



CLEARING THE PATH FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: CONFIDENCE-BUILDING IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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I. Introduction

This paper explores possibilities for building confidence in the Korean peninsula to address the conflict dynamics that underlie excessive militarization in this sub-region. These dynamics, which derive from the Korean war (1950–1953), have become increasingly dangerous over time with heavy reliance on deterrence on both sides. The Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) regularly holds the world’s largest military exercises together with the United States, which also provides extended nuclear deterrence to South Korea. On the other side, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea)—which is estimated to have an arsenal of 50 nuclear weapons—frequently demonstrates its nuclear delivery capabilities through provocative missile tests.¹ While there has been no major conflict in the peninsula for over seven decades, military incidents between the two Koreas are a relatively frequent occurrence. The related risks are currently magnified by the pre-emptive military doctrines on both sides which drive arms race dynamics and lower the threshold for nuclear weapon use.²

Confidence-building measures (CBMs)—broadly defined as efforts to ‘reduce tensions, misunderstandings and the danger of surprise attack through measures of restraint, transparency, and active contact and dialogue’—as an approach to manage the deep-rooted conflict in the Korean peninsula are by no means new.³ In particular, confidence-building has long been at the centre of past inter-Korean reconciliation efforts, which culminated in the September 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) that included far-reaching military CBMs aimed at stabilizing the border between North and South Korea.⁴ However, this approach has been discredited in recent years by the failure of North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy in 2019 and the

SUMMARY

● This paper explores possibilities for building confidence in the Korean peninsula to address the conflict dynamics and militarization in the region. It argues that a key reason for the failure of past diplomatic efforts has been the coercive approach in pursuit of immediate nuclear disarmament in North Korea.

In addition to a more incremental approach to North Korean–United States nuclear diplomacy focused on arms control, the paper highlights the need for reciprocity in terms of sanctions relief, as well as more robust confidence-building measures aimed at reducing instability and addressing the security rationales behind North Korea’s nuclear policy.

At the same time, it proposes embedding nuclear diplomacy into a broader framework of cooperative risk reduction and arms control that also includes South Korea and possibly other regional actors. If sustained over time, such a framework could ultimately also promote nuclear disarmament alongside the normalization of political relations between key conflict parties.

¹ Kristensen, H. M. and Korda, M., ‘North Korean nuclear forces’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2024: Armaments, Disarmament and National Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2024), pp. 339–53.

² Erästö, T., ‘Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military alliances’, *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, June 2024, pp. 14–15.

³ Lachowski, Z et al., *Tools for Building Confidence on the Korean Peninsula* (SIPRI and Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich: Stockholm, 2007), p. 4.

⁴ National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), ‘Agreement on the implementation of the historic Panjunjom declaration in the military domain’, 19 Sep. 2018.

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subsequent erosion of the CMA. Since 2020 the South Korean–US alliance has almost exclusively relied on military and economic pressure as a means of addressing the nuclear challenge from North Korea. This approach is partly shared by the rest of the international community, with several United Nations Security Council sanctions resolutions demanding that the country rejoin the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and ‘abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programmes in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner’.⁵ In line with these demands, previous US efforts to engage North Korea—while also containing elements of confidence building—have largely been based on coercive diplomacy. This has reflected the logic that the combination of punishment created by sanctions and rewards in the form of sanctions relief can convince North Korea to move towards disarmament—a goal which tends to be framed more broadly as ‘the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula’.⁶

This paper argues that the coercive approach in pursuit of immediate nuclear disarmament in North Korea is not only unrealistic but has also created an obstacle to more sustainable diplomacy which could make this goal achievable in the long term. In addition to calling for a more incremental approach initially focused on arms control, the paper highlights the need for more robust CBMs and reciprocity in terms of sanctions relief as keys to more successful nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. At the same time, it proposes embedding nuclear diplomacy into a broader framework of cooperative risk reduction and arms control—which, if sustained over time, could ultimately promote nuclear disarmament alongside the normalization of political relations between North Korea and the USA as well as between the two Koreas. Particular attention is paid to the need to stabilize deterrence relationships among key conflict parties by means of ‘strategic CBMs’—defined here as measures aimed at reducing arms race and crisis instability in the Korean peninsula and, ultimately, at addressing the security rationales behind North Korea’s nuclear deterrence policy.

Section II of the paper provides an overview on past nuclear diplomacy with North Korea, pointing to insufficient attention to confidence building and lack of readiness to reward incremental nuclear concessions with sanctions relief as its main shortcomings. Questioning the demand for immediate disarmament in North Korea, it highlights that denuclearization is a long-term goal intertwined with political normalization. Section III explains how the overreliance on deterrence, to which the failure of past diplomatic efforts has contributed, has exacerbated the conflict in the Korean peninsula. The focus here is on the arms race dynamics and escalation risks created by pre-emptive military doctrines, as well as the erosion of previous military CBMs between North and South Korea. Section IV makes the case for embedding nuclear diplomacy into a more comprehensive framework for cooperative risk reduction and arms control, involving both nuclear and conventional forces. Section V summarizes the policy recommendations based on the preceding discussion.

⁵ See e.g. UN Security Council Resolution 1718, 14 Oct. 2006, para. 6.

⁶ See e.g. Sheen, S.-H., ‘Enabling effective coercive diplomacy for DPRK denuclearization’, *Global NK*, 2 Sep. 2024.



II. Shortcomings of past nuclear diplomacy towards North Korea

Denuclearization has long been viewed by South Korea, the USA and the rest of the international community as the primary goal of diplomatic efforts with North Korea. In the 1990s and early 2000s—after the USA had withdrawn non-strategic nuclear weapons from South Korea and before North Korea had developed nuclear weapons—this goal meant ensuring non-proliferation in the Korean peninsula. However, the practical meaning of denuclearization changed dramatically with North Korea's 2003 withdrawal from the NPT and its six nuclear tests in 2006–17. Rather than just non-proliferation, denuclearization came to mean the verified dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. At the same time, a coercive element to nuclear diplomacy with the country was institutionalized through several UN Security Council sanctions resolutions which have since 2006 called for North Korea to 'abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programmes in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner'; to rejoin the NPT—which the country joined in 1985 and withdrew from in 2003—and to 'suspend all activities related to its ballistic missile programme'.⁷ The demand for nuclear disarmament also forms the basis for several unilateral sanctions on North Korea. However, to date the coercive approach has not achieved its objectives, whereas previous demonstrations of nuclear restraint by North Korea—which have coincided with US gestures indicating interest in confidence building—have not been sustained over time.

Before 2003, significant diplomatic progress towards non-proliferation in the Korean peninsula was made based on the 1994 Agreed Framework—whereby North Korea verifiably froze its plutonium production activities in return for US help in the construction of two light-water nuclear reactors and deliveries of heavy fuel oil.⁸ In addition to the phased implementation of the energy-related aspects of the Agreed Framework, which was facilitated by a multinational consortium, the confidence-building elements of the agreement included a joint commitment to normalize political and economic relations as well as a US commitment to provide formal assurances against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against North Korea.⁹ The joint South Korean–US military exercises were also scaled down to facilitate the negotiation and implementation of the Agreed Framework.¹⁰

The US administration under President George W. Bush abandoned the Agreed Framework in late 2002 in response to revelations of North Korea's undeclared uranium enrichment activities—which critics argue could have been addressed through the existing dialogue enabled by the agreement.¹¹ Already prior to this, the Bush administration had adopted a more confrontational approach to North Korea, notably by labelling it, alongside

⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 1718 (note 5), paras 5 and 6.

⁸ Agreed Framework of 21 October 1994 between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, para. I(2), in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Information Circular no. INFCIRC/457, 2 Nov. 1994.

⁹ Agreed Framework (note 8).

¹⁰ See Collins, R., 'A brief history of the US–ROK combined military exercises', 38 *North*, 26 Feb. 2014.

¹¹ See Interview with Stephen Bosworth, *Frontline*, 21 Feb. 2003.

Iraq and Iran, as part of the ‘axis of evil’ in January 2002.¹² While North Korean threat perceptions regarding US intentions—like the country’s nuclear programme—date back to the 1950s, the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 highlighted the real prospect of a similar war of regime change in North Korea. As North Korean officials have stated, it was this existential threat that ultimately motivated the country’s decision to acquire a nuclear deterrent.¹³

The Bush administration sought to re-engage North Korea as part of the six-party talks which began in late 2003 and included China, Japan, South Korea and Russia as the other parties.¹⁴ In the September 2005 joint statement, all parties to the six-party talks reaffirmed the goal of ‘the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner’, while the USA affirmed that it had ‘no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons’.¹⁵ Reminiscent of the Agreed Framework, the USA also agreed to discuss the delivery of light-water nuclear reactors to North Korea.¹⁶ Apart from a short-lived suspension of North Korea’s plutonium production activities, however, these efforts produced few results.¹⁷ In addition to disagreements on the scope of nuclear verification and the escalatory dynamics around North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests, as well as the resulting sanctions against the country, one problem seems to have been that the USA treated the negotiations as a mechanism for containment rather than confidence building.¹⁸

After North Korea left the six-party talks in April 2009, years of diplomatic non-engagement followed—with the exception of a failed attempt in February 2012 by the Obama administration to freeze North Korea’s nuclear programme in exchange for food aid.¹⁹ During this time, tensions increased, culminating in 2017 with North Korea’s intercontinental missile tests, and mutual nuclear threats by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump.²⁰ Quite unexpectedly, however, bilateral nuclear diplomacy was revived in 2018 in the context of inter-Korean engagement. In spring 2018, following diplomatic overtures to North Korea by South Korea under President Moon Jae-in, a clandestine North Korean–US meeting took place in April.²¹ Later that month, North Korea declared a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, and in May it destroyed the Punggye-ri nuclear test site.²² After this, a historic North Korea–USA summit took place in Singapore in June 2018. In a joint statement at the summit, the parties noted that ‘mutual confidence building can promote the denuclearization of the Korean Pen-

¹² Glass, A., ‘President Bush cites “axis of evil,” Jan. 29, 2002’, *Politico*, 29 Jan. 2002.

¹³ Evans, S., ‘The Saddam factor in North Korea’s nuclear strategy’, BBC News, 9 Sep. 2016.

¹⁴ Davenport, K., ‘The six-party talks at a glance’, Arms Control Association Fact Sheet, Feb. 2023.

¹⁵ US Department of State, ‘Joint statement of the fourth round of the six-party talks Beijing, September 19, 2005’, Press release, 19 Sep. 2005.

¹⁶ US Department of State (note 15).

¹⁷ Lewis, J., ‘Revisiting the Agreed Framework’, *38 North*, 15 May 2015.

¹⁸ See Davenport (note 14); Lachowski et al. (note 3), p. 25; and Chinou, M., ‘Six party talks: the least bad alternative’, *38 North*, 10 Feb. 2011.

¹⁹ Davenport (note 14); and Hu, E., ‘Lessons of the North Korea “leap day deal”’, NPR, 13 Apr. 2018.

²⁰ Baker, P. and Choe, S.-H., ‘Trump threatens “fire and fury” against North Korea if it endangers US’, *New York Times*, 8 Aug. 2017.

²¹ Wertz, D., ‘Inter-Korean relations’, NCNK Issue Brief, updated by A. Yeo, Sep. 2023.

²² Wertz (note 21); and Jeong, S. et al., ‘Kim Jong Un: North Korea no longer needs nuclear tests’, CNN, 22 Apr. 2018.



insula', in which spirit the USA 'committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK'.²³ Political normalization was also implied in the commitment 'to establish new US–DPRK relations', and parties agreed to work together to build 'a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula'.²⁴ As in connection with the Agreed Framework, the USA demonstrated military restraint during this period of engagement with the North by suspending large-scale joint exercises and drills with South Korea.²⁵

However, at their next summit in February 2019 in Hanoi, Viet Nam, President Trump reportedly demanded the dismantlement of North Korea's entire nuclear programme as a precondition for any sanctions relief.²⁶ This maximalist approach contradicted the spirit of the Singapore statement, which had seemed to imply a more gradual approach towards nuclear diplomacy in the spirit of mutual confidence-building.²⁷ The Trump administration subsequently appeared to shift away from this maximalist approach at working-level talks, seeking instead to freeze the North Korean nuclear programme in the latter half of 2019. In practice, this meant halting fissile material production in the country without addressing its existing nuclear stockpile. More specifically, the USA reportedly asked North Korea to verifiably close the Yongbyon nuclear facility—including the graphite-moderated 5MW(e) reactor, which is the country's only source of weapons-grade plutonium—and halt the production of enriched uranium, which is another pathway to nuclear weapons.²⁸

While the objective of nuclear freeze in North Korea was in principle more achievable than immediate denuclearization, the sanctions relief offered by the USA in exchange for the freeze—a three-year waiver on UN Security Council sanctions targeting North Korea's textile and coal exports—was arguably very modest.²⁹ It also suggested that, despite having shifted to a more incremental approach, the USA was still very much focused on denuclearization, which appeared to be a precondition for substantive sanctions relief. At the same time—apart from the suspension of South Korean-US military exercises—the USA had not made any concessions of its own to reciprocate the measures taken by North Korea in 2018. In addition to the testing moratorium and the destruction of the nuclear test site, these measures included steps taken in summer 2018 to dismantle a missile engine test stand at the Sohae satellite launching station (also called Dongchang-ri) and a shut-down of the graphite-moderated 5MW(e) reactor at Yongbyon in December 2018.³⁰ In a comment following the working-level talks, North

²³ White House, 'Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit', 12 June 2018.

²⁴ White House (note 23).

²⁵ Collins (note 10); Lamothe, D., 'Pentagon suspends "war games" with South Korea after Trump's meeting with Kim', *Washington Post*, 18 June 2018; and Starr, B. and Crawford, J., 'US, South Korea scale back joint military drills "to reduce tension" with North Korea', CNN, 3 Mar. 2019.

²⁶ Panda, A. and Narang, V., 'The Hanoi summit was doomed from the start', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 Mar. 2019.

²⁷ White House (note 23).

²⁸ Ward, A., 'Here's the nuclear proposal the US plans to offer North Korea this weekend', *Vox*, 2 Oct. 2019.

²⁹ Ward (note 28).

³⁰ Bermudez, J. S., 'North Korea begins dismantling key facilities at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station', *38 North*, 23 July 2018; Brumfiel, G., 'Experts are underwhelmed by North Korea's promise

Korea stated that it had no interest in further negotiations ‘before the US takes a substantial step to completely and irreversibly abandon the hostile policy toward the DPRK, a policy that threatens the security of the country and hampers the rights to existence and development of its people’.³¹ After this, the bilateral nuclear diplomacy collapsed, followed by North Korea’s announcement in late 2019 that it would no longer be bound by the self-imposed testing moratorium.³² North Korea also restarted the 5MW(e) reactor in summer 2021.³³

The diplomatic deadlock between North Korea and the USA has continued to this day. Despite the Biden administration’s stated openness to diplomacy with North Korea based on an incremental approach towards denuclearization—and ‘threat reduction’, pointing to even more modest objectives—North Korea rejected US offers for talks.³⁴ North Korea’s lack of interest in engagement with the Biden administration has been explained in terms of the apparent priority given by the latter to deterrence and punitive measures—including the expansion of the South Korean–US military exercises to a trilateral format that includes Japan, more visible strategic signalling around the Korean peninsula, and the enforcement and imposition of new unilateral sanctions on North Korea.³⁵ At the same time, closer ties between North Korea and Russia—which in addition to the military dimension also include economic cooperation—especially since 2024, may have reduced the incentives for North Korea to engage with the USA.³⁶

North Korea’s decisions and provocations have partly contributed to the failure of past efforts at nuclear diplomacy. However, based on the above, it seems that one major problem with the US approach has been its underestimation of North Korea’s security concerns and of the related need for robust CBMs to address those concerns through a gradual transformation of the long-standing conflict between the two countries. Although past diplomatic efforts have involved a principled commitment to confidence building—including through the implicit recognition of the interconnectedness between denuclearization and the normalization of North Korean–US relations—a tendency to prioritize the coercive approach seeking immediate disarmament in North Korea has in practice undercut this commitment. A related problem has been the USA’s lack of readiness to reward North Korea’s incremental nuclear concessions with sanctions relief, which remains tied by UN resolutions to the goal of nuclear disarmament.³⁷

to dismantle missile site’, NPR, 19 Sep. 2018; and Panda, A., ‘What the restarting of North Korea’s Yongbyon reactor means’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 2 Sep. 2021.

³¹ Pyongyang Times, ‘Fate of DPRK-US dialogue depends on US attitude: DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesperson’, KCNA Watch, 7 Oct. 2019.

³² Shin, H., ‘N. Korea suggests it may resume nuclear, missile tests; slams “hostile” US’, Reuters, 20 Jan. 2022.

³³ Panda (note 30).

³⁴ US Congressional Research Service (CRS), ‘US–North Korea relations’, CRS In Focus Report no. IF10246, 6 Dec. 2024.

³⁵ Aum, F., ‘Why the US should offer concessions to North Korea’, *Washington Post*, 26 July 2023; and Mahadzir, D., ‘US, Japan and Korea begin Freedom Edge exercise, North Korea attempts ballistic missile test’, US Naval Institute (USNI) News, 27 June 2024.

³⁶ Young, B. R., ‘North Korea’s bold turn toward Russia poses test for Trump’s second term’, RAND Commentary, 5 Dec. 2024.

³⁷ Center for Energy and Security Studies (CENESS) and International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *DPRK Strategic Capabilities and Security on the Korean Peninsula: Looking Ahead* (IISS: July 2021), p. 74.



III. Drivers of instability in the Korean peninsula

The failure of past efforts at nuclear diplomacy involving North Korea and the USA has contributed to a tendency by all key conflict parties in the Korean peninsula to prioritize deterrence in recent years. As explained below, this tendency—in particular the pre-emptive military doctrines on which their deterrence policies are currently based—has exacerbated the conflict by fuelling arms race dynamics and adding to nuclear escalation risks. At the same time, the erosion of previous military CBMs between North and South Korea has removed mechanisms to prevent and manage low-level military incidents that could lead to high-level escalation.

Instability created by pre-emptive military doctrines

In contrast to mutual deterrence based on the threat of punishment that mainly characterizes relations between nuclear-armed states, the South Korean and US strategy towards North Korea is deterrence through denial and pre-emption. This means readiness of the two countries to target the North Korean government and its nuclear command and control (NC2) infrastructure to neutralize perceived nuclear threats.

South Korea's so-called Kill Chain strategy—which is 'designed to preemptively destroy North Korea's nuclear and other missiles before they can be launched in the event of clear indications of their use'—was first discussed publicly in 2016, and outlined in more detail in the Yoon Suk-yeol administration's 2023 National Security Strategy.³⁸ In addition to such pre-emptive counterforce strikes, the document refers to deterrence by punishment—or the Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) strategy—which basically means a conventional 'decapitation' strike aimed at eliminating the North Korean leadership.³⁹

The USA explicitly referred to pre-emption as a policy option with regard to North Korea in the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review, which stated that it had 'the early warning systems and strike capabilities necessary to degrade North Korean missile capabilities prior to launch'.⁴⁰ The same review implied that such a strike could also involve using nuclear weapons, noting that the USA 'will continue to field a range of conventional and nuclear capabilities' able to hold at risk North Korea's 'hardened and deeply buried facilities'.⁴¹ While such language was absent from the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, it too stated that 'Any nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its Allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime'.⁴²

³⁸ South Korean Government, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy: Global Pivotal State for Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity* (South Korean Office of National Security, June 2023), p. 92.

³⁹ South Korean Government (note 38), p. 93; and Panda, A., 'South Korea's "decapitation" strategy against North Korea has more risks than benefits', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 15 Aug. 2022.

⁴⁰ US Department of Defense (DOD), *Nuclear Posture Review* (DOD: Washington, DC, Feb. 2018), p. 33.

⁴¹ US DOD, *Nuclear Posture Review* (note 40), p. 33.

⁴² US DOD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (DOD: Washington, DC, Oct. 2022), p. 9.

As several observers have noted, these pre-emptive strategies give rise to crisis instability. More specifically, if North Korea were to perceive an imminent threat of a disarming or decapitating strike by South Korea and the USA, it could resort to pre-emptive nuclear retaliation to avoid total defeat.⁴³ Thus, the South Korean and US strategies seem to have contributed to North Korea's policy of pre-emption. In its new declaratory policy adopted in September 2022, North Korea reserves the right to first use of nuclear weapons in the event that deterrence fails. That is, the language in the document seems to point to the possibility of a pre-emptive nuclear strike, in addition to nuclear retaliation against conventional aggression.⁴⁴ North Korean statements include even more explicit references to the pre-emptive strategy; for example, in 2023 Kim Jong Un described the country's new submarine as being capable of 'launching a pre-emptive or retaliatory strike at the hostile states in any waters'.⁴⁵

Given that all nuclear-armed states have historically gone to great lengths to ensure the survivability of their second-strike nuclear forces, pre-emption is generally not considered a viable strategy against other nuclear-armed states. While the pre-emptive strategies of South Korea and the USA were initially driven by a belief that this did not apply to North Korea given that its nascent nuclear and missile capabilities were a relatively easy target for counterforce strikes, the subsequent modernization of those capabilities has significantly complicated such planning.⁴⁶

Alongside crisis instability, the pre-emptive strategies of South Korea and the USA have thus contributed to arms race instability by incentivizing North Korea to enhance the survivability of its nuclear arsenal so as to ensure a reliable second-strike capability.⁴⁷ North Korea's development of new delivery means and 'tactical' nuclear warheads, as well as its current plans to increase the number of nuclear warheads, can all be viewed as part of such efforts.⁴⁸ Together with the country's aggressive signalling of its readiness to use nuclear weapons, North Korea's nuclear build-up is fuelling South Korean arguments that present the development of its own nuclear weapons as the ultimate answer to the problem.⁴⁹ These arms race dynamics—which highlight the perceived need for North Korea not only to maintain but also to expand its nuclear arsenal and create proliferation pressures in South Korea—create an additional challenge for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

⁴³ Panda (note 39).

⁴⁴ Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Law on DPRK's policy on nuclear forces promulgated', KCNA Watch, 9 Sep. 2022.

⁴⁵ 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un makes congratulatory speech at ceremony for launching newly-built submarine', KCNA, 8 Sep. 2023.

⁴⁶ Panda (note 39).

⁴⁷ Panda (note 39).

⁴⁸ Rodong Sinmun, 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un guides work for mounting nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles', KCNA Watch, 28 Mar. 2023.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Seo, Y. and Harvey, L., 'North Korea's Kim Jong Un threatens to destroy the South with nuclear weapons if provoked', CNN, 4 Oct. 2024; and Choe, S.-H., 'In a first, South Korea declares nuclear weapons a policy option', *New York Times*, 12 Jan. 2023.



The erosion of CBMs between North and South Korea

The risk of a military incident between the two Koreas turning into another major war has been a long-standing concern. The possibility of further escalation involving nuclear weapon use—the threshold of which, as noted above, may be lower due to the pre-emptive military doctrines of the key conflict parties—amplifies this concern. While an armed conflict in the highly militarized region could be devastating, nuclear escalation would have even more catastrophic and long-lasting humanitarian and environmental consequences.

In the past, North and South Korea have not only sought to create mechanisms to prevent and manage incidents between their respective military forces, but have also pursued non-military CBMs involving economic and cultural cooperation projects.⁵⁰ The UN Security Council sanctions from 2016 and 2017 have largely blocked such joint ventures and other forms of economic cooperation with North Korea. This partly explains why the inter-Korean engagement in 2018 focused on military CBMs, culminating in the adoption of the CMA in September 2018.⁵¹ In addition to hotlines—which had also been established prior to 2018 in connection with previous inter-Korean reconciliation efforts—the CMA included no-fly zones and a ban on artillery drills and live-fire exercises around the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).⁵² However, all of these mechanisms were lost with the collapse of the agreement in June 2024.⁵³ It seems that even the earlier hotlines are no longer in use.⁵⁴

While various explanations have been offered as to why the CMA collapsed, the failure of North Korean–US nuclear diplomacy likely played a role in reducing the perceived benefits of the agreement for both sides.⁵⁵ One expert's assessment in 2021 was that: 'In a scenario in which nuclear negotiations . . . break down or North Korean acts of aggression rise above a certain threshold, the South Korean government, even under progressive leadership, would have to react. In such a scenario, the CMA could collapse.'⁵⁶ The CMA's demise was indeed preceded by North Korean actions since late 2019 that arguably signalled its frustration with the failure of bilateral diplomacy with the USA and that undermined the agreement—such as its live-fire coastal artillery drills in November 2019 and the destruction of the two countries' liaison office on its own territory in June 2020.⁵⁷ South Korea's

⁵⁰ Maduz, L., *Confidence and Security-building on the Korean Peninsula and the Role of Switzerland* (CSS, ETH Zurich: Zurich, June 2021), p. 7.

⁵¹ Maduz (note 50), p. 6.

⁵² NCNK (note 4).

⁵³ NCNK (note 4); and Mahadzir, D., 'Seoul scraps military agreement with North Korea after "waste balloon" incidents', USNI News, 5 June 2024.

⁵⁴ Moon, C. and Boo, S.-C., 'Hotlines between two Koreas: status, limitations, and future tasks', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, vol. 4, suppl. 1 (2021); and Moon, C., 'A new Korean war is not imminent. Accidental escalation might be', National Interest, Korea Watch Blog, 1 Feb. 2024.

⁵⁵ See e.g. Yoon, S., 'The failure of the 9/19 Comprehensive Military Agreement: what now?', 38 *North*, 1 Mar. 2024; and Gallo, W., 'Why a "historic" inter-Korean military pact broke down', VoaNews, 24 Nov. 2023.

⁵⁶ Maduz (note 50), p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ji, D., 'North Korean artillery drills violated inter-Korean military agreement, MND says', NK News, 25 Nov. 2019; Panda, A., 'South Korea expresses "regret" at North Korean violation of 2018 military agreement', *The Diplomat*, 26 Nov. 2019; and Bicker, L., 'North Korea blows up joint liaison office with South in Kaesong', BBC News, 16 June 2020; and Maduz (note 50), p. 6.

subsequent decision to partly suspend the CMA in November 2023—which ultimately contributed to the full suspension of the agreement by both sides—was justified in terms of allegations of North Korea’s violations.⁵⁸ At the same time, the decision reflected the hardline policy of President Yoon Suk-yeol, who had won the 2022 elections partly based on his criticism of the previous administration’s lack of success in addressing the threat from North Korea.⁵⁹

A recent incident between the two Koreas serves as a reminder of the continued need for crisis prevention and management mechanisms around the DMZ. In October 2024 South Korea sent a drone over Pyongyang to drop propaganda leaflets, to which the North threatened to respond with artillery fire and a ‘horrible disaster’ for South Korea if more drones were detected—after which South Korea said that North Korea will see ‘the end of its regime’ if South Korean citizens are harmed.⁶⁰ While North Korea did not respond militarily this time, previous incidents between the two countries illustrate the escalation risks, which are further increased by the room for overreaction and misperception created by the absence of crisis communication channels.

IV. Towards cooperative risk reduction and regional arms control in the Korean peninsula

Already prior to the inauguration of President Trump in January 2025, there were indications that both his administration and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un might be willing to resume bilateral talks.⁶¹ At the same time, the indictment of the conservative South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol in January 2025 could ultimately lead to a domestic power shift. This points to a possibility that South Korea will resume its long-standing engagement policy towards the North, which was prioritized not only by Yoon’s predecessor, President Moon Jae-in, but also by previous South Korean governments, in particular those on the progressive side of the political spectrum.⁶² While the window for diplomacy could thus be opening, any new efforts to engage North Korea run a high risk of failure if related CBMs continue to be undermined by the coercive approach based on unrealistic expectations regarding the pace of nuclear disarmament.⁶³

To manage such expectations and to create a stronger basis for sustained diplomatic engagement on a range of issues that ultimately need to be addressed to prevent dangerous escalation and to reverse arms race dynamics in the Korean peninsula, this section proposes a comprehensive framework of cooperative risk reduction and arms control in the region. Rather than

⁵⁸ Reuters et al., ‘South Korea to partially suspend military deal with North after launch of spy satellite’, *The Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2022; and Mahadzir (note 53).

⁵⁹ Vu, K., ‘From Moon to Yoon: will the Korean peninsula see fire and fury return?’, Lowy Institute, 11 Mar. 2022.

⁶⁰ Kim, S., ‘S. Korea warns N. Korea will see end of regime if it harms its people’, Yonhap News Agency, 13 Oct. 2024.

⁶¹ Shin, H., ‘North Korea wants to restart nuclear talks if Trump wins, says ex-diplomat’, Reuters, 1 Aug. 2024; and Hunnicut, T., ‘Trump team weighs direct talks with North Korea’s Kim in new diplomatic push, sources say’, Reuters, 26 Nov. 2024.

⁶² Kim, H. and Klug, F., ‘What to expect after South Korea’s impeached president was indicted on rebellion charges’, Associated Press, 28 Jan. 2025; and Bae, J.-Y. and Moon, C., ‘South Korea’s engagement policy: revisiting a human rights policy’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2014).

⁶³ Wong, E., ‘Trump officials are split over approach to North Korea talks’, *New York Times*, 1 July 2019.



just removing international concerns over North Korea's nuclear weapons, cooperative risk reduction would seek to address threat perceptions of key parties in a more balanced manner, with the overarching goal of regional stability and peaceful coexistence in the Korean peninsula.⁶⁴ Notably, this framework—which would incorporate CBMs and constraints on both nuclear and conventional forces—would also involve South Korea, either through the expansion of the scope of talks to a trilateral format or through carefully synchronizing the North Korean–US and inter-Korean diplomatic tracks. It could possibly also include broader regional participation.

Nuclear restraint by North Korea

Despite the political taboo against deviating from the internationally shared goal of denuclearization in the Korean peninsula, several experts agree that arms control would be a more realistic framework for nuclear diplomacy with North Korea than disarmament.⁶⁵ In practice, arms control would mean accepting that North Korea remains nuclear-armed until it deems that its national survival does not depend on nuclear deterrence. Similar to the existing arms control model between Russia and the USA, the primary objective would be to maximize nuclear restraint by the North while stabilizing its deterrence relationship with the South Korean–US alliance. In contrast to arms control between nuclear peers, however, constraints on nuclear weapons and related activities in the Korean peninsula would inevitably be asymmetrical in that they would focus primarily on North Korea. At the same time, these constraints would need to be reciprocated in terms of both tangible sanctions relief and strategic CBMs, discussed separately below.

A freeze of North Korea's nuclear programme—which seems to be the focus of the second Trump administration—would serve the arms control objective of maximizing restraint. In essence, such a freeze would need to include a moratorium on North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile testing as well as a verifiable suspension of its fissile material production facilities at Yongbyon. The latter step would include the graphite-moderated 5MW(e) reactor, which is a source of both plutonium and tritium (a key ingredient of thermonuclear weapons, which North Korea claims to have developed in addition to fission nuclear weapons).⁶⁶ These steps would not be unprecedented; as noted above, North Korea already declared and implemented a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing during its diplomatic engagement with the first Trump administration and, at the same time, shut down the graphite-moderated reactor at Yongbyon—which it had also done in connection with the Agreed Framework.⁶⁷ That the Trump administration made no reciprocal gestures was arguably because it viewed North Korea's nuclear restraint as falling short of the goal of immediate

⁶⁴ Aum, F., 'Exploring peaceful coexistence with North Korea', United States Institute of Peace, 8 Jan. 2024.

⁶⁵ Kang, S., 'Time to shift focus on arms control with North Korea: experts', *Korea Times*, 14 Jan. 2021.

⁶⁶ Panda (note 30); and 'North Korea nuclear test: Hydrogen bomb "missile-ready"', BBC News, 3 Sep. 2017.

⁶⁷ Diamond, H., 'Nuclear deal with North Korea back on track after sub incident', *Arms Control Today*, Jan. 1997.

denuclearization—and because this restraint did not extend to its production of highly enriched uranium (HEU).

Given that HEU seems to be the most abundant material available for North Korea's new warheads, a freeze would also need to cover its uranium enrichment activities.⁶⁸ At minimum, this would mean a suspension of such activities at North Korea's only known uranium enrichment facility, likewise located at Yongbyon.⁶⁹ Indeed, in 2019 North Korea signalled readiness for this measure by suggesting all nuclear facilities at Yongbyon could be dismantled in exchange for the lifting of UN sanctions.⁷⁰ As with the graphite-moderated reactor, a shutdown of the enrichment facility at Yongbyon could be verified through International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards or similar arrangements.⁷¹

However, a verified suspension of undeclared uranium enrichment facilities in North Korea might be more difficult, as their existence would first need to be acknowledged and declared—and even then there might be suspicions of further clandestine sites. The main challenge here would likely be North Korea's threat perceptions regarding potential military action against or sabotage at such facilities in the event of a collapse of the diplomatic process, with cyber operations and threats of military action against similar infrastructure in Iran providing a warning example.⁷² While this would create uncertainty about the real extent of the freeze, safeguards at the enrichment facility in Yongbyon could alleviate related concerns through the verification of the disposition of enrichment activities there.⁷³

Hence, a suspension of nuclear activities at North Korea's declared facilities at Yongbyon could be achievable in the short term, potentially constituting the first stage of nuclear arms control. In contrast, verifiably suspending North Korea's entire HEU production can be expected to take more time, likely requiring CBMs and security guarantees, which could be the focus of the second stage of arms control. The final stage would be the verifiable dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, including all existing nuclear warheads, warhead materials in production, the infrastructure related to nuclear weapons manufacturing, and nuclear delivery vehicles. For the reasons outlined above, however, transition towards this final stage would likely take a long time, requiring intermediate stages and a sustained process of confidence building simultaneously aimed at political normalization.

Indeed, even a principled commitment to disarmament by North Korea might be difficult today given its September 2022 statement that its nuclear status is 'irreversible' and that it would no longer subscribe to the goal of denuclearization.⁷⁴ Yet any advancements made in arms control with the country would be significant in their own right and their value should not

⁶⁸ Kristensen, H. M. et al., 'North Korean nuclear weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 15 July 2024; and Kelley, R. E., Expert and consultant in nuclear non-proliferation, Interview with author, online, 9 Dec. 2024.

⁶⁹ Kelley (note 68).

⁷⁰ Sanger, D. E. and Wong, E., 'How the Trump–Kim summit failed: big threats, big egos, bad bets', *New York Times*, 2 Mar. 2019.

⁷¹ Kelley (note 68).

⁷² Motamedi, M., 'Iran says Israeli "sabotage" on Fordow nuclear plant foiled', *Al Jazeera*, 14 Mar. 2022; and Hudson, J. et al., 'Israel likely to strike Iran in coming months, warns US intelligence', *Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 2025.

⁷³ Kelley (note 68).

⁷⁴ Davenport, K., 'North Korea passes nuclear law', *Arms Control Today*, Oct. 2022.



be measured only in terms their contribution to the eventual goal of nuclear disarmament.

Sanctions relief focused on UN Security Council resolutions

To facilitate diplomacy, the USA might need to provide some sanctions relief in advance of actual nuclear negotiations with North Korea. This would be an important sign of goodwill in light of past experience when North Korea's nuclear concessions were left unreciprocated in 2018–19.⁷⁵ The political controversy that unilateral sanctions relief to North Korea is likely to create in the West—not least because of the country's recent support for Russia in the latter's war on Ukraine—could be mitigated by a limited focus at this stage on those UN Security Council and other sanctions which are known to have negatively impacted the humanitarian situation in North Korea and which have no direct connection to the nuclear programme. Indeed, while the UN Security Council has repeatedly affirmed that sanctions should not adversely affect civilians, evidence points to the severe unintended humanitarian consequences, such as food insecurity, of some of the measures imposed.⁷⁶

Determining the price of further sanctions relief in proportion to North Korea's nuclear restraint would be the key task for North Korean and US negotiators. One possibility is that a halt to fissile material and tritium production at Yongbyon—achievable as the first stage of arms control diplomacy, as argued above—could be reciprocated with the suspension of those UN Security Council sanctions that have had the most detrimental effect on North Korea's economy. This would be in line with what North Korea reportedly asked in the negotiations in 2019: the lifting of those articles of the five UN Security Council sanctions resolutions from 2016 and 2017 that adversely impact its civilian economy and the livelihood of its citizens.⁷⁷ In practice, this would mean suspending measures that restrict North Korea's revenue-generating activities—such as its export of coal, textiles and seafood—and undermine its energy security, including the ban on the import of petroleum.⁷⁸ The suspension of the remaining UN sanctions could be tied to the second stage of nuclear diplomacy proposed above—that is, North Korean actions in addressing international concerns about the possible existence of clandestine HEU production facilities.

The suspension of UN Security Council sanctions in return for a nuclear freeze would provide tangible incentives for North Korea to implement and maintain measures related to the latter. Arguably, this would not give away leverage as long as the decisions to suspend sanctions were temporary and dependent on North Korea abiding by the freeze. It would

⁷⁵ In addition to the nuclear and missile testing moratorium and shut-down of the Yongbyong reactor, in 2018 North Korea took steps to dismantle the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and a missile engine test stand at the Sohae satellite launching station (also called Dongchang-ri). See Panda, A., 'Trump asked Kim Jong Un to dismantle a "missile engine testing site". What did he mean?', *The Diplomat*, 14 June 2018; Bermudez (note 30); and Haas, B. and Borger, J., 'North Korea "destroys" nuclear test site as world's media watches', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2018.

⁷⁶ United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the panel of experts submitted pursuant to Resolution 2680, S/2024/215, 7 Mar. 2024, p. 4 and section VI.

⁷⁷ Global News, 'North Korea blames US after Trump–Kim summit ends abruptly', YouTube, 28 Apr. 2019.

⁷⁸ See Panda and Narang (note 26).

also not remove incentives for North Korea to move towards disarmament providing the permanent removal of UN Security Council sanctions is tied to this long-term goal. For example, verifiable nuclear disarmament by North Korea could enable the reversal of all previous UN sanctions on the country—potentially based on the model of Resolution 2231 that lifted the previous international sanctions on Iran as part of the 2015 nuclear deal.⁷⁹ Additional incentives for North Korea to move towards this final stage could consist of the removal of any remaining unilateral sanctions as well as the security benefits of simultaneous CBMs—and, potentially, conventional arms control constraining South Korean military capabilities and US troops in the peninsula (see below).

Confidence building

North Korea's readiness for nuclear restraint can be expected to depend not only on reciprocity in terms of sanctions relief but also on trust that such restraint will not end up jeopardizing its national security. This points to the need for strategic CBMs aimed at promoting arms race and crisis stability and at addressing the security rationales behind North Korea's nuclear deterrence policy. At the same time, the root causes of conflict in the Korean peninsula need to be dealt with through broader confidence-building efforts, including the revival of various CBMs between the North and the South. A closer alignment of North Korean-US and inter-Korean engagement could help to harness the mutually supportive potential of these two diplomatic tracks and increase the stakes for all parties, contributing to the sustainability of the overall process. For example, the perception that improved relations between the North and the South could help maintain that overall process would arguably increase the incentives for both Koreas to uphold inter-Korean CBMs, while also building confidence in the gradual resolution of the higher-level conflict over the nuclear issue. At the same time, embedding nuclear arms control into a broader diplomatic framework that includes South Korea could raise the threshold for domestic critics in the USA to push for the country's withdrawal from agreements with North Korea, and convince South Korean critics that its security interests will not be undermined by the easing of international pressure on North Korea.

Strategic CBMs

North Korea can be expected to hold on to its nuclear deterrent as long as it perceives it necessary to counter an existential threat from the USA. While this fundamental distrust seems like an obstacle to nuclear disarmament, it is not an obstacle to arms control based on a nuclear freeze in North Korea. In contrast, the arms race instability created by the combination of South Korean and US pre-emptive doctrines works against the objective of nuclear freeze by providing an incentive for North Korea to further expand its nuclear arsenal. Hence a key priority in nuclear negotiations should be to remove this incentive through strategic CBMs that signal restraint by South Korea and the USA regarding pre-emptive military options.

⁷⁹ See UN Security Council Resolution 2231, 20 July 2015.



Indeed, others have called for unilateral risk reduction measures whereby the USA would renounce attacks against NC2 infrastructure and South Korea would communicate to the North that it would not seek a decapitating strike at early stages of a potential war between the two countries.⁸⁰ While such strategic CBMs have been proposed primarily to reduce crisis instability, they would also address the problem of arms race instability and therefore be a logical part of any nuclear freeze agreement with North Korea. A further step could be the incorporation of such CBMs into official military doctrines. For example, the next South Korean government could, based on a reassessment of the security benefits of the country's pre-emptive military doctrine in the current context, revise its national security strategy so as to renounce pre-emption. The USA for its part could seek to incorporate restraint regarding attacks against NC2 infrastructure into its next nuclear posture review.

By helping to lower North Korea's threshold of nuclear weapon use, South Korean and US restraint regarding pre-emptive military options could also lead North Korea to reconsider its pre-emptive strike doctrine. Should the two Koreas and the USA each renounce pre-emption, the related strategic CBMs could be extended to include joint statements by all three countries reinforcing such messaging and highlighting the need to avoid nuclear war in the Korean peninsula.

Moreover, the USA could abstain from strategic bomber overflights and other forms of nuclear signalling over and in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula, while making sure that South Korea does not view this as undermining its national security.

Finally, although it would be important for the USA to once again commit to providing security guarantees to North Korea—as it did in 1994 and in 2018—the confidence-building value of such promises might in practice be limited to demonstrating goodwill, given the likely credibility problems. However, inviting third parties from the region to cooperatively provide such guarantees could show more seriousness about this commitment, as discussed below.

Military CBMs

As part of the effort of addressing North Korea's threat perceptions regarding the superior conventional capabilities of the South Korean–US alliance, South Korea and the USA could limit or suspend joint military exercises to facilitate diplomatic engagement—as they have done in connection with previous diplomatic efforts.⁸¹ In contrast to the policies of the first Trump administration, however, decisions on this matter should be made in close consultation between these two allies so as to address South Korea's concerns about US security commitments.

As for reciprocal military CBMs to be negotiated as part of the diplomatic process, reviving and strengthening the previous measures between North and South Korea would be essential for preventing and managing military incidents, and so would serve the overarching goal of regional stability. While in principle it is possible for the two Koreas to revive previous CBMs independently of nuclear diplomacy, past experience suggests that

⁸⁰ Panda, A., 'Missiles, preemption, and the risk of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula', *Arms Control Today*, Mar. 2024.

⁸¹ Collins (note 10); and Lamothe (note 10).

it is difficult to sustain inter-Korean diplomacy without simultaneous engagement between North Korea and the USA on the nuclear issue. At the same time, inter-Korean diplomacy can be expected to reflect positively on North Korean–US engagement, including by helping to avoid incidents which could jeopardize the diplomatic process.

While the two Koreas may be wary of new engagement or discussions on far-reaching military CBMs such as those included in the CMA, they could start by re-establishing the more basic crisis management tools, notably military hotlines. As for potential efforts to revive the CMA or negotiate a new agreement to regulate conventional forces at the inter-Korean border, it would be important for North and South Korea to reach a shared assessment on the reasons for the CMA's failure. The first step could be establishing a bipartisan commission in South Korea to analyse those reasons. North Korea could conduct a similar internal process.

Depending on their respective analyses, the two Koreas could come up with a new agreement, or a roadmap for a more gradual process of implementing various military CBMs. Alongside the CBMs based on the CMA model, those measures could also include transparency measures similar to the Vienna document.⁸² Given that the CMA mostly focused on the land border between North and South Korea, consideration of new military CBMs to stabilize their maritime boundary might also warrant consideration.⁸³ At the same time, the parties could consider reinvigorating some of the CBMs dating back to the 1950s—notably by allowing the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission to carry out its observation and verification mission on the northern side of the border, and by diversifying the United Nations Command, whose contributors today mainly consist of the USA and its allies.⁸⁴ At a later stage, discussions could move on from military CBMs to conventional arms control, possibly including mutual restraint and limits on missile development and deployments, military exercises, and other activities that might be viewed as threatening.⁸⁵ The possibility of reduced US military presence in the peninsula could also be discussed in this context, potentially providing one of the incentives for North Korea to take more far-reaching steps towards nuclear restraint. While South Korea currently feels threatened by the prospect of the eventual removal of US troops, its threat perceptions regarding this issue might change over time depending on the success of the diplomatic efforts.

Moreover, alongside military CBMs, the suspension of UN Security Council sanctions would create opportunities for the kind of non-military CBMs that North and South Korea pursued in the early 2000s.⁸⁶ However, any joint economic and cultural projects should start from the premise of cooperation between two sovereign countries seeking mutual benefits, rather than the

⁸² Engman, M., 'Towards a new conflict management system on the Korean peninsula: a military perspective', Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) Focus Asia paper, July 2020, p. 12.

⁸³ Zhao, T., 'Beyond the Putin–Kim alliance: how can the international community engage China to contain nuclear risks over the Korean peninsula?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Commentary, 10 July 2024.

⁸⁴ Engman (note 82), pp. 9–10; and Manorama Yearbook, 'What is the purpose of United Nations Command?', 20 Aug. 2024.

⁸⁵ See Engman (note 82), p. 12.

⁸⁶ Lachowski et al. (note 3), pp. 66–69.



past premise of one country preparing for re-unification—a goal North Korea renounced in January 2024.⁸⁷

Broader regional involvement

Although the main actors in the proposed framework for cooperative risk reduction and arms control would be the two Koreas and the USA, there are opportunities for broader regional involvement. Indeed, this framework could be used to resume previous dialogue on the development of a regional security architecture in Northeast Asia—which was one of the topics discussed at the six-party talks.⁸⁸

Third parties would likely also be needed to enable a credible security guarantee to North Korea. While representing a very different situation and not applied in practice, the 2022 discussion on multilateral security guarantees to Ukraine—where Russian and Ukrainian negotiators developed the idea that the permanent members of the UN Security Council, together with a group of additional countries, would be obliged to come to Ukraine's assistance if it were attacked—can provide ideas for a similar arrangement in Northeast Asia.⁸⁹ For example, China and Russia could be invited to provide security guarantees to North Korea, with the USA and South Korea formally approving the arrangement.

As with inter-Korean engagement, the suspension of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea would also open the door for the resumption and increase of trade and other forms of cooperation between North Korea and other regional powers. While this would facilitate North Korea's already existing ties with China and Russia, it would concurrently reduce its reliance on them by extending trade relations to Japan and South East Asian countries and creating interdependence within the broader region. Such cooperation could be seen as a non-military CBM that, together with the nuclear restraint demonstrated by North Korea, could reduce tensions in the region. In the case of Japan, this would probably require additional reconciliation efforts, notably to address the issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁰

V. Conclusions

The dangerous situation in the Korean peninsula requires urgent steps towards risk reduction and arms control. This paper has proposed pursuing these objectives as part of a cooperative framework that includes strategic and military CBMs alongside short- and medium-term efforts at nuclear diplomacy aimed at freezing North Korea's nuclear programme. While the precise nuclear concessions by North Korea and reciprocal steps in terms of

⁸⁷ Slow, O., 'North Korea's Kim Jong Un abandons unification goal with South', BBC News, 16 Jan. 2024.

⁸⁸ Pang, Z., *The Six-Party Process, Regional Security Mechanisms, and China-US Cooperation: Toward a New Regional Security Mechanism for a New Northeast Asia?* (Brookings: Washington, DC, Mar. 2009); and CENESS and IISS (note 37).

⁸⁹ Charap, S. and Radchenko, S., 'The talks that could have ended the war in Ukraine', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 Apr. 2024.

⁹⁰ King, R. R., 'Japan and North Korea: Summitry, missile fears, and abductions', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 June 2019.

sanctions relief are ultimately up for negotiation, a freeze should be rewarded by significant relief on UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea, with the prospect of the permanent lifting of those sanctions and other incentives being tied to verifiable steps towards nuclear disarmament. Although the process of reaching the latter goal can be expected to take several years or even decades, CBMs and continuous diplomatic engagement could help to maintain stability and reduce tensions during this time.

Of course, the proposed framework would likely face a great deal of scepticism and even resistance—within the USA, domestic opposition to providing sanctions relief to adversaries; international objections based on the fact that UN Security Council sanctions are legally tied to the goal of complete denuclearization; and concerns, especially in South Korea, that an arms control approach to North Korea would legitimize the country's status as a nuclear-armed state. However, sanctions should not be an end in themselves but a means of diplomacy based on realistically achievable goals. Nor is the association between nuclear weapons and international status to be taken for granted, especially as the majority of the world's states view nuclear weapons as unacceptable and a source of stigma. Indeed, a gradual process from arms control to denuclearization in the Korean peninsula—if successful—could become a model for other nuclear-armed states, all of which view the elimination of their own arsenals as a long-term goal to be achieved only through a fundamental transformation of the security environment.



Abbreviations

CBM	Confidence-building measure
CMA	2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
HEU	Highly enriched uranium
MW(e)	Megawatt electric
NC2	Nuclear command and control
NPT	1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)

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CLEARING THE PATH FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: CONFIDENCE-BUILDING IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

TYTTI ERÄSTÖ

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