

Shaping the Future of Security on the Korean Peninsula

Next-Generation Policy Perspectives

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Shaping the Future of Security on the Korean Peninsula: Next-Generation Policy Perspectives

Introduction by Susan A. Thornton and Nia Williams

The geopolitical landscape of 2025 is set to be one marked by transitions and uncertainties. With another Trump administration in Washington, U.S. allies and partners are preparing for a unilateralist America and a chaotic international policymaking environment. In the Asia Pacific, countries are bracing for potential economic turbulence, as President Donald Trump has signaled for tariffs as a way to build leverage for negotiations or to right America's trade and budget imbalances. Allies in the region are preparing for pressure on alliances and worry about the reliability of the American security backstop in the form of presence, extended deterrence, and other support.

Countries in the Asia Pacific will have to redefine their own roles in the region and on the global stage. Already in Japan, under a new prime minister, we are seeing the reset of relations between Japan and China, with the Japanese Foreign Minister making a trip to China last December and ongoing high-level exchanges. In South Korea, a new president will take the stage following the historic declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk Yeol and his subsequent impeachment and arrest. Relationships and partnerships will continue be tested, mended, and renewed. North Korea's involvement in the war in Ukraine creates the risk of a larger regional interconnected conflict. However, with President Trump's return to Washington, talks with North Korea may again be on the table, creating the opportunity to stabilize the tensions.

The political crisis in South Korea, the continuous escalation of military pressure from Beijing on Taipei, North Korea's involvement in the war in Ukraine, tense U.S.-China relations, as well as domestic social pressures in each country are all intricate and intertwined issues that, if left unaddressed and unmanaged, could escalate into a regional, if not global, conflict. These threats to the stability of the Korean Peninsula and the greater Asia-Pacific region have implications for all.

Against this uncertain backdrop, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy presents this edited volume of policy papers on a range of topics particular to issues involving the Korean Peninsula and U.S. policy toward Korea and in the Asia-Pacific region. They cover proposals for soft power diplomacy, suggestions for engagement with the DPRK, how to address concerns about deterrence, and a range of other issues.

The volume taps into the rich vein of young policy professionals and scholars working on Korean Peninsular issues around the world; they were chosen through a competitive process to share their insights and develop a professional global network. With many challenges ahead of us in 2025 and the coming years, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) has endeavored to highlight next-generation voices and their new ideas for making progress on these longstanding issues and fundamental obstacles in the Asia Pacific.

Rethinking U.S. Strategy Toward North Korea with Blue Ribbon Commissions

Chelsie Alexandre

Executive Summary

As the U.S. approaches a presidential transition, it faces a critical juncture in its approach to North Korea. Historical patterns show that policy reviews typically reaffirm the status quo: denuclearization through diplomacy and strengthened regional deterrence. However, this strategy has proven ineffective as North Korea's nuclear arsenal expands and the Kim regime aligns with antagonistic states, notably Russia, China, and Iran. This alignment with the so-called Axis of Upheaval highlights the inadequacy of current U.S. policy, necessitating a thorough reassessment.¹

Previous U.S. administrations have grappled with ineffective strategies. For example, the Biden administration's approach, a hybrid of Trump's "grand bargain" and Obama's "strategic patience," yielded minimal progress. North Korea's nuclear development continues unabated despite international sanctions and diplomatic isolation. The Clinton administration's Perry Process, which engaged North Korea through diplomacy, briefly shifted the paradigm and led to a freeze in missile tests and the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué of 2000. However, subsequent administrations, particularly under President George W. Bush, reversed these gains, leading to a breakdown in negotiations and worsening relations.

To address the stagnation in U.S. policy, this paper advocates for the establishment of a Blue Ribbon Commission to examine U.S. policy toward North Korea. These commissions, composed of distinguished experts and former officials, have historically provided innovative and bipartisan solutions to complex issues. Through analysis of past uses of these commissions to comprehensively analyze and critique foreign policy issues, such as the Iraq Study Group, this paper aims to emphasize the potential for such commissions to influence future policy. While immediate implementation and popularity of the report are not guaranteed, a commission's findings could draw more attention to North Korea and spur public debate, fostering more innovative approaches to North Korea.

1 Richard Fontaine and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

This paper proposes the following recommendations:

- **Executive Branch:** The President should appoint a high-caliber blue ribbon commission to review U.S. policy toward North Korea. This commission should include experts in nuclear policy, former diplomats, and bipartisan figures with extensive experience in Korean affairs. Notably, former President Bill Clinton, given his historical involvement in North Korea negotiations, could provide significant leadership.
- **Legislative Branch:** Members of Congress focused on Korean Peninsula issues should advocate for the commission's formation and elevate the North Korean threat on the national agenda. This push is crucial given the current lack of attention to North Korea's nuclear capabilities in presidential campaigns and public discourse.

Introduction: The U.S. Needs to Review its North Korea Approach

As the U.S. nears a presidential administrative change, so comes a review of the country's policy toward North Korea. However, the reviews tend to land on the same strategy or the status quo: the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy with North Korea and shoring up deterrence through stronger cooperation with U.S. allies in the region.² Pyongyang was uninterested in the Biden administration's offer for "unconditional talks" and instead aligned itself with other antagonistic states. North Korea's nuclear arsenal continues to grow despite diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. The Federation of American Scientists in their 2018 publication estimated that North Korea had enough material to create about 30 nuclear weapons, but only had 10–20 weapons assembled.³ In July 2024, the FAS released a report that concluded that North Korea has enough fissile material to build 90 nuclear warheads, and has about 50 nuclear warheads assembled.⁴ It is clear that if the U.S. goal in its approach to North Korea is the eradication of its nuclear weapons program, its strategy is utterly failing. With this reality in mind, the U.S. must find a way to begin conversations to thoroughly amend its North Korea policy.

2 "The Biden Administration's North Korea Policy," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 3, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/biden-administrations-north-korea-policy>.

3 Hans S. Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project with the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), and Robert S. Norris, a senior fellow at the FAS, wrote this in their 2018 publication of *The Nuclear Notebook*. The *Nuclear Notebook* is a column published with the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. Hans S. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean nuclear capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74, no.1 (2018): 41. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062?needAccess=true>

4 Josh Smith, "What to Know About North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Programme," September 13, 2024, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-know-about-north-koreas-nuclear-weapons-programme-2024-09-13/>.

Context

In 1994, amid threats from North Korea to go nuclear, the U.S. negotiated a deal with North Korea to halt further development of its nuclear program. Known as the Agreed Framework, North Korea agreed to suspend and dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for energy supplies and the eventual normalization of relations with the United States.⁵ While the Agreed Framework succeeded in temporarily freezing nuclear weapons development and prevented an all-out war, the North Korean threat remained unresolved. In 1998, North Korea launched a long-range ballistic missile over Japan, the Taepodong-1, which drastically shifted the security context of the region. The test demonstrated new concerning developments in North Korea's missile program, immediately prompting the Clinton administration to consider alternate paths for engaging with the North to prevent further missile testing and a moratorium on weapons development. President Clinton established a comprehensive review of U.S. policy toward North Korea, tasking a small team of experts both within and outside of the U.S. government to conduct a North Korea policy review.⁶ Led by former Secretary of Defense William Perry, the newly established North Korea Policy review team collaborated with the governments of South Korea, Japan, China and North Korea to produce a report with a series of recommendations for a new U.S. approach to the eventual dismantling of North Korea's weapons program.⁷ Known as the Perry Process, the negotiations and subsequent recommendations took account of the drastic changes in the international security context posed by the missile test. It advocated for a policy of engagement with North Korea that would offer an eventual path to establishing relations with the U.S. in exchange for dismantling its weapons program.⁸

In the last year of his presidential term, Clinton adopted the recommendations laid out in the Perry Process, easing economic sanctions against the DPRK as the first step in a long process of persuading the Kim regime to abandon its weapons program.⁹ President Clinton rightfully sought a dramatic easing up on North Korea following its demonstration

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- 5 James E. Goodby, "North Korea: The Problem That Won't Go Away," *Brookings Institution*, May 1, 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/north-korea-the-problem-that-wont-go-away/>.
 - 6 Catherine Killough, "Factsheet: History of US Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present," *Ploughshares Fund*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>.
 - 7 William J. Perry, "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," *U.S. Department of State Archive*, October 12, 1999, https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html.
 - 8 James E. Goodby, "North Korea: The Problem That Won't Go Away," *Brookings Institution*, May 1, 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/north-korea-the-problem-that-wont-go-away/>.
 - 9 Robert A. Wampler, "Engaging North Korea II: Evidence from the Clinton Administration," *National Security Archive*, December 8, 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/korea/2017-12-08/engaging-north-korea-ii-evidence-clinton-administration>.

of its missile capabilities. Clinton's call for a comprehensive review of his policy reflected his acknowledgment of a transformed security situation: North Korea was developing and testing missile weapons using unanticipated technology and the associated proliferation concerns. The analysis from the Perry Process also articulated that the Kim regime relied on nuclear weapons and missiles for regime survival and stability.¹⁰ The North Koreans responded positively to these developments, freezing their missile test launches during the negotiation period. The U.S. and North Korea signed the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué in October 2000, marking a shift in the tone of future negotiations and bilateral relations. High-level reciprocal visits by the U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Kim Jong Il's top military advisor, Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok were made in 1999.¹¹ Despite promising beginnings of Clinton's new approach to North Korea, the succeeding George W. Bush administration pivoted to a hawkish stance toward North Korea. Following the revelation that the DPRK pursued a clandestine uranium enrichment program, violating the terms of the Agreed Framework, there was a breakdown in negotiations and talks with Pyongyang.¹²

Kim's Increased Leverage?

With each new U.S. administration, the president's team conducts a North Korea policy review, and while these reviews can provide strategic changes, they have not proven effective in altering the U.S. approach to North Korea. For instance, the Biden administration's North Korea policy tried to strike a balance between Trump's grand bargain diplomacy and the Obama administration's "strategic patience" strategy, leading to no engagement with the Kim regime.¹³ The lack of innovation in the U.S.'s North Korea policy has real consequences, including Kim Jong Un's increased reliance on Russia and the DPRK's support for the Kremlin's war in Ukraine through weapons transfers and upgrading the status of the DPRK-Russian relationship through a new comprehensive partnership pact signed

The lack of innovation in the U.S.'s North Korea policy has real consequences.

10 Ken E. Gause, "North Korea: A Case Study of Asymmetric Relations," *Center for Naval Analyses*, October 2021, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/10/COP-2021-U-030765-Final.pdf>.

11 Department of State, "US-DPRK Joint Communiqué," *The National Committee on North Korea*, October 12, 2000, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/US_DPRK_Joint_Communique_2000.pdf.

12 Goodby, "North Korea: The Problem That Won't Go Away."

13 Robert Einhorn, "The Rollout of the Biden Administration's North Korea Policy Review Leaves Unanswered Questions," *Brookings Institution*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rollout-of-the-biden-administrations-north-korea-policy-review-leaves-unanswered-questions/>.

in June 2024.¹⁴ The lack of U.S. engagement with Pyongyang has opened a door to further military, economic, technological, and diplomatic cooperation between North Korea and Russia, China, and Iran, and coordinated efforts made by these bad actors to overturn the international order.¹⁵ Despite its status as a pariah, North Korea has emerged from isolation and found itself among friends.

The Need to Shake Up U.S. North Korea Strategy

The eradication of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program is the goal of U.S. policy toward North Korea. Despite the fact that the Kim regime relies on its nuclear weapons program for regime survival and deterrence, U.S. demands for total denuclearization fail to reflect this reality. Even in the face of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, the DPRK regime has stuck to its weapons development. Therefore, even though the U.S. is committed to upholding the international non-proliferation regime, U.S. strategies have not been effective in curbing North Korea's weapons development.

Sanctions have not worked, offers for unconditional talks have fallen on deaf ears in Pyongyang, and strengthening cooperation with U.S. allies in the region has not persuaded Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear weapons. The arsenal continues to grow despite the deployment of all these tactics. The U.S. sorely needs an update to its current strategy. The consequences of an inadequate U.S. strategy toward North Korea are already apparent, such as the growing calls in South Korea for indigenous nuclear weapons, a move that would further exacerbate the current arms race in the region. North Korean soldiers have also gained battleground experience in Ukraine, fighting alongside Russian troops in their first on-the-ground experience since the Korean War.¹⁶

14 Tong-Hyun Kim, "Russia and North Korea sign partnership deal that includes vow of mutual aid," *PBS News*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-and-north-korea-sign-partnership-deal-that-includes-vow-of-mutual-aid>.

15 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

16 John T Psaropoulos, "North Korean troops 'enter' 'enter' battle; Trump win throws Ukraine aid in doubt," *Al Jazeera*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/8/north-korean-troops-enter-battle-trump-win-throws-ukraine-aid-in-doubt>.

Argument

North Korea and its weapons program have been an intractable problem, and hesitation around drastically changing U.S. strategy from the current deterrence posture is understandable. Any miscalculation can have devastating, lasting effects, from escalation to the region to outright nuclear confrontation. There are also reputational risks for American leaders in the event of a perceived misstep. It is a tricky situation to navigate, and the Biden administration's strategic ambiguity approach, nestled between Obama-era strategic patience and Trump's grand bargain, has maintained an uneasy stability. However, North Korea's growing arsenal and antagonism indicate that the status quo will be tested, and the U.S. will be compelled to adapt its approach to this new challenge.

There are limited opportunities to overhaul U.S. policy on North Korea, especially in the face of little wiggle room for miscalculations and recent conflicts in Europe and the Middle East that have engulfed the American public and government's attention. Through analysis of blue ribbon commissions used to tackle other foreign policy and national security issues, such as U.S. involvement in the Iraq War, this paper aims to elucidate a deliberative mechanism in the U.S. political process that will provide a platform for a comprehensive review of U.S. strategy toward North Korea.

Blue Ribbon Commissions as a Platform for Much-Needed Innovation

Blue ribbon commissions are one channel that the U.S. has yet to use for upgrading its North Korea policy. In the United States, a "blue ribbon commission" refers to a special panel or committee composed of distinguished and respected individuals, often experts or leaders in their respective fields, who are tasked with investigating, analyzing, and providing recommendations on important or complex issues. Blue ribbon commissions are special platforms in the U.S. political process for promoting innovation in policy ideas, allowing a space for open debate on difficult issues.¹⁷ The term "blue ribbon" signifies the high caliber and prestige of the commission's members. These commissions are formed to address specific, complex, or controversial issues that require thorough investigation and high-level recommendations. The president or Congress appoints each commission with the intention for it to operate independently and provide objective, nonpartisan recommendations. The goal is to ensure that the findings and suggestions are based on thorough analysis rather than political considerations. The result of a commission's investigations

17 S. Anna Kondratas and Stephen Moore, "Breaking the Entitlements Deadlock with a Presidential Commission," *The Heritage Foundation*, November 1985, <https://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/9231>, 2.

into an issue is usually a detailed report outlining their findings, analyses, and recommendations. This report carries significant weight and can influence policy decisions, legislative changes, or other actions.

Commissions are most commonly used to tackle complex domestic problems and lead to some of the most influential transformations in American government and society.¹⁸ Blue ribbon commissions are an increasingly popular mechanism for examining foreign policy issues, since presidents are more often preoccupied with domestic issues and popularity at home.¹⁹ Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton appointed commissions to address issues such as U.S.-Japan trade relations, U.S. policy toward Central America, and chemical warfare policy.²⁰

Case Study: The Iraq Study Group

Blue ribbon commissions can inject radical proposals into the mainstream debate and provide an opportunity to challenge an administration's policy.²¹ During the U.S. involvement in the Iraq War, U.S. Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) established a commission with the backing of the Bush government to study the U.S.' involvement in the war. When asked for comment, Wolf wanted to create the commission because "at the time no real solutions were being offered in Iraq."²² In light of the escalating violence in Iraq, Wolf recognized that a commission was a platform that could indirectly criticize the Bush administration and encourage it to reconsider its strategy in Iraq.²³

One important legitimizing function of the blue ribbon commissions is the fact that they are bipartisan, made up of former government officials from both sides of the aisle. Since the members are no longer in office, there is less partisanship and little pressure to appeal to electoral bases. The members can also dedicate more of their time and attention to the study group. The commission apparatus also allows space for the commission members to openly debate and make recommendations based on the situation at hand through fact-finding missions rather than getting intertwined in the politics of an issue.²⁴

18 Kondratas, "Breaking the Entitlements Deadlock with a Presidential Commission," 1.

19 Zegart, "Blue Ribbons, Black Boxes," 380.

20 Zegart, "Blue Ribbons, Black Boxes: Toward a Better Understanding of Presidential Commissions," 373.

21 Jordan Tama, "The Contemporary Presidency: The Power and Limitations of Commissions: The Iraq Study Group, Bush, Obama, and Congress," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2011): 136.

22 Tama, "The Contemporary Presidency," 138.

23 Tama, "The Contemporary Presidency," 139.

24 George T. Sulzner, "The Policy Process and the Uses of National Governmental Study Commissions," *The Western Political Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1971): 443.

As Jordan Tama’s interviews with the members of the Iraq Study Group illustrate, many members joined the group supportive of the Bush administration’s Iraq policy, but upon attending a research trip and meeting with Iraqi officials, they changed their stances. After intense debate and commission investigations, the subsequent report recommendations reflected the changing views that gave a scathing assessment of the Bush administration’s approach to Iraq.²⁵

The value of a commission’s report lies not only in its recommendations but also in how it is presented to the public, which plays a crucial role in its reception and impact on public discourse.

The value of a commission’s report lies not only in its recommendations but also in how it is presented to the public, which plays a crucial role in its reception and impact on public discourse. The unanimous nature of the recommendations, where all members of the commission come to agree on the proposals through intense deliberations, throws more weight behind the significance of the report.²⁶ The Iraq Study Group presented its findings and recommendations to President Bush at a highly publicized press conference,

one of the most watched television moments of 2006. The commission’s report was also widely read, topping the New York Times best-seller list. The dissemination of the report led to a shift in public opinion against the Bush administration, with polls reflecting that a higher proportion of Americans disapproved of Bush’s handling of the Iraq conflict after the report’s release.²⁷

Addressing Criticisms of Blue Ribbon Commissions

This section of the paper aims to outline and address some of the criticisms blue ribbon commissions receive and assess whether this mechanism would still be valuable for addressing U.S. strategy toward North Korea.

Despite the characterization of blue ribbon commissions outlined above, there are limits to commissions’ influence. There is no guarantee that the new administration will embrace a commission’s proposals. As President Bush did with the recommendations outlined in the Perry Process, U.S. presidents can reject the blue ribbon commissions’ recommendations. However, due to their independent nature and the immortalization of the reports,

25 Tama, “The Contemporary Presidency,” 141.

26 Tama, “Three Cheers for Blue Ribbon Panels,” 31.

27 Tama, “The Contemporary Presidency,” 143.

successive administrations can still adopt these recommendations, regardless of party. While the Iraq Study Group's report received favorable publicity, had a large impact on public opinion, and many members of Congress endorsed it, the Bush administration rejected the proposal. Although Bush ultimately pursued a different strategy, the impact of the commission was still significant. The report's release and public reception revitalized the debate in Congress over the U.S.'s role in Iraq, galvanizing and inspiring members of Congress to push for new initiatives on Iraq policy.²⁸ The biggest impact of the study group's recommendations came after the Bush administration. During his time as a Senator and in his presidential campaign, President Obama relied heavily on the Iraq Study Group's recommendations in crafting his own Iraq policy. The independence of the review meant that any future president or administration could adopt the recommendations made. The availability of the report after publication also means that it can serve as a valuable resource to rely upon for decision-making in cases of administration change or crisis.

Unlike the reception of the Iraq Study Group's report, some commissions' reports may not gain any popularity when initially released. However, the very existence of a blue ribbon commission's reports and recommendations can be extremely important when a crisis hits, and swift policy change is needed. In 1998, Secretary of Defense William Cohen appointed the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission to examine U.S. national security priorities and develop a U.S. national security strategy for the turn of the century. The Hart-Rudman Commission produced the most comprehensive review of U.S. national security since the National Security Act of 1947.²⁹ Among the findings of this exhaustive review of U.S. national security, the commission found that given the changed security environment and increased globalization, "a direct attack against American citizens on American soil is likely over the next quarter-century."³⁰ Due to the commission's underlying assumption, the recommendations outlined in the report prescribed major changes to U.S. national security institutions to be best positioned to address these new threats.³¹

The report received little attention from the public and the Bush administration when it was published in early 2001. It seemingly died as soon as it was released. It was not until the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, later that same year, that the recommendations outlined in the report were brought to the forefront. The report's main proposals, the updated national security institutions, led to the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.³² Although the commission's report was initially met with little fan-

28 Tama, "The Contemporary Presidency", 146–147.

29 Zegart, "Blue Ribbons, Black Boxes," 370.

30 Hart-Rudman Commission, January 31, 2001.

31 William W. Ellis, "Terrorism in the United States: Revisiting the Hart-Rudman Commission," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (2004): 25.

32 Tama, "Three Cheers for Blue Ribbon Panels," 30.

fare, in the face of a crisis, it became the foundation for significant policy and institutional change. Especially in a time of overwhelming change and chaos, the proposals from the commission were essential for swift transformation.

While one major benefit to blue ribbon commissions is their independent and nonpartisan design, the selection process and appointing authority may cast doubts on the objectivity of a commission's findings. The commission's members may inadvertently reflect the biases of the appointing authority. However, since the findings of the report and the members are public and can be referred to at any time, there is more pressure for the members to practice objectivity in their proposals to protect their reputations. Former Secretary of State James Baker, co-chair of the Iraq Study Group with very close ties to the Bush family, noted just as such when he supported the harsh criticisms of the Bush strategy in the commission's report.³³ The high-status nature of the members of these commissions also means that the makeup of these commissions tends to be mostly older men who were former government officials, reflecting little diversity.

The act of even appointing a blue ribbon commission can come under scrutiny. Commissions can be perceived as a way for leaders to deflect criticism or delay making difficult decisions by appearing to take action without committing to substantial changes. In a situation as contentious as that of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, officially deviating from the status quo can lead to immense public criticism and have devastating consequences domestically and internationally. A blue ribbon commission to examine the issue is an attractive alternative to an administration because a president's legacy is not tied to the report.

Achieving unanimity in blue ribbon commissions sends a strong signal to the public, but prioritizing reaching a consensus over debating innovative and controversial ideas may result in less cutting-edge recommendations.

Despite these criticisms, the value of a blue ribbon commission and its report lies in the platform it provides for intensive deliberation of complex issues as well as recommendations that can provide a resource in a time of crisis. Even the undertaking itself could be a signal to allies and adversaries that the U.S. is seriously considering its policy options and strategy. Nonetheless, keeping these criticisms in mind will be paramount in appointing a blue ribbon commission to address U.S. strategy in North Korea.

33 Tama, "The Contemporary Presidency", 141.

Appointing a Blue Ribbon Commission to Review U.S. Strategy Toward the DPRK's Weapons Program

The U.S. needs a comprehensive and creative review of its policy toward North Korea, and there is untapped potential in blue ribbon commissions to serve as a platform for sorely needed deliberations and innovative recommendations. Given the above overview of blue ribbon commissions, their makeup, and the role they have played in past foreign policy and national security matters, this paper offers the following policy recommendations:

The U.S. needs a comprehensive and creative review of its policy toward North Korea, and there is untapped potential in blue ribbon commissions to serve as a platform for sorely needed deliberations and innovative recommendations.

U.S. Executive Branch

- 1. Appoint a blue ribbon commission to comprehensively examine U.S. policy toward North Korea and establish the scope of the commission's review.**

The U.S. president should appoint a blue ribbon commission and establish the scope of the commission's review to examine whether the current U.S. policy approach to North Korea's nuclear threat has been successful in ensuring American national security.

- 2. Begin canvassing high-caliber figures with extensive experience on North Korea issues to chair and participate in the commission, including members representing both parties, nuclear policy specialists, and former diplomats.**

As highlighted above, including high-caliber names on commissions can bring much-needed attention and credibility to findings and recommendations. One suggestion would be having former President Bill Clinton, who had extensive experience negotiating and engaging with the North Koreans, chair such a commission. However, given how little attention is paid to North Korea, it may be difficult to find other members of similar preeminence.

U.S. Legislative Branch

- 1. Current advocates for issues related to the Korean Peninsula (Korean POW remains, etc.) in Congress should push for the establishment of a blue ribbon commission and further attention on the North Korean nuclear threat.**

North Korea's nuclear threat is not receiving much attention from the American public or U.S. politics. As Seoul's Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho has noted, in the lead-up to the U.S. presidential election in November, neither candidate brought up the nuclear threat North Korea poses.³⁴ It is crucial that Congress push for more attention to the challenge that North Korea's arsenal poses and the failures of U.S. strategy to mitigate that threat.

By fostering innovative ideas and providing a platform for rigorous debate, such a commission could offer actionable recommendations to address the ongoing threat posed by North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal.

A blue ribbon commission represents a strategic opportunity to rethink and revitalize U.S. policy toward North Korea. By fostering innovative ideas and providing a platform for rigorous debate, such a commission could offer actionable recommendations to address the ongoing threat posed by North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal. This approach not only promises a more effective creative and objective strategy review but also signals a serious commitment to resolving one of the most pressing national security challenges.

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³⁴ Andrew Salmon, "Seoul urges U.S. to refocus on North Korean denuclearization," *Washington Times*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/aug/22/seoul-urges-us-to-refocus-on-north-korean-denuclea/>.

Reframing the U.S.-ROK Strategy for North Korean Diplomacy

Ian Fleming Zhou

Executive Summary

North Korea's negotiation strategy has often relied on time-delay tactics, enabling it to avoid meaningful commitments during negotiations while advancing its nuclear capabilities. These tactics involve the deliberate manipulation of time to control outcomes, slow negotiations, prevent conclusive agreements, and await favorable external developments.¹ As such, negotiating parties must develop effective counter-strategies to address these methods. Historical diplomatic efforts, including the Six-Party Talks, have demonstrated that North Korea's stalling tactics can weaken alliances' resolve and lead to fragmented responses, which play right into North Korea's strategy of avoiding reaching concrete agreements during negotiations.

This policy paper focuses on how the United States (U.S.) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) can maintain cohesion and effectively counter North Korea's negotiation tactics through a reinforced phased approach. This approach is predicated on the assumption that North Korea, South Korea, and the U.S. will agree to negotiations. It emphasizes a forward-looking strategy to address the ongoing threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons.² A phased approach that acknowledges the complex realities underlying North Korea's nuclear program and the regime's security-driven motivations would facilitate solid results-oriented negotiations.

This policy paper acknowledges several challenges associated with the proposed roadmap. First, reengaging North Korea would be challenging because Kim Jong Un might be reluctant and skeptical. Strengthening backchannel diplomacy and multilateral coordination would help to increase pressure while offering phased concessions. Secondly, the mismatched domestic political dynamics and polarization regarding North Korea between the U.S. and ROK could hinder cohesive action. Thirdly, developing reliable verification mechanisms and methods remains a critical obstacle to ensuring compliance

1 Amira Galin. *World Of Negotiation, The: Theories, Perceptions And Practice*, 2015: 146.

2 US Department of Defense. 2022. "DOD Releases National Defense Strategy, Missile Defense, Nuclear Posture Reviews." <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>. Accessed August 10, 2024.

with any agreements. And lastly, fluctuations in leadership in both Washington and Seoul can impact continuity and commitment to negotiations. These challenges have been evident in past attempts at addressing a possible roadmap.

Key Recommendations

This paper identifies short-, medium- and long-term recommendations. The short-term goal is to initiate a back channel with North Korea and implement phased sanctions relief tied to specific, verifiable actions. This would shift the focus from denuclearization demands to arms control agreements that freeze and cap North Korea’s nuclear activities. In the medium term, this paper recommends to establish a permanent diplomatic channel between the U.S. and South Korea to ensure policy alignment and prevent fragmented approaches. In the long term, this paper recommends steps toward regional security integration that will help North Korea to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons.

Background

North Korea’s negotiation history is characterized by a consistent use of time delay tactics, leveraging diplomatic engagements to buy time while continuing to advance its nuclear weapons program. This strategy was evident during the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009), which aimed to achieve denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through multilateral negotiations involving the United States, South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. Despite initial progress, including the 2005 Joint Statement that outlined steps toward denuclearization, North Korea’s entry-exit brinkmanship and its repeated stalling undermined the talks.

North Korea’s negotiation history has been characterized by a consistent use of time delay tactics, leveraging diplomatic engagements to buy time while continuing to advance its nuclear weapons program.

Time-delay tactics during negotiations typically involve alternating between periods of engagement and disengagement. The use of this tactic is designed to either prolong the negotiations, avoid making substantial concessions or to entrap other negotiating parties in a failing negotiation.³ By prolonging negotiations without making substantive concessions, North Korea has

3 Ian Fleming, Zhou, and Wyk Jo-Ansie Van. “North Korea’s Entrapment and Time Delay Tactics during Nuclear Negotiations.” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 9, no. 2 (November 30, 2021): 415.

successfully maintained and built its nuclear capabilities while extracting economic aid or other concessions from the United States and South Korea. Any progress achieved in talks with North Korea has often proven to be temporary, failing to result in sustained commitments or enduring solutions.⁴ What makes this observation particularly noteworthy is the emphasis on the failure of both North Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance to consistently honor their commitments.

Furthermore, South Korea's emphasis on engagement has often conflicted with the United States' more hardline stance, leading to differing approaches in how to deal with North Korea. The Sunshine Policy (1998–2008), which sought reconciliation between North and South Korea, further highlighted these divergences. Since South Korea's approach was more conciliatory compared to the U.S. approach, this created a lack of cohesion, and North Korea exploited these differences to stall progress. The alliance not only had to deal with an actor that was not willing to make any considerable concessions on its nuclear program, but it also dealt with its own challenges—diverging priorities, differing strategies and internal divisions. Alliances are not however, monolithic; they have different interests and this can lead to divergent preferences.⁵

In recent years, North Korea's nuclear program has persisted despite efforts at direct diplomacy, such as the Trump-Kim summits in 2018 and 2019. One of the reasons why Kim Jong Un agreed to the summits was that he needed to gain time to further upgrade his nuclear weapons program, whilst avoiding pressure from the U.S. administration.⁶ In this way, Kim Jong Un appeared willing to negotiate, but in hindsight, it was a strategy meant to buy time, achieve concessions, and distract from the main issue of denuclearization. The failure of these summits stemmed from the big gap between Trump's complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID) principles, and Kim's step-by-step approach.⁷ Thus, the failure to achieve a comprehensive agreement and the continued development of North Korea's nuclear arsenal illustrate the need for a recalibrated approach.

4 Sigal, Leon V. "Hand in Hand for Korea: A Peace Process and Denuclearization." *Asian Perspective* 32, no. 2 (2008): 1–32.

5 Snyder, Glenn H. "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics." *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–95.

6 Kwon, Edward. "Negotiations on the Denuclearisation of North Korea: A Critical Evaluation of Summit Diplomacy." *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 3 (May 27, 2022): 742–767, 748.

7 Friedman, Uri. "Inside the Collapse of Trump's Korea Policy." *The Atlantic* (blog), December 19, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/12/donald-trump-kim-jong-un-north-korea-diplomacy-denuclearization/603748/>.

As Victor D. Cha and Sung-Yoon Lee have argued, prior efforts, such as the Agreed Framework, lacked mechanisms to effectively counter North Korea's stalling tactics.⁸ Building on their critiques, this paper introduces an approach with phased incentives and regional monitoring designed to address North Korea's reluctance to engage meaningfully. This phased approach aims to create a more balanced negotiation dynamic by linking rewards directly to the successful completion of each incremental, verifiable step, avoiding the pitfalls of premature concessions. This strategy incorporates built-in flexibility, allowing the alliance to maintain consistent strategic goals even as political leadership changes. Reinforcing diplomatic engagement in this way establishes a structured and accountable negotiation process, minimizing the risk of stalling while maximizing progress.

Policy Problem

The ongoing diplomatic deadlock with North Korea has highlights significant challenges for the U.S.-ROK alliance, particularly in the context of North Korea's strategic manipulation of diplomatic engagements. This has undermined previous efforts at denuclearization. The ability of North Korea to engage in brinkmanship—agreeing to terms only to later stall or walk back from commitments—has allowed it to maintain and advance its nuclear capabilities. Between April and September of 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in conducted three summit meetings with North Korea.⁹ Even when Kim destroyed a major nuclear test site in Punggye-ri after the June 2018 Singapore Summits to prove his will to denuclearize, no nuclear experts were invited to verify the event, and only a small number of selected foreign news reporters were allowed to be present.¹⁰ Shortly afterwards, in November 2018, satellite images revealed that North Korea was secretly improving more than a dozen secret missile launching sites while it pretended to dismantle the Sohae Launching Station, one of the major missile launching sites in Dongchang-ri.¹¹ This pattern of deceitful tactics illustrates the type of counterpart the U.S.-ROK alliance will need to confront in future negotiations. It is against this backdrop of strategic deception that the alliance must formulate a cohesive and resilient strategy for dealing with North Korea.

8 Cha, Victor D. *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. HarperCollins, 2012; U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Sung-Yoon Lee's Testimony Before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs*. 115th Cong., 2nd sess., April 11, 2018. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20180411/108116/HHRG-115-FA05-Wstate-LeeS-20180411-U1.pdf>.

9 Christopher Lawrence, "A Theory of Engagement with North Korea," Discussion Paper 2019-02, (Cambridge, Mass.: Project on Managing the Atom, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, May 2019).

10 Liu, Jack, Frank Pabian, and Jenny Town. "North Korea's Punggye-Ri Nuclear Test Site: Three Years After Its Dismantlement." 38 North, June 9, 2021. <https://www.38north.org/2021/06/north-koreas-punggye-ri-nuclear-test-site-three-years-after-its-dismantlement/>.

11 Liu, Jack, and Jenny Town. "North Korea's Tongchang-Ri: Rebuilding Commences on Launch Pad and Engine Test Stand." 38 North, March 5, 2019. <https://www.38north.org/2019/03/sohae030519/>.

For the U.S.-ROK alliance, this presents a dual challenge:

1. **Cohesion within the Alliance:** Historically, divergent approaches between the United States and South Korea have complicated diplomatic efforts. The Sunshine Policy pursued by South Korea in the late 1990's and 2000's emphasized engagement and economic cooperation with North Korea, leading to points of divergence with the U.S., which often favored a harder stance involving sanctions and military readiness. These differing priorities can weaken the alliance's collective bargaining position, giving North Korea room to maneuver strategically.¹² North Korea has exploited these differences to its advantage, stalling negotiations and weakening the alliance's bargaining power. This divergence was evident in 2018 and 2019, when the U.S. and South Korea carried out separate summits with North Korea.

While South Korean President Moon Jae-in pursued active engagement with North Korea, promoting the Panmunjom Declaration to reduce military tensions and enhance economic cooperation, the U.S., under President Donald Trump, insisted on complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID) before agreeing to broader cooperation. This misalignment created friction within the alliance: while Moon's administration sought to relax certain sanctions to advance inter-Korean projects, the U.S. resisted, concerned that easing sanctions would undermine maximum pressure. North Korea capitalized on this rift by selectively engaging with South Korea on economic and humanitarian issues while stalling in denuclearization talks with the U.S. This strategic exploitation weakened the unified front the alliance sought to present, allowing North Korea to maintain leverage and delay substantial commitments on denuclearization. A more unified diplomatic strategy is crucial to prevent North Korea from exploiting these divergences and to strengthen collective bargaining power.

2. **Dealing with North Korea's Time-Delay Tactics:** North Korea's strategic use of engagement to buy time while advancing its nuclear program requires a more structured and accountable negotiation framework. The current paradigm, which alternates between pressure and sporadic high-stakes diplomacy, has failed to prevent North Korea from advancing its nuclear capabilities. The alliance needs to let go of an "all-or-nothing" strategy, because this has not worked. Moving forward, the U.S. and ROK must ensure that their diplomatic engagements are synchronized, preventing North Korea from using tactics meant to play one alliance member against the other.

¹² Cha, *The Impossible State*.

Policy Alternative

Shift from Maximum Pressure to Constructive Engagement

Constructive engagement involves shifting from rigid demands of immediate, complete denuclearization to a strategy that prioritizes gradual, verifiable steps and mutual concessions. Demanding complete, immediate denuclearization has historically led to diplomatic stalemates, as North Korea perceives such demands as existential threats.¹³ This approach emphasizes dialogue over coercion and seeks to create a balanced negotiation environment, where both sides can achieve incremental progress without sacrificing their core interests.

Constructive engagement involves shifting from rigid demands of immediate, complete denuclearization to a strategy that prioritizes gradual, verifiable steps and mutual concessions.

Previous hardline stances have only pushed North Korea away from negotiations rather than encouraging compliance.¹⁴ Thus incorporation of realistic expectations of not leading with CVID would facilitate bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table in good faith without having to derail the negotiation process with delaying tactics because it does not believe in the terms of the negotiation process. Expecting quick and complete denuclearization is unrealistic, and there is

ongoing debate among Korean Peninsula experts that a pragmatic approach, would involve interim arms control measures and this would help to build trust with North Korea.¹⁵ Arms control measures could be in the form of freezing nuclear development, limiting missile tests, and dismantling specific facilities, with an eye toward long-term stability rather than immediate disarmament. Disarmament should remain the ultimate goal; however, arms control should be prioritized.

A recalibration towards a phased approach would signify a strategic shift towards gradual, reciprocal steps aimed at building trust and fostering long-term engagement. The U.S.-ROK alliance could use North Korea's time delay tactics to their advantage for 'protracted diplomacy.'¹⁶ Rather than allowing North Korea to control the pace and direction of talks, the alliance can use protracted diplomacy to set incremental, verifiable benchmarks that

13 Ibid.

14 U.S. Congress. *Sung-Yoon Lee's Testimony*.

15 Wertheim, Stephen, Markus Garlauskas, Ankit Panda, and Jenny Town. "No Choice but Crisis? The Next President's Options for North Korea." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 18, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/10/north-korea-next-us-president-options?lang=en>.

16 Zhou et al., "North Korea's Entrapment," 423.

compel North Korea to take tangible actions in exchange for phased economic relief.¹⁷ This approach reduces North Korea's ability to stall for time without consequence, ensuring that progress remains structured and accountable over the course of negotiations.

Instead of frontloading incentives, concessions should be tied to North Korea's verifiable compliance with each phase of the process. This gradual, step-by-step approach would involve:

1. Freezing current nuclear activities in exchange for limited sanctions relief;
2. Capping missile development in return for economic or security incentives; and
3. The incremental dismantling of nuclear infrastructure, paired with international monitoring, to reduce North Korea's nuclear capabilities over time.

Sustained diplomatic flexibility and multilateral support can be a constructive way to engage North Korea. The lack of flexibility over the years in how to approach the North Korean nuclear problem has led to a nuclear-armed rogue state. As Snyder notes, states can become entrapped by rigid alliance commitments and inflexible strategies, which limit their diplomatic options.¹⁸ Similarly, Revere argues that sweeping demands and over commitment to denuclearization have created an unsustainable negotiation process, effectively trapping the U.S. in cycles of diplomatic breakdown.¹⁹ By entrenching themselves in rigid approaches, negotiators have hindered their ability to adapt and find pragmatic solutions, ultimately undermining the goal of denuclearization. By focusing on smaller, achievable steps, the U.S. can create a foundation for future disarmament and reduce the risk of a complete diplomatic collapse.

The goal should be to limit nuclear proliferation and reduce immediate threats. By managing expectations, the U.S. and ROK can build momentum over time without risking a breakdown.

Benefits of this Approach

1. Gradual Progress: Small, verifiable wins build trust and keep North Korea engaged in the process. By shifting from maximum pressure to constructive engagement, the approach reduces the risk of diplomatic breakdowns and increases the likelihood of reaching meaningful, long-term solutions.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Snyder, "Alliance Politics."

¹⁹ Revere, Evans JR. "The United States and Japan in East Asia: challenges and prospects for the alliance." *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35, no. 4 (2013): 188–197.

2. Through a phased, monitored process, North Korea's use of time-delay tactics can be mitigated. By attaching rewards to tangible actions, this approach creates a balance between incentives and accountability.
3. Ensuring that the U.S. and South Korea maintain a cohesive diplomatic and military strategy is vital for the success of constructive engagement.

Through this process that prioritizes incremental progress, each party would undertake verifiable actions in exchange for corresponding concessions, creating a framework of trust and cooperation. Verification in this context would be conducted through a multi-layered system involving both international and regional actors in a manner similar to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) framework. The JCPOA did not require Iran to dismantle its entire nuclear program all at once; rather, it focused on incremental progress, with each step tied to corresponding concessions from the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany). The JCPOA had specific timelines and benchmarks for Iran to meet. For example, Iran agreed to limit its stockpile of enriched uranium and reduce the number of centrifuges over a set period. Each phase of compliance had to be verified before the next round of sanctions relief was granted.

Like Iran in the JCPOA, North Korea would gradually dismantle parts of its nuclear program, with each phase tied to verifiable steps, such as freezing current nuclear activities, reducing the number of centrifuges, or limiting missile tests. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would play a central role in monitoring North Korea's compliance, conducting both routine and snap inspections of declared and non-declared sites. Just as with Iran, the IAEA's monitoring would involve on-the-ground inspections and the use of advanced technology to ensure transparency. If North Korea violates the agreement, the phased approach would include mechanisms to re-impose sanctions or freeze the negotiation process. This would ensure that North Korea cannot stall while continuing to develop its nuclear program.

Incorporation of Realistic Expectations

While planning may be approached in logical phases toward some desired final stage, international politics seldom unfold in a linear fashion.²⁰ The U.S.-ROK alliance must be prepared for any negotiation process with North Korea to be brittle and beleaguered by threats of breakdown. Even if diplomacy with North Korea can progress in the desired direction, sustaining a favorable outcome can hardly be taken for granted.

20 Most, Benjamin A., and Harvey Starr. *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics*. Studies in International Relations. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2015.

In light of the shifting politics and perceptions between the two Koreas, the U.S. and South Korea need to conduct a rigorous examination of their long-term objectives on the Korean Peninsula, including clear delineations of red lines and baseline acceptable scenarios. These objectives should be demarcated as either realistic interim goals or merely aspirational. By setting realistic, achievable benchmarks—such as freezing further nuclear development, dismantling specific facilities, or limiting missile tests—this strategy aims to recalibrate expectations, build confidence, and achieve meaningful progress more attainable over time.

Additionally, the alliance should adapt deadlines or time frames to mitigate North Korea’s delay tactics that could hinder progress for the phased approach. An element of weakness in both the 2018 Singapore Summit and September 2005 Fourth Round Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks was the lack of timeline to mark progress in the verification and dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear program and infrastructure.²¹ The language of “to work toward” implies a process of indeterminate length, and this affects the ability to achieve realistic tangible progress on curbing the nuclear program.

The initial phase would entail a freeze on North Korea’s nuclear activities in exchange for limited sanctions relief or security guarantees. Robust, multilateral verification mechanisms would be put in place to ensure compliance at each stage of the process. For accountability purposes, there should be mechanisms for holding North Korea accountable if it fails to meet its commitments, with agreed consequences that do not derail the entire negotiation process.

On the other hand, in acknowledging North Korea’s security-driven motivations and allowing for gradual concessions rather than demanding immediate denuclearization, there is a concern that North Korea might consolidate its nuclear capabilities during the negotiation process. The danger is that, over time, the international community could come to accept North Korea’s nuclear arsenal as a permanent fixture, rather than as a temporary challenge to be resolved.

The U.S.-ROK alliance must be prepared for any negotiation process with North Korea to be brittle and beleaguered by threats of breakdown.

21 Przystup, James. “Aspiration vs. Reality: Where Are We with the North Korea Denuclearization Process?” Institute for National Strategic Studies, November 16, 2018. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1692529/aspiration-vs-reality-where-are-we-with-the-north-korea-denuclearization-process/>.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of previous strategies and the proposed alternatives, the following recommendations aim to create a more cohesive and effective U.S.-ROK alliance strategy to deal with North Korea's nuclear problem, while addressing the challenges posed by North Korea's stalling and delay tactics in diplomatic negotiations. The recommendations aim to foster gradual, verifiable progress towards denuclearization while mitigating the risks posed by North Korea's negotiation tactics by moving away from maximum pressure and all-or-nothing demands.

1. Short-term Measures

A. Initiation of Back-Channel Communications with North Korea

- Establish discrete communication channels through trusted intermediaries, such as neutral third-party countries such as Switzerland, Sweden and Canada. This allows for continuous engagement and can help prevent misunderstandings that could escalate tensions.
- Back-channel diplomacy can also facilitate incremental confidence-building measures that may not be possible through formal talks.

B. Confidence-Building Measures

- Suspend large-scale joint military exercises as a goodwill gesture, contingent on North Korea's adherence to freezing its nuclear activities.
- Formalize communication channels between military commanders to prevent accidental escalation and build trust incrementally.
- Phased sanction relief tied to verification of specific nuclear-related commitments, like in the JCPOA. This phased approach would for a gradual buildup of trust while maintaining leverage over the course of the agreement. This ensures that North Korea is rewarded only for concrete actions rather than mere promises.

2. Medium-term Strategies

A. Negotiation of Interim Arms Control Agreements

- Rather than pushing for immediate and complete denuclearization, focus on interim agreements that cap North Korea's nuclear capabilities. These agreements could include limits on missile tests or dismantling certain nuclear facilities, paired with partial sanctions relief.

- This approach prioritizes risk reduction while laying the groundwork for future denuclearization.

B. Establishment of a Permanent Diplomatic Channel Between the U.S.-ROK and North Korea

- Establish a permanent, multilateral diplomatic channel that includes representatives from both the U.S. and South Korea, to ensure alignment and prevent policy divergence within the alliance.
- This channel should operate continuously, even during periods of heightened tensions, to prevent communication breakdowns and maintain steady diplomatic momentum.

3. Long-term Goals

A. Integration of North Korea into Regional Security Frameworks

- Work towards the gradual integration of North Korea into broader regional security frameworks, which include South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. This would provide North Korea with security guarantees that address its concerns while fostering a regional environment conducive to denuclearization.
- This integration would also help reduce North Korea's reliance on nuclear weapons for security by embedding it in a multilateral security network.

B. Comprehensive Arms Control and Disarmament Agreements Under International Legal Frameworks

- As progress is made, aim for a comprehensive arms control agreement that would bring North Korea into compliance with international non-proliferation treaties, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- International organizations, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), should play a leading role in verification and compliance, ensuring that North Korea's commitments are credible and enforceable.

Conclusion

The North Korean nuclear issue remains one of the most complex security challenges in the international arena, primarily due to Pyongyang's adept use of time-delay tactics and its refusal to engage in meaningful, comprehensive denuclearization talks. While previous strategies, such as maximum pressure and sporadic, high-stakes diplomacy, have failed to achieve lasting results, a shift towards constructive engagement—grounded in realistic expectations and a phased approach—offers a more sustainable pathway.

A reinvigorated phased approach that emphasizes incremental, verifiable steps is the best approach forward. By moving away from an all-or-nothing mentality, the proposed strategy offers a balanced framework that allows for gradual progress while building trust.

Importantly, it outlines specific verification mechanisms—modelled on successful elements of the JCPOA—to ensure that North Korea complies with its commitments at each stage, preventing the regime from exploiting the process to buy time for further nuclear development.

Ultimately, the phased approach balances the need for firm verification with diplomatic flexibility, recognizing that expecting complete and immediate denuclearization is unrealistic given North Korea's security concerns. Instead, by focusing on freezing nuclear development, limiting missile tests, and dismantling key facilities, this strategy can promote long-term stability and reduce the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program.

Ultimately, the phased approach balances the need for firm verification with diplomatic flexibility, recognizing that expecting complete and immediate denuclearization is unrealistic given North Korea's security concerns. Instead, by focusing on freezing nuclear development, limiting missile tests, and dismantling key facilities, this strategy can promote long-term stability and reduce the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program.

The success of future negotiations will hinge on the unity of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the willingness of North Korea to engage, and the effective implementation of verification mechanisms. While challenges remain, the proposed phased strategy, grounded in verifiable actions and supported by international collaboration, offers a pragmatic and realistic solution to the ongoing nuclear impasse on the Korean Peninsula.

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Mr. Zhou's dedication to advancing nuclear arms control and disarmament is reflected in his extensive contributions, including policy papers, peer-reviewed journal articles, and opinion pieces, as well as active participation in international arms control forums. During the 10th NPT Review Conference in 2022, he served as the Peaceful Uses Youth Working Group Chair under the British American Security Information Center (BASIC)'s Emerging Voices Network. He is also a former Executive Board Member of BASIC's Emerging Voices Network.

Previously, Mr. Zhou was a research fellow at the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) as part of the 2022 cohort. His areas of expertise include arms control, nuclear diplomacy, nonproliferation, and disarmament.

Restructuring the Agenda: Shifting U.S.-DPRK Talks Toward Nuclear Safety

Caroline Kearney

Executive Summary

Due to decades of political tensions and failed negotiation attempts, the U.S. and DPRK governments currently have no regular communication channel. This presents a dangerous security situation because the DPRK has a capable and active ballistic missile and nuclear weapons program and considers the U.S. and South Korea to be its top enemies.¹ In 2023 and 2024 alone, North Korea conducted 74 tests of short-range to intercontinental ballistic missiles—all of which are capable of delivering nuclear warheads.² Since 2006, North Korea has conducted six nuclear weapons tests and is expected to conduct a seventh any day now.³ There also has not been an external inspection of the nuclear weapons program since 2010, raising the potential for a nuclear accident that would devastate the region.⁴ Now, North Korea may be further emboldened to act in an aggressive manner, as Pyongyang has been selling weapons to Moscow to support its conflict in Ukraine since September 2023.⁵ This new arrangement addresses the economic need in the DPRK that may otherwise motivate the leadership to return to talks with the U.S.

Even though restarting U.S.-DPRK diplomacy will not be easy, the U.S. must pursue it precisely because of this dangerous security environment. The U.S. has already spent more than three decades pursuing complete denuclearization of the DPRK but all of those talks ultimately failed. One of the serious threats the nuclear weapons program poses, but is

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- 1 Martin, Timothy W. “Kim Jong Un Has a New Enemy No. 1—and It Isn’t the U.S.” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/kim-jong-un-has-a-new-enemy-no-1and-it-isnt-the-u-s-942eaa10>.
 - 2 “The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database,” November 12, 2024. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>.
 - 3 Lee, Rachel Minyoung. “To Do or Not to Do: Pyongyang’s Seventh Nuclear Test Calculations.” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 7, 2024. www.38north.org/2023/03/pay-attention-the-commentator-returns/.
 - 4 Hecker, Siegfried S, and Elliot A Serbin. *Hinge Points: An Inside Look at North Korea’s Nuclear Program*. Stanford University Press, 2023.
 - 5 Lee, Joyce Sohyun, and Michelle Ye Hee Lee. “Russia and North Korea’s Military Deal Formalizes a Bustling Arms Trade.” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/22/russia-north-korea-military-deal-ukraine/>.

rarely mentioned, is the potential for a nuclear accident caused by improper safety measures. Previous inspections over the years noted safety concerns; however, an external inspection has not been conducted in over 14 years, leaving the exact status of the program unknown. Therefore, a nuclear accident or disaster is certainly possible. This would place all persons (including hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens) living in Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region in danger.

This shift in strategy not only addresses pressing safety concerns but also allows negotiators to return to the table with a new priority and agenda, saving face for both parties. Washington can feel at ease that it is addressing the safety of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, while Pyongyang can return to the table addressing a new issue, gaining educational opportunities in the international arena for its citizens, and developing the potential for this issue to lead to larger and more beneficial negotiations with the U.S. While addressing safety issues in the DPRK's nuclear weapons program will not solve the ultimate problem, it is an interim step that will benefit the U.S. and Indo-Pacific region and restart U.S.-DPRK dialogue. Once cooperation on nuclear safety has been achieved, the U.S. can move forward in the process towards threat reduction, arms control and eventual denuclearization.

While addressing safety issues in the DPRK's nuclear weapons program will not solve the ultimate problem, it is an interim step that will benefit the U.S. and Indo-Pacific region and restart U.S.-DPRK dialogue.

To that end, Washington should:

- Leverage President Trump's re-election and his previous rapport with Kim Jong Un to reinstate diplomatic talks with Pyongyang.
- Develop a new U.S. policy titled "Towards Nuclear Safety on the Korean Peninsula" and privately present it to North Korean officials to define and negotiate key parameters.
- Include South Korea in the process from the outset, ensuring their input and feedback are fully integrated into the new policy.
- Collaborate closely with Russia, utilizing the strong current ties between Moscow and Pyongyang to advance the initiative.
- Publicly announce the new policy after reaching an agreement with North Korea, emphasizing its primary goal of protecting the lives of American citizens, both military and civilian.
- Partner with European and Northeast Asian nations to jointly fund North Korean participation in nuclear safety training led by international organizations, with necessary exceptions made to U.S. and UN sanctions.

Time for a New Approach

Since 1993, the U.S. has attempted to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development programs through periods of negotiations and sanctions. While the process has included fits and starts, there has yet to be a round of negotiations that has succeeded long-term. The DPRK has likely possessed sufficient plutonium to build nuclear weapons since 1993–94 and has been testing their capacity since 2006.⁶ Now, in 2025, it is evident that North Korea continues to advance its nuclear weapons program despite all previous attempts to denuclearize the country. Thus, the U.S. can either make the best of the current situation by doing its utmost to protect persons in the region by focusing on the safety of the program, or it can remain dedicated to a complete denuclearization-or-nothing approach, allowing the program to further develop and endanger the region. Denuclearization of not only the Korean Peninsula, but also the whole world, can and should remain a long-term goal, but it should be dropped from the U.S.-North Korea agenda in the short term to improve safety in the region and restart talks.

The U.S. must also acknowledge that it will need to develop a tailored approach to negotiations with North Korea—as it is one of the most headstrong and independent countries that it will encounter. Pyongyang adamantly rejects the U.S.-led international order that has dominated international politics since the end of World War II.⁷ Instead, Pyongyang focuses on building diplomatic relationships with post-colonial countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America which have promoted socialist and communist values.⁸ In addition, North Korea has proven time and again that it would rather endure mass domestic casualties than lose face by adhering to international standards that it does not align with—i.e., the Arduous March of the mid-1990s and the 2020–2023 COVID pandemic.⁹

The North Korean leadership has also been described as having a short fuse, which was witnessed in the breakdown of the 2019 U.S.-DPRK Summit in Hanoi. In the lead-up to the meeting, the DPRK leadership felt so confident a deal would be made with President Trump

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- 6 Engelberg, Stephen, and Michael R. Gordon. "INTELLIGENCE STUDY SAYS NORTH KOREA HAS NUCLEAR BOMB." *New York Times*, December 26, 1993. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/26/world/intelligence-study-says-north-korea-has-nuclear-bomb.html>.
 - 7 Ho, Jong Ho, Sok Hui Kang, and Thae Ho Pak. *The US Imperialists Started The Korean War*. Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1993. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/484814>.
 - 8 Wertz, Daniel, and Jean Lee. "DPRK Diplomatic Relations," June 2024. <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/dprk-diplomatic-relations>.; Benjamin Young, California R. *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader : North Korea and the Third World*. Stanford University Press, 2021. <https://www.sup.org/books/history/guns-guerillas-and-great-leader>.
 - 9 Haggard, Stephen, and Marcus Noland. *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*. Columbia University Press, 2007; Cha, Victor, Katrin Fraser Katz, and J Stephen Morrison. "North Korea's Covid-19 Lockdown: Current Status and Road Ahead," March 9, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-koreas-covid-19-lockdown-current-status-and-road-ahead>.

within the scheduled timeframe, that a large group of KCNA news staff were brought on the trip and readied to announce a deal.¹⁰ Further, to reach this point, Kim expended significant leverage with his domestic population to meet with and trust the Americans. Once Kim realized a deal would not happen on this occasion, he immediately became angered and embarrassed and quickly returned to Pyongyang.¹¹ The collapse led him to lose face with his domestic audience as well as patience with the U.S. leadership.

Even though U.S. and North Korean officials met again later that year in Stockholm for working-level talks, the U.S. side no longer sensed a genuine interest on the part of DPRK officials in reaching a deal.¹² Going forward, U.S. negotiators will need to balance the personality of the North Korean leadership, domestic political considerations in the DPRK, and most especially, the danger posed by the nuclear weapons program to the region. If another opportunity presents itself, the U.S. will have to act faster and offer more concessions than it did in Hanoi to avoid another failed round of negotiations.

Precedent

To support this approach, current officials can look to precedent set in the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework and 2003–2009 Six-Party Talks. On June 11, 1993, the U.S. successfully convinced North Korea to suspend its withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct inspections of the DPRK’s previously declared nuclear sites.¹³ While Pyongyang withdrew its IAEA membership in June of 1994, the U.S. and DPRK signed the Agreed Framework in October of the same year.¹⁴

In the Agreed Framework, the two parties agreed to multiple steps towards denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with Pyongyang committing to freeze operation and construction of nuclear reactors capable of weaponization in exchange for two proliferation-resistant nuclear power reactors. The DPRK also agreed to allow visits by IAEA technical teams to

10 *KCNA Watch*. “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Arrives in Hanoi.” February 27, 2019. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1551216328-906830023/supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-arrives-in-hanoi/>; Details regarding the atmosphere during U.S.-DPRK meetings in Hanoi and Stockholm were received from anonymous sources present at both meetings.

11 Based on conversations with anonymous sources present at the Hanoi Summit.

12 Based on conversations with anonymous sources present at the U.S.-DPRK working-level talks in Stockholm.

13 “IAEA and DPRK: Chronology of Key Events.” Accessed January 13, 2025. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/dprk/chronology-of-key-events>.

14 “Agreed Framework Between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control*. United States of America, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, October 21, 1994. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/rls/or/2004/31009.htm>.

monitor the freezing of North Korean graphite-moderated reactors and related facilities and their eventual dismantlement. But, by 2002, both parties were blaming the other for lack of implementation. Then, as part of the Six-Party Talks, the U.S. and the DPRK signed a joint statement on September 19, 2005, renewing commitments made in 1994.¹⁵ Even though the Six-Party Talks ultimately failed, it provides precedent for cooperation between Washington and Pyongyang on the DPRK's nuclear program. While the focus of this agreement would have been the prevention of proliferation, if light water reactors are not properly constructed and managed, it can lead to a meltdown and release of radioactive materials.¹⁶

Even though the Six-Party Talks ultimately failed, it provides precedent for cooperation between Washington and Pyongyang on the DPRK's nuclear program.

The U.S. also paid an American company to clean and stabilize 8,000 used fuel rods from a research reactor at Yongbyon.¹⁷ While the fuel rods disposal was carried out, the LWRs were never completed as the deal fell through in part due to delays with the U.S. Congress. While noting the U.S. funded safety

equipment at Yongbyon during his 2008 visit, Dr. Hecker said the U.S. technical team had unprecedented access to the country's nuclear facilities.¹⁸ Citing a U.S. participant, Hecker explained that the U.S. had already spent \$15–\$17 million for dismantlement activities at Yongbyon through the end of 2007.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. provided nuclear safety and weapons reduction support to the Russians through the successful Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program in 1991. As DPRK-Russia ties have recently grown warmer, the U.S. administration can reach out to Russia and ask them to advocate to the DPRK, on the U.S.' behalf, to explain the success of U.S.-Russian cooperation on nuclear safety. Russia shares a border with North Korea and has previously expressed concern about the safety of North Korea's nuclear program. With the recent rekindled relations, and potential for working relations between Trump, Kim, and Putin, the U.S. can look to Russia as a new interlocutor this round.

15 "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing." Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 19, 2005. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.

16 Kessler, Günter, and Anke Vesper. "Safety and Risk of Light Water Reactors," 99–129, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-55116-1_5.

17 Levi, Nicolas. "How North Korea Handles Nuclear Waste From Risky Disposal to Deals with Taiwan." *NK News*, April 20, 2023. <https://www.nknews.org/2023/04/how-north-korea-handles-nuclear-waste-from-risky-disposal-to-deals-with-taiwan/>.

18 Hecker and Serbin, *Hinge Points: An Inside Look at North Korea's Nuclear Program*.

One consideration to keep in mind is that both Moscow and Pyongyang are currently pre-occupied with the conflict in Ukraine and neither government will likely have the capacity to handle or support U.S.-DPRK talks prior to a ceasefire or pause in conflict. However, incoming U.S. President Trump has promised to end the war promptly after taking office in January 2025.¹⁹ U.S. aid to Ukraine far outweighs contributions of other foreign nations and Ukraine will likely find it difficult to fund its defense on European support alone.²⁰ Trump is expected to use this leverage to pressure Ukraine and Russia into a deal, perhaps requiring Ukraine to cede some of its eastern territory.²¹ Once this process is finalized, Moscow and Pyongyang can build on their recent progress in fostering closer relations by turning their attention to ensuring the safety of North Korea's nuclear program.

Potential Safety Risks of North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

When considering the safety risks that the North Korean nuclear weapons program poses to the region, it is important to keep in mind two key issues. First, the location of the nuclear weapons program to the Indo-Pacific region in the event of an accident, and second, the safety and security measures involved to maintain the facilities, conduct nuclear tests, and dispose of nuclear waste.

Geographical Concerns

Most of North Korea's nuclear weapons production facilities are believed to be in and around the city of Yongbyon, only 170 miles or a 2.5-hour drive from Seoul, with a population of around 26 million people.²² A nuclear accident would not only affect Korean, Chinese, and Japanese citizens in the region but also the hundreds of thousands of Americans living in

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- 19 Slattery, Gram, and Jonathan Landry. "Trump's Plan for Ukraine Comes into Focus: NATO off the Table and Concessions on Territory." *Reuters*, December 5, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/trumps-plan-ukraine-comes-into-focus-territorial-concessions-nato-off-table-2024-12-04/>.
- 20 Rose, Adam, Zhenhua Chen, and Dan Wei. "The Economic Impacts of Russia-Ukraine War Export Disruptions of Grain Commodities." *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 645-65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aep.13351>; Coi, Giovanna, and Lucia Mackenzie. "Ukraine's Funding Gap-by the Numbers," January 25, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-funding-budget-defense-european-union/>.
- 21 Ward, Alexander. "Trump Promised to End the War in Ukraine. Now He Must Decide How." *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/trump-presidency-ukraine-russia-war-plans-008655c0>.
- 22 Distance between Seoul (37.5503° N, 126.9971° E) and Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center (39.7974° N, 125.7549° E).

Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. currently has 28,500 U.S. military personnel in Korea and 55,000 in Japan, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of civilians who would all be directly impacted by an incident.²³

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has about 375,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel assigned to the larger region.²⁴ The Indo-Pacific also hosts more than 50% of the world's population, and the U.S. conducts more than \$2 trillion in trade each year in the region.²⁵ Therefore, the importance of regional stability to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific cannot be overstated.

Facility Maintenance, Nuclear Testing & Waste Disposal

The most recent official and detailed inspection of North Korea's nuclear weapons program was conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2008, 16 years prior to the time of writing this article.²⁶ In a February 2008 visit, Dr. Siegfried Hecker noted a significant improvement in health and safety practices in all the visited facilities.²⁷ In particular, he observed an increase in radiation monitors, air filter units, and safety equipment, as well as staff wearing anti-contamination suits and face masks instead of casual attire. In fact, this equipment was primarily funded by the U.S. State Department's Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund to contribute to dismantlement as part of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

However, after this agreement fell through and Hecker visited the site again for a final time in 2010, he became deeply concerned about the safety issues that could result from North Korea's construction plans and practices to build an indigenous Light Water Reactor (LWR).²⁸ The IAEA had been formally asked to leave the country in 2009 and cooperation with the DPRK officially ended. Since 2010, there has been no known external inspection of North Korea's nuclear facilities.

23 Vergun, David. "U.S.-Japan Alliance Increasingly Strengthened Since End of WWII." *DOD News*, U.S. Department of Defense, November 7, 2024. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/2306658/us-japan-alliance-increasingly-strengthened-since-end-of-wwii/>; Campbell, Caitlin, and Christina Arabia. "U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress," September 12, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11388>.

24 "Headquarters, United States Indo-Pacific Command." Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://www.pacom.mil/about-usindopacom/>.

25 U.S. Department of State Spokesperson, "Fact Sheet: The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific," February 9, 2024.

26 "Fact Sheet on DPRK Nuclear Safeguards." Accessed November 8, 2024. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/dprk/fact-sheet-on-dprk-nuclear-safeguards>.

27 Hecker and Serbin.

28 Hecker and Serbin.

In December 2023, the IAEA Director General made a public announcement about concerns over indicators that the LWR at Yongbyon was operating again without notice.²⁹ The Director General added that the IAEA does not have sufficient information to comment on the safety of the reactor but reiterated that safety is the most important factor to consider when restarting an LWR.

On January 24, 2014, a 38 North report determined that the DPRK's Experimental Light Water Reactor has likely been operational since October 2023, while its 5 MWe Reactor has been operating since July 2021.³⁰ A faulty design or an electrical or mechanical failure that is not properly handled can result in a meltdown, resulting in the release of radioactive materials.

The Nuclear Threat Initiative released its 2023 Nuclear Security Index and ranked North Korea either the lowest or near the lowest of all countries considered when it comes to nuclear security.³¹ Overall, it scored last on actions to secure materials against theft as well as actions to protect facilities against sabotage. Some of the specific and most concerning areas with the lowest score include on-site physical protection, control and accounting procedures, response capabilities, and zero current commitments to global norms.

The international community expects North Korea to conduct a seventh nuclear test at any time. Each test and subsequent waste disposal involve the possibility of health and safety impacts. For example, radioactive pollution is often released into the surrounding water and atmosphere after a test. In February 2023, the South Korean Transitional Justice Working Group released a report drawing attention to the radioactive contamination of the groundwater near the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site.³² The report estimated that 500,000 people living in China and North Korea could be impacted by the radiation stemming from DPRK underground nuclear tests.

29 IAEA, "IAEA Director General Statement on Recent Developments in the DPRK's Nuclear Programme," December 23, 2023. https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/styles/hd_1920x1080/public/iaeaflag11140x640.jpg?itok=o193TBMj.

30 Park, Sulgiye, and Allison Puccioni. "North Korea's Pursuit of an ELWR: Potential Power in Nuclear Ambitions?" *38 North*, January 24, 2024. <https://www.38north.org/2024/01/north-koreas-pursuit-of-an-elwr-potential-power-in-nuclear-ambitions/>.; Makowsky, Peter, and Jack Liu. "Growing Activity at North Korea's Experimental Light Water Reactor," April 1, 2023. <https://www.38north.org/2023/04/yongbyon-nuclear-research-center-growing-activity-at-the-experimental-light-water-reactor/>.

31 Roecker, Scott, Nickolas Roth, Ross Matzkin-Bridger, and Jack Brosnan. "NTI Nuclear Security Index," July 2023. <https://www.ntiindex.org/country/north-korea/>.

32 Lee, Hubert Youngwhan, Minjong Ryu, Ethan Hee-Seok Shin, April Song-Ah Park, Suhena Mehra, and Jeonghyun Kang. *Mapping the Risk and Effect of Radioactive Contamination of Groundwater Sources from the Punggye-Ri Nuclear Test Site in North Korea*. Seoul: Transitional Justice Working Group, February 2023.

Further, a review of recent nuclear energy-related accidents can provide explicit examples of the consequences of such programs. In March 2011, a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and ensuing tsunami led to a nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant, impacting an estimated 32 million people in Japan.³³ People were displaced from their homes and radiation exposure led to immediate and long-term expected health problems such as cancer and psychological conditions.³⁴ Even though Japan is an advanced country that responded quickly and appropriately, the health and safety of its citizens was still impacted by the incident.

The 1986 nuclear accident in Chernobyl, at the time governed by the Soviet Union, was the largest uncontrolled release of radiation in history.³⁵ The accident occurred due to flawed reactor design and insufficiently trained staff. As a result, two nuclear facility staff died immediately from the explosion, and another 28 people died in the following weeks due to acute radiation syndrome.³⁶ At least 5,000 cases of thyroid cancer in individuals who were children at the time were directly attributed to the accident.

Chernobyl is an interesting parallel as the incident has been attributed to the Soviet Union's isolation during the Cold War and the resulting lack of safety measures. When individual countries are not members of, or actively participating with, international nuclear security organizations, such as the IAEA, they lose the opportunity to benefit from lessons learned from other nuclear energy programs and are not subject to international safety standards and inspections. North Korea has surely learned from the lessons of Chernobyl, but as external inspectors have not examined its facilities in the last two decades, any potential safety issues cannot be identified or addressed.

Separately yet relatedly, a nuclear accident would require a swift and international response, but North Korea's closed and controlled governance style is known to hinder both. For example, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and dominated international headlines by January 2020. The virus quickly spread through China and the world. North Korea and China share an 840-mile border, and up until 2019, saw frequent and regular movement for trade, travel and more.³⁷ Nonetheless,

33 Samet, Jonathan M, and Dayana Chanson. "Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant Disaster," March 9, 2015. <https://reliefweb.int/report/japan/fukushima-daiichi-power-plant-disaster-how-many-people-were-affected-2015-report>.

34 Samet and Chanson.

35 *Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission*. "Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident." March 2022. <https://www.cnsccsn.gc.ca/eng/resources/health/health-effects-chernobyl-accident/>.

36 *Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission*. "Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident."

37 Hastings, Justin V., and Yaohui Wang. "Informal Trade along the China-North Korea Border." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 2018): 181–203. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2018.4>; Hotham, Oliver. "China Opens New Sino-North Korea Border Crossing in Jilin Province." *NK News*, April 9, 2019. <https://www.nknews.org/2019/04/china-opens-new-sino-north-korea-border-crossing-in-jilin-province/>.

North Korea denied there were any positive cases of the virus until May 2022, even though it certainly had numerous cases within the two-and-a-half years.³⁸ Pyongyang also refused to accept international vaccines until around the same time. It is not a country that is quick to admit its own mistakes or request help from the international community. As a result, countries that could be impacted by an accident, must take initiative and proactively address the situation.

Previously, negotiations have broken down when the U.S. and North Korea cannot agree to whether Pyongyang has declared all facilities that produce nuclear materials.³⁹ Instead of pressing North Korea to declare every site, it is more imperative to ensure that safety regulations are fully understood and completed. This process will require trust between the U.S., DPRK, and the organizations and experts who carry out the safety regulation trainings.

Addressing Opposition

Arguments against this approach mainly come from the fear this strategy implies recognition of the nuclear weapons program, that the U.S. is rewarding bad behavior, and that this move could embolden other countries to develop nuclear weapons programs of their own, particularly in South Korea.⁴⁰ However, Washington should clarify that any country that moves forward with the development of a nuclear weapons program without becoming a signatory of the NPT—whether a U.S. ally or not—will face economic sanctions from the UN Security Council and U.S. Treasury Department. After all, North Korea has also faced such sanctions since its first nuclear weapons test in 2006, following its withdrawal from the NPT in 2003. It is only fair that any other country faces the same consequences.

Because the DPRK was already detached from the U.S. economy, it was able to shield itself from any significant negative impacts of U.S. sanctions. Meanwhile, countries with existing and strong economic ties to the U.S., will suffer direct consequences from such sanctions. This also serves as a reminder to the U.S. leadership to keep allies close and entwined in the U.S. economy, ensuring that rebellious and destructive decisions will be met with economic sanctions.

38 McCurry, Justin. “North Korea Admits to Covid Outbreak for First Time and Declares ‘Severe National Emergency.’” *Guardian*, May 11, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/12/north-korea-admits-to-covid-outbreak-for-first-time>.

39 *The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization*. “History of KEDO.” Accessed November 12, 2024. http://www.kedo.org/au_history.asp.

40 Dalton, Toby. “What Would Happen If South Korea Built Nuclear Weapons.” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, September 22, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/22/south-korea-nuclear-weapons-proliferation-deterrence-strategy/>.

Secondly, ignoring the program and pretending like it does not exist, even though it poses a very real threat to the region, has only led to the program's further advancement. Repeating the same policy for decades while expecting North Korea to suddenly change its policy is illogical. Instead, it is time for U.S.-based analysts to try a new way of thinking.

Other observers may oppose the shift away from denuclearization towards nuclear safety, arguing that North Korea retains the opportunity to use nuclear weapons against the U.S. or South Korea. But there are at least two strong arguments made by dozens of experts explaining why this is unlikely. First, Kim Jong Un may be a brutal leader, but most DPRK analysts agree that he is also a rational leader. The leadership's primary goals are regime preservation and deterrence.⁴¹ Kim Jong Un is fully aware that using nuclear weapons against the ROK or U.S. is a suicide mission.⁴² The U.S. and South Korea would respond quickly and forcefully, ensuring an end to the Kim regime.

Second, the exercise of cooperating on nuclear safety issues will ease tensions. Once the two countries interact with each other and make progress, the diplomatic relationship has the potential to improve. If relations remain stable over time, trust can be built between both countries and the security threats that both countries experience will ease. In the medium to long-term, North Korea will have the opportunity to realize there is no need to prepare a nuclear weapons program to respond to threats from the U.S. or South Korea.⁴³

Policy Recommendations

The U.S. should lean on the previous relationship built between Trump and Kim Jong Un to convince the DPRK to restart talks. After taking office, Trump should write a personal letter to Kim, mentioning a forthcoming policy which he hopes will contribute to renewed U.S.-DPRK talks.

To make a compelling argument to convince the North Koreans that this offer serves their interest, the U.S. will need to seek out and cooperate with negotiators who have deep understanding of the leadership's mindset and have previous and successful experiences working with DPRK officials. It is likely that some of these individuals have already left

41 Bowden, Mark. "How to Deal With North Korea—The Atlantic." *The Atlantic*, August 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/the-worst-problem-on-earth/528717/>.

42 Cohen, Zachary. "CIA: North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Isn't Crazy." *CNN*, October 6, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/05/politics/cia-kim-jong-un-intelligence-profile/index.html>

43 The authors describe the cycle of provocations that occur between the U.S. and North Korea as well as between the DPRK and ROK. Delury, John, Morton Halperin, Peter Hayes, Chung-in Moon, Leon Sigal, and Tom Pickering. "Revisiting the Comprehensive Security Roadmap to Reduce the Risk of War on the Korean Peninsula." *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, April 19, 2024, 8–11. https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Revisiting-the-Comprehensive-Security-Roadmap-to-Reduce-the-Risk-of-War-on-the-Korean-Peninsula_Updated.pdf.

their official government positions or are even non-U.S. citizens. But the dire nature of this situation requires out-of-the box strategies. A few experts the U.S. should consider include two former U.S. government officials, Bob Carlin and Allison Hooker, as well as Glyn Ford, former member of the European Parliament.

In the meantime, the U.S. should draft a new policy, “Towards Nuclear Safety on the Korean Peninsula,” and privately share it with North Korean interlocutors. It is important to provide them ample time to consider this new approach and invite them to discuss it in further detail once as they are ready. The Trump administration can consider attaching this policy to another personal letter.

The U.S. should also reach out to Russian and South Korean counterparts to cooperate closely on this issue. The Russians can be brought in as a mediator between Pyongyang and Washington, especially if the Russia-Ukraine conflict can be resolved soon. The new U.S. administration can take advantage of the closer ties between the DPRK and Russia and ask Russian to explain the advantages the country received from nuclear safety cooperation with the U.S. in the early 1990s.

The ROK is the closest ally in the region and faces the most direct and physical brunt of North Korean reactions. Their historical and cultural ties with North Korea would also contribute unique and valuable perspectives to the formulation of a new policy. Further, ensuring Seoul’s buy-in and close collaboration on this strategy can contribute to dialogue and mutual understanding between South Korea and the U.S. on the importance of preventing South Korea from also developing an indigenous nuclear weapons program. The last thing the Korean Peninsula needs is another nuclear weapons program.

Once the parties agree, Washington and Pyongyang should simultaneously and publicly announce their new plan. The U.S. must make clear to the American public the new policy is first and foremost about fulfilling its duty to protect the lives of U.S. citizens—both military and civilian—living abroad. The framing should focus on the safety compliance standard expected by all nuclear-capable countries. This moves the parties away from the never-ending argument over which countries can (the U.S., UK, France, China, and Russia) and which countries cannot have nuclear weapons programs.

During negotiations, the U.S. and North Korea should discuss the range of nationalities the DPRK would be comfortable allowing into the country to inspect its nuclear weapons

To make a compelling argument to convince the North Koreans that this offer serves their interest, the U.S. will need to seek out and cooperate with negotiators who have deep understanding of the leadership’s mindset and have previous and successful experiences working with DPRK officials.

program for safety issues. It could include European or American inspectors, though DPRK officials may prefer a primarily Russian, Chinese, or Asian team. Understandably, the DPRK leadership may not want officials from countries it considers hostile, and allied with hostile countries, to inspect the details of its program. The goal is not to ensure Americans are a part of an inspection process, but to ensure qualified and trustworthy individuals can guarantee the safety of the program.

Last, funding will need to be provided, and UNSC and U.S. sanctions lifted, or exemptions provided, for North Korean nuclear scientists and related support positions to attend safety trainings held by international nuclear safety organizations. All countries could be impacted by a nuclear accident, and all countries would benefit from a safe nuclear program on the planet. A less hostile North Korea would also be globally beneficial; therefore the U.S. should not fund these programs alone. It can look to allies in Europe, Asia and beyond to create a collective fund. South Korea and Japan would be obvious co-donors due to their alliance with the U.S., geographical proximity to North Korea, and previous funding contributions to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), an outcome of the 1994 Agreed Framework.⁴⁴

By inviting North Koreans to existing nuclear safety trainings alongside nuclear scientists and support staff of all nationalities, the North Korean leadership can save face with its domestic audience. The leadership can announce to its citizens that it provides internationally recognized safety and educational trainings to its staff, with the purpose of ensuring maximum safety standards and protections for its staff and its citizens.

Conclusion

U.S. government officials repeatedly express frustration that all previous negotiation attempts with North Korea have failed and that new approaches are needed. This will require U.S. officials to shift their mindset and think about the North Korean nuclear program in new and different ways. This paper recommends the U.S. to change the objective of negotiations with the DPRK from denuclearization towards nuclear safety. Guaranteeing safety of people living in the Indo-Pacific region should be paramount to all other concerns in the short-term.

44 *The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization*. “History of KEDO.”

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A U.S. Perspective: Sweden's Role as Protecting Power in the DPRK

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Executive Summary

Sweden plays a critical role as a protecting power for the United States of America in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter referred to as the DPRK). Given the absence of formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the DPRK, Sweden has acted as a protecting power since 1995, providing consular services, administrative support, and facilitating humanitarian work between the two countries. The role of Sweden is vital for maintaining a channel of communication in a relationship marked by recurrent tensions and mutual distrust. As the geopolitical landscape on the Korean Peninsula continues to evolve, it is imperative that both the United States and Sweden review and strengthen this unique diplomatic agreement.

There is a dearth of research and understanding of Sweden's role as protecting power outside of the diplomatic and DPRK expert spheres which this paper seeks to address by conducting semi-structured interviews with former diplomats and government officials from the U.S. who have worked extensively with the DPRK portfolio and available official publications. This policy paper outlines the role of Sweden as protecting power for the U.S. in the DPRK, highlights the challenges and opportunities inherent in this role, and provides actionable recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of this diplomatic arrangement.

By investing in and enhancing support for Sweden's protecting power efforts, the U.S. can ensure the safety of its citizens in the DPRK, receive a trustworthy and unbiased perspective of politico-military developments in-country, and maintain a critical communication channel with their DPRK counterparts.

By investing in and enhancing support for Sweden's protecting power efforts, the U.S. can ensure the safety of its citizens in the DPRK, receive a trustworthy and unbiased perspective of politico-military developments in-country, and maintain a critical communication channel with their DPRK counterparts. By upgrading its unique and long-term presence in Pyongyang, Sweden will benefit by earning diplomatic prestige and goodwill with the U.S. and DPRK, as well as having a greater capacity to forge new relationships with key

stakeholders in the DPRK government. Finally, there are advantages for the DPRK as well since this vital channel of communication with the U.S. will become more robust, be able to quickly and efficiently resolve consular issues with minimal risk for escalation and will allow DPRK officials to gain deeper insights to European and NATO perspectives.

Policy Recommendations

The State Department Should Consider Staffing the U.S. Interest Section at the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang When Relations Improve: As per the 1995 Protecting Power Agreement, the U.S. and Sweden have already agreed that an interest section can be established within the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang. Should the geopolitical environment become more open for engagement with the DPRK, the U.S. should consider sending foreign service officers to be embedded with the Swedish embassy where they can carry out political work, delegation support, and open direct channels to their DPRK counterparts, while still permitting Swedish officials to be responsible for administrative, humanitarian, and consular efforts.

The State Department and Swedish MFA Should Consider Reviewing and Adapting the Protecting Power Agreement: The 1995 Protecting Power Agreement between the U.S. and Sweden should be reviewed and updated, as several key sections are outdated or unused. As diplomatic normalization between the U.S. and the DPRK is highly uncertain in the near future, revising the agreement will ensure it remains relevant and effective in addressing current diplomatic and security challenges, facilitating consular support and humanitarian efforts in the DPRK. This review should aim to update or remove defunct paragraphs, clarify the scope of Sweden's responsibilities, and incorporate new mechanisms to address contemporary issues. In the end, it is important to note that any possible expansion of the Protecting Power Agreement will require DPRK sign-off.

The U.S. Should Encourage the Swedish Government to Review a Possible Expansion of the Embassy in Pyongyang: As the U.S. protecting power in the DPRK, Sweden has for the benefit of both countries effectively assisted in resolving numerous consular incidents and facilitated diplomatic communication with Pyongyang. Taking into consideration the increasingly significant role the DPRK plays in Euro-Atlantic Indo-Pacific security, it is in all parties' best interests that Sweden should seek to expand the size of its mission, as well as upgrade it by posting a permanent defense attaché to Pyongyang, to elevate the politico-military relationship and hedge against misunderstanding. Furthermore, additional financial support for Sweden's embassy in Pyongyang by the U.S. State Department, in line with the Protecting Power Agreement, will be necessary to bolster their capacity to handle increased responsibilities, especially in light of the recent reopening of the DPRK to outside tourism and humanitarian work.

Background

The Concept of a Protecting Power

A protecting power is a neutral country that represents the interests of another state in a third country where the latter does not have diplomatic representation. This arrangement is typically formalized under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. As protecting power for the United States of America in the DPRK, the guiding frameworks for Sweden are article 8 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and article 46 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.¹ Sweden has a long history of engagement on the Korean Peninsula, dating back to the Korean War, and serves as a protecting power for several states such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.²

Sweden's Role as U.S. Protecting Power in the DPRK

The U.S. and the DPRK have never established formal diplomatic relations. Following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the early 1990's and the U.S. humanitarian support for the DPRK during the arduous march famine and the Agreed Framework, there was nascent hope that the two countries would soon normalize diplomatic relations.³ As a first step towards normalization, the United States requested Sweden in 1995 to serve as its protecting power via the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang.⁴ In this capacity, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs agreed to provide consular services to U.S. citizens in the DPRK, provide administrative support for official and unofficial U.S. delegations visiting the DPRK, and services for U.S. humanitarian actors with a presence in the country.⁵ According to a former Swedish diplomat who served in the DPRK, the amount of time and resources that are dedicated to the protecting power mission fluctuates and are entirely dependent upon how many foreign citizens are detained at the time.⁶ Furthermore, the U.S. State Department

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- 1 Regeringskansliet, "Överenskommelse med Amerikas förenta stater om antagande av skyddsmaktsuppdrag i Demokratiska folkrepubliken Korea," 1996 <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/sveriges-internationella-overenskommelser/1996/01/so-199629/>; Regeringskansliet, "Uttalande av utrikesminister Tobias Billström," September 27, 2023, <https://www.regeringen.se/uttalanden/2023/09/uttalande-av-utrikesminister-tobias-billstrom/>.
 - 2 Andersson, Magnus and Bae, Jinsun, "Sweden's Engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," North Korean Review, 2015, 11(1), 48, https://research-api.cbs.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/45590381/jinsun_bae_sweden_s_engagement_with_the_democratic_people_s_republic_of_korea_publishersversion.pdf; Regeringskansliet, "Uttalande av utrikesminister Tobias Billström."
 - 3 Andersson and Bae, "Sweden's Engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," 48.
 - 4 Regeringskansliet, "Överenskommelse med Amerikas."
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 Dalbard, Karl and Axelsson, Gustav, "Sveriges relation med Nordkorea : En analys av Sveriges motiv och agerande utifrån ett neoliberalt perspektiv," 2018, DIVA, 27, <https://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1238283&dswid=4458>.

covers the expenses incurred by Sweden for carrying out the protecting power mission.⁷ Although not officially a statute of the 1995 Protecting Power Agreement, the Swedish Foreign Ministry also facilitates communication between Washington and Pyongyang and serves as a channel for diplomatic messages between the country leadership.

Administrative, Humanitarian, and Consular Services

How Sweden carries out the protecting power mission is determined primarily by U.S. requests and developments on the ground in the DPRK.⁸ The majority of the services carried out by Sweden are consular and administrative in nature, such as receiving visiting officials, providing consular services to detained individuals and providing support to NGO staff.

The Swedish embassy in Pyongyang regularly provides the U.S. State Department with ongoing reports and assessments of developments in the DPRK and the annual visits to Washington by the Swedish Ambassador to the DPRK's are appreciated by the State Department.⁹ These ambassadorial consultations are comprised of several meetings to debrief on the execution of Sweden's protecting power mission for the year in passing.¹⁰ The reports and information provided by the Swedish embassy to the State Department primarily focus on U.S. citizens who have been detained in the DPRK and are seen as very helpful.¹¹

Knowledge of the welfare of the prisoners was the most important issue covered in these meetings; political issues were discussed, but from the U.S. side there is active consideration not to have Sweden be involved in exchanging any policy views or insights which could actively harm their bilateral relationship with the DPRK.¹² Furthermore, as a protecting power, the embassy is tasked with answering questions regarding the local situation which can be of interest for American citizens visiting the country in either an official or unofficial capacity. One such example highlighted in several interviews is the appreciation the U.S. has for Swedish responses to requests for reports assessing the availability of and access to healthcare for U.S. citizens detained in the DPRK.

7 Regeringskansliet, "Överenskommelse med Amerikas"; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, virtual interview with the author on Sweden's Role as Protecting Power for the U.S. in the DPRK, October 25, 2024. This interviewee has held a long and remarkable career within the U.S. Foreign Service and has held numerous senior positions and worked on the DPRK and Indo-pacific issues for 35+ years.

8 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview.; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, virtual interview with the author on Sweden's Role as Protecting Power for the U.S. in the DPRK, October 31, 2024. This interviewee has held a long and remarkable career within the U.S. Foreign Service and has served in numerous senior positions in particular leading efforts on DPRK issues for 8+ years.

9 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview.

10 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview.

11 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview.

12 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview.

In the early 2000's the U.S. donated hundreds of thousands of tons of grains in humanitarian aid to the DPRK which resulted in over a dozen representatives of American NGO's having a presence in Pyongyang and all over the country.¹³ This resulted in an uptick of protecting power services the Swedish embassy provided to the NGO workers. Consular services were provided to the humanitarian workers and the embassy assisted with administering the aid monitoring mission, but the personal support and hospitality provided for the humanitarian workers was greatly appreciated by all sides.

In addition, the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang also provides support to, briefings, and hospitality services to both official and unofficial American delegations visiting the DPRK. While U.S. officials value the Swedish embassy's support in Pyongyang, they note that Swedish diplomats typically greet U.S. delegations upon arrival and are available

for assistance when requested, but do not accompany the delegations throughout their visits as typical of U.S. embassy staff in other foreign countries.¹⁴ In typical scenarios, U.S. embassies provide visiting delegations with comprehensive in-country support, including secure communications access and meticulously arranged schedules, enabling teams to operate efficiently from arrival to departure. However, in the absence of a U.S. embassy in the DPRK, such structured assistance is unavailable, making any support from the Swedish embassy particularly valuable.¹⁵

Another complicating factor is that DPRK officials typically provide little to no advance information, leaving U.S. delegations “flying in blind,” a situation where Sweden’s role as a protecting power is limited, as the DPRK is unlikely to share such details with a third party.

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13 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 2 virtual interview with the author on Sweden's Role as Protecting Power for the U.S. in the DPRK, October 3, 2024. This interviewee has held a long and remarkable career within the U.S. government and has been deeply involved with DPRK humanitarian aid policy and following DPRK-U.S. relations for 30+ years.

14 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 4, virtual interview with the author on Sweden's Role as Protecting Power for the U.S. in the DPRK, November 26, 2024. This interviewee has held a long and remarkable career within the U.S. government and has served in numerous senior positions in the executive branch, in particular leading efforts on DPRK issues for 20+ years.

15 Ibid.

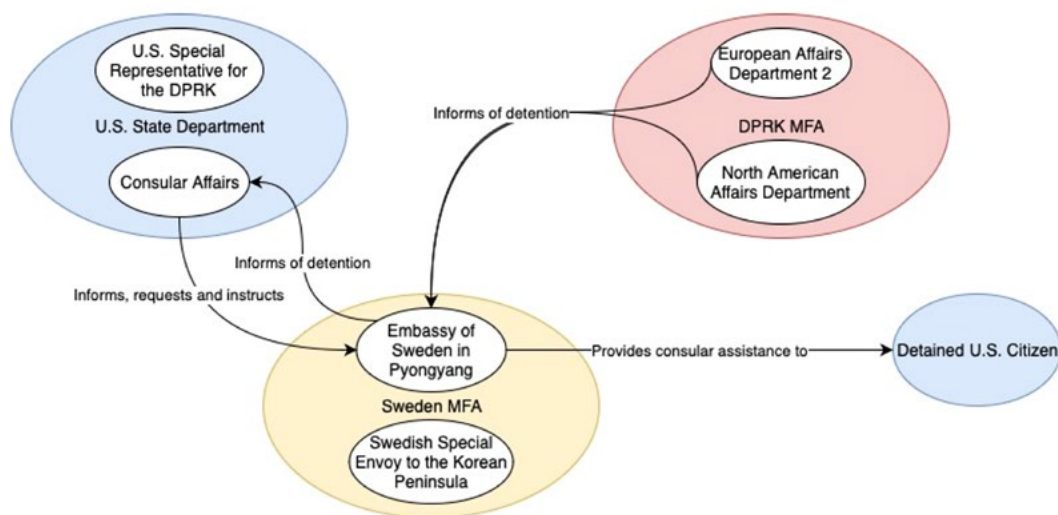
16 Ibid.

to communicate only through Sweden and China.¹⁷ This highlights how Sweden’s role becomes critical in situations where the DPRK opts to avoid direct dialogue with the U.S. Furthermore, some officials indicated that DPRK officials appreciated Sweden’s work as a protecting power, as they facilitated greater cooperation with the U.S.

Arrests and Detentions of U.S. Citizens

Arrests or detentions of U.S. citizens in the DPRK are a recurrent concern for both the U.S. and Sweden. Although the U.S. State Department has attempted to stop this from happening by implementing a travel ban on the DPRK, arrests still occur, with the most recent 2023 arrest and deportation of the U.S. soldier Travis King.¹⁸ As previously mentioned, Sweden is responsible for providing detained citizens with consular support, as per the Protecting Power Agreement; and for the U.S. this is the most important service which Sweden provides.¹⁹

FIGURE 1. Role of the Swedish embassy in handling detention case



The most significant person for coordinating with the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang at the State Department is the U.S. Special Representative for DPRK, and others that have contact with Sweden are the DPRK Desk and Consular Affairs.²⁰

17 Ibid.

18 Regeringskansliet, "Uttalande av utrikesminister Tobias Billström."

19 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview.

20 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 2, interview; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview.

When U.S. citizens are detained, the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang is informed either by the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in particular the Second European Affairs Department or North American Affairs Department, or more rarely from the U.S. State Department depending on how the situation has developed. The role of the Swedish embassy in this situation is to immediately inform the U.S. State Department, maintain close contact with the DPRK MFA, keep themselves informed about the peculiarities of the case, and to the best of their abilities arrange a consular visit with the detained citizen.²¹ According to former senior U.S. official 3, in most detention cases Swedish diplomats are granted access to the incarcerated U.S. citizen shortly after their trial has concluded. Generally, the U.S. side will inform the families of those detained shortly after the Swedish embassy has informed them.²² During the detention process the Swedish embassy will continuously keep the U.S. State Department updated through reports about the citizens' well-being, how the case develops, and in some instances follow State Department requests and instructions. In some cases, the DPRK counterparts showed a high level of willingness and professionalism in cooperating with the Swedish embassy on the handling of detention cases. The Swedish embassy's intensive efforts in working with these cases were helped by leveraging their working relationships with local ministry contacts.

Challenges and Limitations

Trade-Offs of the U.S.-Sweden Protecting Power Agreement

The arrangement of having a protecting power offers both advantages and challenges for the U.S. and Sweden. For the U.S., the primary benefits include avoiding the political and diplomatic costs of establishing a direct mission in the DPRK, which could be seen as legitimizing the regime and reducing the risks to U.S. nationals by delegating consular functions to Sweden. However, the downsides include the inefficiencies of a longer communication chain and triangular diplomacy, which can slow responses, complicate negotiations and

increase the risk for misunderstandings. Diverging national interests, power dynamics and interagency rivalry between the U.S. and Sweden can also create friction, as Sweden may prioritize humanitarian concerns over the U.S.'s foreign policy and national security strategic objectives. For Sweden, the role elevates its diplomatic profile and reinforces its reputation as a leading diplomatic and

Diverging national interests, power dynamics and interagency rivalry between the U.S. and Sweden can also create friction

21 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 1, interview.

22 Ibid.

humanitarian actor, providing opportunities to influence peacebuilding efforts. Yet, this also comes with significant downsides, including domestic criticism of Swedish leadership for maintaining diplomatic relations with the DPRK, particularly given the DPRK's military support for Russia in its war against Ukraine, which contrasts sharply with Sweden's own stance as an ardent supporter of Ukraine.

The U.S.-DPRK Relationship and How it Impacts Sweden as Protecting Power

One challenge for the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang is avoiding that Sweden, in light of the tense U.S.-DPRK relationship, is perceived negatively by the DPRK authorities and that this could harm the Swedish-DPRK bilateral relationship. The assessment by several interviewees is that the deteriorating U.S.-DPRK relationship in practice has not negatively impacted Sweden in carrying out the protecting power mission. The DPRK authorities were fully aware of the dual responsibilities the Swedish diplomats carried out as protecting power and as representatives of Sweden and could differentiate between different cases.

However, former senior U.S. government official 1 holds an opposing view, as they perceived DPRK officials as “rude” towards the Swedish embassy staff when they were involved with the release of one American citizen. According to this former official, on the day of the citizen's release Swedish diplomats tried to see the citizen and the U.S. delegation off but the DPRK officials did not grant them access.

Furthermore, former senior U.S. government official 2 stated that Sweden does not view its diplomatic relations with the DPRK as a concession but rather as a necessary means of maintaining communication, recognizing that even strained dialogue is preferable to the absence of direct contact.²³ They further elaborated that the absence of a U.S. liaison office has left the U.S. in a stagnant position, with the DPRK surpassing all the benchmarks set by Washington.²⁴ In reality, sanctions, a lack of engagement, and the refusal to offer concessions have yielded little progress.²⁵ Therefore having Sweden maintaining a mission to facilitate access and communication with the DPRK is seen as a critical diplomatic function, offering the U.S. a necessary channel in an otherwise deadlocked situation.²⁶

When official U.S. delegations visit Pyongyang, DPRK officials generally strive to be good hosts and maintain a professional atmosphere.²⁷ However, as noted earlier, the DPRK

23 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 2, interview.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 4, interview.

authorities rarely provide schedules in advance. Despite this, the presence of the Swedes as a protecting power is reassuring for U.S. officials, as they serve as a critical resource in case unforeseen issues arise. Given the current stagnation in U.S.-DPRK bilateral relations, Sweden's role remains vital, ensuring a diplomatic channel is preserved and providing essential support in an otherwise isolated environment.

DPRK Involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian War and Sweden's NATO Membership

Swedish weapons systems and DPRK infantry find themselves on opposing sides of the battlefield in Russia and Ukraine, a stark illustration of how the Russo-Ukrainian War interlinks Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, further complicating Sweden's role as a protecting power in the DPRK. With Sweden's NATO ascension and strong support for Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian War, while on the other hand, the DPRK's military backing of Russia creates a stark geopolitical divide that could strain Sweden's role as protecting power in the DPRK.

The DPRK's status as a de facto co-combatant in the war in Ukraine has significantly strained its relations with EU member states, including Sweden, where it is likely that Swedish diplomats—aligning with the EU's policy of constructive engagement—will deliver harsh *démarches* to their DPRK counterparts in response to their support for Russia.²⁸ This divergence risks eroding Sweden's perceived impartiality in the eyes of DPRK decision makers, as the DPRK may view Sweden's alignment with Ukraine and opposition to Russia as evidence of being a member of the U.S.'s camp, potentially complicating diplomatic interactions. Furthermore, Sweden's domestic public and political opinion may increasingly question the legitimacy of maintaining relations with a regime openly aiding Russia, which could pressure Swedish leadership to recalibrate its diplomatic engagement.

Defunct Paragraphs from the Protecting Power Agreement

The most significant limitation identified in this study is the failure to implement key sections of the 1995 Protecting Power Agreement, alongside the fact that some provisions have become obsolete in light of the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. First, the 1995 Protecting Power Agreement was originally drafted with the intent that Sweden would protect U.S. consular interests on a "temporary basis".²⁹ However, as this agreement approaches its 30th anniversary in 2025, it appears poised to join other "temporary" arrangements, like the Korean War Armistice Agreement, that have become long-term

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Regeringskansliet, "Överenskommelse med Amerikas."

fixtures in the security landscape of the Korean Peninsula. In the mid 1990's the U.S. and the DPRK were set to normalize relations, but this was hindered by advancements in the DPRK's nuclear weapons programs. Given that the DPRK has developed into a de facto nuclear weapons state and the unwillingness in Washington to negotiate with the DPRK without their complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization, and global great power rivalry, it is uncertain that there will be substantive movements towards improving bilateral relations in the coming decade.

The third paragraph of the agreement stipulates that the Interest Section of the German embassy in Pyongyang will assist the Swedish embassy in carrying out the protecting power mission if required. According to the former Swedish official the German Interest Section had not, as far as they were aware, been involved in carrying out the protecting power mission as the Swedish embassy had been able to carry it out independently.

Paragraph six of the agreement provides the U.S. State Department with the ability to establish an Interest Section at the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang. This presents a possibility for having a U.S. diplomatic presence in the country while simultaneously negating the need to normalize relations. Ultimately, there is a pervasive view among the U.S. officials that the U.S.-DPRK bilateral relationship has not matured to a level that would allow this to be permissible. Furthermore, there seems to not be any considerable interest from the U.S. side to pursue the option of having U.S. diplomats stationed within the Swedish embassy as there is little to gain and would potentially be difficult for the U.S. diplomats stationed.³⁰ The DPRK is likewise not interested in expanding their diplomatic presence in the U.S. as they are content with the UN mission in New York.³¹

Conclusion

The 1995 Protecting Power Agreement between the U.S. and Sweden was initially designed as a temporary measure to be taken to start the process of normalizing relations between the U.S. and DPRK. As protecting power, Sweden has protected U.S. consular and humanitarian interests in the DPRK, yet the underlying agreement was drafted during a different zeitgeist and should be reviewed in light of the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. The Korean Peninsula will continue to be fraught with tension and uncertainty which will require more engagement and diplomacy by all actors involved. While the future of U.S.-DPRK relations remains uncertain and the DPRK's involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian War has further tarnished its already strained relations with EU member states, it is unlikely that

30 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview; Former Senior U.S. Government Official 4, interview.

31 Former Senior U.S. Government Official 3, interview.

this will significantly undermine Sweden's role as a protecting power and communication facilitator in Pyongyang. By investing in and enhancing support for upgrading Sweden's efforts, the U.S. is taking steps which contribute to the safety of its citizens in the DPRK,

receive another unbiased perspective of the political and security developments in-country, and for all three parties maintain a critical communication channel with their respective counterparts, which is more important than ever now considering the increasing interconnectedness of security across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific.

The Korean Peninsula will continue to be fraught with tension and uncertainty which will require more engagement and diplomacy by all actors involved.

APPENDIX 1

Policy Paper Interview Questions for U.S. Officials

1. Who are the key actors on the U.S. side that coordinate with Sweden on carrying out the protecting power mission, and how do they collaborate with each other?
2. How is Sweden's protecting power mission for the U.S. in the DPRK perceived and received by the State Department, the Department of Defense, and other government authorities?
3. Based off your experiences interacting with the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang, how does Sweden's role as protecting power for the U.S. in the DPRK function on a practical, day-to-day basis?
4. In your opinion why has the U.S. not opened an interest section within the Swedish embassy as agreed to in the protecting power agreement?
5. To what extent do you think Sweden's NATO membership will influence its role and responsibilities as the protecting power for the U.S. in the DPRK?

Please feel free to share any other thoughts, comments or anecdotes that come to mind!

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He has published on book chapters and articles on the Perception of Genghis Khan in DPRK Historiography, Swedish-Mongolian foreign relations, the North Korean Cruise Missile Program, DPRK conceptualization of security and Food in Pyongyang. His main research interests are disaster risk reduction in the DPRK, DPRK military capability development, air and missile defense, CCP espionage, DPRK-Mongolian bilateral relations, Swedish-Mongolian bilateral relations and the security environment on the Korean peninsula.

Shifting Perspectives: Redefining Track Two Diplomacy to Re-engage North Korea

Cathy Kang¹

Executive Summary

This policy paper explores how **unofficial diplomacy (Track 2/1.5 diplomacy)** can be re-introduced to break the current diplomatic stalemate between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) and the United States (U.S.). By exploring the strengths of European-led Track 2/1.5 dialogues with North Korea in the past, the paper recommends that such past experience is vital and can be a starting point for re-engaging with North Korea, as there is more at stake for Europe since the Russian invasion in Ukraine

in 2022 and North Korean troops joining the Russian army in the conflict as a result of the Russia-North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Based on previous experience, European-led Track 2/1.5 dialogues can rekindle dialogue with the DPRK. The new geopolitical configuration would require more creative and innovative ideas to overcome the lack of communication and the lack of trust. Policy recommendations to address these issues include:

The absence of official talk between the U.S and the DPRK since 2019 has led to a prolonged state of intensifying threats and worsening relations between the DPRK and the U.S., and ROK respectively.

1. In the short term: Any talks are better than no talks.

The absence of official talk between the U.S. and the DPRK since 2019 has led to a prolonged state of intensifying threats and worsening relations between the DPRK and the U.S., and ROK respectively. The Biden administration took a hard line approach in contrast to Trump's first term which prioritized dialogue. Biden's North Korea strategy included deterrence through coordination with South Korea and strengthening the alliance through unilateral

1 The author would like to thank Jenny Town for the generous comments and unique insight into the matter, Marialaura De Angelis for sharing experience, the NCAFP's team for the support, and the other program participants for their comments and encouragement.

sanctions and deployment of nuclear-capable assets to the Korean Peninsula.² In addition, Pyongyang's growing partnership with Russia after Moscow's illegal war in Ukraine (2022–) is a new factor for the growing disconnection with North Korea. This resulted in no interest from North Korea in talks despite the U.S.' readiness to start talks without preconditions ("Anywhere, anytime").³ Monitoring the active participation of the DPRK in international forums or conferences, such as BRICS, could give insight into what Pyongyang's interests are and areas of possible engagement, such as sports or joining regional and international organizations.⁴ In addition, European-led engagement should tactically and strategically include U.S. participants in the talks.

2. In the long term: Establish a European-led mechanism for information sharing between practitioners internationally.

History has shown that engaging with North Korea requires specific tactics which include back-channel diplomacy and alternative tracks of diplomacy (Track 2/1.5). Despite the unsuccessful summit in Hanoi (2019), which led to the current deadlock in relations between the U.S. and the DPRK, many of the factors which led to the summit in first place can be contributed to the forementioned tracks of diplomacy. A more specific mechanism for information sharing could strengthen these types of unofficial dialogues.

The U.S. administration should invest in creating a mechanism for current practitioners who can nurture the next-generation practitioners in Track 2/1.5 as well as mediation through the already established NGOs and think tanks with expertise in engaging with North Korea—such as the National Committee for American Foreign Affairs (NCAFP), the Stimson Center, the Asia Society, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

European think tanks and leading universities with practitioners engaging with North Korea, such as SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) and NUPI (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs), should lead the network of practitioners, based on their successful experience in engaging with North Korea, through unofficial diplomacy. At the moment, including SK practitioners is not feasible given the negative attitude of Pyongyang towards Seoul; but in the long-run South Korean academia, think tanks and practitioners should also be included in the information sharing mechanism for practitioners.

2 Hanjin Park, Jiachen Shi, "Will Trump Reopen Back-Channel Diplomacy with North Korea?", *The Diplomat*, December 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/will-trump-reopen-back-channel-diplomacy-with-north-korea/>.

3 Christy Lee, "US remains committed to diplomacy despite North Korea's nuclear escalation", *Voice of America*, March 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-remains-committed-to-diplomacy-despite-north-korea-s-nuclear-escalation-/7596178.html>.

4 Rachel Minyoung Lee, "Quick Take: North Korea and BRICS," *38North*, September 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/09/quick-take-north-korea-and-brics/>.

Introduction

Since the breakdown of talks at the 2019 Hanoi summit, North Korea has shifted its strategic alliances, building stronger ties with Russia and other like-minded states, while not answering the multiple invitations to nuclear talks by the Biden administration and announcing the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) as the number one state enemy and removing decades of unification rhetoric.⁵ This disengagement, compounded by North Korea's continued missile and nuclear advancements, has rendered the policy of strategic patience and critical engagement as not effective. Furthermore, the enshrinement of the nuclear weapons strategy and the mandate to continue the development of weapons of mass destruction in the North Korean constitution has significant implications for potential long-term re-engagement through negotiations with Pyongyang. Lastly, in the beginning of November 2024, the U.S. and South Korea confirmed North Korean soldiers (10,000) joining the Russian army in Kursk and combating against Ukraine.⁶ This has turned yet a new page not only in the Russia-Ukraine war, but in the growing threat against Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

The outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential elections has shed light on the potential role of Trump's personal diplomacy. With two months left until the inauguration, little speculations can be made on how the second Trump administration will approach not only the DPRK, but also the Russia-Ukraine war, on which the Russia-DPRK recent close relations

are based. Nevertheless, resuming talks with North Korea would be on Trump's agenda, according to former Trump national security advisor Robert O'Brien.⁷

Against this backdrop, this policy paper argues that any talk is better than no talk at the moment. And that 'any talk' can be achieved through a European-led initiative given the current state of events on the European continent, namely Putin's

war in Ukraine and the North Korean troops fighting against Ukrainian troops in Kursk. Emphasizing the role of diplomacy in stalemate situations, unofficial diplomacy or Track 2/1.5

Emphasizing the role of diplomacy in stalemate situations, unofficial diplomacy or Track 2/1.5 has the potential to achieve a breakthrough in the current lack of engagement by the DPRK.

- 5 Jenny Town, "Has Conflict on the Korean Peninsula Become Inevitable," Arms Control Association, March 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-03/features/has-conflict-korean-peninsula-become-inevitable>.
- 6 Taejun Kang, "US confirms North Korean troops joining Russia in combat against Ukraine," Radio Free Asia, November 12, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/korea/2024/11/13/north-korea-us-kursk-confirm/>.
- 7 Simone McCarthy, "Trump claims Kim Jong Un 'misses' him. But he faces a very different North Korean leader this time around," CNN World, November 8, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/08/asia/trump-kim-jong-un-north-korea-intl-hnk/index.html>.

2/1.5 has the potential to achieve a breakthrough in the current lack of engagement by the DPRK. As Pyongyang is coming out of its long isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, being backed-up by Moscow through its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and looking toward new like-minded partners, this situation has created opportunities for North Korea to exploit.⁸ There is little to no leverage for the U.S. or Europe.

The recent North Korean participation in international forums and games can be indicators for areas in which Kim Jong Un would be willing to reengage if given the right incentives. Joining the 2024 Olympic games and other international sports competitions, such as participating in the 2024 FIFA Under-20 Women's World Cup, opening its borders to foreign personnel (foreign embassy officials, foreign professors employed by Pyongyang University of Science and Technology), and announcing the reopening of international tourism all may indicate Pyongyang's desire to be acknowledged as a legitimate state by the international society. On the other hand, active participation in BRICS forums by the North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui is another indicator for the areas of interest for Pyongyang as well.⁹

Why Europe and why Track 2/1.5 diplomacy?

Unlike the U.S., European countries have long recognized the DPRK, established embassies in Pyongyang and have a policy of maintaining dialogue through difficulties. Sweden, Finland, Germany, the UK, Switzerland and Spain have historical ties with the DPRK on Track 2 engagement, which has proved to be positive and productive. Sweden's embassy in Pyongyang has been a vital channel for U.S. communication with Pyongyang, hence the important role of Sweden in possible Track 2 initiatives. This makes Europeans trusted and regular interlocutors for Pyongyang.

As the current state of events does not allow any engagement, let alone progress on Track 1 dialogue between the U.S. and the DPRK, and the ROK and DPRK respectively, now more than ever European states can play a strategic role in initiating re-engagement with Pyongyang. Neither U.S.-DPRK nor ROK-DPRK Track 1 engagement is feasible at the moment. At the end of December 2024, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's announced implementing the "toughest" anti-U.S. policy and accused the expansion of U.S.-South

8 Roundtable in Asia Policy 19.3 with Jenny Town, Chung Min Lee et al, "Confronting the Nuclear Challenge North Korea's Ambitions and Regional Strategies," The National Bureau of Asian Research, July 26, 2024, 5-14, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/confronting-the-nuclear-challenge-north-koreas-ambitions-and-regional-strategies/>.

9 Rachel Minyoung Lee, "Quick Take: North Korea and BRICS."

Korea-Japan security partnership as a “nuclear military bloc of aggression.”¹⁰ On South Korean policy, Kim Jong Un announced South Korea as the “principal enemy” and is to be “wiped out” (in contrast to past policy of “to be liberated”). The anti-unification policy through erasing all traces of decades worth of unification policies with the South has began in full swing.¹¹ The North Korean Constitution now defines South Korea as a hostile state and solidifies the two state system. In addition, the hard stance of ROK president Yoon Suk-yeol on North Korean matters points out that approaching the DPRK through the ROK is not feasible at the moment. In different circumstances, the ROK would have played a mediating role or even an active initiator of Track 1.5 dialogues, as was the case during the Moon Jae-in administration.¹²

Definition of unofficial diplomacy (Track 2/1.5 diplomacy)

In contrast to Track 1 or official diplomacy, where the main actors are government officials, unofficial diplomacy or alternate forms of diplomacy do not include government officials, hence the character of the dialogues are not on a state-to-state basis.¹³ According to U.S. State Department Foreign Service Officer Joseph Montville who coined the term Track 2 diplomacy is “a process involving unofficial, informal interactions between members of adversary groups with the aim of developing strategies, influencing public opinion, and organizing human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.”¹⁴ Track 2 diplomacy is “designed to assist the officials of Track 1 diplomacy and to compensate for the constraints imposed upon these officials.¹⁵ On the other hand, Nan (2003) defines Track 1.5 diplomacy as “diplomatic initiatives that are facilitated by unofficial bodies, but

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- 10 Kim, Hyung-Jin. “North Korea’s Kim Vows the Toughest Anti-US Policy before Trump Takes Office.” Associated Press, December 29, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-us-trump-nuclear-966025c8f264422ad6b5d5b46dafd317>.
 - 11 Lee Jeing-Ho, “Kim Jong Un labels S Korea as ‘principal enemy,’ boasts war readiness,” Radio Free Asia, January 9, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-sk-warning-01092024210827.html>; Fyodor Tertitskiy, “The truth behind Kim Jong Un’s “anti-reunification” policy,” DailyNK, May 27, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/truth-kim-jong-un-anti-reunification-policy/>.
 - 12 Leo Byrne, “North Korea, U.S., South Korea to hold track 1.5 dialogue in Finland,” NK News, March 16, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/03/north-korea-u-s-south-korea-to-hold-track-1-5-dialogue-in-finland/>.
 - 13 Jennifer Staats et al, “A Primer on Multi-track Diplomacy: How Does it Work,” US Institute of Peace, July 31, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/primer-multi-track-diplomacy-how-does-it-work>.
 - 14 Priscilla Jung Kim, “United States’ Track II Diplomacy During the Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis (2002–2008),” PhD. Diss. University of Central Lancashire (2019), https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/30846/?template=default_internal.
 - 15 Joseph Montville, “The arrow and the olive branch: A case for track two diplomacy,” United States Information Service, 1993, pp. 161–175.

directly involve officials from the conflict in question”.¹⁶ The participants in Track 2 diplomacy are often former government officials or academic experts who have credibility within their government. Similarly, Track 1.5 diplomacy’s actors are a mix of private individuals and government representatives who participate in an unofficial capacity.¹⁷

Track 1.5 initiatives, while unofficial, are closely aligned with formal diplomatic processes due to the involvement of decision-makers typically linked to foreign or defense ministries. As Jones describes, “Track One and a Half is the closest that unofficial dialogues get to official diplomacy.”¹⁸ Such initiatives are particularly common in interactions with authoritarian states, where participants are often tied to governmental institutions.

The proximity of Track 1.5 dialogues to official diplomacy is a key factor in their definition, offering both significant opportunities and potential risks depending on the context. While Track 2 dialogues often emphasize conflict resolution, Track 1.5 discussions frequently tackle broader policy-relevant issues, including norm-building, regional security, and peace initiatives. This nuanced positioning underscores the sensitive and strategic nature of these dialogues in shaping international relations.

While the United States has engaged with North Korea on Track 2 initiatives through diverse participants, including both officials in their unofficial capacity and specialists from think tanks and NGOs and NPOs, different European-led initiatives with North Korea have had a more Track 1.5 character. Some European non-governmental actors have demonstrated sustainable dialogue through Track 1.5 with Pyongyang despite the isolationist foreign policy of the DPRK. In addition, U.S. and South Korean NGOs and think tanks have continued Track 1.5 dialogues on North Korean issues despite the absence of North Korean official representatives in such formats.

16 Susan Nan, “Track I Diplomacy,” Beyond Intractability, June 2003, http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/track1_diplomacy/; Susan Nan, “Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgian-South Ossetian Peacemaking,” in *Paving the Way*, ed. Ronald J. Fisher (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 41–63, <https://archive.org/details/pavingwaycontrib0000unse>.

17 Daniel Wertz, “Track II Diplomacy with Iran and North Korea.” *Lessons Learned from Unofficial Talks with Nuclear Outliers*, NCNK (2017), https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/NCNK_Track_II_Conference_Report_0.pdf; Eric Ballbach, “Socialization on a Second Track? European Track 1.5 Initiatives with North Korea.” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 29.1 (2020): 77–105, https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/11603/5/영문논총_2020_29-1호_03_내지_기획4.pdf; Jeffrey Mapendere, “Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks.” *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, 2(1), (2006), pp. 66–81, <https://www.defence.lk/upload/ebooks/Track%20One%20and%20a%20Half%20Diplomacy%20and%20the%20Complementarity%20of%20Tracks.pdf>.

18 Wertz, “Track II Diplomacy with Iran and North Korea.”

Track 2/1.5 dialogues with North Korea

Multitrack diplomacy with North Korea is very unique in itself since there is no such thing as Track 2 with North Korea due to the representatives of the DPRK being always in their official capacity, representing the regime. That is why on the North Korean side it can be viewed as being Track 1, while the opposite side is viewed as Track 2, since it normally consists of former officials, diplomats in their unofficial capacity and think tank experts who are trusted by their respective governments. This unique framework has proven to work, given the right environment, and built trust between the participants from both sides.

On one hand, the U.S.-DPRK bilateral Track 2 dialogues have had their fair share of successes and challenges. On the other hand, multilateral parallel approaches such as the complementary Track 2/1.5 conferences during the Six-Party Talks have also proved to be effective with the right actors.

In all cases, the Track 1.5 approach does seem to be optimal, even in the current deadlock, given its unique ability to blend the strengths of both official (Track 1) and unofficial (Track 2) diplomatic channels. This approach is especially suited for North Korean context due to several factors: 1) combining official authority with informal flexibility; 2) building trust and personal relationships; 3) having potential for policy influence; and 4) leveraging international and regional partnerships; 5) avoids expending political capital and the risk of Track 1 for both sides. These are some of the advantages of Track 1.5 based engagement with North Korea.

U.S.-led Track 2 dialogues

Since the North Korean nuclear crisis began over 25 years ago, Track 1.5 dialogues and people-to-people exchanges between North Korea and the international community have played a significant role in facilitating official negotiations. These interactions started becoming regular in the late 1980s, with North Korean officials and international experts engaging through various informal channels. The early 1990s saw the first major instance of such unofficial talks, complementing official negotiations, particularly via the “New York Channel.”¹⁹ North Korea’s participation in forums like the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) was pivotal in these efforts.

19 As the U.S. and North Korea do not have diplomatic ties, they use different ways and back-channels for communication. One of the main channels is the “New York channel” which is the North Korea’s mission to the U.N. in New York.

The 1994 Agreed Framework is one of the most prominent successes of Track 1.5 diplomacy with North Korea. Back then, escalating tensions over North Korea’s nuclear program nearly led to military confrontation. Behind the scenes, Track 1.5 discussions played a crucial role in opening communication channels between the U.S. and North Korea. These informal contacts were initiated by intermediaries such as former U.S. officials and NGOs. A notable example is former U.S. President Jimmy Carter’s visit to North Korea in 1994, which, while unofficial, played a key role in de-escalating tensions and laying the groundwork for the Agreed Framework. This agreement, signed later that year, saw North Korea agree to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for energy aid and the construction of light-water reactors.

The Six-Party Talks, involving North Korea, the U.S., China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia, aimed to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear program. Although the talks were a formal diplomatic process, Track 1.5 dialogues complemented them by providing informal avenues for negotiation. For example, during the Six-Party Talks, semi-official discussions occurred through backchannel meetings hosted by neutral European countries, such as Sweden and Norway. These Track 1.5 dialogues allowed the parties to discuss technical details and explore compromise positions in an environment with less political pressure. One notable initiative in 2005 involved NCAFP, which organized a series of Track 1.5 talks that allowed U.S. experts to engage directly with North Korean diplomats. The meeting helped achieve a breakthrough that led to a significant denuclearization statement. Track 1.5/II dialogues also played a critical role in resuming the Six-Party Talks in 2007 after a period of stalled negotiations. Despite the collapse of the Six-Party Talks, these informal dialogues have persisted as a crucial communication mechanism, often occurring in Europe and Asia. They continue to gather information and maintain lines of communication in the absence of sustained official talks between the U.S. and North Korea.

European-led Track 1.5 dialogues

The Asian Track 2/1.5 dialogues in which North Korea is a participant are conference-type dialogues, held annually or bi-annually, and have a multilateral character and larger in scale. These types of dialogues touch upon broader topics related to regional security in Asia with developments on the Korean Peninsula being one of them.²⁰ Others include the

20 Ballbach, “Socialization on a Second Track?”

General Conferences of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific²¹ and the annual meetings of the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security.²²

To understand the leverage European countries have, first and foremost, there is a need to consider the role of neutrality of the European states for the past decades in being a responsible and reliable channel for Track 1.5 dialogues. In contrast to the U.S. and the ROK relations with the DPRK, which is not based on official diplomatic ties, the European countries that engage in unofficial talks with Pyongyang have official diplomatic ties and in some cases, due to historic closeness, share decades-long relationships. In the case of Sweden, their bilateral diplomatic relations started in 1973. Sweden, being one of the four nations in the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission continued this unique relationship which included official government to government support through the years.²³

This kind of decades-long relationship, based on official diplomatic ties, backbones mutual trust and confidence-building. Moreover, such European countries have established embassies in Pyongyang which makes the bilateral dialogue more accessible. In the case of the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang, opened in 1975, has been used for consular services for U.S. citizens and has played a mediator role between Washington and Pyongyang ever since.²⁴

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- 21 The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), established in 1993, functions as a multilateral Track-1.5 initiative aimed at fostering regional confidence-building through dialogue, consultation, and cooperation on security issues among experts and officials in a private capacity. It formulates policy recommendations for regional and international institutions while promoting innovative ideas and cooperative security approaches, despite varying interests and worldviews among its members. With its robust institutional framework, including national membership committees and specialized groups, CSCAP plays a key role in issuing confidence-building measures, such as recommendations and national security outlooks, and serves as an example of an epistemic community fostering knowledge-sharing and policy coordination. The CSCAP currently has 21 full members, among which are the US, the EU, South Korea, North Korea and many others (It has 21 full members of the Council (Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, China, Europe, India, Indonesia, Japan, DPR Korea, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, United States of America and Vietnam) and one associate member (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat). Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) <https://www.cscap.org/index.php?page=about-us>.
- 22 The Ulaanbaatar Dialogue (UBD), launched in 2014, is a Track-1.5 initiative aimed at fostering regional peace in Northeast Asia through institutionalized dialogue, confidence-building, and cooperation on issues like security, energy, and environmental protection. It involves core regional players, including North Korea, and international actors such as the EU and UN, emphasizing multilateralism, transparency, and mutual trust. By incorporating officials, diplomats, and scholars, the UBD provides a platform for tangible security collaboration and consultation. Permanent Mission of Mongolia to the United Nations, Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, <https://www.un.int/mongolia/mongolia/ulaanbaatar-dialogue>
- 23 김계동. “북한의 외교정책과 대외관계”, 명인문화사, (2012), 384.
Kim Gye-dong, “North Korea’s foreign policy and foreign relations”, Myeongin Munhwasa, (2012), 384.
- 24 Swedish Embassy (U.S. Protecting Power) website, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/resourcesold/csi/us-embassies/north-korea.html>.

Certainly, the European-led Track 1.5 initiatives have a lot in common with the U.S.-led initiatives in their nature—they are also informal and private, they bring together North Korean representatives—often from institutions like the Institute for Disarmament and Peace or the Korea-Europe Association—alongside European academics, experts, and officials, who participate privately or as observers.^{25,26} A distinctive feature of these European-led initiatives is their emphasis on fostering a community of experts who explore innovative solutions while considering how European countries and the EU can contribute to peacebuilding.²⁷ In some cases, high-ranking decision-makers have participated, such as during the 2019 meeting in Sweden, underscoring the potential for these processes to influence official policy indirectly. These initiatives have been recognized by officials from conflict parties, including the U.S. and North Korea, as valuable tools for fostering communication. A key feature of these dialogues is the active participation of European experts and officials, whose impartial contributions help frame discussions, probe critical issues, and encourage responses from conflict-party representatives. Another important characteristic of the Swedish or Norwegian facilitated initiatives is that they are unofficial but involve participants who have enough influential power to brief their home authorities. Furthermore, in the case of Sweden, SIPRI and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have worked together to achieve optimal synchronization.²⁸ For example, SIPRI in Sweden has long facilitated informal Track 1.5 dialogues with North Korea, but in 2019, these efforts expanded to include a high-level meeting organized by the Swedish Foreign Ministry.²⁹ This gathering brought together senior officials from North Korea, South Korea, the United States, and European experts, marking the first working-level talks among U.S. envoy Stephen Biegun, North Korea’s Choe Son Hui, and South Korea’s Lee Do-hoon. Similarly, a Track 1.5 meeting in Oslo in May 2017 served as the initial platform for direct dialogue between the Trump administration and North Korean representatives.³⁰ Having diplomatic

25 The Korea-Europe Association (KEA), under North Korea’s Foreign Ministry, facilitates exchange and cooperation with European policy institutes and civil organizations across media, education, culture, arts, and sports. It promotes dialogue on international issues, particularly concerning Europe and Northeast Asia, and provides policy advice in related areas. The Association includes current and former officials from diverse fields and is organized into sections corresponding to its areas of focus. (ibid).

26 The Institute for Disarmament and Peace (IDP) is a policy research institute under North Korea’s Foreign Ministry that focuses on disarmament, peace, and security issues on the Korean Peninsula and globally. It provides policy recommendations, organizes international academic exchanges, and contributes to regional peace efforts, including its role as a member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. The Institute comprises divisions for disarmament, peace and security, reunification, and external affairs, facilitating collaboration with foreign counterparts on these issues. Ballbach, “Socialization on a Second Track?”

27 Ballbach, “Socialization on a Second Track?”

28 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/about>.

29 Stephen E. Noerper, “Sweden’s Role On The Korean Peninsula: Protecting Power, Mediator And Peacemaker,” The National Committee on North Korea, October 2023, <https://ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/swedens-role-korean-peninsula-protecting-power>.

30 Ballbach, “Socialization on a Second Track?”

relations with North Korea is a big advantage and what sets apart the European-led Track 1.5 initiatives. Another advantage is the lack of media coverage of such unofficial meetings and comparably less public interest in North Korea. The continuation of humanitarian aid is an additional aspect of the advantages European countries have when it comes to trust-building with North Korea.

European-led Track 1.5 dialogues with North Korean officials have often acted as essential channels for communication and information exchange when official diplomatic avenues were unavailable.³¹ These meetings have allowed North Korea to gather insights into the policies and intentions of other governments, such as the United States, particularly

during periods of diplomatic stalemate. For instance, after Donald Trump's election, North Korean representatives used these informal settings in Europe—often involving U.S. experts—to better understand the new administration's policy stance.³² At the same time, international participants leveraged these dialogues to explore North Korea's perspectives in greater detail. This dual function has enabled both sides to identify potential areas of agreement and gauge the feasibility of future Track 1 negotiations.³³

European-led Track 1.5 dialogues with North Korean officials have often acted as essential channels for communication and information exchange when official diplomatic avenues were unavailable.

Track 2/1.5 dialogues have the capacity to support and influence a Track 1 dialogue in a positive way. Nevertheless, the following challenges do occur in the process.

1. Dependence on political climate: The success of Track 1.5 initiatives depends heavily on the political environment in the organizing country. Hostile or skeptical governments can undermine these efforts, sometimes accusing organizers of conflicting with official foreign policy, and may even block visa approvals for North Korean participants. Political changes in Europe or North Korea often disrupt these initiatives. North Korea has withdrawn from participation, particularly after the 2019 Hanoi summit, which highlights the fragility of such dialogues. Furthermore, in the current geopolitical context where Sweden and Finland have joined NATO against the backdrop of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and North Korean soldiers being deployed to the Russian army on Ukrainian land, all communications, including backchannel efforts, have been blocked

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Joel Wit, "How to Talk to a North Korean," 38North, April 22, 2011, <https://www.38north.org/2011/04/joelwit042011/>.

from all sides. Thus, the current prominent challenge is to break the ice of entrenched mutual mistrust

2. The participant composition and trustworthy venues: As North Korean representatives tend not to change for a longer period of time, sometimes for 10 years, having permanent counterparts is key to building trust. For that to happen, the European representatives should be available for a long-term commitment. What's more, the selection of a neutral and non-threatening location of crucial.
3. Bridging Track 1 and Track 2 outcomes: Despite the unofficial character of the Track 1.5 meetings, establishing a mechanism to integrate insights from Track 1.5 dialogues into official diplomatic efforts can enhance the role of this type of engagement. As a result, the lack of coordination among various European Track-1.5 processes is a crucial challenge. This fragmentation leads to thematic overlaps and allows North Korea to selectively engage, reducing the effectiveness of these initiatives in creating a unified approach.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to redefine Track 2/1.5 diplomacy as a tool for breaking the North Korean stalemate:

1. In the long-term, create a European-led mechanism for information sharing between practitioners.

The advantages of a European-led mechanism would be historical know-hows of the practitioners on one side, and the nature of certain European countries which are considered neutral when it comes to their North Korea agenda. The reasoning for this is the diplomatic ties between these countries and the DPRK were established in the 70s (Finland, Sweden, and Denmark establishing relations in 1973, Austria in 1974, and Portugal in 1975), continued throughout the 2000s, and lead even to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the European union (EU) and the DPRK in 2001.³⁴ Out of the 27 EU states, only France currently (2025) does not have diplomatic ties with North Korea.³⁵ Countries that are considered neutral to North Korean affairs have had some economic bilateral relations in the past, and have a continuous humanitarian aid program for Pyongyang. States that have science, educational, and sports exchanges are mostly thought to be neutral grounds.

34 Glyn Ford, "From Coy to Cold Shoulder—The European Union and North Korea," East-West Center, March 2023, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/coy-cold-shoulder-european-union-and-north-korea>.

35 Kim, "North Korea's foreign policy and foreign relations," 384.

It is important to note that the recent political shift to far-right parties in some of the EU states such as France, Italy, Germany, Hungary and others aligns interestingly with the second Trump administration. Trump’s “America first” rhetoric can be viewed as a double-sided coin in this context. On one hand, a similar political alignment in Europe and the U.S. can be utilized for mutual diplomatic support if and when it comes to North Korean policy, but on the other hand the “America first” is a sign for prioritization on domestic politics and lessening the weight on the alliances. That is why, a European-led mechanism would be more feasible compared to a U.S.-led one.

Develop and invest in a cohesive and consistent platform for information sharing between practitioners in Track 2/1.5 dialogues with North Korea. Such a mechanism for regular exchange between scholars can play a vital role and fill the gap in the challenge of lack of coordination and ongoing fragmentation when it comes to engaging with North Korea. This would also build a community of practitioners that can also nurture the next generation of specialists and practitioners on talking to North Korea.

There would be some challenges related to funding and publicity, but nevertheless, the mechanism in itself would be a unique platform that can be used as a pool for more creative thinking even between the practitioners themselves.

The role of European states with a history of successful Track 2/1.5 dialogues would be vital. With the current lack of communication between the DPRK and US, and more specifically the new aggressive rhetoric of DPRK against South Korea, European states have a better chance of initiating such networking group. Last but not least, such an international group would benefit from a multi-generational composition with more young people being involved. This would require patience and a long-term vision.

European think tanks like SIPRI and NUPI in collaboration with U.S. institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, NCAFP, the Stimson Center, Asia Society, and South Korea’s Asan Institute could facilitate consistent Track 1.5 meetings. These should be held annually, with North Korean participation encouraged through a focus on technical or humanitarian issues. European countries should continue to provide neutral spaces for Track 1.5 dialogues, ideally on an ongoing basis. These forums should aim to de-escalate tensions and provide North Korea with a non-threatening platform to engage with U.S. and South Korean representatives, indirectly fostering pathways back to official negotiations

2. In the short term. Any talks are better than no talks.

The past 5 years have shown what is the result of no talks with North Korea. Biden’s open dialogue policy, “Anytime, anywhere,” towards Pyongyang did not show any results. Furthermore, North Korea now has a stable partner in the face of Moscow and the need

for talks from Kim Jong Un’s side is not as big as in 2018–2019. The ongoing deadlock has resulted in Pyongyang’s even more aggressive behavior than before. In the current geopolitical reality, North Korea’s troops in the Russian army, fighting against Ukraine, has brought close the DPRK to Europe than never before.

This demonstrates that when North Korea does not have stakes in what is happening, they get detached from their European counterparts and vice-versa.

Against this background, any talks is better than no talks. Historically, when talks were initiated in the past, there were less weapons testings by the DPRK and at times even no testing. And while the situation is drastically different compared to 2018–2019, it is still imperative to emphasize the need for stabilization, tension reduction, and avoiding misunderstanding. The following factors should be taken into consideration.

Against this background, any talks is better than no talks. Historically, when talks were initiated in the past, there were less weapons testings by the DPRK and at times even no testing.

First, the change in Pyongyang’s international engagement since the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (June 2024). Pyongyang’s openness to BRICS and the reopening of the Swedish and the Polish embassies in North Korea after 4 years of absence could be the first opportunity for European states to initiate talks, now that the official representatives have returned back to the DPRK’s capital.

Second, the second Trump administration. The North Korea policy remains as one of the international priorities for the U.S.’ 47th President.

Third, South Korea domestic politics. Pyongyang’s reaction to the sudden martial law announced by South Korea’s President Yoon Seok Yeol was seemingly slow compared to the past. According to Lee, the reasons for the silent reaction might be that North Korea wants to prevent escalation and seeking stability is a priority at the moment.³⁶

The Europeans have leverage, and preparing for a future engagement is crucial. Active re-engagement through Track 2/1.5 diplomacy as a stepping stone towards Track 1

36 Rachel Minyoung Lee, “Quick Take: Pyongyang’s Subdued Coverage of South Korea’s Post-Martial Law Situation”, 38North, December 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/12/quick-take-pyongyangs-subdued-coverage-of-south-koreas-post-martial-law-situation/>.

negotiations should be prioritized.³⁷ Finding creative ways to re-engage and build upon feasible goals and trust-based dialogue is crucial. One instance of trying to re-engaging with Pyongyang would be to monitor the active engagement of the DPRK on the international stage—including international forums like BRICS or different types of bilateral engagements where European states where North Korea would have opportunities to chip in and create triangular Track 2 partnerships, for example.

In conclusion, as the U.S. and the ROK are facing more domestic problems in 2025, the European states, which historically have had neutral backgrounds when it comes to initiating unofficial talks with North Korea, have an advantage in re-engaging with Pyongyang in the short-run. Said unofficial Track 2/1.5 initiatives could touch upon certain areas of interest, not specifically needing to address the denuclearization as of now. Until then, the need for practitioners in this field remains, and a potential European-led mechanism for nurturing more Track 2/1.5 practitioners would be a valuable asset in the long-run.

37 세계에서 가장 비밀스러운 나라와 대화하기: 북미 간 비공식(1.5 트랙) 대화 어떻게 진행되나 [Talking to the World's Most Secretive Country: How the Unofficial (Track 1.5) Dialogue Between North America Works], BBC News Korea, October 19, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-41675756>; Antoine Bondaz, "Evolution of Europe-North Korea relations: from active engagement to partial rupture 2/2," Korea Security and Diplomacy Program, December 20, 2023, <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/programmes/programme-coree-securite-diplomatie/publications/2023/10.pdf>.

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Driven by a commitment to enhance understanding and peace regionally and globally, Cathy Kang aspires to contribute to policy-making that supports stability and development in the region. He is particularly fascinated by the interplay of cultural diplomacy and political strategy on the Korean Peninsula.

Outside of academia, Cathy enjoys networking, traveling and coffee.

Who Should Speak for South Korea? Invigorating South Korea’s Unification Diplomacy Efforts in the U.S.

By Minseon Ku¹

Executive Summary

Despite growing public apathy and a dismissive attitude toward inter-Korea engagement in South Korea and the U.S., unification is enshrined in South Korea’s constitution and identity discourse produced by South Korean political elites. South Korea’s current security interests and its alliance with the U.S. present a dilemma not only for its identity but its unification policy. What can South Korea do to reconcile its competing needs and interests through diplomacy that can buffer against leadership changes in both Seoul and Washington? This paper presents four policy recommendations for Seoul. The first two are related to South Korea’s diplomatic representation and bureaucratic coordination, and the last two are related to its public diplomacy efforts in the U.S.

1. The South Korean diplomatic corps needs to present a more diversified diplomatic “face” that can represent South Korea’s interests and identity effectively. Unification-wise, the Ministry of Unification (MOU) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) can implement an exchange program for their officials to spend one to two years at the other agency to better equip themselves with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective unification diplomacy. Generally, South Korea needs to diversify its diplomatic actors regarding gender, background, and specialization.
2. The unification attaché program should expand to countries and embassies beyond the traditional four “major powers”—the U.S, Russia, China, and Japan—and the diplomatic rank of these attachés should be upgraded to a rank high enough to have an input on political decisions regarding South Korea’s diplomatic activities abroad.
3. Unification *public* diplomacy needs to be revamped in two ways to nurture non-governmental actors as the mainstay of South Korea’s public diplomacy that will enhance its effectiveness. First, it should promote long-term research collaboration between scholars based in the U.S. and South Korea to build an epistemic community for high-quality knowledge production on topics related to North Korea and inter-Korea relations.

1 The author would like to thank Ambassador Kathleen Stephens, the NCAFP Korea Peninsula Emerging Leaders participants and staff for their helpful comments and feedback.

4. Second, unification *public* diplomacy targeted at the American public should harness the power of various forms of South Korean and American arts and culture to reach lay Americans and facilitate not only their understanding of inter-Korea relations and history but also nurture empathy toward the necessity of peaceful co-existence.

South Korea's Identity Dilemma and Unification Problem

Notwithstanding changes in leadership in the U.S. or South Korea, unification remains unquestionable for the South Korean state. Even as North Korea announced its decision to abandon its unification plans with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in January 2024, going so far as to amend its constitution to designate South Korea as a “principal enemy,” South Korea has maintained its unification aspiration. Unification is more than domestic politics within South Korea. It is enshrined in its constitution and is a constant in South Korea’s domestic politics, foreign policy, and diplomacy.² After all, the ongoing Korean War is a war over legitimacy to govern the Peninsula, which had existed for 5,000 years as a single entity with a distinctive culture of its own, only to be legally divided after liberation from Japan’s colonial rule in 1945 because of the emerging U.S.-Soviet Union competition. In this sense, it is only logical that the two Koreas seek reunification after having been separated for 75 years—a relatively short period considering the 5,000-year shared history. Under South Korea’s National Security Act of 1948, the Kim regime in Pyongyang was designated the enemy of South Korea and an illegal group occupying the northern part of the demilitarized zone.³ Under this logic, the ROK government is the Peninsula’s sole legal and rightful government.

Thus, domestic politics surrounding North Korea is often a contestation of *how* to pursue unification rather than whether to pursue one, often used by presidents for their individual legacy-building. The partisan difference, therefore, lies in the degree of criticisms against the Pyongyang regime. Conservatives prefer unification by absorption and thus tend to hew to U.S. policy rhetoric on illiberal regimes, characterizing Pyongyang as a transgressor of human rights and challenging the liberal values and norms of the international community. In contrast, the so-called progressives prefer highlighting the need for inter-Korea

2 Article 4 stipulates that South Korea “shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the basic free and democratic order.” See: Government of the Republic of Korea, *Constitution of the Republic of Korea*, October 29, 1987, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?lang=ENG&hseq=1.

3 Terrence Matsuo, “The Enduring Consequences of South Korea’s National Security Law,” *The Peninsula*, September 6, 2022, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/the-enduring-consequences-of-south-koreas-national-security-law/>.

engagement that can help North Korea’s socialization with the international society. Under this engagement framework, unification can be achieved when North Korea becomes a “normal” state and member of the international society.

Underlying South Korea’s unification aspiration is the challenge of its evolving and fragmented understanding of its national identity. While the discourse of unification based on ethnic homogeneity and on shared blood and ancestry (i.e., “단일민족/danilminjok”) has been imposed on the South Korean people by political elites as recently as in the past year, according to a survey in 2023, fewer see the need for unification based on homogenous ethnicity.⁴ Regarding its relational identity vis-à-vis other states, South Korea faces an identity dilemma between its present identity narratives centered on its security alliance with the U.S. and its future or aspirational identity as a unified Korea. This dilemma is inherent in South Korea’s perception of two of its most significant “Others” in its identity—the U.S. and North Korea. Both are cast as positive and negative “Others” in South Korea’s identity dis-

course.⁵ The U.S. may be a security ally in the present, but it not only betrayed Korea by enabling Japan to colonize it in 1910 but also propped up dictators and stood by as democratization movements were brutally oppressed during the Cold War. Similarly, North Korea features as a negative “Other” because it poses immediate security threats. Yet, it is also seen as familial because of homogenous ethnicity.

Underlying South Korea’s unification aspiration is the challenge of its evolving and fragmented understanding of its national identity.

The national identity question inadvertently spills over into diplomacy via diplomatic representation.⁶ Public diplomacy can be understood as self-presentations and national identity management, allowing states to present their “best” face to the world.⁷ South Korea’s unification public diplomacy, however, is at odds with its “best” face, as it undermines

4 Government of the Republic of Korea, “Brief information”, Ministry of Unification, accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/about/aboutmou/infomation/; Bum-su Kim et al., 2023 *Survey of Perceptions on Unification [2023 통일외식조사]*, (Seoul: Seoul National University Institute of Peaceful Unification, 2023): 31; Ibid: 36.

5 Minseon Ku, “Report on South Korea’s National Identity 2010,” *Making Identity Count Asia*, 2019, <https://makingidentitycount.wordpress.com/countries/mic-aisa/>; Minseon Ku, “Report on South Korea’s National Identity 2015,” *Making Identity Count Asia*, 2019, <https://makingidentitycount.wordpress.com/countries/mic-aisa/>.

6 Alisher Faizullaev, “Diplomacy and Self,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 3 (2006): 497–522.

7 For scholarly work on public diplomacy and impression or identity management by states, see Ben Mor, “The rhetoric of public diplomacy and propaganda wars: A view from self-presentation theory,” *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 5 (2007): 661–683 and Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alexei Tsinoi, “International Misrecognition: The Politics of Humour and National Identity in Israel’s Public Diplomacy,” *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 1 (2019): 3–29.

South Korea's supposed role as a model follower in the U.S.-led order championing values like democracy and human rights. South Korea thus faces reputation problems, especially when it pushes for inter-Korea initiatives that could undermine international sanctions imposed on North Korea.⁸ Such contrasting identities performed through South Korea's inter-governmental and public diplomacy heighten the chance of misrecognition by other states leading to less successful foreign policy endeavors.

For example, in 2019, as the then South Korea's Moon Jae-in government raised the possibility of a peace agreement ending the Korean War ahead of the second U.S.-North Korea summit, the U.S. preferred a more cautious approach, suggesting a policy misalignment between the two governments over the pace of engagement with Pyongyang.⁹ The general American public also continued to view North Korea unfavorably in 2019, even as they no longer saw it as the "greatest enemy."¹⁰ While a portion of the general American public is supportive of Korean unification, the numbers have been fluctuating in recent years, peaking in 2019 (52.3 percent) and decreasing since 2021 from 40.3 to 34.3 percent in 2023.¹¹

With the recent reelection of Donald Trump as the U.S. president and the possible radical shifts in U.S. foreign policy and security strategy in East Asia, it has become even more imperative for South Korea to build international support for productive diplomacy with North Korea while maintaining a healthy alliance with the U.S.

The Rise of South Korea's Unification (Public) Diplomacy

With the rise of public diplomacy as its key foreign policy instrument, South Korea has started venturing into public diplomacy resources to promote awareness and understanding of how its national identity is intricately tied with unification, which requires a policy of engagement with the so-called "rogue" North Korea. Public diplomacy is relatively new to South Korea in terms of institutionalization and bureaucratization. Historically, public diplomacy practices were mobilized to help South Korea overcome its limited diplomatic

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- 8 Christy Lee, "Proposed Inter-Korean Projects Could Violate UN, US Sanctions," *VOA News*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/Korea-sanctions/4577831.html/>.
 - 9 Joohee Cho, "US, North Korea may declare end to Korean War during second summit," *ABC News*, February 25, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-north-korea-declare-end-korean-war-summit/story?id=61297002/>.
 - 10 RJ Reinhart, "Far Fewer Americans See North Korea as Greatest U.S. Enemy," *Gallup*, February 27, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247151/far-fewer-americans-north-korea-greatest-enemy.aspx/>.
 - 11 Bum-su Kim et al., *2023 Survey of Perceptions on Unification* [2023 통일외/식조사], (Seoul: Seoul National University Institute of Peaceful Unification, 2023): 145.

capital and capabilities during the Cold War as it competed with North Korea over legitimacy and statehood.¹² Since designating 2010 as the year of the launching of public diplomacy, Seoul has created an ambassadorial position (2011), established the bureau of public diplomacy policy (2012), enacted the Public Diplomacy Act (2016), and published its first five-year public diplomacy blueprint (2017).¹³ As public diplomacy evolved and institutionalized into key foreign policy statecraft, unification public diplomacy (or “UPD”) has similarly taken root as a critical policy for South Korea’s inter-Korea process.

The origins of UPD date back to 1973 when the government first used the term “unification diplomacy” (or “UD”) in its June 23rd Declaration on Peaceful Unification Diplomacy. Recognizing the international constraints because of the Cold War and great power politics, President Park Chung-hee declared the policy of peaceful unification diplomacy for greater autonomy over South Korea’s security and relations with North Korea.¹⁴ Around 2010, as issues such as North Korea’s human rights violations and its nuclear program required multilateral solutions, South Korea’s UD was assessed as unproductive in persuading and convincing the four key countries (i.e., the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia) of the importance of unification to South Korea.¹⁵ A successful UD required a bottom-up approach entailing persuading the foreign publics whose opinions in foreign policy and world politics began to matter politically.

South Korea has used UPD to project its desired identity. By doing so, its public diplomacy efforts associated with unification have centered on South Korea as the main player because unification is deeply entrenched in South Korea’s national identity, at least as perceived by the elites.¹⁶ The objectives of UPD, however, are broad, and include security issues, especially denuclearization, thus lacking in focus.¹⁷ According to the policy research

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- 12 Author’s Note: The history of South Korea’s public diplomacy as a diplomatic practice goes way further back to the founding of the ROK. See: Kwang-jin Choi, *The Republic of Korea’s Public Diplomacy Strategy: History and Current Status* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2019).
 - 13 Byung-gon Jeon et al., *Study on Civilian Role in Peace & Unification Public Diplomacy [평화-통일 공공외교 추진기반 조성을 위한 민간의 역할과 개선방안. 주변4국을 중심으로]*, (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2021): 21.
 - 14 Byung-deok Hwang et al., *Recommendations for Unification Public Diplomacy Strategy (II) [한반도 통일공공외교 추진전략(II): 한국의 주변4국 통일공공외교의 실태 연구 (총괄보고서)]*, (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013): 4.
 - 15 Byung-deok Hwang et al., *Recommendations for Unification Public Diplomacy Strategy (II) [한반도 통일공공외교 추진전략(II): 한국의 주변4국 통일공공외교의 실태 연구 (총괄보고서)]*, (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013): 5.
 - 16 Byung-gon Jeon et al., *Study on Civilian Role in Peace & Unification Public Diplomacy [평화-통일 공공외교 추진기반 조성을 위한 민간의 역할과 개선방안. 주변4국을 중심으로]*, (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2021): 21.
 - 17 Byung-deok Hwang et al., *Recommendations for Unification Public Diplomacy Strategy (II) [한반도 통일공공외교 추진전략(II): 한국의 주변4국 통일공공외교의 실태 연구 (총괄보고서)]*, (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013): 7.

reports published in 2013 and 2021 by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), a governmental research institute affiliated with the MOU, South Korea’s UPD remained exclusive to governmental actors.¹⁸ Both reports arrive at similar conclusions and policy recommendations about the state of UPD in the U.S.: first, there is a need to increase civilian or non-governmental actors’ participation; second, both advocated expanding the target audience to lay American people; and finally, there is a need to diversify public diplomacy by expanding beyond policy and knowledge-production diplomacy to include arts, sports, and cultural diplomacy.¹⁹

The 2021 report provides more concrete recommendations to improve UPD in the U.S. to help “sell” the idea that unification matters. First, UPD should emphasize peace rather than unification per se, as the latter fails to resonate with the U.S. policy circle and the general public. It recommends a semantic change—replacing unification public diplomacy with “*Korean peace public diplomacy*,” *ceteris paribus* because the idea of peace tends to resonate better with the international community which lacks a clear understanding of the international politics of the Korean Peninsula.²⁰ Second, it recommended structural reorganization for a more precise division of labor between the MOU and the MOFA: the former should be the primary agency for UPD, delegating general public diplomacy to the MOFA.²¹ Third, it blamed the absence of an epistemic community that could produce knowledge and correct misinformation regarding North Korea. According to the report, South Korea has a comparative advantage in knowledge production on North Korea that could be utilized to advocate perceiving North Korea ‘as it is’ rather than what it ought to be through the tinted lens of American foreign policy and ideology.²² Fourth, UPD should introduce themes of peace on the Korean Peninsula into Korean popular cultural products.²³ Fifth, the South Korean government should support and nurture emerging and early career experts who are friendlier toward South Korea’s North Korea policy.²⁴

18 Author’s Note: Not much is available on South Korea’s unification public diplomacy, either as research or policy publications. The KINU reports published in 2013 and 2021 are the only ones published by KINU on unification public diplomacy. The 2021 report recognizes the dearth of research on South Korea’s unification public diplomacy. This could be due to its niche nature. The KINU reports are published in the Korean language only.

19 Byung-deok Hwang et al., *Recommendations for Unification Public Diplomacy Strategy (II)* [한반도 통일공공외교 추진전략(II): 한국의 주변4국 통일공공외교의 실태 연구 (총괄보고서)], (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013), 104-105; Byung-gon Jeon et al., *Study on Civilian Role in Peace & Unification Public Diplomacy* [평화-통일 공공외교 추진기반 조성을 위한 민간의 역할과 개선방안: 주변4국을 중심으로], (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2021): 275-278.

20 Byung-gon Jeon et al., *Study on Civilian Role in Peace & Unification Public Diplomacy* [평화-통일 공공외교 추진기반 조성을 위한 민간의 역할과 개선방안: 주변4국을 중심으로], (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2021): 288-9.

21 Ibid: 289.

22 Ibid: 290-1.

23 Ibid: 291.

24 Ibid: 292-3.

‘What National Identity You Represent Depends Upon Where You Sit’

South Korea’s UPD is further complicated by the policy specialization and bureaucratic compartmentalization representing two clashing identities inherent in South Korea’s contemporary identity narratives.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) favors projecting South Korea’s identity centering on traditional security issues such as denuclearizing North Korea and branding itself as a pivotal state and, hence, a faithful follower of the U.S.-led order.²⁵ Relatedly, the ministry is also responsible for managing South Korea’s relations with the U.S. A recent domestic public diplomacy includes promoting the South Korean public’s receptiveness toward U.S. forces in South Korea. This initiative, which was established in 2020, invites members of South Korean society to form a “We Go” supporter group that will engage with the U.S. forces in South Korea. MOFA also created a virtual “SOFA Center” in the form of a widely used *Naver* blog to communicate the importance of U.S. military presence in South Korea for security and diplomatic reasons.²⁶

The U.S. State Department and ROK MOFA also have an exchange program for their diplomats which began in 2011.²⁷ Both agencies invest heavily in public diplomacy targeted at each other’s populations. The U.S. embassy’s cultural affairs unit organizes public diplomacy program targeted at South Koreans in addition to Fulbright programs. The Korea Foundation (KF), affiliated with MOFA, is primarily responsible for South Korea’s public diplomacy efforts. Established in 1992, KF promotes Korean culture and language and facilitates international exchanges in arts and academia.²⁸ While it aims to promote “proper awareness and understanding of Korea” in the international community, its public diplomacy efforts are too diverse in activities and contents, ranging from arts and culture to fostering Korean studies and literature in foreign academic institutions. While comprehensive, KF’s programs are often tailored to emphasize South Korea’s soft power rather than informing the world on thorny issues such as the division of the Korean Peninsula and its subsequent international politics.

25 Government of the Republic of Korea, “Foreign Policy Goal,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_24965/contents.do/.

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Hello U.S. Forces in Korea!” accessed December 29, 2024, <https://blog.naver.com/sofacenter>.

27 Young-ho Park, Dong-su Kim, In-hwi Park, and Gi-woong Jung, *The State of South Korea’s Unification Public Diplomacy in the United States* [한국의 대미국 통일공공외교 실태], (Seoul: Korea Institute of National Unification, 2013).

28 Korea Foundation, “Who We Are,” accessed November 6, 2024, <https://www.kf.or.kr/kfEng/cm/cntnts/cntntsView2.do?mi=2126/>.

In contrast, MOU projects South Korean identity centering its shared identity with North Korea based on ancestry, history, and ethnicity. It is primarily responsible for policies related to human and non-traditional security issues related to North Korea and unification, including, but not limited to, advocating improving North Korea's human rights, humanitarian assistance, supporting North Korean defectors, and finally, promoting inter-Korea cooperation.²⁹ While policy prioritization and focus may vary under conservative and progressive administrations, MOU embodies and represents the ethnonationalist dimension of South Korea's aspirational identity as a unified Korea.

The establishment of MOU in 1969 is owed to the power of collective deliberation at the mass level and the popular desire for unification. Economic woes and discontent with a corrupted government drove South Koreans to the streets to protest, leading to the April 19 Revolution in 1960 and the resignation of the country's first president, Syngman Rhee. The protests subsequently evolved into calls for demilitarizing South Korea and pursuing unification, as people identified the division of the Peninsula as the root cause of uneven economic development.³⁰ Civic discussions on unification soon became too salient to be ignored, prompting the government to appropriate them to prevent further instability. The government promulgated the Korean Council of National Unification Act in January 1969 and announced the establishment of what would later become the MOU: the Korean Board of National Unification.³¹ In 1998, it changed its name to the Ministry of Unification. Since 2000, it has been tasked with all policies related to inter-Korea relations and unification in conjunction with the first inter-Korea summit.³²

Inter-Korea policies are, therefore, perceived within South Korea as domestic. However, they are increasingly challenged by the stigmatization and vilification of North Korea in the U.S.-led international order because of the transnational nature of the denuclearization issue and human rights violations. Any efforts to expand and deepen inter-Korea cooperation, such as the joint Kaesong industrial complex venture and rail project, are often met with skepticism or disapproval from the US because they are seen as sidestepping

29 Ministry of Unification, "North Korean Human Rights," accessed January 6, 2025, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/NorthKoreanHumanRights/humanrights/.

30 Minhyeong Lee, Kyungjin Lim, and Jiyi Jeong, "Why was the MOU established? [통일부는 왜 만들어졌을까? 통일부의 발자취를 따라서]," *Ministry of Unification*, November 3, 2021, <https://blog.naver.com/gounikorea/222557610297>.

31 Minhyeong Lee, Kyungjin Lim, and Jiyi Jeong, "Why was the MOU established? [통일부는 왜 만들어졌을까? 통일부의 발자취를 따라서]," *Ministry of Unification*, November 3, 2021, <https://blog.naver.com/gounikorea/222557610297>.

32 Government of the Republic of Korea, "Brief History," Ministry of Unification, accessed November 6, 2024, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/about/aboutmou/history/.

the international sanction regime and challenging the nuclear non-proliferation regime.³³

The transnationalization of North Korea-related issues naturally raised questions about the necessity of MOU, further eroding the Ministry's legitimacy to protect and represent South Korea's national interests domestically and abroad. It met its first bureaucratic crisis in 2008 following Lee Myung-bak's election when the presidential transition committee discussed the possibility of abolishment as part of Lee's push to reduce the size of the government based on a principle of pragmatism. The proposal was retracted following heated societal controversy. Again, in 2021, the then-representative of the conservative People Power Party, Lee Jun-seok, proposed abolishing the Ministry and merging it with the Foreign Ministry, citing its redundancy and unimpressible work by former ministers. However, even his party members opposed it because of the symbolic value of the Ministry in representing South Korea's commitment and determination to realize unification.³⁴

The MOU's Unification (Public) Diplomacy: Representation Without Recognition

Under this differentiated policy and identity representations by the two ministries, one can understand that South Korea faces an identity dilemma or two clashing identities that can be summed up as "pro-US" or "pro-North Korea" identities or diplomatic faces. MOFA's policies appeal to the U.S. and undergird the alliance, while MOU's existence, vital to South Korea's constitution and the popular, albeit declining, desire for unification, undermines U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea.

The clashing identities and diplomatic faces are aggravated by MOU's diplomacy. MOU conducts international diplomacy at all levels, sometimes resulting in duplicated or contrary diplomatic faces vis-à-vis MOFA's. Like most of South Korea's bureaucratic agencies, it has a department of international cooperation responsible for outreach activities vis-à-vis foreign governments. The unification ministers conduct personal diplomacy by making foreign visits and engaging in public diplomacy abroad to increase awareness of inter-Korea

33 Choong Nam Kim, "Inter-Korean Relations and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 2006, Vol. X, No.2m 75-106; Benjamin Haas, "Train project linking North and South Korea stopped in its tracks by US," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/31/north-south-korea-train-project-halted-us>.

34 Ki-ju Lee, "Lee Jun-seok: MOU should be Abolished" [이준석 "통일부도 폐지하자"...당 내에서도 "언행 신중해야"], *MBC*, July 9, 2021, https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2021/nwdesk/article/6285146_34936.html.

relations and unification.³⁵ Such diplomatic activities often tout the need to declare the end of the Korean War or unification but are vague on the implications for U.S.-South Korea relations and alliance.

A further boost to MOU's diplomatic capacity and unique to South Korea is the MOU's diplomatic representation abroad in the form of an attaché program. The unification attaché program started in 1996 with the deployment of attachés to embassies in Washington, Beijing, Berlin, and Tokyo—countries that are highly invested in North Korea's nuclear program and Korean Peninsula affairs. In 2012, Moscow was added to the list.³⁶ The attaché serves a three-year position and is primarily responsible for collecting intelligence and information related to unification and promoting South Korea's unification policies in foreign capitals.

However, the diplomatic weight the MOU carries has been stymied by both domestic and external reasons. Domestically, the MOFA has deliberately kept the unification attaché program small. In an audit report drafted in 2011, there were recommendations to send attachés to countries that had undergone unification, such as Germany, Vietnam, and Yemen, as well as Russia, which was a party to the Six-Party Talks, but eventually additional attachés were sent only to Germany and Russia.³⁷ Former unification minister and scholar Ryu Kil-jae pointed out that the MOFA had “abandoned” unification diplomacy.³⁸ Despite vacancies in embassy positions, the foreign ministry restricted unification diplomacy to just five embassies (out of 164 missions abroad) and limited the attaché to the secretary level and their duties to administrative tasks instead of more consequential political and essential functions. As a result, epistemic diplomacy regarding unification has fallen on the shoulders of MOFA diplomats who lack both knowledge and expertise in inter-Korea affairs, resulting in superficial unification diplomacy. South Korean lawmakers have also questioned the attaché program's function and productivity in the last decade, citing the substandard quality of reports written by the attachés, adding to existing criticisms against

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- 35 Khody Akhavi, “68th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Agreement,” Quincy Institute, July 27, 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/2021/07/27/68th-anniversary-of-the-korean-war-armistice-agreement/>; Je-hoon Lee, “Unification ministry holds unprecedented high-level meeting with US State Department,” *The Hankyoreh*, June 22, 2021, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1000420.html/; Yonhap, “Seoul official calls Korean Peninsula unification ‘moral’ obligation,” *The Korea Times*, October 18, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/103_384493.html.
- 36 Soo-young Jo, “MOU sends attaches to German and Russian embassies” [통일부, 주독일-러 대사관에 주재관 파견], *Hankyung*, May 29, 2012, <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/2012052807451/>.
- 37 Government of the Republic of Korea, *2011 Audit Report (draft)*, Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Unification Committee of the National Assembly, December 2011.
- 38 Gil-jae Ryu, “Recommendations on the Role of the National Assembly in Strengthening Unification Diplomacy [통일외교 강화를 위한 국회의 역할 제고 방안],” *National Assembly Research Service*, November 2017.

the ministry. For example, lawmakers questioned the necessity of the program based on the number of reports submitted by the attachés across the five embassies, who submitted an average of 13.2 reports in 2018—during the height of North Korea’s summitry activities.³⁹

Domestic skepticism toward its necessity inadvertently leads to a lack of recognition of the MOU’s diplomatic efforts by foreign governments and policy actors. Theoretically, there are few foreign government agencies in the world charged with a mission like MOU’s. This means that unification attachés have no partner organizations or agencies in hosting countries to engage with. The lack of recognition for MOU’s diplomatic representation is also evident from views expressed by experts in the U.S. that MOU’s functions overlap with those of MOFA and its niche role should be confined to unification as domestic affairs.⁴⁰ Despite representing South Korea’s interests and identity in an official capacity for close to three decades, MOU’s diplomacy remains marginalized by domestic and foreign actors.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion: Who Should Speak for South Korea in Unification Public Diplomacy?

In light of the importance of unification in South Korea’s history and identity-making process, unification will remain a primary national interest and goal for as long as the constitution does not undergo amendment such that unification is removed as a goal of the South Korean state. The election of Donald Trump as the next U.S. president holds renewed opportunities for U.S.-North Korea diplomacy if Pyongyang chooses to re-engage. As such, unification diplomacy and public diplomacy will continue to be a steadfast effort domestically and abroad. There are four policy recommendations—two on public diplomacy and two on traditional inter-governmental diplomacy.

First, there needs to be better coordination between the MOU and the MOFA in delegating the role and function of diplomatic representations by promoting inter-agency exchange where officials spend up to two years at the other agency to brush up on complementary skills and knowledge related to unification and inter-Korea policies. MOFA diplomats can immerse themselves with knowledge of inter-Korea policies, whereas MOU officials can learn from career diplomats’ diplomatic skills in managing different and multiple relations

39 Hye-yoon Na, “Official Reports by Unification Attaches Staggering Average of 1.6 per Month [통일부 해외주재관 공식보고 월평균 1.6건꼴... 활동 ‘저조],” *News 1*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.news1.kr/politics/assembly/4075284>.

40 Kyung-ha Rhee, “US Experts Respond Positively to Abolishing the Unification Ministry [미 일부 전문가들, 통일부 폐지에 다소 긍정적 반응],” *Radio Free Asia*, July 9, 2021, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/nk_nuclear_talks/unificationdept-07092021161020.html.

with key countries like the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia. Relatedly, a diversified diplomatic corps that is representative of South Korean society and people, along with nurturing a deft diplomatic corps who can not only speak for South Korea but know how to speak to their foreign counterparts of various cultural backgrounds and experiences, would present a better diplomatic “face” and contribute to South Korea’s unification interests.

Second, the unification attaché program should expand to more countries and embassies, and the diplomatic rank of attaches should be upgraded enough for the MOU attachés to have input on political decisions regarding South Korea’s public diplomacy activities abroad. This ensures that South Korea’s unification efforts and interests are better represented officially. Concurrently, inter-Korea policies should be explicitly reflected in Seoul’s foreign policy, including in its security alliance with the U.S. Such policies should not be limited to military coordination and defense policies but include foreign policy and security coordination between Seoul and Washington, DC, on sensitive subjects such as sanctions on North Korea. As Seoul increasingly bears the greater financial burden of the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, it should recognize its leverage in communicating its unification and inter-Korea policies to the U.S.

Third, unification *public* diplomacy needs to be revamped in two ways such that policy and governmental actors are not the sole diplomatic actors, making room for non-official and non-governmental actors to become and remain the mainstay of unification public diplomacy. As the KINU reports recommend, there is a need to engage more non-governmental actors and nurture ‘new faces’ in policy and research related to the Korean Peninsula.⁴¹ This, however, overlooks the technical language barrier that many in the U.S. face when it comes to engaging with Korean-language sources and materials, inhibiting a more objective perspective of North Korea.

The first sub-recommendation is to recognize the role of Korean scholars in the U.S. and South Korea in bridging intellectually South Korea’s knowledge assets regarding North Korea and the policy world in Washington. Not only can Korean experts and scholars in

Unification public diplomacy needs to be revamped in two ways such that policy and governmental actors are not the sole diplomatic actors, making room for non-official and non-governmental actors to become and remain the mainstay of unification public diplomacy.

41 Byung-deok Hwang et al., *Recommendations for Unification Public Diplomacy Strategy (II)* [한반도 통일공공외교 추진전략(II): 한국의 주변4국 통일공공외교의 실태 연구 (총괄보고서)], (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013): 104-105; Byung-gon Jeon et al., *Study on Civilian Role in Peace & Unification Public Diplomacy* [평화-통일 공공외교 추진기반 조성을 위한 민간의 역할과 개선방안: 주변 4국을 중심으로], (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2021): 275-278.

the U.S. and South Korea access Korean-language materials on North Korea, but they can also communicate their research to the broader American audience by capitalizing on their professional network in the U.S. Seoul could also sponsor research collaboration between scholars based in South Korea and the U.S. related to the Korean Peninsula. These grants should be large enough to cover multi-year research projects so that they not only help support and sustain impactful research for several years but also facilitate the gradual building of an epistemic community in both countries working on Korea. This will also require relaxing South Korea's National Security Act to allow Korean scholars to access North Korean materials easily for research purposes.

Second and more importantly, South Korea's UPD should aim to meet the American people where they are, rather than what they should know about Korean unification. Such efforts involve tapping into South Korea's strength and reputation as a resilient democracy and an emerging popular culture power. Cultural products contextualizing the division and unification historically would be a good starting point to open the American public's mind toward North Korea and inter-Korea engagement. These are also effective in nurturing the American public's empathy toward the division and the necessity of peaceful co-existence of the two Koreas for humanitarian reasons. The power of literary arts in publicizing historical events to foreign audiences was illustrated by author Han Kang's works and Nobel Prize in Literature. The May 18th democratization movement, suppressed by force by then-president Chun Doo-hwan, a collective memory entrenched into South Korea's identity, gained global attention through Han's award.

Public diplomacy events can also include a public showing of Korean films on the theme of the Korean War and Korean identity from South Korea's perspective, such as *Taegukgi*, *Joint Security Area*, *Shiri*, *Ode to My Father*, and *A Taxi Driver*. Supporting the promotion and production of movies based on existing novels on North Korea authored by Korean Americans could facilitate the "knowing" of North Korea void of politicization and ideological lens, albeit fictitious. *Crashing Landing on You*, *Pachinko*, and *Minari* are all examples of how popular culture can help average Americans encounter major themes in Korean history and culture through the narrative lens of Korean American and Korean writers and directors.

Successful diplomacy and public diplomacy not only vindicate South Korea's peace efforts and unification goal in the eyes of other countries and the foreign public but can bolster domestic political rhetoric on the necessity and feasibility of peaceful co-existence with North Korea.

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domestic political rhetoric on the necessity and feasibility of peaceful co-existence with North Korea. Bureaucratic compartmentalization of functions and responsibilities may hinder greater coordination or division of labor in diplomatically representing and balancing South Korea's clashing interests between peaceful co-existence with North Korea and security alliance with the U.S. However, as diplomacy becomes increasingly complex and decentralized to include non-state actors, it is time for South Korea's MOFA to innovate and modernize its diplomacy to cater to competing needs and interests by diversifying diplomatic actors, practices, and platforms.

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Soft Power, Deterrence, and South Korea's National Security

Attawat Assavanadda

Executive Summary

It is important to recognize the relevance of soft power for South Korea's national security, as soft power not only helps South Korea garner international prestige and increase gross national incomes through tourism and cultural products, but it also serves as an indirect deterrence mechanism by adding more costs to its rivals' potential misbehaviors. The South Korean government's efforts to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics in a time of peace can influence foreign policymakers' strategic decisions to support

South Korea in a time of conflict. However, in terms of soft power operations, South Korea should continue to expand its scope beyond the cultural realm. Specifically, it should focus more on enhancing the quality of its democracy and promoting its image as a democratic, peace-loving nation to the global audience. Such an image will increase international affinity for South Korea not only in a time of peace and sympathy but also in a time of conflict.

The South Korean government's efforts to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics in a time of peace can influence foreign policymakers' strategic decisions to support South Korea in a time of conflict.

Brief Policy Recommendations:

- The Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) should continue to enhance its soft power, as it can serve as an indirect deterrence mechanism by demonstrating to South Korea's rivals that it has overseas supporters who are willing to pressure their respective governments to side with the ROK and put forward policies to sanction its rivals in case of undesirable actions.
- Regarding soft power, South Korea should extend its focus beyond the cultural realm to include a renewed focus on democratic progress and values-based diplomacy. Seoul's current approach to soft power is fundamentally culture-focused. The nation

underperforms in values and foreign policy aspects, both of which are more relevant to South Korea's national security than cultural soft power.

- To increase soft power, South Korea should first enhance the quality of its democracy, in terms of citizens' political participation, non-discrimination policies, and social integration. Improvement in these aspects will further highlight South Korea's image as a democratic, peace-loving country. Such an image matters highly to South Korea's security because it can bring about international sympathy and support in times of conflict.
- Second, South Korea should increase its engagement with overseas emerging leaders in other "like-minded" democracies through exchange programs to raise awareness about the country's pursuit of democratic values. The next generation can serve as a bridge between the top-level elite policies and the grassroots civil society, and has the potential to implement policies that benefit South Korea in the near future.
- Third, South Korea should promote its democracy experience to overseas audiences at both the public and policy elite levels. The South Korean government should rely on its public diplomacy tools and leverage social media to promote itself as a resilient democratic society. This can be done by blending its democratic, liberal ways of life into media programs.

Introduction

The ongoing political trends on the Korean Peninsula portray contrasting approaches to national security adopted by the two Koreas. On the northern side, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; hereinafter North Korea) has been investing resources in progressively developing its nuclear warheads and sophisticated missiles, maintaining its enormous active military personnel, and advancing its cyber, electronic, and signal intelligence warfare capabilities.¹ It also strives to strengthen ties with its neighboring countries, namely Russia and China, which pose formidable challenges to regional peace and security. North Korea's focus on hard power development epitomizes the nature of realpolitik, where a state yearns to obtain the upper hand in military prowess to ensure its survival. On the southern side, the Republic of Korea (ROK; hereinafter South Korea) has been taking a more nuanced approach to its national security. While standing firm on

1 For a broad description of North Korea's military capabilities, please read Kim Min-seok, "The State of the North Korean Military." In *Korea Net Assessment 2020: Politicised Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, eds. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020) 19–30. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Korea_Net_Assesment_2020.pdf; For more in-depth analyses of North Korea's cyber, electronic, and signal intelligence warfare capabilities, please read Anthony H. Cordesman, Charles Ayers, and Aaron Lin, *DPRK Cyber, Electronic Warfare, and Sigint Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23358.7>.

traditional security agendas, such as maintaining its close military alliance with the United States, making efforts to set aside historical conflicts and foster security cooperation with Japan, and upgrading its own advanced combat capabilities, South Korea is also committed to the creative and cultural industries as well as public diplomacy, endeavoring to blend soft power into its overall security strategies.

Against this backdrop, South Korea's tenacity in soft power is somewhat puzzling. Given the nature of the threats from North Korea, it might be more sensible for South Korea to devote much of its resources to refining its hard power and further broadening collaborative security efforts with other countries. Effective deterrence against the North stems mainly from the preeminent military capabilities of the ROK and its allies. Then, in what way does soft power matter to South Korea's security? How does soft power contribute to its survival? These questions are of high policy importance, and addressing them can contribute to the existing debates surrounding the role of soft power in maintaining South Korea's security, especially in debunking the criticisms about the futility of soft power on security matters.

First, most publications on South Korea's soft power are still mainly descriptive. Their detailed descriptions of South Korea's efforts in building and exporting its soft power globally deserves merit for information usefulness. However, there are still relatively few works that explain how soft power potentially works to help South Korea achieve its foreign and security policy goals.² Second, existing research gives considerable attention to the cultural aspects of South Korea's soft power but surprisingly leaves aside the aspect of political values. It is necessary to understand how soft power operates and supplement South Korea's deterrence efforts, shedding light on how this aspect of soft power can contribute as much, if not more, to its national security.

Overall, soft power plays a supportive deterrence role by increasing South Korea's favorability among the foreign publics who appreciate its popular culture, political values, and foreign policies. These individuals can induce their governments' willingness to support South Korea in times of conflict by motivating policies that benefit South Korea or threatening the costs of "punishment" to the leadership who refuses to stand with South Korea.³ Faced with potential audience costs, foreign governments then need to take congruent

2 Those few works include Chung Min Lee, "Can Soft Power Enable South Korea to Overcome Geopolitics?" in *The Case for South Korean Soft Power*, eds. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto [Online Report] (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020). <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/12/the-case-for-south-korean-soft-power?lang=en>.

3 "Refusing to stand with South Korea" here refers broadly to a failure to give support to it. The failure means not only an explicit rejection to assist South Korea when requested but also an inaction or "too little, too late" efforts.

actions in support of South Korea and against South Korea's rivals.⁴ Eventually, policy-makers in the rival nations will need to shoulder these higher costs if they decide to initiate misbehavior against South Korea. Consequently, it is crucial for the South Korean government to continue doubling down on its soft power initiatives and expand the scope of work beyond the cultural realm. At the same time, South Korea's soft power can help alleviate its neighboring countries' concerns over its military augmentation.

Operationalizing soft power

According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the ability to get others to want the outcomes you want through cooptation rather than coercion or payment.⁵ It is the power that enables a country to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, not just the power to change the minds through threat of military force or economic sanctions, and a country's soft power ultimately rests on three domains: culture, political values, and foreign policy.⁶

Policymakers and strategists of the past were oriented towards hard power construction. They prioritized building a large army of well-trained soldiers, developing advanced weaponry, and devising efficacious war plans, which altogether could enhance their chances of fighting and winning the war. They strived to portray their country as formidable so that other countries would be too scared to harm it.⁷ In modern times, however, the power to build trust, make friends, and generate appeals is increasingly important. Military muscle is still essential, but it alone is barely adequate in helping a country manage its international relations in the present-day interconnected world. It is necessary to augment a strong army with a favorable image among foreign audiences so that the country can garner international support in a time of peace and in the event of conflict. Soft power serves as a force multiplier to hard power and inducement, and its presence can reduce the need to resort to threats of coercion and monetary incentives to achieve preferred outcomes.

4 In International Relations scholarship, audience costs typically refer to penalties imposed by domestic audiences, such as political parties, interest groups, and the public, on leaders when they make external threats and later back down or enter a conflict after promising not to. However, in a more general sense, audience costs simply refer to penalties on leaders when their foreign policies fail to meet or contradict popular demands. In democracies, which is the focal point of this research, such penalties can come in the form of loss of trust and legitimacy, social unrest and protests, or potential loss of votes in the subsequent elections. Please see, for instance, Alan S. Gerber, Gregory A. Huber, David Doherty, and Conor M. Dowling, "Citizens' Policy Confidence and Electoral Punishment: A Neglected Dimension of Electoral Accountability," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 4 (2011): 1206–24.

5 Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 11.

7 For example, Niccolò Machiavelli advised princes in Italy in the 15th Century that it is better to be feared than loved. His political thoughts are widely accepted as an exemplar of the realism school of International Relations that is influential among foreign affairs theorists.

To capitalize on soft power, a country needs to establish resources in the three domains. In terms of culture, the global reach and appeal of a nation's cultural outputs are of foundational significance. They can be used to influence global public opinion towards the country by setting common values and practices for others to follow and bolstering mutual understanding with foreign publics. In terms of political values, a state must acknowledge

Soft power serves as a force multiplier to hard power and inducement, and its presence can reduce the need to resort to threats of coercion and monetary incentives to achieve preferred outcomes.

universal principles and endeavor to align itself with and actively promote them. Shared values can create ideational commonalities among nations that would otherwise be separated. Examples of these values include, but are not limited to, democracy, respect for peace and human rights, and environmental protection. They can be showcased both on a domestic level (i.e., how the government abides by and promotes them at home) and on an international level (i.e., how the government collaborates with other nations on

such issues). In terms of foreign policy, the state can devise policies to assist other nations, assail the wrongdoer, and assert itself in the international agenda. Because soft power is about mobilizing cooperation, policies based on universal norms and values such as humanitarianism, morality, and altruism can bring more credit to the country than those focusing on self-interest and short-term goals.

Unpacking soft power mechanism

Unlike hard power, which is usually carried out to coerce foreign governments into complying with one's demands in a direct manner, the operation of soft power is rather indirect as it targets winning the hearts and minds of overseas publics, comprising political elites and ordinary foreign individuals who are assumed to influence their government's policy choices. In this sense, the success of one's use of soft power hinges on two conditions: (1) the ability to attract foreign targets and (2) the ability to translate its popularity into political leverage. The first condition is fulfilled when the foreign individuals are attracted to the country's soft power elements—cultures, political values, and foreign policies—and subsequently sympathize or identify with the country. The second condition is fulfilled when those individuals exert influence on their countries' policies that match or benefit that of the originating country. Such a process can be illustrated using a diagram as follows.

FIGURE 1. Illustration of Soft Power Mechanism⁸



Thus, it can be inferred that soft power in itself can also serve as a country’s deterrence mechanism, although its role and functions are slightly different from conventional deterrence, which focuses on the use of hard power—military force, economic sanction, or both combined—to deter international conflicts and war.⁹ Instead of using threats of the use of force to convince another party to refrain from initiating some course of action, or to urge another party to turn aside or discourage through fear of consequences, soft power supports deterrence by adding indirect costs to those actions to the extent beyond the benefits.¹⁰ Soft power reassures that the country is not alone in a conflict; at least it has support from the overseas public attracted to it. In case of an inter-Korean conflict, for instance, South Korea’s soft power can increase the chance that foreign publics will, albeit with differing degrees, demand or put pressure on their own governments to implement policies or take actions in support of South Korea and against North Korea and

In case of an inter-Korean conflict, for instance, South Korea’s soft power can increase the chance that foreign publics will, albeit with differing degrees, demand or put pressure on their own governments to implement policies or take actions in support of South Korea and against North Korea and its potential allies.

8 Based on Nye, *Soft Power*, 5–11.

9 For a comprehensive review of the concept, please read Paul K. Huth, “Deterrence and International Conflict: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Debates” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no.1 (1999): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.25>. In addition, Glenn Snyder argued that deterrence can also come in the form of the promise of reward. Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 10.

10 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 71.

its potential allies.¹¹ From this vantage point, North Korea and its allies will be exposed to retaliation not only from South Korea or its military allies but also from other countries not directly related to the conflict. The higher the anticipated costs, the more likely they are to be deterred.

South Korea's soft power

South Korea is no stranger to soft power. Since the late-1990's, when the South Korean government under President Kim Dae-jung first implemented policies to support cultural industries and promote cultural exports, Korean popular cultures, from K-Pop and K-drama to cuisine, have hit the global market and become popular worldwide, yielding positive impacts on the domestic ecosystem of the cultural industry, generating a great amount of revenue, and enhancing the country's image abroad.¹² A study by the Korean Foundation has shown that products related to the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, brought about US \$6.38 billion to South Korea in 2019, more than double from 2016, and the number is predicted to continue rising annually.¹³ Hallyu also helps increase the exports of other consumer goods and tourism.¹⁴ Consequently, it is undeniable that South Korea has great advantages in the area of cultural soft power.

Unfortunately, the growth in global interest in South Korean culture does not always automatically render soft power, from which the government can utilize for its international affairs, especially in response to security threats from its neighboring country, North Korea. Indeed, South Korean cultural products still have limited impacts on shaping the policy agendas of other governments. According to Brand Finance's *Global Soft Power Index 2024*,

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- 11 In the event of inter-Korean conflict, it is widely anticipated that both South Korea and North Korea will receive some form of support from other countries. In this sense, South Korea's adversaries entail not only North Korea but also countries likely to aid, back, or side with North Korea, such as China and Russia. For more information about North Korea's potential backers, please read: Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order", *Foreign Affairs*, May, 2024, 50–63; Samuel Ramani, "The Russia-China-DPRK Strategic Triangle: Phantom Threat or Geopolitical Reality?", *38North*, June 13, 2024.
 - 12 They suggest that the policies were largely carried out during this period because South Korea's economy was hit by the Asian Economic Crisis and facilitated by the liberalization of media around Asia. See Introduction and Chapter 1 in *The Korean Wave: Korean Popular Culture in Global Context*, edited by Yasue Kuwahara (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Seung-Ho Kwon and Joseph Kim, "From censorship to active support: The Korean state and Korea's cultural industries", *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 24, no.4 (2013), 524.
 - 13 Yong-rak Kim, *Global Hallyu Trends 2020* (Seoul: Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, 2020), 30.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 31.

South Korea ranks number 15 worldwide, below its Asian neighbors—China and Japan.¹⁵ The report, branching out more categories than Nye’s original idea, showed that South Korea scores high in familiarity, reputation, and business and trade but relatively low in influence, international relations, governance, and people and values.¹⁶ In sum, South Korea’s soft power is fundamentally culture-focused rather than comprehensive across all domains stipulated by Nye.

South Korea’s underexploited soft power resource

Democratic values, such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, and a separation of power, are what South Korean society has arduously fought for and maintained. They are in and of themselves highly relevant to South Korea’s soft power but still squarely under-exploited. Seoul should do more to tap into this valuable resource.

South Korea’s path to democracy was not all smooth. After the Korean War, the country was controlled by military governments that suppressed their citizens through violent means.¹⁷ Only after the late 1980’s under the Roh Tae-woo administration did the country gradually transition towards democracy, but since then South Korea’s democracy has quickly become full-fledged and acknowledged worldwide. The Freedom House has consistently ranked South Korea as a free country since 1988–1989, with a score as high as 83 out of 100 in 2024.¹⁸ Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit considers South Korea as one of the 24 full democratic countries in the world.¹⁹ With all these supporting data, South Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism explicitly deems its country an economic powerhouse and an exemplar of liberal democracy.²⁰

Democracy can serve as a fruitful asset of soft power, amplifying a country’s image as being governed by a legitimate government that respects the people’s needs and rights. South Koreans have shown a willingness to defend their democracy when it faces threats, especially in the era of global democratic backsliding, in which a number of third-wave

15 Brand Finance, *Global Soft Power Index 2024* (London: Brand Finance PLC, 2024), 32.

16 Ibid.

17 Arguably, the most consequential event regarding South Korea’s democratization is the May 18 Movement, also known as the Gwangju Uprising or Gwangju People’s Uprising. Although the uprising ended up being suppressed by the military junta, it played a pivotal role in a long-term increase in support for democracy that ended South Korea’s dictatorship in 1987.

18 “Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses, 1973-2024,” Freedom in the World Database, Freedom House, accessed August 13, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world#Data>.

19 Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict* [Annual report], accessed August 14, 2024, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>.

20 “Transition to a Democracy and Transformation into an Economic Powerhouse,” History, [KOREA.net](https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Transition-Democracy-Transformation-Economic-Powerhouse), accessed August 13, 2024, <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Transition-Democracy-Transformation-Economic-Powerhouse>.

democracies in Asia and elsewhere have reverted to a hybrid regime or autocracy.²¹ South Korea's democratic resilience should resonate with and gain support from the overseas public who lean towards democracy. Pew Research Center surveyed citizens in 24 countries across the world and found that solid majorities in each of these countries describe representative democracy, or a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law, as a good, preferred way to govern their country, whereas a military regime is highly opposed.²²

With all that said, while the country performs well overall by global standards, there is still room for improvement in its democracy. For example, South Korea received a low score on political culture in the Economist Intelligence Unit, on non-discrimination in the Sustainable Governance Indicators, and political/social integration in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI).²³

Regarding political culture, a study conducted by Korean scholars argued that there is still substantial tension between the public's participatory orientation and Korean representative democracy.²⁴ That is, while South Koreans are typically enthusiastic about politics and willing to participate in government decisions, the current representative design does not fully provide opportunities to exercise political action. Therefore, they have to seek costlier alternatives to express themselves, such as through social movements and protests.²⁵ Although these actions are considered part of democratic politics, they inevitably come at higher cost of the country's economy and social stability than actions through parliamentary means.

The second and third aspects of South Korea's democracy improvement pertain similarly to the social dimensions of South Korea's democratic politics. Although Article 11 of the Korean Constitution states that "there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social or cultural life on account of sex, religion or social status," South Korea still lacks

21 Youngho Cho, "Contentious Civil Society and Democratic Resilience in South Korea," *Global Asia* 19, no. 1 (March 2024), 40. <https://www.globalasia.org/data/file/articles/79796d14a4019ecf38d0a2b8fa393c3b.pdf>.

22 Pew Research Center, "Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It's Working" [February 2024], accessed August 13, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/gap_2024.02.28_democracy-closed-end_report.pdf.

23 Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023*. It measures political culture by popular attachment to democracy and democratic institutions compared to support for non-democratic alternatives such as the military or expert rule; Nancy Kim, Hannes Mosler, and Thomas Kalinowski, *South Korea Report: Sustainable Governance Indicators 2022*, https://www.sgi-network.org/2022/South_Korea/Quality_of_Democracy; "South Korea Country Report 2024", BTI Transformation Index, Bertelsmann Stiftung, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/KOR>.

24 Youngho Cho, Mi-son Kim, and Yong Cheol Kim, "Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea," *Asian Survey* 59, no.2 (2019), 285. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26663708.pdf>.

25 Ibid.

a comprehensive anti-discrimination law to enforce these constitutional rights.²⁶ For example, the pay gap between genders remains the largest in the OECD, and political empowerment of women and LGBTQ+ is still scarce.²⁷

These issues continue to be a hindrance or, as Andrew Yeo describes it, a “glass ceiling” for South Korea’s further democratic progress.²⁸ That is to say, while democracy can help generate positive nation images necessary for gaining overseas support and essential for supplementing the nation’s hard power deterrence, it remains largely underexploited. For South Korea to be able to effectively deploy its soft power, more actions need to be taken to improve its democratic system.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

As a democratic country, South Korea has the upper hand in attracting foreign sympathy and support in case of conflict with North Korea. Nevertheless, the current state of democracy in the nation is porous, thereby restricting its effectiveness. One key evidence to this statement is the recent event in South Korean politics—that is, President Yoon Suk Yeol imposed martial law in December 2024. The president’s imposition of martial law, which is the first time since 1980 and indeed did not meet its legal conditions for proclamation, along with his parallel attempts to suspend the democratically elected civilian government and replace it with military rule, has raised serious questions to South Korea’s democracy credential and, by extension, its soft power.²⁹

On the surface, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the president’s declaration of martial law (i.e., the act *per se*), which severely contradicts South Korea’s democratic values, would critically undermines its

With all that said, more work still needs to be done for South Korea in order to continue polishing its democracy, allowing it to tap into this genre of soft power more effectively.

26 World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023* [Insight report], accessed August 14, 2024, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, 225.

27 Ibid.

28 Andrew Yeo, “Has South Korean Democracy Hit a Glass Ceiling? Institutional-Cultural Factors and Limits to Democratic Progress,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 12, no.4 (2020), 541. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12552>.

29 Article 4 of South Korea’s Martial Law Act stipulates that: (1) “When martial law is declared by the President, he/she shall notify the National Assembly thereof without delay”; and (2) “In the case of paragraph (1), if the National Assembly is out of session, the President shall, without delay, request the National Assembly to convene the session.” President Yoon himself ordered special forces to obstruct the National Assembly convention.

image. However, the fact that the country could promptly and peacefully put an end to the chaos through parliamentary means without any bloodshed, as well as South Koreans' demonstration of anger towards the president and unyielding resistance to military operations surrounding the National Assembly Building, should positively reverse the course. Put another way, instead of exposing the pitfalls of South Korea's democracy, the recent event was a silver lining as it accentuated the resilience of its democratic system and willpower of its people, altogether augmenting its image as a solid democratic society. With all that said, more work still needs to be done for South Korea in order to continue polishing its democracy, allowing it to tap into this genre of soft power more effectively. This research proposes policy recommendations, as follows.

1. Improving the quality of democracy through expanded participation

Further improvement of democracy, notably in terms of citizens' political participation, non-discrimination, and social integration, is crucial for South Korea. While South Korea's democracy is now acknowledged by other full-fledged democracies and looked up to by other aspiring ones, in reality, ordinary Koreans still find it difficult to make their voices heard by politicians, let alone to have the power to make changes from the bottom up. Many Koreans, especially the younger generation, are politically active and eager to participate in the country's decision-making, but their formal representation is at present highly limited.³⁰ Increasing channels for ordinary citizens and civil society to directly engage in national politics can be a few first steps towards greater representation; namely encouraging groups of underrepresented people to take a consultative role in the legislature or to collectively propose a bill can help the authorities grasp the sense of people's ongoing dissatisfaction and socio-political demands. At the same time, the working committees, tailored especially for the youth, women and LGBTQ+, and the low-income population should be set up to identify and tackle problems at the ground level. Korea scholars often suggest that the main challenge for Korean democracy lies in its socio-political culture, so empowering these groups of people can lay a groundwork for new norms where tolerance and open debate can prevail.³¹ The better quality of democracy at a national level can reflect and enhance South Korea's legitimacy and status on the world stage, helping the country garner support when facing security threats more effectively.

2. Connecting with overseas emerging leaders

Another critical way to maximize overseas support is to strategize its communication with overseas audiences. Although the ultimate goal of soft power attraction for South Korea is to imprint the image of a free and fair, democratic society in the minds of the general public,

30 Eunsun Cho, "Limitations of Youth Participation in the Policymaking Process in South Korea," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 14, no.1 (2014), 92.

31 Yeo, "Has South Korea democracy," 555; See also, Cho, Kim, and Kim, "Cultural Foundations," 275.

it needs strategic delivery to avoid being inundated with enormous public engagement costs that sometimes yield sub-optimal returns.³² In this aspect, Seoul should concentrate its efforts on reaching overseas emerging leaders in other “like-minded” democracies through exchange programs to raise awareness about the country’s pursuit of democratic values, such as hosting a democracy-themed forum for international young leaders or for foreign government officials and parliamentarians to learn about the country’s democratic resilience. The conventional understanding about using exchange diplomacy as public diplomacy is that cultural and educational activities typically have long- to very long-term time horizons because they aim at those with interests in the organizing country but might not have authoritative roles in their home countries yet.³³ Therefore, for South Korea to inform the foreign public about its state of democracy more efficiently, it should specifically target emerging leaders. The fact that they are on track to policymaking roles makes them ideal candidates to provide support to South Korea in the foreseeable future.

3. Promoting South Korea’s democracy abroad through mass media and events

South Korea should leverage its existing resources, namely the media and international event platforms. Thanks to the worldwide popularity of K-Pop and K-Dramas, which spearhead Korean cultures to every corner of the world, the government can utilize this asset to further promote its image of a democratic country to overseas audiences by integrating inspiring stories into its TV series, dramas, or music videos. Alternatively, the government, in collaboration with private producers, can showcase its democratic stories worldwide through documentaries, TV shows, or news reports. This tactic can help increase overseas audiences’ familiarity with South Korea’s democratic values.

In a similar fashion, high-level events can boost the country’s democratic image among overseas elites. The 2024 Summit for Democracy, for instance, highlighted South Korea as the host of a global democracy event, further demonstrating South Korea as a responsible country that champions democratic values for current and future generations.³⁴ Seoul should continue to play a leading role in promoting democratic values worldwide. In doing

32 The examples of ‘high-cost, low-return’ type of public engagement include, but are not limited to, giving aids to ‘buy’ support in the recipient countries and spending on digital influence operations to stir hatred of geopolitical rivals among the audiences in the third-party state. For the empirical study discussing the first example, see Robert A. Blair, Robert Marty, and Philip Roessler, “Foreign Aid and Soft Power: Great Power Competition in Africa in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no.3 (2022), 1355–1376; For the second example, see Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist, “When Does Public Diplomacy Work? Evidence from China’s ‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomats,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 11, no.4 (2023), 922.

33 Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009), 25.

34 Ken Godfrey and Anthony Smith, “Inside the Summit for Democracy: What’s Next?” [ADRN Issue Briefing], accessed September 29, 2024, [https://www.eai.or.kr/avanplus/filedownload.asp?o_file=2024032815145548472837.pdf&uppath=/data/bbs/eng_issuebriefing/&u_file=\[ADRN_Issue_Briefing\]_Inside_the_Summit_for_Democracy.pdf](https://www.eai.or.kr/avanplus/filedownload.asp?o_file=2024032815145548472837.pdf&uppath=/data/bbs/eng_issuebriefing/&u_file=[ADRN_Issue_Briefing]_Inside_the_Summit_for_Democracy.pdf).

so, it will establish its image as a pivotal democratic society and secure more recognition from like-minded nations. The recent failed seizure of power by the president can serve as a meaningful reflection of the country's democratic resilience.

These three strategies are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are mutually enforcing and should be carried out together. While the first goal may take a longer time to complete than the other two, South Korea's gradual democratic progress can help facilitate its connection with emerging leaders in the "like-minded" countries and self-promotion of democratic experience via media. At the same time, the second and third strategies help keep the overseas public become more aware of the country's soft power attractiveness, which can translate into affinity for South Korea in a time of peace and sympathy in a time of conflict.

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How Do Joint Military Exercises Under the Nuclear Umbrella Affect South Korea's Stance on Nuclear Proliferation?

Jinwon Lee

Executive Summary

How do joint military exercises (JME) conducted under the U.S. nuclear umbrella influence public opinion on nuclear weapons development in South Korea? This research analyzes public opinion surveys from 2013 to 2022 to explore the effects of two types of military exercises: high-level nuclear table exercises and joint drills involving U.S. nuclear assets. Nuclear sharing mechanisms, including consultations, generally reduce public support for an independent nuclear arsenal, especially when joint nuclear strategy exercises are highlighted in the media. Additionally, when the public is exposed to large-scale joint exercises involving nuclear assets, this visibility tends to decrease strong public preferences for South Korea's own nuclear weapons. These nuanced findings highlight the complex role such exercises play in the nuclear proliferation debate and provide valuable insights into alliance dynamics and foreign policy.

While some may argue that redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons could enhance deterrence and address nuclear ambitions in Seoul, a combination of nuclear-sharing mechanisms and joint exercises more effectively manages public aspirations for nuclear weapons. This approach not only strengthens the credibility of the U.S.-South Korea nuclear umbrella but also helps balance South Korean public opinion by weighing the benefits of U.S. security assurances against the potential risks of a nuclearized South Korea.

There are important lessons for South Korean policymakers and the government in promoting South Korea's non-proliferation agenda. Key policy suggestions include:

- For the South Korean government, it is essential to maintain a consistent policy regarding U.S.-ROK nuclear extended deterrence, even amidst changes in leadership.
 - A steady commitment to nuclear extended deterrence is key to maintaining both military readiness and effective communication between allies.
 - Annual Deterrence Strategy Committee Table-top Exercises (DSC TTX) should be consistently held to address recent changes in North Korea's nuclear strategy and capabilities. To achieve this goal, ensuring the continuity of DSC TTX regardless of administration changes would be crucial.

- For policy makers in South Korea, effective communication is crucial for shaping South Korea’s nuclear policy.
 - Engaging with the media and the public is crucial to enhancing their understanding of the relative costs associated with maintaining a nuclear umbrella versus pursuing nuclear weapons or redeploying tactical nuclear weapons.
 - Additionally, it is important to convey the strategic significance of JMEs with nuclear assets in reinforcing the credibility of U.S. security commitments. Media attention and detailed discussions on these exercises also remind the public that U.S. nuclear extended deterrence can serve as an effective alternative to pursuing its own nuclear weapons.

Introduction

Public opinion is essential for understanding the dynamics of both domestic and international politics. While public opinions influences nuclear policies, it does not solely determine them. Studying public opinion on non-proliferation issues offers important insights into how nuclear security and alliance network management challenges are perceived by South Koreans.¹ Understanding public opinion on these matters is essential, as it influences and reflects broader nuclear security challenges and international alliances.

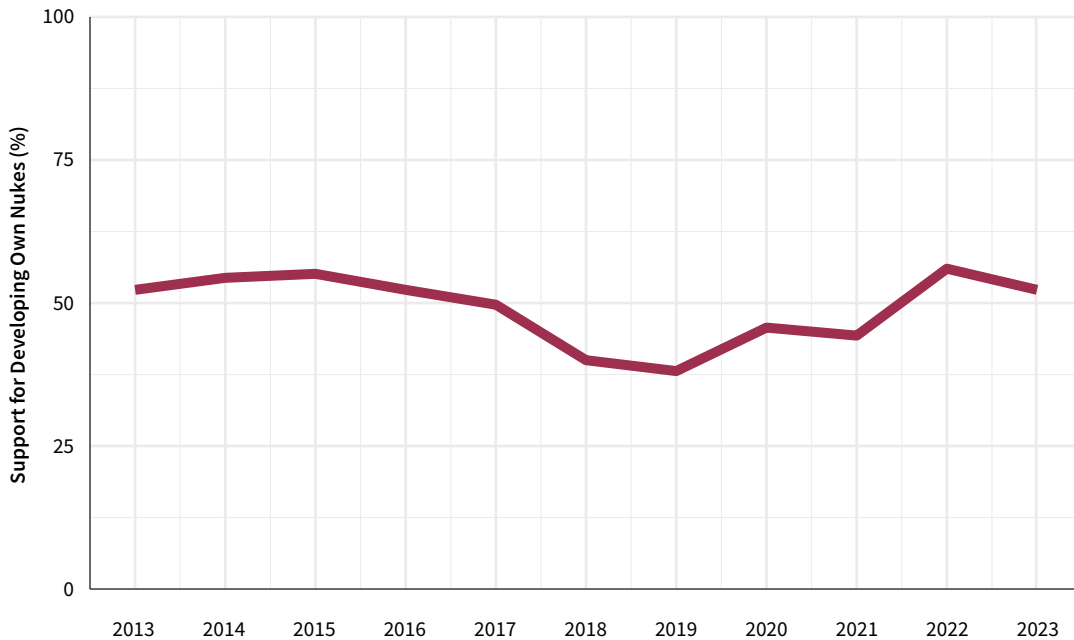
South Korean public concerns about North Korea’s nuclear weapons have increased. After North Korea officially withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, Pyongyang reactivated its nuclear facilities. Over the past twenty years, the country has launched long-range missiles and conducted six nuclear tests during the late 2000’s and throughout the 2010’s. By 2006, these developments had established North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. The country announced the creation of a nuclear weapon delivery system, including military platforms and delivery vehicles. Since then, North Korea has developed and tested intercontinental ballistic missiles with ranges over 15,000 km, including Hwasong-17 missiles, which can carry nuclear warheads. Additionally, North Korea is working on submarine-launched ballistic missiles.² As North Korea continues to expand its nuclear arsenal and engage in provocative actions, the perceived threat to South Korea from North Korea’s nuclear capabilities is expected to rise. As a result, in South Korea, three options have been publicly debated to mitigate North Korean nuclear

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- 1 Sukin, Lauren, and Woohyeok Seo. “East Asia’s Alliance Dilemma: Public Perceptions of the Competing Risks of Extended Nuclear Deterrence.” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 1-24.
 - 2 *BBC News*. “North Korea: What Missiles Does It Have?” September 5, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41174689>.

threats: (1) developing independent nuclear weapons, (2) relocating U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, and (3) strengthening U.S. extended deterrence with offshore nuclear assets.³

Among the three options, if the public perceives serious nuclear threats from North Korea and believes that South Korea requires stronger nuclear protection, they may support either the development of an indigenous nuclear program or the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. The below Figure demonstrates how South Korean public opinion survey results indicate that over 50% of South Korean public supports for developing South Korea’s own nuclear weapons. The 2023 Unification Perception Survey, carried out by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University (SNU) revealed that approximately 52.3 percent of South Koreans favored nuclear proliferation.⁴ Other surveys indicate that around 70 percent of South Koreans support nuclear weapons development.⁵

FIGURE 1. Public Support for Nuclear Development (South Korea)



Source: 2023 Unification Perception Survey, SNU IPUS

- 3 Cho, Hyun Joo, and Jinwon Lee. “Understanding South Korean Public Attitudes Toward Nuclearization: Trends Over a Decade Through External, Domestic, and Individual Perspectives.” *Korea Observer* 55, no. 4 (December 31, 2024): 573–624.
- 4 “Unification Consciousness Survey 2023.” Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University, January 9, 2024. <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/eng/archives/publications/8004>.
- 5 Dalton, Toby, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim. “Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons.” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 2022.

However, the decision to pursue an indigenous nuclear weapons program could severely damage South Korea's existing relationship with the United States. Developing its own nuclear weapons would likely lead to harsh sanctions from both the U.S. and the international community, as well as a cutoff from U.S. security and economic aid.⁶ If the U.S. were to impose economic sanctions and cut off aid to Seoul, it would be hard to imagine South Korea pursuing nuclear weapons without considering the significant economic costs involved. These costs would be especially high, given South Korea's heavy reliance on exports and its trade-centered economic growth strategy. Furthermore, there are reputational costs that South Korea would incur on the international stage. This move would directly contradict its longstanding commitment to the non-proliferation regime, where South Korea has played a key role in promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy and preventing further proliferation globally. The development of its own nuclear arsenal would undoubtedly tarnish South Korea's reputation in the international community.

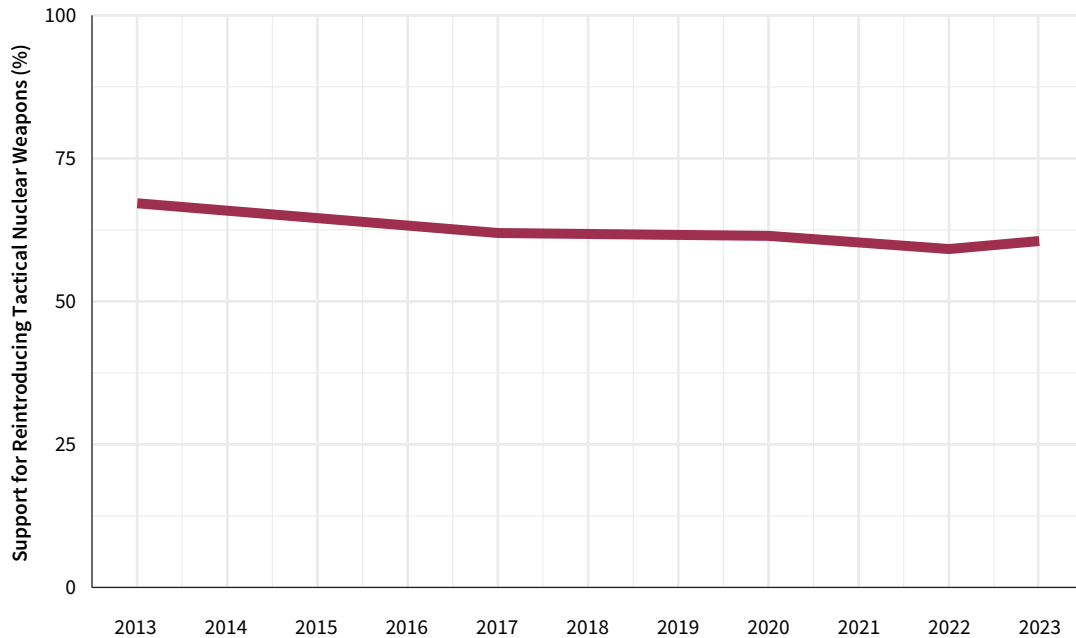
Alternatively, some believe the U.S. should redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to enhance its nuclear deterrence. Previously, the U.S. deployed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea from 1958 to 1991.⁷ Although the number of deployed weapons has changed over time, the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons could signal that the U.S. has provided the most credible nuclear security assurance. Deploying forward-based nuclear weapons implies a more credible threat of nuclear retaliation.⁸ However, after the Cold War, the U.S. withdrew all tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in a change to its nuclear strategy. Against this backdrop, as the below table shows, over 60 percent of the South Korean public supports the idea of reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in South Korean territory.

6 Bleek, Philipp C., and Eric B. Lorber. "Security Guarantees and Allied Nuclear Proliferation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 3 (April 2014): 429–54.

7 Jang, Se Young. "The Evolution of US Extended Deterrence and South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 4 (June 6, 2016): 502–20.

8 Fuhrmann, Matthew, and Todd S. Sechser. "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 919–35.

FIGURE 2. Public Support for Nuclear Redeployment (South Korea)



Source: Asan institute for foreign policy: Asan Annual Survey (2010–2023). Asan Poll (2013)

Although over 60 percent of South Koreans support this idea, there are three elements to consider regarding the “redeployment option.” First, U.S. nuclear policy and its capability to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons should be examined in the context of its alliance networks. Within the non-proliferation and arms control agenda, can the U.S. increase the number of tactical nuclear arsenals in other countries? Additionally, the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea could lead to increased demands from other U.S. allies to host such weapons. China’s reactions must also be taken into account. When the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system was deployed in South Korea in 2017, China viewed it as a threat, believing it was aimed at its own territory. This led to widespread economic retaliation against South Korea, with the cost estimated at \$14.76 billion.⁹ Lastly, as the THAAD case illustrates, domestic repercussions are another important factor. Although a majority of South Koreans agree with the redeployment idea, deciding on the specific location for deployment would be challenging. If tactical nuclear weapons are stored in a certain location, that area is more likely to become a target for adversaries and would require heightened security measures.

9 Boo, Jang-won. “China’s THAAD Retaliation May Cost Korea’s GDP \$14.76bn: Private Study.” *Pulse MK*, March 8, 2017. <https://pulse.mk.co.kr/news/english/7738480>.

In contrast to the widespread public support for an indigenous nuclear weapons program in South Korea, there are alternative ways to reinforce the existing nuclear umbrella. One such option is JMEs with nuclear assets, which can enhance the credibility of the umbrella. These exercises have become more frequent and involve strategic interactions between the militaries of multiple states, enhancing their ability to carry out joint operations.¹⁰ Additionally, establishing nuclear consultation mechanisms and conducting tabletop exercises can further strengthen the nuclear umbrella. For instance, in April 2023, South Korea and the U.S. issued the Washington Declaration, aimed at deepening cooperation in countering North Korea's nuclear threat.¹¹ In addition, the U.S. and South Korea revived the bilateral Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) in 2022, alongside regular U.S.-South Korea DSC TTX in 2023.¹² Specific types of JMEs conducted under the nuclear umbrella could have the potential to diminish the nuclear aspirations of South Korean publics.

Joint Military Exercises Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Increasing the Credibility of Nuclear Umbrella

Over the past few years, numerous JMEs have been conducted by the United States and South Korea. These exercises vary significantly in scale, ranging from involving a few hundred individuals to hundreds of thousands of personnel. During the 1980's, over 200,000 personnel joined the South Korea-U.S. joint exercises, but the numbers have been shifted in consideration of internal and external dynamics. The team spirit military exercise in 1993 had a total participation of 120,000. Later, the Foal Eagle exercises in 2018 reached to around 11,500 U.S. and approximately 300,000 ROK troops participation.¹³

As JMEs enhance the ally's mutual ability to carry out military operations, they are a strong tool for alliance military coordination. In particular, joint military exercises can serve as a distinct indicator of alliance military coordination in peacetime, as many of them have the possibility to be institutionalized, where participant countries operate exercises under the same heading according to a regular schedule. Institutionalized JMEs have two crucial

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- 10 D'Orazio, Vito. "International Military Cooperation: From Concepts to Constructs." The Pennsylvania State University, 2013.
 - 11 Kuhn, Anthony. "The U.S.-South Korea Washington Declaration Meets with Criticism in Seoul." *NPR*, April 28, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/28/1172695196/south-korea-washington-declaration-criticism>.
 - 12 U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Korea. *Joint press statement for the 21st Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue*. U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Korea. August 18, 2022. <https://kr.usembassy.gov/081722-joint-press-statement-for-the-21st-korea-u-s-integrated-defense-dialogue/>.
 - 13 Gady, Franz-Stefan. "US, South Korea Kick Off Annual Military Drill Without US 'Strategic Assets.'" *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/us-south-korea-kick-off-annual-military-drill-without-us-strategic-assets/>.

dimensions: 1) technical and tactical dimension; 2) political-strategic dimension.¹⁴ For political-strategic purposes, participant nation states can train staffs and forces with logistics, new technologies and weapons systems, and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) through conducting these military exercises.

On the other hand, JMEs are also meant to signal alliance commitment to deter an enemy and reassure allies.¹⁵ These exercises demonstrate the readiness of the military forces of both nations to collaborate in particular situations, as well as their capacity to employ military force jointly to accomplish shared goals together.¹⁶

Although two countries agreed to conduct JMEs annually, it is possible to suspend temporarily or terminate permanently the JMEs if both sides consider them not in favor of their political and security interests. For example, U.S. military exercises with South Korea have also been cancelled or reduced due to policy line shifts from some new governments (Foil Eagle was replaced by Team Spirit).¹⁷

Moreover, the different types of arms introduced in the joint military drills can make an impact on the credibility of extended deterrence. Among the various weapons and vehicles, the introduction of U.S. nuclear assets has achieved great attention from the South Korean media and its public. Introduction of U.S. nuclear assets are used to both deter North Korea and increase the credibility of South Korea to the U.S.' nuclear umbrella.

In some instances, the U.S. deployed B-52 bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons during these exercises as a deterrent against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. Since 2004, the U.S. Air Force has maintained an ongoing cycle of deploying bombers such as the B-1B Lancer, B-52 Stratofortress, and B-2 Spirit to Guam.¹⁸ These bomber rotations are crucial in increasing U.S. commitment to deterrence and offering assurance to South Korea. Official North Korean news accused both the U.S. and South Korea of preparing for nuclear war.¹⁹ The below table includes a list of JMEs with nuclear assets between the U.S. and ROK. The two allies did not always agree to hold JMEs, and not all exercises were conducted with nuclear assets.

14 Heuser, Beatrice, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias, eds. *Military exercises: Political messaging and strategic impact*. NATO Defense College, 2018.

15 D'orazio, "International Military Cooperation"; Heuser et al., *Military exercises*.

16 Kuo, Raymond, and Brian Dylan Blankenship. "Deterrence and Restraint: Do Joint Military Exercises Escalate Conflict?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66, no. 1 (January 2022): 3–31.

17 Heuser et al., *Military exercises*.

18 Gady, Franz-Stefan. "US, South Korea Kick Off Annual Military Drill Without US 'Strategic Assets.'" *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/us-south-korea-kick-off-annual-military-drill-without-us-strategic-assets/>.

19 Bernhardt, Jordan, and Lauren Sukin. "Joint Military Exercises and Crisis Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65, no. 5 (May 2021): 855–88.

TABLE: APPEARANCE OF U.S. nuclear assets in joint military exercise with ROK.

Year	Event	Source
2006	No B-52/B1-B appearance.	
2007	B-52	Yonhap News Agency (Korean) [https://n.news.naver.com/mnews/article/001/0001514623?sid=104]
2008	B-52	U.S. 7th Air Force [https://www.7af.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/408669/kunsan-host-first-max-thunder-exercise/]
2009	No B-52/B1-B appearance. However, F-16, F-15 are teaming with ROKAF KF-16s, F-15Ks during the Max Thunder joint exercise (Max Thunder, a joint military exercise involving the air forces of the ROK and US, 2009. Also, USS John C. Stennis, aircraft carrier dispatched.	Source: U.S. Air Force, 8th Fighter Wing Public Affairs [https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/120343/usaf-rokaf-put-max-thunder-into-full-swing/] Source: Korea times [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/08/113_41127.html]
2010	No B-52/B1-B appearance. However, F-22 Raptor aircraft joined the US-ROK JME for the first time.	Source: American Forces Press Service: [https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/116101/us-and-south-korean-defense-leaders-announce-exercise-invincible-spirit/].
	The US and South Korea agreed to institutionalize the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee (EDPC) to enhance extended deterrence in 2010 during the 2010 SCM (United States (U.S.)-Republic of Korea (ROK) Security Consultative Meeting) ²⁰ . Later, the EDPC was transformed into the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC), merging with the CMCC (Counter-Missile Capabilities Committee) in 2015.	
2011	No B-52/B1-B appearance. USS, aircraft carrier George Washington dispatched for joint military exercises. Foal Eagle exercises were downscaled due to 2011 Japan earthquake.	Source: Reuters, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-strategy-idUSTRE71803H20110209].
2012	B-52s	Source: U.S. Pacific Air Force [https://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/593141/b-52s-break-tradition-during-max-thunder/]

20 Manning, Robert A. "The Future of US Extended Deterrence in Asia to 2025." Washington: Atlantic Council, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, October 2014.

Year	Event	Source
2013	B-52s	Source: CNN [https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/19/world/asia/korea-b-52s/index.html]
2014	The U.S. downscaled the military hardware involved in the exercises, excluding aircraft carriers and nuclear-capable strategic bombers.	Source: CSIS [https://amti.csis.org/key-resolve-and-foal-eagle/]
2015	Discussed re-introducing US nuclear assets into Korean peninsula, but canceled plans. (Korean)	Source: MBN [https://www.mbn.co.kr/news/politics/2508891]
2016	Two U.S. Air Force B-1B strategic bombers/ B-52 Stratofortress	Source: USFK, UNC/CFC/USFK Public Affairs [https://www.andersen.af.mil/News/Features/Article/642789/rokus-alliance-aircraft-conduct-extended-deterrence-mission/] https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/940461/rok-us-alliance-ready-to-meet-mutual-defense-obligations/]
2017	B-1B	Source: USFK, NBC News [https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/1324058/us-bombers-fighters-fly-in-international-air-space-east-of-north-korea/] https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-bombers-carry-out-exercise-near-dmz-show-force-n780726]
2018	Scale back joint military drills during the peace process (without strategic assets)	Source: Diplomat: [https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/us-south-korea-kick-off-annual-military-drill-without-us-strategic-assets/]
2019		
2020		
2021		
2022	B-52 /B-1B/ F-22 fighter jets	Source: AP News, USFK [https://apnews.com/article/us-bombers-drills-north-korea-ab6d5649f6d171ed8817a971bffe11be] https://www.usfk.mil/Media/Press-Products/Press-Releases/Article/3254191/us-strategic-bombers-b-52h-deploy-to-the-korean-peninsula-and-conduct-combined/]
2023	B-52s, B-1B, a nuclear-armed submarine (USS Kentucky)	Source: AP News, Reuters [https://apnews.com/article/south-korea-us-north-korea-nuclear-0c6a71344452d5b12420c13fd66a5a1f] https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-b-52-bomber-joins-drills-with-south-korea-amid-north-korea-tension-2023-06-30/]

On the other hand, there is a distinct type of JME under the U.S.' nuclear umbrella. South Korea and the U.S. agreed to convene a bilateral EDSCG, which entails comprehensive and in-depth discussions on strategic and policy matters concerning extended nuclear deterrence against North Korea. Following its inauguration, the meeting was suspended for three years but was subsequently revived in 2023.

The regular U.S.-ROK DSC TTX can also facilitate consultations on extended deterrence between the two allies and serve as a potent signal to North Korea. High-ranking officials from both sides participate in these tabletop exercises to deliberate on how to effectively deter the possibility of the DPRK's use of nuclear weapons under the TTX scenario. Joint exercises focusing on responding to nuclear crises via tabletop exercises can contribute to enhancing mutual understanding regarding the utilization of alliance capabilities. Concurrent with the revival of the EDSCG, the U.S. and South Korea established the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) in the April 2023 Washington Declaration. The NCG serves as a high-level standing consultative body for discussing nuclear strategy and planning nuclear operations.²¹ This includes a new consultation mechanism between South Korea and the U.S., which has not been utilized in previous military exercises. The two sides would engage in regular discussions to address specific strategic and operational issues, such as the types of nuclear weapons that could be employed under various circumstances and potential targets.

21 Kim, Sung-han, and Hyun Ji Rim. "Comprehensive Extended Deterrence with the ROK: Integrating Economics." *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 123–41.

TABLE: U.S. nuclear extended deterrence strategy table exercise with ROK

Year	Event	Source
2016	<p>The United States and the Republic of Korea will hold the bilateral Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) on December 20 in Washington, DC. The EDSCG provides an opportunity for both governments to examine how best to strengthen extended deterrence and discuss efforts to improve the Alliance’s comprehensive deterrence posture.</p> <p>The United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) conducted the 5th U.S.-ROK Deterrence Strategy Committee Table-Top Exercise (DSC TTX). (2016. Feb.24–26)</p>	<p>U.S. Department of State: [https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/12/265789.htm]</p> <p>ROK, Ministry of National Defense (Korean): [https://www.korea.kr/briefing/pressReleaseView.do?newsId=156111291]</p>
2018	<p>The United States of America and the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.) held the second meeting of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) in Washington, D.C., on January 17, 2018.</p>	<p>U.S. Department of State: [https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-and-republic-of-korea-hold-second-meeting-of-the-extended-deterrence-strategy-and-consultation-group/]</p>
2019–2021	<p>After the second meeting in 2018, the EDSCG was suspended following the Moon Jae-in administration’s emphasis on an initiative aimed at promoting inter-Korean rapprochement and cooperation. However, two different Deterrence Strategy Committee Table-Top Exercises (DSC TTX) conducted during this period. 6th: Feb 2019. 7th: September 27–28, 2021.</p>	<p>Sources: Yonhap news Agency: [https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230915005900325] [https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20211202108700504?input=1195m]</p> <p>US Embassy in ROK: [https://kr.usembassy.gov/092821-joint-press-statement-for-the-20th-korea-u-s-integrated-defense-dialogue/]</p> <p>Defense Daily (ROK) (Korean): [https://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/20220802/2/BBSMSTR_00000100042/view.do]</p>
2022	<p>The United States and the Republic of Korea will hold a bilateral Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) meeting on September 16, 2022.</p> <p>In addition, the leaders committed to hold the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) in September 2022, and conduct a DSC tabletop exercise (TTX) in the near future.</p>	<p>U.S. Department of State: [https://www.state.gov/united-states-of-america-republic-of-korea-extended-deterrence-strategy-and-consultation-group-edscg/]</p> <p>US Embassy in ROK: [https://kr.usembassy.gov/081722-joint-press-statement-for-the-21st-korea-u-s-integrated-defense-dialogue/]</p>
2023	<p>The United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) conducted the 8th U.S.-ROK Deterrence Strategy Committee Table-Top Exercise (DSC TTX).</p>	<p>U.S. Department of Defense: [https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3308356/8th-us-rok-deterrence-strategy-committee-table-top-exercise-joint-press-release/]</p>

Can military drills with nuclear assets change public opinion?

How might these joint military exercises impact South Korean public opinion on nuclear proliferation? JMEs involving nuclear assets have had mixed effects on South Korean public opinion. The two allies conducted JMEs involving nuclear assets in 2013, 2016, 2017, 2022, and 2023. While public support for nuclear development declined in 2016, 2017, and 2023, it increased in 2013 and 2022. Typically, JMEs are expected to enhance the credibility of the nuclear umbrella and address concerns about potential abandonment.²² These exercises, which involve key nuclear assets of the United States, are extensive training operations where the armed forces of both nations work together to strengthen their collective military capabilities. However, large-scale U.S.-ROK JMEs have occurred both before and after North Korean provocations.²³ Thus, when these exercises involve nuclear assets, they are often a reactive measure to North Korea's nuclear or missile provocations. Given that South Korean public opinion has already been influenced by North Korea's series of provocations, these reactive measures alone may not sufficiently address the fundamental concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, following the implementation of the newly established extended deterrence strategy and consultation mechanisms between the U.S. and South Korea, public support for South Korea's nuclear weapons development declined. After the revival of the EDSCG, which held annual meetings in September, public support continued to decrease in the following years. Alongside the bilateral EDSCG, the U.S.-ROK DSC TTX were held in 2016, 2019, 2021, and 2023. With the exception of 2021, the DSC TTX were conducted in February, and the public surveys are typically carried out annually between July and August. The results show a decline in public support for nuclear development in most years, except for 2021. In 2022, due to the presidential election in March, the survey did not capture the effect of the exercise conducted in 2021. Moreover, the DSC TTX conducted in 2019 and 2021 did not receive significant media attention. In contrast, the two exercises held during the conservative administration (2016 and 2023) were widely covered in the Korean media, making the public more likely to be exposed to the information in those years.²⁴

This case illustrates that encouraging the media to provide more detailed coverage of JMEs can help the public better understand the relative costs and actual deterrence effects of maintaining a nuclear umbrella versus pursuing nuclear weapons. While North Korea's

22 Son, Sangyong, and Man-Sung Yim. "Correlates of South Korean Public Opinion on Nuclear Proliferation." *Asian Survey* 61, no. 6 (December 1, 2021): 1028–57.

23 Cha, Victor, Na Young Lee, and Andy Lim. "DPRK Provocations and US-ROK Military Exercises." *Beyond Parallel*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 18, 2016.

24 I found hundreds of news articles on DSC TTX exercises in 2016 and 2023, while only a few articles were found in 2019 and 2021.

evolving nuclear threats are a direct and key factor in shaping South Korea's preference for developing its own nuclear arsenal, increased media attention and in-depth reporting on these joint exercises can highlight alternative options for mitigating the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

In general, the consultation group and joint table exercises will enhance the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella by involving South Korea in joint execution and nuclear planning. Under the NATO system, nuclear sharing encompasses four key areas: (1) information sharing; (2) nuclear consultations; (3) joint nuclear planning; and (4) joint execution.²⁵ Similarly, the U.S.-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group includes elements such as intelligence sharing, nuclear command and control coordination, joint planning, and joint operations.²⁶ By establishing advanced and highly institutionalized coordination mechanisms, the credibility of the nuclear umbrella can be bolstered. These military coordination institutions give smaller allies confidence in credible security guarantees. In this context, nuclear sharing arrangements are more likely to prevent the public from developing increased nuclear ambitions. Such mechanisms help address concerns that arise in the context of nuclear deterrence by ensuring that minor allies do not independently decide on or manage the use of the defender's weapons. This case demonstrates that the existence and operation of consultative mechanisms ultimately alleviate public concerns about credibility and nuclear assurance. Increasing the visibility of existing deterrence consultative groups, such as the DSC and EDSCG, can not only reinforce the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella but also highlight the most viable options among the given alternatives. These new consultative mechanisms are viewed as nuclear sharing arrangements, allowing protégés to participate in nuclear planning through these consultative processes.²⁷

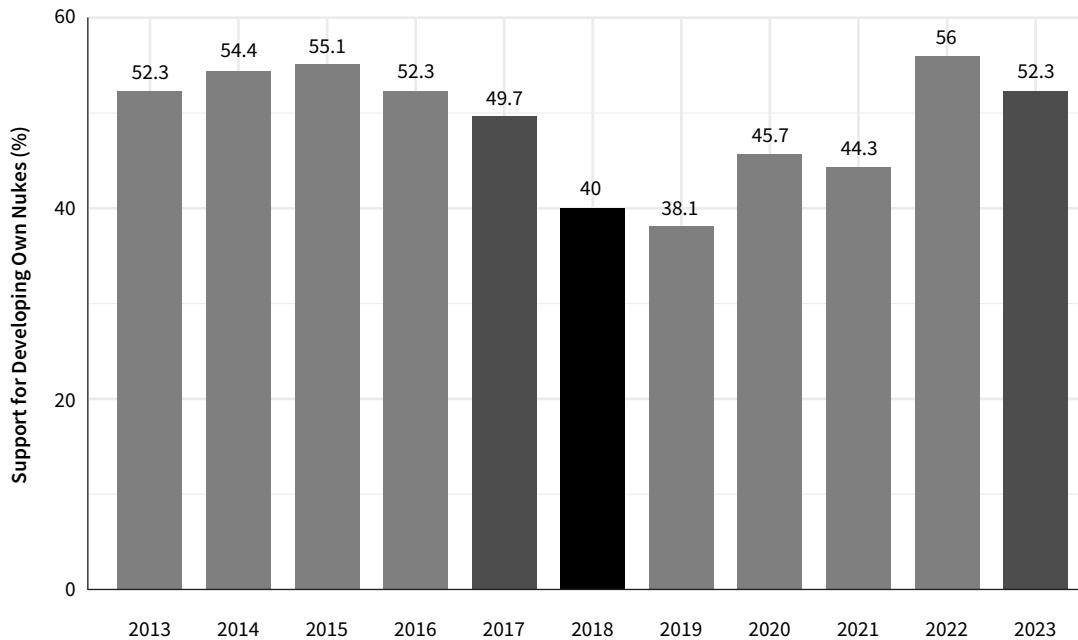
While North Korea's evolving nuclear threats are a direct and key factor in shaping South Korea's preference for developing its own nuclear arsenal, increased media attention and in-depth reporting on these joint exercises can highlight alternative options for mitigating the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

25 Kamp, K. H., & Remkes, R. C. (2011). Options for NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*, 82. Kamp, Karl-Heinz, and Robertus C.N. Remkes. "Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements." *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*. The Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011: 82.

26 Kim and Rim, "Comprehensive Extended Deterrence."

27 Ibid.

FIGURE 3. Public Support for Nuclear Development (South Korea)



Source: 2023 Unification Perception Survey, SNU IPUS

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, including South Korea in decision-making and nuclear planning within the framework of extended deterrence could help alleviate public concerns regarding the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. For the South Korean government, it is essential to maintain a

consistent policy regarding U.S.-ROK nuclear extended deterrence, even amidst changes in leadership. In South Korean policy circles, nationalists—regardless of their ideological background, whether conservative or progressive—argue for the development of indigenous nuclear weapons to preserve their national dignity and strategic autonomy. However, a steady commitment to nuclear extended deterrence is key to maintaining both military readiness and effective communication between allies.

Overall, including South Korea in decision-making and nuclear planning within the framework of extended deterrence could help alleviate public concerns regarding the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.

Moreover, effective communication among the South Korean government, media, and public is crucial when considering the direction of South Korea's nuclear policy. It is important to convey the strategic significance of JMEs in reinforcing the credibility of US security commitments. Through public debates and policy, accurate and comprehensive information on the various policy options along with their associated costs. The policymakers need to offer substantive insights, helping the public weigh the economic and security implications of developing a nuclear weapons program against the benefits of credible security assurances from the U.S.—benefits that might be jeopardized by a nuclearized South Korea. Public perception of this information can vary significantly.

Specifically, since the initiation of tabletop exercises within the U.S.-South Korea extended nuclear deterrence framework, the media has highlighted the importance of these exercises with the US. If the significance of these training sessions is informed, the public is more likely to grasp the relative costs of maintaining a nuclear umbrella versus other two options: developing nuclear weapons and redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons. This approach enables the public to better assess the economic, security, and reputational costs associated with nuclear weapons programs. Effective communication plays a crucial role in shaping South Korea's nuclear policy. Public discussions should provide accurate information about North Korea's security threats, the global context, and the various policy options along with their associated costs. Media and policymakers must offer clear and substantive insights to help the public evaluate the trade-offs between developing nuclear weapons and relying on U.S. security assurances.

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Coordinating with the Quad: A Case for South Korea's Involvement at the Working Group Level

Emma Whitmyer

Executive Summary

The Yoon Suk Yeol administration of South Korea strived for the country's recognition as a Global Pivotal State, one that "seeks out agenda for cooperation and shapes discussions in the region and wider world."¹ As South Korea's middle power status has grown, so has its influence and ability to contribute to the region and beyond. The time is prime for South Korea's cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, which is already comprised of Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. It would be in the interest of South Korea to pursue engagement and cooperation with the Quad through many of its working groups. With overlapping strategic interests among Quad members and the ability to pool resources, it's in all of the countries' interest to find ways to coordinate towards the group's mission of improving prosperity and providing much-needed public goods to the Indo-Pacific. This will allow Seoul to work with the group to address regional challenges for a larger policy impact and to begin leading in ways that protect South Korea's strategic interests not only on the Peninsula but also in the Indo-Pacific. Specifically, joint cooperation and progress could be focused in the areas of technology, cyber, infrastructure, and more, which directly correspond to the Quad's working groups and areas South Korea has highlighted in its most recent strategy documents.

Introduction

Following the release of the Republic of Korea's, otherwise known as the ROK or South Korea, Strategy for A Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region (Indo-Pacific Strategy)² in December 2022, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's National Security Strategy:

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- 1 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Strategy for A Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, The Government of the Republic of Korea, December 2022, 7, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do.
 - 2 Ibid.

Global Pivotal State or Freedom, Peace and Prosperity (National Security Strategy)³ in June 2023, and the National Cybersecurity Strategy⁴ in 2024, the ROK has aimed to enhance engagement with countries in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The ROK has reached a critical point in its diplomatic history that necessitates the need to forge new strategies that appropriately leverage its position, and these documents do just that. It would be beneficial to Seoul to begin coordinating with the other members of regional alliances, such as Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, which comprise the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), on common goals and challenges. Doing so would not only contribute towards shared goals in the region, like peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, but also provide opportunities for South Korea to advocate for its strategic interests, including maintaining the rules-based order. Through engagement and combined efforts with Quad, South Korea will reap stronger benefits by engaging directly with the Quad than by tackling the same initiatives bilaterally, especially in the areas of health, climate, and infrastructure where South Korea is already acting.

Through engagement and combined efforts with Quad, South Korea will reap stronger benefits by engaging directly with the Quad than by tackling the same initiatives bilaterally, especially in the areas of health, climate, and infrastructure where South Korea is already acting.

South Korea as a Global Pivotal State

There is no denying the changes that have taken place in South Korea since the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement in 1953. From an aid-recipient nation to a donor country, South Korea's economic situation has changed dramatically over the last seven decades. While pursuits of South Korea's larger involvement in foreign policy matters beyond the Peninsula are not new, such as President Lee Myung-bak's (2008–2013) "Global Korea," it seems the timing is just right in many respects. As South Korea's economy has grown, so too has its influence. Since becoming the 14th-largest economy in the world and Asia's fourth-largest economy, South Korea has begun joining NATO summits alongside leaders from the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) which includes Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, and was first invited to the G7 in 2020, in part because of its interest in cooperating on many

3 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration's National Security Strategy*, Office of National Security, June 8, 2023, <https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/viewer/skin/doc.html?fn=20230621040037933.pdf&rs=/viewer/result/202408>.

4 Republic of Korea President of the Republic of Korea's Office, *National Cybersecurity Strategy*, Office of National Security, February 1, 2024, <https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/press/gdXzwtKB>.

of the present challenges being faced.⁵ Over the last 70 years, the challenges threatening South Korea’s security, such as those posed by North Korea and even China, have not only remained but have become more pressing and dangerous. As stated in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, South Korea’s national interests are directly tied to the stability and prosperity in the region.⁶ South Korea acknowledges in the Indo-Pacific Strategy that “rising geopolitical competition” and “deepening arms race in the region, coupled with a lack of action to build transparency and trust in the military and security domains, is making the region less secure.”

The Quad and its initiatives

Since the first formal meeting in 2007 and revitalization in 2017, the Quad has worked to shake outside perceptions that it’s an anti-China alliance. Instead, it has viewed itself as a diplomatic partnership committed to supporting an open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient.⁷ The pact remains steadfast in its commitment to addressing shared values, global challenges, and strategic goals such as promoting a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” The question of expanding the Quad has been one that has come up year after year, however the group seemed to hold off on this as it worked to find its ground and become a formal institution itself. In the past, South Korea has also taken precautionary steps to avoid being viewed as anti-China, as it is sensitive to the role that China plays in its economy. At the same time, however, it has become hard to ignore South Korea’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. For the Quad and South Korea, both have reached respective points where they gained recognition and have the means to address and carry out initiatives that tackle pressing issues in the region. With a new focus on areas such as infrastructure, maritime security, public-private partnership, climate, health, critical and emerging technologies, and space, it’s an ambitious initiative for the region.⁸ These correspond closely with South Korea’s expressed interests in securing its future and being able to “overcome global challenges, such as disease, famine, poverty, illiteracy, the digital divide, and environmental pollution, and striving to expand our contribution to the international community.”⁹ As South Korea envisages itself as a Global Pivotal State, this

5 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Relations with the Republic of Korea*, https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/topics_50098.htm?selectedLocale=en.

6 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Strategy for A Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*, The Government of the Republic of Korea, December 2022, 4, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_26382/contents.do.

7 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *The Quad*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/quad>.

8 White House, *Quad Leader’s Summit Fact Sheet*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/quad-leaders-summit-fact-sheet/>.

9 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy*, 5.

is an opportunity for it to take part in many of these initiatives, contribute toward shared goals and interests, and become involved with the Quad’s working groups. South Korea’s participation in the working groups focusing on health, climate, and infrastructure could be some of the most impactful areas of improvement and would be an excellent starting point for South Korea to begin its involvement. Commitments to improvements in these fields have already been witnessed through South Korea’s pledge in 2021 to ship roughly 1.57 million COVID-19 vaccines to Vietnam and Thailand.¹⁰ Additionally, in November 2024, the Korean government announced that over the next three years, it will donate \$3 million to support climate change initiatives in Central Asian countries towards “building infrastructure, promoting energy projects and supporting agriculture, fisheries and regional supply chain stabilization”¹¹ Contributions such as these could have a significant value-add to the Quad and the region. The ROK government should coordinate with the Quad to find further opportunities within the sectors to contribute.

As South Korea envisages itself as a Global Pivotal State, this is an opportunity for it to take part in many of these initiatives, contribute toward shared goals and interests, and become involved with the Quad’s working groups.

In December of 2023, the Quad Senior Cyber Group¹² discussed the importance of enhanced cooperation on securing the resilience of Information Technology (IT) and Operational Technology (OT) systems in critical infrastructure; ensuring mutual recognition of Quad nations’ labeling schemes for cybersecurity of Internet of Things (IoT) products; and the use of critical and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. Shortly after, in February of 2024, the ROK published an updated National Cybersecurity Strategy which emphasizes an expansion of global leadership and aims to have tailored cooperation with nations to “enhance deterrence against cyber threats and elevate the level of international cooperation and solidarity, including the development of norms for responsible state behavior in cyberspace.”¹³ As a Global Pivotal State, South Korea believes it has a responsibility to uphold international obligations and joint responses to malicious actors. While the updated document has called attention to the illicit cyber

10 Jin Yu Young, *South Korea will donate 1.6 million vaccines doses to Vietnam and Thailand*, The New York Times, Oct. 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/14/world/south-korea-will-donate-1-6-million-vaccine-doses-to-vietnam-and-thailand.html>.

11 Korea Times, *Korea pledges \$3 mil. to support climate action in Central Asia*, November 10, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/11/113_386000.html.

12 White House, *Joint Statement of the Quad Senior Cyber Group*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/15/joint-statement-of-the-quad-senior-cyber-group/>.

13 Republic of Korea President of the Republic of Korea’s Office, *National Cybersecurity Strategy*, 13.

activities of North Korea, it does not make mention of those carried out by China or Russia. Some might wish for South Korea to take a more hardline approach in calling out China and Russia's behaviors, but those like India might find South Korea's refrain from doing so more appealing.

At the May 2023 Quad Leaders' meeting in Hiroshima, Japan, a further commitment to investment in economic development was announced. The Quad Investors Network, or QUIN, was "...created to accelerate investment in critical and emerging technologies for the Indo-Pacific region. The QUIN brings together investors, corporations, and public institutions across India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. to support its mission."¹⁴ This particular initiative is another area for South Korea to become involved. Home to some of the world's largest innovative technologies such as semiconductors, batteries and clean energy technology, quantum science and technology, and artificial intelligence, these all put South Korea on target to better contribute to this network. As does the government's commitment to creating greater supply chain resilience. Many well-established as well as emerging companies and institutions in South Korea focusing on clean energy and biotech, quantum computing, or AI, for example, could collaborate with QUIN. Further coordination with the Quad within the sectors to could be argued as urgently needed as they face growing competition from China.

The Quad Infrastructure Fellowship is an additional initiative that South Korea could greatly contribute to. Aimed at providing 1,800 scholarships, work exchanges, and other executive programs to government officials, along with the Quad's goal of "development, stability, and prosperity to benefit the people of the Indo-Pacific," having government officials from all participant countries gaining deeper knowledge and clearer comprehension on the "best practices surrounding the design, delivery, and management of high-standard infrastructure projects" truly benefits the success of the projects and those impacted by this work.¹⁵ Increased opportunities for officials to enhance their education on best practices in infrastructure projects will benefit current and future projects. Additionally, there is the Quad STEM Fellowship, in which 100 students are sponsored to study in the United States each year in the areas of graduate-level studies in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Not only would South Korea's participation expand the networks of fellows, but hosting STEM fellows in South Korea would provide new areas of exploration and connection. These could include visits to universities, research institutions and facilities in South Korea and the chance to create longer-term connections and partnerships. Expanding the number of fellowships to include those from South Korea would also help in promoting deeper people-to-people ties among all of the nations.

14 White House, *Quad Leaders' Summit Fact Sheet*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/quad-leaders-summit-fact-sheet/>.

15 Ibid.

At the inaugural U.S.-ROK Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies (CET) Dialogue hosted in Seoul in December 2023, efforts for upgraded bilateral technologies between the two countries were announced.¹⁶ Cooperation didn't stop there—in March of 2024, Seoul also hosted the inaugural Trilateral Technology Dialogue (TTD) between the United States, India, and South Korea. This first meeting covered opportunities to cooperate on topics such as semiconductor supply chains, artificial intelligence, quantum, space, clean energy and critical minerals.¹⁷ They also committed to protect sensitive technologies, to build more resilient technology supply chains, and to delivering technology solutions for the region.¹⁸ Numerous opportunities remain for South Korea to engage with Australia and Japan on critical and emerging tech areas and rather than trying to pursue them bilaterally. South Korea and the Quad should find ways to add them to the workstream to spur innovation and build more resilient supply chains.

Why the timing is right for South Korea to participate

In February 2024, the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) held a webinar on “South Korea and the ‘Emerging Quad Plus Calculus.’” Discussed were the opportunities for functional cooperation, as well as concerns about the strategic implications and effectiveness of such an expansion to a Quad Plus format. South Korea has shown that it has the economic prowess, access to cutting-edge technology, and a talented workforce, among other resources it can contribute. Becoming more involved in the initiatives put forth by the Quad would not only build credibility for South Korea's middle-power status but for the Quad as well. Projects and initiatives with better buy-in from partners and potentially shorter timelines for completion could be viewed more positively by those impacted and generally

South Korea has shown that it has the economic prowess, access to cutting-edge technology, and a talented workforce, among other resources it can contribute. Becoming more involved in the initiatives put forth by the Quad would not only build credibility for South Korea's middle-power status but for the Quad as well.

16 White House, *JOINT FACT SHEET: Launching the U.S.-ROK Next Generation Critical and Emerging Technologies Dialogue*, December 8, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/08/joint-fact-sheet-launching-the-u-s-rok-next-generation-critical-and-emerging-technologies-dialogue/>.

17 United States Mission Korea, *READOUT OF THE UNITED STATES-INDIA-REPUBLIC OF KOREA TRILATERAL TECHNOLOGY DIALOGUE*, U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, March 13, 2024, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/031324-readout-of-the-united-states-india-republic-of-korea-trilateral-technology-dialogue/>.

18 Ibid.

as a success. Quad cooperation on common goals and challenges provides an opportunity for Korea to advocate for its strategic interests without trying to do so on only its capital and resources. It would also allow for initiatives to be accomplished on a much larger scale than what one country could accomplish on its own, especially those most pertinent to its security concerns. Included in President Yoon’s National Defense Strategy is a keen interest in being able to “overcome global challenges, such as disease, famine, poverty, illiteracy, the digital divide, and environmental pollution, and strive to expand our contribution to the international community.”¹⁹ This shows interest in participating and a willingness to lead in many initiatives that Quad is targeting. It is in the interest of the South Korean government to pursue engagement and cooperation with the Quad through many of its working groups.

The U.S. election and its impact on the Quad

For much of the past year, the November Presidential election in the United States loomed large on the minds of many, as did the impacts it will have not only on bilateral relations but on U.S. cooperation in multilateral venues for years to come. With a new administration moving into the White House in January 2025, support for new membership into the Quad from Donald Trump could be limited. Under his previous leadership, he displayed indifference and ambivalence towards traditional alliances and partnerships. Uncertainty remains on how a second Trump administration will handle security and economic agreements, as well as partnerships like the Quad. While previously Trump was interested in cooperation with the Quad, he might choose to use the group in taking a tougher stance against China, which would likely be faced with displeasure from India and could risk pulling focus away from its initiatives. Relations with members of the Quad and South Korea could be exposed to changes in the United States trade policy under a second Trump administration as well, straining relations and putting common goals, like supply chain resilience, at risk. Furthermore, the Quad could be faced with friction if Trump goes after one of its members in the areas of trade or security. The Economic Intelligence Unit’s Trump Risk Index indicates that the countries with the most exposure to trade policy changes are Japan (#6), India (#8) and South Korea (#10).²⁰ Trump has often expressed that others are not contributing enough and has placed pressure on other members to step up their contributions. Cooperation from Seoul in a multilateral, such as the Quad, could help to balance the scales and create better unity among members to continue efforts in the areas of infrastructure, maritime security, public-private partnerships, climate, health, critical and emerging technologies, and space. It could also help strengthen bilateral relations between South Korea and other Quad countries if faced with significant trade policy changes.

19 Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Yoon Suk Yeol Administration’s National Security Strategy*, 5.

20 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Trump Risk Index*, The Economist Group, 2024, 5, https://elements.visualcapitalist.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/EIU_Trump_Risk_Index.pdf.

Under previous administrations in South Korea, it was viewed as in the ROK's best interest not to formally sign into an organization that was viewed as anti-China. As mentioned, the Quad has worked rebrand itself not as an anti-China alliance but instead as a diplomatic partnership committed to supporting an open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient.²¹ In recent years South Korea has sought to find a balance between being viewed as anti-China and supporting a rules-based order. In a joint statement with the U.S. and Japan, South Korea has agreed to condemn "dangerous and aggressive actions" taken by China in the South China Sea.²² A tougher stance against China might play well for Trump and could soften harsh rhetoric and action in other areas, like trade and military spending. While South Korea would not be seeking formal membership into the Quad at this time, engagement in the alliance could be a path to showing the next administration that South Korea is committed and willing to contribute.

Additional Quad Plus members could also make it more challenging to progress on certain initiatives. Dr. Brendon J. Cannon's presentation at the SCSA-IPA webinar in February 2024 discussed that South Korea and India have diverging interests from the group, as "India's primary concern is less on the Pacific and more on the Indian Ocean and South Asia region, and South Korea focusing more on North Korea."²³ Does it become more challenging to implement with more partners? Potentially, especially in circumstances where there is disagreement on strategy or implementation. While it can be agreed that South Korea does have serious concerns about North Korea's growing nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities and the threat that it poses to the Korean Peninsula, this likely is not the only area or region of concern for the ROK, as seen in their Indo-Pacific Strategy. Dr. Cannon's presentation concluded that of the different choices to enlarge the Quad, South Korea is by far the best option and "brings to the table its strategic geographical relevance, shared concerns about China, and national capabilities that could be interesting for the group."²⁴ Formal membership might be a challenging path for South Korea to pursue at this time, from both the response of China and historic lack of support for multilaterals from Donald Trump. However, it is one that could be reexamined in the future. For now, the ROK government should pursue collaboration with the Quad on its numerous working groups.

21 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *The Quad*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/quad>.

22 Hyonhee Shin, Trevor Hunnicutt and David Brunstrom, *US, Japan and South Korea condemn dangerous and aggressive actions' by China*, Reuters, August 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-japan-south-korea-condemn-dangerous-aggressive-actions-by-china-2023-08-18/>.

23 Institute for Security & Development Policy, *SOUTH KOREA, INDIA, AND THE EMERGING QUAD PLUS CALCULUS*, February 7, 2024, 12, <https://isd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ISDP-Webinar-Report-2-March-2024-final-25-March.pdf>.

24 Ibid, 12.

What is the difference between working with the Quad vs. pursuing cooperation through bilateral relationships?

By South Korea working with the Quad, its impact in the areas of improvement for the region will be amplified and will help in institutionalizing the work being done collectively. Should changes in leadership among other Quad members occur, it will be best to act now to avoid turbulence that may come with a change of administration. Since President Yoon took office in May of 2022, there has been witness to significant improvements in relations between the ROK and Japan. From an increase in commitments to strengthening trilateral relations, like the historic Camp David Summit and the first Trilateral Ministerial Meeting in July of this year, to bilateral summits and a renewing of relations, a great emphasis on efforts to reestablish relations with Japan have occurred. One major reason for this is has been the growing shared security concerns in the region, like those taken by North Korea and China. In another historic move, both countries normalized bilateral defense ties on the sidelines of this year's Shangri-La Dialogue.²⁵ Rapprochement with Japan is considered to be an achievement of the Yoon government, and though it is controversial among the South Korean public, Yoon appears determined to continue improving relations and shore up public support for continued engagement and stronger people-to-people ties.²⁶ While there have been improvements in relations between the two in addressing regional security and economic growth, momentum could slow with changes in leadership on either side. If South Korea were to continue to work with Japan through bilateral and multilateral channels, this could help maintain momentum and progress should bilateral relations become stagnant, especially with changes at the leadership level. Adding more players can create complications, but South Korea's contributions towards the Quad and its initiatives can be impactful in meaningful ways without complicating the relationship of formal membership.

What would be China's response?

China has been working to counter the growing ties between Japan and South Korea, especially those in coordination with the United States. While harsh rhetoric directed at Seoul and the Quad from Beijing could be expected if South Korea were to become a Quad Plus member, it's less likely should South Korea pursue engagement and not full membership at this time. Additionally, the likelihood of economic retaliation, like witnessed in 2017 under the THAAD missile deployment, would not be expected. China is interested in seeking greater cooperation with South Korea and Japan as a way of combatting the closer

25 Christopher B. Johnstone and Victor Cha, *South Korea and Japan Cement Bilateral Security Ties*, CSIS, June 4, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-and-japan-cement-bilateral-security-ties>.

26 Emma Whitmyer, *A Closer Look at South Korea's 22nd National Assembly Elections*, Asia Society Policy Institute, April 24, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/closer-look-south-koreas-22nd-national-assembly-elections>.

relationship with the United States. An example was this May's Leaders' level trilateral summit meeting between ROK, Japan, and China, the first since 2019. Japan's release of its National Security Strategy in 2023 has also called for a "constructive and stable" relationship with Beijing, especially in maintaining economic engagement."²⁷ Yoon is expected to continue strengthening ties and advocating for the advancement of freedom, peace, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond while maintaining a tough stance on North Korea and Russia.²⁸ Through the release of the three strategy documents early on in the Yoon administration, it has become clear that he will not be continuing the "strategic ambiguity" policy that was witnessed under the previous Moon Jae-in administration, in which South Korea chose not to closely align itself with the United States or China. Instead, as Ellen Kim agrees, "South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy leaves room for South Korea to cooperate with China."²⁹ The document has specifically called for a resumption of the trilateral summits in hopes of greater peace and stability. The challenge for President Yoon will be struggling with low approval ratings among voters and persuading them that engagement with China is to the benefit of South Korea despite significantly declining perceptions of China among the youth.³⁰ Continued engagement with the United States and other multilaterals, such as the Quad, could build greater support for the Yoon administration.

Policy recommendations

Since the Quad's first meeting in 2007 and more formal ending in 2017, it has become an established network, having had numerous meetings among officials, as well as at the ministerial and leadership levels. South Korea's involvement and engagement with the Quad's working groups, in particular those focused on health, climate, infrastructure, and technology, are a great place to begin coordinating directly, such as the Quad STEM Fellowship, which offers a unique opportunity for the next generation of South Koreans, Americans, Australians, Indians and Japanese to expand their networks and collaborate to explore new areas of research, to develop creative solutions to today's problems, and strengthen people-to-people ties through new experiences and perspectives.

27 Michelle Ye Hee Lee, *China attempts to counter Japan and South Korea's closer ties with U.S.*, The Washington Post, May 26, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/05/26/china-japan-south-korea-summit-meeting/>.

28 Whitmyer, *A Closer Look at South Korea's 22nd National Assembly Elections*.

29 Ellen Kim, *Assessment of South Korea's New Indo-Pacific Strategy*, CSIS, January 19, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessment-south-koreas-new-indo-pacific-strategy>.

30 Lee Dong Gyu and Kang Chungku, *How Should South Korea Respond to Youth's Worsening Perception of China?*, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, November 10, 2023, <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/how-should-south-korea-respond-to-youths-worsening-perception-of-china/>.

As South Korea's middle power status has grown, so has its influence and ability as a Global Pivotal State to contribute to the region and beyond. South Korea has shown that it has the economic prowess, access to cutting-edge technology, and a talented workforce, among other resources it can contribute. This is an opportunity for the ROK to contribute toward shared goals and interests, take part in many of the initiatives, and become involved with the Quad's working groups. With overlapping strategic interests among Quad members, including maintaining the rules-based order, it is in all of the countries' interest to find ways

to coordinate towards shared challenges for a larger policy impact. It would be beneficial and of interest to Seoul to find ways to coordinate with the other members of the Quad on common goals and challenges, like peace, prosperity, and public goods to the Indo-Pacific, to coordinate towards its mission of improving prosperity. These would provide opportunities for South Korea to contribute to the region while also strengthening its image as a contributor to global issues.

As South Korea envisages itself as a Global Pivotal State, this is an opportunity for it to take part in many of these initiatives, contribute toward shared goals and interests, and become involved with the Quad's working groups.

Countries worldwide are preparing for what the future of U.S. foreign policy looks like and if it remains committed to shared values and agreements. Should the next U.S. administration choose to take a tougher stance on China, or wish to see other allies doing more in terms of burden sharing, South Korea's involvement in the Quad would help build its case that it is committed and is willing to contribute resources towards these initiatives as well as further institutionalizing its existing efforts, as seen through the documents released under the Yoon Suk Yeol government, including investments in vaccine diplomacy and climate assistance.

While the possibility of Quad Plus membership is an option, it should be evaluated at a later time. South Korea should presently focus engagement at the working group level and potentially the ministerial level as time goes on, formal membership could be addressed at a later time when all parties feel confident in the decision to expand to a Quad Plus partnership.

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Strategic Pathways for South Korea in Taiwan Contingency Scenarios

Yerin Yoon

Executive Summary

As the Taiwan Strait becomes a central focus in the great power competition between the United States and China, its rising tensions mark a pivotal shift of geopolitical landscapes in the Indo-Pacific. The recent election of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te in January 2024 has further intensified regional tensions, with President Lai's pro-independence stance adding complexity to cross-strait relations. The strategic importance of the Taiwan Strait resonates throughout East Asia, significantly influencing the security environment of the Korean Peninsula and shaping the U.S.-Republic of Korea (U.S.-ROK) alliance.

This paper explores the broader implications of a Taiwan contingency within the context of the great power competition between the United States and China. Additionally, South Korea emerges as a significantly impacted player due to its economic dependence on maritime trade through the Taiwan Strait and its security partnerships with the United States.

The paper examines various conflict scenarios in the Taiwan Strait, including maritime blockades and Chinese armed attacks. By analyzing these probable scenarios, this study examines how a Taiwan contingency could impact the security architecture of the Korean Peninsula. It delves into the dynamics of the U.S.-ROK alliance, emphasizing the challenges South Korea faces in navigating its strategic priorities amidst escalating regional tensions, particularly with North Korea. To fortify Korea's role in regional security associated with a Taiwan contingency, the paper provides policy recommendations aimed at enhancing South Korea's maritime security to protect its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), improving military readiness against North Korea's armed provocations, and fostering trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan.

In conclusion, the Taiwan Strait remains a volatile region with far-reaching implications for global security and economic stability. Proactive strategic planning and strengthened alliances are imperative for South Korea and its partners to navigate the complexities of a potential Taiwan crisis, ensuring the preservation of regional peace and stability.

Introduction

The Taiwan Strait, a narrow maritime passage separating Taiwan from mainland China, has emerged as a critical arena in the broader great power competition between the United States and China. The Taiwan Strait holds significant geopolitical importance due to its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific region, as this strait is vital for global trade, with 88 percent of the world's largest ships by tonnage passing through it.¹ Beyond its economic significance, the Taiwan Strait is a focal point of geopolitical tensions rooted in the enduring sovereignty dispute between Taiwan and China.

After the Chinese Civil War, Taiwan emerged as a separate governmental entity, leading to ongoing disputes over sovereignty. While China insists on its “One-China Principle,” which sees Taiwan as part of Chinese territory ruled by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan continuously claims its own sovereignty. According to the 1992 Consensus, both the PRC and Taiwan’s own Nationalist Party—Kuomintang (KMT)—claimed to represent all China, yet neither one could extend its jurisdiction beyond its own side of the Taiwan Strait.² This consensus has often been characterized as merely an “agree to disagree” understanding, rather than a truly diplomatic agreement, as it allows both sides to negotiate while holding fundamentally divergent views officially. However, in recent years, Taipei, under Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leadership, has refrained from endorsing the 1992 Consensus, viewing it as a mechanism used by Beijing to limit Taiwan’s sovereignty. This stance, characterized by Taiwan’s rejection of Beijing’s interpretation of the consensus, has led to the cessation of official communications between the two sides for the past eight years.³ Additionally, with the election of Lai Ching-te in 2024, who is considered more pro-Taiwan independence than former President Tsai Ing-wen, relations between China and Taiwan over the cross-Strait issue appear to be growing more intense. President Lai is taking a firm stance against accepting the One-China Principle. Therefore, the much-feared Taiwan contingency appears to be becoming more likely. While the United States adheres to its strategic ambiguity, its continuous and extended naval exercises in the Taiwan Strait also add more tensions in this region, as the U.S.-China rivalry sharpens.

The potential for a Taiwan contingency—ranging from military blockades to full-scale invasion—poses significant challenges not only for Taiwan and China but also for regional actors such as South Korea. South Korea, heavily reliant on maritime trade routes that

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- 1 Katie Zeng Xiaojun, “East Asia: Impact of China and Taiwan Conflict on Shipping,” RiskIntelligence, June 2022, <https://www.riskintelligence.eu/analyst-briefings/east-asia-impact-of-china-and-taiwan-conflict>.
 - 2 Chow, P.C.Y. (2008). An Overview on the Dilemma of “One China”: Myth Versus Reality. In: Chow, P.C.Y. (eds) The “One China” Dilemma. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230611931_1.
 - 3 PYO, Nari. “Taiwan’s 2024 Presidential Election: Results and Implications for Cross-Strait Relations.” *IFANS Focus* IP2024-01E (2024): 3.

traverse the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, stands to be profoundly affected by any escalation of tensions in the region. Moreover, South Korea faces the intricate task of balancing its strategic alliance with the United States and its economic ties with China, which is a dilemma that ongoing security threats by North Korea further complicates.

The Implications of a Taiwan Contingency

Taiwan Contingency in the Great Power Competition

The escalated tensions between Taiwan and China have profound implications geopolitically. As Taiwan's democratic governance contrasts with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this confrontation draws international attention, as well as support, particularly from the United States. While the United States maintains a "strategic ambiguity" stance towards Taiwan, which is articulated through its "One China Policy," it has shown a consistent desire for Taiwan's self-governance and democratic system. This stance is reflected in U.S. domestic legislation, such as the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which provides for defensive support to Taiwan. Though the TRA does not explicitly commit to U.S. military engagement in the Taiwan Strait, it provides indirect support, enabling the United States to train Taiwanese forces and enhance their capacity for self-defense.

Therefore, the discrepancy between China's unification goals and Taiwan's desire for self-governance creates a persistent source of conflicts in the region. Admiral John Aquilino, the former Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOMM), made remarks at the Operationalizing Integration in the Indo-Pacific (OIIP) 2024 conference highlighting this tension. Admiral Aquilino believed that some demonstration of Chinese force against Taiwan was expected after Taiwan's presidential election last year, in addition to China's pressure on Taiwan's diplomatic allies.⁴ Indeed, just after Lai's May 2024 inauguration, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted drills that encircled the island and which were designed to simulate, in their own words, how to "seize power."⁵ As the United States and China vie for global influence, actions taken by China in the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the South China Sea, may be interpreted as part of a larger strategy to assert its power and challenge the U.S.-led international order. This competition influences China's approach to foreign policy and military strategy, framing its actions within a larger narrative of great power competition. The regular military drills in the Taiwan Strait and airspace incursions by China into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) heighten concerns in both

4 John Aquilino. "Keynote Address," Jan. 16, 2024. Alohilani Hotel, Hawaii, the US, <https://pacforum.swoogo.com/2024-OIIP>.

5 Nectar Gan, Eric Cheung and Brad Lendon, "China says military drills encircling Taiwan designed to test its ability to 'seize power,'" CNN, May 24, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/23/asia/china-military-drills-taiwan-second-day-intl-hnk/index.html>.

Taiwan and the United States. These actions are perceived as provocations, challenging the status quo, and raising the specter of instability in the region. In response, while maintaining its One-China Policy, the United States continues to provide defense support to Taiwan consistent with the TRA. Specifically, President Biden's explicit acknowledgment of the risks in Taiwan and discussion about the possibility of direct military intervention are seen as indicative of a shift away from the long-held policy of strategic ambiguity.⁶ This approach represents a more openly assertive stance on ensuring Taiwan's security, signaling a potential departure from previous U.S. strategies that aimed to balance relations between China and Taiwan while avoiding clear commitments to military intervention.

The implications of a conflict over Taiwan extend far beyond the immediate region, posing a serious threat to the stability of the U.S.-led liberal democratic order. There is growing concern that the Taiwan Strait could become a powder keg, potentially igniting a broader confrontation among major powers and impacting global security dynamics. In an era already marked by ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and protracted unrest in the Middle East, another armed confrontation in the Taiwan Strait could have catastrophic global consequences, placing additional strain on the United States.

Why Taiwan Contingency Matters to South Korea

South Korea would be one of the countries most affected by a Taiwan contingency. Security in the Taiwan Strait is crucial for South Korea because the maritime transportation volume passing through or near the Taiwan Strait accounts for 33.27 percent of South Korea's entire maritime transportation.⁷ Moreover, it is calculated that an economic loss of U.S. \$342.46 million per day would result if any issue arises along this route and interrupts transportation.⁸ This calculation simply accounts for major resources and products; therefore, the expected amount of economic damage would increase further when including other resources, and products.⁹

If the United States turns out to be involved in a Taiwan contingency, whether it is directly or indirectly, this may cause a daunting task for the South Korean government to deal with associated security challenges, especially in coordination with its strongest ally, the United States. As South Korea significantly relies on China's economy, the South Korean government will fall into a dilemma. To directly support the United States as a security partner

6 Zolan Kanno-youngs and Peter Baker, "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese attack," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html>.

7 Jai Chul Heo, "The Taiwan Issue and Korea's Economic Security in the Era of U.S.-China Strategic Competition," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Feb. 22, 2023, 2, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4476087>.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

would be regarded as a belligerent gesture to China, resulting in potential enormous losses from China’s countermeasures on South Korea’s economy. South Korea learned this from the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in 2017, which resulted in Chinese economic coercion and led to an estimated economic loss of U.S. \$6.5 billion (exchange rate of 1,300 KRW to 1 USD).¹⁰ This precedent complicates the South Korean government’s deliberation of alignment with the United States in a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan Contingency Scenarios and Their Influence on the Korean Peninsula

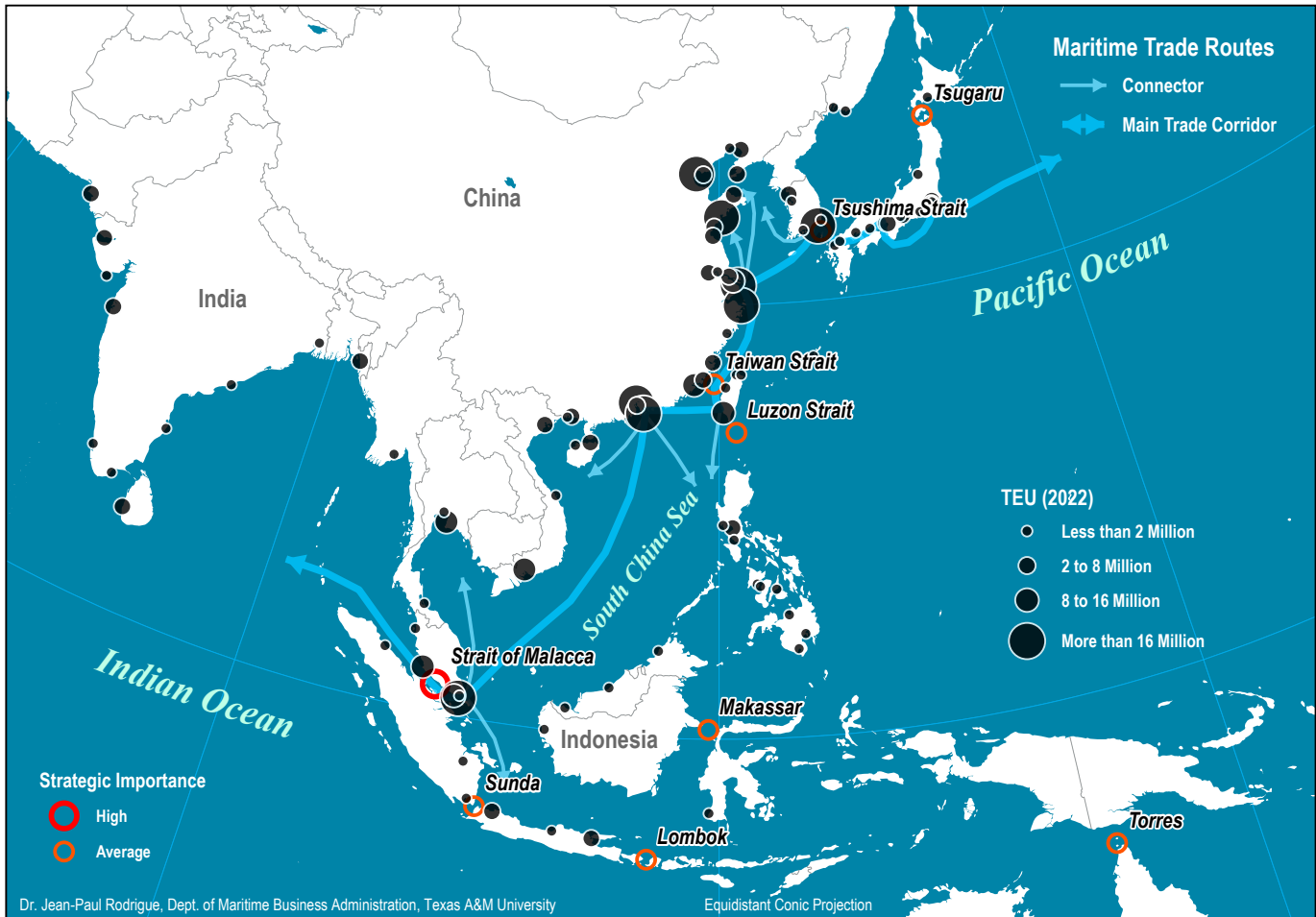
The escalation risk in the Taiwan Strait is not just a theoretical construct but a palpable concern that commands global attention. In a strategic assessment, experts from Global Guardian estimate the likelihood of a full-scale Chinese invasion of Taiwan at 35 percent.¹¹ This probability, although lower than the assessed 60 percent likelihood associated with limited combat scenarios in Taiwan, is significant enough to necessitate a discussion of viable strategies for managing and mitigating such risks.¹²

10 L. Yoon, “South Korea: Estimated Economic Loss from Chinese Boycott Against THAAD by Industry,” Statista, Jan 24, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/748538/south-korea-estimated-economic-loss-from-chinese-boycott-against-thaad-by-industry/>, accessed Feb 27, 2024.

11 “Will China Take the Potentially Devastating Step of Invading Taiwan—and If so, When Can We Expect an Invasion to Happen?,” Global Guardian, February 2024, <https://www.globalguardian.com/global-digest/will-china-invade-taiwan>.

12 “Will China Take the Potentially Devastating Step of Invading Taiwan—and If so, When Can We Expect an Invasion to Happen?,” Global Guardian, February 2024, <https://www.globalguardian.com/global-digest/will-china-invade-taiwan>.

FIGURE 1. Shipping Lanes and Strategic Passages in Pacific Asia.



Source: Adapted from *Port Economics, Management and Policy*, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://porteconomicmanagement.org/pemp/contents/part1/interoceanic-passages/shipping-lanes-strategic-passages-pacific-asia/>.

Many research institutions and government agencies have developed a variety of Taiwan Strait conflict scenarios. These scenarios presuppose both the capacity and inclination of China to undertake such actions. Amid those scenarios, this paper will focus on specific military conflict scenarios over Taiwan regarded as influential on the Korean Peninsula, including cases of maritime blockades and the Chinese invasion of Taiwan territory. As for the scenario involving naval blockades, cases could be bifurcated into a blockade of the Taiwan Strait and the blockades of the Yellow Sea to prevent the deployment of the U.S. military and its allies. Regardless of which scenario unfolds, the United States may force circumstances requiring careful consideration of its roles and response, and South Korea is likely to take corresponding measures.

Maritime Blockades

Taiwan Strait Blockade

A maritime blockade of Taiwan by China could emerge as a strategic option for the PRC, owing to Taiwan's substantial reliance on maritime trade. The Taiwan Strait, a vital maritime route, confronts the prospect of a blockade in the event of a Taiwan contingency. China's capability to implement such a blockade is underpinned by its considerable maritime prowess. A range of blockade scenarios could unfold, including the use of China's naval supremacy to hinder shipping to Taiwan's ports or direct assaults on merchant vessels. This blockade would significantly disrupt Taiwan's access to international waters and constrain its ability to import crucial commodities, including military provisions. In such circumstances, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) might deploy a combination of naval and aerial forces to enforce the blockade, utilizing surface vessels, submarines, and air patrols to monitor and regulate sea traffic traversing the Strait.

The implications of such a blockade for the Korean Peninsula are multifaceted. The South China Sea, including the Taiwan Strait, is a major maritime communication route since a massive portion of South Korea's import and export traffic passes through. This situation could escalate into a regional security dilemma, prompting South Korea to reassess its maritime security posture and enhance its naval capabilities. Moreover, the blockade could disrupt South Korea's trade routes, as it relies heavily on maritime transportation for commerce, including crucial components for its industries. Considering South Korea's reliance on imports, its economy would undoubtedly suffer from substantial harm. For instance, more than 90 percent of its maritime trade volume passes through the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, meaning that protecting this region's SLOCs has a significant impact on South Korea's economic and energy security.¹³ Disruptions in these shipping lanes could have profound effect on South Korea's economy, which depends heavily on its export and import activities.¹⁴

The Yellow Sea Blockade

A hypothetical maritime blockade of the Yellow Sea in a Taiwan contingency scenario could have the most direct threats to the Korean Peninsula, given its geographic proximity and strategic importance in East Asian maritime routes. The blockade could be aimed at restricting the military movements of the United States forces or its allies. Specifically, it could cut off supply lines, potentially involving both military and commercial vessels.

13 Scott A. Snyder, "U.S.-South Korea Coordination Toward China on Maritime Security," *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), May 5, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-south-korea-coordination-toward-china-maritime-security>.

14 David Uren, "Why a Blockade of Taiwan Would Be Disastrous for China," *The Strategist*, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-blockade-of-taiwan-would-cripple-chinas-economy/>, accessed March 3, 2024. *The Yellow (West) Sea Blockade*.

Even though the closure of both the Taiwan Strait and the Yellow Sea could concurrently impose significant burdens on China, this would be a clear advantage over the United States, whose territory is far from this area. Moreover, the imposition of a blockade in this region may be coordinated with North Korea, given China's established ties with North Korea and historical naval activities observed in the Yellow Sea during periods of peace. As a matter of fact, the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK) in North Korea sent a "solidarity letter" to its counterpart in the CCP, following the contentious visit to Taiwan by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2022.¹⁵ It demonstrated Kim Jong Un's strong support for China against the United States and flaunted the steadfast alliance. Although the recent strengthening of North Korea-Russia relations has prompted controversial evaluations regarding China's stance—highlighted by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's remark that China finds this alliance "unnerving,"—there appears to be no significant changes at present, given the enduring China-North Korea relationship and the mutual benefits they derive from one another.¹⁶ Additionally, the possibility of Russian involvement cannot be entirely ruled out even though the likelihood remains low due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, in consideration of the recent mutual defense treaty between North Korea and Russia.¹⁷ Should China request support to deter U.S. military advancement, it is reasonable to consider that North Korea or Russia might respond accordingly because they do not want to see an expansion of U.S. influence in this region.

In such a scenario, South Korea could present a direct geopolitical challenge to China. Significant restrictions on a range of maritime activities, including fishing and commercial operations, are anticipated consequences. This would increase the vulnerability of territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as sea routes that connect to South Korea would be impeded. Therefore, in consideration of these complicated dynamics in this region, this scenario prompts delicate and complex military and economic calculations for both the United States and South Korea.

Chinese Armed Attack on the Taiwan Territory

The scenario of Chinese armed attacks on Taiwan, particularly in the form of an amphibious invasion, presents a significant military challenge from all over the international community, in addition to the United States and South Korea. According to a CSIS report,

15 Thomas Maresca, "North Korea sends letter of 'solidarity' to China after Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit," UPI, August 10, 2022, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/08/10/Kim-Jong-Un-China-Taiwan-NancyPelosi/5511660123152/.

16 Justin McCurry, "China Unnerved by Russia's Growing Ties with North Korea, Claims US Official," *The Guardian*, November 24, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/24/china-unnerved-russia-growing-ties-north-korea-claims-us-official>.

17 Troy Stangarone, "The China-North Korea Relationship," *The Peninsula* (blog), Korea Economic Institute of America, May 15, 2023, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/the-china-north-korea-relationship/>.

elaborating how such an invasion would likely include a combination of amphibious landings, air assaults, and airborne operations, these attacks would focus on capturing key ports and airfields with the Chinese forces seeking to establish a beachhead for further military operations.¹⁸ Moreover, a major conflict in Taiwan could lead to broader regional instability as a ripple effect. For a conflict of this large-scale to become feasible, the likelihood of involvement by North Korea or Russia would inevitably increase. In response, the United States would more likely mobilize its allies to counteract such developments, increasing the probability of involvement from geographically proximate states such as South Korea or Japan, as well as broader allied networks like NATO. This could heighten the risk of regional instability, extending beyond the Taiwan Strait to encompass the South China Sea and potentially even larger areas.

Chinese armed attacks will also cloud South Korea's economic and security environment. While the direct military implications for South Korea may be limited due to its primary focus on countering threats from North Korea, indirect consequences could still arise. South Korea could also face pressure to support U.S. military operations since the crisis would draw significant U.S. military resources and attention, potentially affecting the U.S.-ROK alliance dynamics. As a result, South Korea would have to assist the United States either with logistics or noncombat fields, as seen in South Korea's past military deployment in Afghanistan. However, the South Korean government's decision to support the United States would need careful diplomatic and strategic planning in resistance to China's forceful response. In this context, South Korea might find itself in a delicate position, balancing its alliance commitments with the need to maintain regional stability and its own security interests.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance in Taiwan Contingency

In response to these threats against Taiwan, the United States will probably get involved in the relations between China and Taiwan to maintain regional security. As U.S. President Joe Biden stated, the U.S. forces could defend Taiwan in the event of an unprecedented attack.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the White House later clarified that the United States would maintain its policy of "strategic ambiguity," while continuing to uphold its commitments under TRA.²⁰ Additionally, the recent election of Donald Trump adds further complexity to the

18 Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War, Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," *Forging the Sword*, December 31, 2020, 40-51, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804797382-004>.

19 Scott Pelley, President Joe Biden's "60 Minutes" Interview Transcript, CBS News, September 18, 2022, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-joe-biden-60-minutes-interview-transcript-2022-09-18/>.

20 "President Joe Biden says U.S. would defend Taiwan against Chinese invasion," CBS News, September 18, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-joe-biden-taiwan-60-minutes-2022-09-18/>.

dynamics of the Taiwan Strait. While it is currently difficult to precisely picture what the U.S. foreign policy would be like under the Trump administration, it cannot be ruled out that the United States would support Taiwan in some capacity if a crisis in the Taiwan Strait were to escalate.

Building on this, it is unlikely that South Korea will be completely impervious to the U.S.' potential responses given the alliance between the two countries. Rather, it would be reasonable to presume that South Korea will assume some level of responsibility, given the high probability that the United States, committed to supporting freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait, would provide some kind of military assistance. However, in case of an all-out war, it is highly unlikely that South Korea will directly participate in the conflict. In a 2022 interview with CNN, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol noted that a military conflict near Taiwan could increase the likelihood of provocations from North Korea. Therefore, it remains challenging for South Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance to prioritize objectives beyond addressing North Korean threats.²¹ To be specific, South Korea already has a frontline threat from North Korea, which can jeopardize its territory immediately. Nations typically do not accord precedence to distant threats beyond their territorial borders to the detriment of immediate threats posed to their homeland. For this reason, the United States Forces Korea (USFK) would remain inextricably bound to the defense of South Korea by its bilateral defense treaty commitments during a Taiwan crisis.²²

Nonetheless, in terms of the U.S.-ROK alliance itself, the chance of “entrapment” into a war by the alliance cannot be ignored. Even though the legal obligation of deployment for the ally does not apply, it would be difficult for South Korea to refuse assistance to the United States against China without undermining the alliance.²³ Notably, President-elect Trump has consistently emphasized the need for allies to assume a greater share of the regional security burden. In addition, considering South Korea’s historical involvement in conflicts such as the Vietnam War and the Afghanistan War at the behest of the United States, it is improbable that South Korea would disregard the potentiality of deploying its troops, even if it involves rear support or non-combat missions.

In the meantime, South Korea’s stance is further complicated by its overall economic reliance on China. This reliance has been demonstrated through a long history of diplomatic ambiguity, reflecting the South Korean government’s concerns over possible economic

21 Fareed Zakaria, “Fareed Zakaria GPS,” CNN, September 25, 2022, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-09-25/segment/01>.

22 Bruce Klingner, “South Korea Cannot Afford to Sit Out Taiwan Contingencies,” The Heritage Foundation, May 3, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/china/report/south-korea-cannot-afford-sit-out-taiwan-contingencies>.

23 Tongfi Kim, “The U.S.-South Korea alliance and the deterrence of China’s aggression against Taiwan,” Policy Brief, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), November 15, 2022.

retaliation or diplomatic tensions. Although recently President Yoon advocated for a clearer stance on Taiwan and stronger alliance with the United States, translating this into tangible military support in a Taiwan scenario, South Korea has balanced the rivalry between the United States and China throughout its history, adjusting its stance with every shift of administration. In particular, former President Park Geun-hye stirred up controversy by attending the military parade for China's 70th anniversary commemoration of the end of World War II, while deciding to introduce the THAAD, which drew strong reactions from Beijing and brought tremendous economic losses. On the other hand, President Moon Jae-in embraced a stance known as a "hedging strategy," remaining silent about China's economic retaliation against the introduction of THAAD, while intimating support for the international norm of freedom of navigation in the relations with the United States. From these points of view, South Korea's stance on China might be unclear to the United States, while South Korean policymakers would be in a predicament between the "historical entrapments" based on the alliance and a realistic threat assessment.

Admittedly, responses to a Taiwan contingency require a thorough examination of both countries' strategic positions and potential avenues for cooperation. Consequently, a sophisticated and well-coordinated strategy is essential for the U.S.-ROK alliance, taking into account the broader implications for regional stability and international relations. Specifically, the possibility of deploying South Korean military forces to Taiwan cannot be determined by a single factor but rather depends on multiple considerations: the duration and escalation of a full-scale conflict, the level of required military forces, and the influence of domestic political dynamics on such decisions. The longer a conflict is prolonged, the greater the likelihood that troop deployments of South Korea may increase. Therefore, South Korean policymakers should prepare for this possibility through careful strategic calculations.

Policy Recommendations to Improve Korea's Roles for Regional Security

1. Strategy for Maritime Security and SLOC Protection

South Korea must prioritize safeguarding its SLOCs, which pass through the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan sits at the nexus of global shipping lanes and nearly half of the world's 5,400 container ships passed through the Taiwan Strait in 2022.²⁴ South

24 "Map shows why Taiwan is so important to the world," *Newsweek*, April 14, 2021, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/map-taiwan-maritime-traffic-1860121#:~:text=These%20three%20countries%20comprised%20nearly,by%20the%20U.S.%20Naval%20Institute.>

Korea is one of the three big countries in addition to China and Japan, which comprised almost 40 percent of the world’s manufacturing output in 2019, providing raw materials to manufacturing powerhouses through this transit.²⁵ Approximately 30 percent of South Korea’s imports, including over 65 percent of its crude oil sourced from Middle Eastern countries, and 23 percent of its exports—amounting to approximately U.S. \$357 billion in goods—pass through the Taiwan Strait²⁶ This fact harbingers that South Korea would be at serious risk with its economy and energy when there might be a challenge in this Strait. Therefore, a Taiwan crisis is crucial given the strategic importance of these sea lanes for South Korea’s trade and national security. In the protection of its SLOCs, immediate measures should include securing the international waterway and protecting merchant vessels from potential disruptions. To safeguard its SLOCs, South Korea should invest in advanced maritime surveillance and patrol capabilities. Modernizing its naval fleet with state-of-the-art surface ships, especially with air defense, submarines equipped with sophisticated sonar systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance would be vital. Additionally, increasing the deployment of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities and maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) can ensure a more robust defense posture in the region. Investment in satellite-based maritime surveillance and intelligence systems would enhance South Korea’s ability to monitor its SLOCs effectively. This would provide early warning of potential blockades or disruptions, allowing for prompt response measures.

Considering that 44 percent of global shipping traffic has access to its international waterway in the Taiwan Strait, which is protected by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation remains a critical principle.²⁷ Based on this international law, the South Korean government can draw out cooperation and actively participate in international forums and like-minded states focused on maritime security. Collaborating with regional partners to ensure the freedom of navigation and the safe passage of commercial vessels is paramount. This collaboration can include joint naval exercises, joint patrol, information sharing, and diplomatic efforts to uphold international maritime law. For instance, these countries can establish an initiative or utilize multilateral cooperation to protect SLOCs and their own interests through this strait. If they were to be initiated during peacetime, such international cooperation would prevent the problem from escalating further.

Finally, South Korea should also develop contingency plans for alternative shipping routes in the South China Sea and diversify its import sources to mitigate the impact of potential

25 Ibid.

26 “South Korea’s Trade Reliance on the Taiwan Strait,” *Taipei Times*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/10/15/2003825323>.

27 “Taiwan Strait: The Ocean’s Most Contested Place,” *Proceedings*, November 2023, accessed March 25, 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/november/taiwan-strait-oceans-most-contested-place>.

disruptions in the Taiwan Strait. Strengthening logistics infrastructure and actively participating in the restructuring of the global supply chains are also essential to minimize the effects of potential blockades in the region. By adapting its economic systems and exploring alternative maritime routes, South Korea can build greater resilience against such disruptions.

2. Preparing the Military Readiness against Armed Threats by North Korea

In addressing the complexities of a Taiwan contingency and its potential impact on regional security, a significant aspect for South Korea involves preparing for armed threats by North Korea. Although the probability of potential USFK's relocation to the Taiwan Strait has been evaluated as significantly low, heightened military readiness on the part of South Korea against North Korea is essential. Particularly during the crises in the Taiwan Strait, North Korea might seek to exploit the situation to its advantage in terms of the Korean Peninsula security. Simultaneously, China may leverage its relationship with North Korea to counter the United States and its allied forces advancing from the east. The recent deployment of North Korean military personnel to assist Russian forces not only underscores North Korea's military capabilities but also suggests that such North Korea-Russia relations could influence the Taiwan contingency in one way or another. South Korea's military strategy should incorporate comprehensive defense plans, bolstering capabilities to counteract various forms of North Korean provocations. Given the evolving nature of military technology and tactics, South Korea must ensure its forces are equipped with advanced weaponry and surveillance systems. This includes expanding and modernizing missile defense systems, such as THAAD and Patriot missile systems, to effectively intercept ballistic missile threats. Additionally, South Korea should invest in cutting-edge surveillance technologies, such as satellite-based monitoring systems and advanced radar networks. Cyber warfare capabilities and aerial reconnaissance assets combined with early warning systems must also be enhanced, ensuring a robust and agile response to an array of security challenges.

Collaborative exercises and intelligence-sharing with the USFK and other allies should be intensified. Based on the U.S.-ROK military alliance, South Korean government could facilitate regular joint military drills, encompassing scenarios that simulate North Korean incursions or missile attacks, which ends up honing the combat readiness of the forces. These exercises should not only focus on conventional warfare tactics but also include strategies to counter hybrid and asymmetric warfare techniques, which North Korea has been developing. Furthermore, establishing robust civil defense mechanisms must be considered. Enhancing the preparedness of the civilian population through regular drills, and education on emergency procedures can significantly mitigate risks in crisis scenarios.

While the international geopolitical focus might temporarily shift towards the Taiwan Strait, South Korea cannot afford to diminish its vigilance against threats from North Korea. Even if the security burden is inevitably allocated to the Taiwan Strait, it should not be forgotten that North Korea will always be a top priority for South Korea. A balanced approach, combining advanced military preparedness, strategic alliance enhancements, and civil defense systems, is paramount in ensuring the nation's security in an increasingly unpredictable regional landscape.

3. Enhancing the trilateral relationships with the United States and Japan

The United States and South Korea would need to work together closely to maintain the status quo in this region and prevent escalation, recognizing the high stakes involved in a potential military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Consolidating extended deterrence is also pre-emptively required. Strengthening mechanisms including the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) would be key to reinforcing deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. Beyond these diplomatic and strategic frameworks, enhancing joint military capabilities—particularly naval forces—through strengthened combined operations would be indispensable. This focus on operational readiness would not only ensure preparedness for any contingency but also underscore the importance of military synergy in addressing shared regional threats.

Furthermore, the trilateral relationships among the United States, South Korea, and Japan are essential for addressing security challenges in a Taiwan Strait crisis. The recent initiatives and summits by the Yoon administration have marked a significant advancement in trilateral cooperation in 2023. Since the establishment of trilateral relations, extensive discussions on cooperation have taken place at the working level, offering opportunities for further engagement. It is necessary to strengthen the ability to complement and implement these initiatives and their system at the practical level to play a substantial role in strengthening regional security problems, including the Taiwan Strait tensions. South Korea should also deepen defense cooperation with the United States and Japan through joint military exercises that simulate various conflict scenarios in the Taiwan Strait. These exercises would help improve interoperability and readiness among the armed forces of the three countries. Particularly, real-time intelligence sharing among the three nations should be bolstered. This can include establishing a trilateral intelligence-sharing mechanism that encompasses satellite imagery, signal intelligence, and human intelligence. This would intensify collective situational awareness and enable more coordinated responses to potential threats.

Regular high-level trilateral dialogues focusing on defense and security cooperation would be beneficial for strategic alignment. Collaborative research and development projects in defense technology, such as missile defense systems, cyber warfare capabilities, and the development of new military technologies, would also be beneficial for all three. Undoubtedly, the disparities among the three states' approaches to China might provide a critical barrier to cooperation; nevertheless, if they all have a common understanding of the risks in the Taiwan Strait, they can collectively make the most significant contributions to this initiative. These three parties are required to be institutionally bonded.

Bolstering military, intelligence, and crisis management collaboration based on trilateral relations, will be crucial in collectively managing and alleviating the impacts of potential crises in both the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. The United States and Japan have discussed the responsibility concerning Taiwan Strait conflict for a long time. Within the framework of this trilateral alliance, the present juncture gives an opportune moment for South Korea to articulate its stance and engage in deliberations regarding respective roles and burden-sharing in Taiwan contingency scenarios. These recommendations based on a comprehensive approach will solidify South Korea's contribution to upholding regional stability, encompassing both immediate and long-term strategic, economic, and military considerations.

Conclusion

In the complex geopolitical tapestry of the Indo-Pacific, a Taiwan Strait crisis poses significant challenges, not just to the immediate parties but also to regional players like South Korea. The summit between Biden and Xi in November 2023, promising restraint on the Taiwan issue, offers a reprieve. However, it did not dissolve the underlying military tensions in the region. Even right after Taiwan's presidential election in January 2024, the Chinese military brought in a sizable contingent of aircraft and warships to go over the median line of the Taiwan Strait.²⁸ In response to the provocative Chinese military drills in the Taiwan Strait, the Joint U.S.-Filipino exercises also were conducted in South China Sea.²⁹ South Korea, while maintaining a cautious stance and avoiding official involvement while balancing between the United States and China, will not be able to ignore the potential ramifications of these tensions in the near future. Moreover, the dynamic nature of international relations in this region, especially based on complex historical, political, and economic ties in East Asia, demands continuous vigilance and adaptability.

28 BBC News, "What China Means by 'All Measures Necessary' on Taiwan," *BBC News*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgd4yn45qlo>.

29 CBS News, "U.S., Philippines Launch War Games amid China-Taiwan Tensions," *CBS News*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-philippines-launch-war-games-china-taiwan-drills/>.

This paper highlights the significance of proactive planning and strategy development in light of feasible Taiwan contingency scenarios. Thus far, South Korea's strategic ambiguity has been effective because of its urgent diplomatic needs due to its economic reliance on China and security concerns tied to its alliance with the United States. However, these dynamics call for a balanced strategy that compensates military readiness with diplomatic statecraft, and it might need reevaluation in the face of escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait today. In addition to South Korea's self-help, the strenuous efforts by the U.S.-ROK alliance to fortify extended deterrence and enhance trilateral cooperation, are commendable steps toward managing potential crises. In the progress of cooperation, it is imperative to endeavor towards narrowing the disparity between the alliances and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, continuing geopolitical undercurrents in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea necessitate persistent attention and strategic foresight by South Korea. The role of the U.S.-ROK alliance, coupled with South Korea's evolving regional strategy, remains instrumental in navigating these challenges. Together, they play a crucial role in safeguarding national security and contributing to the broader objective of maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

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