



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

USIP's Work on North Korea



In September 2020, USIP hosted a virtual public roundtable discussion to explore a new direction for U.S. policy on North Korea. The panel was moderated by USIP's Frank Aum and included five experts: Ankit Panda, Van Jackson, Markus Garlauskas, Suzanne Dimaggio, and Christine Ahn.

CURRENT SITUATION

In 2018, reinvigorated diplomacy and reduced tensions generated hope for a more secure and peaceful Korean Peninsula. At a historic summit in Singapore in June, the United States and North Korea committed to establish “new U.S.-DPRK relations” while North Korea also committed to work toward the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” However, the two countries disagreed about what each side should concede and when, leading to a diplomatic failure at a subsequent summit in Hanoi in February 2019.

Today, the United States and North Korea coexist in an antagonistic, high-risk stalemate.

The Kim regime, perceiving the United States as hostile and unwilling to normalize relations with a nuclear North Korea, has fundamentally shifted the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and in the region. It has cut off all talks with the United States since October 2019, ending its longstanding preference to engage with Washington. In 2024, it also renounced its five-decade policy of peaceful unification with South Korea, identifying Seoul as the “principal enemy.”

Instead, North Korea has centered its national defense strategy on strengthening deterrence through nuclear weapons. North Korea continues to expand its fissile material stockpile, enough for 60-90 nuclear weapons, and improve its delivery systems, which can put the United States and its allies at risk. It also entered into a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia in 2024,



providing weapons and personnel for the conflict in Ukraine in return for energy, nutritional and military technology assistance. Russia's support has also crippled the international sanctions campaign against North Korea.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy remains focused on seeking the “complete denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula despite the U.S. intelligence community's consistent assessment that North Korea will not disarm. Under the Biden administration, the United States emphasized enhanced deterrence through alliance partnerships with South Korea, Japan and likeminded countries to contain and manage the North Korean threat. However, this approach failed to restart negotiations to advance the denuclearization goal.

The challenge today is how to shift away from dangerous arms racing, tit-for-tat military demonstrations and diplomatic estrangement toward a more stable coexistence of risk reduction, confidence building measures and improved relations.

USIP'S CURRENT WORK ON NORTH KOREA

For decades, USIP has supported efforts to strengthen peace and stability and prevent crisis on the Korean Peninsula. USIP collaborates with U.S. and regional experts, government officials and diplomats to convene dialogues and conduct research exploring strategies for enhancing diplomacy, avoiding conflict and managing crises related to North Korea.

Facilitating High-Level Dialogues. In the absence of formal ties between Washington and Pyongyang, the Institute regularly engages governmental officials and nongovernmental experts from South Korea, Japan, China and other relevant countries to strengthen security in Northeast Asia and reduce the risk of violent conflict on the Korean Peninsula. These recurring, private dialogues create opportunities to share insights and policy ideas that might not emerge through official diplomatic channels.

Convening Experts. USIP partners with think tanks and other organizations to engage experts on strategies and concrete actions to enhance the use of diplomacy in resolving the North Korea issue. In 2018, USIP convened a senior study group that examined [China's role in North Korean peace and denuclearization negotiations](#). In 2021, USIP conducted a “[peace game](#)” simulation exercise with U.S., South Korean and Chinese experts to explore ways to enhance diplomatic risk-taking and reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In 2024, USIP — in partnership with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace — convened two expert workshops that reviewed the sustainability of the current U.S. approach to North Korea and developed recommendations for a new way forward.

Promoting Independent Research and Analysis. USIP supports research and [analysis](#) that sheds new light on regional strategies toward North Korea and explores creative approaches for enhancing cooperation to strengthen mutual security. In 2020, USIP published a report that examined the contours of a [peace regime for the Korean Peninsula](#). In 2023, USIP published an essay series on new and creative approaches to [improving ties between South Korea and Japan](#). In 2024, USIP published an essay series that explored various ways to advance [peaceful coexistence with North Korea](#).

Educating Policymakers, Academics and the Public. USIP convenes public and private panels and roundtable discussions that inform U.S. policymakers and the public about the viability of different diplomatic strategies for dealing with North Korea. Past panels have addressed lessons from the [Four Party Peace Talks](#), takeaways from the [1954 Geneva Conference](#), and [new approaches to North Korea policy](#). USIP also hosts university students and military scholars to engage in comprehensive discussions about the political, economic, military and social situation in North Korea.