

POLICY BRIEF NO. 92

The Need for US-China-Russia Cooperation on North Korea

GABRIELA BERNAL

DECEMBER 2022



© 2022 Gabriela Bernal

This report is published under a 4.0 International Creative Commons License the terms of which are found [here](#).

The views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of APLN, its staff, nor their boards.

Please direct inquiries to:
Asia-Pacific Leadership Network
APLN Secretariat
4th floor, 116, Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul, ROK, 03035
Tel. +82-2-2135-2170
Fax. +82-70-4015-0708
Email. apln@apln.network

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at www.apln.network.

Cover Photo: Roman Harak, Creative Commons, Flickr

THE NEED FOR US-CHINA-RUSSIA COOPERATION ON NORTH KOREA

In the past few months, tensions on the Korean Peninsula have continued to rise to dangerous levels. Diplomacy with North Korea has been at a standstill ever since the Hanoi summit of 2019 failed to produce any concrete results. A long time has passed since then, but the North Korean issue remains unresolved and as problematic as ever. If anything, North Korea has shown this year that any future negotiations will be far more complex and demanding than those from the past.

While the former administration of US President Donald Trump paid significant attention to Kim Jong Un and his nuclear weapons program, the current government of President Joe Biden has not prioritized North Korea in a similar way. Instead, Washington has been preoccupied with various domestic issues, its ongoing rivalry with China, and the situation in Ukraine. Although all are important, every day that goes by without making progress on the North Korea front increases the risk of an unwanted conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

The year 2023 will mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice Agreement that was signed in 1953. Many forget that the Korean War has never formally ended. The Armistice—signed by representatives from the United States, China, and North Korea¹—cannot be turned into an end-of-war declaration or a peace treaty without major progress being made first between

Washington and Pyongyang. This is where Moscow and Beijing could come in.

While the North Korean government will always continue to make its own independent decisions, it's difficult to ignore the strong ties that both Russia and China share with North Korea. Although the United States, China, and Russia share many disagreements on a range of issues, a nuclear war in Northeast Asia would not benefit any party. Peace is in the common interest of all and should be pursued as a common goal. As such, urgent cooperation is needed between these three key actors.

ESCALATING TENSIONS

Military tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been on a sharp rise particularly since September 2022, when North Korea began a series of missile and artillery tests in response to US-South Korea joint military drills. A tit-for-tat series of provocations soon ensued, with missiles even falling north and south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) for the first time ever.²

Besides military posturing, another noteworthy development is the nuclear law that was passed in North Korea in September.³ According to the law, if the North Korean leader were to suffer an accident, “a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately to destroy hostile forces including the starting point of provocation and the command according to operational plans decided in advance.” As such, North Korea has clearly put forward the possibility of a preemptive strike which could be launched if a major external attack is believed to be imminent.

¹ See UN Peacemaker, “Armistice Agreement, Volume 1, Text of Agreement,” accessed November 30, 2022 https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%2BKOR_530727_AgreementConcerningMilitaryArmistice.pdf

² “N. Korea's missile flies across NLL for 1st time; S. Korea sends missiles northward in its show of

force,” *Yonhap News Agency*, 2 November 2022 <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220307009057325>

³ Kelsey Davenport, “North Korea Passes Nuclear Law,” *Arms Control Association*, October 2022 <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/news/north-korea-passes-nuclear-law>

The law also has very real implications for future negotiations with North Korea, as the country's leader asserted that North Korea will never again engage in talks premised on its denuclearization.⁴

"There will never be such a thing as our abandonment of the nuclear weapons or denuclearization first, nor will there be any negotiations to this end or bargaining chip in these processes," Kim Jong Un said on September 8.⁵ These recent developments are relevant because they show how much more dire the situation on the Peninsula is becoming with the passage of time. If the world wants to stop further nuclear proliferation by North Korea, then a different approach is desperately needed.

DISAGREEMENTS AND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

In order to head in the direction of peace, the United States and North Korea must get on the same page. If not, the Korean War will not end and the nuclear threat will remain. Although the current Biden administration's policy remains one of seeking denuclearization and the continuation of pressure, including sanctions,⁶ Kim Jong Un has made it repeatedly clear that, without a change in US policy, there is no chance

of North Korea resuming diplomatic talks, let alone enter into an agreement regarding denuclearization.⁷

While both China and Russia support the goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, neither agree with the United States approach.⁸ In particular, Moscow and Beijing don't see more pressure as the solution to the North Korea issue. They made this stance very clear in May when they both vetoed US-proposed sanctions targeting North Korea at the United Nations Security Council.⁹ The veto marked the first time Council members had disagreed to such an extent with regard to sanctions against North Korea.

At the time, China's Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun blamed "the flip-flop of US policies" and its disregard for the North's "reasonable concerns" for the tensions on the Korean Peninsula today.¹⁰ Similarly, Russia's deputy UN ambassador Anna Evstigneeva said new sanctions against the DPRK "would be a dead end," stressing that current UN sanctions have failed to guarantee security in the region "nor moved us any further toward settling the nuclear missile nonproliferation issues."¹¹ Evstigneeva reiterated this stance once again on

⁴ Andrei Lankov, "North Korea's new nuclear law makes the world a more dangerous place," *NK News*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.nknews.org/2022/09/north-koreas-new-nuclear-law-makes-the-world-a-more-dangerous-place/>

⁵ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at Seventh Session of the 14th SPA of DPRK," *Rodong Sinmun*, September 9, 2022, <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?MUAYMDIyLTA5LTA5LU4wMDFAMUAXQEAWQDEz==>

⁶ Bruce Klingner, "Biden and Yoon Aligned on Approach to North Korea," *The Heritage Foundation*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/biden-and-yoon-aligned-approach-north-korea-0>

⁷ The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "How to Understand North Korea's Demand for the Withdrawal of ROK-U.S. 'hostile policy'," January 21, 2022, <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/how->

[to-understand-north-koreas-demand-for-the-withdrawal-of-rok-u-s-hostile-policy/](#)

⁸ Brian G. Carlson, "Sino-Russian Relations and Security Ties to North Korea," *Korea Economic Institute of America*, July 29, 2019, <https://keia.org/publication/sino-russian-relations-and-security-ties-to-north-korea/>

⁹ Michelle Nichols, "China, Russia veto U.S. push for more U.N. sanctions on North Korea," *Reuters*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-russia-veto-us-push-more-un-sanctions-north-korea-2022-05-26/>

¹⁰ "China, Russia defend North Korea vetoes at U.N.," *Nikkei Asia*, June 9, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-Russia-defend-North-Korea-vetoes-at-U.N>

¹¹ Ibid.

November 21, when she blamed the United States' "desire to force Pyongyang into unilateral disarmament by implementing sanctions and exerting force" for the current tensions on the Korean Peninsula.¹²

Despite the opinions of Russia and China, however, the United States has continued to impose more unilateral sanctions against the DPRK in recent months. But North Korea remains unfazed. Kim Jong Un made it explicitly clear in September that more sanctions would not result in the North changing its stance on nuclear weapons. "Let them impose sanctions for 100, nay 1000 days or even ten or 100 years," the North Korean leader said.¹³ Moreover, with both Russia and China unwilling to support further UN sanctions against North Korea, the impact of unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States or other actors remains questionable.

THE NEED FOR COOPERATION

Although the disagreements among them are many, cooperation between the United States, China, and Russia on the North Korea issue is important. Beijing and Moscow have been North Korean allies since the very beginning of the formation of North Korea as a separate state back in 1948. It was the Soviet Union who appointed Kim Il Sung as de-facto leader of the country in 1946¹⁴ and it was China who saved

North Korea from almost certain defeat in the Korean War in 1950.¹⁵ Both countries remain North Korea's closest allies to this day.

If the United States, China, and Russia can come to an agreement as to how to go about resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, the chances of Pyongyang actively engaging in such talks—which would be shaped in part by its close allies—could be high. Common ground must be found among all parties. For example, since China accounts for over 90% of North Korea's total trade, calling for sanctions without Chinese support is largely meaningless.¹⁶ Moreover, given the recently increasingly close relationship between Russian president Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un,¹⁷ Moscow has a direct communication channel open with the North Koreans that could prove helpful when it comes to mediating and encouraging dialogue between the different parties.

Although the South Korean government under former president Moon Jae-in was able to act as a mediator and facilitator for dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington, the same cannot be said for the current Yoon Suk-yeol administration. North Korea refuses to engage in any kind of communication with the new conservative government in Seoul and continues to express its dislike of the new South Korean president.¹⁸ As such, this leaves China and Russia

¹² Edith M. Lederer, "US, allies clash with Russia, China over North Korea tests," *AP*, November 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-china-united-states-nations-linda-thomas-greenfield-f93525d7eed426d5cf5dea72e97af217>

¹³ See Sept. 9 Rodong Sinmun article.

¹⁴ Fyodor Tertitskiy, "The Ascension of the Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-sung was Constructed (1945-1974)," *Acta Koreana*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015): 209-231

¹⁵ Yufan, Hao, and Zhai Zhihai. "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited." *The China Quarterly*, no. 121 (1990): 94–115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/654064>.

¹⁶ "China's Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations," *United States Institute for Peace*, 2019, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/chinas_role_in_north_korea_nuclear_and_peace_negotiations.pdf

¹⁷ Ifang Bremer, "Kim Jong Un exchanges letters with Putin on bolstering North Korea-Russia ties," *NK News*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.nknews.org/2022/08/kim-jong-un-exchanges-letters-with-putin-on-bolstering-north-korea-russia-ties/>

¹⁸ Colin Zwirko, "'We hate Yoon': Kim Yo Jong slams Seoul's plan to denuclearize North Korea," *NK News*, August 19, 2022,

as the two main communication lines between North Korea and the world.

THE PATH FORWARD

There are various tasks ahead to achieve a de-escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the resumption of diplomatic dialogue, the signing of meaningful agreements, and ultimately a long-term and sustainable peace. The following five tasks should be considered high priorities by policymakers.

The United States must do an objective and realistic review of its North Korea strategy.

The number one priority in the short-term is for Washington to take a close and hard look at its (failed) North Korea policies over the years.

Particularly, policies adopted since the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006. Since then, US strategy toward North Korea has largely consisted of strategic patience and maximum pressure. The former was premised along the assumption that it would only be a matter of time before North Korea would either collapse or crack under pressure and surrender its nuclear weapons.¹⁹ As time has shown, these assumptions proved to be wrong.

Maximum pressure advocates a hardline approach and the United States of pressure mechanisms such as economic sanctions to push North Korea into a corner with the goal of attaining complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID).²⁰ The hope here was

that the North Korean government would feel the economic sting of sanctions and isolation to such an extent that they would eventually surrender their nuclear weapons pursuit. However, as illustrated earlier through Kim Jong Un's own words, neither sanctions nor pressure of any kind have stopped North Korea's nuclear weapons program from growing, improving, and becoming a much bigger threat than before. On the contrary, research shows sanctions have had an adverse effect on ordinary North Koreans and done little if anything to curb the nuclear program.²¹

While a mix of maximum pressure and engagement was used under the Donald Trump administration, the engagement part of the equation was not well thought out. The Trump negotiating team had the completely wrong idea about what the North Koreans really wanted or what they were prepared to give up. Kim Jong Un was not interested in offers of foreign investment or the building of economically modern and affluent cities across his country. And he certainly was not ready to make unilateral concessions in exchange for mere words. The Trump side completely failed to read North Korea accurately and, just like that, missed what could have been the last opportunity at reaching a potential denuclearization agreement.²²

Productive diplomacy with North Korea cannot resume as long as the United States does not take an objective look at its past policies and implement major changes to its approach to

<https://www.nknews.org/2022/08/we-hate-yeon-kim-ye-jong-slams-seouls-plan-to-denuclearize-north-korea/>

¹⁹ Jong Kun Choi, "The Perils of Strategic Patience with North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, 38:4, (2015): 57-72, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2015.1125829](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1125829)

²⁰ Spencer D. Bakich, "Signalling capacity and crisis diplomacy: Explaining the failure of 'maximum pressure' in the 2017 U.S.-North Korea nuclear crisis," *Journal of Strategic*

Studies, 45:5, (2022):692-717, DOI: [10.1080/01402390.2020.1755960](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1755960)

²¹ "The Human Costs and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea," *Korea Peace Now*, October 2019, <https://koreapeacenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/human-costs-and-gendered-impact-of-sanctions-on-north-korea.pdf>

²² Ankit Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Ch. 10.

North Korea. In particular, **the United States must, at least for the foreseeable future, drop the unrealistic goal of denuclearizing the DPRK.** While recognizing North Korea as a nuclear weapons state may be a hard pill to swallow, this is the reality of the times and it must be accepted. Denial will only serve to slow down an already highly drawn-out process.²³

US, China, Russia must mutually agree on an arms control roadmap for the Korean Peninsula.

Since denuclearization is out of the question for the time being, **the next best (and necessary) option is arms control.** The key here for North Korea is reciprocal action.²⁴ Not just words, but real action. Instead of demanding unilateral denuclearization by North Korea, the United States and its allies should consider sitting down with China and Russia to develop a more realistic roadmap aimed at arms reduction—a strategy that may actually be accepted by the North Koreans.

Arms control can be defined as “a progressive series of restrictions, limitations, and constraints on arms (nuclear and conventional) and associated steps that reduce the risks of conflict and insulate relations against crises and escalation.”²⁵ Arms control negotiations would be based on the premise that North Korea has already become a de-facto nuclear weapons state and that the focus now must be on how to prevent their weapons arsenal from further growing and ensuring that these weapons will never be used. While the long-term goal could remain the eventual denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—not just North Korea—

mechanisms can be put in place in the meantime to prevent additional missile manufacturing and testing, reduce current weapons stockpiles, dismantle nuclear facilities, and more.

While the details of a final arms control agreement would likely be made between Pyongyang and Washington, Moscow and Beijing can play a constructive role throughout the preparation, negotiation, and implementation process of such an arms control roadmap.

The United States, China, Russia should prioritize long-term peace and proactively work on ending the Korean War.

While nuclear weapons have long been the greatest concern regarding the Korean Peninsula, **a broader, more long-term approach must be adopted in order to ensure lasting peace.** As long as the Korean War has not ended, the state of tension on the Korean Peninsula will remain and the threat of renewed conflict breaking out will also continue. As such, it is not enough to only focus on arms reduction and the nuclear issue. Such negotiations must be held with the long-term goal in mind of ending the war and getting to a peace treaty. This would also help set the foundation for new levels of diplomatic cooperation and relations between Washington and Pyongyang, which may—one day—lead to the normalization of relations between the two countries. Although such goals may seem closer to fantasy than a real possibility at this time, a peaceful solution to this issue will never be achieved unless cooperation is focused on the long-term.

²³ Jeffrey Lewis, “It’s Time to Accept That North Korea Has Nuclear Weapons,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/opinion/international-world/north-korea-us-nuclear.html>

²⁴ Inyeop Lee, “Rethinking Economic Sanctions on North Korea: Why Crippling Economic Sanctions Will Not Make North Korea Denuclearize” *Korea*

Observer 53, no.1 (2022) : 47-73.doi: 10.29152/KOIKS.2022.53.1.47

²⁵ Toby Dalton and Youngjun Kim, “Negotiating Nuclear Arms Control with North Korea: Why and How?,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 33, No. 1, (2021): 1-21, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22883/kjda.2021.33.1.001>

The United States, China, and Russia should encourage and support inter-Korean cooperation, exchanges, and reconciliation efforts.

Besides improving US-DPRK relations, **it is also of utmost importance for the long-term stability and peace of the region that the two Koreas get along well.** This will be impossible, however, without any exchanges between North and South. While the major goal of reunification may be difficult to achieve in the short-term, the parties concerned must at least strive for peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas. For this, exchanges and cooperation on various fronts are needed. **Family reunions should be resumed, certain economic projects such as the connecting of railroads should be pushed forward, people-to-people exchanges must be promoted such as through sports or music, tourism to certain areas should be resumed, etc.** The United States should allow for certain sanctions exemptions for such exchanges to take place while China and Russia should encourage North Korea to take on a more active role in improving its ties with the South.

China and Russia should encourage North Korea to cooperate with the international community on humanitarian issues.

On one hand, North Korea has long been skeptical of external intervention in its internal matters and the state of geopolitics have always played a major role in humanitarian aid to North Korea.²⁶ On the other hand, however, there are many examples of North Korea working together with international humanitarian actors.²⁷ Natural

disasters, economic sanctions, the pandemic, and other factors have all had a negative impact on the humanitarian situation in North Korea in recent years.²⁸

As such, **resuming cooperation with international humanitarian organizations is necessary and in the best interest of the North Korean public.** Since a major humanitarian disaster in North Korea could be destabilizing for the entire region, especially to Beijing, China and Russia should actively encourage North Korean cooperation with the international community in the humanitarian realm. Fewer humanitarian issues in North Korea means a more stable country and a better foundation for expanding cooperation with the outside world.

CONCLUSION

While the United States, Russia, and China disagree on a wide range of issues, the North Korean problem is something that all three should strive to find a solution for. This is because the costs of continuing to ignore the problem and allowing Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal to grow could potentially be catastrophic not just to the Korean Peninsula, but to the region and even the world. Although recent developments will surely make future negotiations with North Korea more complicated, engagement and cooperation remain the best strategies in dealing with the North Korea issue. Washington, Beijing, and Moscow must set their differences aside and put the long-term, greater good of the world ahead of their own disagreements and rivalries.

²⁶ Jong-Woon Lee, "The Geopolitics of Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea under International Sanctions," *Journal of the Economic Geographical Society of Korea* Vol.22, No.4, (2019): 405-421.

²⁷ See: Park, Jeong Won Bourdais, and Jacklin Suji Lee. "The Green Paradox: A Key Catalyst for Inter-Governmental Organizations' Environmental Assistance to North Korea." *North Korean Review*

16, no. 2 (2020): 49–74.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975893>

²⁸ "Humanitarian Aid in North Korea: Needs, Sanctions and Future Challenges," *Centre for Humanitarian Leadership*, April 2020, <https://centreforhumanitarianleadership.org/research/sanctions-and-future-challenges/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriela Bernal is a PhD candidate at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, South Korea and a freelance writer on North Korean affairs. Her analyses and writings have appeared in various outlets, including BBC, Nikkei Asia, The Financial Times, Voices of America, The Korea Times, The Straits Times, The South China Morning Post, Asia Times, and more. Gabriela's main research focuses on inter-Korean relations and North Korean foreign policy.

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament** (APLN) is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apln.network