Korean constitution, which has remained unchanged since 1987, has long been criticized for various limitations, and public consensus on the necessity of a constitutional amendment has already formed. Almost every president who has taken office in the 21st century has pledged to revise it. Most recently, this May, South Korea’s ruling Democratic Party attempted to pass a constitutional amendment bill through the National Assembly but failed due to opposition from the minority People Power Party.[20]

Even if South Korea undertakes constitutional revision, amending the core clauses related to unification is highly likely to provoke tremendous backlash from conservative forces in society, especially in the opposition party. Nevertheless, South Korea cannot evade this issue, and the government must engage in a serious dialogue with its citizens regarding the concepts of unification and the nation.

20 Wonju Yi, “Ruling Party Fails to Push Through Constitutional Amendment Bill Amid Opposition Boycott,” Yonhap News Agency, May 8, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260508007451315.

PART II

Creating a More Inclusive Security Environment in Northeast Asia

CHAPTER 5

Reviving Regional Diplomacy for Korean Peace

JOHN DELURY

For almost half a century, Northeast Asian states have quietly achieved something extraordinary: They have avoided going to war; a phenomenon scholars label "the East Asia Peace."[1] And yet, the absence of large-scale armed conflict has not given rise to regional security community-building, institution-building, or official dialogue. Northeast Asia lacks a dialogue mechanism like the Conference on Security Co-operation in Europe, or CSCE, was for Cold War Europe, let alone an intergovernmental institution like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, or a supranational confederation like the European Union. Instead, hard deterrence, backed by hostile alliances, keeps a tenuous peace.[2]

"Accepting the reality of North Korean nuclear weapons and dropping rhetorical insistence on complete denuclearization open up possibilities for Northeast Asian regional security dialogue that would mitigate the mounting risks to the tenuous East Asia Peace.

In the absence of concerted diplomacy, the East Asia Peace is coming under severe strain, and the unrealistic obsession with denuclearizing North Korea has become an obstacle to establishing necessary dialogue channels. The Korean Peninsula remains a dangerous fault line at the heart of Northeast Asia that could erupt in conflict with little warning. North Korea is now an advanced nuclear-armed state, and its regime is crystal clear that its nuclear weapons are not up for discussion. Meanwhile, Chairman Kim Jong Un has plunged his country into a comprehensive military alliance with Russia, supporting President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine with arms and men. By insisting on complete denuclearization, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo only succeed in making dialogue with Pyongyang impossible.

1 Stein Tønnesson, Explaining the East Asia Peace: A Research Story (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017). See also Van Jackson, Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace (New Haven: Yale, 2023).

2 Moon Chung-in, "There's More to Security than Deterrence," Hankyoreh, Feb. 20, 2024, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1129096.html.

Accepting the reality of North Korean nuclear weapons and dropping rhetorical insistence on complete denuclearization open up possibilities for Northeast Asian regional security dialogue that would mitigate the mounting risks to the tenuous East Asia Peace. Regional dialogue would not make tensions stemming from great power competition, territorial disputes, and historical grievances magically disappear. But institutionalized dialogue among diplomats from across Northeast Asia would increase the odds of sustaining peace and stability in the region, and moving beyond North Korean denuclearization could help pave the way for that sort of regional security community-building.

Learning from the Failure to Denuclearize North Korea

Ironically, it was the North Korean nuclear issue that gave rise to Northeast Asia's previous effort at regional security dialogue, known as the Six-Party Talks. The failures of that process yield useful lessons for a renewed attempt now.

Launched by Beijing in 2003, as the second North Korean nuclear crisis erupted, the Six-Party Talks brought together senior envoys from China, the United States, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea.[3] During years of on-again, off-again negotiations aimed at North Korean denuclearization, the parties agreed to form a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Working Group, with Russia as chair. But, like a lifeboat chained to a sinking ship, regional dialogue was doomed by linkage to the specific objective of Pyongyang surrendering its nuclear program. When the Six-Party Talks' progress toward denuclearization floundered, the possibility for regional dialogue evaporated with it.[4]

As Kim orchestrated a sprint toward full-spectrum nuclear deterrence from 2015 onward, Beijing's calls for a return to the Six-Party Talks fell on deaf ears. The last serious push for reviving the talks came when Beijing, joined by Moscow, urged de-escalation of US–North Korea tensions, which reached a boiling point in 2017. The Chinese and Russian foreign ministers jointly proposed "double freezing and parallel advancement": suspending nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM, tests and US–South Korea joint military exercises so as to enable parallel negotiations on peace and denuclearization in line with the Sept. 19 joint statement on the Six-Party Talks.[5]

The breakthrough summitry of Chairman Kim and US President Donald Trump in 2018, in fact, initially resembled the Sino–Russian double freeze concept. Kim unilaterally imposed

3 The second nuclear crisis refers to the diplomatic breakdown of the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea, which came into full view when Pyongyang resumed activities at the Yongbyon nuclear plant, expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, and withdrew from the Treaty on Nuclear Nonproliferation, or NPT. For more on North Korea's nuclear breakout and the failure of US diplomacy, see Mike Chinoy, Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

4 On the Six-Party Talks, see Yoichi Funabashi, The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Nuclear Crisis (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

5 "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems," Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 4, 2017, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549360; "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing, September 19, 2005," US Department of State, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm.

a moratorium on nuclear and ICBM testing that April before the Panmunjom meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in; Trump abruptly announced the suspension of US–South Korea military exercises in June immediately after his Singapore summit with Kim.[6] But the progress toward denuclearization at that moment was predicated on parallel bilateral efforts, rather than an integrated regional initiative. The collapse of the tripartite US–North Korea–South Korea diplomacy after the Trump–Kim summit in Hanoi was the nail in the coffin of the Six-Party Talks.[7] Afterward, Beijing stopped calling for their resumption. In the last couple of years, Beijing has stopped mentioning denuclearization.

Establishing a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Dialogue

At this stage, a full two decades after North Korea's first nuclear test, accepting the reality of the country's nuclear-armed status makes it possible to reimagine the Six-Party Talks' ephemeral working group. Shorn of the unattainable goal of denuclearization, the original idea can be reformulated as a more durable institutional design: a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Dialogue, or NAPSD.

In anticipating the impact of a Northeast Asian dialogue mechanism, it is important to keep in mind that talking itself is the point. Defining success in terms of concrete deliverables would be misguided. Indeed, that is a key lesson of the failure of the Six-Party Talks, which were hostage to the deliverable of North Korea giving up bits and pieces of its nuclear program. Instead of generating lists of deliverables, an NAPSD would operate at a more structural and foundational level, creating opportunities for enhanced "intersubjective knowledge" among Northeast Asia's diplomats.[8]

By developing a shared definition of the security issues facing the region and nurturing diplomatic relationships across borders, an NAPSD can reduce the risk of miscalculation and widen the space for mitigating conflicts and resolving disputes. Such a regular forum would give diplomats a chance to float trial balloons, testing possibilities made possible by repeated engagement. The value of an NAPSD would be palpable in terms of crisis management, as dialogue relationships and channels could be used in moments of crisis. Michael Swaine's point about the need for "crisis management infrastructure" in the context of US–China relations can be applied in the regional context of Northeast Asia.[9] An NAPSD is a critical piece of that "infrastructure." Over time, an NAPSD could build a

6 "Press Conference by President Trump," The White House, June 12, 2018, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/press-conference-president-trump.

7 For a meticulous reconstruction of Trump's diplomacy with Kim during the former's first term, see Joel S. Wit, Fallout: The Inside Story of America's Failure to Disarm North Korea (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025).

8 On the importance of intersubjective understandings, see Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," International Organization 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 391–425, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764.

9 Michael D. Swaine, "Avoiding the Abyss: An Urgent Need for Sino–US Crisis Management," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Sept. 27, 2024, https://quincyinst.org/research/avoiding-the-abyss-an-urgent-need-for-sino-u-s-crisis-management.

sense of shared investment in sustaining the East Asia Peace and a platform for the region to speak as one.

The core parties of an NAPSD should be the five United Nations member states physically located primarily in Northeast Asia: China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, and South Korea.[10] These five would take turns hosting annual ministerial dialogues, with schedules of agenda-setting preparatory meetings and follow-up implementation meetings at appropriate levels. Regional associations with geographical proximity or economic ties to Northeast Asia—such as ASEAN, the European Union, and the Pacific Islands Forum—can regularly participate as dialogue partners. Participants from other regional associations, intergovernmental organizations, and individual countries can be invited at the host nation's initiative. The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs can be engaged to play an auxiliary role to facilitate meeting planning in a neutral and constructive manner.

Northeast Asia's adjacent great powers, Russia and the United States, should be invited automatically to all dialogues based on the principle of security proximity. As defense treaty allies of core states that station military personnel on land and traverse the seas and skies of Northeast Asia, the United States and Russia could enjoy the status of full dialogue participants; more than observers but less than hosts.

The inclusive membership of an NAPSD takes inspiration from the CSCE, a European initiative designed to bridge the dangerous Cold War divide between East and West.[11] As a regional forum, the CSCE successfully brought opposing sides of the Iron Curtain together and helped lay the foundations for European integration, eventually transitioning into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE, in 1995. By including the rival superpowers, the CSCE created a third-pole platform for American and Russian competition that centered around European values, interests, and priorities.[12]

Similarly, the principal objective of an NAPSD would be to socialize the great powers in a space dedicated to building habits of understanding and cooperation across Northeast Asia. Including the United States and Russia—and China, for that matter—would compel the great powers to present their case in a common space, making it harder for them to dictate hegemonic terms to smaller and middle powers as in a one-to-one format.

An NAPSD can build on existing dialogue mechanisms at the track 1 (intergovernmental/formal), track 1.5 (semiformal), and track 2 (informal) levels. ASEAN has led the way by establishing the Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and Political Security Community and has demonstrated the value of forging shared norms (the ASEAN Way) and regular dialogue at the regional level. Successive South Korean governments have sought to

10 There may be skepticism toward the inclusion of Mongolia, given the asymmetry in its national wealth and power as compared with the other four prospective member states. However, Mongolia's neutralist tradition and status as a sparsely populated, developing country should enable Ulaanbaatar to play a useful role as convener and balancer within the grouping.

11 "Our History," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, https://www.osce.org/history.

12 Michael Cotey Morgan, The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

replicate this model in Northeast Asia, and while presidential projects like the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative failed to take root, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, headquartered in Seoul, would be a building block for an NAPSD.[13] Expertise can also be drawn from track 1.5 efforts such as the University of California's Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue and the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security, launched by the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[14] These pioneers of regional security cooperation can feed expert insights and networks into the process of establishing intergovernmental dialogue.

Regional Dialogue and Korean Peaceful Coexistence

If Northeast Asian states were to create an inclusive regional security dialogue mechanism like an NAPSD, they could tackle some of the region's toughest challenges through the pragmatic, stabilizing force of regular diplomacy: reducing risk, building confidence, and negotiating solutions. A serious push for regional security cooperation, no longer fixated on North Korean denuclearization, could, in fact, pay dividends in terms of supporting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. In a post-denuclearization diplomacy scenario, Northeast Asian cooperation can backstop and buttress something that the region has awaited for decades: a peace-building process between South Korea and North Korea.

"In a post-denuclearization diplomacy scenario, Northeast Asian cooperation can backstop and buttress something that the region has awaited for decades: a peace-building process between South Korea and North Korea.

A relevant model here is the Northern Ireland peace process, where European integration and the European Union played a vital, if quiet, role in sustaining the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It is easy to forget just how violent and destructive the period of fighting known as the Troubles was for Northern Ireland, where 3,500 people were killed and tens of thousands wounded in paramilitary, police, and military violence, with religious sectarianism inflaming nationalist passions rooted in centuries of enmity. Yet the two sides managed to set down their guns and achieve peaceful coexistence.[15]

European integration proved critical to sustaining that imperfect peace. The hard-line postures of Republicans and Unionists softened over time, as borders for goods and people across Europe became porous. The importance of the European Union was brought into stark relief when the United Kingdom voted to leave the union in 2016; indeed, one of the

13 "What Is TCS," Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, https://www.tcs-asia.org/en/about/overview.php.

14 "Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue," University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, https://ucigcc.org/research/china-and-the-indo-pacific/northeast-asia-cooperation-dialogue; "UBD 2026: Ulaanbataar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security, Eleventh International Conference," Mongolia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://ubd.iss.gov.mn.

15 Dong Jin Kim and David Mitchell, "What Can Korea Learn from Ireland? A Comparative Analysis of the Two Peace Processes," Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, online only (2026): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2026.2694790; Giada Lagana, "The European Dimension of the 'Talks Process' in Northern Ireland," Twentieth Century British History 34, no. 4 (Dec. 2023): 611–33, https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwad032.

most worrisome aspects of implementing this so-called "Brexit" was the potential impact on peace in Northern Ireland.

A similar process is imaginable in Northeast Asia, where peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas could be supported by a larger regional process of tension reduction and community building. An NAPSD could pilot regional-level humanitarian corridors and economic development carve-outs within the sanctions regime, jump-starting the long-delayed process of normalizing economic relations with North Korea. The prospect of trade and investment flows in and out of North Korea could be a game changer for inter–Korean ties, as both states would be linked to and benefit from economic dynamism at the regional level. Increased travel and people-to-people exchanges across the region, starting with NAPSD gatherings, would reduce North Korea's alienation from the neighborhood.

By institutionalizing security dialogue and regularizing interaction between North and South Korean diplomats as equal members of a regional mechanism, an NAPSD could reinforce Pyongyang's and Seoul's efforts to normalize their relationship. Regular convening would address a fundamental problem in the current situation: The Korean Peninsula's adversarial parties lack a ready-made way to engage with their counterparts on the other side of the 38th Parallel. An NAPSD could provide a diplomatic space not only for South Korea but also for the United States and Japan to pursue improved relations with North Korea, in line with the paradigm of peaceful coexistence in a post-denuclearization era. And in the event of a security crisis, regional actors would have built-in channels to facilitate de-escalation.

A Test for Leadership

It will take bold leadership on both sides of the regional divide to realize the idea of an NAPSD. But it is a process that could conceivably begin with the current batch of leaders.

The natural candidate to catalyze and drive the effort to establish a regional dialogue mechanism is the South Korean president, who has worked strenuously since taking office in 2025 to improve relations in all directions. President Lee Jae Myung has been largely successful in simultaneously enhancing ties with Beijing and Tokyo while managing uncertainty in the alliance with Washington. But Lee has been stymied in his search for a breakthrough with Pyongyang. Determined to find a path toward "peaceful coexistence" with North Korea, Lee would appreciate the value of an NAPSD in terms of stabilizing inter–Korean dynamics.[16]

Chairman Kim has shown no inclination to improve relations with South Korea, but he could prove surprisingly amenable to a regional initiative, given the implicit recognition of nuclear status that accompanies participation. Since his visit to Beijing last year as a guest of honor at the parade celebrating the anniversary of the end of World War II, Kim

16 "Policy for Peaceful Coexistence on the Korean Peninsula by the Lee Jae Myung Government," Republic of South Korea, Ministry of Unification, Mar. 24, 2026, https://unikorea.go.kr/web/eng_unikorea/bbs/bbs_0000000000000179/54817.

has opened the aperture of North Korean diplomatic engagement, hosting leaders of China, Vietnam, and Belarus as well as senior diplomats from Singapore and Russia. Invited to participate as an equal member of an NASPD, with no preconditions or pressure on the nuclear issue, Kim might well be willing to engage.

If both Koreas are on board, Chinese President Xi Jinping, in turn, can be expected to give strong support to an NAPSD in line with Beijing's "neighborhood diplomacy" and strategic interests in Northeast Asian stability.[17] The current, acrimonious state of Sino–Japanese relations undoubtedly poses a significant obstacle to Northeast Asian cooperation. Nonetheless, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi would not want to be left out of the table, and Tokyo ultimately benefits from regional stability. Mongolia is eager to offer "host diplomacy," and President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh would likely be an enthusiastic participant.

Neither Trump nor Putin is a great proponent of multilateralism, but the United States and Russia are likely to accept invitations to participate as dialogue partners in a regional diplomatic platform. As the CSCE helped stabilize superpower rivalry in the European theater, an NAPSD could contribute to peace and security amid intensifying great power competition, helping extend East Asia's peace record.

17 "Xi Jinping: Let the Sense of Community of Common Destiny Take Deep Root in Neighboring Countries," People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oct. 24, 2013, https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2021-01/27/content_77158881.shtml.

CHAPTER 6

Security Cooperation with China Is Back on South Korea's Table

KYURI PARK

During his first state visit to China this January, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung proposed to Chinese President Xi Jinping that the two countries' navies resume joint search-and-rescue exercises, or SAREX, in the Yellow Sea as part of efforts to revitalize their Strategic Cooperative Partnership.[1] The proposal presents a puzzle. Why would South Korea, a US ally, seek security cooperation with China amid intensifying US–China strategic competition?

Lee's proposal challenges a growing conventional wisdom about the strategic choices available to small and middle powers amid US–China strategic competition. Over the last few months, a series of essays in major foreign policy magazines has advanced the argument that, as the US–China rivalry intensifies, middle powers (including South Korea) have little choice but to continue relying on the United States for their security.[2] Many analysts acknowledge that the United States has become less predictable and, at times, more coercive toward its allies and partners. Nevertheless, such analysts contend that US allies, particularly in Asia, have no meaningful "Plan B" and are therefore "doomed to hug [President] Donald Trump close."[3]

This line of thinking, however, overlooks an important dimension of statecraft. It implicitly treats deterrence as the only meaningful source of security. Yet states also seek to "build a secure strategic environment not only by strengthening deterrence with states they share amity with, but also through reassurance and confidence-building with those they

1 "李, 한·중 해군 서해 연합훈련 재개 제안" ["Lee proposes resuming joint South Korea–China naval exercises in the Yellow Sea"], Kukmin Ilbo, Jan. 8, 2026, https://www.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=1767785549.

2 Michael Beckley, "The Middle Power Delusion," Foreign Affairs, May 25, 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/middle-power-delusion.

3 Mira Rapp-Hooper and Zack Cooper, "Washington's Asian Allies Need a Backup Plan," Foreign Policy, June 11, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/06/11/trump-asia-strategy-rethink; "Asian Allies Are Doomed to Hug Donald Trump Close," Economist, July 16, 2026, https://www.economist.com/international/2026/06/16/asian-allies-are-doomed-to-hug-donald-trump-close.

experience enmity with."[4] Once reassurance is taken seriously, a much broader strategic playbook of small and middle powers comes into focus.

This essay argues that South Korea is pursuing a strategy of vertical diversification, combining deterrence through its alliance with the United States and reassurance and confidence-building toward China to proactively shape its strategic environment, thereby reducing the risk of being drawn into great-power conflicts not of its own choosing. Accordingly, this strategy is likely to become even more important as the US–China rivalry heightens Northeast Asian regional tensions, Washington adopts an increasingly hawkish approach toward Beijing, and US foreign policy becomes far more unpredictable.

Lee's Olive Branch to China and Beijing's Response

Lee's proposal to revive bilateral SAREX with China in the Yellow Sea provides a useful entry point for examining South Korea's willingness to signal a "live-and-let-live" approach toward China and whether such reassurance signaling can contribute to a more stable bilateral security relationship.

"South Korea is pursuing a strategy of vertical diversification, combining deterrence through its alliance with the United States and reassurance and confidence-building toward China to proactively shape its strategic environment.

Beijing's response soon became evident through subsequent actions. Within a month of Lee's proposal, South Korean and Chinese defense officials met in Beijing for their first working-level defense policy dialogue since 2022 to discuss practical steps toward resuming bilateral SAREX after a 15–year hiatus.[5] This May, Lee's proposal to resume maritime SAREX was pragmatically adopted: South Korea's Coast Guard and China's Maritime Rescue Coordination Center conducted a joint SAREX in the Yellow Sea, involving two vessels and one helicopter from each side.[6] By entrusting the exercise to maritime law enforcement and search-and-rescue agencies rather than the two navies, both sides reduced the exercise's political sensitivity while preserving its purpose as a confidence-building measure and taking concrete steps toward rebuilding habits of cooperation in the security realm.

Given its humanitarian and nontraditional security focus, some may dismiss this year's South Korea–China SAREX as a symbolic diplomatic overture with limited strategic significance. Yet such a view overlooks the broader significance of the initiative. Its strategic value lies not only in the exercise itself as a reassurance measure but also in

4 Kyuri Park, "Network Strategies of Secondary States in the Asia–Pacific: Evidence from Joint Military Exercises, 1970–2024," Journal of Peace Research 63, no. 2 (March 2026): 219, https://doi.org/10.1093/jopres/xjag004.

5 Kim Seung-yeon, "S. Korea, China Hold Working-Level Talks on Resuming Joint Maritime Search Drills," Yonhap News Agency, Feb. 5, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260205015300315.

6 Jong Koo Kang, "한중 해양수색구조 첫 실기동훈련…서해서 함정·헬기 투입" ["First joint South Korea–China maritime search-and-rescue field exercise: Vessels and helicopters deployed in the Yellow Sea"], Yonhap News Agency, May 29, 2026, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260529052000065.

the strategic context in which that reassurance was conveyed; namely, where and when it occurred.

Why Security Cooperation in the Yellow Sea Matters

The resumption of SAREX between Seoul and Beijing is noteworthy because it took place in the Yellow Sea. This narrow body of water separating mainland China and the Korean Peninsula is one of Northeast Asia's most politically sensitive maritime spaces, where unresolved South Korea–China maritime disputes intersect with the intensifying US–China strategic rivalry.

South Korea and China have yet to agree on their maritime boundary in the Yellow Sea and continue to dispute maritime jurisdiction, fishing rights, and law enforcement activities. One long-standing point of contention is Ieodo (also known as Socotra Rock or Suyan Islet), a submerged reef located within South Korea's claimed exclusive economic zone, or EEZ, over which Beijing disputes Seoul's jurisdiction.

Since 2018, bilateral tensions have heightened after China's installation of several large steel structures in the Provisional Measures Zone, or PMZ, where the two countries' EEZ claims overlap.[7] While Beijing maintains that the structures are civilian facilities supporting aquaculture and fisheries, Seoul has questioned both their legality and whether they serve solely their stated purposes. In 2025, the South Korean research vessel Onnuri attempted to inspect the structures twice, but Chinese coast guard vessels and rubber boats blocked both missions. Seoul subsequently lodged a diplomatic protest and summoned a Chinese Embassy official.[8]

China's installation of maritime structures in the PMZ also drew a rare bipartisan response in South Korea's National Assembly, where lawmakers expressed concern that the structures could strengthen China's de facto control over the area and reinforce its maritime claims.[9] US analysts have likewise characterized these structures as an example of China's "gray zone" tactics: coercive measures designed to advance strategic objectives while remaining below the threshold of armed conflict. Such analysts have argued that these potentially dual-use structures resemble a broader pattern of gray zone tactics that Beijing has employed to assert its maritime claims in the South and East China Seas.[10]

7 Victor Cha, "Creeping Sovereignty? China's Maritime Structures in the Yellow Sea (West Sea)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dec. 9, 2025, https://beyondparallel.csis.org/creeping-sovereignty-chinas-maritime-structures-in-the-yellow-sea-west-sea.

8 Roh Suk-jo and Kim Mi-geon, "Exclusive: China Threatened S. Korean Research Ship Near Unauthorized Structure in Yellow Sea," Chosun, June 27, 2025, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/06/27/X4OXOQCUFFACTETL2Z5IK32NZE; Choi Kyong-ae, "China Blocks S. Korean Survey Ship Near West Sea Structures in 2nd Standoff This Year: Report," Yonhap News Agency, Oct. 28, 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251028012600320.

9 Seo Ji-eun, "Koreans Skeptical as Chinese Envoy Repeats Claim that Yellow Sea Structures Are for Fisheries," Korea JoongAng Daily, March 25, 2025, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/12347294.

10 Song Sang-ho, "Expert Says US Should Flag China's Steel Structures in Yellow Sea as Example of 'Grey Zone' Tactics," Yonhap News Agency, Dec. 10, 2025, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251210000400315.

Given this context, one might ask whether conducting SAREX in the Yellow Sea risks normalizing Beijing's presence in a disputed maritime space and inadvertently reinforcing its expansive maritime claims. Beijing's actions following Lee's olive branch, however, point in the opposite direction. Within weeks of Lee's proposal to revive SAREX, Beijing relocated the very steel structure in the PMZ that had become a focal point of South Korean concerns over creeping sovereignty and China's use of gray zone tactics to advance its maritime claims.[11] This episode suggests that reassurance may encourage reciprocal restraint rather than embolden unilateral behavior.

Meanwhile, the US–China strategic rivalry is making itself increasingly felt in the Yellow Sea. This February, more than 10 F–16 fighter jets from US Forces Korea, or USFK, conducted a unilateral military exercise near the overlapping South Korean and Chinese air defense identification zones above the Yellow Sea without prior notice or consultation with the South Korean military regarding the drill's purpose and scope.[12] The exercise, which reportedly involved more than 170 US F–16 sorties over two days, prompted China to dispatch its own fighter jets to the scene, leading to a rare aerial standoff between the two great powers' militaries. After being briefed on the incident, South Korean Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back lodged a protest in a phone call with General Xavier Brunson, commander of the USFK. The exercise, originally scheduled to run from Feb. 18 to 21, concluded on Feb. 19 following the call.[13]

Fortunately, no clashes occurred, but the standoff vividly illustrated what many South Koreans regard as the country's worst nightmare: being drawn into a US–China conflict not of their own choosing and becoming collateral damage in a great power confrontation. For Seoul, this juxtaposition reinforces the strategic imperative of managing tensions in the Yellow Sea and preventing Washington and Beijing's mutual rivalry from spilling over onto the Korean Peninsula.

The Revival of Security Cooperation Despite THAAD

Another reason the SAREX warrants closer attention is that it revived a form of security cooperation between South Korea and China that many observers believed had become politically untenable after the 2016/17 THAAD crisis, which triggered the most serious deterioration in bilateral relations since diplomatic normalization between the two countries in 1992.

In July 2016, Seoul and Washington announced plans to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, system in Seongju, South Korea. While both governments maintained that the system was intended solely to counter Pyongyang's growing nuclear

11 Yi Wonju, "China's Top Envoy Says Issue of Disputed Steel Structures in Yellow Sea Making Positive Progress," Yonhap News Agency, Feb. 4, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260204013100315.

12 Lee Minji, "USFK, Chinese Fighter Jets in Brief Aerial Standoff over Yellow Sea This Week," Yonhap News Agency, Feb. 20, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260220003151315.

13 Haneul Son, "'누가 동맹을 위태롭게 하나?'··美中 '서해 대치' 긴박했던 전말" ["'Who endangers the alliance?' The tense full story of the US–China 'West Sea standoff'"], MBC News, March 1, 2026, https://imnews.imbc.com/news/2026/politics/article/6804056_36911.html.

and missile capabilities, Beijing strongly opposed the deployment.[14] Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi argued that THAAD "far exceed[ed] the Korean Peninsula's defense needs" and contended that its radar capabilities could be used to monitor military activities inside Chinese territory.[15] The deployment also prompted protests by local residents and activists concerned that THAAD would deepen great-power rivalry on the Korean Peninsula.[16] Nevertheless, key THAAD components were quietly transported to the deployment site in April 2017 during the dead of night.[17]

China responded with extensive economic retaliation against South Korea, including unofficial restrictions on tourism, cultural exports, and South Korean businesses operating in the Chinese market. Given China's position as South Korea's largest trading partner, these measures imposed significant costs on Seoul, with losses associated with the crisis estimated at roughly $15 billion.[18]

The THAAD crisis effectively brought a decade of sustained functional military cooperation and confidence-building between South Korea and China to a halt. Prior to that, the two countries had established a modest but meaningful record of reassurance-oriented security cooperation. Their navies conducted four joint search-and-rescue exercises in nearby waters in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2011 as well as three joint anti-piracy exercises in 2010, 2013, and 2015 in the Gulf of Aden.[19] During their 2015 anti-piracy exercise, for example, the South Korean Navy deployed the Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin–class destroyer, while the Chinese Navy contributed the guided-missile frigate Liuzhou, to strengthen mutual trust and improve coordination in maritime security operations.[20]

Hence, the 2026 SAREX was more than a humanitarian exercise; it marked the revival of reassurance-oriented security cooperation that had been largely dormant since the THAAD dispute.

14 "ROK & US Joint Statement: ROK–US Alliance Agrees to Deploy THAAD," US Forces Korea, July 7, 2016, https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Newsroom/News/Article/831175/rok-us-joint-statement-rok-us-alliance-agrees-to-deploy-thaad.

15 "Deployment of THAAD Far Exceeds Korean Peninsula's Defense Needs: Chinese FM," Xinhuanet, July 9, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2016-07/09/c_135500539.htm; Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views on South Korea's Deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb. 2, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/02/chinese-views-on-south-koreas-deployment-of-terminal-high-altitude-area-defense-thaad.

16 Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korean Villagers Protest Plans for US Missile Defense System," New York Times, July 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/world/asia/south-korea-thaad-us.html; "South Koreans Shave Heads in Protest at Thaad Anti-Missile System," BBC, Aug. 15, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37086447.

17 Mooyoung Lee, "Thaad Battery Installed in Dead of Night," Korea JoongAng Daily, April 28, 2017, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/10649338; Jung In-hwan, "Who Is Rushing the THAAD Deployment, and Why?" Hankyoreh, April 27, 2017, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/792545.html.

18 Chae Sung-jin and Ryu Jung, "Chinese Tourists Cancel Korea Trips amid THAAD Row," Chosun, March 9, 2017, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2017/03/09/TUCDAJLQFTTKZFGMBUIUDX3ZAM.

19 Yonhap News Agency, "Korea, China to Conduct Joint Naval Exercise, Talks," Korea Times, Nov. 21, 2011, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/20111121/korea-china-to-conduct-joint-naval-exercise-talks.

20 "S. Korea, China Conduct Joint Anti-Piracy Drills," Yonhap News Agency, Nov. 20, 2015, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20151120002600315.

South Korea's Strategic Playbook

As a middle power with limited material capabilities, South Korea's security and strategic autonomy depend critically on how effectively it cultivates and manages cooperative ties. If security were South Korea's sole strategic objective, close alignment with the United States might appear sufficient. Yet when strategic autonomy is also a key objective, such dependence becomes far less desirable. Asymmetrical alliances inevitably entail trade-offs: In exchange for security, junior allies accept constraints on their freedom of action.[21] As Moon Chung-in, who served as special adviser to President Moon Jae-in on foreign affairs and national security from 2017 to 2022, has argued, the interests of Seoul and Washington do not always coincide.[22] These trade-offs have become more pronounced as the US–China strategic rivalry has intensified and Seoul and Washington have increasingly diverged in their approaches toward Beijing.

The United States has become far more reluctant to engage China through military confidence-building activities. In 2014 and 2016, Washington invited Beijing to participate in the Rim of the Pacific exercise, or RIMPAC, in order to foster military-to-military communication and reduce the risk of miscalculation. By 2018, however, the United States had reversed course. That May, it rescinded the invitation it had extended to China the previous year, citing Beijing's militarization of the South China Sea. Three months later, the US Congress formally barred China from future participation in RIMPAC.[23] This marked a broader shift in US strategy. Rather than complementing deterrence with military confidence-building measures toward China, successive administrations increasingly focused on building balancing coalitions and mini-lateral security partnerships to constrain China's regional influence and maintain a favorable balance of power in the Asia–Pacific region. This more exclusionary approach reflected a growing bipartisan consensus in Washington that China's rise poses an existential threat to the United States.

> **"A broad bipartisan consensus remains that South Korea must coexist peacefully with its powerful neighbor, rather than seek to confront or isolate it.**

Seoul, by contrast, has not abandoned reassurance and confidence-building measures toward Beijing, viewing them as indispensable complements to deterrence for mitigating the security dilemma and maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. While conservative and liberal South Korean leaders differ over how closely to align with the United States and how extensively to engage China, a broad bipartisan consensus remains that South Korea must coexist peacefully with its powerful neighbor, rather than seek to confront or isolate it. The key

21 Park, "Network Strategies of Secondary States in the Asia–Pacific," 217.

22 Eunji Kim, "문정인의 충고 '한국과 미국의 이익이 늘 일치하지 않는다'" ["Moon Chung-in's advice: 'South Korea's and US interests do not always align'"], Sisa In, April 12, 2023, https://www.sisain.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=50060.

23 US Congress, John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019, Pub. L. No. 115-232, 132 Stat. 1636, https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ232/PLAW-115publ232.pdf.

strategic question, therefore, is how best to integrate deterrence and reassurance as complementary instruments of South Korea's statecraft.

A Regional Pattern of Vertical Diversification

South Korea is not alone in pursuing this strategic approach. Across the Asia–Pacific region, many US allies and partners conduct joint military exercises with China as part of broader efforts to diversify their security relationships and shape their strategic environment.

One of the clearest examples came in Oct. 2018, when, despite heightened tensions in the South China Sea, all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, participated in the first ASEAN–China Joint Maritime Exercise off the coast of Zhanjiang, China. Co-organized by Singapore and China, the exercise involved eight naval vessels, three helicopters, and more than 1,200 military personnel from China and all 10 ASEAN member states. Notably, the three member states with ongoing territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea— the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei— also deployed naval vessels.[24]

My research on joint military exercises, or JMEs, in the Asia–Pacific from 1970 to 2024 reveals a broader regional pattern:

> Until the 1990s, China had conducted no JMEs with any secondary states [i.e., small and middle powers] in the region. This changed in the 2000s, with 28 exercises involving China recorded between 2000 and 2009. From 2010 to 2019, that number surged to 149— an approximately fivefold increase. In the past 5 years (2020–2024), regional countries conducted 58 exercises with China, indicating the continuation of this trend.[25]

In terms of the nature of the JMEs, while the exercises held by the United States and regional countries were predominantly deterrence-oriented, focusing on warfighting capabilities, 87 percent of those held with China were reassurance-oriented, focusing on nontraditional security issues— such as search-and-rescue, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism— and confidence-building measures.[26]

The broader regional pattern of complementing deterrence with reassurance toward China appears to have continued into 2026. At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth reiterated Washington's emphasis on "peace through strength," arguing, "[w]e need more combat power…less Shangri-La, more

24 Li Wenfang, "China, ASEAN Begin Joint Naval Drill," China Daily, Oct. 23, 2018, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201810/23/WS5bce80d7a310eff303283f68.html; Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why the First China–ASEAN Maritime Exercise Matters," The Diplomat, Oct. 22, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/why-the-first-china-asean-maritime-exercise-matters.

25 Park, "Network Strategies of Secondary States in the Asia–Pacific," 220.

26 Park, "Network Strategies of Secondary States in the Asia–Pacific," 223.

ships, more subs."[27] By contrast, Vietnamese President To Lam argued that the region faces a "crisis of strategic trust" and called for "responsible coexistence." He maintained that security should be built through "dialogue, mutual accommodation, and self-restraint—not through coercion … [or] threats of force," urging Asian countries to move "from passive response to proactive shaping" and "from managing crises after they erupt to mitigating risks before they escalate."[28] Likewise, despite recurring maritime incidents in the South China Sea, Philippine officials reiterated their pursuit of "dialogue" and "confidence-building measures" with China to avoid unnecessary escalation.[29]

South Korea's Security Cooperation with China May Grow

Reassurance-oriented cooperation with China is likely to become more attractive as South Korea grows more concerned about the credibility of the United States as a security patron. As discussed above, despite the severe deterioration in relations with Beijing during the 2016/17 THAAD crisis, Seoul accepted the resulting political and economic costs as a trade-off for the security benefits of extended deterrence from Washington.

Nearly a decade later, however, the THAAD controversy took an unexpected turn, prompting questions about the costs and benefits of relying on US extended deterrence. This March, all six THAAD launchers stationed in Seongju were temporarily relocated to Osan Air Base, fueling speculation that THAAD interceptors would be dispatched to the Middle East during the US–Israeli war against Iran. The Lee administration objected to any such deployment, arguing that assets stationed on the Korean Peninsula should remain dedicated to its defense.[30] Defending the relocation, the Pentagon argued that "our flexibility and our ability to redeploy assets to ensure that they meet the most poignant and urgent need across the globe is a tremendous strength of our system."[31]

27 "Remarks by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at the 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (as Delivered)," US Department of War, May 30, 2026, https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4504755.

28 "Keynote Address by General Secretary and President To Lam at Shangri-la Dialogue 2026," Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, May 29, 2026, https://en.baochinhphu.vn/keynote-address-by-general-secretary-and-president-to-lam-at-shangri-la-dialogue-2026-111260529213048 21.htm. See also Hunter Marston, "At Shangri-La, Washington and Southeast Asia Talked Past Each Other," Lowy Institute, June 1, 2026, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/shangri-la-washington-southeast-asia-talked-past-each-other.

29 Sana Khan, "Philippines Keeps Dialogue Open with China amid South China Sea Tensions," Modern Diplomacy, Feb. 20, 2026, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/02/20/philippines-keeps-dialogue-open-with-china-amid-south-china-sea-tensions; Sebastian Strangio, "Philippines Says It Wants 'Dialogue' with China Following Maritime Clash," The Diplomat, June 26, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/philippines-says-it-wants-dialogue-with-china-following-maritime-clash.

30 Lim Hui Jie, "South Korea Opposed to US Moving Air Defense Systems in the Country to Middle East: President Lee," CNBC, March 10, 2026, https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/10/south-korea-patriot-transfer-iran-war-air-defenses.html.

31 Song Sang-ho, "Pentagon Official Calls US 'Flexibility' to Meet Urgent Needs a 'Strength' Amid THAAD Redeployment Concerns," Yonhap News Agency, March 18, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260318000400315.

Although subsequent reports indicated that the THAAD battery itself remained in South Korea, the episode reignited debate in Seoul.[32] Critics questioned why South Korea had invested so much political capital in hosting a defense system that could be so readily dismantled and its components reassigned to support US military operations elsewhere whenever Washington deemed it necessary.[33] Others worried that the US mobilization of military assets stationed on the Korean Peninsula for an overseas conflict could entangle South Korea in a war not of its choosing. Some South Korean experts warned that North Korea could interpret the move as a temporary weakening of allied defenses and exploit it through limited provocations designed to test the US–South Korea alliance's readiness.[34]

The episode underscored a broader lesson for Seoul. Even great powers face finite resources and competing commitments, forcing them to make difficult choices across multiple theaters. Although the alliance with the United States remains indispensable to South Korea's security, the episode highlighted the dangers of making deterrence the sole foundation of Seoul's strategic playbook.

Conclusion

South Korea is right to improve security cooperation with China to signal that Seoul seeks to live and let live with Beijing. The alliance with the United States remains the cornerstone of South Korea's defense, but Seoul should use every available instrument of statecraft to shape its own security environment.

The recent Yellow Sea standoff between China and the United States demonstrated how intensifying competition between the two countries could spill over onto the Korean Peninsula. Precisely because of this, South Korea should resist simply mirroring the structure of the US–China rivalry and instead pursue an independent networking strategy that advances its own strategic interests.

“ South Korea should resist simply mirroring the structure of the US–China rivalry and instead pursue an independent networking strategy that advances its own strategic interests.

South Korea's renewed security cooperation with China is not an exception but part of a broader regional pattern. Across the Asia–Pacific region, many US allies and partners are proactively seeking to combine deterrence with reassurance rather than choose between Washington and Beijing.

32 Lee Haye-ah, “All 6 THAAD Launchers Return to Seongju from Osan,” Yonhap News Agency, June 21, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260621002900315.

33 Justin McCurry, “Hasty Redeployment of US Missiles from South Korea to Middle East Leaves Seoul Rattled,” Guardian, March 11, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/11/redeployment-us-missiles-thaad-south-korea-middle-east-seoul-iran.

34 Bahk Eun-ji, “THAAD Redeployment Sparks Fears of High-Altitude Defense Gap in South Korea,” Korea Times, March 11, 2026, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/defense/20260311/thaad-redeployment-sparks-fears-of-high-altitude-defense-gap-in-south-korea.

This regional pattern carries important implications for US strategy. A hawkish approach centered on building an exclusive balancing or containment coalition against China may ultimately prove self-defeating. As Jae Ho Chung, who served as the South Korean ambassador to China from 2022 to 2025, argues:

> While Sino–American competition, if not confrontation, is probably unavoidable down the road, whichever power that first preaches the "us or them" exclusivity is likely to lose more than it will gain since it will ipso facto constitute a greater threat to the region of East Asia. Sino–American relations are evolving over time and so are the responses of East Asia to the rise of China.[35]

Thus, if the goal of the United States is to maintain its leadership position in the Asia–Pacific region and promote regional stability, it should take the initiative in creating platforms for dialogue, confidence-building, and practical cooperation with China, rather than demand "us-or-them" exclusivism.

35 Jae Ho Chung, "East Asia Responds to the Rise of China: Patterns and Variations," Pacific Affairs 82, no. 2 (Winter 2009/10): 675, https://doi.org/10.5509/2009824657.

PART III

Rethinking the US–South Korea Alliance

CHAPTER 7

Sheathing the Dagger: The Case for a Narrower US Role in Korea

JAEWOO JUN

The Combined Forces Command, or CFC, rests on a premise that no longer holds: that the two allies that comprise it—the United States and South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea, or ROK—face threats of the same kind from the same direction. Washington now prioritizes countering Beijing and wants to use its forces in South Korea, and the alliance behind them, for that purpose. Seoul, however, does not want to be committed to a war it does not choose. This essay argues for redesigning the CFC around that difference: the United States concentrating on nuclear deterrence, South Korea leading its own conventional defense, and the integrated command giving way to parallel national commands. The American presence would remain; what would change is who commands what. Washington would gain strategic latitude, resolve a long-standing dispute with Seoul over strategic flexibility, better protect its nonproliferation interest, and maintain a stable forward presence that rests on shared interest rather than on an ally's forbearance.

A Structure without Its Premise

During the Cold War, Washington's and Seoul's primary threats differed, but their direction and character did not. The threats from the Soviet Union and North Korea both came from the north, were ground-based, and their potential paths of expansion overlapped. Therefore, the mismatch in threat perception did not translate into strategic misalignment.

Today, the United States and South Korea face real misalignment in security priorities and interests. The former now treats confronting China as its top strategic priority, while the latter remains preoccupied with deterring North Korea. The gap surfaces in the recurring dispute over "strategic flexibility" and the terms under which US Forces Korea, or USFK, can be committed beyond the Korean Peninsula.

In the 2006 joint statement between Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Seoul agreed to "respect the necessity for strategic flexibility of US forces in ROK," while Washington agreed to "respect the ROK position that it shall not

be drawn into a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people."[1] Rather than a binding agreement, this was a compromise based on diplomatic ambiguity. Seoul acknowledged US global priorities while underscoring that USFK operations must not entangle South Korea in regional conflicts outside the peninsula without its consent. The two sides could leave this underlying tension unresolved, as the United States remained predominantly focused on the Middle East back then and for many years afterward.

Now, as the US global strategic priority shifts to countering China, the alliance with South Korea faces a serious dilemma. When priorities diverge, an integrated command becomes a mechanism that subordinates the weaker ally to the stronger one's strategic aims. Under this trajectory, if the United States keeps wartime operational control, or OPCON, South Korea will face a growing danger of being pulled onto the front line of a US–China proxy war. As Washington continues to resist OPCON transfer to Seoul while seeking to transform USFK into a Beijing–focused military, calls in South Korea for US withdrawal and for independent nuclear weapons could gain additional traction. The question is whether the two allies can find a structure that addresses both American and South Korean interests.

An Outdated Structure from the Cold War

The existing Combined Forces Command is an outdated structure from the Cold War era. Post–Cold War developments in Northeast Asia rationalize a shift from an integrated command to parallel commands on the Korean Peninsula.

Institutions lose legitimacy when the conditions that bore them vanish, and the CFC is no exception. Washington's original design was the opposite of what it built: In 1969, President Richard Nixon directed that South Korea take over for its conventional defense, with the United States providing only a trip wire and air and naval support.[2] What

1 "United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership," US Department of State, Jan. 19, 2006, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm.

2 See "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," Nov. 25, 1969, doc. 46 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XIX: Part 1, Korea, 1969–1972*, ed. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2010), 118, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v19p1/d46. In the handwritten note appended to the memo, Nixon instructed that a plan be developed for a South Korean takeover of conventional defense, with the United States providing a trip wire and air and naval support only. The 1971 withdrawal of the US Seventh Infantry Division executed that design. The directive applied to Korea the principle that Nixon had announced at Guam on July 25, 1969—later known as the Nixon, or Guam, Doctrine—under which the United States would honor its treaty commitments, primarily as a nuclear shield, while expecting allies facing conventional threats to supply the manpower for their own defense. The doctrine was Asia–wide in scope, and its most prominent application was Vietnamization; the Korea directive was its Northeast Asian counterpart. On restraining the two Koreas, Nixon told Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1972 that "[w]hat is important here is that both of us exert influence to restrain our allies." See "Memorandum of Conversation," Feb. 23, 1972, doc. 197 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XVII: China, 1969–1972*, ed. Steven E. Phillips (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2006), 733, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d197. On the Seventh Infantry Division's withdrawal as an execution of the doctrine, see Victor Cha, "The Meaning of US Troop Withdrawals from Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/meaning-us-troop-withdrawals-korea.

inverted it was a particular combination: the collapse of US–Soviet détente and renewed superpower rivalry, a South Korean nuclear program Washington wanted stopped, and a US presidential push to withdraw from the peninsula that the Pentagon and Congress both resisted.[3] The CFC was the compromise: Washington could cut troop numbers while retaining command, and Seoul gained a nominal voice in allied operational control and joint military command decisions within it. South Korea was given a formal, coequal role on paper, even as the United States retained actual command.

On the surface, just as the heightened military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War hardened the CFC, today's intensifying US–China rivalry may appear to necessitate a similar reinforcement of the integrated command. But it actually does not, because the threats posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War and by China today press South Korea in fundamentally different ways.

Since the Soviet Union posed ground-based expansionist threats, an integrated command in South Korea led by large US ground forces was necessary for both the defense of South Korea and the overall US military posture in Asia. The Soviet Union had no year-round, ice-free port in the Pacific, so projecting its power outward had to run along the land axis of the Korean Peninsula. An integrated command anchored on US ground forces therefore served both the defense of South Korea and the broader US posture in Asia.

However, the geographical scope of China's contest with the United States is fundamentally maritime: in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. China's territorial interests mostly concern the South and East China Seas, and Japan confronts China directly over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In essence, China's path of potential expansion collides with Japan's core security interests. This is not the case for South Korea. While tensions exist between China and South Korea in the Yellow/West Sea, those tensions have been managed diplomatically and remain rather far from legitimate territorial disputes.[4] Moreover, China's expansion through the Korean Peninsula would, in any case, have to pass through North Korea, which is not an option for Beijing.

Another decisive post–Cold War development that rationalizes a shift to parallel commands is the reduced threat of conventional war between the two Koreas, driven by the South's conventional military dominance and the North's nuclear buildup.[5] During the Cold War, the possibility of another conventional war between the two Koreas remained

3 Clint Work, "US Troops in Korea: From History's Vantage Point," *38 North*, May 8, 2018, https://www.38north.org/2018/05/cwork050818.

4 Seung-yeon Kim, "China Says Work Is Under Way to Remove Part of Steel Structures in Overlapping Waters of Yellow Sea," Yonhap News Agency, Jan. 27, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260127008400315.

5 According to *Major Statistics Indicators of North Korea in 2024*, published by South Korea's Ministry of Data and Statistics (pp. 42–48), North Korea's nominal gross national income, or GNI, was estimated at approximately 40.9 trillion South Korean won, or KRW, or about $30 billion USD. In contrast, South Korea's defense budget for the same year reached nearly 59.4 trillion KRW, or about $44 billion USD. This demonstrates that South Korea's annual military expenditure alone exceeds North Korea's total national economic output by a factor of roughly 1.45, highlighting the immense disparity in financial resources between the two nations. See "2024 Defense Budget Finalized at 59.4 Trillion Won, a 4.2 Percent Increase over the Previous Year," Ministry of National Defense, Dec. 21, 2023, https://www.korea.kr/briefing/pressReleaseView.do?newsId=156607021.

relatively high. A tightly integrated command was necessary for the United States to constrain military adventurism on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone and direct a second Korean War if deterrence failed.

Nevertheless, South Korea's achievement of conventional military dominance and North Korea's eventual nuclearization have fundamentally reduced the need for an integrated command, establishing a state of mutual deterrence in which both sides find waging war an existential risk not worth betting on. The potential costs of war, regime destruction for North Korea and nuclear retaliation for South Korea, have become too high for either side to bear.

A Carrier in Range, a Dagger Drawn: The Flawed Logic

As explained above, because the primary threats to both the United States and South Korea overlapped in direction (north) and character (ground-based), a tightly integrated command made sense during the Cold War. Despite the risks of entrapment in US–Soviet confrontation, South Korea had clear needs and incentives to accept an integrated command under US control. Today's regional security environment, however, looks different. Threats posed by China and North Korea do not overlap, reducing the shared incentive to maintain an integrated command. The costs of an integrated command are growing for both South Korea and the United States.

“ Threats posed by China and North Korea do not overlap, reducing the shared incentive to maintain an integrated command. The costs of an integrated command are growing for both South Korea and the United States.

For South Korea, the costs of becoming an anti–China military outpost are clear. South Korea sits roughly 186 miles, or 300 kilometers, from the Chinese coast; it can easily become a frontline battleground in a conflict between the United States and China.

There are costs for the United States as well. The first cost regards operational speed. An integrated command presumes a shared threat. If the United States and South Korea focus on different threats (China and North Korea), pointing in different directions (land and sea), one chain of command would now have to carry two sets of priorities. Integration should supposedly buy speed, but it gains none when the two governments cannot agree on what their combined forces are for.

The second cost is survivability. Reorienting USFK toward China gives Beijing a reason to strike the peninsula that it does not otherwise have; a point that the next section takes up.

The third cost is political. In a bilateral alliance, a structure that subordinates the weaker ally's priorities and interests to those of the stronger ally could be sustained for some time but not indefinitely, especially in a vibrant democracy like South Korea, where the public actively reacts to government decision-making. If the United States moves in the direction of de-prioritizing North Korea and seeking to transform USFK into a China–focused military, all while refusing OPCON transfer, calls in South Korea for US withdrawal

could gain ground, and the case for independent nuclear weapons—already backed by the majority of the public—could move from the margins of elite and policy debate into the mainstream.[6]

However, the increasing costs of maintaining an integrated command are largely being overlooked by the US strategic community.

In May 2025, the commander of USFK, General Xavier Brunson, called the Korean Peninsula a "fixed aircraft carrier" moored between Japan and the Chinese mainland.[7] A year later, this May, Brunson described the peninsula as "the dagger in the heart of Asia"; a phrase that drew a public rebuke from the Chinese Embassy in Seoul.[8] But in modern doctrine, a carrier operates outside the range of an adversary's anti-access/area-denial zone; one operating within that range is not an asset but a target. Brunson's metaphor holds only if South Korea is treated as a frontline battlefield whose destruction can be accepted, rather than a space to protect.

Of course, the belief that more forward presence is always better is one perspective. There are now growing voices in Washington—from former officials and think-tank experts alike—arguing for expanding USFK's strategic flexibility and shifting its role from defending South Korea to confronting China.[9] These are not abstractions: Proposals on the table include moving US Army Pacific to the Korean Peninsula and prepositioning munitions there for use against China.[10]

Converting USFK into an active instrument of anti–China deterrence would, however, weaken regional deterrence rather than strengthen it. If USFK's role expands from a denial-focused presence aimed at defending South Korea to an active counter–China force, China will begin to view it as a more legitimate offensive threat. In response, China could re-posture its Northern Theater Command to focus on Taiwan and consequently treat US bases in South Korea as legitimate targets in a Taiwan contingency. South Korea is

6 A 2024 survey of South Korean strategic elites found that only 34 percent supported nuclear acquisition, compared with roughly 61 percent of the public, but that 51 percent of those opposed would change their position if the United States withdrew its security commitments. See Victor Cha, *Breaking Bad: South Korea's Nuclear Option* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2024), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-04/240429_Cha_Breaking_Bad.pdf. For public opinion, see Yi Wonju, "65 Pct of S. Koreans Support Nuclear Armament: Poll," Yonhap News Agency, Aug. 28, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260828006400315.

7 David Choi, "US Forces Korea Leader Says His Troops Deter China, Guard 'Freedom's Front Yard'," *Stars and Stripes*, May 16, 2025, https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2025-05-16/brunson-south-korea-china-lanpac-17807125.html.

8 Song Sang-ho, "USFK Commander Says S. Korea Is 'Dagger' in Heart of Asia from China's Perspective," Yonhap News Agency, May 27, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260527000200315.

9 Kim Hyun-soo, "Ex–Pentagon Official Calls for Greater Strategic Flexibility of USFK for Deterrence in Indo–Pacific," Yonhap News Agency, June 23, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260623012100315.

10 Brian Kerg, "South Korea Is the Ideal Anchor for the First Island Chain," Atlantic Council, July 10, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/south-korea-is-the-ideal-anchor-for-the-first-island-chain.

far from Taiwan, too close to China, less survivable than Japan, and, correspondingly, more exposed to preemption.[11]

The role that serves American interests runs the other way. China's Northern Theater is not a Taiwan–facing command, and its forces—ground formations, air assets, and the North Sea Fleet—are oriented toward the Korean Peninsula. Cross-theater doctrine lets Beijing move them; it does not take the peninsula out of the planning. Reallocating those forces is a decision, and one the peninsula makes costly.[12] What holds them there is the South Korean force rather than the American one: a constant in any Northern Theater plan. The American contribution is what makes that constant matter: an alliance behind it and a nuclear commitment Beijing cannot discount.

A USFK whose declared mission is deterrence against North Korea supplies that and little else, which is precisely its value. By striking the peninsula in a conflict over Taiwan, China gains nothing and only risks bringing USFK and South Korea into a war they did not intend to enter. That would be a poor trade for Beijing. It is in China's interest to keep a conflict over Taiwan from expanding across the whole region, and that is what makes the peninsula difficult for Beijing to act against and equally difficult to discount. A USFK configured instead for operations against China resolves the dilemma on Beijing's behalf, and Washington pays twice for doing so. It would simplify China's assessment of USFK in a Taiwan scenario—as a target to be swiftly destroyed rather than one to be approached with caution—and would also invite strong South Korean resistance to a role Seoul did not choose, causing friction in the US–ROK alliance.

The contribution South Korea and USFK make is ambiguous by nature—a presence the Northern Theater has to account for, without either force being configured to fight China—and the ambiguity works only so long as the declared mission stays narrow.

The First Step of Reform: OPCON Transfer

Addressing the emerging strategic misalignment between Seoul and Washington requires a fundamental redesign of the alliance, focused on narrow objectives: 1) maintaining a certain level of durable US presence in South Korea; 2) defusing the recurring friction over USFK's strategic flexibility; 3) fair burden-sharing; and 4) control over a potential regional

11 Both South Korea and Japan are within reach of China's shorter-range missiles. The difference is what lies between each country, the launch points, and how much room each has behind them. Allied sensors cover the geographic area between China and Japan (the Yellow Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the East Sea/Sea of Japan). On the other hand, nothing comparable sits between the Chinese coast and South Korea, where flight times are measured in a handful of minutes. Nor does South Korea have Japan's depth. US forces in Japan are distributed from Okinawa to Misawa in northern Honshu, so that dispersal northward remains available. Meanwhile, Camp Humphreys, Osan, and Kunsan lie within a single threat envelope in the west-central peninsula. Being within range is not the same as being equally exposed. South Korea is closer, with less in front of it and less behind.

12 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 2024), 120–22, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF.

nuclear domino. The first three turn on where operational control sits; the fourth follows from them.

The agreement to transfer OPCON is two decades old and unexecuted. Two misguided assumptions have corrupted the debate.

The first holds that transferring OPCON would trigger US withdrawal and weaken the alliance. But the US military presence rests on the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty and the Status of Forces Agreement, not on who commands South Korean troops. The precedent of the US alliance with Japan settles the question: Washington never obtained operational control there, never withdrew, and the alliance never dissolved. Alliance, presence, and command are distinct layers.

The second holds that transferring OPCON would erode deterrence against North Korea. But OPCON is command over conventional forces, and extended deterrence flows from the 1953 treaty and the nuclear umbrella, regardless of who holds it. Coordination between the United States and South Korea would have to be redesigned; the commitment itself would not.

Beyond these two assumptions, three conditions attached to the transfer of command have become the real obstacle. OPCON transfer has been made conditions-based rather than time-based, and the danger is that its conditions serve as a permanent pretext.

The first, South Korean military capability, is circular. Operational proficiency develops only by bearing command responsibility. As long as US forces hold OPCON, South Korean officers will remain at the tactical level. The condition demands a capacity while withholding the structure that would build it. The condition is also unavailable on Washington's own terms and has been for 20 years. In 2006, the Pentagon assessed that South Korean forces were capable of defending the country, with American support in enabling areas such as airpower.[13] The 2026 US National Defense Strategy says the same thing in nearly the same words: South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea, with critical but more limited US support.[14] Twenty years apart, the assessment reads the same. What has gone un-transferred is not the capability but the command.

The second fares no better: The link between the North Korean nuclear threat and the pace of transfer is inconsistent. Wartime transfer talks scheduled for 1996 were postponed over the first nuclear crisis, when the North had no nuclear weapons. A decade later, 12 days before the North's first actual test, the Pentagon was pressing for transfer by 2009. A threat that delays transfer when it is a possibility and does not when it becomes

13 According to the 2006 congressional testimony of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless, "Our assessment is that the ROK forces are capable of defending the Republic of Korea, but that US support in key areas, such as airpower, is a critical enabler to that defense." See "United States–Republic of Korea Alliance: An Alliance at Risk?" Hearing before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., Sept. 27, 2006, 19–20, via GlobalSecurity.org at https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2006_hr/060927-transcript.pdf.

14 Song Sang-ho, "S. Korea Capable of Taking Primary Responsibility to Deter N.K. with 'Critical, but More Limited' US Support: NDS," Yonhap News Agency, Jan. 24, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260124002400315.

fact is not doing the work of a condition and could not, since extended deterrence does not depend on OPCON.

The third, a stable security environment, is a category error in itself. Instability is a structural constant, so making its absence a precondition renders transfer impossible by definition, and the more unstable the environment, the more urgent independent capability becomes. Demanding as a precondition something South Korea cannot achieve alone is not a condition but a veto.

Beneath these conditions lies a deeper fear—that, if US forces no longer command South Korean forces, the United States might not actually intervene when it counts—the fear of broken coupling. But this conflates two kinds. Command coupling arises from operational control; deterrence coupling arises from the presence, the nuclear-umbrella commitment, and the political will behind them. Japan faces the same nuclear-armed neighbors; since being constituted in 1954, Japan's post–World War II military, the Self-Defense Forces, has never been commanded by the United States, though no one doubts Washington's commitment to Tokyo. What creates coupling is the credibility of presence and commitment, not the chain of command.

The Second Step: Separating the Three "Hats"

Reforming the CFC cannot mean swapping the commander's nationality. If the combined structure is kept and only the top authority changes, the American general becomes deputy to a South Korean commander while still wearing their USFK and UN Command, or UNC, hats; the same authority, just labeled differently. Real reform requires dividing the three.

Under the new division of labor, the CFC should be split into two distinct, parallel commands. The USFK commander would no longer control South Korean forces and would focus on nuclear extended deterrence, while South Korean forces would lead conventional deterrence through their own joint staff, coordinating in parallel with USFK's command.

The UNC would also be confined strictly to armistice management. Beyond that mandate, it controls a multinational reinforcement channel through seven bases in Japan and serves as a conduit for strategic flexibility, which is the basis of the case for dissolving it. Narrowing the UNC to managing the armistice would blunt the argument for dissolving it.

None of this is a novel proposal. It is, almost to the word, what the United States itself planned. Testifying before the House International Relations Committee in Sept. 2006, Richard Lawless, then the deputy under secretary of defense for Asia–Pacific security, described the agreed path as a transition "from a system of shared operational control under a combined headquarters to a system of independent, parallel national commands where the US plays a supporting role to the ROK lead," which, he added, meant the disestablishment of the CFC. He called it "a natural evolution, one whose time has come both militarily and politically," and warned that stretching the transition beyond three years "only increases risk and degrades deterrence." According to Lawless, US forces

would remain throughout under an American commander, and the change could be made at "low risk" with no degradation of deterrence; he quoted the commander of USFK as deeming it achievable "within the next three years."[15] What is proposed here is thus not a departure from American design but a return to it.

The standing objection to a parallel structure is that splitting command sits near the top of what militaries are taught never to do. The operational costs are real: Coordination is slower than in a single chain, and deconfliction consumes staff effort that a unified structure does not. But the comparison is between failure modes, not between costs and none. A single chain fails differently: When two governments cannot agree on guidance in time, there is no second chain to fall back on, and a structure built for speed produces paralysis instead.

Interoperability and unified command are, moreover, not the same thing. The former is the technical capacity built from common communications, shared intelligence, linked targeting, and combined exercises; the latter merely adds the question of who holds final authority. The US–Japan alliance is the standing proof that the two can be separated: The Self-Defense Forces are commanded through their own joint staff, US forces through theirs, and seven decades of parallel coordination have produced interoperability that no one describes as deficient. Nor is this a legacy arrangement the two governments are leaving behind. Japan activated its Joint Operations Command in March 2025, and the United States is reconstituting US Forces Japan as its counterpart headquarters.[16] Washington's other Northeast Asian alliance is deepening coordination while keeping the chains separate.

Two objections remain. The first is that narrowing the US role in the Korean Peninsula to nuclear deterrence recreates the credibility problem of massive retaliation: When the choice is all or nothing, the threat is believed less. But that problem arises when the rungs below the nuclear threshold are missing. Here they are not removed but reassigned: Conventional response passes to the ally that fields it, and the ladder stays intact, held at its lower rungs by the state with the strongest interest in not being escalated past. What no command arrangement can supply is certainty about the nuclear decision itself: Authority over nuclear use is never divided with an ally. That is a condition of extended deterrence as such, and it holds for the US–ROK alliance as currently structured, no less than for the redesign.

Second, a parallel structure would barely reduce the US footprint, since interoperability demands a steady presence. But the objection assumes the footprint is fixed. South Korea leading conventional defense changes what the United States has to supply. Supporting an ally's campaign requires a different force and a different order of commitment than commanding one.

15 See Lawless testimony in "United States–Republic of Korea Alliance," 21–22.

16 Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Japan Stands Up New Joint Operations Command Planned to Work with Local US Forces," *USNI News*, March 25, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/03/25/japan-stands-up-new-joint-operations-command-planned-to-work-with-local-u-s-forces.

The redesign should be implemented in several phases with a timeline. Conditions without deadlines have functioned as an indefinite veto for two decades; the transfer should proceed with defined dates, with capability milestones attached to those dates rather than standing in their place.

Within two years, the "full operational capability" conditions will be converted into a verifiable checklist—independent command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence; theater-level intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; precision-strike assets; and the joint-staff capacity to plan a campaign—each with objective metrics and a target year as well as automatic progression, once met, turning "conditions" from instruments of indefinite delay into milestones with deadlines.

By year four, command goes parallel: South Korea's joint forces command will become an independent war-fighting headquarters, and the combined command will be reorganized as parallel coordination, with interoperability deliberately strengthened even as command divides.

Alongside these, the UNC's functions will be limited to armistice management under an agreement between the United States and South Korea, with the latter's consent codified as a condition for activating its reinforcement channel through rear bases in Japan.

Once the command has divided, US forces tied specifically to leading a ground campaign—namely, theater-level command elements and the formations built around that mission—can be redeployed to Japan and the Philippines. The key elements of combined deterrence and interoperability—air and naval cooperation, the joint-exercise architecture, intelligence-sharing infrastructure, the liaison structures that parallel coordination runs through, and the nuclear-deterrence function—should remain intact.

Conclusion: Toward Win-Win Alliance Modernization

From the proposed alliance redesign, the United States should gain four things.

First is strategic latitude. The CFC's current structure fixes the US presence to a mission defined in 1978 (commanding the ground defense of the Korean Peninsula), which determines not only how many forces are needed but what kind, regardless of priorities elsewhere. South Korea bearing conventional defense while the United States concentrates on nuclear deterrence is fair burden-sharing in practice, and it will free Washington to configure its presence against current requirements rather than inherited ones. Whether that means a smaller footprint or a differently composed one is a question the present structure does not permit Washington to ask.

Second is an end to the strategic flexibility quarrel. Two decades of ambiguity over what Seoul agreed to in 2006 would give way to a defined role, and the recurring fight over whether USFK can be committed beyond the peninsula would have terms to settle.

Third, and related, is greater control over a nuclear domino in East Asia. An ally with no say over how American forces on its territory are used has reason to look for alternatives, and

the nuclear debate in Seoul moves toward the mainstream. If Seoul goes nuclear, it will not be introducing the question in Tokyo but answering one already open there.[17]

None of this should loosen American influence over the alliance with South Korea. As long as Seoul depends on Washington's nuclear umbrella without a credible alternative, the deepest lever stays in American hands; and that dependence is not a condition South Korea can simply work its way out of, since authority over nuclear use is never divided with an ally. A redesign would transfer conventional command while leaving that asymmetry intact. But the lever is not unconditional; it holds so long as the umbrella remains something Seoul wants, and Washington preserves it by not testing it.

> **"Seoul would gain the autonomy it has sought without leaving the alliance; Washington would gain latitude it does not now have, an end to a recurring quarrel, and a nonproliferation order left intact.**

Fourth, and most importantly, the redesign should strengthen the political sustainability of the presence itself. Autonomy does not reduce the need for American forces; it changes what their presence rests on. Where an ally regards US forces as its own asset, they rest on shared interests. Where its autonomy has been denied, they rest on forbearance; and forbearance, unlike an agreement between governments, is not something either government controls. The political ground under the presence can erode until it no longer holds.

This redesign would not be a concession by either side. Seoul would gain the autonomy it has sought without leaving the alliance; Washington would gain latitude it does not now have, an end to a recurring quarrel, and a nonproliferation order left intact. Both should gain an alliance resting on terms that neither will have reason to contest.

17 Jesse Johnson, "Japan 'Cannot Avoid' Nuclear Weapons Debate, Defense Chief Koizumi Says," *Japan Times*, July 19, 2026, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/07/19/japan/politics/koizumi-japan-nuclear-weapons-debate.

CHAPTER 8

Thinking Beyond the Comfort Zone

JEFFREY ROBERTSON

The most important strategic development in South Korea during the Yoon Suk Yeol administration (2022–25) was not international. It was not North Korean missile launches, Chinese military exercises, or South Korea–Japan–US cooperation; it was domestic sociopolitical change.

During the 2022 presidential campaign, Yoon raised the issue of the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. On Jan. 11, 2023, eight months into his presidency, he reiterated this and added that, in response to North Korea's program, South Korea could develop its own nuclear arsenal.[1] Yoon's position transformed nuclear weapon acquisition from a fringe idea into a serious domestic policy debate.

After an extraordinarily negative, personality-driven, and divisive election campaign, Yoon had won by 0.73 percent, the narrowest presidential victory in South Korean history.[2] Soon afterward, prosecutors launched and accelerated multiple investigations into allegations against his defeated rival, Lee Jae Myung. Conservatives viewed the investigations as overdue accountability, while progressives viewed them as politically motivated lawfare. Fueled by a highly active social media scene, this led to widening political divisions and increased stress on domestic institutions.

On Dec. 3, 2024, President Yoon declared martial law, citing threats posed by "anti-state forces" and political obstruction. Within hours, the National Assembly voted to overturn the declaration, and Yoon rescinded the order in the early hours of Dec. 4.[3] The episode exposed deep domestic political polarization, triggered an impeachment process, and raised serious questions about the resilience of South Korean democracy.

1 Uk Yang, "Is South Korea Going Nuclear?" *38 North,* Feb. 3, 2023, https://www.38north.org/2023/02/is-south-korea-going-nuclear.

2 Cho Yi-jun, "Yoon Suk-yeol Elected President on Slimmest of Margins," *Chosun Daily,* March, 10, 2022, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2022/03/10/2GSLGZVVSPW266BM3OVTX3PBYI.

3 Choe Sang-Hun, John Yoon, Jin Yu Young, and Thomas Fuller, "President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea Declares Martial Law, Then Backs Down," *New York Times,* Dec. 3, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/world/asia/south-korea-martial-law.html.

These three events were domestic crises but had immediate foreign policy impacts. The emergence of a mainstream nuclear weapons debate, the rapid intensification of political polarization, and, ultimately, the martial law crisis, sent shock waves through the US–South Korea alliance. All three developments carried profound implications for regional security and American strategy, yet none occupied a central place in mainstream Washington policy discussions until they were already unfolding. Each was discussed in non-mainstream media and blogs yet was overlooked in mainstream think tank analysis.

The failure to anticipate these issues raises an uncomfortable question: Why does Washington repeatedly struggle to anticipate major domestic political developments in Seoul?

The answer is not a lack of information. Intelligence failures are rarely caused by the complete absence of information. They emerge because information is interpreted through preexisting mental models that shape what evidence is noticed, what is ignored, and how contradictory information is reconciled. These mental shortcuts help analysts manage information overload and complexity but also create systematic distortions in judgment.[4]

South Korea presents a particularly difficult analytical challenge because it combines the universal pathologies of intelligence analysis, a unique set of country-specific obstacles, and a highly dynamic target. The result is a recurring tendency to misunderstand domestic sociopolitical change on the Korean Peninsula.

Cognitive Challenges

On Korean Peninsula issues, mainstream Washington think tanks hold a near obsession with "strengthening" or "modernizing" the alliance with Seoul and a commensurate unwillingness to contemplate its end.[5] More imaginative and creative questions, which are just as relevant, are never asked: What would the bilateral relationship look like beyond the alliance? How could US national interests be pursued in the absence of an alliance? What role would South Korea play in East Asia in the absence of an alliance? Such questions remain outside the realm of possibility in mainstream think tanks. This essay briefly touches on linear thinking, imaginative failure, and mirror imaging to highlight how mainstream Washington think tanks can miss core emerging issues.

4 Richards J. Heuer Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Langley: Central Intelligence Agency, 2010), 4–7.

5 Scott Harold, "Increasing the Value of the 'Linchpin' Alliance between the US and South Korea," Korea Economic Institute, Oct. 15, 2025, https://keia.org/analysis/increasing-the-value-of-the-linchpin-alliance-between-the-u-s-and-south-korea; J. James Kim, "Redefining the US–ROK Alliance in an Era of Uncertainty," Stimson Center, Jan. 30, 2026, https://www.stimson.org/2026/redefining-the-u-s-rok-alliance-in-an-era-of-uncertainty; Michael O'Hanlon, Michael Green, and Jung Pak, "Reimagining the US–South Korea Alliance," Brookings Institution, Aug. 22, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/events/reimagining-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance; Victor Cha, Choi Kang, and Katrin Katz, *Strengthening Extended Nuclear Deterrence in a Shifting Strategic Landscape* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026), https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-republic-korea-alliance-strengthening-extended-nuclear-deterrence-shifting.

Linear thinking assumes change occurs at a gradual and incremental pace. It assumes political systems evolve steadily rather than experience abrupt disruptions or sudden crises. This tendency makes analysts less sensitive to the possibility that underlying tensions accumulate over time before manifesting in rapid, unexpected, and sudden political change. South Korean political polarization and extremism have been on the rise since the Dec. 2016 impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye. President Yoon's Dec. 2024 imposition of martial law should not have come as a surprise.

Imaginative failure narrows the range of outcomes considered plausible, limiting analytical effectiveness. Before Dec. 2024, analysts in Washington did not consider political turmoil, let alone the imposition of martial law, to be a possibility.[6] Political turmoil appeared inconsistent with prevailing Western expectations regarding trends toward democratic maturity. Non-mainstream analysts noted the Dec. 2016 impeachment of Park, the narrowness of Yoon's 2022 victory, and the trends in populism, polarization, and extremism in the immediate aftermath of Yoon's victory.[7] Imaginative failure and the unwillingness to accept risk meant that Washington's mainstream think tanks did not.

Mirror imaging creates additional distortions by encouraging analysts to assume that South Korean leaders, policymakers, and voters view strategic issues through the same normative and strategic lens as their counterparts in the United States. One of the most consistent findings in intelligence studies is that foreign societies behave rationally according to assumptions, priorities, and historical experiences that outsiders neither share nor fully understand.[8]

The assumption that nuclear weapons carry the same "taboo" in Seoul as they do in Washington is an example. American analysts grew up in a cultural environment saturated with warnings about nuclear catastrophe, from *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* to Cold War films and music. South Koreans, by contrast, view nuclear weapons less as symbols of apocalypse than as symbols of power, prestige, technological advancement, and strategic self-reliance.[9]

6 Victor Cha and Dana Kim, "Yoon Suk Yeol: What to Expect from South Korea's Next President," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 9, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/yoon-suk-yeol-what-expect-south-koreas-next-president; Andrew Yeo, "What to Expect from the Incoming South Korean President's Domestic and Foreign Policy Agendas," Brookings Institution, March 10, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-to-expect-from-the-incoming-south-korean-presidents-domestic-and-foreign-policy-agendas; Anthony B. Kim, "Conserving, Advancing Freedom Is Central to South Korea's Alliance with US," Heritage Foundation, Aug. 19, 2022, https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/conserving-advancing-freedom-central-south-koreas-alliance-us.

7 Jeffrey Robertson, "Yoon as a 'Window of Opportunity' in Australia–Korea Relations," *Junotane*, March 15, 2026, https://www.junotane.com/p/2022-04-11-yoon-as-a-window-of-opportunity.

8 Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, 72.

9 Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Feb. 21, 2022, https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons; Sangmi Jung, "안보 vs. 국가 위상 : 컨조인트 실험을 통한 한국 대중의 핵무장 여론 분석" ["National Prestige vs. Security: A Conjoint Experiment on Korean Public Opinion on Nuclear Armament"], *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* 17, no. 1 (2025): 143–72, https://doi.org/10.35369/jpus.17.1.202503.143.

The above problems are not abstract concepts confined to intelligence textbooks; they have repeatedly appeared in American assessments dating back to the Korean War. Studies of intelligence failures in that war found that warning indicators were often available but discounted because they contradicted prevailing assumptions about adversaries, intentions, and acceptable risk.[10] Similar analytical failures remain visible today.

Contemporary Korea–Specific Challenges

Cognitive biases provide a useful starting point but do not operate in isolation. Analytical judgments are also shaped by the time-specific environments in which information is collected and interpreted. In the South Korean case, a number of country-specific factors constrain access to information, narrow the range of perspectives considered, and increase the likelihood that existing assumptions go unchallenged.

First, language remains a major obstacle. Despite decades of alliance cooperation, much of the most prominent American analysis still depends heavily on English–language materials, translations, and a relatively small number of intermediaries. Important political debates emerge in Korean–language discourse long before they become visible to foreign observers. While computer translation aids and improves access, there is an inherent gap that remains between translation and cultural understanding, which can only be overcome by linguistic competency.[11] Even common words —such as region, middle power, alliance, and security —have culturally specific nuances that lead to misunderstanding.[12]

Linguistic incompetence leads to further analytical challenges; most notably, the filtering of information and access through a small number of epistemic "gatekeepers." Foreign analysts coming to South Korea frequently rely on a limited network of officials, journalists, think tank researchers, and English–speaking experts. These individuals provide valuable insights but also function as gatekeepers who filter information. Over time, analytical communities become trapped inside self-reinforcing information ecosystems that amplify some perspectives while excluding others. Thus, American academic and think tank visitors in South Korea routinely interact with a limited number of interlocutors whose positions are already known, who can be easily accessed from back home, and who will rarely challenge expectations.

10 See P. K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950: Perceptions and Reality," *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 5 (Fall–Winter 2001), https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/studies-in-intelligence-fall-winter-2001/two-strategic-intelligence-mistakes-in-korea-1950; Jonathan Corrado, "Rethinking Intelligence Failure: China's Intervention in the Korean War," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 36, no. 1 (2023): 200–202, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2021.1938905.

11 Jeffrey Robertson, "Is Pyongyang Different in Washington and Seoul? English and Korean Language Policy Discourse on North Korea," Korea Economic Institute, April 23, 2019, https://keia.org/publication/is-pyongyang-different-in-washington-and-seoul-english-and-korean-language-policy-discourse-on-north-korea.

12 Jeffrey Robertson, "Australia, Korea, and the Entangled Language of Common Strategic Interests," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 2 (2023): 188–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2023.2179016.

Second, elitism and groupthink compound analytical difficulties by discouraging dissent and reinforcing consensus. In highly centralized policy and academic communities, authority, status, and institutional prestige often shape which perspectives are considered legitimate. For a junior academic or analyst, it is impossible to hold a contrarian position if one wants to access funding, apply for fellowships, or secure participation in think tank panels.

Modern social media platforms intensify this tendency. Think tanks, commentators, and experts compete for visibility in algorithm-driven information environments that reward clear, confident, and widely shared narratives over nuanced or contrarian analysis. As similar voices amplify one another across digital networks, alternative perspectives are crowded out, creating the appearance of consensus even where significant disagreement or uncertainty still exists. Consensus becomes self-reinforcing, generating a false sense of confidence even when important questions remain unresolved. Elitism thus contributes directly to groupthink by elevating conformity over critical scrutiny and reducing the diversity of ideas necessary for effective analysis.

“More work is done on “strengthening” or “modernizing” the US–South Korea alliance than on alternatives to it. This reflects bipartisan consensus in Washington and is therefore not questioned.

Motivated reasoning and politicization present further challenges. Korean Peninsula analysis is routinely influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by preferred policy outcomes, ideological commitments, and institutional incentives. As noted above, more work is done on “strengthening” or “modernizing” the US–South Korea alliance than on alternatives to it. This reflects bipartisan consensus in Washington and is therefore not questioned.

Collectively, these cognitive tendencies contribute to closure, the pressure to settle on a coherent explanation rather than tolerate uncertainty, ambiguity, or competing interpretations. While closure provides intellectual comfort and facilitates decision-making, it also reduces analytical flexibility and discourages reconsideration of existing assumptions. The cumulative effect is an analytical environment that privileges continuity over change, consensus over dissent, and certainty over uncertainty, increasing the likelihood that important developments will be overlooked until they become impossible to ignore. This is the story of Korean Peninsula analysis in Washington, yet it only gets worse.

Embedded Narrative Frames

An even deeper problem lies in the narrative frameworks that South Korea is currently understood through. For decades, American analysis has been shaped by a largely coherent image of South Korea as a liberal democratic success story, a Cold War frontline state, a middle power committed to the liberal international order, and a reliable ally embedded within the US–led alliance system.

Each of these characterizations contain elements of truth. Together, however, they have become so deeply embedded that they often function less as analytical tools than as

assumptions. Once established, these narratives shape what analysts expect to see, what developments appear plausible, and which warning signs attract attention. Understanding contemporary South Korea therefore requires challenging these inherited frames rather than treating them as fixed descriptions of reality.

The first frame is South Korea as a liberal democratic stalwart. Following its democratization and rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s, South Korea came to be viewed as one of the great democratic success stories of the post–Cold War era. It was frequently presented as evidence that economic modernization, democratic consolidation, and integration into the liberal international order could reinforce one another.

This narrative encourages analysts to view South Korea as a mature and stable democracy whose democratic trajectory is largely secure. Once a country receives such a label, observers often become less sensitive to signs of institutional stress or political decay. Intensifying polarization, declining trust in institutions, political radicalization, constitutional confrontations, and growing social divisions can be interpreted as temporary disruptions rather than indicators of deeper structural problems.

Media reporting and think tank op-eds in the aftermath of the 2024 declaration of martial law highlight this problem. The overwhelming majority of pieces took the position that the overturning of the martial law decree highlighted the strength of South Korea's democracy.[13] It was left to non-mainstream sources to highlight that, in order to arrive at a point where an incumbent leader can even *contemplate* imposing martial law, there must have been very real weaknesses in democratic institutions.[14] The assumption of democratic stability created an analytical blind spot, leading observers to underestimate the possibility of political crises or democratic erosion until such developments became impossible to ignore.

The second frame is Korea as a Cold War frontline state. This perspective prioritizes deterrence, military readiness, alliance management, and confrontation with North Korea. It emerges from the realities of division, the Korean War, and decades of confrontation on one of the world's most heavily militarized borders. Within this framework, South Korea is primarily understood as a strategic outpost in a broader geopolitical contest. This was demonstrated in the broad consensus on expectations of Yoon's positive contribution to the alliance. In the aftermath of his 2022 election, Washington think tanks across the political spectrum —including the Center for Strategic and International Studies; the Heritage Foundation; and the Brookings Institution —shared their expectations of how Yoon would, and should, strengthen the alliance by expanding military cooperation, align

13 Andy Lim, Seiyeon Ji, and Victor Cha, "Yoon Declares Martial Law in South Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dec. 3, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/yoon-declares-martial-law-south-korea.

14 "Korea's Democracy Is Stronger in the West," *Junotane,* June 21, 2026, https://www.junotane.com/p/koreas-democracy-is-stronger-in-the-west.

more closely with US strategic aims in the Indo–Pacific region, and deepen trilateral security ties with Japan.[15]

While this perspective remains important for understanding Korean Peninsula security policy, it encourages analysts to focus overwhelmingly on external threats and to underestimate internal political developments. South Korea's political polarization, generational change, institutional tensions, economic grievances, and democratic backsliding can receive less attention because they are viewed as secondary to the security challenge posed by North Korea. Analysts become highly attuned to military developments while remaining less sensitive to changes occurring within South Korean society and politics.

The third frame is South Korea as a middle power. This framework emphasizes diplomacy, coalition-building, multilateral engagement, and international activism. South Korea is portrayed as a constructive actor that advances its interests through institution-building, mediation, development assistance, and support for international norms.

While this perspective captures important aspects of South Korean diplomacy, it also obscures the domestic tensions that shape strategic choices. Foreign policy initiatives often emerge not only from strategic calculations but also from domestic political incentives, leadership preferences, and competing visions of national identity. By emphasizing continuity and activism, the middle power lens understates the extent to which South Korean foreign policy is shaped by internal political contestation.

The middle power framework also reflects assumptions rooted in a very different international environment. Developed during an era of American primacy and a relatively stable liberal international order, middle power theory has assumed that states could advance their interests primarily through multilateral institutions, coalition-building, and rules-based cooperation. Intensifying great power rivalry, economic coercion, technological competition, and growing security pressures have since weakened many of those assumptions.

Traditional middle power prescriptions, therefore, provide limited guidance for states confronting systemic change. Yet the persistence of the framework encourages analysts to expect familiar patterns of mediation and order maintenance, even as the strategic environment increasingly demands adaptation, alignment decisions, and renewed emphasis on security as understood in the now-past Cold War era.

The fourth frame is South Korea as a US ally. This perspective treats alliance maintenance as the defining feature of South Korean behavior. Policy choices are frequently interpreted in terms of their implications for the alliance with the United States, while domestic political developments are often evaluated through the lens of alliance cohesion. Changes in defense spending, diplomacy toward China, relations with Japan, or policy toward

15 Cha and Kim, "Yoon Suk Yeol"; Yeo, "What to Expect"; Bruce Klingner, "South Korea's New President Is Welcome Development for US Policy on North Korea, China," Heritage Foundation, March 11, 2022, https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/south-koreas-new-president-welcome-development-us-policy-north-korea-china.

North Korea are therefore understood primarily in terms of their impact on alliance management.[16]

While the US alliance remains a central pillar of South Korean security, this framework can lead analysts to overlook the domestic political forces that shape alliance policy. Electoral competition, ideological divisions, nationalism, economic interests, and public opinion all influence how South Korean leaders approach the alliance. By focusing primarily on alliance outcomes, analysts risk treating policy in Seoul as a derivative of Washington's strategic preferences rather than as the product of domestic political debate and contestation.

The problem emerges when analytical frameworks become analytical prisons. Once a particular interpretation becomes dominant, contradictory evidence is more likely to be discounted, minimized, or explained away. The result is a reduced ability to recognize political and strategic developments that fall outside expectations.

Challenging Embedded Narrative Frames

The question posed at the outset was straightforward: Why does Washington repeatedly struggle to anticipate major domestic political developments in Seoul? The problem is not a lack of information but the assumptions that information is interpreted through. Warning signs preceded the nuclear debate, political polarization, and the martial law crisis, yet were discounted because they fell outside established expectations.

> **"The challenge for the US is to build analytical institutions that are as adaptive as the South Korea they seek to understand.**

Strategic surprise on the Korean Peninsula is unlikely to arise from information that is unavailable. It is more likely to arise from information that is available but discounted because it falls outside established expectations. The challenge for the US is therefore to build analytical institutions that are as adaptive as the South Korea they seek to understand. Three paths forward could address this issue.

First, broaden the community. Korea analysis should not be confined to the traditional pipeline from international relations departments to think tanks and government. Greater disciplinary diversity and practitioners outside the foreign policy establishment would challenge established assumptions, introduce new methods, and encourage new ways of thinking. In particular, "next generation" programs should encourage creativity rather than conformity in analysis.

16 Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "The Global Consequences of Yoon's Martial Law Gambit," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dec. 4, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/12/south-korea-martial-law-foreign-policy-us-alliance; Edward Wong and Michael Crowley, "Martial Law in South Korea Tests Biden and a Key US Alliance," *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/us/politics/south-korea-martial-law-united-states.html; Bruce Klingner, "Seoul's Constitutional Crisis Has Upset East Asia's Security Status Quo," Heritage Foundation, Dec. 16, 2024, https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/seouls-constitutional-crisis-has-upset-east-asias-security-status-quo.

Second, encourage greater creativity in output. Korea analysis should move beyond the dominance of short policy briefs and commentary aimed at immediate policy debates. Institutions should support a broader range of analytical products, including long-form essays, documentaries, graphic novels, and other interdisciplinary projects. Different forms of communication reach different audiences, encourage different modes of thinking, and allow for the exploration of more complex ideas than a conventional policy brief.

Third, normalize speculation. Institutions should reward rather than discourage the exploration of unconventional, unpopular, or low-probability scenarios. Rather than focusing solely on the most likely future, analysts should systematically examine alternative political trajectories that challenge prevailing assumptions. The purpose of speculation is not prediction but preparation: By expanding the range of futures considered plausible, policymakers are better equipped to recognize strategic surprise before it unfolds.

The NATO Defense College's *NATO 2099* project illustrates the value of institutionalizing imaginative analysis.[17] By commissioning science fiction and speculative fiction writers to explore the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's future through a graphic novel, the project sought not to predict the future but to expand the range of futures policymakers were prepared to consider.[18] Korea analysis would benefit from a similar willingness to broaden the analytical community, encourage more creative forms of analytical output, and systematically explore alternative futures.

Such approaches would not eliminate strategic surprise but would reduce the likelihood that important political developments are overlooked because they fall outside established expectations.

17 Jaouen Salaün et al., *NATO 2099: A Graphic Novel* (Brussels: NATO, 2024), https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/nato-2099-a-graphic-novel/?wpdmdl=2167.

18 Florence Glaub, "About *NATO 2099*," NATO Defense College, 2024, https://www.ndc.nato.int/nato2099/about.php.

About the Authors

JAMES PARK is a research associate at the Quincy Institute's East Asia program. His research focuses on Korean Peninsula security and US grand strategy in East Asia. At the Quincy Institute, James has authored several research briefs, including "From Punishment to Denial: Stabilizing Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula" (May 2025), "The US–Japan–South Korea Trilateral Partnership: Pursuing Regional Stability and Avoiding Military Escalation" (April 2024) with Mike Mochizuki, and "Paths to Crisis and Conflict Over Taiwan" (January 2024) with Michael Swaine. His short essays and op-eds have appeared in outlets including the *National Interest*, the *Diplomat,* and *Responsible Statecraft*. He holds an MA in Asian Studies at George Washington University, a graduate certificate in China Studies at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, and a BA in International Studies with a minor in Mandarin Chinese from Arizona State University.

ANKIT PANDA is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is also an affiliate of the Center for Nuclear Security Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His ongoing research is focused on nuclear strategy in the 21st century, artificial intelligence and nuclear weapons, escalation, space security, and US alliances. Panda is the author of *The New Nuclear Age: At the Precipice of Armageddon* (Polity, 2025), *Indo–Pacific Missile Arsenals: Avoiding Spirals and Mitigating Risks* (Carnegie Endowment, 2023), and *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2020).

SO JIN LEE is an Assistant Professor of International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Public and International Affairs. She studies how states use coercion and inducement (sanctions, positive incentives, and costly signals) and how adversaries, allies, and publics perceive their credibility. Drawing on political psychology, her work spans economic statecraft, nuclear deterrence, and alliance politics, with a focus on East Asia. Lee's research has appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *PS: Political Science and Politics* and has been supported by the National Science Foundation and the Eurasia Group Foundation. Previously, she was a Stanton Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and a Grand Strategy, Security, and Statecraft Postdoctoral Fellow at MIT and Harvard. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Duke University.

JENNY TOWN is a Senior Fellow at the Stimson Center and Director of 38 North. Her research covers North Korea, US–DPRK relations, US–ROK alliance relations and extended deterrence, and Northeast Asia regional security. She is also a Research Fellow in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna, an Associate Fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and a Member of the National Committee on North Korea, and she serves on the Editorial Board for *Inkstick*. She previously served as the Assistant Director of the US–Korea Institute at SAIS and an expert reviewer for Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* index, where she previously worked on the Human Rights

in North Korea Project. She holds a BA in East Asian Studies and International Relations from Westmar University and a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.

SANGSIN LEE is Director of the Unification Policy Research Office and Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification, or KINU, Seoul. His research focuses on public opinion, Korean politics, inter–Korean relations, and international security, particularly South Korean attitudes toward nuclear armament and peaceful coexistence. He leads the KINU Unification Survey and the Global Survey on Korean Unification, examining public perceptions of unification, regional security, and international relations. His recent coauthored publications include *KINU Unification Survey 2026: Executive Summary* (2026), *KINU Unification Survey 2025: Cooperative and Belligerent Internationalism* (2026), and *2025 Global Survey on Korean Unification: Executive Summary* (2025). His current work examines nuclear security, changing geopolitical dynamics, and the future of peace on the Korean Peninsula.

JOHN DELURY is Resident Professor of International Politics at the Hopkins–Nanjing Center as a member of the faculty of Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, or SAIS. A historian of modern China and expert on US–China relations and Korean Peninsula affairs, he is the author of *Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey and the CIA's Covert War in China* (Cornell University Press, 2022) and coauthor, with Orville Schell, of *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century* (Random House, 2013) along with numerous scholarly articles and book chapters. For over a decade, he served as Professor of Chinese Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul. In 2023, he was selected as the inaugural Rome Prize Fellow in East–West Interactions at the American Academy in Rome. He received his BA, MA, and PhD in history from Yale University.

KYURI PARK is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research focuses on international security and cooperation in the Asia–Pacific region, particularly the strategic behavior of small and middle powers amid China's rise and US–China competition. Her forthcoming book project, *Connection Strategies of Asia–Pacific Secondary States: Security Cooperation and Network Power*, examines how these states diversify partnerships to enhance security and strategic autonomy, drawing on a unique dataset of joint military exercises from 1970 to 2024. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia–Pacific Research Center and the College of William & Mary. She received her PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Southern California, MA from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and BA from Ewha Womans University.

JAEWOO JUN is a Research Fellow and project manager at the Center for Security and Strategy, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, or KIDA, a government-affiliated research institution in Seoul. At the Penn Project on the Future of US–China Relations, he is a fellow of the Transpacific and Asian Dialogue on China. His research focuses on great power politics around the Korean Peninsula and East Asian security, and he is a regular contributor to *Global NK*, published by the East Asia Institute. He previously held a research assistant professorship at Hanyang University, an adjunct professorship at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and lectured at the University of Seoul. He holds a PhD from Peking University.

JEFFREY ROBERTSON is an Associate Professor of Diplomatic Studies at Yonsei

University in Seoul. Before moving to academia, he worked for the Australian government in the field of diplomacy, foreign policy, and North Asia. His research interests include the diplomatic practice and foreign policy of middle powers with a focus on North Asia and the Korean Peninsula. He is author of *Diplomatic Style and Foreign Policy: A Case Study of South Korea* (Routledge, 2016) and *When Korea Turns: Strategic Questions on a Crumbling World Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026). He is currently completing *The North Korea Watchers*, an ethnographic fiction reconstituting the diverse stories of the North Korea watcher community into a cohesive and engaging study of espionage, foreign policy, and folly. He writes creatively and provocatively with a down-to-earth academic twist on his Substack, *Junotane*.

Acknowledgments

This volume would not have been possible without the support and dedication of donors and several individuals. First and foremost, the Quincy Institute would like to express deep gratitude to Ploughshares and to George Long for making this project possible.

I am also grateful to several colleagues at the Quincy Institute who supported the project in various ways: Brandon Carr, Lora Lumpe, Jake Werner, and Jessica Rosenblum. I appreciate your guidance, support, and encouragement throughout this project.

Finally, I sincerely appreciate the authors for their rigorous work, creative thinking, and willingness to challenge themselves throughout multiple drafting stages.

—James Park
November 2026

About the Quincy Institute

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft believes that efforts to maintain unilateral US dominance around the world through coercive force are neither possible nor desirable.

A transpartisan, action-oriented research institution, QI promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and towards vigorous diplomacy in pursuit of international peace. We connect and mobilize a network of policy experts and academics who are dedicated to a vision of American foreign policy based on military restraint rather than domination. We help increase and amplify their output, and give them a voice in Washington and in the media.

Since its establishment in 2019, QI has been committed to improving standards for think tank transparency and producing unbiased research. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at www.quincyinst.org/coi/ and its list of donors at www.quincyinst.org/about.


Qi
QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT
quincyinst.org