



**Nuclear Risk-Reduction and  
Peace on the Korean Peninsula:  
Development of Dialogue,  
Non-Proliferation and  
Bilateral Relations**

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**Abstract**

This article contains an analysis of expert discussions justifying the evolution of approaches to ensuring nuclear non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia (NEA). Many representatives of the Western, Russian, and Chinese expert communities propose the assumption that North Korea will remain a state with nuclear potential, without formal recognition of this in the foreseeable future.

Problems with the nuclear non-proliferation regime at the global level show that international concerns about nuclear risks are coming to the fore. This assessment is confirmed by various events and trends, in particular the deterioration of the international security environment, strategic competition between great powers, and the emphasis on the architecture of nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. As at the global level, measures to reduce nuclear risks and manage risks are also becoming a priority for ensuring nuclear non-proliferation in the NEA region.

A systemic approach to reducing nuclear risks, which is quite applicable to the NEA region, involves reducing doctrinal risks, as well as escalation risks, risks of unauthorized use, and risks of accidental use. From this point of view, diplomatic efforts by China, which has taken over the presidency of the “nuclear five,” with the participation of the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, and China, are important. In

particular, in December 2024, a discussion on nuclear doctrines was held at the expert level under the chairmanship of China, with the aim of achieving a greater understanding of the nuclear doctrines of official and de facto nuclear powers to prevent misunderstandings and miscalculations.

### **Introduction**

Nuclear non-proliferation is becoming a high priority issue on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia (NEA). Russian and foreign experts are discussing the need to gradually establish effective mechanisms for controlling nuclear and ballistic weapons, not just those of North Korea, to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and prevent an uncontrolled nuclear arms race. At the same time, the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is no longer a top priority. This is happening against the backdrop of challenges in strengthening the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The last Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) in 2022 concluded without the signing of a final document. However, in the communiqué of the December 2021 P5 nuclear weapons conference in Paris, the five countries acknowledged their responsibility to work together to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and their commitment to build on their strategic risk reduction work within the P5 process during the next NPT review cycle to reduce the likelihood of nuclear weapons use.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, international concern about nuclear risks is becoming a pressing issue, requiring urgent action. This assessment is supported by various events and trends, including the deteriorating international security environment; strategic rivalry among great powers; the emphasis on nuclear arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation architecture; the emergence of regional tensions; and the potentially destabilizing consequences of several technological advances.<sup>2</sup>

Against this global backdrop, the evolution of approaches to nuclear non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia should be assessed. As at the global level, nuclear risk mitigation and risk management measures are becoming a priority for ensuring nuclear non-proliferation in the region.

### **History and Background**

Over the past few decades, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has had a decisive influence on the nature of the economic, political, and security arrangements in Northeast Asia. The unregulated nature of relations between the two Koreas and the extraordinarily high concentration of troops and weapons on such a small piece of territory result in a high potential for regional and sub-regional tension. Here, transparency arrangements and military and political verification measures assume a special urgency.

While most politicians and experts view the very development of transparency and confidence-building measures as a bilateral process between North and South Korea, no one disputes the thesis that genuine peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the eventual reunification of the two countries are possible only under the conditions of an effectively functioning, multilateral mechanism for regional stability.<sup>3</sup>

The solution to the Korean problem lies in the gradual development of political dialogue, nuclear non-proliferation, and bilateral relations in all areas, under a favorable external environment.

The political and legal foundations for transparency and confidence-building measures on the Korean Peninsula were laid at the Protocol on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Cooperation, and Exchanges between North and South Korea of December 13, 1991, and the provisions of the Mutual Non-Aggression Agreement agreed upon in September 1992.

The US–North Korean Framework Agreement of 1994 had taken the edge off the nuclear crisis and largely ruled out the chance for North Korea to make use of loopholes in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Sceptics pointed out, however, that the Framework Agreement was not a legally binding document, and it was entirely up to the parties to comply with it. Besides, the special inspection of the nuclear waste burial site had been postponed, which raised serious doubts as to how efficient the IAEA new tool was going to be.

The 1994 Agreed Framework failed not only because of the North Korean stubbornness, but also because both the Clinton and Bush administrations violated the letter and the spirit of the agreement. On its side, North Korea expressed dissatisfaction with three interrelated examples of what it perceives as US double-standards: refusing to remove Pyongyang from its list of “rogue states,” even while engaging in a diplomatic rapprochement; testing new anti-ballistic missile systems while urging further North Korean restraint in its missile testing program; and refusing to condemn or prevent the attempted acquisition by South Korea of ballistic missiles capable of striking anywhere in North Korea.<sup>4</sup>

For several years, North Korea declared its intention to discuss not the terms of abandoning its nuclear program, but rather the conditions for maintaining and even further developing it. This position had its own justifications, and not without merit. Pyongyang had begun its nuclear research in the absence of security guarantees from the United States, thus attempting to preserve its regime and protect the country’s independence and territorial integrity. Several decades have passed since then, and the nuclear program (at least the development of nuclear warheads and delivery systems) has advanced. According to the logic of the DPRK leadership, what was the point of curtailing it when so much effort and resources had been invested in it?

When these considerations are placed in the context of global politics, many questions immediately arise. The most important is that Pyongyang's policies have for many years openly and consistently ignored the nuclear non-proliferation regime, one of the cornerstones of the modern world order. This regime, based on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, other treaties and agreements, and the work of the UN Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reflects the consolidated will of the international community to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems—both “horizontal” (across countries and continents) and “vertical” (improving nuclear weapons technologies).

This system, far from perfect, but perhaps the only possible one under current international conditions, gradually encompassed virtually every country in the world. And throughout its existence, it has been criticized as “unfair”: Why are some countries allowed to have nuclear weapons while others are not? Pyongyang has repeatedly invoked this argument—recall its agreement, after much persuasion from the international community, to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and then its withdrawal from the Treaty in 1993.

Under these circumstances, South Korea has increasingly begun to consider that the only means of securing the country is to acquire its own nuclear bomb. This is a worrying sign: Japan, Taiwan, and others will then want to acquire their own bomb. It is unlikely that Northeast Asia will become a safer place. The official nuclear powers, despite all their contradictions and disagreements, have spent many years and efforts to stop nuclear proliferation in various regions of the world, including the Korean Peninsula. It is enough to recall the agreement between Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush not to deploy American and Soviet tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and adjacent waters. This paved the way for the signing of the 1991 Agreement on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which, if

properly implemented by all parties, would have long ago helped resolve security in the region.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of formal international law, no one can force a sovereign state to join or withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Pyongyang says. But if only one of the nearly 200 countries that have joined the nuclear non-proliferation regime chooses this path, it is perceived by the others as illegitimate behavior and a challenge to the international community.

This is the path taken by India and Pakistan, which, despite calls from other countries, acquired nuclear weapons. But if someone has managed to breach the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, this does not mean that Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and other nuclear capitals will agree to another attempt to do so, whether in Pyongyang or Seoul.

### **Discussions on North Korea Nuclear Status**

In recent years, debate has raged over whether North Korea can be considered a “de facto nuclear power” and how this will impact the international non-proliferation regime. Some have argued that North Korea’s nuclear missile status should be viewed against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis as confirmation that only nuclear weapons can guarantee the country’s security and sovereignty.

As for China’s position on North Korea’s nuclear missile program and inter-Korean dialogue, it boils down to the following points, proposed by experts from the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University:

First, China should continue to improve, develop, and strengthen relations with the DPRK and ROK, actively supporting and promoting North-South dialogue and reconciliation. Reconciliation between North and South Korea is essential for eliminating North Korea’s incentive to

develop nuclear weapons, addressing insecurities on both sides, and maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula.

Second, China should strive to support the DPRK-US dialogue on a phased and synchronized plan to implement a comprehensive agreement to achieve denuclearization on the peninsula as soon as possible.

Third, it should actively participate in the denuclearization dialogue on the peninsula and put forward Chinese proposals to ensure progress in the nuclear field.

Fourth, efforts should be made to develop bilateral dialogue into a multilateral dialogue and promote the establishment of a multilateral security cooperation mechanism in Northeast Asia. The signing of a peace agreement between China, the US, the DPRK, and the ROK is key to establishing such a peace mechanism. China will play an important role in the signing and entry into force of the agreement and, together with the US and Russia, will provide security guarantees to North Korea in accordance with the agreement.

Fifth, progress achieved in denuclearization will promote economic recovery, development, and prosperity on the peninsula, and expand economic cooperation between China, the ROK, and the DPRK. China will be able to make a significant contribution to the peninsula's economic recovery and development and will reap significant economic benefits from it.

Sixth, China must do everything possible to prevent military conflicts and wars on the Korean Peninsula. China will make every effort to persuade the parties toward peace and negotiations and strengthen crisis management and control.

Seventh, under no circumstances will China agree to North Korea becoming a de facto nuclear weapons state like India and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

However, there were nuances to China's position, which were actively debated among experts. Professor Zhao Tong, for example, asked, "If China's call for sanctions relief could open the door for North Korea to permanently acquire nuclear weapons, does this mean China is okay with North Korea becoming a de facto nuclear weapons state? Over time, many experts seem to be gradually coming to terms with the reality that North Korea is irreversibly moving toward a permanent nuclear weapons state."<sup>7</sup>

On the US side, the realistic approach to the issue was that "There's no way North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons because they have no reason to believe the United States will implement any denuclearization deal between them," as John Mearsheimer, a professor at the University of Chicago well known for his realist views on international politics, said.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, American experts have formed the conviction that "Beijing considers a nuclear North Korea to be inherently destabilizing, since it provides a rationale for US military deployment and possible intervention in the region, which is not in line with China's interests and security."<sup>9</sup>

Moscow and Beijing proposed the following approaches to facilitate the resumption of US-North Korean negotiations:

- Adopt a definitively agreed-upon denuclearization roadmap with a clearly defined end goal: which nuclear weapons and delivery systems are to be eliminated. The most realistic option would be to eliminate those capable (even hypothetically) of reaching the United States.
- Agree on a comprehensive list of North Korean nuclear (and possibly missile) program facilities to be closed or eliminated, based on the principle of "proving the presence" of nuclear capabilities, rather than "proving

their absence.” The latter verification approach would quickly lead to a dead end: Attempts to “prove their absence” could lead, for example, to demands for the elimination of all precision engineering and other modern manufacturing facilities in the DPRK.

- Determine the modalities and stages for achieving the stated goals. The “action for action” principle is now the only viable option: North Korea’s next step toward abandoning nuclear technology must be accompanied by a partial and gradual lifting of sanctions under the entire range of UN Security Council sanctions resolutions. Priority should be given to those that undermine the peaceful sectors of the North Korean economy and hinder the development of inter-Korean dialogue.

The two countries’ consolidated position was reflected in the “Joint Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China on the Korean Peninsula” of July 4, 2017. In this document, the parties put forward a joint initiative based on the Chinese side’s proposed ideas of a “double freeze” (on North Korea’s nuclear missile activities and large-scale joint exercises between the United States and the Republic of Korea) and “parallel progress” toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a peace mechanism on the peninsula, as well as on Russia’s phased plan for a Korean settlement.

The adoption of the Law on North Korea’s Nuclear Forces Policy was perceived as the final confirmation of North Korea’s status as a nuclear power (although this had been enshrined in the country’s constitution since 2012). At the same time, North Korea’s concept of the use of nuclear weapons is entirely adequate, since it provides for the non-use

of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries and a commitment to the ideas of nuclear non-proliferation.

North Korean leaders tirelessly emphasize that the country's newly acquired nuclear status is "irreversible." Against this backdrop, many in the expert community say decades of attempts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula have failed. Following North Korea's recent declaration of nuclear power, "it's time for the United States and its allies to accept this reality and learn to live with it."<sup>10</sup>

For several years, there has been debate in Chinese academic circles about whether the international community will gradually come to terms with North Korea's nuclear weapons, as has happened with India and Pakistan, for example. Historically, while India and Pakistan have succeeded in gradually getting the international community to accept their nuclear weapons, their approach to the North Korean nuclear issue has been limited by a variety of factors.

According to a number of Chinese scholars and experts, India and Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons cannot be considered illegal because they have not signed the NPT or the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, thus not having assumed any legal obligations not to develop nuclear weapons. Therefore, India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests and openly developed nuclear weapons in 1998, which was not perceived as a violation of the law. Moreover, since the relevant UN Security Council Resolution 1172 only "calls upon" the two countries to cease further development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile projects, rather than making a clear "demand," the subsequent development of related projects by India and Pakistan clearly did not violate the requirements of the resolution.

In contrast, North Korea is the only country to have signed the NPT and subsequently withdrawn from it. Accepting North Korea's nuclear capabilities could weaken the authority of the Nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty and the entire international non-proliferation regime, potentially increasing the likelihood that other countries will follow North Korea's example.

According to Chinese reasoning, North Korea's missile tests were a clear violation of Security Council resolutions, which have the force of international law. Since 2006, North Korea has conducted five nuclear tests and repeatedly violated the explicit requirement of relevant Security Council resolutions for North Korea to cease nuclear testing.

Possessing nuclear weapons, India and Pakistan primarily pose a threat to each other, while direct threats to other countries are limited, according to Chinese scholars and experts. Compared to the bilateral nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons could pose a direct threat to several neighboring countries. Convincing these countries to accept North Korea's nuclear status will be even more difficult.

While India and Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons haven't directly prompted other countries to develop nuclear weapons, a nuclear North Korea could prompt South Korea and Japan to consider their own need to develop nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, while the nuclear weapons of India, Pakistan, and North Korea can be considered serious failures of the international nonproliferation regime, the responsibilities of the respective major countries differ. For India and Pakistan, nuclear weapons development is a direct result of bilateral conflicts, and third countries such as the United States and China bear no direct responsibility. However, due to North Korea's gradual development of nuclear weapons over several decades, these third countries bear significant responsibility in the eyes of public opinion. For example, China and Russia believe that the United States repeatedly avoided diplomatic engagement to resolve the North

Korean nuclear issue. The United States, in turn, blamed China and Russia of insufficient economic pressure on North Korea.

Ultimately, China emphasized that it was necessary to accept the reality, but at the same time distinguish between North Korea's actual possession of nuclear weapons and the international community's recognition of its nuclear status. In this regard, they recommended that if US-China negotiations resume, the emphasis should not be on denuclearization, but on developing transparency and military confidence-building measures in the nuclear and missile spheres, in order to "convince the United States and its regional allies that North Korea is willing and able to fulfill its international obligations, and, in turn, to convince Kim Jong-un that no one wants to treat him like Gaddafi."<sup>11</sup>

### **From Denuclearization to Nuclear Risk Reduction**

The nuclear non-proliferation situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia has recently become significantly more complex. Recent amendments to the North Korean Constitution reflect the North Korean leadership's desire to cement the country's nuclear status and make it "irreversible." Pyongyang's priorities include guaranteeing North Korea's security and lifting at least some of the international sanctions related to North Korea's nuclear missile programs.

For their part, Western experts have long been aware that North Korea has no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons as long as its leadership continues to believe its regime faces an existential threat. This will require transparency and trust-building measures to strengthen trust between the two sides.

A way out of this situation may lie in focusing not on North Korea's denuclearization, but on measures to reduce nuclear risks, including transparency and military trust-building measures. According to some experts, North Korea, in one way or another, is demonstrating a commitment to non-proliferation.

Furthermore, measures to reduce nuclear risks and denuclearization are not mutually exclusive. Thus, measures traditionally considered in the context of denuclearization, such as halting the production of fissile material or freezing missile launches, are in fact risk reduction measures.<sup>12</sup>

In any case, the point is to ensure that both Korean states, as well as other Northeast Asian countries, do not cross so-called security “red lines.” A “red line” can be defined as “a territorial boundary or other limit of military action that an adversary must not cross.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, North Korea views joint US exercises or shows of force as an expected invasion, or even an accident that could occur during these exercises, as crossing “red lines.” This, according to Western analysts, could prompt North Korea to launch a series of limited strikes against US military bases, personnel, or assets in the region, or against US targets along the demilitarized zone.

Since the greatest risk of unintentional incidents stems from insufficient awareness of military activities such as exercises and missile launches, the first priority should be to develop measures to inform the parties of upcoming military activities in the missile and nuclear sphere. North Korea has been criticized by international organizations for launching missiles over Japan without warning civilian aircraft and ships. Given Pyongyang’s insistence that these are missile tests, not operational exercises, ensuring timely notification is a relatively simple measure that would simultaneously enhance North Korea’s credibility as an international actor while avoiding the risk of accidental harm to civilians.

In general, scholars and experts believe that ensuring regional stability requires a long-term, ongoing, and comprehensive risk management project, combined with traditional measures to maintain the balance of power and nuclear deterrence.<sup>14</sup> In particular, experts from the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) propose a more

systematic rethinking of nuclear risk reduction. They have proposed a framework that defines four potential risk scenarios: doctrinal, escalatory, unauthorized, and accidental. Risk mitigation approaches for each of these were outlined, general goals were established, and illustrative measures were proposed: “Examining the Korean Peninsula for potential ‘trigger events’ across various exploitation pathways is essential for identifying appropriate risk mitigation measures. Thus, the international community can move toward identifying practical and feasible sets of risk mitigation measures appropriate to the situation, eliminating potential pathways, reducing their number, and thus reducing the overall risk of exploitation.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the idea of security guarantees could become key and defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. However, the most difficult issue remains how to reconcile North Korea’s de facto nuclear status with the framework and conditions of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.

### **Discussion on Ensuring Nuclear Non-Proliferation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia**

The need for such an evolution is being justified during discussions by many representatives of the Western, Russian, and Chinese expert communities. They propose that North Korea will remain a de-facto nuclear-armed state without formally acknowledging this for the foreseeable future. However, they believe that the DPRK may be able to accommodate the international community by striving to become a responsible nuclear state.<sup>16</sup> Expert discussions have argued for the need to move away from the notion that normalization of relations and peace on the peninsula are a consequence of denuclearization. They propose viewing denuclearization as a natural outcome of a peace process that begins with risk management, arms control, reliable security guarantees, and normalization of relations. Progress toward this goal should be gradual, as the experience of collective crisis management in Northeast Asia and on the Korean Peninsula is limited. Nevertheless, the process

of negotiation and agreement on specific measures will constitute a trust-building process.<sup>17</sup>

Analyzing the results of the last several rounds of US-North Korean denuclearization talks, Chinese experts conclude: “Any approach that hinders the implementation of policies that can effectively reduce the risk of nuclear war in Northeast Asia is short-sighted. In addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, the United States should fundamentally prioritize reducing the risk of nuclear war.”

In turn, representatives of the American expert community propose prioritizing risk reduction and achieving practical limits in US policy, while maintaining a long-term commitment to disarmament. “First, the United States should de-emphasize denuclearization. Second, US policy should recognize—but not accept—North Korea’s arsenal. Finally, the United States should explore the possibility of risk reduction and achievable limits in negotiations with North Korea.”<sup>18</sup>

The United States should base its dialogue with North Korea on more practical goals: arms control and risk reduction. The former would entail the adoption of a specific, unambiguous set of measures limiting North Korea’s nuclear arsenal to its current level and prohibiting additional long-range missile tests in exchange for the gradual lifting of US and UN sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

There’s also talk of establishing a system of so-called “red lines” in the security sphere. “Red lines” between the two Koreas could arise at sea, on land, or in the air. One country could deliberately decide to carry out a limited act of aggression, perhaps under the false belief that it can control further escalation. A “red line” could also be crossed because of an accident or misperception, for example, during military exercises that might be perceived as requiring a military response.<sup>20</sup>

## **Nuclear Risk Reduction and Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia: A Menu of Possible Measures**

Existing risk management systems are based on outdated concepts of peace and war and the balance of power. However, experts propose developing a systemic approach to reducing nuclear risks that is fully applicable to the Northeast Asian region:

- To reduce doctrinal risk, states should narrow the range of situations in which they might consider using nuclear weapons and reduce ambiguity around these situations. This includes de-stigmatizing the use of nuclear weapons in general, clarifying the conditions of use, and doctrinal provisions.
- To reduce the risk of escalation, states should seek to raise the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, particularly in unstable situations. This includes increasing the predictability of conditions of use, strengthening nuclear restraint, and crisis prevention measures.
- To reduce the risk of unauthorized use, states should strengthen security measures to prohibit direct and indirect access to nuclear weapons and related materials. This includes improving physical and digital security operations and strengthening risk assessment and management systems.
- To reduce the risk of accidental use, States should implement security measures that can limit human and technical errors and the scope of possible consequences. This includes strengthening security features, improving management controls, and measures to limit the consequences of error.<sup>21</sup>

Transparency and military confidence-building measures, both nuclear and conventional, are becoming increasingly important. Without a commitment from both sides to defusing tensions and conflict through military confidence-building measures in the air, on land, and at sea, conducting large-scale exercises as a show of force along the fortified border, re-establishing guard posts previously removed from the demilitarized zone, and resuming reconnaissance patrols in buffer zones along the maritime border will significantly stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula, both in peacetime and during emergencies.

If the political situation between the two Koreas improves, Pyongyang and Seoul should seek to reinstate the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) or a similar agreement, which generally provides for a larger buffer between the Korean People's Army and the South Korean armed forces. Such an agreement would not necessarily be tied to specific denuclearization measures by Pyongyang but would have the practical effect of limiting the path to conflict that could quickly escalate due to pre-emptive attacks by both sides.

While improving diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea is not a traditional approach to reducing nuclear danger on the Korean Peninsula, it could have a beneficial effect on crisis stability. For example, the prospect of opening a US liaison office in Pyongyang, staffed by one or more US Foreign Service officers, is a possibility.<sup>22</sup>

As a measure to reduce nuclear risks, the United States and South Korea could amend their military planning, abandoning disarming strikes against North Korean command and control facilities and/or attempts to decapitate the DPRK leadership. In return, they could expect Pyongyang to promise not to delegate authority to use nuclear weapons to lower military command levels and to initiate a bilateral strategic dialogue.<sup>23</sup>

American military experts propose considering four main command models that North Korea could employ to execute a nuclear strike:

First model, “Automaticity” or the proverbial “button on Kim’s desk” would likely involve a pre-programmed or pre-recorded order that could be transmitted to the force under extraordinary circumstances.

A second model, devolution, would entail an institutionalized line of succession to maintain political continuity over nuclear operations.

A third model, delegation, is one in which Kim could grant discretion over employment decisions to military authorities after he has decided that the use of nuclear weapons is required.

The fourth model, pre-delegation, would involve transferring conditional launch authority to the military in anticipation that Kim might lose contact with his forces or become incapacitated.<sup>24</sup>

Some American experts also believe that US officials working with China should help Pyongyang ensure its nuclear protocols are up-to-date and that it takes nuclear security seriously.<sup>25</sup>

According to Chinese experts, promoting North Korea’s integration into the international community should be no less a strategic goal than containing its nuclear program. China, the United States, and other relevant parties should coordinate their efforts to facilitate North Korea’s gradual opening up and reintegration into the international community and include this issue in future multilateral dialogues with North Korea as an important condition for North Korea receiving security guarantees and international economic assistance.<sup>26</sup> South Korean experts propose initiating the creation of a dedicated communication channel with China. This crisis management channel will be crucial during times of heightened tension in the region. China is more inclined to engage in dialogue on non-military security issues, such as the economic and energy crises. A realistic approach is to first

establish a “track two” platform<sup>27</sup> for comprehensive discussions on crisis management on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the risk of nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia is becoming increasingly real. The idea of security guarantees could become key and defuse tensions in the region. Recall that it was the absence of such guarantees from the West that led to the escalation of tensions in the Euro-Atlantic region, including the situation surrounding Ukraine. Initially, a system of mutual security guarantees could be established at the political and diplomatic level and then expanded to the operational level through transparency and military confidence-building measures.

## Notes

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<sup>14</sup> Mats Engman and Frida Lampinen, “Risk Reduction and Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula,” 38 North Special Report, The Stimson Center, July 2023, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.38north.org/reports/2023/07/risk-reduction-and-crisis-management-on-the-korean-peninsula/>

<sup>15</sup> Wilfred Wan, “Nuclear Risk Reduction. A Framework for Analysis,” UNIDIR, June 2019, pp. 37-38, <https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/nuclear-risk-reduction-a-framework-for-analysis-en-809.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Engman and Lampinen, “Risk Reduction and Crisis Management,” 14.

<sup>17</sup> Engman and Lampinen, “Risk Reduction and Crisis Management,” 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> John Carl Baker, “North Korean Arms Control Doesn’t Have to Conflict with Disarmament,” United States Institute of Peace, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/north-korean-arms-control-doesnt-have-conflict-disarmament>

<sup>19</sup> Daniel R. DePetris, “Solutions to the North Korea issue no longer include denuclearization,” Lowy Institute, 2022, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/solutions-north-korea-issue-no-longer-include-denuclearisation>

<sup>20</sup> “Open Nuclear Network’s nuclear risk reduction approach,” One Earth Future.

<sup>21</sup> Wan, “Nuclear Risk Reduction.”

<sup>22</sup> Ankit Panda, “How to Reduce Nuclear Risks Between the United States and North Korea,” United States Institute of Peace, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/how-reduce-nuclear-risks-between-united-states-and-north-korea>

<sup>23</sup> Asano Hideo, “Arms control with North Korea? Opportunities and challenges,” *Pacific Forum*, PacNet 61, August 14, 2023, accessed April 30, 2026, PacNet-61-Arms-control-with-North-Korea-Opportunities-and-challenges.pdf. URL: <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-61-arms-control-with-north-korea-opportunities-and-challenges/>

<sup>24</sup> Shane Smith and Paul Bernstein, “North Korean Nuclear Command and Control: Alternatives and implications,” HDTRA1137878, August 2022, pp. 6-8, [https://wmdcenter.ndu.edu/Portals/97/Documents/Publications/NK-Nuclear-Command-and-Control\\_Report.pdf](https://wmdcenter.ndu.edu/Portals/97/Documents/Publications/NK-Nuclear-Command-and-Control_Report.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> DePetris, “Solutions to the North Korea issue.”

<sup>26</sup> Tōng, “North Korea denuclearization talks deadlocked.”

<sup>27</sup> An unofficial, informal interaction between non-state actors—such as academics, retired officials, and NGO leaders—designed to build trust, foster understanding, and solve conflicts between hostile groups.

<sup>28</sup> Jina Kim, “Strategic Stability on the Korean Peninsula: Dual crisis and risk reduction measures,” Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, February 2024, pp. 15-16, accessed April 30, 2026, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/strategic-stability-on-the-korean-peninsula-dual-crisis-and-risk-reduction-measures/>