



# Breaking the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Stalemate

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Recommendations for the United States,  
South Korea, and China

MAY 2026

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Cover Photo: The Joint Security Area at the Demilitarized Zone, the 4 km wide buffer zone separating the two Koreas. (Kok Leng Yeo, via Wikimedia.)

## **Acknowledgements**

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**BREAKING THE KOREAN PENINSULA NUCLEAR STALEMATE:  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES, SOUTH KOREA,  
AND CHINA**

**May 2026**

Frank O'Donnell

## INTRODUCTION

Nuclear and strategic risks on the Korean Peninsula are steadily growing in the absence of coordinated diplomatic action to address them. The DPRK's nuclear and strategic capabilities are expanding and diversifying as it exhibits growing self-confidence. This self-confidence partly draws from Russian strategic support and reduced dependence on China, complicating efforts to coordinate incentives and sanctions underpinning new DPRK talks and a framework agreement. The South Korean Lee administration has launched new diplomatic initiatives for the DPRK's phased denuclearisation, but these have yet to receive serious consideration by the Trump administration and have been robustly rejected by Pyongyang.

Korean Peninsula nuclear concerns do not end at the 38th Parallel. The ROK Lee administration has recently underscored its commitment to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, but at the same time is seeking to develop enrichment and reprocessing capabilities that could enable nuclear latency. Concrete legislative and other actions could allay some of these concerns, although uncertainties and tensions in the US-ROK relationship can fuel demand for nuclear weapons hedging options. Reports at the time of the workshop concerning apparent US planning to relocate air and missile defence assets from South Korea to the Middle East to support operations against Iran highlight the need for closer US-ROK alignment on the direction of their relationship, and pathway to engaging Pyongyang.<sup>1</sup>

On March 27, 2026, a group of US, ROK, and international senior Track-II former officials and experts were convened in Washington for a workshop co-hosted by the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to consider these issues and suggest pathways forward to reduce nuclear risks on the Korean Peninsula. This policy brief summarises their findings and concludes with proposed recommendations for the United States, ROK, and China as key stakeholders in these security challenges. This analysis and selected policy proposals have also informed a separate joint statement by some of the workshop participants, offering recommendations ahead of the May 2026 Trump-Xi summit.

## EVALUATING THE DPRK'S NUCLEAR AND STRATEGIC TRAJECTORY

The DPRK's nuclear and strategic capabilities are growing and diversifying rapidly. This trajectory was further affirmed in the new Five-Year Defense Plan, announced at the Ninth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in February 2026.

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<sup>1</sup> US authorities subsequently clarified that no Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems were removed. See remarks by Gen. Xavier T. Brunson, Commander, United Nations Command / Combined Forces Command / United States Forces Korea, in US Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Testimony on the Posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2027 and the Future Years Defense Program", 21 April 2026, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04-21-2026\\_full-open-transcript.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04-21-2026_full-open-transcript.pdf), 68-70.

The plan committed Pyongyang to advance its ground- and sea-launched ICBM programmes; upgrade and stress-test its nuclear command-and-control systems; and develop AI, electronic warfare, UAV, and anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities. At the Ninth Party Congress and March 2026 Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Jong Un's remarks and associated documents made no positive reference to denuclearisation, instead claiming the DPRK's irreversible status as a nuclear-armed state. The Ninth Party Congress detailed that DPRK nuclear forces would transition toward an operational nuclear posture over the next five years, marking a distinctive step forward from weaponisation. This process could also entail more nuclear explosive tests in the years to come.

Kim's intention to conduct full nuclear drills and test the reliability and effectiveness of nuclear deterrence capabilities suggests a likely future full-range ICBM test launch. This could be intended to further signal to the United States that Pyongyang had the capability to pose unacceptable risk to mainland US targets, to deter Washington from becoming involved in a Korean Peninsula conflict. Pyongyang's expanding nuclear and military posture has been enabled by its strengthening strategic partnership with Russia and reduced dependence on China.

## **RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCES ON KOREAN PENINSULA SECURITY**

Russian technical assistance has likely aided the DPRK's SSBN, space, satellite technology, and air defence programmes, alongside efforts to improve missile accuracy. Pyongyang has also probably received further military benefits from its partnership with Moscow. These include Russian financial transfers to the DPRK in the range of \$7.6bn - \$14.4bn from August 2023-2025 alone, according to one INSS estimate; and UAV combat training.<sup>2</sup> Such developments support the DPRK's efforts to field more modern nuclear and conventional forces; design subconventional and conventional operational concepts which integrate UAV swarm and other cutting-edge tactics; and insulate itself against external sanctions. Russian alignment and coordinated diplomacy with the US and ROK on DPRK nuclear risk reduction would significantly increase its chances of success, but this is unlikely in at least the near term.

Despite China's significant economic leverage over the DPRK, it remains reluctant to exercise it. Growing Russia-DPRK ties have not displaced China as the DPRK's largest trading partner. China's priority on DPRK issues has long been preserving stability on the Korean Peninsula. This tendency was captured in China's 2025 White Paper on arms control, the first iteration of this White Paper to omit any reference to denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lim Su-ho, "Economic Effects of North Korea's Deployment of Troops to Russia and Export of Military Supplies", Institute for National Security Strategy, 13 March 2026, [https://inss.re.kr/publication/bbs/js\\_view.do?nttId=41037787](https://inss.re.kr/publication/bbs/js_view.do?nttId=41037787).

<sup>3</sup> People's Republic of China, *China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation*

Beijing has also tended to view US efforts toward DPRK denuclearisation as part of a broader campaign of regime change, concerns which have only intensified following US actions against Venezuela and Iran in 2026. These perceptions could complicate US efforts to involve China in initiatives to reduce DPRK nuclear threats.

Nevertheless, there are certain nuclear capabilities that China would like to avoid the DPRK developing, such as space-based nuclear weapons, and the desire to avert this outcome could incentivise greater Chinese involvement in a Korean Peninsula risk reduction agenda.<sup>4</sup> A declaration formally ending the Korean War could not only bolster new DPRK engagement, but incentivise Chinese support for this engagement. Xi would likely wish to join the ceremony commemorating this declaration, creating opportunities for bilateral and multilateral diplomacy on Korean Peninsula nuclear risk reduction.

## DISCUSSING REALISTIC OUTCOMES FOR DPRK NEGOTIATIONS

Before inviting the DPRK to new direct talks with the US, it is critical to review historical and current engagement efforts both in terms of their record and shifting strategic context. This in turn should inform which outcome for the US-DPRK and ROK-DPRK relationship is envisioned as the basis for negotiations.

Previous efforts since the early 1990s have foregrounded a denuclearised Korean Peninsula as the outcome to work toward. Diplomatic outreach initiatives have varied from expecting immediate DPRK denuclearisation actions, to denuclearisation instead occurring toward the end of a more gradual, phased process of progressive normalisation and trust-building. The 1994 Agreed Framework can be viewed as an example of the former. The Lee administration's Exchange-Normalisation-Phased Denuclearisation policy could be understood as an example of the latter.<sup>5</sup> This policy would entail improving aid and inter-Korean cultural engagement during the "Exchange" stage, to be followed by full US and ROK recognition of DPRK with "Normalisation." "Phased Denuclearisation" could involve gradual lifting of UNSC and secondary sanctions on the DPRK in return for reciprocal steps by Pyongyang to eliminate its nuclear weapons and capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

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*in the New Era* (Beijing: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, November 2025), [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xw/wjbxw/202511/t20251127\\_11761653.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202511/t20251127_11761653.html).

<sup>4</sup> Ankit Panda, "North Korea Is Getting Serious About Space Weapons", *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/09/north-korea-nuclear-space-weapon-missile-defense-golden-dome/>.

<sup>5</sup> This is more commonly known as the "Exchange-Normalisation-Denuclearisation (END)" policy, as enumerated by President Lee at his September 2025 UN General Assembly speech, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/ph-en/brd/m\\_3272/view.do?seq=761068](https://www.mofa.go.kr/ph-en/brd/m_3272/view.do?seq=761068).

<sup>6</sup> More recent Lee administration diplomacy has sought to emphasise that the denuclearisation stage itself would have multiple phases. For example, the India-ROK Joint Strategic Vision statement of April 20, 2026, released during President Lee's state visit to India, lauded "the ROK's efforts to (...) achieve peaceful coexistence and shared growth on the Korean Peninsula by expanding inter-Korean exchanges, normalization of relations, and **achieving denuclearization in a phased manner**" [emphasis added]. Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Strategic Vision for India-ROK Special Strategic

Significant US, ROK, and international investments to transform the DPRK’s energy grid – especially in building renewable energy facilities – and to develop its economy could be further incentives for Pyongyang to persist in the Phased Denuclearisation stage. Recognising the challenges of securing the DPRK’s participation in negotiations premised on “denuclearisation”, the Lee administration has also sought to replace this term with “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula”.<sup>7</sup> However, this new language has been inconsistently applied, and “denuclearisation” still features in high-level Lee administration statements regarding the DPRK.<sup>8</sup> To some observers, the outcome of a “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula” raises questions of compatibility with existing US nuclear extended deterrence assurances. This seeming interchangeability of “denuclearisation” and “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula” suggests that Lee administration approaches to denuclearisation is more an incremental extension of, rather than a meaningful break from, previous frameworks that centre denuclearisation as the targeted outcome.

However, the Lee administration has demonstrated notable openness to publicly recalibrating its approaches to the DPRK in favour of a policy that will yield results, while recognising that a leading commitment to denuclearisation complicates these efforts. As such, a key recommendation of this report is that the term “stable co-existence” should instead define the targeted outcome and the basis of US-DPRK and ROK-DPRK negotiations. Such a policy would be more likely to lead to DPRK acceptance of a US invitation to direct talks; clearly build upon the declared preferences of both Seoul and Pyongyang for a relationship of “peaceful co-existence”; and enable an early focus on nuclear risk reduction and stability measures which pose the most immediate threats to ROK, US, DPRK, and regional security. Moreover, this approach would not formally abandon denuclearisation as a long-term preference, but reframe it as a potential long-term result of a durable, stable co-existence outcome.

The selection of “stable” as the adjective is, in part, intended to differentiate the US diplomatic commitment from “peaceful co-existence”. The latter term has been proposed by China as a new framework for US-China relations, which would entail full US endorsement of Chinese positions on Taiwan. “Stable” co-existence, by comparison, would avoid the appearance of the US setting a precedent in accepting this specific framework that could then complicate its ongoing efforts to resist the same framework with China.

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Partnership”, 20 April 2026,

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2253977&reg=3&lang=2>.

<sup>7</sup> Republic of Korea, Peaceful Unification Advisory Council, “Chairperson’s Speech at the Inauguration of the 22nd Peaceful Unification Advisory Council,” 2 December 2025,

<https://www.puac.go.kr/langNtcnBbs/detail.do?bbsId=NABSMSTR000000000023&nttId=693>.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, US White House, “Joint Fact Sheet on President Donald J. Trump’s Meeting with President Lee Jae Myung”, 13 November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/joint-fact-sheet-on-president-donald-j-trumps-meeting-with-president-lee-jae-myung/>; and “Joint Strategic Vision for India-ROK Special Strategic Partnership”.

Such a shift to “stable co-existence” would not be without its own costs, however. The NPT regime could be impacted by this shift away from denuclearisation and toward implicit nuclear recognition, potentially sending the signal of rewarding Pyongyang’s decision to withdraw from the NPT in 2003. On this point, US and ROK leaders could emphasise their focus on nuclear risk reduction and stability mechanisms to address the most immediate nuclear dangers the Korean Peninsula currently faces. Washington and Seoul could also highlight that decades of centring “denuclearisation” in their DPRK engagement has not yielded that outcome, and this new approach offers the most feasible conditions within which denuclearisation could possibly occur.<sup>9</sup>

A key requirement for any successful DPRK negotiations is for the US and ROK to credibly assure their commitment to the safety and security of the Kim Jong Un regime, and definitive abandonment of perceived regime-change goals and planning that Pyongyang characterises as part of US “hostile policy”. Establishing this credibility would be especially challenging for the US following its recent regime-change operations against Venezuela and Iran, and similar threats against Cuba at the time of writing, leading Kim Jong Un to likely conclude that his nuclear weapons had preserved his government from a similar fate. Involving international institutions in monitoring the ongoing compliance of all states with their commitments under an agreement would help buttress this credibility.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF US-ROK CONSULTATIONS PRIOR TO DPRK ENGAGEMENT**

It is critical to ensure US-ROK alignment on the goals of DPRK engagement before US-DPRK talks begin. The Trump administration needs to decide the strategic/military concessions it is willing to accept as part of DPRK negotiations, and its definition of a stable co-existence outcome. Only after this process has been completed can it then commence ROK consultations to build US-ROK convergence on these points, with DPRK talks to follow.

Establishing common definitions of terms is also essential as part of these consultations, as operating without clearly shared definitions and visions has complicated past diplomatic efforts. This means that agreeing upon the meaning of stable co-existence and the pathway to secure it is a priority for US-ROK consultations before US-DPRK dialogue.

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<sup>9</sup> For further analysis of a possible “stable co-existence” approach to the DPRK, see Frank Aum and Ankit Panda, *Pursuing Stable Coexistence: A Reorientation of US Policy Toward North Korea* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 May 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/pursuing-stable-coexistence-a-reorientation-of-us-policy-toward-north-korea>; and Frank Aum (ed.), *Pursuing Peaceful Coexistence with North Korea: An Essay Series* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 2024), <https://web.archive.org/web/20250224220621/https://www.usip.org/programs/pursuing-peaceful-co-existence-north-korea-essay-series>.

## EVALUATING THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP IN MANAGING CHALLENGES

The broader US-ROK relationship should not be conflated with the alliance. For example, officials have claimed FTAs and economic integration as advancements for the alliance, yet they are better understood as advancements for the broader relationship.

This conflation risks migrating multiple politically-charged topics and issues in the broader US-ROK relationship into analyses of the health of the alliance itself. Semiconductor manufacturing, shipbuilding, battery industries, US FDI from ROK, and supply chain derisking are now key questions in the bilateral relationship, but are increasingly viewed as being crucial for the alliance too. Setbacks on agendas on the broader relationship risk generating increased mistrust in the alliance, if the alliance's health is now evaluated on that of many US-ROK issues that do not directly concern its core tasks of deterring the DPRK, mutual defence, and extended deterrence.

ROK perceptions of alliance issues include US demands that the ROK accept a US “strategic flexibility” approach to enable ROK-based US forces to be available for redeployment to regional contingencies outside the Korean Peninsula; and for the ROK to commit forces to support the US in these regional contingencies. The Lee administration is currently resisting both demands, as it does not want the ROK to become entangled in a Taiwan war to the detriment of its military posture against the DPRK.

The Lee administration's push to achieve OPCON transfer was in part to prevent ROK forces from becoming involved in these regional contingencies. In this thinking, if OPCON transfer leads to a reduction in ROK-stationed US forces, this could similarly reduce the risk of ROK military entanglement in US regional contingencies and Chinese threat perceptions around the scale and intentions of regional US forces. From a US perspective, the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty makes no mention of a specific adversary and further establishes reciprocal obligations on both allies to defend the other if attacked, leaving the possibility of South Korean involvement in a broader Pacific conflict consistent with alliance obligations.

The US and ROK also have distinct views on the DPRK actions which constitute “provocations”. US forces are not on the Korean Peninsula to deter DPRK missile tests or subconventional provocations, but to deter general war and major crises or higher-level skirmishes on the Peninsula. However, this difference is rarely addressed in alliance consultations. Reaching a common understanding on the DPRK actions that would necessitate a military response would further aid alliance policy alignment.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY ROK NUCLEARISATION DEBATE

For many years there has been majority public opinion in South Korea favouring acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, support tends to decline once respondents are asked about potentially suffering severe political, economic, and material costs.<sup>10</sup>

The Yoon government publicly raised the possibility of ROK nuclear weapons, possibly as a way of bargaining to secure greater US nuclear assurances. By contrast, the Lee government has consistently said that it does not want nuclear weapons, though it does want more nuclear capabilities for peaceful energy purposes. Still, this stance is viewed with concern in the US, as this policy could entail developing nuclear latency. While the recent APLN commentary by serving ROK Foreign Minister Cho Hyun ruling out nuclear hedging is welcome, this statement could be followed up with concrete policies to prevent this outcome, including legislation to bind successor governments.<sup>11</sup>

Efforts to reduce ROK interest in nuclear latency or nuclear weapons acquisition have not been helped by recent Trump administration thinking. Reports of the administration considering drawdowns of US forces stationed in ROK are a prominent example.<sup>12</sup>

The 2026 US National Defense Strategy (NDS) could also inflame ROK support for nuclear hedging or weapons. One passage arguably reduces US military commitments to South Korea: “With its powerful military, supported by high defense spending, a robust defense industry, and mandatory conscription, South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited US support.”<sup>13</sup> Nor does the NDS mention the term “extended deterrence” anywhere.

The NDS further contends that “The DPRK poses a direct military threat to the Republic of Korea (ROK) as well as to Japan, both of which are US treaty allies”.<sup>14</sup> This language is more limited than that of several previous US administrations, which

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, “Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons”, Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2022, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>11</sup> Cho Hyun, “Non-Proliferation as a Strategic Imperative”, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 1 April 2026, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/non-proliferation-as-a-strategic-imperative>; see also “Non-Proliferation as a Strategic Imperative: Experts Respond to ROK Foreign Minister”, Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, 2 April 2026, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/the-pulse/non-proliferation-as-a-strategic-imperative-experts-respond-to-rok-foreign-minister>.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Thomas Maresca, “Reducing US Troops in South Korea Would Be ‘Problematic’, Top Commander Warns”, *UPI*, 11 April 2025, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2025/04/11/USFK-General-Xavier-Brunson-troop-reduction-problematic-South-Korea/4941744357116/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2025/04/11/USFK-General-Xavier-Brunson-troop-reduction-problematic-South-Korea/4941744357116/); and Nancy A. Youssef, Alexander Ward, and Timothy W. Martin, “US Considers Withdrawing Thousands of Troops From South Korea”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/u-s-considers-withdrawing-thousands-of-troops-from-south-korea-725a6514>.

<sup>13</sup> US Department of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, 23 January 2026, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>, 20.

<sup>14</sup> US Department of Defense, *2026 National Defense Strategy*, 12.

have instead consistently described the DPRK as posing a threat to the alliance itself. If the absence of the “extended deterrence” term from the 2026 NDS were to be paired with ongoing similar US messaging and practices consistent with limiting its responsibility for the defence of ROK, Seoul’s fears of abandonment and corollary support for independent nuclear capabilities could grow.

## **CONCLUSION**

The rapidly expanding DPRK nuclear arsenal and intensifying threats it poses to ROK, US, and regional security necessitates renewed efforts to engage Pyongyang on addressing these dangers. Given the accelerating speed of its nuclear force advancements, it is critical to not only launch high-level talks with the DPRK, but ensure that these talks are based on a targeted outcome most likely to ensure success in the near, medium, and long-term. This report has noted that past and current efforts to centre denuclearisation as the outcome, while laudable, have not yielded this desired result. This diplomatic track record, combined with Pyongyang’s ongoing refusal to even enter talks with denuclearisation on the agenda, suggests that a new targeted outcome of stable co-existence offers a more realistic way to cooperatively reduce the risks of nuclear conflict. Moreover, denuclearisation is now most achievable as a possible result of a durable relationship premised on stable co-existence.

The urgency of initiating direct negotiations with Pyongyang should not detract from the necessity of first ensuring US-ROK alignment on this shift to a stable co-existence basis for talks; the definition of key terms and development of common expectations for this dialogue; and incentives and concessions Washington and Seoul are willing to offer toward this outcome. Direct outreach from Washington to Pyongyang inviting it to high-level dialogue should not take place until this US-ROK common understanding has been achieved.

Nevertheless, the Trump-Xi summit in May 2026 provides a window of opportunity for the Trump administration to signal its intentions to renew dialogue with Pyongyang and engage Beijing. The US can ensure shared concern with Korean Peninsula security issues is expressed on the summit joint statement, and include dedicated dialogue on the growing DPRK threats to China’s security interests during summit exchanges. This diplomacy can deliver valuable outcomes of indicating that DPRK nuclear issues are a high-level US strategic priority and encouraging greater Chinese involvement in supporting US-DPRK talks based on stable co-existence. These mutually reinforcing lines of effort, as crystallised in the following policy recommendations, offer the most realistic pathway to breaking the Korean Peninsula nuclear stalemate.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for the United States

- The US should place Korean Peninsula security on the agenda for the May 2026 Trump-Xi summit and subsequent high-level bilateral interactions. Trump should personally and consistently raise Korean Peninsula security as an issue whenever he talks with Xi, ensuring that the Chinese leadership understands this is a serious US priority.
- The Trump administration should internally determine its definition of stable co-existence as the basis for negotiations; the political, economic, and military incentives it is willing to provide; the costs it is willing to accept; the minimum DPRK concessions it will require for a negotiated agreement; and its working definitions of “nuclear risk reduction”, “stability”, and “provocations” prior to engaging the Lee administration on these points. This review should begin immediately.
- As part of a stable co-existence framework, Washington and Seoul should also discuss potentially proposing an end-of-war declaration to Pyongyang, including mitigation plans against its possible side-effect of undermining the rationale for US-ROK alliance commitments.
- US efforts to develop internal agreement and engage ROK on these points need to proceed expeditiously, given the rapidly expanding and diversifying nuclear and strategic threats that the DPRK pose.
- US-ROK alignment on key working definitions of terms; the desired outcome of DPRK talks; and the incentives they are willing to offer and costs they are willing to bear as part of achieving this outcome are critical to achieve before US-DPRK talks could begin.
- Establishing a high-level US-ROK taskforce can accelerate this process, while continuing to meet to consult on the progress of direct DPRK talks.
- The US should also appoint a Special Envoy to the DPRK, to both support this high-level US-ROK task force and US-DPRK talks once these commence.
- In direct talks with the DPRK, the US should seek common ground on working definitions of “stable co-existence”; “nuclear risk”; “nuclear risk reduction”, “stability”, and “provocations”. Washington should also probe Pyongyang’s willingness to reaffirm all or parts of the 2018 Singapore Statement, and explore other potential mutual compromises. The US should then work to reconcile these definitions and compromises with US-ROK understandings in close consultation with ROK leaders.

- As an early outcome of US-DPRK talks, Washington should seek to establish a small US Liaison Office with US Foreign Service Officers posted within the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang (as the protecting power of US official interests in the country in the absence of a US-DPRK diplomatic relationship). This diplomatic channel would advance stable co-existence efforts.
- Recognising legitimate international concerns about the durability of US policy commitments across successive presidencies, US negotiators should insist that international institutions be empowered to monitor compliance by all parties with their commitments under any diplomatic agreement.
- The US should engage China, ROK and Japan – and Russia if ready to cooperate – on crisis management and cooperation mechanisms to be activated in case of a serious conflict instigated by the DPRK.

### **Recommendations for the ROK**

- Reflecting the Lee administration’s notable willingness to embrace the formulation “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula”, it should be equally open to accepting that denuclearisation can be most feasibly attained in the long term through a more realistic focus on stable co-existence.
- Seoul should actively encourage Washington to expedite US deliberations on objectives and definitional terms underpinning a DPRK policy; begin bilateral US-ROK talks to attain alignment; and conduct DPRK direct talks following these US-ROK consultations.
- The Lee government should further clarify how its civil nuclear developments are safeguarded against being used toward nuclear weapons hedging, to allay US and regional concerns counterproductive to Northeast Asian nuclear risk reduction efforts. This could include legislation and other measures to bind successor ROK governments.

### **Recommendations for China**

- China should acknowledge the seriousness of DPRK strategic and tactical challenges to regional stability, and engage in structured, working-level dialogues with the United States on how each defines Korean Peninsula stability, identifies major risks, and moves toward a common approach. This should include dedicated discussions on this point at the rescheduled May 2026 and subsequent US-China summits.
- Cooperation between China and the United States on Korean Peninsula security should be decoupled from their broader relationship.

- Beijing should support US-ROK efforts to agree an end-of-war declaration with DPRK, including treating a commemoration ceremony as an opportunity for high-level bilateral and multilateral diplomacy on Korean Peninsula security.
- Beijing should recognize that certain DPRK nuclear and strategic developments, such as potential space-based nuclear weapons, threaten core Chinese interests, and support US and global efforts to develop norms and constraints against development of these forces

## **About the Author**

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## ABOUT APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (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.



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