

The background of the cover features a close-up, slightly blurred image of the United States flag and the North Korean flag. The US flag is on the left, showing its stars and stripes, while the North Korean flag is on the right, featuring its distinctive red, white, and blue horizontal stripes and a white circle with a red star in the center. The flags are set against a dark, leafy background.

OCTOBER 2019

United States- DPRK Relations

Is Normalization Possible?

PREFACE
Jeffrey Mankoff

AUTHOR
Anastasia Barannikova

A Report of the CSIS RUSSIA AND EURASIA PROGRAM

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Preface

For decades, North Korea has posed one of American diplomacy's most intractable challenges. Despite international isolation, multiple rounds of UN Security Council sanctions, the collapse or transformation of its former Communist patrons, and economic calamity, the government in Pyongyang—now on its third generation of Kims—has proven remarkably resilient. It has one of Asia's largest armies and nuclear and missile capabilities that hold its closest neighbors at risk, and is on the threshold of developing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of striking the United States.

Multiple U.S. administrations have sought to force Pyongyang to abandon these weapons programs, primarily by escalating economic and military pressure. Neither pressure nor diplomacy, such as the now-abandoned Six Party Talks, has had much success.

In this new report, Dr. Anastasia Barannikova, a Research Fellow at Adm. Nevelskoy Maritime State University in Vladivostok, Russia and a visiting fellow with the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program from January-May 2019, proposes a radically different approach. Based on her analysis of North Korea's own strategic objectives, Barannikova suggests that Washington renew its efforts at bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang without preconditions, accept the Kim regime as a legitimate actor, and build relations with it as a means of tilting the overall balance of power in East Asia in its favor.

This approach is at odds with what for decades has been conventional wisdom in Washington. It would require the U.S. to fundamentally rethink how it manages deterrence and non-proliferation, and downplay considerations about North Korea's abysmal human rights situation. For those reasons, it is likely to generate strong objections in many quarters.

Yet with America's North Korea strategy at a dead end, Barannikova is surely right that it is time to re-think basic assumptions underpinning that strategy. As a Korea expert with a deep knowledge of North Korean political dynamics and strategic culture, as well as an outsider to Washington's endless arguments about dealing with Pyongyang, Barannikova brings a fresh approach to a problem that has bedeviled U.S. policy makers for decades. We hope that her report will jump-start a much-needed conversation about how to deal with what may be the most dangerous flashpoint on earth.

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Introduction

Why Dialogue Must Continue

U.S.-North Korea dialogue resumed in 2018 after a long pause, resulting in the first-ever bilateral summit in Singapore on June 12 of that year. A second meeting between heads of state of the United States and North Korea (DPRK) followed on February 27, 2019. Neither meeting yielded any tangible results: in 2018, the parties signed only a vague joint declaration, and the following year, they failed to agree on even a symbolic document. Nevertheless, Washington and Pyongyang both insist that their dialogue continues, substantially reducing the likelihood of a military conflict. Still, a continued absence of progress and a gradual loss of interest in talking to each other could lead to a new outbreak of tensions between the two countries. In such an event, a number of threats could come to the fore, as detailed below.

However, the Hanoi summit was not a complete failure: the fact that dialogue is still ongoing, as proved by a spontaneous meeting at the Korean DMZ this summer, is an achievement in itself, especially given the nature of Washington-Pyongyang relations. Despite the positive personal relationship that may exist between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, and their apparent mutual interest in normalization, there is no denying that the road to compromise is hampered by major obstacles. Numerous factors, both internal to each country and within the wider Northeast Asian region, prevent U.S.-DPRK negotiations from progressing. This report looks at the key factors preventing a normalization between the United States and North Korea and offers possible ways of achieving a compromise that takes both parties' interests into account.

1 | Possible Consequences of Ending U.S.-North Korea Dialogue

Further Nuclear Proliferation

The DPRK has nuclear weapons and missile technology, some of which it developed internally and some which was acquired from other countries or organizations. That technology could be of interest to other states and non-state actors. Experts believe that North Korea has supplied weapons (more precisely, short- and medium-range missiles) to countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia.¹ There have been no reliable reports about any nuclear exports. Joshua H. Pollack, a leading expert on nuclear and missile proliferation, notes that reports of alleged DPRK nuclear exports are typically based on U.S. documents, statements by U.S. officials, and various media reports. According to Pollack, some DPRK officials “are said to have affirmed that they would never transfer nuclear weapons or materials” (meaning weapons-usable fissile materials), while others have warned that they would consider supplying weapons to terrorists, should their country be threatened.² Another opinion has been suggested, which probably comes the closest to the actual state of affairs: “Should pressure on the DPRK by a major world power increase, we will start selling weapons to that power’s adversaries.”³ This was said during a low point in DPRK-China relations, in the context of a conversation about China and Taiwan—but the same approach could be used against any other power that puts pressure on the DPRK, thereby giving it the “moral right” to engage in nuclear proliferation, especially if there are no other readily available means of alleviating the pressure put upon it by a larger and stronger state.

Current circumstances make the likelihood of nuclear or missile technology proliferation by the DPRK as low as it has ever been. But that can change overnight, should diplomacy fail in an irrevocable fashion. Speaking at the third plenary session of the Workers’ Party of Korea on April 20, 2018, Kim Jong-un made a commitment “not to proliferate

1. Associated Press in Seoul, “North Korea’s shadowy arms trade,” *Guardian*, July 18, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/18/history-north-korea-arms-dealing>; Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., “North Korea’s Illegal Weapons Trade,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-06-06/north-koreas-illegal-weapons-trade>.

2. Joshua Pollack, “North Korea’s Nuclear Exports: On What Terms?” 38 North, October 14, 2010, https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/38North_SR9_Pollack2.pdf.

3. Interview with an anonymous expert under Chatham House Rules.

nuclear weapons and technologies under any circumstances.”⁴ However, Chairman Kim also reserved the right to take all necessary steps “to protect national sovereignty and the supreme interests of the state”⁵ if the United States changes its current stance on the DPRK and relevant sanctions, which suggests that it would be unwise to completely discount the scenario of proliferation by the DPRK in the future.

One of the potential motivations for nuclear and missile proliferation by the DPRK is to secure the resources needed to bolster economic growth. At the aforementioned party meeting in 2018, economic growth was designated one of the country’s twin priorities (the so-called “second track” of the new “simultaneous development” policy, also called the byungjin line). This calls for a new model of economic development—perhaps a system borrowed from Vietnam and China or perhaps a locally-developed North Korean version of state capitalism—and implementing it will require extra resources. Initially, it is possible that economic reforms will only be pursued in an experimental capacity, limited to certain parts of the country. Regardless, these reforms will require new social and economic programs, as well as improved standards of living, which have taken a hit from tighter economic sanctions. North Korea’s own means are limited, and foreigners aren’t flocking in to invest. To spur economic growth, Pyongyang will have to diversify its international relations and pursue closer ties with countries other than China, which could anger the Chinese. Amid the ongoing pressure of UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, a falling-out with China could cause major economic problems, driving DPRK leadership to seek other sources of foreign currency and other resources required for economic growth. Ultimately, should economic pressure imperil the stability of the regime, Pyongyang may feel compelled to pursue extreme measures such as selling its nuclear and missile technology, which may end up in the hands of rivals of the United States or China—or even international terrorist organizations.

As for the technical means of proliferation, after years of sanctions, the DPRK has established various grey- and black-market channels for imports and exports.⁶ Based on reports of interdictions of North Korean shipments, it is only the failed attempts at arms exports that come to the attention of the international community; by definition, nothing is known about the deals that have successfully gone through. The sources mentioned by Pollack are unreliable by default—not just because of the lack of any corroborating facts but also because any information of that kind is part of the information warfare between the United States and North Korea and cannot be considered impartial.

The risks above are contingent on the DPRK resorting to proliferation in response to external pressure or in order to prop up its economy. But there is another possibility, which also depends on external pressure: the DPRK may end up in a situation where it has nothing left to lose in terms of its international standing and reputation. Having achieved the goal of acquiring a nuclear deterrent in late 2017, the DPRK has launched efforts to

4. “3rd Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un,” KCNA Watch, April 21, 2018, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1524400229-922732211/3rd-plenary-meeting-of-7th-c-c-wpk-held-in-presence-of-kim-jong-un/>.

5. “New Year Address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un,” KCNA, January 1, 2019, <http://kcpa.kp/kcpa.user.special.getArticlePage.kcmsf>.

6. Eleanor Albert, “What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea,” Council on Foreign Relations, February 25, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-know-about-sanctions-north-korea>.

improve its international image, a campaign that has already made notable progress. For example, some experts in Japan and South Korea have come to regard North Korean leadership as somewhat more rational than the current U.S. administration.⁷ South Korean perceptions of the North and Kim Jong-un have also improved in recent years, with measures of likeability rising sharply in 2018. According to opinion polls from May 2018, 78 percent of South Koreans regard Kim Jong-un as trustworthy, up from 10 percent in March 2017 and 4 percent in 2013.⁸

It cannot be ruled out that Donald Trump's image and his "fire and fury" tactics have played a role in such a drastic change of perceptions, but we should also give credit to DPRK diplomacy under Kim Jong-un. That being said, the West has continued to demonize North Korea even amid the U.S.-DPRK dialogue, accusing it of selling ballistic missiles to other states, raising the issue of human rights, and complaining of North Korean hackers. Given the instability of its reputation, if rumors that the DPRK is leaking nuclear technologies were to arise, it would be difficult for Pyongyang to disprove these rumors, further deteriorating its international standing. Another possibility to consider is opponents of a U.S.-DPRK normalization orchestrating a "false flag" operation—or a misinformation campaign about such an operation—in order to frame the North Korean leadership. This practice has already been used not only against the DPRK but also against Russia, China, and Iran, often achieving results without a shred of evidence ever being produced. This is where a country's international image, formed by the media over many years, can play a decisive role. If Pyongyang decides that it has nothing left to lose in terms of its international image and reputation, it may well return to the "madman" tactics it has been known for in the past and begin to proliferate missile and nuclear technologies in earnest.

Degradation of the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan Alliances

During preparations for the second U.S.-DPRK summit, some experts voiced concerns that a normalization between the two countries would inevitably lead to a pullout of U.S. troops from South Korea, an abrogation of U.S. commitments to Seoul, and a collapse of the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK).⁹ In reality, such a collapse would be far more likely to result from growing U.S.-DPRK tensions than from a potential U.S. troop pullout, and the North Korean nuclear arsenal is but one of several components of the problem faced by the Korean peninsula. Meanwhile, Washington's inability to reach an agreement with a nuclear-weapon state—an agreement that would remove the (arguably hypothetical) nuclear threat—has had a negative impact on the image of the United States, raising questions about its ability to protect its allies. In such circumstances, the ROK and Japan may well choose to pursue nuclear weapons programs of their own or to launch a conventional arms race.

7. Choe Sang-hun, "Kim Jong-un's Image Shift: From Nuclear Madman to Skillful Leader," *New York Times*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/06/world/asia/kim-korea-image.html>.

8. Kanga Kong, "Kim Jong Un Now Has a Nearly 80% Approval Rating... in South Korea," *Time*, May 2, 2018, <https://time.com/5262898/kim-jong-un-approval-rating/>; Adam Taylor, "Is Kim Jong Un trustworthy? 78 percent of South Koreans think so, poll finds," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/05/02/is-kim-jong-un-trustworthy-78-percent-of-south-koreans-think-so-poll-finds/>.

9. "Prospects for the Trump-Kim Vietnam Summit" (panel presented at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., February 22, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/prospects-trump-kim-vietnam-summit>.

Both South Korea and Japan have pondered the merits of acquiring nuclear weapons in the past, even going so far as to initiate nuclear weapons programs. Even though both countries were eventually forced to dismantle those programs, they do have the requisite economic, technological, and R&D capabilities to develop nuclear weapons quickly. Experts reckon that Seoul could build a nuclear weapon in a matter of 6 to 18 months and that its existing capability would be sufficient to build an arsenal of 4,000 nuclear warheads.¹⁰ There are, however, several hurdles on that path, should South Korea choose to pursue it, including the country's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) membership, assurances issued as part of U.S. "nuclear umbrella" arrangements, and the 123 Agreement on peaceful nuclear cooperation with the United States. The latter includes a ban on enriching uranium and reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, which makes it impossible for Seoul to acquire a key component of the nuclear fuel cycle.¹¹

Seoul continues to regard its alliance with the United States as a top priority, but there are additional factors at play, such as dialogue with the North and a détente between the two Koreas, which reduces South Korea's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons. However, it is worth recalling that the ROK elects a new president every five years, which often leads to sharp swings in its foreign policy and its relations with Pyongyang. It is therefore important not to completely discount the risk of South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. If the latest positive trend persists, then the "North Korean threat" will disappear, and proponents of South Korean nuclear weapon development will be stripped of their key argument. However, if Seoul fails to pursue dialogue with the North—be it through U.S. pressure or due to the arrival of a new president—then inter-Korean tensions will resume, and South Korean voices in favor of acquiring a nuclear arsenal will grow stronger.

In fact, some experts believe that Seoul may already be laying the foundations of a future naval nuclear force. One of the potential components of that force is the KSS-III submarine, which the South Korean military say will be equipped with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). Some experts believe that acquiring this capability will only make sense if the SLBMs are tipped with nuclear warheads. Another technology the South is currently developing is nuclear propulsion, which relies on enriched nuclear fuel.¹²

The U.S.-ROK alliance is important to South Korea, but the country may end up paying too dearly for it: not only as a matter of financial burden but due to the risk of being dragged into a U.S.-led conflict on the peninsula. Both the United States and the DPRK possess weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and the South is well aware of the potential consequences of cooperating with a country that is both far away from the epicenter of the potential conflict and known for pursuing its own national interests above all else.

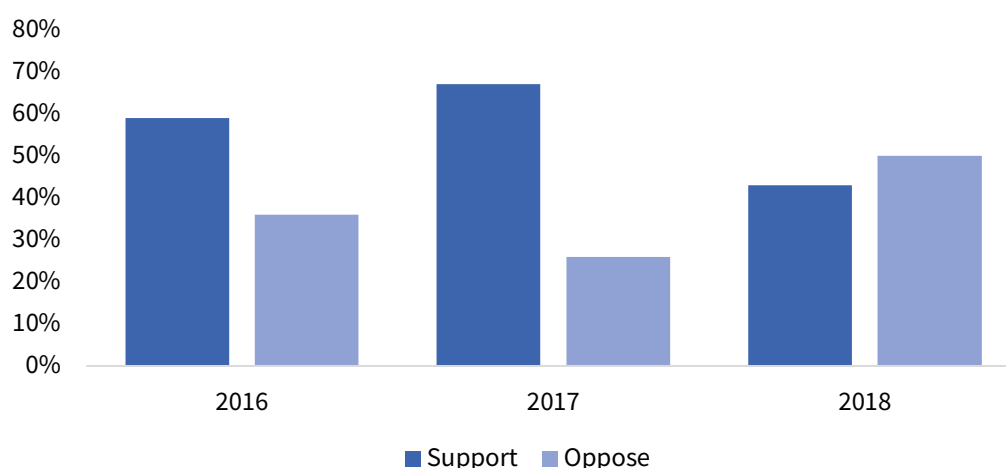
10. Zachary Keck and Leon Whyte, "Can South Korea Build a Nuclear Bomb in 6 Months?" *The National Interest*, September 22, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/can-south-korea-build-nuclear-bomb-6-months-22437>; Cheong Seong-chang, "How South Korea can respond to a nuclear-armed Pyongyang," NK News, January 2, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/01/how-south-korea-can-respond-to-a-nuclear-armed-pyongyang/>.

11. V.E. Novikov and A.V. Khlopkov, "Republic of Korea Military Nuclear Program," in *Nuclear Nonproliferation: A Brief Encyclopedia* (Moscow: PIR Center, 2009), <http://www.pircenter.org/sections/53-voennaya-yadernaya-programma-respubliki-koreya>.

12. Sebastien Roblin, "Are South Korean Submarines About to Go Nuclear?" *National Interest*, March 9, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/are-south-korean-submarines-about-go-nuclear-46582>.

Should a conflict break out between the South and the North, there is an expectation that the United States will come to Seoul's aid, putting its own cities at risk. However, if Seoul does not have full confidence in Washington's willingness to risk its own security for the sake of an ally, the South Koreans may well decide to develop their own deterrent, including nuclear missiles, instead of relying on the U.S. "nuclear umbrella."¹³ Opinion polls taken during a period of tensions between Washington and Pyongyang show that a large percentage of South Koreans were in favor of developing their own nuclear weapons, but that figure fell in 2018, when the United States and the DPRK launched a bilateral dialogue.

Figure 1: Should South Korea acquire its own nuclear weapons?
Opinion polls in 2016-2018



Source: Kim Jiyeon and Karl Friedhoff, "The Fallout: South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea's Third Nuclear Test," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, February 24, 2013, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/issue-brief-no-46-the-fallout-south-korean-public-opinion-following-north-korea's-third-nuclear-test/>; Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 4th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2016): Analysis Report on Comparative Data* (Tokyo: July 2016), http://www.genron-npo.net/pdf/forum_2016_en.pdf; Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 5th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2017): Analysis Report on Comparative Data* (Tokyo: July 20, 2017), http://www.genron-npo.net/en/archives/170721_en.pdf; Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2018): The Japan-South Korea Joint Opinion Poll on North Korea's Denuclearization and the future of the Korean peninsula* (Tokyo: June 2018), <http://www.genron-npo.net/en/180618.pdf>.

If the negative scenario comes to pass and South Korea acquires nuclear weapons, it is likely that Japan will follow. The country has the requisite expertise and technology to build a nuclear arsenal of its own, and in fact, the Japanese government has said on several occasions that its "peaceful" constitution allows the country to possess nuclear weapons because they would still fall under the "minimum capability" required for self-defense.¹⁴

Japan has questioned the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella in the past, namely in the 1950s and 1960s. An official 1969 report titled *Basic Principles of Diplomatic Policy* argued

13. Doug Bandow, "Perhaps It's Time for South Korea to Go Nuclear," CATO Institute, February 14, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/perhaps-its-time-south-korea-go-nuclear>.

14. Mina Pollmann, "Japan's Nuclear Weapons Conundrum," *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/japans-nuclear-weapons-conundrum/>.

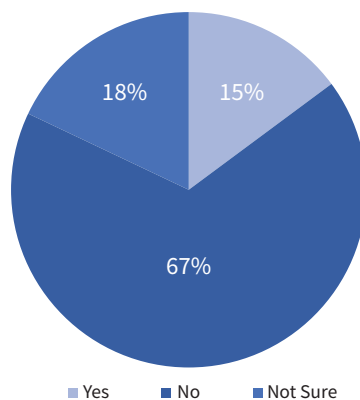
that Japan could not keep relying on that umbrella indefinitely and recommended that the country develop the capability to build its own nuclear weapons.¹⁵

Japan already has a plutonium stockpile that would be enough to build approximately 5,000 warheads in a matter of months, as well as the capability to reprocess and enrich nuclear fuel. It also has highly-advanced nuclear energy and space industries, so for all intents in purposes, it already has ballistic missile technology. Its peaceful nuclear capability is often seen as a security asset, or, as the media put it, “a nuclear bomb in the basement.”¹⁶ In the early-2000s, Japanese cabinet officials let it be known that the country’s nuclear power reactors were dual-use facilities and that its civilian nuclear program could be weaponized, should the need arise.

While Seoul’s primary reason for seeking nuclear weapons would be the North Korean threat that resurfaces whenever tensions between the two Koreas run high, for Japan, the key threat motivating nuclear development would be China.¹⁷ Even though the DPRK nuclear missile capability has reached an impressive level, Japan sees that capability as merely a convenient pretext for discussions about acquiring a nuclear arsenal. Japan’s deeper motivations for considering nuclear development include military growth in China but also the threat posed by the potential of significant improvement in inter-Korean relations. Despite allaying Seoul’s fears, such an improvement would cause a lot of worry in Tokyo, which has fraught relations with both Seoul and Pyongyang. An inter-Korean détente would probably be perceived in Japan as an even greater threat than a ROK-DPRK confrontation.

Figure 2: Japanese Attitudes to Article 4 of the Constitution, 2018

Does Article 9 protect Japan from invasion?



Source: Ken Y-N, “Two in three feel constitution doesn’t protect Japan,” What Japan Thinks, March 20, 2018, <https://whatjapanthinks.com/2018/03/20/two-in-three-feel-constitution-doesnt-protect-japan/>.

15. Yo-Jung Chen, “Nuke or No Nuke? Japan’s Long Dilemma,” *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/nuke-or-no-nuke-japans-long-dilemma/>.

16. Robert Windrem, “Japan Has Nuclear ‘Bomb in the Basement,’ and China Isn’t Happy,” NBC News, March 11, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/fukushima-anniversary/japan-has-nuclear-bomb-basement-china-isn-t-happy-n48976>.

17. David McNeill, “Tokyo Governor: Japan Should Build Nukes to Counter China,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10, no. 22, December 2, 2012, <https://apjjf.org/site/view/4623>.

Until recently, the factors that kept Japan from seeking a nuclear weapons capability included official domestic political considerations, U.S. security assurances, and the Japanese public's attitudes toward nuclear weapons (frequently referred to as a "nuclear allergy" in the foreign media).¹⁸ But public opinions change. Not so long ago, the very subject of nuclear weapons was taboo in Japan; these days, however, it is openly discussed by experts and government officials alike.¹⁹ A growing number of Japanese citizens support a revision of Article 9 of the constitution, preferring Japan to become a militarily "normal" country.²⁰ These trends are perceived as dangerous by the DPRK, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the ROK, but it is likely that they could be nipped in the bud by removing the ostensible reason for discussions about nuclear weapons and remilitarization—the North Korean threat. This would require a normalization between the United States and the DPRK.

A lack of progress at U.S.-DPRK talks, and the continued (albeit unlikely) threat of a military conflict, would undoubtedly affect the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances. If the United States were to lose its reputation in Northeast Asia as a major global power that can reliably protect its allies, that would raise questions about the value of such an alliance and encourage U.S. allies to provide their own security through instruments that may include the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

China Becoming the Preeminent Influence on the Korean Peninsula

The Korean peninsula is a strategically important region that China has always tried to control. Beijing would be entirely happy to let tensions on the peninsula continue unabated, so long as it keeps those tensions under control: a deterioration that stops short of an actual conflict would, on balance, be a benefit for China rather than a threat. Growing tensions would give Beijing an opportunity to mediate between the DPRK on one side and the United States and South Korea on the other, burnishing its credentials as the only power that maintains close relations with Pyongyang and is capable of exerting influence on the North Korean leadership. Such a position would offer China clear advantages during negotiations with the United States on other matters.

Chinese influence on the DPRK, which was all but lost following the execution of former Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission Jang Song-thaek, has been almost completely restored following the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 2375 in September 2017. China is now the only power that can exert pressure on both the DPRK and the United States. Andrey Lankov argues that China's total control of North Korean foreign trade enables Beijing to decide how rigorously to apply the sanctions: the Chinese can ramp up the pressure of sanctions on Pyongyang to make its leadership more pliable, or they can ease that pressure in order to extract concessions from Washington.²¹

18. Aron Woonink, "Is Japan's 'Nuclear Allergy' Being Cured?" *Diplomat*, December 02, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/is-japans-nuclear-allergy-being-cured/>.

19. Elizabeth D. Bakanic, "The end of Japan's nuclear taboo," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 9, 2008, <https://thebulletin.org/2008/06/the-end-of-japans-nuclear-taboo/>; Anushree Dutta, "Japan's Non-Nuclear Identity: Future Prospects," *The Globe Post*, June 22, 2018, <https://theglobepost.com/2018/06/22/japan-nuclear-weapons-future/>.

20. Stephen R. Nagy, "The road to revising the pacifist Constitution," *Japan Times*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/05/11/commentary/japan-commentary/road-revising-pacifist-constitution/#.XJFKraBKgdU>; Isaac Kfir, "Revising Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution," *The Strategist*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/revising-article-9-japanese-constitution/>.

21. Andrei Lankov, "The Third Participant. The Role China Plays in Kim-Trump talks," Carnegie Moscow Center,

China is wary of the DPRK's nuclear ambitions, which strengthen Pyongyang's hand and represent a long-term threat to Beijing's strategic interests. On the other hand, the Chinese leadership realizes that putting too much pressure on North Korea could destabilize the country by triggering an economic and political crisis. China's top priorities are therefore maintaining security in the region, preventing a military conflict, averting instability, and generally keeping things under control. That explains why China supports international sanctions against the DPRK but desists from active support of any measures that would seriously hurt the North Korean economy.

For the sake of stability and predictability, China may even be ready to sacrifice its ambition of ensuring North Korea's nuclear disarmament: some remarks by Chinese experts have indicated that China may be willing to reconcile itself to a nuclear-armed DPRK.²² It therefore cannot be ruled out that the Chinese leadership's hopes to preserve and increase its influence on Pyongyang will allow the DPRK to arm itself with nuclear weapons. In such a case, a DPRK armed with a small nuclear arsenal will not represent a threat to China. At this point in time, North Korea's stability is more important to Beijing than the country's disarmament.

Another thing to consider is that China is extremely wary of any North Korean rapprochement with other countries. A reunification of the Korean peninsula or a U.S.-DPRK normalization would not serve China's best interests. Beijing is prepared to use economic pressure or to make economic concessions to North Korea (as the situation dictates) to prevent the DPRK from forging closer ties with other powers, therefore ensuring that it remains firmly in the Chinese orbit. The long PRC-DPRK border and China's opaque economic and political arrangements offer Beijing an advantage over other states. Experts point out that Chinese authorities turn a blind eye to trade between the DPRK and small Chinese firms (or even Chinese smugglers); China also continues to allow North Korean labor into the country and to supply oil and petrochemicals in circumvention of international sanctions.²³ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein has conducted an analysis of fuel prices which concludes that even when China exerts some pressure on the DPRK, it does so out of its own national interests, rather than because of the UNSC sanctions.²⁴ The Chinese experts who attend international conferences and roundtables do not even bother to deny that China always pursues its national interests, including on matters of compliance or noncompliance with UN sanctions.

For all intents and purposes, China remains the DPRK's sole trading partner. The situation keeps the North Korean economy afloat, but it also makes China the only power that can exert any real influence on the DPRK. Considering the shifts in China's foreign policy

June 13, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76582>.

22. Philip Sherwell, "China accepts nuclear North Korea and thinks US must do so too," *Times*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-accepts-nuclear-north-and-thinks-us-must-do-so-too-qw59p5v2t>.

23. Andrei Lankov, "The North Korean Nuclear Program. How to Limit the Threat," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 23, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77662>; Jeong-ho Lee, "North Korean workers and imports continue to cross border into China despite UN sanctions," *South China Morning Post*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2170266/north-korean-workers-banned-seafood-abound-chinese-county>; Tsvetana Paraskova, "China Just Doubled Oil Shipments to North Korea," *OilPrice.com*, July 19, 2018, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/China-Just-Doubled-Oil-Shipments-To-North-Korea.html>.

24. Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "China's Sanctions Enforcement and Fuel Prices in North Korea: What the Data Tells Us," 38 North, February 1, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/02/bkatzeffsilberstein020119/>.

and its more assertive behavior since 2008, this influence may not only be economic in nature.²⁵ South Korean experts on PRC-DPRK relations often voice concerns over North Korea's growing economic dependence on China, fearing that Beijing could effectively turn North Korea into its own province or political protectorate—or maybe even consider outright annexation over the longer term.²⁶ These concerns appear overblown; after all, despite its heavy economic dependence on China, Pyongyang has always pursued an independent course. Recall, for instance, the timing of North Korean nuclear tests, which often come at a time that is inconvenient for Beijing. Fundamentally, an annexation of the DPRK would not serve China's best interests because it would end North Korea's role as a buffer state. Nevertheless, a strengthening of unilateral influence on North Korea by any power—including China—allows that power to meddle in Pyongyang's domestic and foreign affairs, potentially affecting its dialogues with Washington and Seoul.

Since China regards the entire Korean peninsula in the sphere of its strategic interests, it wants to hold sway over the South as well as the North. Some observers argue that Beijing wants Washington's military-political cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo to weaken, viewing the real goal of that cooperation as to "contain China" rather than to hold the DPRK in check.²⁷ In order to weaken that alliance, China may work to prevent regional tensions from abating. Alternatively, being South Korea's largest foreign trading partner, Beijing has the required leverage to apply economic pressure, particularly given how export-dependent the ROK economy is. The reaction of Beijing to the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile batteries (systems designed to shoot down short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in their terminal phase) and its punishing economic sanctions against ROK has demonstrated how prepared China is to make use of that leverage.²⁸ Meanwhile, opinion polls show that South Koreans regard China as the most powerful country in the region, and China's influence is set to grow even further.

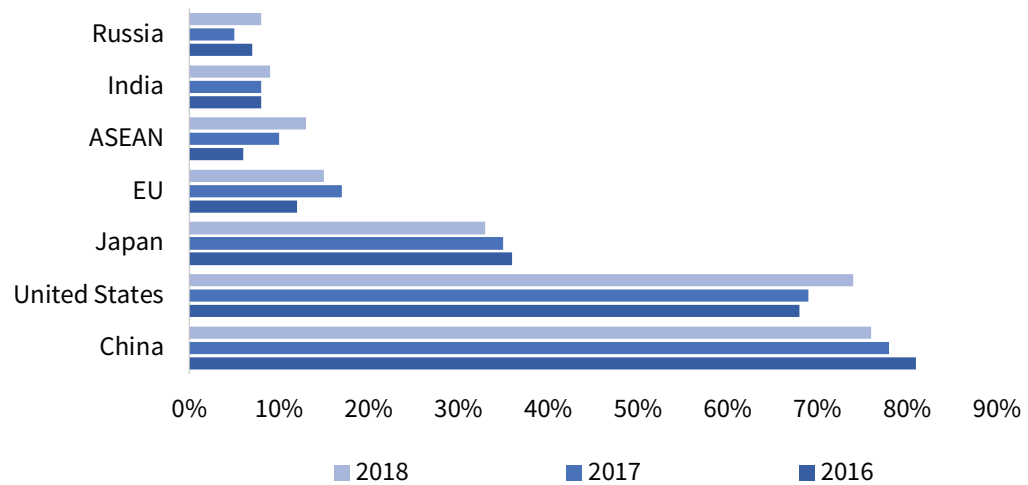
25. Edward N. Luttwak, "Why China Will Not Become the Next Global Power...But It Could," *Infinity Journal* 1, no. 4 (Fall 2011), https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/32/Why_China_Will_Not_Become_the_Next_Global_Power_But_It_Could/.

26. Kim Toil, "If North Korea becomes the fourth province of China in Northeast, Inter-Korean economic cooperation will weaken," Yonhap News, April 20, 2010, <https://m.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20100420059900014>; Hwang Jae-ok, "Will North Korea become the fourth Northeast province of China?" *Kyung Hyang Sinmun*, November 14, 2013, http://m.khan.co.kr/view.html?art_id=201311142124475.

27. Anny Boc, "For Beijing, the greatest threat to China's national security is not the Kim regime: it is the US," *The Conversation*, December 1, 2017, <http://theconversation.com/for-beijing-the-greatest-threat-to-chinas-national-security-is-not-the-kim-regime-it-is-the-us-88271>; Kristian McGuire, "China-South Korea Relations: A Delicate Detente," *Diplomat*, February 27, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/china-south-korea-relations-a-delicate-detente/>.

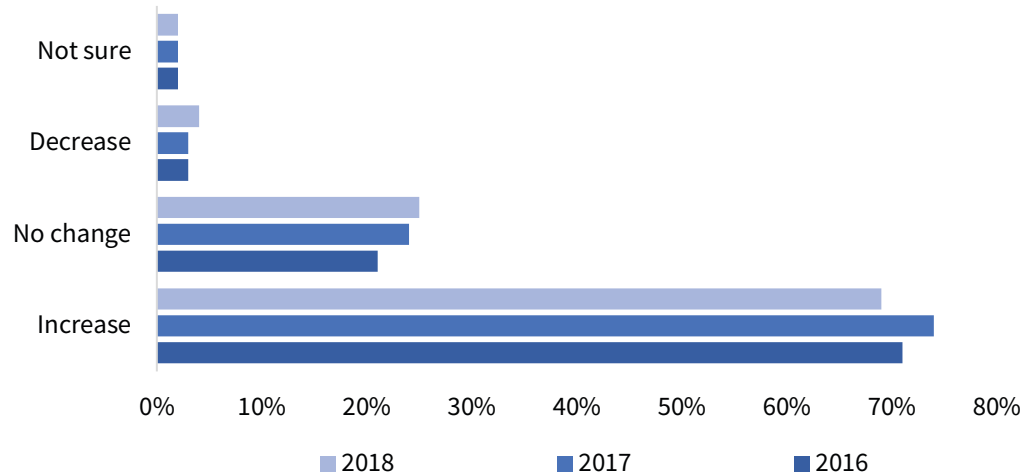
28. Ankit Panda, "China and South Korea: Examining the Resolution of the THAAD Impasse," *Diplomat*, November 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/china-and-south-korea-examining-the-resolution-of-the-thaad-impasse/>.

Figure 3: Economically important countries, as viewed from the ROK



Source: Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 5th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2017)*; Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2018)*.

Figure 4: Prospects for China's influence in the region, as viewed from the ROK



Source: Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 5th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2017)*; Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2018)*.

A Weakening of the Role of Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Instrument

The lack of effect of sanctions on North Korea has been long pointed out by experts and politicians, even before the latest, extremely tough round.²⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this latest round has also failed to force Pyongyang to change course. Experts have voiced different opinions about the impact of sanctions on the DPRK economy. While most tend to agree that the impact is negative, this view is hardly unanimous.

29. Simon Jenkins, "Sanctions against North Korea have failed. End them now," *Guardian*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/09/north-korea-nuclear-test-sanctions-embargo>; "Putin: sanctions against the DPRK are useless and inefficient," *Izvestiya*, September 5, 2017, <https://iz.ru/641537/2017-09-05/putin-sanktcii-protiv-kndr-bespolezny-i-neeftivny>.

On the one hand, the sanctions imposed under UNSC Resolution 2375—a ban on various exports to the DPRK, including oil and petrochemicals above a certain quota—have imposed additional costs on parts of the North Korean populace. They have caused a surge in smuggling operations, including illicit import and export schemes involving foreign-flagged ships. These illicit imports and exports have proved a fertile breeding ground for corruption, undeclared incomes, cross-border crime, and more. There have also been clear humanitarian consequences.

On the other hand, the UNSC sanctions and unilateral measures imposed by some states have also had a number of positive economic repercussions. First, goods that were previously destined for exports have become available for domestic consumption: shortly after the adoption of Resolution 2375, the DPRK reoriented export flows from the coal, consumer goods, and fishing industries toward North Korean consumers. Second, sanctions have been a powerful stimulus for import substitution. As oil imports fall because of the restrictions imposed by the UNSC, North Korea is making rapid progress in producing synthetic fuels from coal. Experts believe that the DPRK has already mastered the technology of turning coal into gas: according to the *Wall Street Journal*, China has supplied equipment capable of producing up to 40,000 cubic meters of synthetic gas from coal every hour.³⁰ David von Hippel and Peter Hayes reckon that even a single Chinese coal gasification unit “could be used to produce synthetic fuels in volumes on the order of 10 percent of recent DPRK petroleum supplies.”³¹ Additionally, the DPRK may have developed similar technology internally or refurbished old equipment supplied by the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Third, the sanctions were viewed by the DPRK’s adversaries primarily as an instrument of undermining the Kim Jong-un regime, but their effect has been exactly the opposite. The entire DPRK ideology is based on standing up to an external enemy. The greater the external threat, the more the North Koreans rally around the flag; that has proven to be true even of the competing members of the North Korean leadership.

Leaving aside the humanitarian aspect for the moment, the economic benefits of sanctions on the DPRK—and their beneficial domestic political implications—are obvious. It is also worth noting that the sanctions against North Korea have caused harm to the countries that voted for them at the UN Security Council. By ending the inflows of North Korean labor, they have lost a channel for spreading their “soft power” and cultural influence—which could have come in handy at a later point when the DPRK begins to integrate into the international community. The near-total collapse of trade with the DPRK will also harm that eventual integration into the global economy. The North Korean economy is not static; it is evolving. The DPRK leadership is studying and implementing new development models, as well as pursuing reforms, albeit on a fairly limited scale for the time being.³² Now that trade relations with North Korea have ceased, other countries will struggle to understand how the North Korean market operates.

30. Jeremy Page, “North Korea Turns Coal Into Gas to Weather Sanctions,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korea-squeezes-its-coal-to-outlast-sanctions-11545067376>.

31. David von Hippel and Peter Hayes, “DPRK investments in coal gasification driven by long-run juche and sanctions proofing,” Nautilus Institute, February 6, 2019, http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/DPRK-Gasification-SR-FINAL-FEB6-2019_for_PDF.pdf.

32. Ankit Panda, “China and South Korea: Examining the Resolution of the THAAD Impasse,” *Diplomat*, November 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/china-and-south-korea-examining-the-resolution-of-the-thaad-impasse/>.

Finally, the sanctions have had precious little effect on what is ostensibly their main target, the DPRK nuclear and missile program. Pyongyang is not showing the slightest sign of being prepared to relinquish its de facto status as a nuclear-weapon state. Having completed all the requisite tests, the country can now launch mass production of the weapons it has developed and tested—a goal set by Kim Jong-un in his 2018 New Year address, toward which some believe the country is already working.³³ The DPRK has everything that is needed for an ambitious nuclear and missile program, including the industrial capability, the expertise, and the technological solutions. The entire North Korean nuclear program is a lot cheaper to maintain than similar programs in other nuclear-weapon states, and unlike nuclear tests or missile launches, mass production of nuclear weapons would be very hard to detect and prove. All of this means that the DPRK would in theory be able to quietly augment its nuclear and missile capability, while at the same time pursuing international dialogue and building a self-sufficient economy. Should Pyongyang continue with its efforts at import substitution while also maneuvering between the great powers, these powers will eventually lose what little influence they still have on it.

Also, the stance adopted by the DPRK may set a further example for other countries that have also found themselves under sanctions (for whatever reason). That would reduce the effectiveness—real or perceived—of this policy instrument, which already has a very questionable track record in terms of achieving its desired effect.³⁴

33. Ankit Panda, “US Intelligence: North Korea Is Continuing to Produce ICBMs,” *Diplomat*, July 31, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/us-intelligence-north-korea-is-continuing-to-produce-icbms/>.

34. A.A. Belkevich, “A Study of Global Experience of the Use of Economic Sanctions in Foreign Policy,” *Izvestiya Tulskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, no 1, (2016): 284-293, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/issledovanie-mirovogo-opyta-primeneniya-ekonomicheskikh-sanktsiy-vo-vneshney-politike>.

2 | Benefits of Continued Dialogue

A continued dialogue and a gradual U.S.-DPRK normalization offer a number of benefits, including:

Strengthening and Revitalization of the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan Alliances

South Korea does not want a military conflict between the United States and North Korea, primarily because of their extreme geographic proximity: strikes against targets in the North would have grave consequences for the South as well. Besides, reunification is a major part of the national ideology in both Koreas, so the prospect of devastation of the other half of the peninsula—especially nuclear devastation—is seen as unacceptable. At this point in time, eliminating the so-called “North Korean threat” by peaceful means is the preferred option. This is true for Japan as well. Both countries host U.S. military bases, which would become targets for North Korean missile strikes in the event of a conflict. Should the United States manage to secure peace on the Korean peninsula by means of a normalization of bilateral relations with the North, that would only strengthen the Washington-Tokyo and Washington-Seoul alliances, which is currently undergoing a crisis over a fresh deterioration of Japan-ROK relations and the recent attitude of the U.S. military-political leadership to Asian allies of the United States.³⁵ The unpredictability of the current U.S. leadership cannot but cause security concerns, both in South Korea and in Japan.³⁶

As for the mission of the U.S.-ROK alliance, deterring North Korea has never been its only goal. Furthermore, on more than one occasion, Washington may not need a pretext (in

35. Park Min-hee and Cho Ki-weon, “The course of deteriorating S. Korea-Japan relations,” *Hankyoreh*, January 10, 2019, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/877851.html; “As wartime issues simmer, 2019 looks to be another testing year for Japan-South Korea relations,” *Japan Times*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/01/02/national/politics-diplomacy/wartime-issues-simmer-2019-looks-another-testing-year-japan-south-korea-relations/#.XKI42phKgDU>; John Power, “US wants Japan and South Korea to tag team China. But history is in the way,” *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/2181758/us-wants-japan-and-south-korea-tag-team-china-history-way>; Troy Stangarone, “Is Trump Right to Suggest that South Korea and Japan Should Go Nuclear?” Korea Economic Institute of America, <http://keia.org/trump-right-suggest-south-korea-and-japan-should-go-nuclear>.

36. Lars Vargo and Anastasiia Starchenko, “Abe’s Strategy in the Trump Era: Uncertainty in U.S. Policy Toward Japan,” Institute for Security and Development Policy, September 21, 2018, <http://isdpeu.eu/abe-strategy-trump-era/>; Guy Taylor, “Asians question U.S. staying power with China’s rise, Trump’s strategy shifts,” *Washington Times*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jul/8/donald-trumps-asia-shifts-raise-strategy-questions/>.

the form of the North Korean threat) to maintain its presence on the Korean peninsula.³⁷ If that is indeed the case, then a U.S.-DPRK normalization would not make the U.S.-ROK alliance any less relevant. It is safe to predict that future South Korean governments will be interested in preserving an alliance with the United States in some shape or form, given the likely continuation of the need to keep China and Japan contained.

Alliances that fail to evolve when the geopolitical situation dictates new requirements are doomed to fail. Two example cases are the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), both established in the 1950s, which dissolved in the new political realities of the 1970s. Successful alliances update their missions and goals, remaining relevant to all their members for many decades. The U.S.-ROK alliance, formalized in the October 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), continues to evolve. Apart from responding to the “North Korean threat,” allied activities have included U.S.-ROK cooperation in various areas, including Iraq and Afghanistan. Changes necessitated by geopolitical developments in Northeast Asia and farther afield have been made, both to the scenarios of joint drills and to the scale of U.S. military presence in South Korea. These changes have not undermined the alliance; to the contrary, they have made it more relevant.³⁸

When analysts argue that the pullout of U.S. troops from the south of the Korean peninsula is Pyongyang’s main goal, they are led by misguided perceptions of North Korea’s rhetoric and propaganda. Furthermore, this analysis ignores historical facts: North Korea has made it quite clear that it could potentially accept a long-term U.S. presence on the Korean peninsula, including at the high-level U.S.-DPRK talks in 1992, at the Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, and in the current ongoing dialogue with the United States.³⁹ For example, at the ROK-DPRK summit in Pyongyang in 2000, Kim Jong-il promised to his Southern counterpart Kim Dae-jung to normalize relations with the United States, adding that “the U.S. armed forces can stay on the Korean peninsula even after reunification.”⁴⁰ The Stimson Center’s Robert Carlin and Joel Wit, who took part in negotiations with the DPRK in the 1990s, say that North Koreans voiced a similar stance at other talks between 1992 and 2001. At the time, Pyongyang regarded U.S. troop presence as a “geopolitical hedge that would serve the regime as protection against baleful Chinese and Russian influence.”⁴¹ North Korea’s position remained unchanged as of 2018.⁴² Unlike nuclear weapons, U.S. military bases would not pose a threat to the DPRK in the event of a normalization with the United States. The U.S.-ROK-Japan alliance is not nearly as dangerous to North Korea as continued hostile relations with the United States are.

37. Interviews with anonymous experts under Chatham House Rules.

38. Richard Sokolsky and Daniel R. Depetris, “Imagining a New U.S.-South Korean Security Architecture,” 38 North, November 15, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/11/rsokolskyddepetris111518/>.

39. Daniel Wertz, “The U.S., North Korea and Nuclear Diplomacy,” The National Committee on North Korea, October 2018, <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/history-u.s.-dprk-relations>.

40. Yang Seong-won, “Kim Jong Il will take neutral position toward the U.S. military after the reunification,” Radio Free Asia, September 28, 2007, http://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/kimjungil_neutral_us_military_after_unification-20070928.html.

41. Simon Denyer, “Confusion over North Korea’s definition of denuclearization clouds talks,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/confusion-over-north-koreas-definition-of-denuclearization-clouds-talks/2019/01/15/c6ac31a8-16fc-11e9-a896-f104373c7ffd_story.html?utm_term=.a608bd330636.

42. Euan McKirdy, “North Korea drops withdrawal of US forces as condition of denuclearization, Moon says,” CNN, April 20, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/19/asia/north-korea-us-forces-korean-peninsula-intl/index.html>.

North Korea's perspective on U.S. troops also applies to U.S.-ROK joint drills. Pyongyang is not worried by the drills in and of themselves; after all, every country is entitled to conduct such drills for security reasons, and the DPRK itself is no stranger to drills. The real cause for concern has been the demonstrably anti-DPRK nature of those drills, which have been essentially a dress rehearsal for an invasion of North Korea. For instance, one of the phases of the U.S.-ROK drills was called "decapitation," which can easily be regarded as a provocation.⁴³ Naturally, the North Korean leadership perceives such things as a threat to national sovereignty and to the regime's survival, and these matters are taken very seriously in the North.

To summarize, there is no reason to believe that the U.S.-ROK alliance would cease to exist once peace is achieved on the Korean peninsula. It would merely have to be restructured so as to give it new missions and goals that reflect the new geopolitical reality. A refusal to modernize amid the ongoing changes and dialogue processes in the region could make the alliance a force for instability on the Korean peninsula, which would run counter to the spirit of cooperation. However, a modernized alliance would reinforce its relevance and draw a positive reaction, not just among allies but also among other countries in the region. Thus strengthened, the alliance would help the United States bolster its position in the region and serve as a counterbalance to China and Russia. The true identity of the countries this alliance is meant to keep in check, though, is never spoken aloud even if everyone knows it, so enacting the above changes would take a certain courage.

U.S. Involvement in Lucrative Future Projects on the Korean Peninsula

U.S. businessman and investor Jim Rogers once said that "investors can make a fortune in North Korea," adding that "as soon as it's legal I'm going to start making progress."⁴⁴ Mr. Rogers is not the only one interested in doing business with the DPRK; plenty of U.S., Russian, and South Korean investors want the same thing, with only U.S.-DPRK tensions keeping it out of their reach. North Korea is rich in natural and human resources. It is a potentially lucrative new market that is currently undergoing a transformation, sometimes compared to Deng Xiaoping's reforms. This view, however, is not entirely accurate, because Pyongyang is learning lessons from reforms not only in China but also in Vietnam, Laos, and some European states. The fact that changes are under way has been noted by many observers from Russia and abroad.⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that even before the economic transformations began, some Europeans and Americans had been doing business with the DPRK for years (for example, Felix Abt, author of the book *A Capitalist in North Korea: My Seven Years in the Hermit Kingdom*, and Nigel Cowie, former CEO of Daedong Credit Bank and director of Phoenix Commercial Ventures Limited).

43. The Associated Press, "New 'decapitation strike' part of South Korea-U.S. exercises," *Denver Post*, March 8, 2016, <https://www.denverpost.com/2016/03/08/new-decapitation-strike-part-of-south-korea-u-s-exercises/>.

44. Julia Limitone, "Investors can make a fortune in North Korea, Jim Rogers says," *FOX Business*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/investors-can-make-a-fortune-in-north-korea-jim-rogers-says>.

45. Andrei Lankov, "Reforms without the openness," *Profile*, October 11, 2018, <https://profile.ru/politics/reformy-bez-otkrytosti-127070-56531/>; Isabella Steger, "Capitalism in North Korea is bringing in \$60 million a year for the Kim regime," *Quartz*, August 27, 2018, <https://qz.com/1370347/capitalism-in-north-korea-private-markets-bring-in-57-million-a-year/>; "WSJ: 'It is a capitalism there now'—North Korean economy bends but does not break under the sanctions," *RT*, February 26, 2019, <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2019-02-26/WSJ-Tam-teper-kapitalizm->.

A gradual U.S.-DPRK normalization would enable businesspeople to set up shop in North Korea for the long run, which would help promote U.S. soft power. It would also serve as a kind of security assurance for North Korea because the presence of Americans doing business on its territory would minimize the risk of U.S. strikes against it.

Another potential opportunity is U.S. participation in promising economic projects on the Korean peninsula—namely, the so-called Trans-Korean projects involving the DPRK, the ROK, and Russia. Moscow has a clear interest in getting the United States involved in such projects.

These projects, however, may run into stiff Chinese competition. On the one hand, Beijing is already involved in several projects in the region. For instance, one of the branches of the Trans-Korean railway line—currently in its planning phase—will run through China. China is also involved in projects to develop the Tumangang railway station and has interests in Rason. On the other hand, there are doubts that China will settle for limited participation in such ventures. At the moment, China is the largest trading partner for both the DPRK and the ROK. However, it has always pursued a “divide and conquer” strategy in the area and may not take kindly to the major political implications of successful Trans-Korean projects, such as sustainable economic growth in the DPRK and increased cooperation and integration on the Korean peninsula.⁴⁶ In view of this, China may well try to stymie such projects, or at least try to secure the leading role for itself.

The Trans-Korean projects are not limited to a large natural gas pipeline, a railway line, power transmission lines, and so on. They also include many smaller ventures in such areas as agriculture, infrastructure, and beyond. At this time, they are being held back by the UN Security Council sanctions and unilateral restrictions imposed by South Korea and the United States. Moscow and Seoul hope that restrictions on North Korean labor exports will be lifted, at least for the Trans-Korean projects, but the United States has the final say on this matter.

It may well be that while other countries are forced to wait for the sanctions to be eased, China will use its advantage in terms of existing economic ties with the DPRK and ROK to try to seize the initiative, strengthening its economic sway on the peninsula even further. The participation of the United States in such projects would not only counterbalance China but also give Washington some economic leverage on the DPRK, albeit indirectly.

The same applies to other cooperation projects, including the production of mineral resources in the DPRK. A lifting of unilateral U.S. sanctions on North Korea would enable countries in the region to participate more fully in economic cooperation projects on the Korean peninsula. It would open up North Korea’s natural resources, including rare-earth metals, to South Korea and Japan, whose high-tech industries depend on imports of such materials.⁴⁷

46. Sung Young Jang and Hansol Kim, “Can Russia Play a Positive Role on the Korean Peninsula?” *Diplomat*, December 01, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/can-russia-play-a-positive-role-on-the-korean-peninsula/>.

47. Frik Els, “Flashback: Largest known rare earth deposit discovered in North Korea,” *Mining.com*, May 29, 2019, <http://www.mining.com/largest-known-rare-earth-deposit-discovered-in-north-korea-86139/>; Ko Soo-suk, “Regional players eye Pyongyang’s rare earth mineral reserves,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 6, 2015, <http://korea-joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3002750>.

Establishment of a New Security Mechanism in Northeast Asia

The North Korean leadership knows full well that the growing U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia is aimed at containing China and, to some extent, Russia (which is mostly being contained in the West) rather than destroying North Korea as a nation and that the DPRK, with its nuclear and missile activities, is just a convenient pretext.⁴⁸ Recall remarks by the North Korean leadership tolerating the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea; in the event of a U.S.-DPRK normalization, the U.S. military bases would not pose any threat to North Korea (if they ever did in the first place). Incidentally, that is why some experts go as far as to suspect collusion between the United States and the DPRK, although it seems unlikely—if only because the price of such a game would be far too high for Pyongyang.

It is clear, however, that the DPRK has offered Washington its help in containing China. Such an offer was voiced, for example, during a meeting between DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan and former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in New York in 2007.⁴⁹ The subject was not pursued, possibly because the DPRK's nuclear capability and foreign policy clout were close to nonexistent at the time, leading Washington to not take the offer seriously. That being said, North Korea is now in a much stronger position, and its offer remains on the table. Its nuclear weapons are already creating tensions in the region—tensions the United States was entirely happy with for a time, up to the acquisition of ICBM capability by North Korea. In the event of a normalization, neither the North Korean nuclear weapons nor its ICBMs would pose a threat to the United States, while North Korea would be free to drive neighboring countries to distraction (through nuclear and missile tests or demonstrations) to the benefit of the United States. The ongoing U.S.-DPRK dialogue is already becoming an instrument for containing China, as demonstrated by Chinese attempts at meddling in that dialogue. The establishment of U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations and economic ties would serve that same purpose even better.

According to Peter Hayes, a Korea expert and director of the California-based Nautilus Institute, at some point in the future the DPRK may come to regard the United States as a more desirable partner than China. He cites remarks by senior DPRK officials that for a small country, there are no eternal friends or foes, and there is no reason why the United States should forever remain North Korea's enemy.⁵⁰

Let us also recall that during the second U.S.-DPRK summit, an adviser to ROK President Moon Jae-in said that in the event of a normalization, Pyongyang and Washington might pursue military cooperation.⁵¹ The idea may seem outlandish, but it is not new and has been studied extensively by experts. For example, William R. McKinney, a retired U.S. Army colonel who was involved in North Korean issues and has worked in the DPRK

48. "KCNA slams U.S. for inventing absurd pretext for MD," KCNA Watch, July 12, 2001, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452002383-230859517/kcna-slams-u-s-for-inventing-absurd-pretext-for-md/>; "U.S. Much Ado about 'Illegal Manufacture of Nukes' Refuted," KCNA Watch, August 20, 2004, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452004863-727102380/u-s-much-ado-about-illegal-manufacture-of-nukes-refuted/>.

49. Oh Dong-ryong, "On secret US-DPRK and Inter-Korean contacts," Chosun News Press, Issue 4, 2007, <http://m.monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=200704100006>.

50. Uri Friedman, "The Mystery at the Heart of North Korea Talks," *Atlantic*, June 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/denuclearization-korean-peninsula-moon/562601/>.

51. "South Korea suggests that the DPRK may become a military partner of the U.S.," REN TV, February 28, 2019, <http://ren.tv/novosti/2019-02-28/v-yuzhnoy-koree-predpolozhili-chto-kndr-mozhet-stat-voennym-partnerom-ssha>.

as a Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) representative, has proposed the very interesting idea of a trilateral U.S.-ROK-DPRK relationship and security mechanism. He argues that the United States should counterbalance the growing Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula by abandoning the misguided approach that puts the DPRK and China on the one side of the divide and the United States and South Korea on the other. Instead, the United States should become friends with both the North and the South, and both of them should stand by its side in its rivalry with China.

Colonel McKinney says that in order for the United States to be taken seriously on its offer of trilateral relations and security cooperation with both Koreas, Washington would need to leverage Korean nationalism, treating Koreans in the North and in the South as a single nation and appealing to the historical aspirations of political autonomy and independence demonstrated by both. It is well known that China has long treated Korea as a tributary state, expecting it to pay exorbitantly for the protection it needs. As far as the Chinese are concerned, such a relationship does not violate Korea's sovereignty and is entirely normal. Also, China has always feared that Korea might become a staging ground for other countries, the way it once did for Japan. As the Americans increasingly feel the need to contain China, they have to coordinate their own balancing strategy with the long-term interests of Koreans so as to strengthen their joint national defense and help them protect their autonomy and self-determination as a nation. Such an approach would help to avert a Chinese hegemony and remove the threat of provocations and crises on the Korean peninsula, but it would require the effort of building a constructive relationship with Pyongyang.⁵²

52. William R. McKinney, "Korea at a Crossroads: Time for a U.S.-ROK-DPRK Strategic Realignment," 38 North, September 17, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/09/wmckinney091718/>.

3 | Regional Actors' Positions on the U.S.-DPRK Dialogue

It is evident that the DPRK, the United States, and China are the principal actors in the ongoing negotiating process. Other countries in the region are not standing aloof, but their influence on that process is extremely limited.

DPRK: Change the Status Quo at Any Cost

The DPRK's position can be described as proactive. After all, the processes leading to the recent series of summits, including the first-ever meetings between U.S. and DPRK heads of state, were initiated in early 2018 by the North Korean leadership. Prior to 2018, North Korea worked hard to build the minimal credible nuclear deterrence capability; having accomplished that mission, it switched its focus to diplomacy. This shift has resulted in an unprecedented series of summits; neither Kim Il-Sung nor Kim Jong-Il showed such diplomatic energy when they were in power.

Pyongyang has skillfully played the United States and China off against each other. The first foreign head of state Kim Jong-Un chose to meet was Xi Jinping. The prevailing opinion in the media and among the expert community is that Chairman Kim had no other choice but to meet the Chinese leader as a supplicant because of the difficulties caused by international sanctions and U.S. pressure.⁵³ However, North Korea has lived under sanctions for years, and China is not the only country that still maintains relations with it. Similar considerations apply to the U.S. military threats and pressure that preceded the ongoing dialogue process: Pyongyang has long come to regard those threats as part of Washington's "madman strategy," which is why they have no effect on the North Korean leadership (even if some of the neighboring states remain impressed by them). Furthermore, the notion that U.S. threats are what prodded North Korea to pursue a dialogue with China makes no sense because the summit with Xi Jinping took place when preparations for the first U.S.-DPRK summit were already well under way. Had Kim Jong-Un really felt an urgent need for dialogue, he would have

53. Thomas Franck, "Treasury Secretary Mnuchin: 'No question' Trump sanctions brought North Korea to the negotiating table," CNBC, April 30, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/30/mnuchin-no-question-trump-sanctions-got-north-korea-to-negotiate.html>; Alexey Bogdanovsky, "Willingness of the DPRK to talk is the result of Trump's tough policy," RIA novosti, March 9, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180309/1516052436.html>.

accepted Xi Jinping's invitation the previous year—but he did so only when it suited his country's interests.⁵⁴

In fact, Pyongyang needed to demonstrate a rapprochement with China to Trump so as to prod him toward negotiations as soon as possible. It remained unclear until the last moment whether the first summit in Singapore would go ahead, but because of the U.S.-China rivalry, the changing world order, and Washington's reluctance to cede its traditional spheres of influence to other powers, the North Korean tactics worked.

In a similar fashion, Pyongyang then used dialogue with the United States to put pressure on China. The DPRK's priority is good relations with its regional neighbors. Nearby Russia does not cause any particular problems, having no serious ups or downs in its relations with North Korea. Relations with China, however, had been deteriorating steadily since the execution of Jang Song-thaek in late 2013. Beijing had used international sanctions against the DPRK to monopolize influence on that country, continuing to regard it as a buffer state and a "little brother." Pyongyang needed to demonstrate to Beijing that the situation has changed and that its opinion had to be taken into account. It therefore leveraged a dialogue with the United States to get China's attention and respect. The North Korean military-political leadership had no illusions about the United States' ability to stick to its word, especially following the U.S. pullout from the Iranian nuclear deal, nor did it expect Washington's policy on North Korea to change in a matter of months. But it needed to end the Chinese monopoly, which was impossible without dialogue with other powers. In the lead-up to the dialogue, the torrent of media reports about the upcoming U.S.-DPRK summit and the intentional leaks about "secret" consultations with the Americans were meant as a signal to President Xi, forcing him to revise his attitude to Chairman Kim.⁵⁵ In addition to dialogue with the United States, the DPRK also launched energetic exchanges with the South. These tactics worked, forcing China to listen to North Korean concerns and take Kim Jong-Un more seriously, having been served a reminder of North Korea's strategic importance.

The DPRK's announcement that it will prioritize economic growth has also served to re-energize diplomacy. The North Korean economy is staying afloat despite the sanctions thanks to Chinese help, import substitution programs, and other means, as previously discussed, but these factors are not enough to implement the country's ambitious plans for its economy and defense sector. If the prevailing assessments of the DPRK nuclear doctrine are correct, the country's next step will be to develop a retaliatory strike capability. It will also have to build several nuclear power plants in order to address the energy shortages. All of this will require expensive investment and, consequently, a diversification of foreign partners. It is unlikely that Pyongyang expected the U.S. sanctions to immediately be lifted after two summits; however, it may have asked for major concessions from China in return for ensuring that the summits not yield any tangible results. By playing China and the United States off of each other and demonstrating its willingness to negotiate with both, Pyongyang may secure some

54. Anastasia Barannikova, "Visit to China as a part of the DPRK foreign policy," *Sluzhu Otechestvu*, April 4, 2018, <http://sluzhuotechestvu.info/2018/04/8635/>.

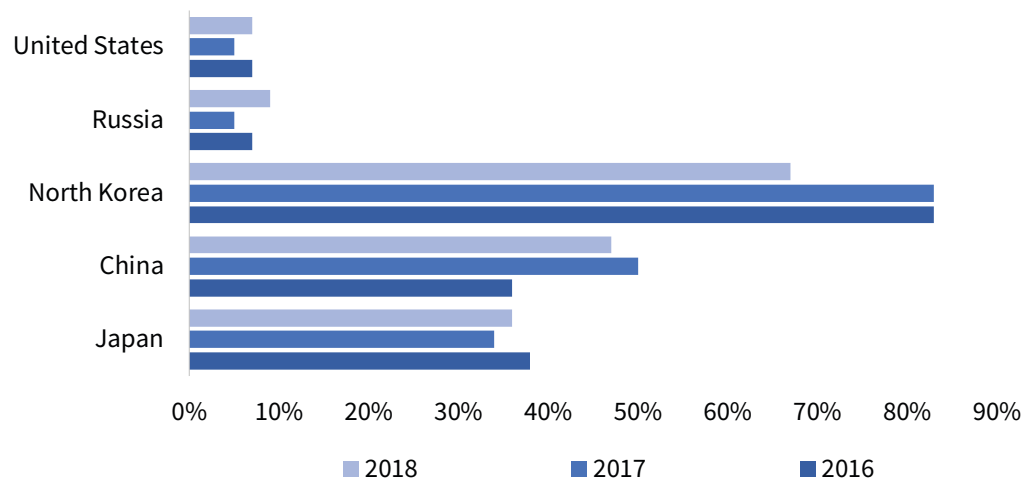
55. Jenny Lee and Tia Han, "Donald Trump to meet Kim Jong Un: experts react," *NK News*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/03/donald-trump-to-meet-kim-jong-un-experts-react/>.

tangible gains, such as sanctions relief or other benefits, that would enable it to keep its economy afloat for as long as it takes for the international community to recognize it as a nuclear power. After all, if the DPRK continues to desist from nuclear and missile tests, it will thereby remain in compliance with the UNSC resolutions, and the sanctions imposed under those resolutions will inevitably be lifted.

China: Divide and Conquer

China has long regarded the Korean peninsula as its own sphere of influence. It does not want any drastic changes at this point—at least, not until it feels capable of standing its ground before the United States in a military capacity. Losing the North Korean buffer would put China face-to-face with the United States, turning their simmering tensions into an open conflict—something Beijing is not yet ready for.⁵⁶ Also, a loss of the buffer would automatically turn China itself into a military threat to such states as Japan and South Korea. Recent opinion polls suggest that in both countries, China is viewed as the second most important military threat after the DPRK.

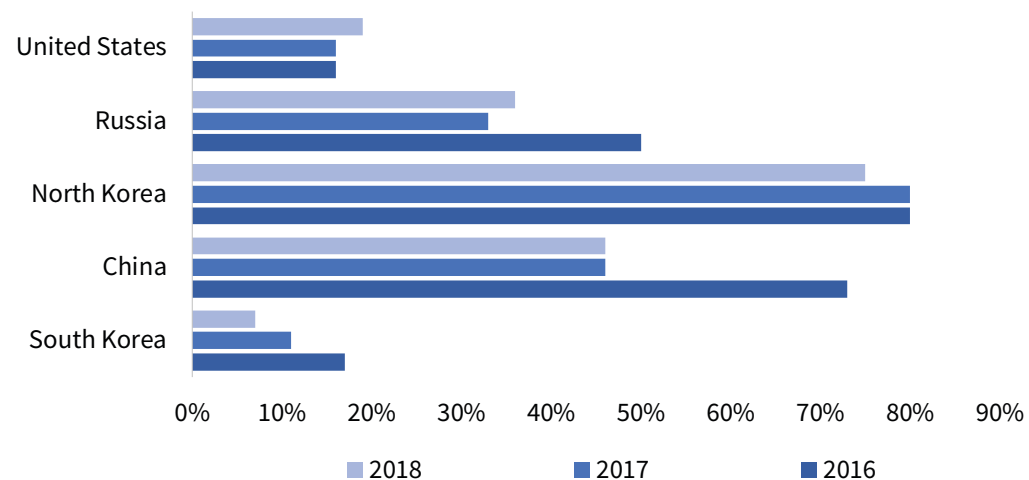
Figures 5: Countries viewed as a military threat in ROK



Source: Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2018)*.

56. Konstantin Asmolov, “Choice of two evils,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, August 7, 2017, <https://globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Vybor-iz-zol-18882>.

Figure 6: Countries viewed as a military threat in Japan



Source: Genron NPO and East Asia Institute, *The 6th Japan-South Korea Joint Public Opinion Poll (2018)*.

North Korea is important to China as a bargaining chip in its own negotiations with the United States. In recent years, however, Pyongyang has increasingly been distancing itself from Beijing and playing its own game, raising questions about China's ability to steer developments in the Korean peninsula and prodding Chinese leadership toward dialogue with the DPRK. In 2017, for example, Beijing agreed to ramp up the pressure of sanctions on Pyongyang in return for a U.S. promise to keep the trade war temporarily on hold. To all outward appearances, by doing so China was repeating a mistake it had made during the deployment of THAAD systems on the Korean peninsula—making concessions in exchange for benefits that would not materialize—because the very next year, the United States launched an outright trade war with the Chinese.⁵⁷ In fact, China's reasons for supporting the sanctions were not derived from trust in U.S. promises. Rather, they hoped to subdue the North Korean leadership by monopolizing economic leverage on the North; previous attempts at pressure and earlier rounds of sanctions had failed to make Pyongyang more pliable, and on the contrary, the DPRK had seemed to shrug off the remaining vestiges of Chinese influence.

However, and perhaps predictably, the latest round of sanctions has instead led North Korea to attempt to reduce its dependence on China. Pyongyang has focused on diversifying its foreign ties, stepping up its diplomatic efforts by resuming dialogues with the South and declaring its willingness to talk with the United States. The Chinese were quickly forced to revise their approach and to resume their own dialogue with North Korea as well; moreover, the Chinese leadership felt the need to bolster its flagging credentials before the international audience. Consequently, the summit that took place in late March 2018 was more important to China than to the DPRK, and it was initiated by Beijing, not Pyongyang.⁵⁸ Experts argued during the first U.S.-DPRK summit that China was an

57. Michael Hirtzer and Tom Polansek, "Trade wars cost U.S., China billions of dollars each in 2018," Reuters, December 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china/trade-wars-cost-u-s-china-billions-of-dollars-each-in-2018-idUSKCN1OR1JH>.

58. Alexey Gryazev, "Red carpet: Kim left Pyongyang to visit China," Gazeta.ru, March 28, 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2018/03/28_a_11699222.shtml.

unseen third party of the talks and that the agreement reached in Singapore was, for all its vagueness, entirely in Chinese interests.⁵⁹ Although the second summit was expected to bring more tangible results, it ended ahead of schedule with no agreement whatsoever. That outcome was also the best China could hope for: no documents were signed, but nobody slammed the door on their way out, either, so the opportunity for dialogue remained open.

So long as China regards the DPRK as part of its own sphere of influence, it has no interest in a U.S.-DPRK normalization or a reunification of the Korean peninsula, since these developments would go against its “divide and conquer” strategy. And since one of Pyongyang’s goals in its dialogue with the United States is to counterbalance the Chinese influence, the Chinese will try to interfere with that dialogue.

United States: Maintain the Status Quo?

For the United States, factors driving dialogue with the DPRK include the strengthening of Pyongyang’s position, inter-Korean rapprochement, the improvement in DPRK-PRC relations, and the position of Donald Trump, which is very different from those of his predecessors.

Until recently, the United States looked down on the DPRK with all the airs of a global superpower. It was skeptical of North Korea’s nuclear and missile progress, and it did not expect the regime to survive for much longer. A major shift came in in 2018: by bragging that his nuclear button was bigger than Chairman Kim’s, Trump reframed the DPRK as an adversary to be taken seriously, while simultaneously raising doubts about the United States’ ability to contain the threat.⁶⁰ This tension can be viewed in the context of the Russian “double freeze” initiative, where, in 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov urged the smarter of the two opponents to stop: “When a fight becomes imminent, the stronger and smarter opponent should be the first to step back from the red line.”⁶¹ In the wake of Trump’s comments, the DPRK responded by halting its nuclear and missile tests for two months; meanwhile, the United States went ahead with another round of military drills without hesitation. The DPRK had thereby demonstrated moderation and calm strength, while the United States played the disturber of the peace. Interestingly, this fits the pattern of U.S. tactics in recent years succeeding to impress the DPRK’s neighbors but not the DPRK itself. Recall that Russia and China chose to support new sanctions at the UN Security Council out of fear that the United States would start a war on the Korean peninsula if the sanctions were voted down.⁶² Unlike Moscow and Beijing, however, Pyongyang must be well aware that the United States is only acting the madman—an awareness that likely stems from the fact that Pyongyang itself used the same tactic not so long ago, and to great effect.

As for the inter-Korean rapprochement, there is a repeat of the situations in 2000 and 2007, when the United States demonstrated its willingness to talk to the North out of

59. Andrei Lankov, “The Third Participant. The Role China Plays in Kim-Trump talks,” Carnegie Moscow Center, June 13, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76582>.

60. Lauren Gambino, “Donald Trump boasts that his nuclear button is bigger than Kim Jong-un’s,” *Guardian*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/03/donald-trump-boasts-nuclear-button-bigger-kim-jong-un>.

61. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions at the Terra Scientia on Klyazma River National Educational Youth Forum, Vladimir Region, August 11, 2017,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 11, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2835310.

62. David E. Sanger, “Trump on North Korea: Tactic? ‘Madman Theory’? Or Just Mixed Messages?” *New York Times*, April 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/world/asia/trump-kim-jong-un-north-korean.html>.

fear of changes in the status quo following fresh efforts at de-escalation by Pyongyang and Seoul. The North Korean leadership responded to those signals by making its own attempts at normalization with Washington. It may not be surprising that these attempts have always proved fruitless. After all, the United States has always understood “normalization” as an end to permanent tensions in the region and therefore taken it to mean an end of U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia. The United States’ strategic approach toward the DPRK is still based on Cold War thinking and notions of America’s unrivalled global dominance. Unless Washington changes its approach, any summit with Pyongyang will not yield any meaningful changes. The Korean nuclear problem will be left for the next U.S. president to solve, by which time it will have become unsolvable.

For the time being, there are no signs to suggest that Washington is willing to make its foreign policy more constructive. The only exception is probably the current U.S. president, who has supplanted Kim Jong-un as the world’s most unpredictable leader. It cannot be ruled out that Donald Trump has his own vision of relations with the DPRK; this may include a willingness to embrace change, but it is key to remember that he does not enjoy the same kind of power in the United States as Chairman Kim does in North Korea. His own entourage, the U.S. expert community, and the media have brought to naught all his efforts to make the summit a success, preventing any kind of meaningful agreement from being reached.⁶³

63. Tim Shorrock, “Why Are Democrats Trying to Torpedo the Korea Peace Talks?” *The Nation*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/north-korea-democrats-peace-talks/>.

4 | Ostensible and Real Goals of the Parties to the Dialogue

Denuclearization and Security Guarantees

In discussing denuclearization, North Korea consistently emphasizes that it should apply to the Korean peninsula as a whole. The DPRK's official stance on denuclearization was formulated in 2013, at the 68th United Nations General Assembly session in New York: "The ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is to completely eliminate the nuclear threat the DPRK is facing from the United States, and to make the entire peninsula, including the south of Korea, free of nuclear weapons."⁶⁴ Russia and China use the official term "Korean Peninsula nuclear issue" to cover not only proliferation and denuclearization but also the entire complex of security problems in Northeast Asia. All these problems will therefore have to be resolved in order to achieve a resolution of the "Korean peninsula nuclear issue." This approach is reflected in the July 4, 2017 joint statement by the Russian and Chinese foreign ministries, which also outlines a roadmap for reaching a resolution of Korean tensions.⁶⁵ This approach to the nuclear problem, which views the entire Northeast Asian reason as integral to the "Korean Peninsula nuclear issue," is used by Russian experts as well as others.⁶⁶

The U.S. stance is very different from the approach used by Russia, China, and the DPRK. Admittedly, Washington also frequently uses the term "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula." For example, in a meeting with the South Korean foreign minister, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed that "the United States and the Republic of Korea remain committed to achieving the permanent, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."⁶⁷ He added, however, that "if North Korea takes bold action to

64. "Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula is DPRK's Invariable Stand," KCNA Watch, September 29, 2013, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451895798-387346404/denuclearization-of-korean-peninsula-is-dprks-in-variable-stand/>.

65. "Settlement of the nuclear problem of the Korean peninsula and Russia's position," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mid.ru/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwl2FuDbHx9/content/rossia-i-uregulirovanie-situ-acii-na-korejskom-poluostrove.

66. Ilya Dyachkov, "Nuclear problem of the Korean peninsula: approaches to threat assessment," *Vestnik Tambovskogo universiteta*, 2014, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/yadernaya-problema-koreyskogo-poluostrova-pod-hody-k-otsenke-ugroz>; Den Sik Kan, "Nuclear problem of the Korean peninsula," *Altai School of Political Studies*, June 27, 2015, <http://ashpi.asu.ru/ic/?p=3250>.

67. "Remarks with Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha at a Press Availability by Mike Pompeo,"

quickly denuclearize, the United States is prepared to work with North Korea to achieve prosperity on the par with our South Korean friends.”⁶⁸ Such wording clearly implies that for the United States, the Korean nuclear problem boils down to the North Korean nuclear program, and that North Korea must disarm unilaterally in order to solve that problem.

South Korea uses the same approach in discussing the instability in the region. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said that the ROK “reaffirmed that our goal is to achieve the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula,” before speaking of an “historic opportunity for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.”⁶⁹ ROK officials must at least be aware of North Korea’s stance on bilateral denuclearization, however, since they have voiced their disagreement on the matter. For example, the ROK Minister for Unification Cho Myoung-gyon said at a parliamentary hearing on January 9 that he did not share Pyongyang’s views on the Korean denuclearization issue: “Our ultimate goal is denuclearization of North Korea, not the type of denuclearization described by Pyongyang.”⁷⁰

The distinction between the denuclearization of the DPRK and the denuclearization of the entire Korean peninsula is significant. The latter would require a complete, verifiable, and irreversible elimination of nuclear weapons in the South as well as the North—in other words, a complete lack of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and no legal framework for any future nuclear deployments. It may require establishing a formal nuclear-weapons-free zone in Northeast Asia, as well as declaring the Korean peninsula to have nuclear-weapons-free status in U.N. General Assembly resolutions (as has been done for Mongolia) or for it to follow non-nuclear principles (as has been done in Japan).

Another problem is the exact method of denuclearization. The parties involved (the United States, China, Russia, and ROK) have yet to agree on a denuclearization method at all, even for just the DPRK. Washington insists on a complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID), or the “final, fully verified denuclearization”⁷¹ (FFVD) described by Mike Pompeo. Russia and China are more flexible. Russian experts propose limiting the number of DPRK delivery systems and warheads, allowing the recognition of North Korea as a “minor nuclear-weapon state.” China, on the other hand, proposes the CRID model, which stands for “conditional, reciprocal, incremental denuclearization”; this makes denuclearization itself a process rather than a goal and grants it an indefinite timeframe.⁷²

Other potential options include the DPRK relinquishing all the ICBMs that represent a threat to the United States but keeping the rest of its capability intact or keeping only the civilian component of its nuclear program.

U.S. Department of State, May 11, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-with-republic-of-korea-foreign-minister-kang-kyung-wha-at-a-press-availability/>.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Simon Denyer, “Confusion over North Korea’s definition of denuclearization clouds talks,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/confusion-over-north-koreas-definition-of-denuclearization-clouds-talks/2019/01/15/c6ac31a8-16fc-11e9-a896-f104373c7ffd_story.html?utm_term=.a608bd330636.

71. Mike Pompeo, U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *An Update on American Diplomacy to Advance our National Security Strategy*, 115th cong., 2nd sess., July 25, 2018, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/072518_Pompeo_Testimony.pdf.

72. Georgy Toloraya, “From CVID to CRID: A Russian Perspective,” 38 North, December 26, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/12/gtoloraya122618/>.

Managing Deterrence

U.S. experts on North Korea propose more flexible approaches than those set forth by the U.S. military-political leadership. For example, in a paper titled “Goals for any arms control proposal with North Korea,” John K. Warden and Ankit Panda propose that the United States and its allies should recognize the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state and move on from simply demanding a unilateral disarmament to *managing deterrence*.⁷³ Such an approach aims not to eliminate the DPRK nuclear arsenal but rather to impose numerical and qualitative restrictions on it, with the end-goal being a North Korean nuclear arsenal that is capable of deterring a pre-emptive strike but insufficient to allow for nuclear escalation of conventional-arms aggression. A complete North Korean disarmament would remain as a long-term goal; one of the authors also calls for building a stable deterrent relationship with a nuclear-armed North Korea.⁷⁴

Proposals such as this include not only the steps expected of the DPRK but also the steps that must be taken by the United States—albeit in much less specific terms. While the requirements for North Korea include details about reducing nuclear material production and delivery systems, the United States is merely supposed to “convince” North Korea of the peaceful nature of its military exercises and its lack of intention to orchestrate a regime change. The United States and its allies are meant to take tangible steps but only in return for complex DPRK measures that would be difficult to reverse. Placing the burden of disarmament on North Korea without detailing a commensurate strategy for the United States makes it unlikely for the North Korean leadership to take such risks, particularly since there is no way of knowing how irreversible any assurances of noninterference issued to North Korea might prove to be.

The steps North Korea may be prepared to take in order to achieve its intermediate goals include freezing the tests, dismantling one or several of the nuclear facilities, and even removing its ICBMs to another country. The intermediate goals in question are a normalization or a formal end of the war with the United States. The lifting of sanctions is undoubtedly important to Pyongyang, but it is not the most important goal. Rather than being a goal in itself, such a lifting would be an indicator of Washington’s ability to negotiate in good faith and of whether pursuing further dialogue would be productive.

Siegfried Hecker’s Roadmap for Demilitarization

In his article “Total Denuclearization Is an Unattainable Goal. Here’s How to Reduce the North Korean Threat,” Siegfried Hecker argues that a complete DPRK denuclearization is impossible.⁷⁵ He believes that the United States and the ROK should help North Korea civilianize its nuclear weapons facilities—in other words, that the goal should be demilitarization, not denuclearization. Pyongyang has always insisted on its right to

73. John K. Warden and Ankit Panda, “Goals for any arms control proposal with North Korea,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, February 13, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/02/goals-for-any-arms-control-proposal-with-north-korea/>.

74. Ankit Panda, “The Right Way to Manage a Nuclear North Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-11-19/right-way-manage-nuclear-north-korea>.

75. Siegfried S. Hecker, Elliot A. Serbin, and Robert L. Carlin, “Total Denuclearization Is an Unattainable Goal. Here’s How to Reduce the North Korean Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/25/total-denuclearization-is-an-unattainable-goal-heres-how-to-reduce-the-north-korean-threat/>.

pursue peaceful nuclear and space programs, which is in fact the inalienable right of any sovereign nation. The DPRK continues to face energy shortages, a problem that nuclear power plants would solve. Meanwhile, peaceful space programs are needed for accurate weather forecasts and effective disaster relief measures. Consequently, Hecker—along with Robert L. Carlin and Elliot A. Serbin—has developed a 10-year denuclearization roadmap that includes such elements as eliminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons and civilianizing its nuclear weapons facilities. The roadmap further suggests that the United States and the ROK should help the DPRK implement that process.⁷⁶

The entire proposal is based on the notion that the DPRK will never relinquish nuclear weapons until its security is assured. Such guarantees are impossible to put in place by mere promises or treaties signed with the United States; they can be obtained only after a certain period of coexistence and cooperation.

Hecker’s proposals may become acceptable to the DPRK in the future, once a normalization with the United States takes hold and security cooperation is well underway (or once Pyongyang receives satisfactory security assurances). Nuclear power plants and peaceful space activities are of critical importance to the DPRK; besides, a legalization of North Korean peaceful space activities could enable the lifting of sanctions imposed after satellite launches. But China is unlikely to approve these proposals because there is next to no room for it in such a process. Furthermore, with mutual mistrust between the DPRK and the United States running so high, cooperation in areas as sensitive as nuclear development does not appear realistic.

Conditional, Reciprocal, Incremental Denuclearization (CRID)

The CRID model was proposed at the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Forum held in Seoul in 2018 by Xin Qiang, a professor at Fudan University.⁷⁷ It calls for a series of steps that the DPRK can take toward a complete denuclearization in return for equally significant steps by the United States. These steps range from repealing sanctions to signing a peace treaty.⁷⁸ Establishing a new regime for peace and security on the Korean peninsula would create a climate in which the DPRK would be able to destroy its shorter-range missiles, the ones threatening Japan and ROK. As a result of this approach, North Korea would be left in possession of a small number of nuclear weapons.

However, it is worth noting that this particular roadmap calls for a denuclearization of the DPRK only, rather than of the entire peninsula, which runs counter to the official stances of Pyongyang and of Beijing. The plan also contains a clause that calls for a ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by the DPRK, leaving unanswered questions. If North Korea is supposed to ratify that treaty as a nuclear power, that would represent a final legitimization of its status as a nuclear-weapon state. If, on the other hand, Pyongyang is expected to ratify the CTBT as a non-nuclear-weapon state, this runs

76. Siegfried S. Hecker, Robert L. Carlin, and Elliot A. Serbin, “A Comprehensive History of North Korea’s Nuclear Program,” Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, April 2019, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/content/cisac-north-korea>.

77. Song Sang-ho, “Officials, experts call for greater multilateral peace cooperation in East Asia,” *Yonhap News*, November 28, 2018, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20181128004051315>.

78. Georgy Toloraya, “From CVID to CRID: A Russian Perspective,” 38 North, December 26, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/12/gtoloraya122618/>.

counter to the reality of the situation, since at this point, regardless of the recognition or non-recognition by the international community, the DPRK is a de facto nuclear power.

The signing of a peace treaty is another problem in the CRID model. It is unclear which countries should be party to such a treaty or what role China would play in its development. Additionally, although the author of the roadmap emphasizes the importance of the process of denuclearization over its end result, he does not propose any time frame, making the model impossible to fully implement. This approach ends up preserving the status quo—something in the United States and China’s interests, but not in North Korea’s, making it unlikely to gain traction with Pyongyang. On the plus side, the plan calls for reducing the numbers of North Korean nuclear weapons without completely eliminating the DPRK nuclear arsenal and would therefore be likely to gain Russian support.

Table 1: CRID

DPRK	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and eliminate all nuclear weapons test facilities.▪ Halt production of nuclear weapons.▪ Disable and destroy all production facilities under IAEA supervision.▪ End all nuclear design and research activity in this area, with a particular focus on the ICBM program.▪ Halt production of weapons-grade fissile materials; close and eventually dismantle certain facilities; limit and reduce nuclear charges.
United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Provide phased sanctions relief.▪ Produce declaration of intent to formally end the Korean War.▪ Draft permanent peace treaty.

Source: Georgy Toloraya, “From CVID to CRID: A Russian Perspective,” *38North.org*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/12/gtoloraya122618/>.

Reducing/Dismantling North Korea’s ICBM Program

Many of the proposed denuclearization options include the dismantlement of North Korea’s ICBM program. This element deserves closer scrutiny. If the prevailing assessments of DPRK nuclear doctrine are correct, the country could, in principle, relinquish some of its ICBMs.⁷⁹ Even though ICBMs are a key instrument of deterrence, their practical use against targets in the United States (or more precisely, in the U.S. mainland) would be very difficult. Since the United States already has a missile defense system in place, North Korea would need a successful launch of several missiles at once. The country developed its intercontinental missiles fairly recently, and there have been no reports of them being test-launched with a useful payload. The number of such missiles in the DPRK arsenal also remains uncertain. It cannot be ruled out that Pyongyang will need more time and resources to build large numbers of missiles and to develop missile defense countermeasures. Consequently, the current likelihood of North Korean ICBMs reaching

79. Anastasia Barannikova, “On nuclear doctrine of the DPRK,” Russian International Affairs Council, February 28, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/dvfu/anastasiya-barannikova-o-yadernoy-doktrine-kndr/>.

U.S. territory is too low to serve as a credible deterrent—it can be one of several deterrence instruments, but not the main one. North Korea does not need a large number of ICBMs at all. The fact that the country can produce ICBMs and hydrogen bombs is a sufficient deterrent. Moreover, North Korea is working on more and new types of weapons of high mobility and survivability.

North Korea has not yet been proved to have conducted a high-altitude nuclear detonation or an ICBM test with a useful payload, but such tests do not necessarily have to be made public. Besides, they can be substituted with a computer simulation or a subcritical test while still providing useful results. Overall, the demonstrative tests the DPRK conducted until 2018 were clearly part of the country's nuclear doctrine, serving as an instrument of deterrence against the country's most likely adversaries (with the possible exception of the very early nuclear and missile tests in the late-1990s and early-2000s, when North Korean specialists were gathering data for computer simulations). Given the current North Korean foreign-policy and diplomatic goals, however, Pyongyang no longer has a need for demonstrative tests. That is why the leadership has announced the completion of the nuclear program, voluntarily declared a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests, and launched mass production of those weapons systems that have successfully completed trials.⁸⁰

According to various estimates of North Korean nuclear and missile capability, the country may be in possession of 20 to 60 warheads and 200 to 1,000 missiles.⁸¹ These estimates are not completely reliable and lack recent information; if North Korea was busy making more missiles in 2018, it may have already built a sufficiently large arsenal to achieve its foreign policy goals, including dialogue with the United States. But it will not relinquish its ICBMs or hand them over to a third country without major concessions from the United States, such as sanctions repeal and a recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state. Given the current mood among the U.S. military-political leadership, Washington is unlikely to accept anything short of a total elimination of the North Korean nuclear capability. Finally, if the entire process includes a transfer of North Korean ICBMs to Chinese custody—an option considered by Korean experts and likely by China itself—it would be difficult to verify, since China carefully guards all information about its strategic interests (relations with Pyongyang included). Moreover, China has been known to not be inclined to put much pressure on North Korea, even on such matters as compliance with international treaties. That is why a transfer of North Korean ICBMs to China, followed by their dismantlement, is unlikely. It is also worth noting that such an option would be rejected out of hand by Japan, which regards all North Korean ballistic missiles as a threat. Still, the option may become a possibility at some point in the future, not as a phase of denuclearization but as a goodwill gesture by the DPRK in the event of major improvement in U.S.-DPRK relations—assuming U.S. willingness to pursue normalization.

80. "Kim Jong Un's New Year Address of 2018," KCNA, January 1, 2018, <http://kcna.kp/kcna.user.special.getArticlePage.kcmsf>; Ankit Panda, "US Intelligence: North Korea is Continuing to Produce ICBMs," *The Diplomat*, July 31, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/us-intelligence-north-korea-is-continuing-to-produce-icbms/>.

81. Eleanor Albert, "North Korea's Military Capabilities," Council on Foreign Relations, July 9, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/background/north-koreas-military-capabilities>; Choi Woo-seok, "North Korea will have more than 100 nuclear warheads by 2020," Chosun News Press, October 27, 2017, http://m.monthly.chosun.com/client/mdaily/daily_view.asp?idx=1911&Newsnumb=2017101911.

Each of these options has its pros and cons. All of them, however, share the same weakness, inasmuch as they call for a denuclearization of the DPRK alone rather than of the entire Korean peninsula. Besides, as will be discussed in a later section, none of these approaches fully takes into account the North Korean requirements that were voiced at the Six-Party Talks (multilateral negotiations launched in 2003 for peaceful resolution of security problems connected with the North Korean nuclear program) in the mid-2000s and remain relevant to this day.

DPRK Vision of Denuclearization

The CVID approach proposed by the United States would force North Korea to choose between two paths: integration and economic cooperation with the international community or the continuation of its nuclear and missile pursuits. Realistically, however, it is clear that the DPRK has developed its nuclear capability in order to meet its primary national need, which is security. That is why any denuclearization process must be conducted in a way that avoids endangering North Korean security.

Some experts argue that there has been no clear statement of the DPRK's goals with regard to denuclearization. As it happens, Pyongyang's vision of security guarantees has been explicit as far back as the Six-Party Talks of 2005, where the DPRK made the following demands in return for nuclear disarmament: "Withdraw U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea and rule out their re-deployment there; put an end to all military drills whose scenario is based on a nuclear war against the DPRK; eliminate 'any instruments that can be used by anyone to threaten other countries with nuclear weapons'; establish 'relations of trust between neighboring countries, including relations between the DPRK and the US'; issue assurances that nuclear weapons will never be used against the DPRK; abandon the use of the U.S. 'nuclear umbrella' to protect South Korea from aggression by a third party; and relinquish attempts at changing the DPRK regime by force."⁸²

This framework is consistent with the DPRK ideas on denuclearization voiced at the 7th Congress of the Workers Party of Korea in 2016: "The denuclearization being called for by the DPRK is the denuclearization of the whole Korean peninsula and this includes the dismantlement of nukes in south Korea and its vicinity."⁸³ The DPRK also made the following demands of the United States: "Firstly, all the nuclear weapons should be opened to public, first of all, which the U.S. has neither acknowledged nor denied after bringing them to south Korea. Secondly, all the nukes and their bases should be dismantled and verified in the eyes of the world public. Thirdly, the U.S. should ensure that it would never bring again the nuclear strike means to south Korea, which the U.S. has frequently deployed on the Korean peninsula and in its vicinity. Fourthly, it should commit itself to neither intimidating the DPRK with nukes or through an act of nuclear war nor using nukes against the DPRK in any case. Fifthly, the withdrawal of the U.S. troops holding the right to use nukes from south Korea should be declared."⁸⁴

82. Yuri Fedorov, "The Korean Nuclear Crisis and Russia," *Yaderny Kontrol* 11, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 41–61.

83. "DPRK Government Denounces U.S., S. Korea's Sophism about 'Denuclearization of North'," KCNA Watch, July 6, 2016, <https://kcnowatch.org/newstream/1546383733-821103229/dprk-government-denounces-u-s-s-ko-reas-sophism-about-denuclearization-of-north/>.

84. Ibid.

According to Pyongyang, such steps would demonstrate a sincere intention by the United States and ROK to build a safe and secure world free of nuclear weapons while also serving as security guarantees to North Korea. The DPRK committed itself to taking steps toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula after obtaining such guarantees. In other words, the North Korean approach mirrors the CVID approach but turns it on its head, calling on the United States to take tangible steps first.

North Korea's demands did not appear entirely unreasonable in the past, and they look even more rational today. Pyongyang's emphasis on nuclear weapons as the main instrument of defense may well have resulted in a conventional arms weakness.⁸⁵ As a result, a unilateral nuclear disarmament would reduce the DPRK's ability to defend itself using only conventional forces. Experts point out that one possible alternative to the North Korean nuclear arsenal is for another country (or perhaps even a military alliance) to provide security assurances and a nuclear umbrella to the DPRK. China is usually named as the most likely candidate—some experts even believe that a Chinese nuclear umbrella would protect the DPRK more effectively than its own nuclear capability—but the idea fails to account for the internal political dynamics in North Korea and the nature of its relationship with China. Besides, the idea of offering “nuclear umbrella” guarantees is hardly appropriate in the context of denuclearization, since it effectively defeats the purpose of removing Pyongyang's nuclear capability.⁸⁶

It would, in theory, be possible for the DPRK to form a military alliance with either Russia or China in order to gain the security assurances it seeks. However, there are several obstacles to such an alliance. First, both of these countries—as well as North Korea itself—hold negative attitudes about traditional (leader-satellites) military blocs and alliances. Second, any such alliance would likely be perceived as adversarial to the U.S.-ROK-Japan alliance, which would have troubling implications for regional security. Third, such an alliance would only deepen the rift on the Korean peninsula. Finally, from the point of political realism, there are no eternal alliances and partnerships, so they cannot be considered reliable means of ensuring a country's security. There already is a history of military cooperation between the DPRK and China, for example, in the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, but China sometimes gives reasons to doubt its willingness to fulfill its commitments under that treaty.⁸⁷ In such circumstances, lacking full confidence in its ally, the DPRK prefers to ensure its security by its own means (including nuclear weapons).

The best option for maintaining a balance of power is *CVID for the entire Korean peninsula*. This approach, however, in addition to the DPRK nuclear disarmament, would require a complete, irreversible, and verifiable denuclearization of South Korea as well. All three of these adjectives—complete, irreversible, verifiable—are problematic. It is not clear whether the CVID option proposed by the United States applies only to nuclear weapons

85. James Hackett, “The conventional military balance on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2018/06/military-balance-korean-peninsula>.

86. Philip Bobbit, “Only China can solve the North Korea problem—by inviting it to come underneath its own nuclear umbrella,” *UnHerd*, February 19, 2018, <https://unherd.com/2018/02/china-can-solve-north-korea-problem-inviting-come-underneath-nuclear-umbrella/>.

87. “China ‘not obliged to defend North Korea from an attack’,” *Straits Times*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-not-obliged-to-defend-north-korea-from-an-attack>.

production or peaceful nuclear programs as well, but in addition to ROK relinquishing nuclear weapons, a *complete* denuclearization also implies the closure of all nuclear facilities, regardless of purpose. South Korea would also likely need to give up its place under the U.S. “nuclear umbrella”—a protection which currently grants it a kind of semi-status as a nuclear power, even if the weapons are not its own (the same applies to Japan and Taiwan). The U.S. “nuclear umbrella” assurances were issued to Seoul in return for a commitment not to develop nuclear weapons of its own. A withdrawal of these assurances would also free Seoul of that commitment. As a result, the Korean peninsula would have to be made completely free not only of North Korean nuclear weapons but also of the nuclear technologies and material that could be used by the ROK to build nuclear weapons.

Irreversibility is also challenging because under existing U.S.-ROK military cooperation treaties, U.S. nuclear-armed submarines and bombers can be deployed in the south of the Korean peninsula to participate in military exercises. This reality means that any removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea would, under these treaties, be reversible by definition. To prevent a reappearance of these weapons on the peninsula in the future, the United States and South Korea would have to terminate their existing military cooperation agreements, and the United States would have to disarm. Even the “soft” option—the ROK relinquishing only its access to nuclear weapons—is difficult to imagine, given how integral U.S. nuclear weapons have become to that country’s security arrangements over the decades.

The final point is *verification*. There would need to be international inspections to monitor the progress of North Korean nuclear disarmament and the termination of ROK nuclear programs. U.S. military facilities on the Korean peninsula would also have to be inspected for any tactical nuclear weapons. Considering that the DPRK does not believe the United States genuinely withdrew its nuclear weapons from the south of the peninsula in 1991, and that Pyongyang cannot be certain U.S. nukes will not be deployed there again in the future, the need for verification becomes an unsurmountable obstacle.⁸⁸ The conclusion is obvious: the CVID model is impossible to implement.

CVIG (CVI Plus Security Guarantees for the DPRK)

In the event of a successful denuclearization of the entire peninsula, the DPRK would need to obtain security assurances from the United States. Since the denuclearization should be complete, irreversible, and verifiable, logic dictates that the same terms must apply to any U.S. security assurances. But it is difficult to view promises of this nature as “irreversible.” Treaties and agreements never truly endure; they tend to remain in force only so long as they serve the interests of the countries that signed them. For example, U.S. pullout from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and from the nuclear deal with Iran, as well as ongoing preparations for its withdrawal from the INF Treaty, have obvious repercussions in Pyongyang (and elsewhere) on the image and reputation of the United States as a reliable partner. Fortunately, Kim Jong-un has declared that he is going to leave the bad history of U.S.-DPRK relations in the past, which may indicate an intention to build confidence with the United States despite the collapse of the 1994 Framework

88. Han Seung-ho, “North Korea Group ‘America, South Korea must prove no nuclear weapons,’” *Hankyoreh*, July 14, 2007, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/PRINT/222515.html>.

Agreement.⁸⁹ But Chairman Kim has surely taken note of the recent U.S. pullout from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1 and the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is no guarantee that Washington would treat an agreement with the DPRK any differently. Additionally, unlike North Korean leaders, U.S. presidents come and go, and U.S. foreign policy tends to change with the arrival of a new administration. As a result, Donald Trump's successor in the White House may well put an end to any agreements between Trump and Kim Jong-un.

As for the verification of U.S. security assurances to North Korea, there would have to be an international body to monitor the fulfillment of these commitments, in the same way that international inspectors currently monitor nuclear facilities. Since the Northeast Asian states have proved unable to establish an integrated security mechanism and their differences are only growing, establishing an independent and impartial body does not appear to be a realistic prospect.

89. "New Year Address of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un," KCNA, January 1, 2019, <http://kcna.kp/kcna.user.special.getArticlePage.kcmsf>.

5 | Nuclear Weapons and North Korea's Strategic Goals

Motivation for Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

Numerous opinions exist about the DPRK's motivation for acquiring nuclear weapons and how those weapons fit into the country's strategies. One view is that the DPRK is seeking a legitimization of its status as a nuclear-weapon state—but according to DPRK representatives, Pyongyang is not seeking the recognition of other nuclear powers, and it is sufficient for the North Koreans themselves to know that they are now a nuclear power. The fact that the DPRK remains outside of any relevant treaties and mechanisms directed at nuclear states—and that the restrictions imposed by those mechanisms do not apply to Pyongyang—is a problem for the international community, not for Pyongyang itself, although it will have to be resolved in the future as North Korea integrates into the international community. As for the DPRK itself, its place outside extant nuclear and conventional weapons treaties only works in its favor, leaving it free to develop all kinds of weapons systems in the meantime.

In his paper, Daniel Wertz describes the three most common points of view currently held on the DPRK's motivation for acquiring nuclear weapons.⁹⁰ The first is based on viewing North Korea as an *isolated state*—a view shared by Bruce Cumings, Leon V. Sigal, Henri Féron, and others. It asserts that the DPRK has sought to acquire nuclear weapons as a result of feeling vulnerable, surrounded by unreliable allies—or outright foes—whose goal is to destroy the North Korean regime. This combination of vulnerability, nationalism, and the regime's determination to survive go on to dictate domestic and foreign policy in the DPRK. This perspective views Pyongyang's long attempts at achieving a normalization with the United States as North Korea seeking to guarantee its own security and to end its dependence on China. The nuclear program, then, starts out as a bargaining chip toward that goal—but after several failed attempts at normalization, the DPRK transitions to developing a legitimate nuclear deterrent, in the aim of achieving a more reliable instrument to counteract its vulnerability and isolation.

The second approach views North Korea as a *hyper-realist state*, whose leadership regards military power (rather than any alliances or partnerships) as the only guarantee of

90. Daniel Wertz, "The U.S., North Korea and Nuclear Diplomacy," The National Committee on North Korea, October 2018, <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/history-u.s.-dprk-relations>.

security.⁹¹ Regardless of any concessions and promises the DPRK may make during talks, its leadership has always pursued the strategic goal of building a nuclear arsenal. From this point of view, nuclear weapons are a way of preventing a foreign military intervention and a regime change. They allow Pyongyang to assert its interests and even violate international rules with relative impunity. The North Korean nuclear arsenal and the tensions it has stirred are also a tool for bolstering the regime and rallying the North Korean populace around the flag. Under this approach, negotiations with North Korea on the nuclear problem may be a form of crisis management, but they will never achieve a disarmament or any fundamental change in the DPRK.

The third approach views North Korea as a *revisionist state*. Proponents of this view (B.R. Myers, Benjamin R. Young) argue that North Korea has developed nuclear weapons for offense rather than defense, and that it intends to use its nuclear arsenal to split the U.S.-ROK alliance and seize the south of the Korean peninsula. Despite the profound changes on both sides of the 38th parallel since the end of the Korean War, and the implausibility of the scenario of the North annexing the South (or vice versa, for that matter), this hypothesis posits that Pyongyang is driven by ideological considerations and that its priority is to unify the peninsula under its own rule— the “final victory” Kim Jong-un alludes to in his speeches. In this scenario, the nuclear arsenal exists to defeat the South and prevent a U.S. invasion. The experts who hold to this theory usually believe that Pyongyang is simply manipulating the United States at the talks.

Each of these approaches has its merits, but for the DPRK, nuclear weapons are not just an instrument of security, domestic politics, or prestige. They are also a means to achieve its strategic goals, which are not limited to the Korean peninsula. As a result, each of the approaches described above does not encompass the entire range of North Korean motivations—but the three approaches are mutually complementary.

Most likely, the DPRK is driven by realism. Evidence for that is as follows:

- The DPRK wants to be able to count only on its own resources in protecting its national interests, providing its own defense, and pursuing its foreign policy course;
- The DPRK is trying to wring the maximum benefit from its geopolitical situation; and
- The DPRK believes that peace is possible only when there is a balance of power between different nations that is grounded in their ability to inflict unacceptable damage (ideally, mutual destruction) on each other.

The table below outlines all the factors that may have driven the DPRK to acquire a nuclear arsenal.

91. Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Table 2: Possible DPRK motivations for acquiring nuclear weapons.

<i>Security</i>	The most likely adversary being a nuclear-weapon state; complex relations with/between allies; rejection of alliances; need for deterrence against neighboring states
<i>Status and prestige</i>	Being seen as “a nuclear power in the East” ⁹²
<i>Domestic factors (politics, ideology)</i>	Justification for economic problems; making nuclear-weapon status part of the constitution
<i>Technological progress</i>	Mastering the technologies required for militarization of the nuclear program
<i>Foreign-policy factors</i>	Aspiration to neutrality; political independence; need for an instrument of deterrence vs. major powers; pursuit of foreign policy goals
<i>Economic considerations</i>	Emphasis on nuclear weapons as the most economically sensible instrument of deterrence

An analysis of these factors suggests that even the most impartial approaches to denuclearization are impossible to implement because all of the proposed ways of compensating the DPRK for relinquishing its nuclear weapons regard those weapons only as a security instrument. No approach currently being considered takes into account that North Korea also views nuclear weapons as a symbol of prestige, as an integral part of the national ideology and domestic politics, and ultimately as a means of protecting a whole range of national interests.

Real Interests of the Key Actors

Analysis of the current approach to resolving the Korean nuclear problem suggests that the parties involved are deliberately repeating mistakes made at the Six-Party Talks (as well as many earlier rounds of negotiations with the DPRK). It is hard to imagine the U.S. leadership being unaware of the DPRK position on such an important issue as defining “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.” It is therefore pointless to demand that North Korea denuclearize in accordance with the U.S. model or to speak of any agreements reached by the countries during summits. On the contrary, based on the diametrically opposed ideas about denuclearization held by the DPRK and the United States, it is safe to assert that the parties did not agree on anything at the Singapore summit. It was also entirely predictable that Pyongyang would refuse to make any unilateral concessions without obtaining clear guarantees. The tactics in evidence at the Six-Party Talks may have been justifiable back in the 2000s, when the DPRK lacked a nuclear arsenal and faced serious economic problems: in theory, it could have considered dismantling its nuclear weapons program for the sake of sorting out its economy. But sticking to these outdated approaches seems bizarre in the face of a North Korea that has become a de facto nuclear-weapon state while also managing to keep its economy afloat, and has even achieved progress in economy and diplomacy.

92. “DPRK, Nuclear Power in East,” KCNA Watch, April 25, 2017, <https://kcnawatch.org/new-stream/1493103992-994551589/dprk-nuclear-power-in-east/>.

There are two possible reasons why the major powers are repeating the mistakes of the past. One is their determination to ignore recent changes in the balance of power, both in Northeast Asia and globally. By clinging to ideas of a world dominated by one or two superpowers, their attempts at building strategies rely on archaic Cold War thinking. China, which aspires to fill the role of a new superpower, continues to treat the DPRK (as well as the ROK) in the way an “imperial power” would treat its tributary states. The United States, in the meantime, continues to regard itself as the world’s only superpower that has the right to draw the lines and lay down the law for other countries. The major powers are ignoring the emergence of new centers of power in Northeast Asia—and the Korean peninsula is undoubtedly one such center.⁹³

Alternatively, the major powers may be well aware of recent developments but also be determined to maintain the status quo for as long as possible, delaying changes for which they are not ready. Consider, for example, the fact that the United States has not even tried to use any approach other than pressure in dealing with the DPRK. It has not tried to bring its soft power to bear or to undermine the regime from within by establishing ties with members of the North Korean elite. Washington must be aware of the reality of the DPRK regime and its nuclear status, and it has surely considered that other approaches may be more effective in denuclearization. It follows, according to this analysis, that North Korean denuclearization cannot be the real goal. In fact, the threat posed by a nuclear North Korea is relatively low, certainly when compared to the potential emergence of another nuclear-weapon state (such as Iran, which has likely concluded from the history of U.S.-North Korea interactions that having nuclear weapons capability offers a greater security margin than relinquishing it). Further, people are already starting to get used to the idea of a DPRK armed with nuclear weapons. There is an argument to be made that the consequences of denuclearizing North Korea would be a net negative.

In fact, a nuclear-armed North Korea may bring practical benefits to the United States and other countries in Northeast Asia, including Russia and China. The United States may benefit because a nuclear-armed Pyongyang will not fall under total Chinese control. It will continue to play the part of a relatively independent state, acting as a buffer that could at some later point become capable of containing China. As for Russia and China, North Korean nuclear weapons guarantee the DPRK regime’s survival by forestalling any external attempts at regime change through military force—which is important to China and Russia because it maintains stability on their shared border with the DPRK. This stability avoids the need for Russia and China to deal with the influx of refugees that usually follows major conflicts or civil wars, and it has the added benefit of keeping U.S. forces at a distance. China needs the DPRK as a buffer and a bargaining chip at talks with the United States. North Korea’s nuclear disarmament would strip China of that valuable bargaining chip; even more importantly, it would endanger the DPRK’s continued survival and stability on the DPRK-PRC border. In the current circumstances, with U.S.-China rivalry gaining momentum, North Korea is becoming all the more valuable as a buffer state. Ultimately, the value of its nuclear weapons rises in proportion.

93. Sergei Lavrov, “Russia in the 21st-Century World of Power,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 27, 2012, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russia-in-the-21st-Century-World-of-Power-15809>.

Instability resulting from the DPRK nuclear program has been used for many years as a pretext for militarization by all powers in the region. The United States, for instance, has deployed THAAD systems in South Korea; these interceptors are useless against the DPRK but are positioned to be entirely capable versus potential Chinese missiles.⁹⁴ Unsurprisingly, Russia and China are concerned that the missile defense system, of which the THAAD batteries are an integral component, may be used as a cover for a strategic offensive by the United States at some point in the future. That is why THAAD deployment is seen in Moscow and Beijing as part of U.S. preparations for deploying additional offensive weapons in the region. Meanwhile, both Russia and China have bolstered their own strategic weapons, hypersonic systems, and countermeasures against the U.S. missile defense system.⁹⁵ Experts in both countries are discussing ideas for a collective missile defense system of their own.⁹⁶ China has deployed Dongfeng-41 ICBMs in a province that shares a border with the DPRK and conducted test launches of DF-5C long-range ballistic missiles carrying 10 warheads each.⁹⁷ Russia has completed R&D on the Barguzin railway-based intercontinental ballistic missile.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Japan has used the pretext of the “North Korean threat” to upgrade its navy to well above the minimum self-defense requirements, prompting neighboring states to talk of Japan’s remilitarization.⁹⁹

The arms race has already spread beyond Northeast Asia. India has joined the ranks of countries that possess the nuclear triad, successfully launching the Arihant nuclear missile submarine. Pakistan has test-launched its new Ababeel ballistic missile. Iran, Israel, and other states have also developed impressive new weapons systems. Viewed in this context—which is exactly how they should be viewed—North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities seem mundane, but they have served as an excellent excuse for a military buildup in Northeast Asia. And since the regional branch of the arms race is far from over, countries in the region have no genuine interest in the elimination of the formal pretext for that race, that is, DPRK nuclear ambitions and the U.S. response to them.

The DPRK nuclear arsenal has become an integral part of the security landscape, not only for the country itself but also for the entire region. North Korea has effectively altered the entire regional setup. Denuclearization, in all its possible versions and permutations, would unquestionably cause new changes, and since states in the region have only just now begun to get used to the ripples caused by a nuclear North Korea, they are clearly

94. Jennifer Williams, “THAAD, the missile defense system kicking off a new U.S.-China fight, explained,” Vox Media, May 2, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/3/10/14882778/thaad-south-korea-missile-defense-system-china-explained>.

95. Bill Gertz, “Air Force: Hypersonic Missiles From China, Russia Pose Growing Danger to U.S.,” The Washington Free Beacon, November 30, 2016, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/air-force-hypersonic-missiles-china-russia-pose-growing-danger-u-s/>.

96. Ramil Sitdikov, “Will Russia and China Build an SCO-Based Joint Missile Defense System?” *Sputnik*, July 20, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201607201043363315-russia-china-joint-missile-defense/>; Chen Hanhui, “China and Russia are to enhance cooperation to counter THAAD,” China News, August 1, 2016, <http://finance.chinanews.com/mil/2016/08-05/7962882.shtml>.

97. “China deploys DF-41 nuclear ballistic missiles ‘responding to US missile defense in Asia,’” South Front, January 25, 2017, <https://southfront.org/china-deploys-df-41-nuclear-ballistic-missiles-responding-to-us-missile-defense-in-asia/>; Alexey Orlov, “China tested a ballistic missile with 10 warheads,” Ministry of Defence, February 1, 2017, <https://defence.ru/article/kitai-ispital-ballisicheskuyu-raketu-s-10-boegolovkami/>.

98. Michael Peck, “Russia’s Nuclear Missile ‘Death Train’ Arriving in 2019,” *National Interest*, February 26, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/russias-nuclear-missile-death-train-arriving-2019-19581>.

99. Daviv J. Bercuson, “Why Japan is building its military fast,” *National Post*, November 6, 2018, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/david-j-bercuson-why-japan-is-building-its-military-fast>.

unprepared for more. That is why delaying the process and pushing back the day when more change becomes inevitable is in the interests of all parties in the ongoing DPRK dialogue. Talks will remain just talks, but they will help their most active participants—the United States, the DPRK, and China—win more time.

6 | Dialogue Formats

When we look back at the record of past negotiations, the greatest progress has been achieved when the talks involved only the two Koreas, without any third parties. Using the same approach for U.S.-DPRK talks, however, would be much more difficult. The relationship between these two states stems from events surrounding the division of the Korean peninsula, events which themselves involved several external powers: the United States itself; Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union; China, which fought in the Korean War; and Japan, whose past militaristic policies had led to the occupation of the peninsula and then to its division into two separate states. Some experts therefore suggest that any future U.S.-DPRK settlement should involve all these nations. However, there have been important changes in the regional situation and the balance of power in the decades since the division of Korea. Using a multilateral format to resolve the specific issue of bilateral relations may no longer be appropriate, particularly given the many questions raised by the new status quo in the region. Where previously the issue was limited to a U.S.-DPRK settlement, now there is also the need to resolve the Korean nuclear problem. Furthermore, a settlement would involve signing a peace treaty, which would likely replace the 1953 Armistice. All of these issues can be encompassed by the term "Peace-Building on the Korean Peninsula."

The Korean Nuclear Problem

The record of the Six-Party Talks on the Korean nuclear problem demonstrates why such a format is ineffective. Even back in 2005, experts such as Charles L. Pritchard warned that should the six-party dialogue ever resume, it would be "talks for the sake of talks," serving neither DPRK nor U.S. interests.¹⁰⁰ He predicted that the negotiations would end up deadlocked, with Northeast Asia needing to live with a new status quo that includes a nuclear-armed North Korea. He has since been proved right. Instead of resolving the Korean nuclear problem—once called "the North Korean nuclear problem"—multilateral dialogue has led to the rise of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state. This was entirely predictable, seeing as the participants of the talks were using the dialogue in their own interests, sometimes even to resolve issues that bore little relevance to the subject matter of the talks. For example, China, a "sponsor" and the host of the talks, used

100. Charles L. Pritchard, "The Korean Peninsula and the role of multilateral talks," Brookings Institution, 2005, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/pdf-art2275.pdf>.

ongoing attempts at resolving the “nuclear crisis” in order to bolster its own international standing. Russia used the talks to maintain its presence in Northeast Asia, where it had lost ground since the breakup of the former Soviet Union. Japan used the Six-Party Talks to settle its own scores with the DPRK by inappropriately raising the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by the North Korean secret services, something completely unrelated to the subject matter of the negotiations. Both the United States and Japan were trying to prevent China from playing a greater role and opposed not only the DPRK nuclear weapons program but also its peaceful nuclear energy program.¹⁰¹ In fact, none of the parties—with the possible exception of North Korea itself—were interested in seeing radical changes in the region. The agenda of the talks, and their rather unfortunate format, were aimed at delaying any change, preserving the status quo, and strengthening the positions of the individual parties involved.

The situation has, if anything, changed for the worse since then. The former participants of the Six-Party Talks have failed to agree to a cooperative security mechanism; in fact, their differences have only grown. Washington’s relations with Russia and China have deteriorated, as has the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan. Rivalry between China and Japan is on the rise. The new status of the DPRK makes it impossible to continue treating it as a piece on the game board; to the contrary, it is a player in its own right, who can now negotiate from a position of strength. If talks were to resume using the former six-party format, they would become another arena for the parties to settle their own scores and bicker about matters completely unrelated to the central subject. It is also safe to predict that the participants would immediately split into two opposing camps, with Russia, China, and the DPRK on the one side, and the United States, the ROK, and Japan on the other.

Multilateral Dialogue

Some experts argue that multilateralism favors the peace-building process on the Korean peninsula. They cite the need to maintain the balance of power and to take into account the interests of all Northeast Asian states. They also cite the need to reinforce and stabilize the peace-building process, since governments come and go and each successive government brings new approaches to the table—both to foreign-policy problems in general and to specific issues discussed at relevant talks.¹⁰² Advocates of multilateralism argue that, ideally, multilateral talks would entail Northeast Asian economic cooperation projects that could be implemented once the current problems were resolved. Finally, experts believe that a multilateral format of negotiations would help to share the financial burden, once the time comes to compensate North Korea for relinquishing nuclear weapons.”¹⁰³

At the same time, the multilateral format of negotiations also has several major downsides. The rotation of governments in the countries involved (previously cited as an argument in favor of such a format) may bring in too many changing views and shifting perspectives, causing more harm than good. Two cases in point are the wild swings in

101. Xiaodon Liang, “The Six-Party Talks at a Glance,” Arms Control Association, June 2018, <https://www.arms-control.org/factsheets/6partytalks>.

102. Lee Jae-seung, “Peace-Building on the Korean Peninsula: Does Multilateralism Matter?” (lecture presented at John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2019).

103. Ibid.

Seoul's policy on North Korea and the current differences within the U.S. military-political leadership. Particularly on issues as charged as resolving the Korean nuclear problem and achieving a U.S.-DPRK settlement, it is far easier to find an agreement after a change of government or a shift in political strategies if only two countries are involved, rather than six or more. As for multilateral economic cooperation projects, it has been suggested that it would be a mistake to link negotiations on political problems to economic projects (or to make the implementation of such projects contingent on political preconditions).

Signing a Peace Treaty

Current proposals on the format of a putative peace treaty (or, more specifically, attempts to link this matter to the nuclear talks and denuclearization) are also problematic. Experts largely agree that there needs to be a peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement; some argue that China should also be a party to the future treaty, since it fought in the war on North Korea's side.¹⁰⁴ That being said, scholars such as Konstantin Asmolov point out that neither China nor the United States fought in Korea under their own flag. The Chinese provided only volunteers, whereas U.S. troops were formally part of the UN forces.¹⁰⁵ Based on that logic, the treaty should be signed between the DPRK and the UN. Alternatively, all the countries that participated in the war one way or another should sign. For instance, Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union, is not among the parties who signed the Armistice in 1953, but it is well-known that the Soviet Union did participate in the Korean War. In fact, Chinese participation would not have been possible without Moscow's approval. Russia, China, and the United States therefore find themselves in the same situation regarding the peace treaty. As the Soviet Union's successor and a member of the UN, Russia has both the right and the obligation to participate in the Korean settlement (that is, in formally ending the Korean War) along with all other parties. What is more, if one delves deeper into the origins of the Korean division and the ensuing war, it becomes clear that both Russia (as the successor of the Soviet Union) and the United States should take responsibility because they are the ones who drew the division line in order to accept Japan's capitulation in 1945.¹⁰⁶

U.S.-DPRK Settlement

This issue should be discussed separately. It is worth noting, however, that a multilateral format to discuss this settlement would be inadvisable: none of the countries involved are interested in seeing this settlement happen, which is why they will hamper rather than facilitate the bilateral dialogue. A multilateral format would not be an effective alternative to bilateral talks (or talks facilitated by a mediator).

104. Edward Wong, "Why Is the U.S. Wary of a Declaration to End the Korean War?" *New York Times*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/world/asia/korea-peace-treaty-trump-us.html>; Josh Smith, "When to end the war? North Korea, U.S. at odds over path to peace," Reuters, July 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-peace-analysis/when-to-end-the-war-north-korea-us-at-odds-over-path-to-peace-idUSKBN1KGOPC>.

105. Konstantin Asmolov, "On Chinese draft of quadrilateral peace treaty on the results of the Korean war," *Novoye Vostochnoye Obozreniye*, April 19, 2018, <https://ru.journal-neo.org/2018/04/19/for-the-chinese-quadrilateral-peace-treaty-draft-on-the-results-of-the-korean-war/>.

106. Anastasia Barannikova, "Why Russia bears responsibility for the situation on the Korean Peninsula," *Sluzhu Otechestvu*, March 21, 2019, <http://sluzhuotechestvu.info/2019/03/39273/>.

Choosing a Mediator to Facilitate Negotiations

The ROK government is not refusing to mediate between the United States and the DPRK, but it is also pursuing its own interests. The inter-Korean dialogue that began simultaneously with the U.S.-DPRK dialogue has already yielded practical results; in fact, it looks the more promising of the two (provided that President Moon remains in office). The ROK leadership also realizes the need for serious measures to improve U.S.-DPRK relations. However, Seoul and Pyongyang have different views on what resolving the Korean nuclear problem should look like, and they disagree on peacebuilding on the Korean peninsula. Unlike Washington, which insists on starting with denuclearization, Seoul believes that the DPRK should first be put in a situation where it no longer needs nuclear weapons. To Moon Jae-in, inter-Korean rapprochement is more important than denuclearization. The latter is seen from Seoul as a long-term goal that may take many years to achieve. It is far more important for South Koreans to engage the North in economic cooperation, in the hope that this will lead to a transformation of inter-Korean relations—and later, to an understanding between the DPRK and the United States. Most South Koreans support their current president's policy on the DPRK.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of whether he succeeds at implementing that policy to its full extent, South Korean mediation has already played a positive role. Some observers have taken to calling the Winter Olympics, which were the starting point for the ongoing talks, the “Pyeongchang Winter Political Games.”¹⁰⁸

Speaking of alternative mediators, no one in Northeast Asia is genuinely interested in a U.S.-DPRK normalization, with the possible exception of neutral states such as Mongolia and Russia. Of course, these countries also pursue their own interests when they offer to host the talks, but those interests are limited to bolstering their own prestige and standing in the region rather than strengthening their military or economic presence in Northeast Asia. Such relative neutrality makes it possible to consider them as potential mediators in any future U.S.-DPRK talks. But there is an important factor that must be taken into account when dealing with those countries: their dependence on China and their tendency to support the Chinese approach to the Korean peninsula for lack of any strategies of their own.

Mongolia has a lot in common with the DPRK in terms of its geostrategic and geopolitical situation in Asia, despite their diametrically opposed attitude to nuclear weapons (Mongolia's nuclear-weapons-free status is part of its constitution). The country is forced to maintain a balancing act between the major powers, and it occasionally becomes an arena of political or economic rivalry between them. At the same time, Mongolia, despite its economic dependence on China (which almost everyone has these days), pursues a multi-pillar approach and a “soft balancing” strategy between Russia, China, and a “third neighbor” when it comes to security matters—the role of the “third neighbor” being played by the United States, the European Union, Japan, or South Korea, depending on the time and the

107. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, “Moon Aims to Lock-In Diplomacy with North Korea,” *National Interest*, February 11, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/moon-aims-lock-diplomacy-north-korea-44237>.

108. “The Political Games at the 2018 Winter Olympics,” *Stratfor*, February 8, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/political-games-2018-winter-olympics>.

circumstance.¹⁰⁹ There is, therefore, a chance that Mongolia will not unquestioningly support China on all Korean matters.

Mongolia has also long maintained good relations with the DPRK.¹¹⁰ Both rightly regard each other as a “safe” country with which to cooperate because, unlike Russia, China, or the United States, neither will encroach on the other’s sovereignty or economic independence. The DPRK and Mongolia also have something to offer each other: North Korea may be interested in Mongolia’s experience building relations with the United States and implementing the “third neighbor” concept, while Mongolia must consider North Korea’s seaports and the chance to reduce its dependence on China. There is also Mongolia’s experience as a nuclear-weapons-free zone, which may be of interest to the DPRK and the other countries who want to resolve the Korean nuclear problem.¹¹¹ Finally, Mongolia has long positioned itself as a neutral state and a convenient venue for international talks on such issues as the Korean nuclear crisis. By playing this role, Mongolia bolsters its standing in Northeast Asia, as well as its reputation in the international political arena.

Bilateral Dialogue

A pure bilateral discussion would be the most effective format for improving U.S.-DPRK relations. Unfortunately, it would be extremely difficult to implement, both because of competing forces and interests within the U.S. military-political leadership and in view of China’s influence on the DPRK. It would require not only coordinated steps and a large degree of confidentiality on the part of President Trump and Chairman Kim but also a careful approach to selecting the negotiators. So far, the U.S.-DPRK dialogue has failed to yield significant results, and the second Trump-Kim summit broke off early. Possible explanations include both sides making the wrong choice of diplomats responsible for the negotiations. Last November, the United States asked the DPRK to replace Kim Yong-chol with the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs without giving any explanations for the request. Shortly after the summit in Hanoi, Kim Yong-chol was removed from the talks, but now it was North Korea’s turn: Pyongyang asked Washington to replace State Secretary Pompeo with another negotiator.

U.S. hardliners insist that if Trump had been the only U.S. official involved in the talks, he would have already reached an agreement with Kim—causing harm to U.S. national interests and making unilateral concessions in the process. During the talks, Trump’s opponents did everything they could to prevent him from negotiating effectively and making decisions of his own. On the other hand, if a group of advisers who represent competing forces were to be included in the talks, that would derail the entire process. Russian experts such as Georgy Toloraya believe that there has been a “massive deep-state campaign”—in other words, a campaign by the administration, the Department of State,

109. Tristan Kenderdain, “Mongolia joins China’s ‘One belt, one road’ initiative,” Eurasianet, July 9, 2017, <https://russian.eurasianet.org/node/64541>; Konstantin Kokarev, “Cooperation with Mongolia is an important part of Russia’s eastern policy,” Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, November 13, 2014, <https://riss.ru/analitics/6819/>.

110. “DPRK and Mongolia agreed to maintain traditionally good relations,” Xinhua News, February 6, 2018, http://russian.news.cn/2018-02/06/c_136953602.htm.

111. “Nuclear-weapon-free status of Mongolia,” Nuclear Threat Initiative, April 30, 2018, <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/nuclear-weapon-free-status-mongolia/>.

and other entities—to derail the talks and continue with the old policy of isolating and pressuring North Korea. They also point out that President Trump’s position veered sharply after consultations with National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo.¹¹²

The U.S. stance in negotiations was affected by internal factors, but the situation in the DPRK is different. Kim Jong-un’s domestic situation is very secure at the moment; for example, he feels entirely at liberty to leave the country for foreign trips. Therefore, only external factors could affect Pyongyang’s position at the talks, and the only external player to wield that much influence is China. But whereas the campaign in the United States was very public, with extensive media reporting and a lot of debate among experts (such as the CSIS report about alleged secret DPRK bases, released shortly before the summit), Chinese influence is much harder to prove, even if its existence is beyond any doubt.¹¹³ In a March 2019 South Korean newspaper article headlined “Breakdown of milestone DPRK-US talks,” the author speculates that the conditions voiced by Pyongyang at the summits—especially its insistence on U.S. troop pullout from the south of the Korean peninsula—were China’s demands, not its own.¹¹⁴

Since the talks on denuclearization are now being linked to the idea of signing a peace treaty (though ideally these two processes should go in parallel), it makes sense that the format of these negotiations should follow the model of peace treaty negotiations. In other words, if the goal is a peace treaty between the United States and the DPRK (even though legally speaking, that would not be entirely correct), then any future talks about denuclearization in the Korean peninsula should ideally be held in a bilateral format, free from any third country intervention.

112. Georgy Toloraya, “North Korea: The Path to Denuclearization will be winding,” Valdai Discussion Club, March 20, 2019, http://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/put-k-denuklearizatsii/?fbclid=IwAR2C45fpNeTlXIuwan_8xZorDjH1ASbeS8FsdgFJ6iPO4GmKDuig3pYzsl.

113. Joseph Bermudez, Victor Cha, and Lisa Collins, “Undeclared North Korea: The Sino-ri Missile Operating Base and Strategic Force Facilities,” CSIS, January 21, 2019, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/undeclared-north-korea-the-sino-ri-missile-operating-base-and-strategic-force-facilities/>.

114. Nam Moon-hee, “What was historical North Korea-US summit like?” *Sisain*, March 11, 2019, https://m.sisain.co.kr/?mod=news&act=articleView&idxno=34075&utm_source=dable.

7 | Russian Position on the Korean Nuclear Problem

Russia is officially opposed to the DPRK's status as a nuclear-weapon state, primarily because it continues to regard the DPRK as bound by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)—arguing that since Pyongyang did not follow the correct procedure for terminating its membership, it is still technically an NPT member. Russia is also very conservative on all matters related to the NPT. It believes that only those countries that manufactured and detonated a nuclear weapon or another nuclear explosive device before January 1, 1967 qualify as nuclear-weapon states. Russia advocates for universal membership of the NPT and calls for the de facto nuclear-weapon states—Israel, India, and Pakistan—to join as non-nuclear-weapon states.¹¹⁵ From that point of view, Moscow does not regard any of the de facto nuclear-weapon states as being different from one another. At the same time, Russia does respect each country's right to defend itself and believes that calls for the “unofficial nuclear-weapon states” to disarm and join the NPT should go hand in hand with proposing realistic measures to strengthen international security.¹¹⁶

Russia regards the DPRK nuclear ambitions as part of a more complex “Korean peninsula nuclear issue,” and therefore is not inclined to lay the blame for the existing situation on Pyongyang.¹¹⁷ The Russian expert community shares that view. For example, Ilya Dyachkov points out that “the Korean nuclear problem is not limited to North Korean nuclear research and development; it is a multifaceted international political phenomenon with a complex history.”¹¹⁸ With that definition of the Korean nuclear problem in mind, even a denuclearization of the entire Korean peninsula would not offer a comprehensive solution, since the broader security concerns in Northeast Asia would remain unresolved. There is no denying that over the decades the Northeast Asian security architecture has undergone dramatic changes that have since become irreversible.

115. Elena Chernenko, “No country will disarm to the detriment of itself,” *Kommersant*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3408885>.

116. Dmitry Stefanovich, “The DPRK and nuclear non-proliferation: deathblow or shock therapy?” Russian International Affairs Council, January 23, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/kndr-i-yadernoe-nerasprostranenie-smertelnyy-udar-ili-shokovaya-terapiya/>.

117. “Russia and the settlement of the situation on the Korean Peninsula,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.mid.ru/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwI2FuDbhJx9/content/rossia-i-uregulirovanie-situacii-na-korejs-kom-poluostrove.

118. Ilya Dyachkov, “Korean nuclear problem: approaches to assessing threats,” *Vestnik Tambovskogo universiteta*, 2014, <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/yadernaya-problema-koreyskogo-poluostrova-podhody-k-otsenke-ugroz>.

Another unresolved issue is DPRK security. As President Putin explained at the Eastern Economic Forum in 2017, “[North Koreans] know full well how the situation developed, for example, in Iraq . . . and they see possession of nuclear weapons and missiles as the only way to defend themselves.”¹¹⁹ Russian experts also emphasize that “the DPRK needs nuclear weapons to ensure its own sovereignty and security”¹²⁰ and that “if North Korea did not have a nuclear program, there is a good chance that the country would have already been bombed into rubble.”¹²¹ Such statements clearly show that Russia has a strong understanding of Pyongyang’s motives for building nuclear capability. But the Russian analysis also suggests that, at this point in time, North Korea seems to have no suitable alternative to nuclear weapons.

There is very little Russia can offer the DPRK in terms of security, especially since the two countries do not even have a military cooperation treaty. The agreement signed in 2000 to replace the 1961 Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaty does not include any military cooperation clauses. Even if such a treaty were to be signed over the next few months, the DPRK would not automatically relinquish its nuclear arsenal, since doing so would have catastrophic consequences for North Korean security and internal stability. Furthermore, instability in North Korea and chaos on its borders would represent a far greater threat to Russia itself than North Korea’s status as a nuclear-weapon state.

There is in fact an impression that Russia is not genuinely concerned by the DPRK nuclear arsenal. Moscow reacts only to those North Korean nuclear tests and other actions that draw a response from the United States. It may well be that the Russian government is right, and a nuclear-armed North Korea does not represent a threat to their country. As part of its multivector foreign policy, Russia tends to pay particular attention to the regions or nations that cause special concern in terms of security or those that seem very promising in terms of future cooperation. Russia’s lack of attention to the Korean peninsula may signify that it does not perceive it as a threat. Additionally, Moscow and Pyongyang have long enjoyed a special relationship; although there have been periods of less cordial relations, there have never been outright conflicts between the two. Russia’s passive position may actually be an advantage when dealing with a state such as the DPRK. Russia avoids any attempts at interference in North Korean internal affairs, which is why Pyongyang does not regard it as an external threat; in fact, Moscow has earned more trust in Pyongyang than China, given the latter’s forceful pursuit of its own economic interests. Finally, Russia and the DPRK have adopted a similar stance on respect for national sovereignty as the core principle of international relations.

Most Russian experts believe that the DPRK nuclear program is defensive. From that point of view, North Korean nuclear weapons pose no threat to any country that does not plan on attacking North Korea. Beyond the military doctrines released into the public domain, little is known about Russia’s military planning, but the nature of Russia-DPRK bilateral relations makes it safe to assert that Russia has no hostile intentions toward

119. “Speech of President of Russia at the Plenary meeting of the Eastern Economic Forum,” Kremlin.ru, September 7, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55552>.

120. Alexey Zakvasin, “‘There are no naive in Pyongyang’: will the DPRK give up its nuclear forces for reunification of Korea,” RT, May 27, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/517086-kndr-tramp-yadernoe-oruzhie>.

121. Natalia Makeeva, “A way to defend sovereignty: is North Korea ready to use nuclear weapons,” RT, February 10, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/479523-kndr-yadernoe-oruzhie>.

North Korea. The only situation in which North Korean nuclear weapons would pose a potential real threat to Russian security is if the DPRK were to launch ICBMs at targets in the United States. In such an event, these missiles would overfly Russia, and they could be intercepted by U.S. missile defenses over Russian territory. That could lead to catastrophic consequences, including a military conflict between the world's two greatest nuclear powers.¹²² That being said, Russian experts believe that a DPRK attack against the United States is highly unlikely, because they are confident in the rationality of the DPRK leadership. The opinion that Kim Jong-un is entirely rational is also shared by Russian leaders: President Putin has described of Chairman Kim as a “competent and mature politician,” and he has asserted that Koreans in the South and in the North are well able to prevent a conflict on the Korean peninsula.¹²³

At some point in a distant future, North Korean nuclear weapons could come to pose a threat to Russian security, perhaps in the event of Korean reunification. Some Russian observers believe that a united and nuclear-armed Korea could press territorial claims against Russia and China.¹²⁴ But reunification itself will not become a possibility any time soon.

All that being said, North Korea's nuclear activities clearly do represent a nuclear safety risk in the region. Reports maintain that the DPRK nuclear tests were conducted “professionally” and did not raise radiation levels in the adjacent Russian territories, according to the Russian Maritime Territory's hydrometeorological office and the On-Site Inspection Division experts of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO).¹²⁵ But we know nothing about the safety precautions being taken for nuclear material storage and handling in North Korea. Russian experts have been calling for peaceful nuclear energy cooperation with the DPRK and a revision of international sanctions to enable such cooperation.¹²⁶ In terms of nuclear safety, pursuing cooperation with a de facto nuclear power would of course be preferable to ignoring or denying its status. If some of the sanctions on North Korea were lifted, early cooperation measures could focus on civil nuclear energy education.

Even though Russia pursues a conservative approach to the NPT and is opposed to recognizing North Korea's nuclear status, experts are already discussing the DPRK's “nuclear emancipation,” which would include recognizing it as a nuclear-weapon-state or as a “minor nuclear power.”¹²⁷ These ideas have a lot in common with the CRID model proposed

122. Joshua Pollack, “Nuclear Dangers from North Korea: Managing Risks to the US and Russia,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 30, 2017, <https://globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Krizis-vokrug-KNDR-i-vozmozhnyi-yadernyi-konflikt-Rossii-i-SShA-19097>.

123. “Putin described Kim Jong-un as a competent and mature politician and called for dialogue,” *ITAR-TASS*, January 12, 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/4868128>.

124. Konstantin Asmolov, “Future of Reunified Korea,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, April 28, 2018, <https://globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Budushee-Obedinennoi-Korei-19543>; Alexey Nechaev, “United Korea will Have Territorial Claims to Russia,” *Vzglyad*, March 7, 2018, <https://vz.ru/world/2018/3/7/911341.html>.

125. “Nuclear Test in the DPRK was safe for Primorye,” *Interfax*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/527436>; Oleg Rozhkov, “Nuclear Test in North Korea Poses No Radiation Threat,” interview by Elena Vapnichnaya, *UN News*, January 6, 2016, <https://news.un.org/ru/audio/2016/01/1031591>.

126. Alexander Vorontsov and Georgy Toloraya, “Military Alert On The Korean Peninsula: Time For Some Conclusions,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Korea_web_Eng.pdf.

127. *Proceedings of the round table on Dynamics of International and Political Processes in Northeast Asia in the first half of 2017*, June 29, 2017 (Vladivostok: Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far-East), <http://ihaefe.org/files/pacific-ocean-map/48.pdf>; Andrei Lankov, “Nuclear Program of North Korea: how to limit the threat,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, November 23, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77662>.

by Chinese experts, calling for a numerical and qualitative reduction of the DPRK nuclear arsenal while allowing Pyongyang to retain a small but credible nuclear deterrent.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the North Korean nuclear arsenal could conceivably serve Russian interests. First and foremost, that arsenal would assure security and stability for the DPRK, prevent any attempts by foreign powers to orchestrate a regime change by force, and enable the North Korean leadership to pursue national transformations of its own choosing. Security of the DPRK regime would preserve stability on Russia's eastern borders, which would make a welcome difference from the situation on its western borders and not drain the Russian leadership's attention and resources. Stability of the regime would prevent the potential influx of refugees and ensuing chaos that always follows conflicts and civil wars, and it would keep the U.S. forces at a comfortable distance. Nuclear weapons also prevent North Korea from becoming a puppet state controlled by another power.

Even though Russia was forced to support the sanctions against the DPRK (mostly in order to back the Chinese), doing so has not caused any significant deterioration in Russia-DPRK relations. The reasons for that stem from the nature of those relations. Russia's economic influence on North Korea was negligible even before the sanctions, so their bilateral economic cooperation has not been significantly affected (except in Russia's Far Eastern provinces). In other words, Pyongyang does not have any great expectations of Moscow, which is why it was not too disappointed when those expectations did not come to pass.

President Putin and Chairman Kim had their first meeting in 2019. The fact that the meeting took place after the fruitless Trump-Kim summit may have produced the impression that the DPRK is trying to use Russia as a counterbalance to Chinese influence. But given Russia's stance on the Korean peninsula, its ability to serve as a counterbalance is not at all obvious. On the other hand, with its strategy of active neutrality on Korean matters and noninterference in North Korean internal or external affairs, Russia could still serve as an effective mediator in U.S.-DPRK dialogue.

That being said, tensions between Russia and the United States remain a serious obstacle. The lack of mutual understanding between them on key international issues could make it difficult for Russia to serve as a facilitator between the United States and the DPRK, should Moscow even be willing to assume such a role. Nor can China's role be ignored. As Russia's relations with the United States (and the West as a whole) continue to deteriorate, it becomes ever closer to China, which leads to a tendency to support Beijing on all matters related to the Korean peninsula. Consequently, Moscow is likely to continue to support China on these matters, in return for Chinese support on issues of importance to Russia. This state of affairs has led some U.S. experts to say that Russia is only actively involved in Korean affairs when following the Chinese lead and that only Russia-China cooperation on Korean issues is regarded as a "decisive factor."¹²⁹ If Russia is to become more actively involved on the Korean peninsula, it must first become a more independent actor with a greater stake in facilitating U.S.-DPRK dialogue—something that will be impossible without a substantial improvement in U.S.-Russia relations.

128. Georgy Toloraya, "Towards Peace and Security in Korea—A Russian View," Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development 13 (Winter 2019), <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/towards-peace-and-security-in-korea>.

129. Lyle J. Goldstein, "The Russian Card on North Korea Has Yet to Be Played," *National Interest*, January 5, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russian-card-north-korea-has-yet-be-played-40582>.

8 | Conclusions and Recommendations

It is entirely possible for the DPRK and the United States to achieve a normalization; in fact, there is even the potential for cooperation between the two. However, achieving this outcome would require revising the format and agenda of future talks, and the United States would have to change how it sees North Korea's place and role in its regional strategies.

History shows that when the DPRK was able to maintain a balancing act between the Soviet Union and China, it led a normal existence, and the situation in Northeast Asia was relatively calm. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the DPRK tried to use the United States as a counterbalance to China—but without success, because Washington continues to believe that a confrontation with the DPRK serves its national interests. Whether or not confrontation was an effective tactic in the past, maintaining the old approach to the Korean peninsula now bears a number of risks.

In the event of further nuclear proliferation, the party at fault, from the legal point of view (and perhaps from the historical one as well, if we recall how exactly the DPRK created its nuclear arsenal) will not be North Korea, which is not a recognized nuclear-weapon state and remains outside the relevant treaties. The responsibility will be with the NPT states, which will have proved unable to prevent the emergence of a new nuclear-weapon state—much as they presently appear to have no idea how to stabilize the nonproliferation regime, even at its current level. That outcome would raise more questions about the NPT, which many researchers regard as obsolete. On the other hand, a recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power and a normalization of relations with it could become a step toward containing proliferation and even launching a gradual process that would eventually result in the DPRK relinquishing its nuclear arsenal. In contrast to Iran, North Korea's nuclear status is already an established fact that could only be changed in the event of a fundamental shift in Pyongyang's foreign policy orientation, something that is likely only possible in the event of a change in the regime.

With tensions running high between Pyongyang and Washington, the United States is losing influence with its allies and throwing into doubt the continued existence of the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances. Since the main purpose of these alliances is to contain China (and, to a lesser degree, Russia), it would make sense for Washington to review its approach to North Korea and thereby prevent a degradation of the alliances. Washington's refusal to pursue a normalization with Pyongyang has enabled China to subjugate the DPRK, thereby strengthening Chinese positions on the Korean peninsula and in the

broader Northeast Asian region. If, however, Washington were to review its approach to Pyongyang, it could lead to the establishment of a new security mechanism involving both Koreas. In addition to facilitating inter-Korean integration, that would also help to achieve an eventual denuclearization of the entire Korean peninsula.

Having reviewed the many perspectives on the North Korean nuclear issue, the following eight recommendations can help create a basis for resuming a U.S.-DPRK dialogue:

1. **Flexibility instead of rigidity.** The DPRK should be recognized as an independent actor rather than a buffer state. It makes sense for the United States to review its approach to North Korea, which is still based on Cold War thinking and the idea of a world dominated by a single superpower. The DPRK is capable of not only serving as a buffer but also acting in U.S. interests, if only the United States were to take North Korean interests into account.
2. **Differentiation instead of unification.** The United States should take different approaches to the peaceful and military branches of the DPRK nuclear program. One should not treat peaceful nuclear energy and space programs the same way as one does military programs; such an approach runs counter to international law and damages Washington's reputation.
3. **Normalization instead of denuclearization.** Denuclearization can remain as the ultimate goal or as part of the process, but priority at the talks should be on normalization. Otherwise, it will be impossible to build confidence between the countries involved or to expect them to make any serious steps toward a middle ground. We should also remember that one cannot seriously demand DPRK denuclearization without launching one's own denuclearization. A realistic approach accepts that denuclearization will take decades to achieve and only if the situation is right for it.
4. **Engagement instead of pressure.** History shows that the parties involved do not understand each other on a profound level—or simply do not want to. That is only to be expected, what with the total absence of any cultural, economic, or diplomatic ties. If the two countries are to engage in security cooperation in the future, they must start building confidence without delay. Humanitarian cooperation could serve as a starting point. By expanding such cooperation or at least facilitating the cooperation that is already under way, the United States could gradually spread its soft power and win the DPRK's trust.
5. **Adjustments instead of concessions.** The word "concession" has negative connotations for both parties of the dialogue process. "Adjustment" is relatively harmless, and changing the terminology enables the parties to pursue new ways of achieving their goals instead of abandoning the goals themselves. For example, a suspension of U.S.-ROK exercises is a concession, but the two countries making changes to their joint scenarios (so that they no longer center on an invasion of the DPRK) is an adjustment that would improve Pyongyang's attitude to routine U.S.-ROK drills. For North Korea itself, relinquishing its ICBMs would be a concession, but dismantling the ICBMs that can reach the U.S. mainland is an adjustment.

6. **Bilateralism instead of multilateralism.** To achieve progress at the talks, the diverse nature of the regional powers' interests need to be taken into consideration. Moreover, actors not invested in stability on the Korean peninsula or in U.S.-DPRK normalization should have no influence on the negotiations. To prevent any meddling in the U.S.-DPRK dialogue, talks should be organized in secret and fairly quickly. Also, the persons responsible for these talks should be chosen carefully; at the very least, they should not be in opposition to their own head of state. Neither the U.S. president nor the North Korean leader can make all decisions on their own, so any potential setbacks or delays implementing agreements achieved at the talks should not be seen by either party as the other side's refusal to pursue dialogue.
7. **Neutral mediators.** To bridge the differences between the parties involved, and to weaken the influence of actors who do not wish the negotiations to succeed, there should be a diversification of the DPRK's ties with neutral states. But whereas countries such as Mongolia can be regarded as neutral by definition, Russia's position depends to a large extent on its relations with the West. To achieve more active Russian involvement on the Korean peninsula as a neutral mediator, Russia should also diversify its ties, instead of merely following China's lead, which in turn would require at least a partial normalization between Russia and the United States or a resumption of consultations on the Korean peninsula.
8. **Managing risk instead of avoiding risk.** Many analysts point out that the United States tries to avoid risks instead of managing them. A case in point is Washington's refusal to recognize the DPRK's new role in Northeast Asia or the regional situation as a whole. However, accepting the reality of North Korea's current status and pursuing cooperation with it is a surer way of achieving denuclearization than putting pressure on North Korea—or ignoring it. Should the United States continue with its refusal to recognize the new reality, another country will emerge to lead the process. Some experts already argue that the current U.S. approach to the DPRK is encouraging the formation of a China-DPRK-ROK triangle and leading to Washington's increased isolation.¹³⁰

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