

Reducing and Eliminating Nuclear Weapons: Country Perspectives on the Challenges to Nuclear Disarmament

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Table of Contents

About the IPFM	1
Overview	2
Country Perspectives	
China	10
France	16
Germany	22
India	26
Iran	30
Israel	36
Japan	46
North Korea	56
South Korea	63
Pakistan	67
Russia	74
United Kingdom	84
United States	93
Endnotes	102
Contributors	123

North Korea

North Korea is the only country to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to openly pursue a nuclear weapon program. North Korea's nuclear capabilities are viewed by many as a serious threat to its neighbors. Japan and South Korea are reacting by strengthening their alliances with the United States, and Japan also by building a missile defense system with the United States. It has a growing potential to ignite a second Korean War.

The motivations of North Korea in pursuing nuclear and missile capabilities are often misunderstood and regarded by some just as simply a bluff or attempts to obtain bargaining chips for negotiations with the United States. This paper explains the specific political situation of North Korea as a part of a divided nation and focuses on the political motivations of the leadership for acquiring nuclear capabilities. It offers some possible solutions to North Korea's challenge to the nonproliferation regime.

Historical background

Koreans, next to the Japanese, suffered the greatest losses in the nuclear holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,¹⁹⁸ and Koreans have lived in constant danger of a nuclear war ever since. Most Koreans believe that their country was divided unfairly in 1945 and therefore national reunification remains the highest goal of the two Korean states. The division of Korea remains the root cause for the current trouble in Korea.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) was founded on 15 August 1948 in the Southern part of the peninsula occupied by U.S. forces. The People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) was founded on 9 September 1948. After establishing two ideologically competing regimes, the U.S. and Soviet forces withdrew from Korea in 1949. The two Koreas, emerging from 35 years of Japanese occupation and born fresh with foreign ideologies, did not accept each other. Each claimed to be the sole legitimate representative of all Koreans.

Being militarily stronger than the South, North Korea tried to unify the country by military means by launching an invasion on 25 June 1950 with the help of the Soviet Union. It almost succeeded, but the United States with the support of some other UN members rushed to rescue South Korea. A UN mandate for this rescue mission was possible only because the Soviet Union was absent at the time from the UN Security Council in protest at the fact that Taiwan (Republic of China) was representing China at the UN.

The United States and the UN forces succeeded in freeing South Korea within two months. Seeing an opportunity, however, South Korea persuaded the U.S. Commander to march into the North and impose unification under the South and, more importantly, rollback the Communist expansion in East Asia. This time, however, the newly founded People's Republic of China intervened to rescue its ally, North Korea.¹⁹⁹

The devastating fratricidal war lasted three years. After the death of Stalin in early 1953, fighting stopped and a truce agreement was signed between the US, representing the UN on one hand, and China and North Korea on the other. South Korea refused to sign the truce agreement, however. This is why North Korea believes that the South could resume the war of national unification at any time.

During the war, U.S. Commander General MacArthur was authorized to use eight nuclear bombs but found that US conventional bombing had been so thorough that there were no more targets left in North Korea.²⁰⁰

After the war, until the early 1960s, the two Koreas were preoccupied with the reconstruction of their devastated countries. Although many million Koreans had divided families, neither country allowed its people to have contacts with the other side. As a result, each country has very limited understanding of the other.

After persuading the United States to remain in South Korea and being brought under the U.S. "nuclear umbrella," South Korea felt safe from a possible North Korean invasion. For its part, however, North Korea has turned into a garrison state on constant military alert. Although North Korea signed security treaties with China and the Soviet Union in 1961, since the Soviet and Chinese rivalry and conflicts in the late 1960s North Korea has felt weak and vulnerable. Feeling threatened by the presence of U.S. forces and tactical nuclear weapons in the South, North Korea decided to acquire nuclear capabilities of its own to defend against a possible United States/South Korean invasion. It sent thousands of students to the Soviet Union to study nuclear physics and nuclear engineering and other critical subjects.

Until the early 1970s, North Korea was economically and militarily stronger than the South. It therefore expected a Socialist Revolution in the South and prepared for rapid unification on its own terms. On the other side, South Korea dropped national unification as a priority and, starting in 1962, its military government focused on the industrialization and modernization of South Korea's backward economy. Only in 1972, as a result of the shock of the surprise 1972 rapprochement between China and the United States, did representatives of the leaders of the two Koreas meet secretly for the first time since the Korean War. They agreed on free exchanges and agreed on three principles for unification:

- Unification shall be achieved through independent efforts without external imposition or interference;
- Unification shall be achieved through peaceful means, and not through use of force against one another; and
- National unity as a homogeneous people shall be sought first, transcending differences in ideas, ideologies and systems.²⁰¹

Both Koreas even agreed on free exchanges and a wide range of cooperation in all fields with each other.

Initially, the South, feeling weaker than the North at the time, refused to open the border. By the end of the 1970s, however, the South surpassed the North, both economically and militarily, through South Korea's successful export-oriented industrialization and close military cooperation with the United States, including sending many troops to Vietnam. In addition, starting in the late 1970s, the South was successful in using nuclear technology to generate a significant fraction of its electrical power. The 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul were the turning point, clearly showing to the world who was the winner.

Watching closely, the North wanted to do the same things to rapidly advance its economy and solve its chronic energy problem. It signed a technical cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union and joined the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in late 1985, hoping to import four nuclear power plants. North Korea refused to sign the required safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for seven years, however, until 1992. Its main argument was that the United States was stationing tactical nuclear weapons in the South. Only after the United States and South Korea declared in December 1991 that all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in South Korea had been withdrawn, did North Korea sign its safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

With the rapid political changes in Europe and peaceful unification of Germany, the two Koreas tried again to accommodate with each other. Both Koreas finally gave up their claims to sole representation of Korea in the UN and joined the international community as separate states. But they failed to recognize each other or give up their unification policies. The biggest diplomatic blow to North Korea, however, was the diplomatic success of South Korea. After successfully hosting the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics, most Eastern Bloc countries including the Soviet Union recognized South Korea and finally, in August 1992, even the People's Republic of China, North Korea's principal ally, recognized South Korea as a sovereign state. China had been delaying normalization of relations with South Korea until the United States recognized North Korea. Recognizing South Korea's growing economic strength, however, China decided to establish normal relations with South Korea without prior consultation with North Korea.

Being aware of the changing global political environment, North Korea took the initiative to reach out to the South and asked for deputy prime-minister-level negotiations. Since there is no deputy prime minister in South Korea, South Korea offered to have the dialogue at the prime minister level. North and South Korea negotiated directly from 1990 to 1992 in Pyongyang and Seoul. In December 1991, they reached agreements on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchanges and Cooperation, and, in January 1992, a Declaration on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Many Koreans in both sides believed that unification was near.

After signing these two agreements, North Korea expected massive economic help from the South, but its high-level delegation returned home empty handed. The South believed at that time that extending help to the North would only help the regime avoid collapse, meaning that unification would be delayed. The consequence of this failure in inter-Korean reconciliation was the first nuclear crisis. North Korea discovered that it was surrounded by a hostile world and its stronger brother in the South was hoping and waiting for its collapse, so that it could unify the nation by absorption as West Germany had done with East Germany in 1990.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, North Korea lost all its allies. This made North Korea feel extremely isolated and vulnerable to attack by the South, which was now stronger economically and politically as well as militarily, even without the United States. Unification on the South's terms seemed possible and near.

During this same period, international suspicions about a potential North Korean nuclear-weapon program were growing as was international pressure on North Korea. Since North Korea was a member of the NPT at that time, the IAEA conducted six ad hoc inspections that hardened the suspicion. The IAEA had just had a bad experience in Iraq. Therefore, for the first time in IAEA history, it demanded special inspections of two suspect sites. North Korea withstood strong international and U.S. pressures to give up its nuclear ambition and, in 1993, even threatened to withdraw from the NPT.²⁰² It decided to remain only after the United States promised to consider North Korea's security concerns. Their first ever bilateral negotiations in Geneva ended with the Framework Agreement on the nuclear issue in October 1994.²⁰³ North Korea agreed to freeze the 5-MWe reactor and stop construction on its radio-chemical (reprocessing) laboratory as well as on two new reactors (50 and 200 MWe).²⁰⁴ In return, the United States promised to normalize relations with North Korea, accept it as a sovereign state, to end the Korean War, and not to threaten North Korea with nuclear weapons. Peace in Korea seemed near.

The two Koreas also came closer to each other when South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung addressed numerous peace gestures and called for accommodation with the North. The first ever summit between two leaders of the divided nation took place 50 years after the outbreak of the Korean War.²⁰⁵ The three-day summit in Pyongyang resulted in a "North-South Joint Declaration of June 15, 2000" which basically repeated what they had agreed in 1972 without solving the basic problem of non-recognition and terminating the Korean War. Although the two leaders failed to recognize each other as sovereign states and to formally change their unification policies, they declared their intentions for peaceful unification, which increased hope for peaceful coexistence and free exchanges between the North and South.

High-level bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea continued in an effort to solve the missile problem and U.S. President Clinton even planned to visit North Korea in December 2000. But these positive developments ended when President G.W. Bush named North Korea as one of the "Axis of Evil" countries and, in the leaked portions of the Nuclear Posture Review, the Defense Department included North Korea as a possible target of U.S. nuclear weapons. In December 2002, the U.S. government nullified the 1994 Geneva Framework Agreement, accusing North Korea of having a secret HEU-production program, which North Korea strongly denied until recently.²⁰⁶ On 10 January 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT and announced that it was developing nuclear weapons. This open challenge to the United States and to the NPT regime was a provocative North Korean attempt to engage the United States in direct dialogue as in 1994. This time, however, the United States did not react and pressured China to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear ambition.

With the growing tension on the Korean peninsula, China initiated three-party talks in Beijing in April 2003 and Six-Party Talks in August to solve the North Korean nuclear issue peacefully. The Six-Party Talks process achieved its first success in an Agreement on Principles on 19 September 2005. North Korea agreed, as in 1994, to give up its nuclear option in return for political concessions from the US. For their parts, Japan and the United States promised to normalize their relations with North Korea if it gave up its nuclear program. This time, however, each side agreed to a step-by-step process.

Just as the agreement was reached, however, the U.S. Treasury started financial sanctions against some fifty accounts of North Korean leaders in the Banco Delta Asia in Macau. North Korea felt that it had been cheated again by the United States and boycotted the Six-Party Talks.

In July 2006, North Korea test fired its *Daepodong* ICBM, which failed. On 6 October 2006, it tested a nuclear device. North Korea was demonstrating its capabilities and deploying them as bargaining chips in its negotiations with the United States. In November 2006, in Hanoi, during the APEC Summit, the United States offered a bilateral dialogue with North Korea.

The chief negotiators met first in January 2007 in Berlin. This brought a breakthrough in the Six-Party Talks. On 13 February 2007, North Korea agreed to disable its key nuclear installations in return for energy compensation in the form of heavy fuel oil for its fossil-fuelled electrical power plants by other members of the Six-Party Talks. In the process of the step-by-step-implementation of the agreement, however, Japan refused to supply its portion of the heavy oil to North Korea until the question of its kidnapped citizens was resolved.

In October 2007, the second inter-Korean Summit took place in Pyongyang between South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun and North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il. A peace declaration was signed. The document called for international talks to replace the Korean War Armistice with a permanent peace treaty. Unfortunately, with the change of the government in the South in early 2008, relations between the two Koreas began to deteriorate again. President Lee Myung Bak of South Korea refused to accept the results of the two inter-Korean summits, and all official dialogues between the two countries broke down. Military tension has been increasing, with each side blaming the other for breaking promises.

North Korea's launch of a multi-staged rocket on 5 April 2009—purportedly to put a satellite into space—was condemned by the UN Security Council in a presidential statement. In response, North Korea decided to halt the process of disabling its nuclear facilities, to stop participating in the Six-Party Talks and expelled the IAEA inspectors, reactivating the reactors as well as its reprocessing plant and conducted its second nuclear test in May 2009. But the second test did not have the desired effect of a dialogue with the new U.S. President Barack Obama but instead brought about total isolation of the country including UN sanctions which even China supported.

In summer 2009, North Korea changed its policy from confrontation to a peace offensive by making overtures to the United States and South Korea. When former U.S. President Clinton visited North Korea in August 2009, he met with North Korean Leader Kim Jong-Il and gained the release of two U.S. journalists. It is likely that the Six Party Talks will resume sometime in the future.

South Korea's attempt at nuclear proliferation

After barely surviving the Korean War, South Korea entered into a Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, which established a number of military bases in Korea in 1953. In addition to the deployment of numerous tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, the US reserved the right of first use of nuclear weapons. As a small country surrounded by hostile neighbors armed with nuclear weapons, South Korea believed it necessary to have a US nuclear umbrella to survive. It disregarded North Korea's allegations that these weapons were a threat to the DPRK's existence.

Shortly after North Korean commandos nearly succeeded in mounting an attack on the presidential palace in January 1968, President Park Chung Hee announced his determination to seek a “self-reliant national defense.” His determination was strengthened after the announcement by U.S. President-elect Richard Nixon in 1969 of his decision to disengage from Asia, including Korea. After learning of the U.S. decision to withdraw its Seventh Infantry Division around 1971, President Park decided to start a nuclear weapons program.²⁰⁷ Although he was forced by the US to put it on hold, he continued to seek technical aid from France.

In 1975, President Park made it known openly that South Korea would begin nuclear-weapon development if the United States removed its nuclear umbrella from the Korean Peninsula. He indicated that South Korea was only refraining from developing nuclear weapons in conformity with the NPT. Subsequently, South Korea signed a one-billion dollar contract with France to purchase a reprocessing plant, which would be placed under IAEA safeguards. Under U.S. pressure, President Park cancelled the deal in early 1976. Nevertheless, he kept the option by continuing secret nuclear research.

When U.S. President Jimmy Carter decided in 1977 to reduce U.S. ground forces in South Korea, President Park threatened again that, if North Korea went nuclear and if the United States pulled out its troops from Korea, South Korea would reconsider its own nuclear option.²⁰⁸ This represented an attempt by President Park to pressure the United States to remain in South Korea as long as the tension on the Korean peninsula continued. President Carter put pressure on South Korea to stop the nuclear program, and in return, cancelled the plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea. President Park maintained a secret nuclear program, however. A military coup in 1980 brought President Chun Doo Hwan to power, who stopped the project and disbanded the nuclear research group.

Possible solutions

It is unlikely that the North Korean proliferation problem will be resolved without considering the specific security needs of North Korea. Stronger pressure from the UN Security Council and further isolation of North Korea will only make the situation worse and the regime may even profit from it.

Termination of the Korean War and elimination of the danger of another war on the Korean peninsula are prerequisites to any improvement in the inhumane and tragic situation of the people of North Korea, and should be the top priority of all parties. As long as the two Koreas envision unification without ending their military confrontation, the danger of war will persist.

To resolve the conflict, several steps need to be taken by the United States, China, Japan and the two Koreas:

- The two Koreas and the United States should finally put an end to their unfinished war and commit themselves not to use military means to achieve unification. North and South Korea agreed to this in 1992. They could formalize it by signing a basic treaty recognizing each other as separate systems, each with its own sole jurisdiction, and exchange representatives.
- After normalization of relations, North and South Korea should start negotiations to reduce their armed forces to a level at which neither could be a military threat to the other. The present strength of their military forces makes them a threat to each other as well as to other neighbors such as Japan.²⁰⁹ U.S. forces in Korea should guarantee the security of *both* Koreas.

- Only North and South Korea should sign a peace treaty to replace the 1953 truce agreement. Since China and the United States were involved in the Korean War mainly in support of their allies, it is only essential for the two Koreas to sign a peace treaty. By the way, China did not sign a peace treaty with South Korea before they recognized each other in 1992.
- The United States and Japan should establish diplomatic relations with North Korea, just as China recognized South Korea in 1992. This will influence North Korea to behave normally and to foster peace and stability in the region.
- China could develop the Six-Party Talks process into a multilateral security cooperation mechanism not only to deal with North Korea but also to deal with other serious problems such as environmental problems, territorial disputes and the effects of climate change in the region.

Mark Suh

- ¹⁹². About the ICNND and its report see www.icnnd.org/index.html.
- ¹⁹³. Masami Ito, "Diet Members Send Obama Nuclear Letter," *Japan Times*, February 20, 2010. <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20100220a3.html>.
- ¹⁹⁴. www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/summit/2008/doc/pdf/0708_04_en.pdf.
- ¹⁹⁵. Statement by Mr. Matsuda Iwao, Special Envoy of the Government of Japan, at the 52nd General Conference of the IAEA, September 29, 2008. www.mofa.go.jp/policy/energy/state0809.html.
- ¹⁹⁶. "Mohamed ElBaradei's Vision of a Safer World," *The Economist*, October 16, 2003.
- ¹⁹⁷. President George W. Bush, Remarks on nuclear proliferation delivered at the National Defense University, February 11, 2004, www.command-post.org/gwot/2_archives/010298.html.

Country perspectives: North Korea

- ¹⁹⁸. Until 1945 Korea was part of Japan and therefore many Koreans lived in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In addition, many forced laborers worked in Japan's arms factories at that time. It is estimated that some 50,000–100,000 Koreans died or suffered from the blasts. Some 2000 victims are still alive in North and South Korea.
- ¹⁹⁹. Although North Korea claims that the United States and South Korea invaded the North on June 25, 1950, there is clear evidence on Kim Il Sung's preparation for the war. See the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, Winter 2003-Spring 2004 including the "Introduction" by Kathryn Weathersby.
- ²⁰⁰. General MacArthur wanted to bomb Manchuria to stop Chinese intervention. President Truman, however, not wanting further expansion of the war, dismissed General MacArthur. Fifty years later in 1996 then South Korean president Kim Young Sam made the controversial remark that "if the bombing of Manchuria had been carried out, Korean unification may have already been achieved". AP, June 30, 1996; see also, I. F. Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War*, Monthly Review Press, 1970.
- ²⁰¹. See for the full text of the Joint Communiqué of July 4, 1972, Se-Jin Kim (ed.), *Korean Unification: Source Materials with an Introduction*, Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1976, p. 319.
- ²⁰². Secretary of Defense William Perry subsequently revealed in Congress details of a plan to fight a war with North Korea in summer 1994 after bombing the nuclear complex in Yonbyon, *UPI*, January 24, 1995.
- ²⁰³. For a detailed account of the negotiations, see Joel Wit, Daniel Poneman and Robert Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2004.
- ²⁰⁴. The "freeze" included commitments by North Korea not to reload the reactor with new fuel, not to reprocess the spent fuel, and to allow inspectors continuous access to the spent-fuel storage pond.
- ²⁰⁵. See Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Basic Books, New York, p. 409–435.
- ²⁰⁶. North Korea sent a letter on September 3, 2009 to the UNSC informing that it has entered the final phase of uranium enrichment. *BBC*, September 4, 2009.
- ²⁰⁷. For a detailed report on this issue, see Robert Gillette, "US Squelched Apparent S. Korea A-Bomb Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1978, p. 1, 14–15; Young-Sun Song, "North Korea's Potential to Develop Nuclear Weapons," *Vantage Point*, Volume 14, No. 8, August 1991, p. 2; Won-Chol Oh, "Nuclear Development in Korea in the 1970s", *Pacific Research*, November 1994, pp. 11–18; Mark B.M.Suh, "Nuclear Policy of the Republic of Korea: Nonproliferation and Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Carin A. Wedar et. al (eds.), *Towards a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World*, Swedish Initiatives, Stockholm, 1993, pp. 215–222.
- ²⁰⁸. See Joachim Glaubitz, *Zur Frage des Abzugs der amerikanischen Landesstreitkräfte aus Südkorea: Beweggründe, Konzepte und Revision einer asienpolitischen Entscheidung*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Ebenhausen, 1980, pp. 61–63.

²⁰⁹. The main reason why Japan is participating in the Missile Defense System with the United States is the threat posed by North Korean ballistic missiles.

Country perspectives: South Korea

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²¹¹. Jungmin Kang and H.A. Feiveson, "South Korea's Shifting and Controversial Interest in Spent Fuel Reprocessing," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring 2001.

²¹². Sung-Ki Jung, "US Nuclear Umbrella: Double-Edged Sword for S. Korea," *Korea Times*, June 24, 2009, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/06/120_47427.html).

²¹³. *Ibid.*

²¹⁴. Jungmin Kang, et al., "South Korea's Nuclear Surprise," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 2005.

²¹⁵. International Atomic Energy Agency, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Republic of Korea*, GOV/2004/84, November 11, 2004.

²¹⁶. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2008 Diplomatic White Paper*, September 2008, p.122; IAEA, *Status of Safeguards Agreement & Additional Protocols*, April 2009.

²¹⁷. *Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula*, January 20, 1992.

²¹⁸. *Four Principles on the Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy*, 300th National Security Council Meeting, September 18, 2004 (Korean).

²¹⁹. Oh Joon, a Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs of the ROK, "Delegates' Statements," Preparatory Committee for the 2010 NPT Review Conference Third Meeting, May 4, 2009.

²²⁰. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2008 Diplomatic White Paper*, September 2008, p.123.

²²¹. Ki-Chul Park, "Status and Prospect of Spent Fuel Management in South Korea," *Nuclear Industry*, August 2008 (Korean).

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²²⁵. Jungmin Kang and Frank von Hippel, "Limited Proliferation-resistance Benefits From Recycling Unseparated Transuranics and Lanthanides From Light-Water Reactor Spent Fuel," *Science & Global Security*, No. 13 (2005); Edwin Lyman and Frank von Hippel, "Reprocessing Revisited: The International Dimensions of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership," *Arms Control Today*, April 2008.

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