



BUILDING MUTUAL REASSURANCE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA THROUGH STABLE COEXISTENCE

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Abstract

The Korean Peninsula remains dangerously unstable due to irreconcilable end-states: North Korea's demand for nuclear recognition and regime autonomy versus the US–South Korea alliance's goal of deterrence, denuclearization, and democratic unification. This clash fuels distrust and heightens the risk of conflict, while regional powers complicate the dynamics. This policy brief proposes a stable coexistence framework to manage rivalry and reduce tensions, assuming denuclearization is off the table for now. The plan includes five themes: stable coexistence with respect for sovereignty, arms control without nuclear recognition, front-line guardrails, humanitarian/societal contact, and strengthening regional scaffolding. This approach seeks to narrow miscalculation pathways and manage risk while preserving each side's long-term political aims.

Introduction: Two irreconcilable end-states, one shared risk

Nearly seventy-five years after the Korean War armistice, the Korean Peninsula still exists in a state of unresolved conflict, with the two Koreas entrenched in starkly opposing visions for their future. These divergent trajectories are complicated by the overlapping interests and rivalries of the United States, China, Japan, and Russia, all of which are building up their own military capabilities and view developments on the Peninsula as vital to their security and influence in Northeast Asia.

North Korea and the US–South Korea alliance both seek peace and stability on the Peninsula but have competing visions for what these goals mean. North Korea seeks to preserve regime survival and autonomy from external interference, including a 'hostile' US–South Korea alliance policy and the US-led international order. To this end, it demands international recognition of its nuclear weapons program as a legitimate deterrent. It also rejects peaceful reunification with the South and any outside influence that undermines its control over its people. On the other hand, the United States and South Korea desire security through a robust alliance that deters North Korean aggression and achieves North Korea's long-term denuclearization. Contrary to North Korea, they aspire to inter-Korean reconciliation that eventually leads to democratic unification and the integration of North Korea into a rules-based international order that prioritizes human rights and economic reform.

These visions are irreconcilable. The clash between the two competing sets of visions not only impedes engagement opportunities aimed at peace and security but also fuels the distrust and actions that are exacerbating the risks and tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Yet, in the absence of a realistic pathway to satisfy both desired end-states, there is still an urgent need to achieve a stable coexistence among the key parties that prevents crises and mistrust from escalating into armed conflict. Stable coexistence requires a process of mutual reassurance.

This policy brief outlines a proposal for how the two Koreas, along with the United States, China, Japan, and Russia, can deemphasize their maximalist goals to manage risks, reduce tensions, and reassure each other in the near- and medium-term and create an environment conducive to longer-term economic integration.

The proposed approach rests on five themes:

1. Stable coexistence with respect for sovereignty
2. Arms control without nuclear recognition
3. Front-line guardrails
4. Humanitarian, educational, and societal contact
5. Regional scaffolding

This approach assumes that US–North Korea engagement is the primary catalyst and predominant channel for reassurance on the Peninsula due to North Korea’s insistence on direct dialogue with Washington and the central role the United States plays in providing benefits that North Korea wants, including sanctions relief, security guarantees, and nuclear legitimacy.

Ultimately, this is a coexistence framework, not a settlement. It narrows miscalculation pathways now while keeping space for longer-term political transformation.

I. Stable coexistence: Ensuring sovereignty without prejudice

To reduce tensions and the risk of conflict, the current state of US–North Korea and inter-Korean relations must shift from hostile to stable coexistence. In a [2025 Carnegie report](#), Ankit Panda and I proposed a framework for achieving stable coexistence based on academic literature supporting a gradual and reciprocal process of tension reduction and reassurance.

The United States will need to take the first unilateral steps in reassuring North Korea given that Pyongyang is in no hurry to talk at the moment and the United States is the stronger country with a greater capacity to tolerate the risk of not having its gestures matched. President Trump has the added benefit of maintaining good relations with Kim Jong Un—something the Biden administration did not cultivate, which poisoned its efforts at even unconditional talks.

Beyond diplomatic niceties, President Trump should explicitly state a desire to resume talks based on mutual respect aimed at stable coexistence and new US–North Korea relations, a goal outlined in the Singapore Statement.^[1] There are two potential frameworks for stable coexistence:

i. A time-bound coexistence understanding

A temporary, reversible political statement agreed to by the United States and North Korea—followed by a similar inter-Korean agreement and also with relevant regional stakeholders—that commits to 10–20 years of stable coexistence without conceding or weakening their respective ultimate political outcomes. Key clauses might include:

- An end of war declaration: a symbolic statement that the Korean War is over and that includes non-aggression and non-interference language;
- A commitment to work toward improved ties and eventual normalization;
- Non-recognition: South Korea’s constitutional aspiration for long-term unification and North Korea’s insistence on separation are each acknowledged while neither is endorsed or precluded;
- Immediate partial relief from multilateral sanctions, with a pathway to further relief;
- Tightly managed, pre-agreed channels for people-to-people exchanges, designed to minimize regime-change optics while serving humanitarian and societal goals.

[1] Stable coexistence is defined as “largely normal bilateral relations consisting of low military hostility and regular engagement aimed at reducing security risks and tensions, improving diplomatic ties, enhancing economic trade and welfare, and facilitating dialogue and collaboration related to humanitarian, human rights, and people-to-people matters.”

ii. Permanent stable coexistence

A more severe approach would adopt most of the clauses above but seek permanent stable coexistence through official separation of the two Koreas. Both sides would amend their respective constitutions to ensure that neither side claims territorial or political sovereignty over the other. This option provides greater reassurance and benefit to North Korea given its renunciation of unification but would be a tough pill to swallow for South Korea. Nevertheless, Seoul may have no other options if it wants to engage with North Korea in the future. The reality is that the two Koreas have acted independently since 1948 and have been recognized by the United Nations as separate since 1991. In August 2025, Kim Yo Jong, member of the State Affairs Commission and the sister of Kim Jong Un, stated that North Korea has no interest in engaging with the South, regardless of reassurance measures such as withdrawing loudspeakers, stopping broadcasts, or postponing military exercises, because its fundamental policy toward North Korea remains unchanged.[2] Kim Jong Un reaffirmed this position in a September 2025 speech to parliament.

The first framework seeks to trade formal recognition of sovereignty—important to Pyongyang—for regular engagement and lowered tensions—important to Washington and Seoul—while not undermining the ultimate political aims for either side. The second framework offers a starker way forward given the reality of North Korea’s maximalist demands.

II. Nuclear risk reduction through arms control, not denuclearization

At the moment, North Korea appears open to re-engaging with the United States as long as denuclearization is not on the agenda. In the September speech, Kim Jong Un emphatically affirmed that “there will never, never be denuclearization for us.” He added, however, that “[i]f the U.S. drops its hollow obsession with denuclearization and wants to pursue peaceful coexistence with North Korea based on the recognition of reality, there is no reason for us not to sit down with the U.S.” Similarly, Kim Yo Jong stated in July 2025 that North Korea’s nuclear status was “irreversible,” but noted that two nuclear states should not take a confrontational path and that North Korea was “open to any option” that secures its nuclear deterrent.

Despite South Korean President Lee Jae-myung’s statement after the August 2025 US–South Korea summit that he and Trump had decided on peace and denuclearization as alliance goals, it is unclear where the Trump administration stands. Official administration statements have asserted a few times that complete denuclearization is still the government’s policy. However, Trump himself has never explicitly mentioned denuclearization as a goal during his second term, including during the public portion of the summit, and has only reinforced that he and Kim get along well. His reticence to reaffirm denuclearization as a policy goal may reflect his own belief that a new approach short of denuclearization may be more realistic. Barring any unforeseen changes to the international security environment, the ongoing denuclearization stalemate will continue to forestall any future US–North Korea engagement.

One potential way to sidestep this dilemma and jumpstart diplomacy may be to emphasize arms control while de-emphasizing denuclearization. An arms control approach would focus on tangibly reducing risks, defusing tensions, and reassuring each other in the near- to medium-term.

[2] As evidence of South Korea’s ongoing hostile policy, Kim Yo Jong cited the South Korean constitution’s call for unification by absorption, the continuation of a “‘U.S.-ROK nuclear consultative group’ focusing on preemptive nuclear strike” against North Korea, the various ongoing joint military exercises, and the continued demand for denuclearization in contravention of North Korea’s constitution.

Specific North Korean measures could include:

- a moratorium on nuclear and long-range ballistic missile tests;
- a shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, including all fissile material production at the site;
- a no-transfer/no-assistance pledge covering nuclear materials, delivery systems, and enabling technologies;
- a space launch notification regime, including 72-hour notices and trajectory corridors; and
- pledges to avoid employing multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), hypersonic glide integration, and forward-deployed nuclear signaling platforms near the military demarcation line (MDL).

US and South Korean measures could include:

- suspending the deployment of US strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula;
- modifying the scale, scope, purpose, and location of joint military exercises to reduce the perception of hostile intent;
- downsizing US force posture on the Korean Peninsula;
- moderating hostile language in alliance messaging (e.g., 'end of the regime') and South Korean initiatives, such as the 'kill chain' or 'massive punishment and retaliation plan'.

Both sides should also provide security assurances and doctrine clarity paired with clear deterrence messaging about responses to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) use or transfer. Establishing general officer communication channels may also help to clarify intent during necessary military exercises or deployments.

At the same time, the United States and South Korea would need to downplay the denuclearization issue to get North Korea on board. Potential ways could include:

- avoiding any explicit mention of denuclearization in negotiated agreements and public statements;
- reaffirming the 2018 Singapore Statement—in which North Korea committed to complete denuclearization—but avoiding any explicit mention of denuclearization in subsequent agreements;
- referring explicitly to long-term denuclearization; or
- analogizing North Korea's commitment to denuclearization to the commitment of nuclear weapon states under Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty to seek disarmament in good faith.

Verification of arms control measures enhances reassurance and trust but should be tailored in ways that are feasible and valuable. The initial emphasis should be on observable behaviour that reduces accidents and risk, including activity notifications, geographic boxes, telemetry beacons in test phases, and open-source corroboration. Extensive declaration requirements and intrusive verification protocols should be deferred to future talks.

III. Front-line guardrails: Lowering the conventional risks of conflict

Beyond nuclear risk reduction, North Korea and the US–South Korea alliance should also implement conventional risk reduction measures to reduce tensions and provide mutual reassurance. Potential steps include:

- Reinvigorating the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement, including restoring and updating buffer zones in the land, sea, and air, demilitarizing the Joint Security Area, and removing guard posts along the MDL;
- Reinstating diplomatic and military hotlines and an inter-Korean contact office;
- Exercising transparency and standoff for large-scale military drills near the MDL or contested waters, including 72-hour pre-notification of time and place, standoff distances to buffer zones, and mutual observation pilots for non-strategic events; and
- Establishing a 24/7 cyber incident channel to flag malware outbreaks and ransomware spillovers during crises and ‘do-not-touch lists’ for purely civilian critical infrastructure (e.g., hospitals, water treatment, emergency services).

Measures requiring inter-Korean engagement may be difficult at first. However, this proposal assumes that once North Korea’s sovereignty and nuclear status concerns are addressed, the regime would be more amenable to engaging with South Korea.

IV. Humanitarian, educational, and societal contact: Building trust and habits of interaction

To satisfy the alliance’s interest in inter-Korean engagement and the North Korean people’s welfare and Pyongyang’s desire for control, the two sides can establish a ‘white list’ of narrow, low-risk, high-benefit social and economic projects that are implemented through approved organizations to prevent broad, uncontrolled flows and escrowed procurement to prevent diversion. These projects could include, among other things:

- Public health cooperation on infectious diseases, maternal and child nutrition, vaccinations, and telemedicine consultations;
- Climate and disaster risk reduction efforts related to flood control, droughts, reforestation, and soil erosion;
- Agricultural resilience, seed and soil programs, and climate-resilient irrigation kits;
- Virtual family reunions via a liaison office and in-person reunions at neutral sites;
- Ongoing POW/MIA remains recovery operations;
- Academic, scientific, and cultural exchanges in North and South Korea, the United States, and other countries with vetted curricula, strict participant lists, and pre-agreed media rules;
- Information exchanges on agreed upon topics that are predictable, reviewable, and less escalatory, such as weather and market information; and
- Small-scale inter-Korean economic cooperation or free-trade projects in non-sensitive sectors (e.g., agriculture, forestry), with systems that minimize diversion of funds and are linked to specific risk-reduction deliverables.

These types of cooperative projects may be able to preserve Pyongyang’s core sovereignty claims and give Seoul tangible humanitarian gains and incremental social contact, all while building patterns of cooperation.

V. Regional scaffolding: Strengthening the collective safety net

Any sustainable reassurance framework must integrate the interests of key regional stakeholders (China, Japan, and Russia) and incorporate their buy-in and support. China should take a significant role given its history, weight, and interests in the region, especially in facilitating diplomatic progress and crisis-management. Beijing is best positioned to nudge Pyongyang, though its leverage is limited. Japan could participate in multilateral security dialogues that include North Korea, while also providing support through bilateral tracks to address the abduction issue, normalization, and historical claims. Russia could be engaged in trilateral economic projects (e.g., rail, energy pipelines) that link Siberia to the Korean Peninsula. Reviving the six-party framework in some form, even for non-nuclear issues, may help institutionalize reassurance.

In particular, a Northeast Asia Risk Reduction Forum could be established to normalize and coordinate peacebuilding and communications. A six-party body (two Koreas, China, Japan, United States, Russia) at the Track 1/1.5 level with rotating chairs could address the following areas:

- Maritime and air deconfliction, including test notifications, synchronized NOTAM/NOTMAR issuance, and neutral observer pool to witness agreed upon drills;
- Maritime/air hotlines between People's Liberation Army theater commands and allied commands for incidents near air defense identification zones and exclusive economic zone boundaries;
- Transparent reporting of export-control enforcement actions relevant to the Peninsula;
- Observer participation in Risk Reduction Forum drills and audit teams, demonstrating stakes in stability even amid broader geopolitical competition.

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Conclusion

The Korean Peninsula will remain a theatre of deep disagreement. However, the choice is not between ideal outcomes and failure; it is between managed rivalry and unmanaged risk. The task now is to provide mutual reassurance to manage conflict and reduce risks. A stable coexistence framework—ensuring sovereignty, deemphasizing denuclearization, establishing guardrails, protecting humanitarian channels, and building regional scaffolding—does not solve the political dispute. It shrinks the space for disaster, creates habits of communication, and protects civilians while preserving each side's long-term aims. That is what responsible policy can achieve now: a practical operating system that lowers the temperature today and preserves space for future diplomacy.



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