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Pursuing Stable Coexistence: A Reorientation of U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

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Summary

The status quo trajectory of U.S. policy toward North Korea is unsustainable. Rigid adherence to a narrow strategy of denuclearization and enhanced deterrence has led to a state of dangerous coexistence. The results are unbridled growth in North Korea's nuclear force capabilities, its adoption of a nuclear doctrine that features preemptive use of nuclear weapons, and compounded risks of crisis escalation. The current state is also plagued by complete estrangement between Washington and Pyongyang that forecloses crisis management and tension reduction, increased demand for nuclear weapons in South Korea, and a strategic partnership between North Korea and Russia that is destabilizing multiple regions.

Yet the United States continues its approach of denuclearization through pressure despite consensus among U.S. intelligence that North Korea will not disarm and despite empirical evidence that suggests U.S. diplomatic engagement can mitigate North Korea's provocative behavior. It is now clear that applying pressure does not lead to North Korean restraint; rather, it fuels North Korean provocations. This clash between analysis and goals has promoted policy incoherence.

The United States and its allies should instead seek stable coexistence with Pyongyang as an overarching goal. This approach would emphasize risk reduction and improved relations with North Korea while maintaining deterrence. It would also entail, at least for the near term, tolerating North Korea's continued possession of nuclear arms and recognizing that the status quo of attempting to manage threats exclusively through deterrence measures ultimately presents unacceptable risks to U.S. and allied interests.

Stable coexistence is consistent with U.S. President Donald Trump's stated intention to "have relations with North Korea" and "get along with" with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.¹ The current U.S. administration therefore seemingly has the political will to start pursuing stable coexistence and be the first to take proactive steps to reduce tensions and risks. These steps could include formally announcing the United States' intention to improve relations with North Korea, which Trump has already begun to signal, and initiating confidence-building measures that are taken independently but designed to invite reciprocity from Pyongyang.

At the same time, the United States should instill the urgency of pursuing stable coexistence in its ally South Korea, explaining the goal as crucial for reducing the risk of conflict and nuclear war with North Korea. Regardless of which administration is in power in Seoul, Washington must stay the course on stable coexistence, stressing the reality of a nuclear North Korea, the paramount importance of risk reduction, and the relationship between engagement with North Korea and lower levels of provocative behaviors that could result in unwanted conflict.

This policy framework would also suit broader U.S. geopolitical objectives. Improved relations with Pyongyang could mitigate the worst possible consequences of ongoing Russia–North Korea cooperation. Similarly, given U.S. prioritization of strategic competition and deterrence vis-à-vis China, a more stable relationship with North Korea will help render deterrence and defense requirements for the Korean Peninsula more modest, allowing for a short-term adjustment to the U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Trump administration has an opportunity to fundamentally redesign North Korea policy, moving away from the unattainable goal of denuclearization toward a broader, stable coexistence with a nuclear-armed North Korea. The administration should seize this opportunity to make the United States safer, stronger, and more prosperous and advance peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Introduction

In October 2019, North Korea broke off working-level talks with the United States, ushering in more than five years of complete diplomatic disengagement between Washington and Pyongyang.² That breakdown followed the collapse of the historic second U.S.–North Korea leader-level summit meeting in Hanoi, Vietnam, in February 2019, where the two sides disagreed on the right balance of sanctions relief for disarmament measures.

Since then, despite the lack of engagement, the salience of North Korea for U.S. interests in Northeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific region, and globally has only increased. Pyongyang now stands unquestionably as the third nuclear-armed adversary of the United States, fielding an increasingly capable nuclear force that poses a threat to U.S. and allied territory alike. In 2021, North Korea articulated explicit plans, for the first time, to develop and field tactical nuclear weapons designed to hold at risk South Korean and Japanese targets.³ Kim has also taken some geopolitical initiative as the great power competition between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other, has intensified. Nowhere is this seen more acutely than in the strategic partnership Kim has forged with Russian President Vladimir Putin; Kim has reportedly sent up to 14,000 North Korean forces to fight alongside Russian troops against Ukraine.⁴ In another expression of his confidence as a fully consolidated North Korean leader, Kim took what is arguably his most significant decision since inheriting leadership from his father: he formally turned his back on Pyongyang's decades-long goal of seeking unification with South Korea. North Korea now treats South Korea as a distinct state and the “principal enemy.”⁵ Against this backdrop, little has changed concerning the lot of North Korea's 26 million citizens, who largely continue to suffer under a regime indifferent to their welfare.

Despite these substantial changes to North Korea's capabilities, goals, and policies in the last five years, the core U.S. policy objective regarding the country has remained unchanged. Washington continues to seek the "complete denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula. This goal persists despite the repeated and consistent assessment of the U.S. intelligence community that North Korea is unlikely to relinquish its nuclear arsenal.⁶ Under the administration of former president Joe Biden, the United States failed to reestablish contact with North Korea to advance any possible diplomatic initiatives on achieving denuclearization and instead largely focused on buttressing key alliance relationships with South Korea and Japan. As North Korean capabilities grew and evolved during this period, the United States and its allies emphasized both conventional and nuclear deterrence to contain and manage perceived risks from North Korea.

The current Trump administration cannot treat the status quo trajectory of U.S. policy toward North Korea as either sustainable or tolerable. Instead, it should, in the course of reviewing its policy toward North Korea, reassess fundamental principles guiding the U.S. approach toward the Korean Peninsula; while the goal of denuclearization need not be abandoned from the U.S. diplomatic lexicon, it should be deemphasized and treated as a long-term, aspirational objective.

The overarching, desired near-term goal that the United States, alongside its allies, should seek is one of stable coexistence with Pyongyang. This approach would emphasize reducing risk and improving relations with North Korea while maintaining deterrence. It would also entail, at least in the short term, tolerating North Korea's continued possession of nuclear arms and recognizing that the status quo of managing risks exclusively through deterrence measures is ultimately harming U.S. and allied interests. In addition, pursuing stable coexistence would support Trump's stated intention to "have relations with North Korea" and "get along with" with Kim.⁷

This paper explores avenues that the United States can undertake alone or in concert with its allies to reduce nuclear risks, while preserving general deterrence of a deliberate resort to war by North Korea. It then discusses measures that could help create more favorable conditions for negotiations between North Korea and the United States. Successful negotiations could ultimately improve relations, further reduce risks, and reinforce a more stable coexistence.

The State of Play in 2025

The United States and North Korea are trapped in a state of dangerous coexistence. The potential North Korean threat has reached its highest level, and the risk of conflict is growing. North Korea is estimated to have enough weapons-usable fissile material for up to ninety nuclear weapons and possesses delivery systems that can hold the United States and its allies at risk.⁸ Pyongyang's nuclear forces regularly conduct operational exercises, and

the reliability of its nuclear capabilities has likely increased as a result of years of testing, development, and evaluation. North Korea's nuclear strategy continues to privilege, in Kim's words, the early and massive use of nuclear weapons to "deter" and—should deterrence fail—"repel" the United States and South Korea.⁹ With no means of negotiated restraint at work between the United States and South Korea, on the one hand, and North Korea, on the other, the potential for a possible conventional crisis or conflict to spiral into a nuclear war remains real. Although North Korea's conventional military forces have also seen some modernization, its substantial conventional inferiorities relative to the U.S.–South Korea alliance mean that it likely will be unwilling and unable to sustain prolonged conventional warfighting before resorting to potential nuclear use, especially if it is losing the fight.

At the same time, North Korea's relations with the United States and South Korea are non-existent. Since October 2019, Pyongyang has cut off talks with Washington—the longest absence of any official engagement since the start of senior-level talks in 1992. In September 2022, North Korea declared it would never relinquish its nuclear weapons and made explicit its intent to preemptively resort to nuclear use.¹⁰ North Korea also reiterated in November 2023 that it would never sit face-to-face with the United States if its sovereignty—including its possession of nuclear weapons—was on the agenda.¹¹ And despite signals from the Trump administration about wanting to "get along" with North Korea, the Korean Workers' Party announced plans at a December 2024 plenum meeting for the "most hardline anti-U.S. response strategy" as a counter to enhanced U.S.–South Korea deterrence measures.¹² Similarly, North Korea abandoned its long-standing policy of peaceful unification with South Korea in early 2024, while dubbing Seoul its "principal enemy."

The North Korean nuclear problem is fast metastasizing into other regions. In June 2024, North Korea and Russia signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty that included mutual defense assurances.¹³ This pact, which has since been ratified by both countries' respective legislative bodies, reinforces previous cooperation between the two sides. Russia vetoed United Nations (UN) sanctions against North Korea; dismantled a UN sanctions monitoring body; and provided nutritional, energy, and satellite technology assistance in exchange for North Korean ammunition, ballistic missiles, and labor. Thousands of Korean People's Army personnel have gone on to fight on Russia's behalf against Ukraine. This cooperation proves that North Korea is now contributing to the destabilization of two regions key to U.S. interests; it is prolonging conflict and hindering a settlement in Ukraine and heightening instability in Northeast Asia.

Furthermore, human rights and humanitarian concerns about North Korea abound. The Kim regime continues to violate human rights norms and pursue control over its population through monitoring, surveillance, and punitive measures. Chronic humanitarian crises such as food and health insecurity persist, and efforts to reunite divided Korean families and recover the remains of U.S. servicemembers from the Korean War are hindered by lack of official relations and access to North Korea.

The United States has, in general, sought to strengthen peace and security on the Korean Peninsula by working with allies and partners to deter North Korean aggression, dissuade North Korea's provocative behavior, improve relations with Pyongyang, and achieve denuclearization. Over the last decade, the United States has pursued these goals and objectives through a combination of both pressure and attempted diplomatic engagement. Pressure has included military deterrence, superiority, and readiness measures, multilateral and unilateral economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation and naming and shaming. Diplomatic engagement has included working- and leader-level meetings and confidence-building steps aimed at comprehensive or interim agreements during the Trump administration, as well as offers of unconditional engagement toward North Korea during the Biden administration. The United States increasingly views North Korea as a capable nuclear adversary and the third country, after Russia and China, to pose a realistic nuclear threat to the American homeland.¹⁴

The United States has also sought China's assistance in enforcing sanctions against North Korea and encouraging it to return to talks. But China has largely rejected the U.S. approach, arguing that Washington should address North Korea's legitimate security concerns directly and that pressure is counterproductive. Previously, China has also proposed dual freezes in hostile activities, parallel discussions of denuclearization and peace, and partial relief of UN sanctions. China and Russia have both supported an adjustment of multilateral sanctions against North Korea since 2019, mostly holding the United States culpable for the collapse of diplomacy that year. Since then, China has largely maintained continuity in its Korean Peninsula policy, including by engaging in sanctions-violating trade. China and Russia may have divergent levels of risk tolerance regarding the North Korean regime's propensity to engage in provocative behaviors.

Past Approaches to North Korea

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the United States' overarching priorities for the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asian region have been to ensure peace, stability, and economic prosperity. These priorities were largely defined within the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War.

To achieve these aims, the United States traditionally emphasized deterrence and security through alliance relationships. Washington relied on a robust combined U.S.–South Korea defense posture—backed by extended nuclear deterrence and broader basing of U.S. forces in the region—to deter North Korean aggression. It also cultivated strong diplomatic, military, and economic relations with key allies and partners to create a secure environment for prosperity.

Starting in the 1990s, when North Korea presented a credible nuclear proliferation threat, the United States began cabinet-level talks with Pyongyang¹⁵—for the first time since 1954¹⁶—to pursue disarmament and ensure nonproliferation. Subsequent engagements over the next fifteen years centered on eliminating North Korea’s nascent nuclear and ballistic missile programs in exchange for security and economic benefits, with breakthroughs and setbacks on both fronts.

Due to the lack of sustained progress and growing risks, however, the United States in the mid-2000s began applying stronger diplomatic, military, and economic pressure to compel North Korea’s disarmament. Accounts of humanitarian and human rights crises in North Korea also led Washington to advocate for these issues consistent with U.S. values and principles, though these objectives were secondary to reducing the risk of conflict and war. The narrow emphasis on deterrence and pressure succeeded in preventing a major conflict on the Korean Peninsula and achieved limited, but often temporary, gains in strengthening norms, mitigating proliferation, reassuring allies, and creating negotiating leverage.

However, this approach was deficient in many other important respects. It failed to prevent North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and other advanced military capabilities; reduce risks, tensions, and instability on the peninsula; improve relations, communications, and trust with North Korea; and curtail North Korea’s motivations to support malign actors and engage in illicit activities beyond the peninsula. More intense forms of pressure and deterrence also likely exacerbated North Korea’s drive for greater deterrence capabilities. Ultimately, the United States is less safe and secure today with respect to North Korea than it was when Pyongyang withdrew from the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2003.

Pressure campaigns against North Korea have tended to incite retaliation, provocations, and other undesired behaviors. For example, soon after the United States sanctioned Macau’s Banco Delta Asia (BDA) in September 2005, effectively freezing \$25 million in North Korean funds, North Korea—citing this action—withdrew from the ongoing Six Party talks for one year and conducted its first nuclear test.¹⁷ Likewise, North Korea responded to a U.S.-led pressure campaign during the period 2012–2017, which featured diplomatic isolation, military demonstrations, and economic sanctions, with significant advances in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.¹⁸ These included four nuclear tests and nearly 100 missile tests, several of which succeeded at achieving intercontinental-equivalent ranges. A similar period of U.S.–South Korean enhanced deterrence measures implemented in May 2022 coincided with the greatest number of North Korean ballistic missile tests in any twelve-month period.¹⁹

Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, U.S.-led pressure efforts did not force North Korea to the negotiating table in 2018. Since North Korea first proposed talks in 1974, its door to the United States has largely remained open, which contributed to fairly consistent U.S.–North Korea engagement between 1990 and 2012.²⁰ The six-year absence of official negotiations between 2012 and 2018 (excluding covert intelligence talks and meetings to

secure the release of U.S. detainees) was Washington's own decision stemming from frustrations with North Korean malfeasance—the administration of former president Barack Obama stipulated that negotiations would have to be “authentic and credible” despite repeated North Korean offers for talks.²¹ Estrangement likely would have continued if not for Trump's sudden shift from maximum pressure to maximum engagement in 2018. His willingness to buck convention and take diplomatic and political risks led to the first ever meeting between a sitting U.S. president and the North Korean leader. It is easy to imagine a counterfactual scenario in which former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton, if elected president, would have rejected a meeting with Kim to avoid legitimizing him and stimulating political opposition.²²

It is also likely that pressure diminishes North Korean incentives to engage. It withdrew from the Six Party talks after the BDA sanctions, and only returned a year later after the United States signaled that it would unfreeze the locked funds. And since October 2019, it has cut off all talks with the United States due to what it perceives as hostile U.S. policies. It is important to note, however, that U.S. pressure tactics between 2012 and 2017 also did not preclude North Korean offers for engagement during this period.

Conversely, the historical track record suggests that certain aspects of past approaches helped to stabilize relations with North Korea, or at least lower the immediate risks of conflict. Specifically, engagement with North Korea played a significant role in reducing tensions and risks and enabling diplomatic progress. A 2017 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies demonstrated a strong correlation between U.S.–North Korea engagement during the period 1990–2017 and lower levels of provocative North Korean actions.²³ For example, during the period of engagement between 1994 and 2002, which included the 1994 Agreed Framework and a 1999 Berlin agreement codifying a North Korean missile launch moratorium, North Korea conducted only one ballistic missile test and did not reprocess any plutonium. This period also witnessed unprecedented U.S.–North Korea cooperation across many governmental, nongovernmental, and people-to-people domains.²⁴ Similarly, during periods of engagement in 2011 and 2018, North Korea refrained from nuclear tests, ballistic missile launches, and other provocative behavior. Although this restraint was temporary and not absolute, the pattern of behavior suggests that if the United States wants to reduce risks and improve relations, it must engage North Korea and provide incentives for better behavior.

Drawing on this history, there are three potential ways forward: First, the United States could maximize pressure through coercive diplomatic, military, and economic actions against North Korea. But this would increase the likelihood of conflict and North Korean retaliation, including a nuclear response—a risk the United States cannot afford to take. Second, the United States could maintain the status quo approach of heightened deterrence and pressure with moderate diplomatic outreach. This could temper the risk of immediate conflict, but North Korea's continued perception of U.S. hostility would deepen its resolve to strengthen its military capabilities, prepare for retaliation, seek alternative partnerships with malign actors, and avoid engagement—all of which would intensify the state of dangerous

coexistence and nuclear precarity.²⁵ The status quo would also harm U.S. and allied interests by exacerbating the alliance assurance challenge and fueling South Korea's interest in nuclear armament. This broader crisis becomes amplified in the context of growing U.S. cost constraints and competing foreign and domestic policy priorities. Third, and what we argue is most prudent, the United States could seek a stable coexistence with North Korea through renewed engagement and negotiation to tangibly reduce risks and tensions and improve relations.

First Principles for a New Way Forward

Given the reality of a nuclear North Korea, the primary principles guiding U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula should include the following:

- Pursuing stable coexistence with North Korea to minimize the probability of war on the Korean Peninsula, utilizing diplomatic risk-taking while maintaining deterrence.
- Seeking broader peace and economic prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, including through improved diplomatic ties with North Korea and better inter-Korean relations.
- Sustaining comprehensive U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan as a hedge against future uncertainty and to ensure they continue to abstain—especially South Korea—from nuclear armament.

Washington's main guiding objective should be to move from the status quo of dangerous coexistence to a more stable coexistence, defined by a reduction in hostility and efforts at renewed engagement. The overarching and long-standing U.S. goals of peace, stability, and economic prosperity retain importance, and deterrence must continue to be an indispensable pillar. However, the focus of U.S. attention, political will, and resources should shift toward pursuing an accommodation with North Korea that is mutually acceptable and beneficial and tangibly reduces the risk of conflict and nuclear war. This requires directly addressing North Korea's interests: absolute regime security, relatively normal relations with the United States and the international community, autonomy in its foreign relations, and sovereignty over its people and state development. A new approach will require contending with these interests in tandem with improving U.S. and allied security.

Stable coexistence does not imply simply accepting North Korea's nuclear possession and its other behaviors that harm U.S. interests. Fundamentally, however, U.S. policy has to prioritize the growing risk of nuclear war precisely because of North Korea's possession of credibly threatening nuclear weapons capabilities that bear on the United States and its regional

allies. As a factual matter, the United States and North Korea find themselves today in a nuclear deterrence relationship. This is increasingly uncontroversial in official U.S. discourse; the Biden administration's 2024 nuclear employment guidance, for instance, placed North Korea alongside Russia and China as a nuclear adversary to be deterred.²⁶

Stable coexistence can be characterized as largely normal bilateral relations consisting of low military hostility and regular engagement aimed at reducing security risks and tensions, improving diplomatic ties, enhancing economic trade and welfare, and facilitating dialogue and collaboration related to humanitarian, human rights, and people-to-people matters.

Stability, broadly conceived, can be conducive to regional peace and advance U.S. interests by reducing the potential for unanticipated crises to spiral into a broader conflict, which could precipitate nuclear use in the absence of stabilizing mechanisms.

Largely normal bilateral relations are meant to underscore that the main goal is not necessarily attaining a peace treaty or official normalized relations but rather achieving—to the extent possible—the functional attributes of normal relations, including low military hostility and regular engagement.

Low military hostility refers to minimal or no provocative military actions and demonstrations, including, among others, destruction of life or property, nuclear testing or ballistic missile demonstrations, forward deployed military units and capabilities, strategic asset deployments, provocative military exercises (in other words, those simulating attacks on national leadership), violations of territory and sovereignty, and hostile rhetoric. This approach does not preclude the pursuit of deterrence or defense but rather seeks to minimize practices that increase the odds of crises and conflict.

Regular engagement refers to sustained dialogue, negotiations, interactions, and exchanges across various domains, including diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, parliamentary, nongovernmental, humanitarian, and people-to-people. The engagement is aimed at supporting stable coexistence and the pursuit of other mutually acceptable goals. These interactions should not only enhance U.S.–North Korea bilateral relations but also facilitate North Korea functioning as a responsible member of the international community. They should also strengthen mutually acceptable exchanges of information and ideas and, over the long run, help North Korea transform its behavior and society.

Improving diplomatic ties also requires meaningful engagement on human rights. These rights are not only essential aspects of U.S. values and foreign policy, but also instrumental in advancing normative, political, and law enforcement goals related to improved ties. For example, certain U.S. unilateral sanctions against North Korea cannot be suspended without progress on North Korean human rights. Also, stable coexistence with North Korea cannot be achieved without greater U.S. confidence that North Korea is on a pathway to improving its human rights situation. At the same time, North Korea will not engage on human rights if it is imposed non-consensually or directly threatens the Kim regime.

Stable coexistence cannot be a secondary principle, prioritized only after North Korean disarmament. The United States must accept the reality that to achieve its primary aim of reducing the risk of conflict, it must have stable coexistence with a nuclear North Korea for the foreseeable future. While moving toward this goal, deterrence must be maintained, but diplomacy in the pursuit of stable coexistence should be prioritized.

Beyond the salutary effects of stable coexistence for the United States and its allies in the context of Northeast Asian security, this proposed framework would suit broader U.S. geopolitical and domestic objectives. A relationship with Pyongyang that promotes lower hostility and regularized engagement could mitigate the worst possible consequences of ongoing Russia–North Korea cooperation for the region. While the United States will not be able to provide the same sorts of material benefits to North Korea that Russia might, improved relations can help shape Pyongyang’s approach to its strategic partnership with Moscow and mitigate what could otherwise be an unbounded alliance between two U.S. rivals. Similarly, given U.S. prioritization of strategic competition and deterrence vis-à-vis China, a more stable and less hostile relationship with North Korea will help render deterrence and defense requirements for the Korean Peninsula more modest, allowing for a short-term adjustment to the U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific region. Decreasing deployments of U.S. strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula, for example, can allow for these resources to be used judiciously in other theaters and may also align with the prevailing U.S. sentiment for military restraint.²⁷

De-emphasizing Denuclearization

For decades, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has been the main source of tension in U.S.–North Korea relations. Today, however, the oft-stated goal of “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” should be de-emphasized in U.S. public messaging and strategy toward North Korea, though not abandoned as a long-term aspirational objective (for example, the 2024 U.S.–South Korea Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communique removed mention of this goal after it appeared in the 2023 version).²⁸

Denuclearization was an appropriate goal in the past when North Korea possessed only a rudimentary nuclear program. The term originated at a time when the only nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula belonged to the United States.²⁹ During the 1990s, following the removal of those weapons and as a result of the 1992 Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang was willing to explore U.S. motives and engage on denuclearization at a time of its own structural weakness. Furthermore, the post–Cold War security landscape appeared to have manifested in a benign environment for major power competition. Trying to reduce the North Korean nuclear threat and uphold the nonproliferation regime by restricting North Korea’s nuclear program made sense.

Today, the situation is markedly different. North Korea now possesses an advanced nuclear weapons program and has vowed repeatedly that it will not disarm. This decision likely derives from a determination that normalization with the United States is impossible, that domestic instability stemming from direct or indirect U.S. and South Korean intervention is a concerning threat, and that growing military competition among its regional neighbors justifies the strengthening of its own deterrence capabilities. Where North Korea was once a nonproliferation problem for the United States, it is now a problem of managing nuclear deterrence—similar in important respects to the challenges faced with China and Russia, apart from scale.

Washington's rigid prioritization of denuclearization over North Korea's security concerns and improved relations has also appeared to accelerate Pyongyang's drive to attain a nuclear deterrent and foreclose opportunities for engagement and risk reduction. In recent years, the U.S.–South Korea alliance's narrow emphasis on strengthening deterrence and enhancing pressure on North Korea has similarly exacerbated North Korea's desire to advance its nuclear capabilities. At the same time, the repeated failures to achieve denuclearization and prevent provocative demonstrations are fueling South Korean support for pursuing indigenous nuclear capabilities.³⁰

The U.S. and South Korean intelligence communities and military establishments accept the analytical reality of North Korea's nuclear resolve. But neither government has been able to reconcile their assessments with the continued diplomatic, political, and declaratory emphasis on the denuclearization objective. This clash between analysis and goals has promoted policy incoherence: the United States seeks an outcome as a matter of policy that its intelligence assessments suggest is vanishingly unlikely in a reasonable timeframe. De-emphasizing denuclearization would render U.S. policy more consistent with the analytical reality that North Korea is unlikely to relinquish its nuclear weapons and therefore render progress on other key priorities vis-à-vis Pyongyang more likely. It would also allow the United States, in concert with its allies, to attempt new approaches at resuming engagement with Pyongyang, including through overtures that disentangle the long-standing diplomatic baggage around the term “denuclearization” from other objectives. However, de-emphasizing denuclearization is not tantamount to abandoning the goal altogether.

Managing U.S.–South Korea Relations

The preferences of South Korea, which has greater stakes in Korean Peninsula security than the United States, have rightly been a significant determinant of the U.S. approach to North Korea. Accordingly, U.S. administrations have typically calibrated their North Korea approach based on the policy orientation of the South Korean administration in office. North Korea policy is polarized in South Korea, oscillating between aggressive engagement and hawkish pressure, and U.S. policy has typically floated more in the middle, moderating the risks of both approaches but also making no sustained gains as a result.

For example, progressive South Korean administrations have generally pursued aggressive engagement with North Korea, focused on building confidence and reducing tensions, while de-emphasizing U.S.–South Korea alliance deterrence activities, which in turn tended to motivate Washington’s willingness to engage as well. On the other hand, conservative South Korean administrations have mostly emphasized proactive deterrence against North Korea based largely on threats of disproportionate retaliation, offensive strike capabilities, and preemption, with some openness to engagement and incentives contingent on sincere denuclearization steps, which sharpened the U.S. focus on enhancing deterrence and applying pressure.

In any case, the United States has mostly deferred to South Korea on Korean Peninsula affairs, particularly in terms of (1) supporting unification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy and (2) steering clear of normalizing relations with (or cross-recognizing) North Korea, even though Russia and China established formal diplomatic relations with South Korea in the early 1990s.³¹ However, when matters directly involved or threatened U.S. interests, such as nuclear weapons or U.S. troop presence in South Korea, Washington exerted its prerogatives and sometimes even restrained Seoul’s behavior. Despite their different approaches toward relations with North Korea, both conservative and progressive South Korean administrations have largely maintained continuity in acquisitions and defense strategy, albeit with some divergences in defense spending priorities.

The urgency of pursuing stable coexistence and reducing the risk of conflict and nuclear war with North Korea requires the United States to instill this imperative in its ally. Alliance policy toward North Korea can no longer afford to deviate based on swings in South Korean or even U.S. politics. The election of a new president in South Korea, currently scheduled for June 3, 2025, will likely have a significant near-term impact on the direction of South Korea’s approach to North Korea. A more progressive administration in Seoul would likely be amenable to the stable coexistence approach and disfavor excessive reassurance/deterrence measures. In this case, Washington would have a clear opportunity to begin to lay the foundation with South Korea for a relatively consistent and enduring allied policy approach to North Korea. But a more conservative government would require Washington to work extra hard to ensure continuity and clear understanding among the allies on the value of staying the course on stable coexistence.

Any move away from denuclearization as the overarching objective of U.S. policy will be met with pushback from South Korea, Japan, and others. In the first days of Trump’s current presidency, Seoul objected to the president and his then-nominee for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, describing North Korea as a “nuclear power”; Seoul feared that such terminology would have the effect of legitimating Pyongyang’s nuclear possession.³² This is understandable, but the international community will never accept North Korea as one of the five “nuclear-weapon states” under the NPT definition. At the same time, South Korea, and indeed the international community, must accept a *sui generis* existence for North Korea—similar to India, Israel, and Pakistan—that accounts for its *de facto* possession of nuclear weapons;

and in doing so, they must balance the immediate urgency of stable coexistence against the long-term aspirational goal of denuclearization. China and to a greater degree Russia already appear to accept North Korea's de facto possession of nuclear weapons.³³ Washington should be ready to explain to its allies and others that instead of allowing questions of nuclear status to inhibit meaningful policy shifts that can improve their collective security, they should plainly acknowledge the reality of North Korea's nuclear possession. Doing so will confer no additional nuclear status on Pyongyang.

A greater problem for the United States, however, will be the prospect of managing growing calls in South Korea for nuclear armament and latency amid implementation of the policy shifts recommended in this paper. As it has for decades, the United States should continue to prize nuclear nonproliferation as a principle of its grand strategy, recognizing that added nuclear decisionmaking centers—including friendly ones—introduce more risks than benefits. A South Korea with nuclear weapons will guarantee that the era of aspiring to the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” will come to a close; South Korean nuclear abstention, on the other hand, makes it possible to maintain the long-term aspirations of gradual nuclear disarmament in North Korea. Reassuring a nonnuclear South Korea and pursuing stable coexistence with North Korea, however, should not be seen as contrasting objectives.

Bending relations with Pyongyang toward less hostility can help assuage the security drivers of South Korean proliferation, insofar as North Korea's growing nuclear capabilities are a clear driver of South Korean motivations for seeking its own nuclear weapons. Washington can draw from the empirical relationship between engagement with North Korea and lower levels of hostility and the impact on the South Korean public's need for assurance. For example, as Washington and Seoul engaged with Pyongyang in 2018–2019, the alliance also reduced military deterrence demonstrations such as joint exercises and U.S. strategic asset deployments. Yet there was no broad public outcry about the need to restart or enhance these measures. In fact, a Chicago Council survey conducted in December 2018 showed a plurality of South Koreans believing that their country's security had improved over the last four years.³⁴ The same survey, as well as other surveys, also revealed declining public support for a domestic nuclear weapons program during periods of relatively lower tensions.³⁵ Counterintuitively, a survey of South Koreans carried out in December 2021 indicated that it was those who had the greatest confidence in the U.S. alliance commitment that also tended to want South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons.³⁶ Ultimately, the best way to prevent South Korean nuclear armament might be less about constant costly efforts to assure South Korean governments about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, both conventional and nuclear, and more about the minimization of public and elite clamoring for nuclear weapons by easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula and maintaining strong alliance relations.

A Framework for Achieving Stable Coexistence and Reducing Conflict Risks

The United States can begin pursuing stable coexistence by being the first to take proactive steps to reduce risks and tensions with North Korea, without any detriment to U.S. or allied security. The U.S. government should announce its intention to foster stable, constructive relations with North Korea and initiate confidence-building measures that are taken independently of Pyongyang but designed to invite North Korea to reciprocate. Trump should also initiate direct, high-level communications with Kim, building on the proven success of this approach during the 2018–2019 period of engagement. As the stronger country, the United States can afford to take the first step because it can better tolerate the risk of not having its measures matched.³⁷ Academic literature offers support for diplomatic risk-taking in confidence-building measures to facilitate peacebuilding, and there are precedents for this type of process reducing tensions and advancing diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula.³⁸

As the initiating country, the United States should maintain a strong foundation of national security to begin taking the incremental risks toward reducing tensions. Accordingly, the conciliatory initiatives should not undermine the United States' ability to defend itself, deter adversaries, and retaliate if necessary. The initiatives should also be gradual and diversified in scope to help minimize risk. This posture grounds the aims of peacebuilding within the reality of security.

The initiatives—several options are enumerated below—should be designed and communicated to induce reciprocation, which is a fundamental principle of the broader diplomatic strategy. North Korea appears willing to adhere to a reciprocity principle, having stated in 2021 that its policy toward the United States is “power for power and goodwill for goodwill.”³⁹ To tangibly change North Korea's expectations and assumptions about the United States, Washington should clearly announce its commitment to end hostility and seek a new era of dialogue to resolve differences. The announcement should also be paired with specific unilateral initiatives that demonstrate its credibility and will be understood by North Korea as meaningful. In addition, these initiatives should be unambiguous and easily verified to reinforce credibility. For this approach to succeed, the United States should be persistent despite inevitable delays or setbacks, such as minor North Korean provocative behavior or foot-dragging in negotiations.

To begin engagement, the president—after consulting with allies—should reach out to North Korea directly and early to convey an interest in a summit meeting aimed at establishing “new U.S.–DPRK [North Korea] relations.” In 2016, then-candidate Trump's expression of interest in meeting Kim set in play a mutual courtship that led to their first summit

in Singapore in June 2018.⁴⁰ A similar overture now could serve several purposes. First, it would allow Kim—who felt burned by the lack of positive outcomes at the Hanoi Summit in February 2019 despite making several trust-building gestures—to save face by not having to make the first move, which would be perceived as a sign of weakness.⁴¹ It might also mitigate the potential for Kim to generate a crisis to maximize leverage before beginning talks, which has been a typical feature of North Korea’s playbook. Second, it would set a vision for a fresh bilateral relationship based on stable coexistence and regular engagement and communications. The goal of “new U.S.-DPRK relations” comes directly from the first pillar of the 2018 Singapore Statement, which North Korea has yet to renounce and harkens back to the cooperative spirit between Kim and Trump during that period. Reaffirming this pillar could also pave the way for preserving the other pillars, including the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”⁴²

The outreach should be accompanied by unilateral confidence-building measures that signal good faith to North Korea and invite North Korean reciprocation, but that also serve U.S. interests irrespective of reciprocation. For example, these measures could include the following:

- **Declaring the Korean War over and a desire for stable coexistence.** These statements, though symbolic, would reinforce the broader messaging about a sincere desire for new U.S.–North Korea relations. They would also help establish momentum and an appropriate environment for reciprocal confidence-building measures and substantial shifts in U.S. security policy, including launching a comprehensive, long-term process for replacing the armistice regime with a peace regime and establishing a U.S.–South Korea peace regime consultation group.⁴³ An end-of-war declaration should not be conflated with a more comprehensive peace treaty, and the statement should emphasize that existing mechanisms, such as the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement and the supporting United Nations Command, will remain in place until new mechanisms are negotiated by the parties.
- **Suspending the deployment of U.S. strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula.** Suspending strategic and nuclear-capable deployments can lower tensions, save costs, facilitate diplomacy, and minimize justifications for North Korea’s own military advancement, while also not degrading deterrence.⁴⁴ In May 2018, the United States stopped deploying B1-B and B-52 bombers, carrier strike groups, and nuclear submarines to the Korean Peninsula, which reduced the confrontational dynamics and created a conducive environment for diplomacy.⁴⁵ In May 2022, Biden agreed to restart and enhance these types of deployments to assure South Korea and enhance deterrence signaling, but with the additional outcome of intensifying hostility with North Korea.⁴⁶ These suspensions should be balanced by additional assurance messages to South Korea, emphasizing the sufficiency of alliance conventional deterrence and sustaining consultations on nuclear matters, including through the U.S.–South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group.

- **Reducing the scale and scope of joint military exercises.** Joint military exercises, which North Korea perceives as hostile, can be modified to reduce offensive or threatening signals while still maintaining important defensive, training, and readiness missions and lowering costs.⁴⁷ In 2022, Biden and former South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to expand the scale and scope of joint military exercises after Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in, and Trump had pared back exercises in 2018 to improve the conditions for diplomacy. The United States and South Korea previously canceled the major U.S.–South Korea joint military exercise Team Spirit in 1992 and 1994–1996, as well as the Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise in August 2018⁴⁸—cancellations that helped facilitate diplomacy during those periods.
- **Ending the ban on U.S. citizens traveling to North Korea.** Since 2017, the United States has prohibited its citizens from traveling to North Korea, with a few exceptions.⁴⁹ This ban was instituted due to safety concerns after American detainee Otto Warmbier died shortly after being released to the United States, although thousands of U.S. citizens had visited North Korea safely since the mid-1990s with only a handful of detentions.⁵⁰ Lifting the ban may largely be symbolic because North Korea continues to restrict U.S. access since its COVID-19 lockdown and the breakdown in bilateral relations. However, this move would signal a step toward normalizing relations and allowing for routine people-to-people exchanges, with the only impediment being the North Korean side.

In the interest of rendering the burgeoning U.S.–North Korea nuclear deterrence relationship more stable, the United States should seek to apply many of the same principles it applies to managing its deterrence relations with Russia and China. These steps could include the following:

- **Forgoing declared, deliberate threats to North Korean nuclear command and control systems.** The United States currently pursues a “comprehensive” missile defeat approach to North Korea that reserves the right to interfere with launch control systems for ballistic missiles through unspecified “left-of-launch” capabilities (including, presumably, undisclosed offensive cyber capabilities).⁵¹ While the intention of this policy is to reduce U.S. and South Korean vulnerability to North Korean nuclear attack, it has the practical effect of incentivizing nuclear use by North Korea earlier in a crisis than it might otherwise prefer: essentially, Kim, fearing that he may lose control of his nuclear forces, may opt to delegate the authority to use nuclear weapons or even issue an order for tactical nuclear attacks. The United States should forgo such interference, which significantly contributes to a heightened risk of inadvertent escalation. North Korea, for its part, could reciprocate by reversing its September 2022 declaration of adopting a system for “automatic” and “immediate” nuclear retaliation should its command-and-control systems undergo interference.⁵²

- **Emphasizing that deterrence—not missile defense—is the primary means of preventing North Korean nuclear attacks.** Since the early 2000s, the United States has sustained a limited homeland missile defense system in the form of the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system to protect its homeland from intercontinental nuclear threats from states such as North Korea and Iran. Unlike Iran, North Korea today deploys intercontinental-range ballistic missiles and is gradually expanding the number of launchers it possesses, quantitatively stressing the existing missile defense system. To better promote stable coexistence, the United States should freeze plans to expand the GMD system from forty-four to sixty-five deployed interceptors and, as it does with Russia and China, rely on deterrence to prevent missile attacks on the U.S. homeland. Missile defense should continue to play a role in defending U.S. personnel and allies against North Korean missile attacks in Northeast Asia.
- **Pursuing calculated ambiguity in declaratory policy.** For years, the United States and South Korea have emphasized in unilateral and combined declaratory statements that any nuclear use by North Korea will lead to the end of the Kim regime. While this statement is designed to deter nuclear use through clarity, greater ambiguity may, in reality, better suit deterrence goals while creating an environment more suitable to U.S.–North Korea stable coexistence. North Korea’s increasingly survivable and diverse nuclear arsenal will also mean, in practice, that certain scenarios involving possible nuclear use by North Korea in a crisis could meaningfully result in Washington and Seoul being deterred from making good on a regime-ending threat, fearing follow-on nuclear attacks by Pyongyang against their population centers, for instance. Deterrence of nuclear attack should remain a priority for the alliance, and the best declaratory language to achieve this is to indicate, as the United States and South Korea did in the 2023 Washington Declaration, that any nuclear attack will be met with a “swift, effective, and overwhelming” alliance response.⁵³

Initial North Korean reciprocation to the U.S. measures would ideally include these steps:

- An immediate freeze on nuclear and intermediate and long-range ballistic missile testing. Subsequent negotiations must address North Korea’s right to satellite capabilities in the context of any prohibition against satellite launches that use long-range ballistic missile technology.
- The shutdown and dismantlement of declared uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing facilities at North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear complex.
- A demonstration of willingness to engage at all governmental and nongovernmental levels on the various measures described above. This includes allowing U.S. citizens and nongovernmental organizations to enter North Korea and engage with their North Korean counterparts.

- Cooperation on humanitarian and human rights concerns. North Korea could agree to restart joint recovery operations for the remains of 5,200 U.S. service members still believed to be in North Korea from the Korean War and to support efforts to reunite thousands of Korean American families with their relatives in North Korea.⁵⁴ North Korean willingness to engage constructively on human rights with the United States and other relevant partners such as the UN would help improve diplomatic ties and advance stable coexistence. Meeting human rights obligations to which North Korea has already committed in conventions and the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, such as the rights of children and persons with disabilities, would offer Pyongyang a more palatable starting point. The 1975 Helsinki Accords—under which Europe and the United States secured the Soviet Union's agreement to various human rights provisions as part of a broader deal that allowed Moscow to receive territorial and economic trade benefits—may be a useful model for how the United States could advance North Korean human rights within a stable coexistence framework.

After North Korea reengages and reciprocates with its own confidence-building measures, the United States could, after consulting and coordinating with allies, consider these additional steps within a negotiation process:

- **Offering time-limited, partial sanctions relief.** North Korea likely continues to desire a more normal economic trade relationship with the international community unobstructed by sanctions, as demonstrated by its demands at the 2019 Hanoi Summit. Although Russian support has significantly undermined the efficacy of the international sanctions campaign against North Korea, Pyongyang likely recognizes that this support may not endure indefinitely and more diversified diplomatic and trading relationships with other countries are the best path to greater long-term security and prosperity. Washington should devise a package of sanctions relief as part of an incentive structure to encourage better North Korean behavior and achieve desired U.S. goals. Any agreement with North Korea will likely have to overcome the sticking points from the Hanoi negotiations in 2019: Kim requested complete relief from all the civilian-related sectoral sanctions imposed by five UN Security Resolutions post-2016 in exchange for shutting down parts of the Yongbyon nuclear facility associated with fissile material production. Trump reportedly countered with the elimination of North Korea's entire weapons of mass destruction program, which Kim rejected, and then offered partial sanctions relief if just Yongbyon was on the table, which Kim ignored.⁵⁵ De-emphasizing denuclearization may mean a deal closer to Kim's original offer, though sanctions relief should be time-limited. Incremental implementation and snapback provisions to encourage North Korean compliance with agreed-upon commitments will be essential.

- **Proposing a strategic military-to-military dialogue between the Korean People’s Army and the U.S. Department of Defense.** Despite the influential role of the national security establishment in North Korea, especially the Korean People’s Army, past negotiations with the United States have often been limited to dialogue between leaders, foreign ministries, or intelligence agencies. Establishing sustained senior-level policy engagement between the North Korean military and the U.S. Department of Defense can help manage crises, reduce misperceptions, enhance mutual understanding about strategic thinking and nuclear doctrines, and strengthen military support for diplomatic initiatives.⁵⁶
- **Seeking engagement with North Korea on strategic stability.** With its two nuclear-armed adversaries Russia and China, the United States has understood the value of strategic stability dialogue. Washington and Moscow sustained such dialogue for decades, up until Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The United States has sought sustained dialogue of this kind with China, too. Dialogue of this sort can feed into arms control processes and negotiations, but it can also support the reduction of mutual misperceptions about military doctrines and capabilities. The United States should seek to establish an exploratory strategic stability dialogue with North Korea designed to support the principle of stable coexistence between the two countries. This could involve participation from civilian and military experts from both countries.
- **Resuming discussions on risk and conventional arms reduction frameworks, including the currently suspended 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) between North and South Korea.** Beyond the U.S. measures taken independently of North Korea, Washington should seek a trilateral dialogue with Pyongyang and Seoul to reestablish frameworks for additional arms and risk reduction measures. The CMA—a framework created to reduce military tension near the demarcation line before the two Koreas effectively suspended the agreement in 2024—should be restored and reinvigorated.⁵⁷ Separately, the United States should support a parallel bilateral process between North and South Korea to manage inter-Korean tensions.
- **Loosening restrictions on North Korean travel to and in the United States.** Despite the limited number of North Koreans who visit the United States, easing restrictions on visas to and travel within the United States would open up the potential for engagement through established governmental mechanisms such as the U.S. Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program, as well as through nongovernmental channels focusing on academic, economic, scientific, sports, and cultural affairs.⁵⁸ Allowing North Korean diplomats serving in the mission at the United Nations in New York City—who are currently limited to staying within 25 miles of the city’s Manhattan borough—to travel elsewhere in the country would also facilitate exchanges.

- **Proposing U.S.–North Korea collaboration and exchanges on various economic, health, humanitarian, and other people-to-people areas.** Potential areas of cooperation include:⁵⁹
 - Economic engagement, such as establishing a World Bank–administered multidonor trust fund or inter-Korean free trade zone.⁶⁰
 - Climate-related projects in areas that North Korea has keen interest, such as reforestation, wind power, and disaster risk reduction, through relevant multilateral discussions.⁶¹
 - Health cooperation packages that address workforce training, infrastructure, information management, service delivery, and governance capacity.⁶²
 - Academic and scientific exchanges in areas such as agriculture, medicine, international law, language, and information sciences, similar to the dozens of U.S.–North Korea collaborations that occurred in previous years.⁶³
 - Nuclear safety and security dialogues related to North Korea’s existing nuclear infrastructure, which ranks last among forty-six countries with nuclear facilities in terms of protection against sabotage.⁶⁴
 - Interparliamentary dialogues, rekindling the regular delegation visits that U.S. congressional members and staff made to Pyongyang prior to 2008.⁶⁵
- **Offering humanitarian assistance.** The United States can offer humanitarian assistance to North Korea that is untied to political aims, according to Washington’s stated principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.⁶⁶ North Korea already receives assistance from China and Russia and has turned down or ignored previous U.S. offers for food aid and COVID-19 vaccine assistance.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, continued humanitarian assistance outreach can reinforce the good faith of the broader U.S. overture.

These recommendations are not intended to provide a comprehensive road map for U.S.–North Korea negotiations. North Korea does not have a track record of seeking or agreeing to detailed, long-term road maps, nor is it likely that engagement with North Korea will follow a predictable, linear path. The road toward stable coexistence, peacebuilding, tension reduction, and denuclearization will be long; frequent roadblocks or setbacks are likely. It is crucial, however, to recognize and adopt the first principles of stable coexistence and improved relations with North Korea—supported by comprehensive alliances with South Korea and Japan—and to begin the process of engagement.

Conclusion

After nearly thirty-five years, the time has come for the United States to revise the first principles guiding its policy toward North Korea. The status quo trajectory is unsustainable and has allowed unacceptable risks to fester. Meanwhile, an emboldened North Korea is now not only a source of instability in Northeast Asia, but also in Europe, where its troops fight alongside Russia against Ukraine. Pyongyang's increasingly survivable and diverse nuclear arsenal, meanwhile, has rendered the risk of nuclear war—with catastrophic consequences for Northeast Asia and the U.S. homeland alike—more credible. Against this backdrop, the Trump administration has an opportunity to fundamentally redesign North Korea policy, moving away from one that prioritizes the unattainable goal of denuclearization toward a broader, stable coexistence with a nuclear-armed North Korea. The administration should seize this opportunity to make the United States safer, stronger, and more prosperous and to advance peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

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