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Toward a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula: Policy Approaches to North Korea

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Toward a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula: Policy Approaches to North Korea

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I Research Objectives

- The North Korean nuclear issue is no longer merely “a denuclearization negotiation agenda resolvable in the short term”; rather, it has evolved into a structural problem requiring long-term management.
 - North Korea has institutionalized its nuclear forces as a core instrument of national strategy, affirmed its commitment to their continuous strengthening, and adopted a posture that treats its de facto nuclear-armed status as irreversible.
 - Given North Korea’s view of nuclear weapons as a strategic asset essential for regime survival, comprehensive, all-or-nothing denuclearization approaches, as pursued in the past, are no longer viable in practice.
- The Ninth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 2026 demonstrated policy clarity on North Korea’s intent to reset its external relations while treating its nuclear status as an established fact.
 - Chairman Kim Jong Un proclaimed the continued expansion of nuclear forces but also signaled potential improvements in U.S.–North Korea relations, contingent on U.S. policy changes.
 - However, North Korea’s persistently hostile posture toward South Korea could impose structural constraints on a denuclearization model reliant on inter-Korean cooperation, necessitating strategies to overcome these challenges.
- The rise of denuclearization realism in the United States, coupled with the Trump administration’s increasingly results-oriented and transactional approach, presents opportunities for U.S.–North Korea negotiations.
 - Some U.S. political circles have floated “nuclear disarmament-type negotiations” that acknowledge North Korea’s nuclear capabilities, with growing prospects for its inclusion in multilateral nuclear disarmament talks following the New START framework.¹

1 In an interview with *The New York Times* regarding the New START Treaty, President Trump did not

- President Trump has responded proactively to Chairman Kim Jong Un's conditional overtures by repeatedly affirming openness to dialogue without preconditions, thereby broadening prospects for improved U.S.-North Korea relations.
- President Trump's May visit to China, President Xi Jinping's return visit, and the November APEC summit in Shenzhen could serve as pivotal opportunities for advancing Korean Peninsula denuclearization.
- These shifts in the strategic environment necessitate a reset in the approach to achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.
 - This entails adopting a phased management strategy that upholds complete denuclearization as the ultimate goal while pursuing, in the short term, a halt to nuclear capability enhancements and, in the medium term, a gradual reduction.
 - However, North Korea has yet to demonstrate substantive responsiveness to this phased approach, and South Korea lacks adequate policy tools to elicit it.
 - Simple sanctions relief or economic aid alone cannot alter North Korea's strategic calculus; instead, a new exchange structure is needed that integrates security confidence-building measures with economic cooperation.
- This report presents policy alternatives for halting and reducing North Korea's nuclear capabilities and securing its engagement amid volatile inter-Korean relations and a turbulent international environment.
 - Building on the Korean Peninsula peaceful coexistence policy, it seeks to foster North Korean participation through (1) trust-building, (2) economic incentives, and (3) a multilateral arms control (disarmament) framework.
 - Specifically, it aims to establish negotiation foundations through trust-building between South Korea and North Korea, and between North Korea and the United States; induce participation through economic incentives; and bolster the feasibility of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula by inducing North Korean participation in multilateral arms control and nuclear disarmament platforms.

specifically mention North Korea, but alluded to drawing in several other countries.

II The Direction of the “Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula” Approach

1. Goals and Principles of the Peaceful Coexistence Policy

- The three policy goals—institutionalizing peaceful coexistence between South and North Korea, building a foundation for joint development on the Korean Peninsula, and realizing a Korean Peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons—are to be pursued in organic combination with three guiding principles: (1) respect for the North Korean system, (2) rejecting unification by absorption, and (3) avoiding hostile acts.²
 - Through a comprehensive approach integrating exchanges, normalization of relations, and denuclearization, hostile conditions should be terminated in order to foster peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.
 - To this end, priority tasks include easing military tensions and building trust, dismantling the armistice regime while creating conditions for dialogue, and establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

- On the North Korean nuclear issue, a “Korean Peninsula free of war and nuclear weapons” remains the ultimate goal, pursued through a phased, pragmatic approach that promotes the resumption of U.S.–North Korea dialogue.³
 - In the short term, efforts focus on halting increases in nuclear capabilities; in the medium term, on reopening denuclearization pathways through reductions in nuclear capabilities and related facilities.
 - This phased approach should not be misconstrued as tacit acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear possession, but rather as a realistic method for advancing the ultimate resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

2 Ministry of Unification, *Korean Peninsula Peace Coexistence Policy of the Lee Jae-myung Administration* (2026), pp. 12-14.

3 Ibid., p. 14.

- This approach recognizes the limitations of the existing linear “security-for-economics” exchange model in altering North Korea’s strategic calculus.
 - Thus, rather than relying solely on sanctions relief or economic assistance—which are unlikely to elicit engagement—the approach adopts a compound “security-for-security plus economics” exchange structure.
 - Additionally, a comprehensive roadmap will build trust through humanitarian and cultural “soft balancing” measures, even under sanctions constraints, while advancing denuclearization, a peace regime, and normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations in tandem.

- The primary objective for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula is to halt further enhancements of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities and, while pursuing “decent” peace, establish an institutional foundation for transitioning to gradual reductions.⁴
 - This represents not a mere “freeze proposal” but an entry point to subsequent reductions and elimination of nuclear capabilities.
 - North Korean engagement becomes realistically feasible only by combining trust-building measures, military tension reduction, normalization of relations, economic cooperation with sanctions relief, and multilateral safeguards.
 - If warm coexistence proves unattainable in the short term, “stable coexistence” should be prioritized through military tension reduction and the prevention of accidental conflict to propel inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea negotiations forward.⁵

4 Presidential Office of the Republic of Korea, “Press Conference during China Visit: Remarks by President Lee Jae Myung on the Pursuit of a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula” (January 7, 2026). President Lee emphasized: “In the long term, we must pursue denuclearization, but from North Korea’s perspective, agreeing to eliminate nuclear weapons right now is impossible. In the short term, we should compensate or provide a quid pro quo for maintaining the status quo—that is, for not producing additional weapons—and in the medium term, we should pursue reduction, while not abandoning the long-term goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”

5 Frank Aum, “Diplomatic Approaches for Driving North Korea-U.S. Dialogue,” in *Establishing a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula through North Korea-U.S. Dialogue* (INSS Conference Proceedings, March 30, 2026), p. 18.

- Upon resumption of U.S.-North Korea negotiations, comprehensive agreements should be sought to create a virtuous cycle with inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges.
 - North Korea's dual messaging—that its relations with the United States hinge on U.S. attitudes—should be leveraged to clarify the security and economic benefits of choosing negotiations.
 - South Korea must support U.S.-North Korea dialogue through close coordination with the United States, ensuring these talks advance rather than marginalize inter-Korean efforts.

2. The Direction of the “Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula” Approach

- North Korea's demand for economic development, its scope for external cooperation, and the need for new international mechanisms for crisis management on the Korean Peninsula all function as opportunity factors.
 - North Korea has recently emphasized the importance of external trade, tourism, local development, as well as public health, education, and medical services in its economic strategy alongside its demands for regime security guarantees. This suggests that economic incentives may serve as effective drivers for engagement.
 - For the United States, negotiations could yield tangible gains: the effective elimination of North Korea's ICBM and nuclear capabilities, thereby enhancing national security; strengthened leadership within the global nuclear nonproliferation regime (NPT); and the potential for a signature diplomatic achievement for the Trump administration.
 - At the same time, the current international environment is unfavorable to a comprehensive, all-or-nothing approach to denuclearization, while simultaneously offering limited opportunities for crisis management and phased control.
 - ※ The weakening of the U.S.-Russia arms control regime, prolonged U.S.-China strategic competition, deepening North Korea-Russia alignment, and increasing regional instability paradoxically underscore the need for new cooperative crisis management mechanisms at the Korean Peninsula level.

- The approach adopts a phased process, progressing from a condition-creation stage to halt, reduction, and elimination.
 - The condition-creation stage focuses on building a conducive negotiating environment through the restoration of dialogue channels, coordination of agenda items, and implementation of tension-reduction measures. The key objective is to signal that regime security will not be undermined if North Korea returns to negotiations.
 - This preliminary stage enables mechanisms such as restoring inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea communication channels, resuming humanitarian cooperation, reducing conflict risks in border areas, and aligning negotiating agendas and terminology to function as trust-building measures.
- Phase 1 aims to halt the advancement of nuclear capabilities, including the production of fissile material, nuclear testing, and ICBM test launches.
 - Rather than adopting a management-oriented approach that implicitly accepts North Korea's nuclear status, this seeks to accumulate practical experience in halting nuclear development and implementing verification, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent reduction and eventual complete denuclearization.
 - This represents the most realistic immediate objective and the minimum condition for advancing to the next stage of reduction.
- Phase 2 focuses on making the trajectory toward denuclearization visible through the closure of selected nuclear facilities, reduction of production capacity, and curtailment of related programs.
 - Key areas of discussion include the closure and dismantlement of nuclear facilities at the “Yongbyon-plus” level, limitations on fissile material production capacity, and reductions in research, production, and storage infrastructure.
 - This phase serves as an intermediate pathway that clarifies the direction of denuclearization and, over the long term, acts as a bridge toward complete denuclearization.

- Ultimately, in achieving Phase 3—complete denuclearization—each stage should be understood not as a strictly linear sequence, but as a mutually interconnected and gradually institutionalized process.

3. Limitations and Lessons of Past Denuclearization Negotiations

- Constraints and lessons from the Agreed Framework, the Six-Party Talks, and the U.S.–North Korea summit agreements
 - The 1994 Agreed Framework illustrates how momentum can be lost in the transition from “halt” to “reduction.” While it succeeded in freezing (halting) nuclear activities, it lacked a concrete implementation strategy and the mutual trust necessary to advance to subsequent stages of reduction and elimination.
 - ※ Even during the initial implementation of halt measures, a clear roadmap and trust-building mechanisms for subsequent phases must be developed in parallel.
 - The Six-Party Talks demonstrate the consequences of failing to institutionalize verification and of mismatches in reciprocal measures. Although some progress was achieved under the “action-for-action” principle—including the demolition of the Yongbyon cooling tower—the talks ultimately collapsed at the stage of a “verifiable declaration” due to diverging U.S.–North Korea positions.
 - ※ This highlights the necessity of reaching prior agreement on the detailed conditions and verification methods for phased reciprocal measures, which is closely linked to the development of multilateral arms control-type management mechanisms going forward.
 - The 2018–2019 U.S.–North Korea summit meetings reveal a strategic clash between “partial agreement” and “comprehensive settlement.” North Korea proposed exchanging the dismantlement of Yongbyon facilities (reduction) for partial sanctions relief (economic incentives), while the United States insisted on comprehensive denuclearization (comprehensive settlement), resulting in a breakdown of negotiations.
 - ※ This confirmed the importance of a “package-type” approach, in which the scope of denuclearization and the corresponding measures, such as sanctions relief, are carefully calibrated in advance.

- Applying lessons to the Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula approach
 - In the condition-creation stage, recognizing that mutual distrust constitutes the primary obstacle, concrete signals should be provided through the restoration of dialogue channels, humanitarian cooperation, and reduction of border conflict risks to demonstrate that regime security will not be undermined.
 - In Phases 1 and 2 (halt and reduction), compensation such as sanctions relief should be structured in a phased manner to ensure that tangible incentives are provided at each stage of progress. In particular, multilateral cooperative mechanisms should be activated at clearly observable stages to consolidate gains.
 - In Phase 3 (elimination), complete denuclearization should be approached as a gradual process of consolidating a comprehensive package that integrates trust, economic incentives, and security guarantees. Ultimately, denuclearization should be institutionalized through a framework that simultaneously accommodates North Korea's need for face-saving and the United States' demand for a credible and demonstrable outcome.

III Creating Conditions through Trust-Building

1. Inter-Korean Trust-Building

- The GRIT strategy,⁶ a form of preemptive trust-building, is employed to advance engagement while accounting for North Korea's core demands.
 - Past precedents are adapted to the current security environment, including: (1) the conditional suspension of ROK-U.S. military exercises,⁷ (2) the consolidation of spring and fall exercises,⁸ (3) the 1992 New York talks, and (4) North Korea's 2018 measures, such as the repatriation of remains, release of detainees, and closure of facilities at Punggye-ri and Tongchang-ri.⁹
 - This approach adopts a phased, arms control-oriented framework: initial unilateral or low-cost confidence-building measures → reciprocal actions → gradual scaling → transition from adversarial relations toward cooperation.
 - In operational terms, implementation proceeds from low-intensity measures, including the mutual cessation of hostile acts → accidental conflict prevention mechanisms → humanitarian cooperation → stabilization of military communication channels → arms control dialogue.
- As an initial priority, short-term, low-intensity reciprocal measures should be developed and implemented as a pragmatic entry point.
 - A realistic entry strategy would involve exchanging North Korea's halt to additional nuclear testing, ICBM test launches, and tactical nuclear development for calibrated adjustments in ROK-U.S. combined exercises and the deployment of U.S. strategic assets.

6 Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction.

7 Examples include the temporary suspension of Team Spirit exercises in 1992 and the suspension of large-scale field maneuver exercises (Foal Eagle) from 2018 to 2022.

8 This was reviewed under the Moon Jae-in administration but was not implemented.

9 Frank Aum, *ibid.*, p. 19.

- While such reciprocal measures may be perceived by North Korea as asymmetrical relative to a nuclear freeze, from the South Korean perspective they serve as a necessary entry point for reestablishing dialogue.
- In this context, adjustments to combined exercises function as diplomatic leverage to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table, with the objective of expanding discussions toward broader outcomes, including a peace agreement and normalization of relations.
- The preemptive restoration of the September 19 Military Agreement can serve as a critical institutional foundation for renewed engagement.¹⁰
 - Initial steps would include reconnecting inter-Korean military communication lines and restoring measures for the cessation of hostile acts in border areas, thereby facilitating inter-Korean exchange and stabilization.
 - Restoration of the ground buffer zones under the agreement, particularly in response to North Korea's recent border fortification activities, should be accompanied by the establishment of a mutually recognized "MDL Peace Zone" or "No Fire Zone" within the DMZ to reduce tensions.
 - Reinstating no-fly zones and other confidence-building provisions would further mitigate the risk of accidental conflict.
 - At the same time, consideration should be given to updating the agreement to reflect evolving military technologies, including unmanned systems and AI-enabled capabilities, alongside the establishment of a "South-North Military Joint Committee Preparatory Task Force" to guide future arms control and confidence-building efforts.

10 Presidential Office of the Republic of Korea, "Liberation Day Address Marking the 80th Anniversary: Declaration of the Preemptive and Phased Restoration of the September 19 Military Agreement" (August 15, 2025). In the Liberation Day address on August 15, 2025, President Lee Jae Myung announced the preemptive and phased restoration of the September 19 Military Agreement for the prevention of accidental inter-Korean conflict and military trust-building.

- North Korea's border fortification activities should be leveraged as an opportunity to create conditions for dialogue.
 - Since 2024, North Korea has constructed new defensive lines along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) as part of its "hostile two-state" doctrine, with fortifications reportedly extending across significant portions of the border.
 - Given that North Korea has provided advance notification to the United Nations Command (UNC) for certain construction activities and has not yet responded to South Korean warning shots, treating these developments solely as provocations risks unintended escalation.
 - Instead, these activities could serve as a basis for proposing military-to-military dialogue, including discussions on establishing a mutually recognized reference line for the MDL within the DMZ.
 - ※ Divergences in how the MDL is interpreted by South Korea, North Korea, and the UNC, particularly in mountainous eastern sectors where discrepancies can reach several hundred meters, underscore the practical need for such discussions.

- Humanitarian assistance and emerging areas of security cooperation should be utilized to generate sustained engagement opportunities.
 - Maintaining a clear separation between humanitarian assistance and political-military dynamics allows for consistent signaling of peaceful intent to both the North Korean population and leadership.
 - Accordingly, assistance channels aligned with North Korea's policy priorities, particularly in public health and medical sectors (e.g., medical training, pharmaceuticals, diagnostic equipment, health supplements, and nutritional support for vulnerable populations), should remain continuously operational.
 - In parallel, opportunities for engagement through international sports and cultural exchanges should be actively pursued. For example, the inter-Korean semifinal of the AFC Women's Champions League scheduled in Suwon in May 2026 could serve as a catalyst for the first major inter-Korean sporting exchange under the current Lee administration.

2. Trust-Building between North Korea and the United States

- Reviewing measures for effective trust-building and regime security guarantees, including a declaration ending the Korean war and a peace agreement
 - In light of North Korea's demand for regime security guarantees and its pursuit of de facto nuclear-armed status, key agenda items should include a declaration ending the Korean war, the negotiation of a peace agreement, normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations, and the initiation of nuclear arms control and disarmament talks.
 - Meaningful security guarantees, accompanied by a transformation of the existing armistice framework, should precede any transition from a halt to a reduction phase. To this end, a standing senior-level consultative mechanism should be established, potentially tasked with overseeing the transition from the Armistice Agreement to a formal peace regime, thereby institutionalizing security assurances.
 - ※ This approach should address North Korea's core security concerns by ensuring both the stability of the current system and continuity of regime security beyond the Kim Jong Un era.
 - A coordinated, multilayered package combining inter-Korean cooperation and the normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations should integrate economic, political, and security incentives into a unified incentive structure.
 - Relevant lessons may be drawn from the reported 15-point framework proposed by the United States to Iran on March 24, 2026.¹¹
 - ※ These reportedly included full sanctions relief and the unfreezing of overseas assets; support for civilian nuclear programs (e.g., the Bushehr nuclear power plant); and long-term assurances against the reimposition of sanctions ("snap-back"), coupled with normalization of relations.
- Resumption of high-level dialogue and establishment of permanent communication channels
 - The United States should maintain openness to dialogue without preconditions while consistently signaling the President's willingness to engage directly, thereby reinforcing political commitment to resolving the issue.

11 "U.S. Proposes 15-Point Framework for Iran: Sanctions Relief and Security Guarantees," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2026.

- Contingent upon meaningful nuclear risk-reduction measures, reciprocal liaison offices in Pyongyang, Washington, and Seoul should be established as an initial step toward institutionalized engagement.
- These offices should be complemented by expanded people-to-people exchanges, including the issuance of long-term visas and facilitation of professional and cultural exchanges, to build trust at both the governmental and societal levels.
- Presentation of targeted incentives, including calibrated sanctions relief
 - Sanctions policy should be employed as a calibrated tool to incentivize engagement, beginning with expanded humanitarian exemptions and scaling in proportion to North Korea's concrete steps toward denuclearization.
 - ※ Notably, in February 2026, the United States approved exemptions for 17 previously pending humanitarian assistance projects under the UN Security Council's North Korea Sanctions Committee.
 - At subsequent stages, partial sanctions relief at the confidence-building level, or conditional authorization of inter-Korean economic cooperation projects, should be considered in alignment with verifiable denuclearization measures.
 - In addition, for major North Korean development initiatives such as the Wonsan-Kalma coastal tourist zone, a trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan consortium could be explored to deliver targeted, time-bound investment, thereby reinforcing the economic dimension of a negotiated settlement.

IV Inducing North Korean Engagement through Economic Incentives

1. Economic Approaches in Past Nuclear Negotiations

- Economic incentives offered in past North Korea nuclear negotiations can be categorized into four types: energy assistance, humanitarian aid (particularly food assistance), sanctions relief, and economic cooperation and normalization of relations (integration into the international economic system).
 - Under the 1994 Agreed Framework, incentives focused on energy assistance, including heavy fuel oil shipments and the provision of light-water reactors, in exchange for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear program. These measures were primarily designed to address acute energy shortages rather than to promote broader economic development.
 - During the Six-Party Talks (2003–2008), a more comprehensive package was pursued, linking denuclearization steps to economic assistance, expanded economic cooperation, and eventual normalization of relations. This represented the most integrated economic incentive framework to date.
 - In contrast, the 2018–2019 U.S.–North Korea negotiations centered on a narrower exchange—dismantlement of Yongbyon facilities in return for partial sanctions relief—reflecting a shift away from broad economic assistance toward sanctions-focused incentives.
- Existing economic incentives have exhibited the following limitations.
 - The North Korean nuclear issue is fundamentally linked to regime security, limiting the effectiveness of economic incentives in the absence of credible security guarantees.
 - Repeated breakdowns in implementation and the accumulation of mutual distrust have undermined the credibility and sustainability of economic inducements.
 - The sanctions-based framework constrains both the scope and pace of incentives, as meaningful economic engagement is difficult to advance without corresponding sanctions relief.

- Notwithstanding these constraints, certain forms of economic incentives remain viable and potentially effective.
 - Humanitarian assistance—including food aid, public health support, and nutritional programs—remains a critical tool for trust-building, given its relatively low political sensitivity even within the sanctions regime.
 - At the same time, sanctions relief—rather than stand-alone economic aid—should remain useful for inducing dialogues by easing in trade, selected financial activities, and specific industrial sectors implemented on a phased, reciprocal basis.
 - In the medium to long term, large-scale economic cooperation in areas of structural need—such as energy supply, power grid development, and transportation and logistics infrastructure—could serve as high-value incentives, particularly in conjunction with measurable denuclearization progress.
 - A multilateral cooperation framework—an approach that has not been fully operationalized in past negotiations—offers a more sustainable model for delivering and coordinating economic incentives over time.

2. Changed Economic Incentives in Reflection of North Korea's Current Development and Economic Policies

- The Ninth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea signaled North Korea's open-ended position on engagement with the United States and possible openness to the international community.
 - North Korea outlined an economic strategy that partially departs from a strict self-reliance framework, instead envisioning gradual and controlled economic growth.¹²
 - Its emphasis on revitalizing external trade and designating tourism as a “driving sector” of growth suggests a forward-looking orientation toward selective external engagement.
 - In principle, North Korea continues to maintain a hardline posture toward the United States, while leaving open the possibility of dialogue in exchange of recognition of its nuclear-armed status and the removal of hostile policy.

12 Jisun Yi, “North Korea's Economic Strategy at the Ninth Party Congress: Continuity, Change, and Implications for South Korea,” *INSS Issue Brief*, No. 814 (March 2026).

- Priority areas for future economic cooperation can be grouped into three categories: high policy alignments, long-term industrial demands, and regional development initiatives.
 - Areas closely aligned with North Korea's stated policy direction include external trade, tourism, information technology, and local development sectors such as public health, education, medical services, and food security.
 - Sectors characterized by persistent structural demand—regardless of short-term policy shifts—include energy and infrastructure, light industry, and special economic zone development; however, due to sanctions constraints, these areas are less immediately viable as near-term incentives.
 - Regional development initiatives likely to attract North Korean interest include re-engagement with the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), participation in a Northeast Asian power grid (“super grid”), integration into Eurasian rail and logistics corridors, development of the Tumen River economic belt, and expanded tourism cooperation.

3. Suggesting Economic Incentive Measures Tailored to the Stages of Nuclear Negotiations

- In the initial trust-building phase, a conducive negotiating environment should be established through targeted economic measures. These include the expansion of humanitarian assistance enabled by sanctions exemptions and the authorization of select non-commercial exchanges under eased restrictions.
 - Priority initiatives may include nutritional support programs; public health cooperation targeting infectious diseases such as tuberculosis (including pharmaceuticals and diagnostic equipment); agricultural assistance (seeds, fertilizer, and technical support); and disaster response cooperation.
 - In addition, health and medical projects involving international organizations—as well as non-commercial exchanges in academic, cultural, and sports domains—can play a meaningful role in facilitating early-stage engagement.
- Beginning in the pre-halt and pre-reduction phase (e.g., moratorium stage), economic measures should expand in parallel with initial nuclear constraints. This would involve partial sanctions exemptions or suspensions in selected industrial, trade, and financial sectors, alongside the gradual expansion of authorized financial activities, economic assistance, and cooperative projects.

- An easing of UN sanctions—potentially coordinated among the United States, China, and Russia—would likely constitute a critical threshold for scaling economic incentives.
 - In particular, the U.S. President could exercise executive authorities to introduce flexibility in the application of financial sanctions, enabling tightly scoped North Korean financial transactions.
 - As freeze measures are implemented and verified, development cooperation and technical assistance should expand, particularly in sectors directly affecting livelihoods, including energy, agriculture, and public health.
- In the final phase—corresponding to substantive reductions or the dismantlement of nuclear capabilities—comprehensive sanctions relief could be paired with structural economic integration measures. These may include North Korea’s participation in international financial institutions, large-scale foreign investment, and comprehensive economic cooperation packages.

V Inducing Participation in Multilateral Arms Control Arrangements

1. Basic Framework and Direction

- Measures should be explored to incorporate North Korea into multilateral arms control and broader nuclear risk reduction frameworks as a responsible stakeholder, while providing a rationale for its participation.
 - President Trump has called for a successor to New START that extends beyond the U.S.–Russia framework to include China and other nuclear-armed states, and has signaled openness to nuclear negotiations with North Korea.¹³
 - Rather than implicitly accepting North Korea’s nuclear status, a strategy should emphasize tangible benefits from engagement by framing negotiations around “practical threat reduction” and linking phased incentives to credible regime security guarantees.
 - Positioning nuclear risk reduction and crisis management cooperation as initial agenda items provides a politically viable entry point, allowing North Korea’s participation to be induced without formally recognizing it as a nuclear-armed state—an approach that remains acceptable to both Koreas.
- Any U.S.–North Korea nuclear negotiation should be structured to interface with a broader multilateral arms control framework.
 - Bilateral negotiations would serve as the central axis, while a parallel multilateral track—potentially involving South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia, with possible expansion to Mongolia and ASEAN partners—would operate concurrently, forming a dual-track architecture.
 - Within this framework, regional nuclear risk reduction, particularly on the Korean Peninsula, should be elevated as a core agenda item, with gradual expansion toward a Northeast Asian multilateral mechanism as conditions permit.

13 Ryu Jeong-min, “Trump Hints at Including North Korea in Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations… References ‘Other Players’… Does Not Deny When Asked About North Korea,” *News 1*, January 13, 2026.

- Initial agenda items could include mutual declarations of non-hostility, moratoria on nuclear and missile testing, and the establishment of crisis communication channels; over time, these measures could evolve into confidence-building mechanisms within a Six-Party-type multilateral format.
- North Korea should be gradually integrated into a multilateral framework through phased, issue-specific participation, thereby managing near-term risks while laying the groundwork for eventual denuclearization negotiations.
 - Participation in multilateral arms control should be explicitly framed as an interim step, not a substitute for denuclearization, maintaining a balance between principled objectives and pragmatic engagement.
 - Where full membership is politically unfeasible, alternative models—such as conditional or limited participation tied to specific obligations—should be considered.
- The overall approach should emphasize disciplined terminology, clearly defined phased incentives, and an incremental, “small deals” strategy.
 - Given the political sensitivity of the term “nuclear disarmament,” alternative formulations such as “nuclear risk reduction,” “constraints on nuclear activities,” or “phased denuclearization measures” may be more appropriate in diplomatic contexts.
 - At each stage, the benefits available to North Korea should be clearly specified, with corresponding measures related to security assurances, sanctions relief, and economic support calibrated to observable actions.
 - Rather than pursuing a comprehensive, all-or-nothing agreement, an incremental approach—building momentum through smaller, achievable agreements—can help frame negotiations as a manageable, reciprocal process rather than a coerced disarmament effort.

2. Specific Implementation Measures

- Arms control measures are most effectively advanced through an issue-specific, modular approach that encourages North Korea's participation beginning with areas it can accept.
 - Rather than requiring immediate commitments such as NPT re-accession, comprehensive declarations, or intrusive inspections, Phase 1 should focus on incorporating limited, clearly defined obligations into a multilateral framework—such as a moratorium on nuclear testing, a halt to long-range ballistic missile testing, and a freeze on additional fissile material production.
 - This agenda-based approach allows North Korea to assume partial obligations without committing to full denuclearization at the outset, while enabling the international community to verify compliance through tailored mechanisms.
 - For example, a nuclear testing moratorium could be linked to CTBT norms; fissile material controls could be tied to IAEA monitoring of plutonium and highly enriched uranium production; and missile constraints could be aligned with relevant UN Security Council resolutions governing range and launch activities.

- Where formal inclusion of North Korea in an arms control treaty framework is politically sensitive, alternative legal and institutional arrangements should be considered. One option is to establish supplementary protocols or stand-alone implementing agreements outside core treaty structures, to which North Korea could accede selectively.
 - Such arrangements could include instruments such as a “Northeast Asia Nuclear Risk Reduction Protocol,” a “Korean Peninsula Nuclear Activity Freeze Implementation Agreement,” or annexes covering nuclear testing and fissile material production freezes.
 - This approach would avoid conferring formal recognition of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state while effectively incorporating it into a system of multilateral constraints and oversight.

- A flexible, functionally differentiated multilateral structure should complement the traditional Six-Party framework. Rather than pursuing a single, comprehensive agreement, negotiations could transition to a “multi-minilateral” format that reflects overlapping interest groupings—such as inter-Korean, U.S.–North Korea, ROK–U.S.–Japan, and China–Russia configurations.

- A plenary mechanism (e.g., Six-Party or “5+1”) would provide overall coordination, while substantive negotiations would be conducted through specialized working groups, including: ① Nuclear Testing Halt, ② Fissile Material Production Control, ③ Sanctions Relief and Economic Incentives, ④ Peace Regime and Military Confidence-Building
 - North Korea’s participation could begin with selected working groups and expand over time, with corresponding increases in incentives.
- Verification and monitoring should also be structured in a phased and adaptive manner.
- Given the low likelihood of North Korea accepting comprehensive inspections at an early stage, participation conditions should progress incrementally:
- Phase 1: Passive verification through external monitoring and national technical means
 - Phase 2: Limited, site-specific access
 - Phase 3: Facility-level inspections
 - Phase 4: Verification of fissile material inventories and broader declarations
- Initial monitoring could rely on data-sharing arrangements involving the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) and national intelligence assets. Over time, limited IAEA access—beginning with facilities such as Yongbyon—could be expanded, ultimately progressing toward full declarations of nuclear materials and infrastructure.
- Incentive structures should be multilateralized to enhance credibility and sustainability. Given the limitations of U.S.-only compensation, a coordinated package should combine: normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations, inter-Korean economic and humanitarian cooperation, energy and logistics support from China and Russia, and development and public health assistance from international organizations.
- These incentives should be distributed in a phased manner, aligned with North Korea’s actions—for example, humanitarian assistance and sanctions exemptions following a nuclear testing halt; expanded energy and food assistance upon a fissile material freeze; and partial trade liberalization and development cooperation tied to acceptance of verification measures.

- A broader regional security framework should be pursued to reduce the political burden on North Korea and neighboring states. Rather than targeting North Korea in isolation, arms control efforts should be embedded within a Northeast Asian risk reduction architecture.
 - This could include region-wide measures such as prior notification of missile launches, military hotlines, nuclear test bans, and discussions on fissile material production constraints.
 - Framing these initiatives as collective risk reduction measures allows North Korea to participate as a stakeholder rather than a target, lowering barriers to entry.
 - If full participation is not initially feasible, provisions for observer status—such as designation as a “special observer”—could provide a pathway for gradual integration into the framework.

VI Policy Considerations

- Strengthening South Korea’s role as a “pacemaker” to facilitate and sustain momentum in U.S.–North Korea negotiations
 - South Korea should develop a phased roadmap that integrates denuclearization measures with corresponding incentives—including sanctions relief and regime security guarantees—to help narrow the gap between U.S. and North Korean positions. In parallel, it should play an active agenda-setting and mediating role to support the resumption of working-level negotiations.
 - While continuing to provide inducements for North Korea’s engagement through humanitarian assistance and non-political exchanges, Seoul should pursue a two-track approach linking inter-Korean cooperation to progress in U.S.–North Korea negotiations.
 - To generate early momentum, South Korea should prioritize military tension reduction and low-intensity confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as enhanced transparency in military exercises and mechanisms for conflict prevention. Early deliverables—such as limited facility freezes or expanded humanitarian assistance—can help sustain negotiating momentum.
 - Given the current absence of a dedicated North Korea policy team within the U.S. executive branch, South Korea should encourage the early designation of a specialized policy group or envoy to ensure continuity and expertise in negotiations.
- Strengthening ROK–U.S. coordination and strategic communication in shaping conditions for dialogue
 - South Korea should institutionalize a pre-consultation mechanism with the United States to ensure that its policy proposals are reflected in a coordinated and realistic manner. This includes early-stage consultations on negotiation strategy, agenda-setting, and denuclearization planning.
 - In practical terms, Seoul and Washington should align in advance on negotiation agendas, communication channels, and potential draft agreements, thereby improving coherence and preparedness for engagement with North Korea.

- Enhanced information-sharing on the status and trajectory of U.S.–North Korea negotiations, coupled with coordinated public messaging, will be essential to prevent perceptions of South Korea being sidelined and to maintain a unified strategic posture.

- Building supportive multilateral and regional conditions
 - South Korea should engage key regional stakeholders—particularly China and Russia—through high-level diplomatic outreach, including the dispatch of special envoys, to align positions and encourage constructive roles in facilitating negotiations.
 - China, in particular, could play a stabilizing role by helping to ensure reciprocal commitments between the United States and North Korea, while also supporting economic engagement—such as trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges—linked to denuclearization progress.
 - At the multilateral level, South Korea should actively build consensus in support of denuclearization through forums such as APEC and the United Nations, particularly in coordination with the United States and Japan.

- Expanding and diversifying communication channels with North Korea
 - Given the current stagnation in formal inter-Korean dialogue, South Korea should adopt a flexible approach that utilizes both official and unofficial channels in parallel.
 - Sustained working-level engagement can be maintained through non-political areas—such as public health, medical cooperation, and disaster relief—via civil society organizations and international institutions, thereby rebuilding trust incrementally.
 - Indirect communication channels, including third-country intermediaries and multilateral security forums, should also be leveraged to facilitate dialogue and manage tensions.
 - In addition, multi-party consultation formats—such as ROK–DPRK–U.S. or ROK–DPRK–U.S.–China channels—should be explored, alongside informal diplomatic pathways, to support efforts to narrow differences between Washington and Pyongyang.

- Integrating multilateral arms control and denuclearization within a pragmatic institutional framework.
 - Efforts to link multilateral arms control with denuclearization should be guided by a pragmatic roadmap that combines incremental progress with functional multilateralism.
 - This requires careful consideration of compatibility with existing international legal frameworks, including the NPT, CTBT, and IAEA safeguards and verification protocols.
 - In this context, incorporating North Korea into a multilateral framework should be framed as a means of facilitating negotiations rather than conferring formal recognition of its nuclear status. Accordingly, terminology such as “nuclear risk reduction,” “phased denuclearization measures,” and “crisis management” should be emphasized to avoid political sensitivities.
 - Initial agenda items should prioritize verifiable, low-intensity measures to reduce the risk of early-stage deadlock.
 - U.S.–North Korea negotiations should focus on core exchanges and achieving an initial breakthrough, while regional actors—including South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan—play complementary roles in providing security assurances, economic incentives, crisis management mechanisms, and broader regional trust-building support.

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Abstract

Toward a Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula: Policy Approaches to North Korea

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This report aims to present policy alternatives for halting and reducing North Korea's nuclear capabilities and eliciting North Korean engagement amid volatile inter-Korean relations. It proposes three pillars for inducing North Korean responsiveness: (1) trust-building, (2) economic incentives, and (3) a multilateral arms control (disarmament) framework. In other words, the approach seeks to lay the groundwork for negotiations through trust-building between South and North Korea, and between the United States and North Korea; to elicit engagement through economic incentives; and to enhance the practical feasibility of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula by inducing North Korean participation in multilateral arms control (nuclear disarmament) platforms.

The foremost pillar for inducing North Korean engagement is trust-building. Regarding inter-Korean trust-building, the study examines the preemptive restoration of the September 19 Military Agreement, the use of North Korea's border reinforcement measures as an opportunity to create conditions for dialogue, the maintenance of humanitarian assistance, and the exploration of cooperation in emerging security areas. Regarding U.S.-North Korea trust-building, the study proposes measures including the opening of high-level dialogue and liaison offices, the provision of a security assurance framework and easing of international sanctions, and the activation of informal contacts with North Korea.

As economic incentive measures, the report first calls for the creation of a negotiating environment in the trust-building stage through humanitarian assistance and authorization of non-commercial exchanges. Beginning in the pre-halt and pre-reduction stage, partial suspension and exemptions from sanctions, authorization of financial activities, economic assistance, and economic cooperation would be progressively expanded.

Measures to engage North Korea in a multilateral disarmament regime can be designed to allow partial participation in the form of supplementary agreements or working groups, subject to North Korea's acceptance of specific agenda-based restrictions, such as a moratorium on nuclear testing, a freeze on fissile material production, and limits on missile testing, where formal membership in an existing arms control regime is not feasible. This approach can gradually draw North Korea into a multilateral disarmament regime or multilateral arms control framework while preserving the fundamental principles of denuclearization and international norms. Policy considerations include strengthening South Korea's role as a pacemaker facilitating U.S.–North Korea negotiating momentum in the process of creating conditions for dialogue; enhancing ROK–U.S. coordination and strategic communication; building cooperative and favorable conditions at the multilateral and neighboring-country levels; establishing diversified communication channels to broaden points of contact with North Korea; and combining pragmatic incrementalism with functional multilateralism when reviewing multilateral arms control measures.

Keywords: Nuclear-Free Korean Peninsula, Three-Stage Denuclearization, Trust-Building, Economic Incentives, Multilateral Arms Control

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