

INTRODUCTION

For more than three decades, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons has been a central issue in international security and the predominant foreign policy concern of the United States in Northeast Asia. While several regional and global actors, including China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia, have vested interests in the Korean Peninsula, the United States has consistently positioned itself as both the primary interlocutor in diplomatic negotiations and the leader in the global strategy to pressure and isolate the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Diplomatic initiatives such as the Agreed Framework (1994), the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009), and bilateral summits have, at times, slowed North Korea's nuclear development, yet none have succeeded in achieving long-term denuclearization or altering the entrenched security dynamics on the Peninsula (Mearsheimer, 2010; Revere, 2021).

North Korea's nuclear diplomacy entered a new and more volatile phase during the Trump administration (2017–2021), which oscillated between unprecedented high-level engagement and aggressive rhetoric. President Trump's summits with Kim Jong-un in Singapore (2018) and Hanoi (2019) marked a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, focusing on personal diplomacy and the promise of economic prosperity in exchange for denuclearization. However, the lack of substantive agreements and verification mechanisms led to a diplomatic stalemate, with North Korea eventually resuming missile testing and rejecting further U.S. overtures (Cha & Katz, 2020).

Since its founding in 1948, the DPRK has remained diplomatically isolated, lacking formal relations with the United States. Successive American administrations have pursued a mix of carrots and sticks negotiations, economic aid, bilateral and multilateral sanctions, yet none have halted North Korea's nuclear advancements. As Wendt (2005) notes from a constructivist

perspective, North Korea's behavior is deeply rooted in identity, historical narratives, and regime security, complicating realist assumptions that power balancing alone can constrain it.

The strategic stakes for the United States are significant. Its security commitments to allies in the region, South Korea (ROK) and Japan, mandate deterrence and defense strategies to counter any threat from the North. Tens of thousands of U.S. troops are stationed within striking range of DPRK missile systems, and North Korea's development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) has introduced a potential direct threat to the U.S. homeland (Jonathan, 2003; Panda, 2022).

At the heart of the nuclear standoff is a regime that operates outside the normative framework of international diplomacy. North Korea's political ideology of *juche* (self-reliance), established by its founder Kim Il-sung, has fostered a deeply entrenched resistance to foreign influence and a strategic use of brinkmanship to extract concessions from international actors. John (2005) underscores that the regime's vast military infrastructure serves not only as a deterrent but also as a diplomatic tool, helping Pyongyang leverage its strategic capabilities to maintain regime survival and geopolitical relevance.

Despite Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power and some reported economic improvements, North Korea faces severe internal challenges, including chronic poverty, food insecurity, and increasing exposure to outside information. These vulnerabilities, however, have not translated into domestic reform or nuclear restraint. In defiance of numerous United Nations Security Council resolutions, the DPRK continues to test ballistic missiles and expand its nuclear arsenal. In 2023 and 2024 alone, North Korea conducted multiple missile launches, including new solid-fuel ICBMs and tactical nuclear systems, which further complicated regional security (Kim & Lee, 2024).

Sanctions imposed by the UN and spearheaded by the U.S. have had limited success in altering Pyongyang's strategic calculus. Rather than capitulate, North Korea has deepened its strategic partnership with Russia and China, particularly in the wake of global geopolitical realignments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Intelligence reports in late 2023 indicated growing military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, including arms transfers in exchange for economic and technological assistance, raising new concerns about nuclear proliferation and shifting alliances (Kang, 2024).

The broader implications of these dynamics are profound, particularly for Global South countries. The ongoing U.S.-DPRK confrontation underscores the asymmetric vulnerabilities of smaller states caught in great power rivalries. As the Korean Peninsula remains militarized and diplomatically fragile, Global South countries may suffer the indirect consequences of economic disruption, increased insecurity, and weakened multilateral arms control regimes. This reflects the realist warning that when major powers clash, weaker states bear the brunt of systemic instability. Thus, this paper interrogates the consequences of a nuclearized and diplomatically entangled Korean Peninsula not only for regional peace but also for the broader global order, hence the entrenchment of nuclear weapons in North Korea's security doctrine and the diminishing effectiveness of traditional diplomacy.

Unveiling the Problematic

North Korea's nuclear program is not merely a security challenge; it is a manifestation of a deeply entrenched geopolitical impasse rooted in Cold War legacies and persistent regional insecurity. More than three decades after the Cold War officially ended, the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most militarized and diplomatically volatile regions in the world. The continued absence of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Democratic People's

Republic of Korea (DPRK), alongside the failure to replace the 1953 Korean War Armistice with a permanent peace treaty, underscores the enduring state of conflict (Cha, 2020).

From Pyongyang's perspective, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is both a deterrent and a tool for regime survival, born out of a profound sense of insecurity. The geopolitical landscape of the early 1990s marked a critical shift: the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea's key patron, left a strategic vacuum, while China's normalization of diplomatic and economic relations with South Korea in 1992 further marginalized the North (Liu, 2006). These developments, combined with the continued presence of over 28,000 U.S. troops in South Korea and regular joint U.S.–South Korea military exercises, have intensified Pyongyang's perception of encirclement and external threat (Snyder, 2018).

While this insecurity has isolated North Korea, it has paradoxically served certain U.S. strategic interests. The unresolved conflict on the Korean Peninsula provides a compelling rationale for maintaining a robust U.S. military footprint in East Asia, thereby reinforcing Washington's broader objective of regional dominance and strategic balancing against China (Cumings, 2021). This dynamic, though seldom stated explicitly, reflects the complex duality of U.S. policy seeking denuclearization on one hand while preserving a status quo that justifies continued influence in the region.

As Liu (2006) rightly observes, the post-Cold War balance of power on the Korean Peninsula has shifted sharply against North Korea. Militarily, South Korea has significantly modernized its forces with U.S. support. Economically, the DPRK has suffered under a rigid command economy, compounded by natural disasters, systemic inefficiencies, and the burden of international sanctions. Diplomatically, its isolation has deepened, with only limited partners such as Russia and Iran remaining engaged.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions have become one of the most persistent challenges in U.S. foreign policy since the early 1990s. Particularly under Kim Jong-un's leadership since 2011, the regime has demonstrated both strategic calculation and technological progress. The successful nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests conducted in 2016 and 2017 signaled North Korea's transformation from a regional irritant into a potential direct threat to the U.S. mainland (Panda, 2022). These developments prompted an unprecedented diplomatic response, including the high-profile summits between Kim and former U.S. President Donald Trump. However, these summits yielded no verifiable disarmament and ultimately collapsed amid mutual mistrust and misaligned expectations (Mount & Revere, 2021).

Beyond nuclear weapons, U.S. policy has also targeted North Korea's broader illicit activities. The regime has been implicated in state-sponsored cyberattacks, counterfeiting operations, narcotics trafficking, and human rights abuses, all of which compound its pariah status in the international community (Katz & Cha, 2020). Consequently, the DPRK is one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world, yet the efficacy of these sanctions remains debated, especially in light of ongoing military developments.

China has played a complex role in the evolving dynamics of nuclear diplomacy. As North Korea's largest trading partner and historical ally, China is uniquely positioned to influence Pyongyang, but Beijing's leverage is constrained. While China has publicly supported denuclearization and even endorsed several UN sanctions regimes, it also prioritizes stability on the Korean Peninsula, fearing that a regime collapse could lead to a refugee crisis and U.S. military encroachment near its borders (Zhao, 2023). In its mediatory role, China has repeatedly urged North Korea to halt its weapons program while calling on the United States to address Pyongyang's

legitimate security concerns. However, the deep strategic mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang has thwarted any durable consensus (Fifield, 2019).

Importantly, China does not possess the “security key” that North Korea seeks. Despite its economic influence, Beijing cannot guarantee the regime’s survival in the way that a formal peace treaty or security pact with the United States might. Yet the U.S. has historically refused to engage with North Korea on terms that recognize the DPRK’s regime security as a legitimate concern, opting instead for a policy of "maximum pressure" that reinforces North Korea’s defensive posture and justification for nuclear deterrence (Mount & Revere, 2021).

Faced with this diplomatic gridlock, Pyongyang has moved forward unabated. Between 2022 and 2024, North Korea conducted over 30 missile tests, including hypersonic and submarine-launched systems, while expanding its tactical nuclear capabilities. These developments reflect not only technical advancements but also strategic signaling aimed at deterring intervention and shaping regional security perceptions (Kim & Lee, 2024).

In essence, the North Korean nuclear problematique is not a question of mere non-compliance; it is an enduring strategic deadlock shaped by unresolved historical grievances, asymmetrical threat perceptions, and the failure of multilateral diplomacy. Without a fundamental recalibration of U.S.–DPRK relations that considers mutual security assurances, the likelihood of denuclearization remains remote, and the Korean Peninsula will continue to serve as a flashpoint in global nuclear diplomacy.

Conceptual Elucidation

The Concept of Nuclear Armament: Nuclear Armament is the acquisition by a nation, or the supply to a nation, of nuclear weapons. Put differently, Nuclear Armament refers to the supply or acquisition of nuclear weapons to or by a nation or its armed forces to equip them with nuclear

weapons; give nuclear capability to a nation so that armed forces on both sides would become nuclearized.

The Concept of Peace Process: A peace process consists of all the meetings, agreements, and negotiations in which people, such as politicians or leaders, are involved when they are trying to arrange peace between countries or groups that are fighting with each other.

Nuclear Diplomacy: Nuclear diplomacy refers to the use of negotiation strategies, threats, and agreements involving nuclear weapons or capabilities to advance a country's foreign policy or security objectives. It typically includes arms control talks, non-proliferation efforts, disarmament negotiations, and coercive diplomacy involving nuclear-armed states or aspiring nuclear powers. In the case of North Korea, nuclear diplomacy is both a defensive strategy and a bargaining tool to secure regime survival and political concessions (Panda, 2022; Revere, 2021). The concept intersects with deterrence theory, where states use the threat of nuclear retaliation to prevent aggression (Mearsheimer, 2010).

Denuclearization: Denuclearization refers to the process of reducing or eliminating nuclear weapons and related programs in a specific region or state. On the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization has been a central though highly contested objective of diplomatic efforts. The term itself is politically charged: while the U.S. interprets it as the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal (CVID), the DPRK often frames it as a reciprocal process involving the removal of perceived U.S. nuclear threats in the region (Cha, 2020; Mount & Revere, 2021).

Security Dilemma: The security dilemma is a concept in international relations where one state's actions to increase its security, such as building up its military or acquiring nuclear weapons, lead

others to respond in kind, thereby increasing overall insecurity (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978). North Korea's nuclear program is rooted in such a dilemma: its pursuit of nuclear weapons for deterrence is viewed by others as a threat, prompting countermeasures that, in turn, reinforce North Korea's perception of threat (Wendt, 2005; Liu, 2006).

Non-Proliferation: Non-proliferation is the principle and practice of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, especially to states not recognized as nuclear powers under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). North Korea joined the NPT in 1985 but withdrew in 2003 after accusing the United States of hostility and bad-faith negotiation. Its subsequent nuclear tests directly challenge the international non-proliferation regime, highlighting the limitations of existing global arms control mechanisms (Sagan, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2024).

Strategic Deterrence: Strategic deterrence involves the use of credible threats, particularly nuclear weapons, to prevent adversaries from taking unwanted actions. For North Korea, nuclear weapons serve as a core component of national security strategy, intended to deter U.S. military intervention and coerce diplomatic engagement (Panda, 2022). For the U.S. and its allies, deterrence involves maintaining a military balance and forward presence to prevent North Korean aggression (Snyder, 2018).

Geopolitical Stability: Geopolitical stability refers to the maintenance of balance and order among powerful states or regions, minimizing the risk of armed conflict or systemic disruption. The Korean Peninsula remains one of the most unstable regions in global geopolitics, with frequent military provocations, ideological divides, and great power rivalry involving the U.S., China, Russia, and Japan (Zhao, 2023; Cumings, 2021).

Theoretical Framework (The Balance of Power Theory)

The balance of power theory is the handwork of Dehio (1962), Gulick (1967), Taylor (1971), and Kennedy (1987). Diplomatic international historians such as Gaddis 1986 and Schroeder 1994 have also contributed to the discussion on the balance of power. The balance of power theory in international relations suggests that national security is enhanced when military power is distributed so that no state is strong enough to dominate all others (*Christensen and Snyder, 1990*). If one state becomes much stronger than the others, the theory predicts that it will take advantage of its strength and attack weaker neighbors, thereby providing an incentive for those threatened to unite in a defensive coalition. Some realists maintain that this would be more stable, as aggression would appear unattractive and would be averted if there were an equilibrium of power between the rival coalitions.

When confronted by a significant external threat, states that wish to form alliances may "balance" or "bandwagon". Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat, while states that have bandwagoned have aligned with the threat (*Gilbert, 1949*). States may also employ other alliance tactics, such as buck-passing and chain-ganging. There is a longstanding debate among realists about how the polarity of a system impacts which tactics states use; (*Howard, 1925*), however, it is generally agreed upon that in bipolar systems, each great power has no choice but to directly confront the other (*Kegley and Wittkopf, 2005*). The Balance of Power Theory assumes that:

- i. First, the international system is considered to be anarchic, with no system-wide authority being formally enforced on its agents (Waltz 1979, 88). Because of this "self-help" nature of the system, states do not have a world government to resort to in a situation of danger, but they can only try to increase their capabilities relative to one

- another through either internal efforts of self-strengthening, or external efforts of alignment and realignment with other states (Waltz 1979, p. 118).
- ii. Second, states are the principal actors in the international system, as they “set the terms of the intercourse” (Waltz, 1979.p 96), monopolize the “legitimate use of force” (Waltz, 1979, p.104) within their territories, and generally conduct foreign policy in a “single voice” (Waltz 1959, p. 178-179). Hence, states are also considered to be unitary actors in the international system. This latter assumption is important because if non-state or transnational actors are powerful enough to challenge state actors, power configuration in the world may no longer be considered in terms of polarity but, instead, in terms of the number of layers of policy “networks.

One criticism is that balance of power theory reflects a specific European historical time and place. A number of scholars, like Morgenthau, have sought to expand the pool of cases across time and regions. To widen the pool of cases, the contributors test the balance of power theory against eight historical case studies that cover 2,000 years of international relations. The authors’ findings challenge the core hypothesis of balance of power theory: that states balance against concentrations of power. Instead, the authors conclude that hegemonies are durable.

The balance of power theory is a core tenet of both classical and neorealist theory and seeks to explain alliance formation. Due to the neorealist idea of anarchism as a result of the international system, states must ensure their survival through maintaining or increasing their power in a self-help world. With no authority above the state to come to its rescue in the event of an attack by a hegemon, states attempt to prevent a potential *hegemon* from arising by balancing against it. According to Kenneth Waltz, founder of neorealism, "balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units

wishing to survive". They can do this either through "internal balancing", where a state uses internal efforts such as moving to increase economic capability, developing clever strategies, and increasing military strength, or through "external balancing", which occurs when states take external measures to increase their security by forming allies. States happy with their place in the system are known as "status quo" states, while those seeking to alter the balance of power in their favor are generally referred to as "revisionist states" and aspire for hegemony, thus repairing the balance (Waltz, 1987, p.89).

States choose to balance for two reasons. First, they place their survival at risk if they fail to curb a potential *hegemon* before it becomes too strong; to ally with the dominant power means placing one's trust in its continued benevolence. Secondly, joining the weaker side increases the likelihood that the new member will be influential within the alliance. States choose to bandwagon because it may be a form of appeasement, as the bandwagoner may hope to avoid an attack by diverting it elsewhere as a "defensive reason" or because it may align with the dominant side in wartime to share the spoils of victory as an "offensive reason" (Mearsheimer, 2010).

The weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon than to balance, as they do little to affect the outcome and thus must choose the winning side. Strong states may change a losing side into a winning side and thus are more likely to balance. States will be tempted to bandwagon when allies are unavailable; however, excessive confidence in allied support encourages weak states to free ride, relying on the efforts of others to provide security. Since bandwagoning "requires placing trust in the aggressor's continued forbearance," some realists believe balancing is preferred to bandwagoning. According to Stephen Walt, states are more likely to balance in peacetime, but if they are on the losing side of a war, they may defect and bandwagon in the hopes that they will "share the fruits of victory" (Howard, 1925; Walt, 1987; Sheehan, 2000).

The Relevance of the Balance of Power Theory to the Research

The confrontation between North Korea and the United States of America is a case where the U.S.A.'s continuous presence and domination in the Peninsula constitutes a threat to the security of North Korea. To survive the threat, North Korea decided to increase its military capabilities to balance the power of the United States in a self-help situation. Similarly, South Korea, feeling threatened by the nuclear armament in North Korea, decided to ally with the U.S.A. to escape the potential attack. This struggle to amass weapons has been the core objective of the North Korean foreign policy, while the U.S.A. opposition is to guide its allies and to persist in its domination of the Peninsula.

The Evolution of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The North Korean nuclear crisis is rooted in decades of geopolitical tension, national insecurity, and failed diplomatic engagement. It centers on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) long-standing efforts to develop nuclear weapons as a means of deterring external threats and securing regime survival. North Korea's nuclear aspirations trace back to the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953), during which General Douglas MacArthur, then Commander of United Nations forces, publicly threatened to use nuclear weapons against Chinese and North Korean forces. This threat, along with the enduring legacy of military confrontation with the United States, profoundly influenced Kim Il-Sung's perception of national vulnerability and his determination to acquire an indigenous nuclear deterrent (Liu, 2006; Cumings, 2021).

In 1956, the DPRK signed a cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of its formal engagement with nuclear science. A Soviet-designed nuclear research facility was constructed in Yongbyon, and in 1965, the Soviets supplied an IRT-2M research reactor to the DPRK. By 1974, North Korean scientists had independently upgraded the reactor's capacity,

while also initiating the construction of a second, more advanced 5MWe graphite-moderated reactor (Garwin & von Hippel, 2006). That same year, Pyongyang joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and by 1977, it had signed a Type 66 Safeguards Agreement, allowing limited inspections at Yongbyon. These developments demonstrated both North Korea's growing technological ambition and its cautious attempt to engage with international norms (Liu, 2006).

During the 1980s, North Korea shifted from basic nuclear research to weaponization efforts. The regime constructed uranium fuel fabrication and conversion facilities and began work on a 200MWe power reactor in Taechon. Intelligence reports from 1985 revealed the existence of a secret reactor near Yongbyon, prompting international alarm (Panda, 2022). Under growing pressure, North Korea acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in December 1985. However, it delayed the required submission of a safeguard agreement with the IAEA for seven years, during which time its weapons-related activities continued (Revere, 2021).

Tensions escalated in the early 1990s, when IAEA inspections revealed discrepancies in North Korea's plutonium accounting and evidence of undeclared nuclear activity. In response to IAEA demands for more intrusive inspections, the DPRK announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT in March 1993, an event that marked the first official "Korean nuclear crisis." Although Pyongyang later suspended its withdrawal, the crisis exposed the limits of international verification regimes when dealing with opaque authoritarian states (Wit, Poneman, & Gallucci, 2004).

To resolve the standoff, the 1994 Agreed Framework was negotiated between the United States and North Korea. Under this accord, the DPRK pledged to freeze and eventually dismantle its plutonium-based nuclear program in exchange for U.S. energy assistance and normalization of

relations. However, mutual mistrust and implementation delays undermined the agreement. The deal began to unravel under President George W. Bush, who in his 2002 State of the Union Address labeled North Korea part of an "Axis of Evil," alongside Iran and Iraq. This ideological framing, reinforced by the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review and National Security Strategy, further solidified Pyongyang's belief that nuclear weapons were essential to its survival, especially after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Wendt, 2005; Mount & Revere, 2021).

The crisis entered a more dangerous phase in October 2002, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted DPRK officials with intelligence suggesting that North Korea had resumed a covert uranium enrichment program violating the Agreed Framework. Rather than deny the accusation, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju acknowledged the program, effectively nullifying the agreement. According to Kelly's account, the DPRK framed its actions as a response to American hostility and declared the Agreed Framework dead (John, 2005, p. 23).

In January 2003, North Korea officially withdrew from the NPT, the first and only country to do so. Shortly after, Pyongyang restarted the Yongbyon reactor and announced that it had begun reprocessing 8,000 spent fuel rods. U.S. intelligence agencies estimated that this could yield enough weapons-grade plutonium for four to six nuclear bombs (Garwin & von Hippel, 2006). These developments marked the collapse of the fragile U.S.–DPRK diplomatic framework and the beginning of a prolonged nuclear standoff.

The early 2000s also saw North Korea's growing willingness to use nuclear brinkmanship as a diplomatic tool. Despite participating in the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009) involving China, Russia, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea, Pyongyang conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006. Subsequent tests followed in 2009, 2013, 2016, 2017, and again in 2023, with increasing sophistication in warhead miniaturization and missile delivery systems (Kim & Lee, 2024; Panda,

2022). Thus, the evolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis illustrates the failure of both coercive containment and piecemeal engagement strategies. It is rooted in a complex mix of security fears, ideological rigidity, external pressures, and the DPRK's calculated use of nuclear weapons as both shield and sword, both for deterrence and diplomatic leverage.

The Evolution of North Korea–Russia Relations

The relationship between North Korea and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) has evolved dramatically from Cold War camaraderie to post-Soviet estrangement, and more recently, pragmatic cooperation. During the early years of the Cold War, North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) viewed the United States and its allies as existential threats. To counterbalance these perceived threats, the DPRK relied heavily on the Soviet Union for political, military, economic, and scientific support (Walt, 1987). One of the key areas of cooperation was nuclear technology. In 1959, with Soviet assistance, North Korea established the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center, which initially focused on peaceful nuclear energy development (Sheehan, 2000). By 1965, a small 2-megawatt IRT-2000 research reactor had been installed, marking the DPRK's early steps toward mastering nuclear science. However, the Soviet Union refrained from transferring sensitive technologies such as uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing, indicating that Moscow did not intend to help Pyongyang develop nuclear weapons (Walt, 1987).

By the 1980s, the DPRK began independently advancing its nuclear program. It constructed a 5-megawatt natural uranium, graphite-moderated reactor capable of producing approximately 6 kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium annually, enough for one nuclear bomb per year (Sheehan, 2000). This development alarmed the United States, which subsequently pressured the USSR to compel North Korea to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

in 1985. Although the DPRK acceded to the NPT, it resisted allowing comprehensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), thereby violating the treaty's verification provisions (Nikitin, 2014).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly altered the geopolitical landscape. For North Korea, the disintegration of its principal ally marked the beginning of a profound strategic and economic crisis. The Russian Federation, under President Boris Yeltsin, adopted a pro-Western foreign policy and allowed its 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with the DPRK to lapse without renewal. It formally annulled the treaty in 1994, signaling a clear departure from Cold War commitments (Lankov, 2013). At the same time, Moscow and Beijing established diplomatic relations with South Korea, isolating Pyongyang diplomatically. The resulting security vacuum and economic hardship pushed North Korea further toward self-reliance and radicalized its defense posture, ultimately reinforcing its decision to pursue nuclear weapons (Cha & Kang, 2003).

North Korea's distrust of international institutions and major powers deepened in the early 1990s. In 1992, the IAEA carried out six nuclear inspections, which culminated in disputes over access to suspected nuclear sites. In response to what it perceived as intrusive and politically motivated actions, including the U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises "Team Spirit," North Korea declared its intent to withdraw from the NPT in March 1993, triggering the first Korean nuclear crisis (Niksich, 2002). While the crisis was temporarily defused by the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea's nuclear ambitions remained a central concern for global non-proliferation efforts.

In the post-Soviet era, Russia's relationship with North Korea has become more complex and pragmatic. Under President Vladimir Putin, Moscow began cautiously re-engaging

Pyongyang, largely to preserve regional stability and to assert Russia's relevance in Northeast Asian security dynamics (Toloraya, 2018). While Russia supports the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in principle, it also views North Korea as a geopolitical buffer and counterweight to U.S. influence in East Asia. Russia has repeatedly called for diplomatic engagement and has condemned sanctions that might provoke regime destabilization (Kim, 2020).

One area that has attracted less attention but is equally concerning is North Korea's chemical weapons arsenal. The DPRK has never signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and is believed to possess large stockpiles of chemical agents, including VX nerve gas (Bermudez et al., 2015). This issue gained international attention following the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, in Malaysia in 2017 using VX—a substance banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Russia, a signatory to the CWC, has also been implicated in the use of chemical weapons in recent years, notably in the poisonings of former spies and dissidents like Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal (Walker, 2018). These parallel behaviors suggest a troubling pattern of chemical weapons use and denial among authoritarian states.

Moreover, Russia has played a quiet but disruptive role in international efforts to respond to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Moscow has consistently vetoed resolutions aimed at holding the Assad regime accountable. This diplomatic cover mirrors, to some extent, Russia's approach to North Korea, subtly undermining Western-led initiatives while avoiding overt confrontation (Sauer, 2018).

Although Russia is not a central player in U.S.–North Korea nuclear negotiations, its geopolitical interests and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) veto power give it significant

leverage. As evidenced during the Trump–Kim summits (2018–2019), Moscow maintained a low profile, but continued to advocate for a "dual freeze" suspension of North Korean weapons tests in exchange for cessation of U.S.–South Korean military exercises. While its role may appear secondary to those of the U.S., China, and South Korea, Russia's capacity to influence sanctions, support alternative diplomatic formats, or disrupt consensus makes it an indispensable stakeholder in any comprehensive settlement on the Korean Peninsula (Gabuev, 2018).

North Korea's Foreign Policy and United States Interests on the Korean Peninsula

North Korea's foreign policy has been shaped by a combination of ideological rigidity, strategic insecurity, and the ongoing legitimacy competition with South Korea. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) positions itself as a revolutionary state, aiming to assert its sovereignty, ensure regime survival, and counterbalance the perceived threats posed by the United States and its allies. Three primary objectives underpin North Korea's approach:

- i. compensating for its conventional military inferiority by developing asymmetric capabilities such as nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles;
- ii. attempting to create rifts between Seoul and Washington to weaken the rationale and public support for the U.S. military presence in South Korea; and
- iii. exploiting opportunities to disseminate revolutionary ideals and promote internal discord within South Korea (Cha, 2012; Pollack, 2011).

The Korean Peninsula presents both opportunities and strategic challenges to U.S. interests in Northeast Asia. On one hand, South Korea, a stable democracy with a robust market economy, has developed a strong defense posture and an increasingly global foreign policy outlook that aligns closely with U.S. interests. This alliance strengthens deterrence and fosters cooperative efforts to address regional threats, including North Korea's nuclear and missile programs (Snyder,

2009). On the other hand, North Korea remains a closed, autocratic regime that actively undermines regional security. The DPRK's continuous development of nuclear weapons, long-range missile capabilities, and its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 constitute direct challenges to the global nonproliferation regime and U.S. leadership in international security governance (Wit, 2018).

The nuclear issue has regional, bilateral, and global implications. Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires a coordinated and multilateral approach. The U.S. Council on Foreign Relations (2010) identified three core pillars for U.S. policy on North Korea: (1) prioritizing the complete, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; (2) maintaining strong U.S.-South Korea relations as the cornerstone of regional stability; and (3) ensuring active participation and cooperation from regional actors, particularly China, through platforms like the Six-Party Talks, established in the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005 (Bosworth, 2010).

However, achieving consensus among regional stakeholders has proven difficult due to divergent national interests. China prioritizes regional stability and regime survival in Pyongyang, fearing the consequences of a North Korean collapse, such as refugee flows and a reunified Korea under U.S. influence. Russia supports peaceful denuclearization but maintains economic and strategic ties with North Korea. South Korea, while committed to denuclearization, favors dialogue and gradual engagement. Japan, conversely, has prioritized resolution of the abduction issue involving Japanese citizens, sometimes even ahead of nuclear disarmament (Cha & Kang, 2003; Revere, 2013).

These differences were starkly evident following the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan*, which resulted in the deaths of 46 sailors. The U.S. and South Korea held North Korea responsible and responded with a strengthened security alliance and expanded

joint military exercises. In contrast, China downplayed the incident, citing the need for restraint and regional stability (Manyin et al., 2010). As a Follow up to this and other provocations, Washington and Seoul intensified efforts to deter further North Korean aggression and reinforce their military partnership. Simultaneously, the U.S. has engaged in cautious diplomatic dialogue with Beijing, recognizing that China's leverage over North Korea is indispensable to any sustainable resolution. While U.S.-China coordination has seen moments of success especially in the imposition of UN sanctions failure to align on a unified strategy toward denuclearization could undermine broader security cooperation in East Asia (Lee & Revere, 2019).

The international community, however, remains skeptical about North Korea's willingness to relinquish its nuclear arsenal. Given the DPRK's repeated violations of agreements and its framing of nuclear weapons as essential to regime survival, many analysts argue that denuclearization is unlikely without a major transformation in North Korea's political system. No state that has tested nuclear weapons has ever voluntarily disarmed without a corresponding regime change (Reiss, 1995; Mount & Lieber, 2014).

Moreover, regional powers such as China, Japan, and South Korea remain hesitant to adopt more coercive measures, fearing that increased pressure could provoke conflict or lead to state collapse (Cha, 2012). Ultimately, the Korean Peninsula continues to represent a complex geopolitical fault line. For the United States, managing North Korea's threat requires a combination of deterrence, diplomatic engagement, and alliance coordination, with careful balancing of both regional and global priorities.

Efforts at Resolving the North Korea–USA Faceoff

Efforts to resolve the nuclear standoff between the United States and North Korea have been characterized by intermittent diplomacy, multilateral negotiations, and the persistent challenges of mistrust and strategic divergence. Central to these efforts has been China's diplomatic initiative to facilitate dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang in an effort to deescalate tensions and maintain regional stability.

The first notable multilateral step was taken in April 2003 when China hosted a trilateral dialogue in Beijing involving North Korea, the United States, and China. This forum represented a significant breakthrough as it offered a rare face-to-face engagement between the U.S. and North Korea amidst high tensions following Pyongyang's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003 (Niksich, 2006). The talks provided what analysts describe as "minimal multilateralism," allowing both adversaries a face-saving opportunity to express concerns without appearing weak (Chinoy, 2008).

During the trilateral meeting, North Korea's chief negotiator, Li Gun, reportedly declared that the country had successfully developed nuclear weapons and was prepared to demonstrate their capability if provoked (CNN, 2003). This escalatory rhetoric underscored the urgency for a broader diplomatic mechanism. While China initially preferred to continue the trilateral format, the United States insisted on expanding the dialogue to include South Korea and Japan, and later, at Russia's behest, Moscow was also invited. These developments culminated in the establishment of the Six-Party Talks in August 2003, involving North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States (Manyin & Nikitin, 2022).

Between 2003 and 2007, six rounds of negotiations were held. The fourth round in September 2005 produced the most significant diplomatic outcome the Joint Statement of Principles. In this agreement, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to:

1. The verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,
2. The normalization of diplomatic relations between North Korea and the United States, as well as with Japan,
3. Economic cooperation in the areas of energy, trade, and investment, including multilateral assistance to the DPRK,
4. The negotiation of a permanent peace regime to formally end the Korean War (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

Despite the diplomatic optimism generated by this agreement, the actual implementation remained elusive. Deep strategic and political divergences plagued the process. For the United States, denuclearization was non-negotiable, with Washington demanding a full, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program and re-adherence to the NPT (Sanger, 2009). For North Korea, however, nuclear weapons were not only a deterrent but also a cornerstone of regime survival. The DPRK prioritized the establishment of a formal peace treaty with security guarantees from the United States, viewing Washington as the principal threat to its sovereignty (Park, 2007). Park (2005) rightly observes that the Six-Party Talks were complicated by "domestic policy constraints, differing priorities, and conflicting historical analogies" among participants. While North Korea saw the nuclear issue through a survivalist lens, the United States framed it within a non-proliferation paradigm, complicating negotiations from the outset.

China and South Korea, though formally committed to denuclearization, adopted a more cautious stance. Both governments consistently advocated for diplomatic resolution, fearing that

excessive pressure or sanctions could destabilize North Korea and precipitate a humanitarian or refugee crisis along their borders (Scobell & Nader, 2014). Their primary objective was the maintenance of peace and stability in the region, rather than regime change in Pyongyang.

Despite the early successes, the Six-Party Talks ultimately stalled. Although the Joint Statement of 2005 laid out a roadmap, subsequent actions by both Washington and Pyongyang eroded trust. For instance, shortly after the agreement, the U.S. imposed financial sanctions on Banco Delta Asia, a Macao-based bank accused of laundering North Korean funds an action that Pyongyang interpreted as a violation of the spirit of negotiations (Revere, 2013). In retaliation, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, further derailing diplomatic momentum (Niksch, 2006).

The diplomatic deadlock persisted into subsequent rounds of talks, with little progress made. Analysts have noted that without a fundamental change in the political will of both the U.S. and North Korea, sustainable resolution remains unlikely. As Pirenne (1963) insightfully noted in the context of geopolitical impasses, conflicts rooted in incompatible strategic objectives often resist diplomatic solutions absent significant shifts in the balance of interests.

The North Korean Nuclear Programme, U.S. Opposition, and Its Implications for Global Peace

The nuclear weapons programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the United States' strong opposition to it, continues to constitute one of the most destabilizing forces in global geopolitics, with serious implications for global peace, particularly in developing and non-nuclear states. At the heart of this confrontation lies North Korea's ambition to assert itself as a global power through nuclear capability, and Washington's strategic goal of preserving

the integrity of the global non-proliferation regime. The resulting tensions go beyond the Korean Peninsula and shape international security dynamics, especially in the Global South.

First and foremost, the DPRK's nuclear weapons development represents a serious threat to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. By conducting nuclear tests and openly developing nuclear warheads in defiance of international treaties such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), North Korea challenges the credibility of global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. According to Albright and Stricker (2021), if North Korea escapes significant consequences for its defiance, it may serve as a dangerous precedent for other nations, especially those with latent nuclear ambitions. Iran, for example, has taken cues from North Korea's survival strategy and has been emboldened in its own nuclear pursuits, particularly after the breakdown of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Fitzpatrick, 2016). This trend of non-compliance threatens to normalize nuclear proliferation and erode global norms, thereby increasing insecurity in non-nuclear states especially those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that lack strategic deterrents and depend on international agreements for their security.

Secondly, the North Korean nuclear crisis threatens to trigger a regional arms race in Northeast Asia, with cascading effects on global security. The expansion of North Korea's nuclear capabilities forces neighboring states like South Korea and Japan to enhance their military preparedness and deepen defense cooperation with the United States (Revere, 2013). China, while reluctant to support harsh sanctions against Pyongyang, also views an arms buildup in the region as a serious threat to regional balance (Snyder, 2015). These tensions could lead to a conventional and possibly nuclear arms buildup across East Asia making the region a potential flashpoint for future military conflict. If this escalation spreads or influences other regions, it may accelerate

military spending globally, diverting resources from development and peacebuilding efforts in the Global South.

Thirdly, the perceived hypocrisy in the implementation of disarmament policies by global powers, especially the U.S. and its allies, undermines confidence in the global security architecture. While powerful states call for disarmament, they continue to maintain large nuclear arsenals, modernize their nuclear triads, and sometimes bypass global institutions in enforcing international norms. As Ayoob (2002) and Chomsky (2007) argue, this form of “selective disarmament” serves the strategic interests of the West while keeping developing nations dependent and insecure. Such practices reinforce the perception in the Global South that disarmament is not universal but a tool of domination. For many developing countries, this breeds distrust in international governance institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), thus weakening the global arms control regime.

Fourth, the U.S. opposition to North Korea's nuclear programme has sometimes extended beyond disarmament to broader political and strategic intervention, leading to accusations of policy overreach and the infringement of national sovereignty. In the name of nuclear non-proliferation, Western powers have frequently intervened in domestic affairs of states, thereby weakening the principle of non-interference and respect for sovereignty a core tenet of international law. Developing countries fear that cooperation with such global mechanisms may invite unwanted foreign scrutiny or interference in their internal political processes (Mazrui, 2004).

To cap it all, the North Korean nuclear standoff with the United States has far-reaching consequences beyond the immediate regional dynamics in Northeast Asia. It destabilizes the global non-proliferation regime, risks igniting regional and global arms races, reveals double standards in disarmament policies, and threatens the sovereignty of less powerful states. For the international

community, particularly the Global South, these developments represent a troubling trend toward increased insecurity, strategic imbalance, and geopolitical dependency. To preserve global peace, a more equitable, inclusive, and genuinely multilateral approach to disarmament and nuclear diplomacy is urgently needed.

Conclusion

The North Korean nuclear programme represents a critical failure in the international community's long-standing efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. Despite decades of diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and multilateral talks, Pyongyang has succeeded in crossing the nuclear threshold, becoming the world's ninth nuclear-armed state. This development is not an abrupt or isolated incident, but rather the culmination of deep-rooted and unresolved issues historical grievances, mutual distrust, and clashing geopolitical interests that have persisted since the end of the Korean War and the broader Cold War era.

The crisis is symptomatic of both structural flaws in the global non-proliferation regime and the inability of key actors particularly the United States, China, and regional stakeholders to address North Korea's security concerns through credible diplomacy. From a realist standpoint, North Korea's actions reflect a rational attempt by a regime under existential threat to deter external aggression and bolster its international bargaining power. The regime's consistent desire for direct bilateral negotiations with the U.S. has been met with resistance, pushing it to adopt increasingly provocative strategies, such as missile launches and nuclear tests, to force engagement on its own terms.

While North Korea's strategy may be logical within the context of regime survival, it significantly undermines regional stability and global security. The nuclear test has not only

intensified military tensions in East Asia, but also dealt a serious blow to the integrity of the global counter-proliferation regime. It sets a dangerous precedent for other nations with latent nuclear ambitions, and signals a shift in global power dynamics that could encourage further defiance of international norms.

Importantly, this crisis cannot be fully understood or resolved through coercive means alone. Lasting solutions require a shift from reactive containment to proactive diplomacy anchored in mutual security guarantees, respect for sovereignty, and realistic, step-by-step disarmament frameworks. A failure to address the root causes ranging from the militarized legacy of the Cold War to the asymmetric power relations that define global governance will only perpetuate the cycle of provocation and response. Ultimately, the North Korean nuclear issue is more than a regional flashpoint; it is a test of the international community's capacity to uphold peace through equitable and inclusive multilateral engagement.

Suggestions

In addressing the complex and evolving challenges posed by the North Korean nuclear programme, a multifaceted and pragmatic approach is essential. First, it is imperative that Pyongyang is persuaded to return to the Six-Party Talks, a diplomatic framework involving North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. However, for this dialogue to yield meaningful outcomes, it must go beyond previous efforts by incorporating realistic incentives such as phased sanctions relief, development aid, and security guarantees. These measures would not only demonstrate goodwill but also offer North Korea a viable path toward economic and diplomatic normalization, thereby encouraging a gradual denuclearization process.

Second, the international community particularly the United Nations should reconsider the efficacy of punitive sanctions, which have historically reinforced North Korea's isolation and defiance. Rather than relying solely on economic pressure, a shift toward constructive engagement is advised. Targeted and conditional economic cooperation, coupled with development assistance, could help create internal incentives for the regime to adopt more responsible behaviour. Strengthening trade ties and humanitarian partnerships would present Pyongyang with peaceful alternatives to nuclear armament, while also increasing the cost of continued international isolation.

A third critical consideration is the need to avoid military confrontation or forced regime change, both of which could trigger a humanitarian disaster, particularly in the form of mass refugee flows into China and destabilization across the broader East Asian region. As such, regional stakeholders must prioritize conflict prevention and cooperative security arrangements. This includes the development of early-warning systems, refugee contingency plans, and de-escalatory dialogue mechanisms, particularly between China, South Korea, and the United States.

Furthermore, while direct efforts to topple the North Korean regime may prove counterproductive, it is possible to promote gradual internal transformation through non-confrontational means. The international community, led by the United Nations, could invest in information campaigns that subtly undermine state propaganda and expose the population to alternative worldviews. This could be achieved through external broadcasts, digital information channels, and cross-border humanitarian activities. Over time, such initiatives might erode the regime's monopoly on information and inspire public demand for openness, reform, and peace.

Lastly, soft diplomacy remains a powerful and underutilized tool in inter-Korean relations. The United States and its allies should actively support initiatives that build interpersonal trust and

social cohesion between the North and South Korean people. These efforts could include family reunification programs, tourism development, cultural exchanges, and collaborative agricultural projects. Though modest in appearance, such people-to-people engagements help lay the foundation for long-term reconciliation and dialogue, eventually contributing to a stable security environment on the Korean Peninsula.