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Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation in Northeast Asia: A Case Study of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

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Abstract: *This paper examines the challenges and complexities of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, focusing on Northeast Asia, particularly the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The paper highlights the importance of the role of major powers, such as the US, China, and Russia, in mediating efforts for denuclearisation in the DPRK. Global denuclearisation case studies act as models and give realistic and practical approaches on denuclearisation. The paper concludes that nuclear disarmament in the DPRK and broader Northeast Asia remains a challenging but attainable goal through multifaceted approaches-balancing diplomacy, security assurances, and confidence-building measures.*

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Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation in Northeast Asia: A Case Study of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

Maheesha Premavansha*

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Abbreviations

UN – United Nations

PTBT – Partial Test Ban Treaty

NPT – Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

BWC – Biological Weapon Convention

CWC – Chemical Weapon Convention

CTBT – Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

TPNW – Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

NWFZ – Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone

ICBM – Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile

SRBM – Short-Range Ballistic Missile

MRBM – Middle-Range Ballistic Missile

IRBM – Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile

SLBM – Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile

SSBN – Ship, Submarine, Ballistic, Nuclear / Ballistic Missile Submarine

1.0. Introduction

Although the proliferation of nuclear weapons poses a significant threat to global security, the actual usage of nuclear weapons has historically been limited to only two attacks, on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The current global nuclear stockpile reportedly remains at approximately 12,121 (Arms Control Association, 2024), while the number of nuclear tests conducted to date have been over 2,000 (United Nations, 2022).

Nuclear disarmament is the process of reducing or eliminating nuclear weapons, with the ultimate goal of a world free of such weapons (Ritchie, 2013). Proponents of nuclear disarmament seek to achieve this goal through bilateral agreements, multilateral treaties, and other diplomatic and legal frameworks aimed at the verifiable and irreversible dismantling of nuclear arsenals (Ritchie, 2013). This is a component of larger global initiatives to minimize the influence of nuclear weapons in world politics and eventually to work towards a nuclear-weapon-free future in order to promote peace and security.

Nuclear non-proliferation refers to a set of international legal and political measures designed to prevent the acquisition, development, and spread of nuclear weapons by states that are not recognized as 'Nuclear Weapon States' under the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT) (Sagan, 2010). The term describes actions and initiatives meant to stop the transfer of nuclear weapons and related technologies to nations that do not currently possess them. The goal behind this is to keep the number of nations with nuclear weapons to a minimum in order to prevent nuclear war and preserve international stability. These processes involve the efforts of states and international organisations to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons in military strategies and, ultimately, to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons.

2.0. Laws and Treaties on Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

The governance of nuclear disarmament is the result of a range of international conventions and treaties aiming to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, promote disarmament and guarantee the peaceful use of nuclear energy. These conventions and treaties consist of various UN sponsored agreements as well as regional and bilateral agreements.

Since its inception in 1945, the goals of multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation have been central in the United Nations (UN) efforts to maintain international peace and security. Through global efforts, several *multilateral treaties and instruments* have been established with the aim of regulating, restricting, or eliminating certain weapons (United Nations, 2022). Accordingly, most of the states in the world including Sri Lanka have ratified these UN treaties recognising nuclear weapons to be a global threat. The main UN nuclear treaties include; the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) of 1963, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, the Biological Weapon Convention (BWC) of 1972, the Chemical Weapon Convention (CWC) of 1992, the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) of 1996 and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) of 2017 (UNODA Treaties Database, 2025).

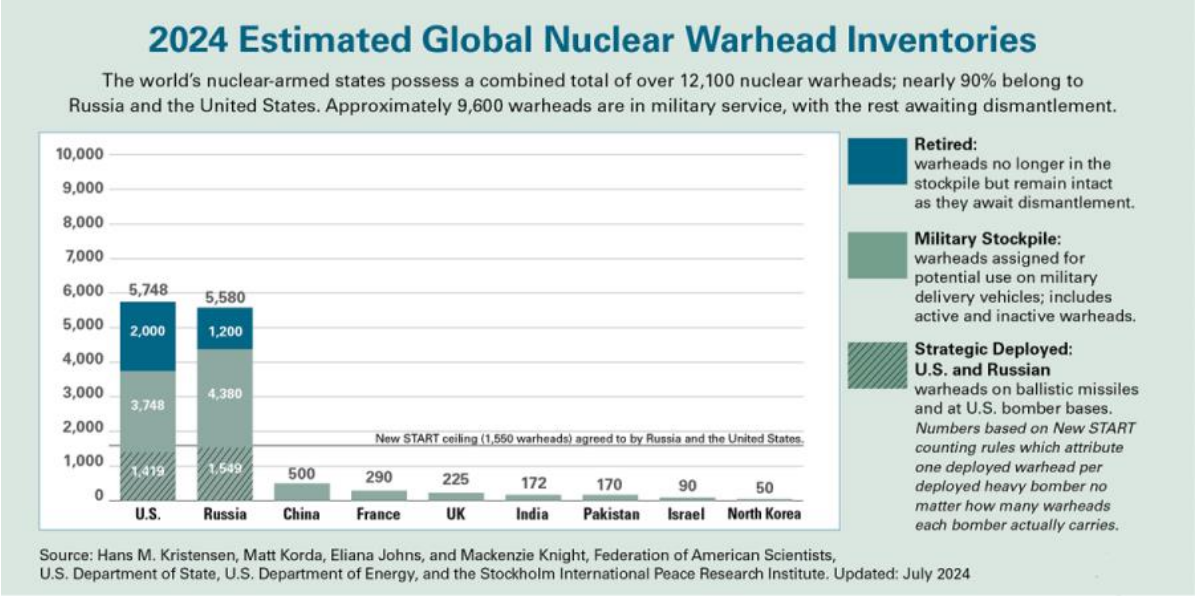
Regional approaches for nuclear disarmament mainly include the establishment of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) to further strengthen global nuclear non-proliferation and to consolidate international efforts towards peace and security (UNODA Treaties Database, 2025). In a NWFZ, countries commit themselves not to manufacture, acquire, test, or possess nuclear weapons. The regions currently covered under NWFZ agreements include: Latin America (Treaty of Tlatelolco of 1967), South Pacific (Treaty of Rarotonga of 1985), Southeast Asia (Treaty of Bangkok of 1995), Africa (Treaty of Pelindaba of 1996) and Central Asia (Treaty of Semipalatinsk of 2006) (UNODA Treaties Database, 2025).

However, notably NWFZs do not exist in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Northeast Asia, or South Asia, despite these regions including nuclear weapon states. A key observation is that nuclear weapons states, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), France, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Russia, and nuclear weapons possessing states including Israel, Pakistan, India, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) (ICAN, 2023) is located within regions which are not operative as a NWFZ (Davenport, 2025). These states which are major regional geopolitical and strategic players, have not joined the NPT, the CTBT and the TPNW treaties, posing a clear challenge to the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation doctrine.

Moreover, countries have also signed *bilateral* agreements aimed at nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear weapons. The US and the USSR have signed many bilateral agreements particularly during the Cold War era with the aim of prohibiting, developing, testing and deployment of Anti-Ballistic Missile systems, reducing and limiting strategic offensive arms, eliminating ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with certain ranges, reducing nuclear arsenals and eliminating an entire category of nuclear weapons (Kimball, 2014). The complete list of these treaties includes; the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I & SALT II) of 1972 & 1979, Threshold Test Ban Treaty of 1974, Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty of 1976, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987, Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I (START I & START II) of 1991 & 1993, Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) of 2002, New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 2010 (Kimball, 2022).

Furthermore, there are prominent examples of the US entering into bilateral treaties with the DPRK with the aim of limiting nuclear tension in the Korean peninsula. The Agreed Framework of 1994 and the Bilateral Missile Talks of 1996-1999 are major examples in this regard. Similarly, the ROK and the DPRK have also been involved in bilateral talks with the goal of achieving a peace agreement between the two countries. These efforts will be further discussed in chapter 4.4.

Figure 1: Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories of 2024

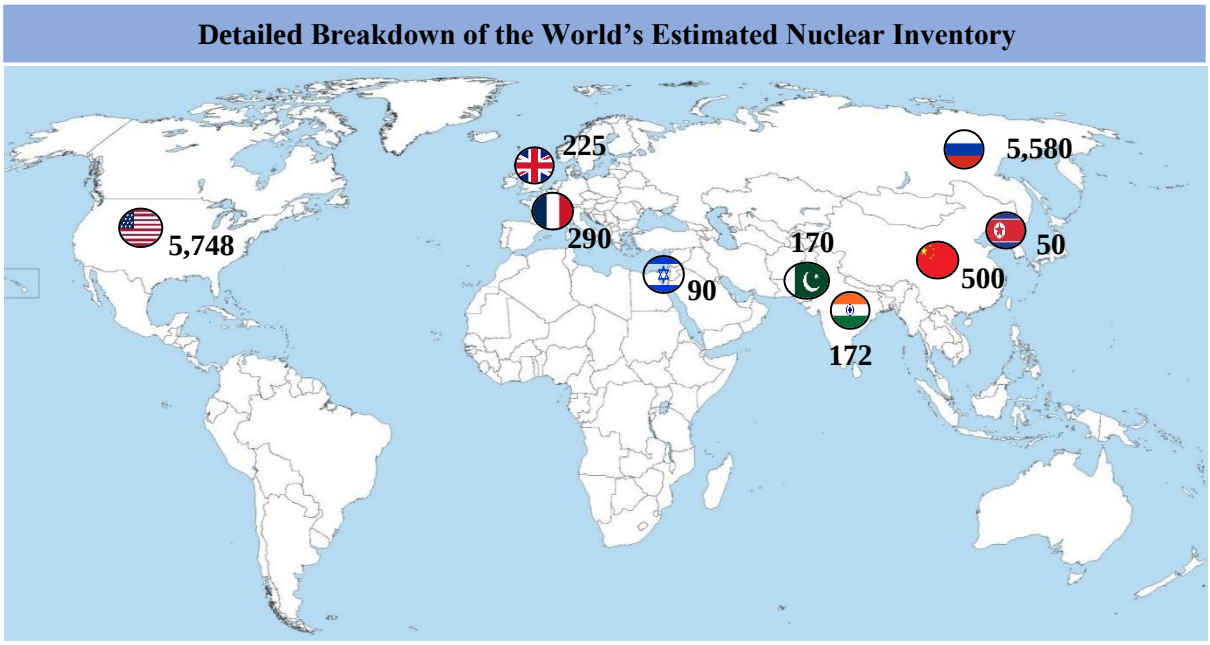


Source: (Davenport, 2024)

Despite many nuclear disarmament efforts, as highlighted by *Figure 1*, the global nuclear stockpile as at 2024 is substantial, with 90% of nuclear warheads belonging to the US and Russia. The US possesses the largest nuclear inventory, with 5,748 total nuclear warheads, including 3,748 in military stockpiles. Russia possesses a total of 5,580 warhead, which includes 4,380 military stockpiles. Under the New START Treaty, the US strategically deployed 1,419 of their stockpiles and Russia deployed 1,549 of their stockpiles. Currently approximately 9,600 nuclear weapons are in active military service.

The below detailed breakdown of the world's estimated nuclear inventory confirm that the US and Russia possesses the largest number of nuclear inventories globally, with the PRC occupying the third possession. This is followed in France, the UK, India, Pakistan, Israel, and the DPRK respectively. It is notable that out of nine nuclear weapon possessing states, six are in Asia which includes Russia, the PRC, Israel, Pakistan, India and the DPRK (ICAN, 2023).

Figure 2: Detailed Breakdown of the World's Estimated Nuclear Inventory



Country	Land-Based	Air-Launched	Sea-Based
	800 • *Silo-based Minuteman III ICBMs – 400*	**788** Air-launched cruise missiles 500 • *B-2A bombers* • *B-52 H bombers*	Ohio-class SSBNs – **14** Columbia-class SSBNs
	1,185 ICBM – 306 • *SS-27 Mod 1 (Topol-M)* • *SS-27 Mod 2 (Yars)* • *SS-X-30 (Sarmat)*	**700** Heavy Bombers - 68 • *Tu-160 (Blackjack)* • *Tu-85MS (Bear H)*	SSBNs – **11** Boreii-class SSBNs – **10** Additional submarines - **26**
	346 Silo-based • *DF-5A, DF-5B* Road-mobile • *DF-31, DF-41*	**Estimated 20** • *H-6N aircraft* • *H-6K aircraft*	**Jin-class SSBNs – 6** • *JL-2 SLBMs* • *JL-3 SLBMs*
	300 SLBMs – 48 Cruise Missiles - 54	**Estimated 50** Land-based aircrafts – 40 Carrier-based aircrafts – 10	Triomphant-class SSBNs
	Doesn't deploy land-based missile	Doesn't deploy Air-launched missiles	**Vanguard-class SSBNs – 4** • *HMS Vanguard* • *HMS Victorious* • *HMS Vengeance* • *HMS Vigilant*

	**80** • *Agni-IV, Agni-P* • SRBMs - *Prithvi-II & Agni-I* • IRBMs - *Agni-II & III* • First ICBM – *Agni-V*	**48** • *Mirage 2000H* • *Jaguar IS* • *Rafale*	• *Dhanush* • *K-15* • *K-4* • *K-5*
	**126** • SRBMs – *Abdali, Ghaznavi, Shaheen-1 & NARS* • MRBMs - *Ghauri, Shaheen - 2 &3, Ababeel*	**36** • *F-16 combat aircraft* • *Mirage III and V*	**N.V.D** • *Babur – 2 & 3*
	**N.V.D** • *Jericho II & III*	**Estimated 90** • *F-15, F-16 & F-35 aircrafts*	**Dolphin-class SSBNs - 6**
	**N.V.D** • SRBMs - *Hwasong-5, 6, 11A, 11B & 11D* • MRBMs - *Hwasong-7 & 9, Pukkuksong-2, Hwasai-1 & 2* • IRBMs - *Hwasong-10, & 12* • ICBMs - *Hwasong-15,17,18*	**N.V.D**	**N.V.D** • *Pukgugsong 1,3,4,5* • *Pulhwasal 3,31* • *Haeil*

Source: Adopted by the author based on the Nuclear Notebook of Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2024

3.0. Nuclear Vulnerabilities in Northeast Asia

Northeast Asia has a population of around 1.7 billion, and includes the PRC and Japan, which are the world's second and third largest economies respectively (ANU, 2021). Thus, it is also an area of great political, economic, and cultural importance. Northeast Asia's political landscape includes the PRC, Japan, Mongolia, the ROK, the DPRK, and Russia.

Northeast Asia is also characterized by significant nuclear weapon capabilities, strategic rivalries, and complex security dynamics. Northeast Asia’s security issues exist independent of the international system, with the DPRK’s nuclear uncertainty being the most pressing security concern (International Crisis Group, 2005; Ikenberry and Moon, 2008, as cited in Choi & Moon, 2010).

Northeast Asia features a complex nuclear landscape balancing non-proliferation and nuclear capabilities. While regions like Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa have successfully

created NWFZs, Northeast Asia remains a region without an operative NWFZ due to the geopolitical complexities, including the presence of nuclear states such as the PRC, Russia and the DPRK (Lacovsky, 2023). Key actors Japan, and the ROK maintain security through nuclear alliances with the US. Japan upholds non-proliferation norms but faces risks due to its nuclear reprocessing technology, while the PRC, after initially opposing the non-proliferation regime, now supports it, but has been involved in nuclear technology transfers to proliferating states (Lacovsky, 2023).

The Korean peninsula is a key focus of the nuclear tension in Northeast Asia. In this context the DPRK is critical as its nuclear program directly affects its immediate neighbours, particularly the ROK and Japan. However, the DPRK's nuclear programme has broader global implication often capturing the attention of major powers including the US. However, the PRC and Russia support the DPRK, further complicating the regional power dynamics.

4.0. Case Study: Denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula

Figure 3: The Map of the Location of the Korean Peninsula

Source: The Korean Peninsula: A View of the Future. Transcend Media Service, 2015

4.1. Background

Prior to its partition, Korea was a unified entity governed by dynastic kingdoms (Pruitt, 2021). The Korean peninsula was occupied by Japan after the Russo-Japanese War (1905) and was held under Japanese colonial rule for 35 years until the end of World War II (Pruitt, 2021). In order to remove Japanese forces from Korea in 1945, under the guidance of former US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, the US drew up a plan to separate Korea along the 38th parallel, ceding Soviet influence in the North, and leaving America control of the South (Meegoda, 2022). In 1948, the US called for an UN-sponsored vote for all Koreans to determine the future of the peninsula, but after the North refused to participate, the South formed its own government in Seoul, led by the strongly anti-communist Syngman Rhee and the North responded by installing the former communist guerrilla leader Kim Il Sung as the first Premier of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with Pyongyang as its capital (Pruitt, 2021).

On 25 June 1950, the DPRK's army attacked the South, which marked the beginning of the Korean War. To defend Seoul, a group of UN forces led by the US was assembled within the ROK. In 1953, the PRC entered the conflict and signed a ceasefire to prevent Pyongyang's defeat. At that time the PRC and the DPRK both wanted peace therefore, with the assistance of the US Department of State the ROK and the DPRK entered into a ceasefire to preserve the integrity of states, while establishing the current separation between North and South (Office of The Historian, 2019).

4.2. DPRK: A Nuclear-Weapon State

According to *Article* (1) and (3) of the Socialist Constitution of the DPRK, the country is an "independent socialist state" governed by *Kimilsungism* and *Kimjongilism* (the theory of revolution and leadership method clarified by the Juche idea) (Schmitz, 2024). The DPRK follows a *Songun* (military-first) policy (Everything We Know about Kim Jong Un, n.d.). The Military-first policy establishes the military as the back-bone and the basic unit of the DPRK's society (Tam & Yang, 2005). The concept of *Juche* (self-reliance) has been the key factor motivating the DPRK's nuclear weapons programme. Notably, *Juche* generates a strong nationalistic ethos, pride and cultural identity among the North Korean people (Dhawan, 2024).

Kim Il Sung founded the DPRK's nuclear programme which initially developed nuclear technology for peaceful purposes with the assistance of the USSR during the early 1950s (Columbia Law School, 2024). In the 1980s, the DPRK started to expand its nuclear programme independently. Notably, as a non-nuclear weapon state it was a signatory state to the NPT in 1985 and had signed a comprehensive safeguard agreement with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1992 (Hautecouverture, 2018).

This all changed in 2003, when with the intention of conducting nuclear tests, the DPRK decided to leave the NPT (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Following this departure, the DPRK conducted six nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, 2016 (two tests) and 2017 respectively (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Starting with the Light Water Reactor technology, the DPRK has gradually improved its nuclear weapon technology such as hydrogen bombs and

presently possesses nuclear weapon delivery systems such as Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs), Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBM) and Cruise Missiles (Columbia Law School, 2024).

The DPRK's nuclear ambitions contribute to the increased tension in the region. In particular, the ROK and Japan view the DPRK's nuclear capabilities as a direct threat to their very existence, compelling them to align with the US for military cooperation. Further, the DPRK's ICBMs directly pose a threat to the US, forcing the US to seek active measures of denuclearisation. These measures mainly include sanctions and a foreign policy which identifies the DPRK as a threat.

Rafael Grossi, the Director of IAEA, described the DPRK as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state following its first nuclear test on 9 October 2006. After 2012, Kim Jong-Un's regime rapidly expanded its nuclear capabilities while the DPRK's Constitution was amended in 2013 to describe itself as a nuclear state and an unchallengeable military power (Arms Control Association, 2024). In September 2022, the DPRK updated its nuclear doctrine, allowing for "first-use" of nuclear weapons in a broad range of scenarios, including pre-emptive strikes (Arms Control Association, 2024).

It could be assessed that despite growing international pressure, the key motivation for the continuation of the DPRK's nuclear programme is the connection it has with the state's sovereignty and national pride alongside the strength of the Kim regime. The stated strategic objective of the nuclear programme also serves as a deterrence against external threats, specially from the USA and the ROK.

4.3. ROK: A Non-Nuclearized State

The ROK is the main rival of the DPRK. Rising regional security concerns poses multiple security challenges for the ROK. This mainly includes the continuous nuclear weapons development by the DPRK undermining the ROK's status as a non-nuclear-weapon state. Notably, the continuing support lent to the DPRK by both the PRC and Russia underscores the ROK's precarious environment (Choi, 2023).

The ROK has declared its commitment to the responsible and peaceful use of nuclear energy (Permanent Mission of the ROK to the UN, 2021), and is required to refuse transfers of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices as a non-nuclear weapon state party to the NPT. It has expressed its intention of keeping nuclear weapons off the Korean Peninsula and has maintained a policy of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons since ratifying the NPT in 1975. ROK has additionally signed the CTBT, BWC and CWC. These efforts reflect the ROK's intension to use diplomatic strategies to advance regional security and stability (South Korea, n.d.).

The ROK's administration under President Yoon Suk-Yeol adopted a defence-driven nuclear non-proliferation policy that is centred on deterrence as its principal approach to risk reduction and arms control (Choi,2023). The ROK is seeking to address the increasing threats of

aggression, inadvertent escalation, and nuclear use, by signalling advances in its conventional capabilities and its military cooperation (Choi,2023). As a non-nuclear state, the ROK relies on US guarantees for its security (Arms Control Association, 2024). This includes achieving long-term deterrence, joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and security deployment of US forces in the ROK's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

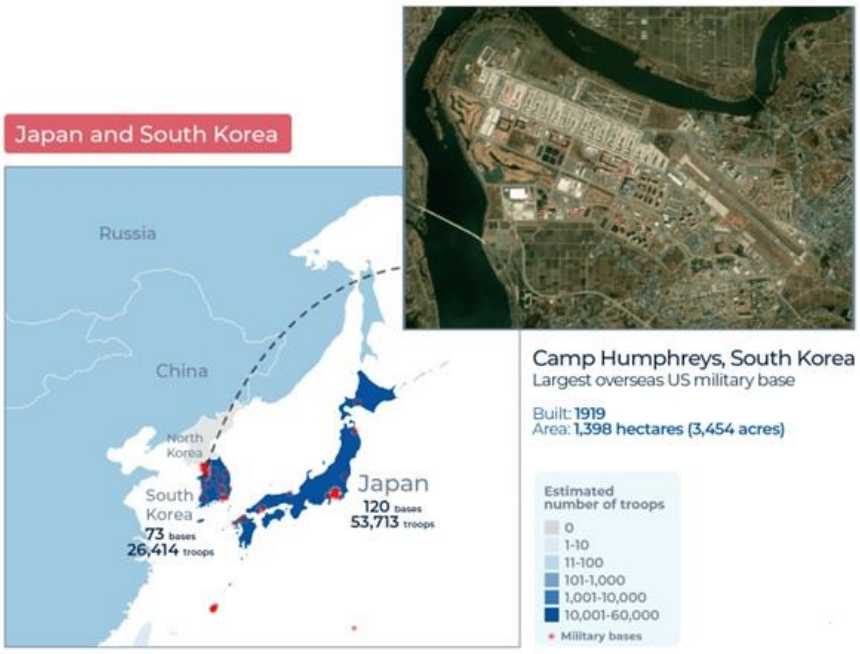
Similarly, to the ROK, Japan also depends on US security guarantees. Altogether, nearly half of all US military personnel deployed abroad are stationed in Japan (53,700) and the ROK (26,400), that being 80,100 personnel out of 173,000 total personnel deployed outside of US (Haddad & Hussein, 2021).

Table 1: US Military Assistance to the ROK and Japan

Type	The ROK	Japan
Troop deployments	Approximately 28,500 personnel	Approximately 53,713 personnel
Army Air Force Navy Marine Corps	23,000 personnel 8,000 personnel 1,500 personnel 1,000 personnel	15,000 personnel 16,000 personnel 19,000 personnel 4,000 personnel
Major US Bases	Camp Humphreys (Pyeongtaek) Yongsan Garrison (Seoul) Osan Air Base	Kadena Air Base (Okinawa) Yokosuka Naval Base (Kanagawa) Camp Zama (Kanagawa)
Defence Spending	US - $13.4 billion (2016-19) ROK - $ 5.8 billion (2016-19)	US - $20.9 billion (2016-19) Japan - $ 12.6 billion (2016-19)

Source: (O'Hanlon, n.d.; US Government Accountability Office, 2021)

Figure 4: US Military Presence in Japan and ROK



Source: (Al Jazeera, 2021)

4.4. Disarmament Efforts in the Korean Peninsula

For years, the US and the international community have tried to negotiate an end to the DPRK's nuclear programme. While there has been some tentative progress towards denuclearisation, such efforts have been generally unsuccessful, witnessing prolonged periods of crisis and stalemate. The DPRK has long been a key challenge for the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. The main denuclearisation efforts concerning the DPRK, have been both bilateral and multilateral as outlined at *Table 2*.

Table 2: Disarmament Efforts in the Korean Peninsula

Year	Agreement/Event	Objectives
Bilateral – ROK & DPRK		
1992 January 21	Joint Denuclearisation Declaration (JDD)	• Denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. • Stop testing, manufacturing, producing, receiving, possessing, storing, deploying or using nuclear weapons or possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities. • Agreed to mutual inspections for verification.
1992 March	Joint Nuclear Control Commission (JNCC)	• Implementing mechanism of the JDD
2018 April 27	First Moon-Kim Summit and Panmunjon Declaration	• Agreed to advance inter-Korean relations to eliminate the threat of war. • Work together to establish a permanent peace regime.
2018 May 26	Second Moon-Kim Summit	• Reduce tensions between the International Committee of the Red Cross to push forward scheduled family reunions. • Accelerate the April 27 Panmunjom declaration.
2018 September 18-20	Third Moon-Kim Summit (in Pyongyang)	• Expand the cessation of military hostilities between the two countries. • Advance economic, humanitarian and cultural cooperation and exchanges. • Pursue complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.
Bilateral – USA & DPRK		
1994 October 21	Agreed framework	• DPRK agreed to freeze and then dismantle the complex in Yongbyon. • Establishes a three-stage process for the elimination of DPRK's nuclear weapons program.
1996 April 21-22	Bilateral missile talks (in Berlin)	• US suggested DPRK should adhere to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), aimed at

		controlling sales of ballistic missile systems, components and technology.
1997 June 11-13	Bilateral missile talks – 2nd round (in New York)	• US negotiators pressed DPRK not to deploy the Nodong missile and to end sales of Scud missiles and their components.
1998 October 1	Bilateral missile talks – 3rd round (in New York)	• US urged Pyongyang to halt its missile programs, offering economic sanctions relief in return.
1998 December 4-11	Talks on Kumchang-ni nuclear facility	• Discussed about concerns over the underground nuclear facility in Kumchang-ni. • Pyongyang allowed US to conduct inspections of the site.
1999 March 29-31	Bilateral missile talks – 4th round (in Pyongyang)	• US reiterated its unease regarding DPRK's missile proliferation and development endeavours and suggested a potential agreement involving DPRK's self-restraint in exchange for US sanctions relief
2018 June 12	Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore	• Signed a joint declaration to renew US-DPRK relations • Join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.
2019 February 27-28	Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi	• Aimed to discuss DPRK's nuclear programs, and establishing a new relationship between the two countries
2019 June 30	Trump visit to the DMZ	• Agreed to designate negotiators to resume talks which were collapsed in summit in Hanoi
Multilateral		
2003 August 9	The Six Party Talks (USA, China, Russia, ROK, Japan & DPRK)	• Ending DPRK nuclear program through negotiations

Source: (Arms Control Association, 2022)

4.5. DPRK & ROK: Challenges to Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

The 2018 *Inter-Korean Military Agreement* was created with the aim of reducing the tensions between the DPRK and the ROK. However, the failure of the second Trump-Kim summit in 2019 resulted in the eventual collapse of the DPRK's discussions with President Moon, which led to the eventual suspension of inter-Korean cooperation. Critics speculate that a possible reason for this scenario could be that General Secretary Kim expected to secure US sanction

relief through President Moon, but when this prospect failed the DPRK was no longer positive regarding continuing discussions (Kim, 2020). In January 2024, Kim broke with decades of precedent and propaganda to declare that the ROK was an enemy nation and that the DPRK would no longer be working toward reunification (Lee and Adams, 2024) and on 31 October 2024, the DPRK test-fired an *Hwasong-19* ICBM, demonstrating a potential advancement in its ability to launch long-range nuclear attacks on the US (Kim & Hyung, 2024). This further complicated the process of denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula.

The increase of the DPRK's nuclear warheads poses serious security challenges to its neighbourhood. As the ROK and Japan face a direct security dilemma, they have begun enhancing their own military capabilities to deter the DPRK, instead of purely focusing on reducing tensions. During an armed forces ceremony on October 2024, the ROK unveiled its most advanced ballistic missile as well as other weapons that could target the DPRK (Kim, 2024). The ROK and Japan also rely on the US for extended deterrence, including the nuclear umbrella, and host US military forces on their territory.

The geopolitical landscape of Northeast Asia is currently seeing heightened tensions amongst the key players of the region, including the US, ROK, PRC and Russia (Barannikova, 2022). The formation of security alliances among the US, ROK, and Japan aims to counter the DPRK, while the DPRK draws support from PRC and Russia. This dynamic creates a complex web of interests that hinder collective disarmament efforts. For instance, growing Russian-DPRK relations are underscoring regime survival and leading to a new polarization in the region. This complicates international pressure aimed at denuclearisation. Along with the tensions and mistrust on the DPRK’s nuclear ambition and the ROK’S security dilemma, geopolitical tension within the region has also been a challenge to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation in the Korean Peninsula.

4.6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Recommendations regarding this issue must acknowledge the general assertion that the DPRK maintains isolation due to the need to pursue the nuclear program without international interference. The international community can take efforts to ease the tension caused by the DPRK's nuclear arsenal. Some policy implications and recommendations are as follows:

4.6.1. Diplomatic Efforts on Denuclearisation

Despite the animosity between states, action towards nuclear non-proliferation should always be an available possibility. The best example is that during the Cold War, the main belligerents, the US and the USSR, jointly entered into agreements such as SALT I/II, INF treaty, START I/II, and the New START Treaty to reduce nuclear weapons. Therefore, leveraging bilateral and multilateral negotiations could be helpful to denuclearisation, leading to the establishment of a sustainable dialogue. Resuming the now stalled negotiations with the Six-Party multilateral framework and resuming the talks between DPRK-ROK, DPRK-USA could help manage tensions and create pathways to peace negotiations. It is possible that the denuclearisation negotiations with the DPRK, initiated by the first Trump administration, would resume with Trump's re-election. It is recommended that initial efforts must be made to prevent further

nuclear testing, since this goal is more practical and achievable rather than a complete dismantling of nuclear weapon production facilities.

4.6.2. Re-Initiating the Inter-Korean Dialogue

To resolve the tensions that have emerged within the Korean peninsula a sustainable dialogue between the two Korean governments also needs to take place. Through such dialogues, bilateral relations can be further developed, economic cooperation can be established and nuclear testing can be reduced.

In 1991 under the Bush administration, the US mediated a deal with the DPRK, which committed to not develop or deploy nuclear weapons and remove any tactical nuclear weapons from the DPRK (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). This prepared the path for the DPRK and the ROK's 1991 Joint Declaration on the Korean Peninsula Denuclearisation. In this context, if the US steps in again there is a possibility to establish a sustainable dialogue or help resuming the dialogue within the Korean peninsula.

4.6.3. Security and Confidence-Building Measures (CBM)

In order to denuclearize the DPRK, the states of the international system must understand why the DPRK is developing nuclear weapons and what their insecurities are. Through such efforts, the DPRK can re-assess its security and build confidence through legal agreements after receiving assurance that its security will not be threatened by external parties. This will allow the US and its allies to gradually direct the DPRK toward denuclearisation through bilateral agreements (USA-DPRK, ROK-DPRK, Japan-DPRK) or to regionally expand defence agreements.

Southeast Asian states maintain a nuclear-free zone through the Bangkok Treaty. Utilizing this as a blueprint, the PRC, Japan, and Russia could work towards a nuclear-free-zone in the region and promote nuclear disarmament in Northeast Asia as well. By limiting the use of nuclear weapons by other nuclear states in the region, the DPRK's security concerns in the region could be further addressed.

4.6.4. Economic and Humanitarian Relief

The DPRK is under sanctions from many countries and the UN, due to its nuclear activities. The denuclearisation process can engage through sanction relief, humanitarian aid, economic aid, and development projects. Iran stands as one of the most prominent examples of this strategy. To denuclearize Iran, the US, the EU, and the UN imposed extensive sanctions on its oil exports, banking sector, and trade, severely affecting its economy. Under the Iran Nuclear Agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran agreed to dismantle much of its nuclear program and open its facilities to extensive international inspections, in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of sanctions relief (Robinson, 2023).

The international community should implement a framework following the aforementioned blueprint to ease the sanctions and establish dialogue with the DPRK, with the proposed incentives to provide economic relief in return of gradual denuclearisation. Food insecurity, lack of basic infrastructure (internet access, energy, etc.), and human rights violations are

identified as domestic issues in the DPRK (Amnesty International, 2023). The international parties also offer to address these fundamental requirements in exchange for the country's willingness to diminish its nuclear weapons arsenal.

5.0. Assessment: The DPRK & Other Nuclear/Threshold Nuclear Powers

The DPRK sets itself apart from other nuclear states, as the nation's nuclear policy is both a tool of diplomacy and a form of resistance to international norms.

5.1. Motivations

The DPRK's nuclear program stands out in several ways compared to other nuclear-armed states, both in terms of its motivations and the geopolitical context in which it operates. The DPRK's nuclear ambitions are driven by a complex mix of national pride, regime survival, and deterrence (Cheong, 2023). The DPRK's leadership views nuclear weapons as a safeguard against external threats, particularly from the US and its allies the ROK and Japan (Cheong, 2023). This contrasts with countries like India or Pakistan, which developed nuclear weapons as a response to regional rivalries and strategic considerations (Mills, 2024), and Iran which has pursued nuclear weapons to gain regional hegemony by involving direct conflict with regional rivals and threatening them with their nuclear capability such as Israel (Cunningham, 2025). The DPRK also sees its nuclear weapons as an essential tool for regime stability. This has created an environment of mistrust and isolation, with the international community pushing for denuclearisation, while the DPRK believes that nuclear weapons are the only means of safeguarding its sovereignty and providing it some leverage.

Similar to the situation in India and Pakistan, the DPRK's nuclear development has increased security dilemmas in the region. For instance, the ROK and Japan, both of which are allied with the US, view the DPRK's nuclear weapons as a direct threat, leading them to strengthen their own military capabilities, including missile defence systems (Beebe, 2024). The Korean Peninsula also remains highly militarized, with a large contingent of US troops and equipment, complicating efforts at disarmament.

5.2. Strategic Posture

One of the central points of comparison is *how these countries have approached nuclear weapons in relation to security*. Ukraine and Taiwan initially pursued nuclear capabilities due to security concerns involving larger, more powerful neighbours; Russia in the case of Ukraine and the PRC in Taiwan's case. However, both countries ultimately abandoned their nuclear weapons programmes. Ukraine did so in December 1994 through the Budapest Memorandum, which included security guarantees from major powers like the US, the UK, and Russia (Kimball, 2014). Despite this, Ukraine's experience of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 demonstrated the vulnerabilities of relying on security assurances, revealing that such agreements may not always provide the intended protection (Borda, 2022).

Taiwan's decision to abandon its nuclear program was similarly influenced by international pressure, particularly from the US in the late 1980s (Albright & Stricker, 2018, p. Chapter 6). Taiwan, unlike the DPRK, was willing to agree with global non-proliferation norms, acknowledging the risks of developing nuclear weapons, which would have escalated tensions with the PRC (Albright & Stricker, 2018). In contrast, the DPRK, showed that nuclear weapons are not just a deterrent against external threats but are integral to maintaining internal stability and the regime's legitimacy. In contrast to Ukraine's and Taiwan's more diplomatic and realistic methods, the DPRK's posture is clearly offensive and threatening.

Another critical comparison lies *the issue of nuclear ambiguity and the approach to global non-proliferation frameworks*. Israel and the DPRK both maintain a level of secrecy around their nuclear capabilities, though their motivations and international contexts differ significantly. Israel has never confirmed nor denied its nuclear arsenal, maintaining a policy of nuclear ambiguity (Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 2020). This strategic ambiguity, while similar to the DPRK's secrecy, differs in that Israel has established strong international alliances, particularly with Western powers like the US, which supports Israel's security despite its nuclear status (Zehra, 2025). Israel's nuclear weapons program emerged as a response to existential threats from neighbouring Arab states (Fitzpatrick, 2023). In contrast, the DPRK's nuclear weapons program is a noticeable challenge to the international non-proliferation regime. The DPRK's decision to pursue and test nuclear weapons against international norms has led to its increasing isolation, with the country facing harsh sanctions. However, the DPRK's Mutual Defence Treaty (1996) with the PRC is operative and there by provides the other with military support if they are attacked (Albert & Fong, 2024).

India and Pakistan's nuclear programs offer another useful comparison to the DPRK, as the two states are involved in regional rivalries particularly over Kashmir since 1947. Similar to the DPRK, India and Pakistan's nuclear programs serve as deterrents against perceived threats (Mills, 2024). However, while India and Pakistan have engaged in diplomatic dialogues, despite their nuclear capabilities, the DPRK has largely isolated itself from discussions. The nuclear weapons programs of India and Pakistan are explained by regional power dynamics, and despite their rivalries, both countries have avoided direct nuclear conflict. This stands in contrast to the DPRK's provocations, where its nuclear tests and missile launches are often public displays of military might, signalling aggression toward global powers.

Hence, while there are shared themes in the nuclear policies of Ukraine, Israel, India, Pakistan, Taiwan, and the DPRK such as security concerns, deterrence, and regional rivalries, their approaches to nuclear weapons have diverged significantly. Ukraine and Taiwan voluntarily abolished their nuclear arsenals in response to international pressure and security assurances, while the DPRK has continued to pursue its nuclear ambitions aggressively, positioning its nuclear arsenal as a core tool of regime survival. Israel, although pursuing nuclear weapons in secrecy, has managed to establish strong international ties that protect it from the global sanctions imposed on the DPRK. Finally, India and Pakistan, despite their nuclear rivalry, have engaged in strategic arms control dialogues, distinguishing their approach from the DPRK's isolationist stance. Ultimately, these countries differing decisions regarding nuclear weapons

reveal the complex interplay between national security, international diplomacy, and global norms.

5.3. The Role of the US, the PRC and Russia in the Denuclearisation of DPRK

The *US* has played a major role in the past to direct countries towards denuclearisation particularly evident through Libya's voluntary nuclear disarmament (2003), the New Start Treaty (2010) and the Iran Nuclear Deal (2015). When pushing for these efforts the US offered security guarantees, sanctions relief and transparency assurance to the negotiating countries which the US as the world power was able to offer. Furthermore, there are many examples in which the US involved themselves in the denuclearisation of nuclear weapon states in Northeast Asia. Specially in the context of the DPRK, the US has played a pivotal role in order to denuclearise the DPRK. The Agreed Framework (1994), Bilateral Missile Talks (1996-1999), Trump-Kim Summits (2018-2019) are some notable examples.

The Trump-Kim summits were improbable due to the prior aggressive positions held by the US and the DPRK, making direct diplomacy extremely hard. Trump's willingness to engage with Kim, breaking from traditional diplomatic norms, was seen as a responsible attempt to reduce tensions and avoid war. However, the failure to reach a concrete agreement with the DPRK shows the lack of trust and specific actionable steps. Trump's personal approach, focusing on his relationship with Kim, failed to address the deeper structural issues of the DPRK's nuclear ambitions. Additionally, the DPRK's continued provocations, including missile tests, undermined confidence in Kim's commitment to disarmament. Ultimately, Trump's role as a negotiator showed that while personal diplomacy may open doors, it is not a substitute for thorough, detailed, and sustained negotiations. In that context the US can act as a critical negotiator strengthening alliances and partnership within the region.

The *PRC* could also take an initiative in mediating with the DPRK on its nuclear programme. Steps could include promoting benefits of sanctions removal and the technological advantages of joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Additionally, the PRC could convince the ROK to refrain from military drills that could heighten tensions (Ghoshal, 2023). This two-way process would help build confidence between the DPRK and the ROK. These measures could be carefully analysed by the PRC to assess the long-term impact on the DPRK and the peninsula (Ghoshal, 2023).

Russia has sought to avoid regional security conflicts in order to strengthen its status as one of East Asia's main powers, deepen its far eastern relationships, and contribute to the formation of a multidimensional regional order (Streltsov et al., 2018). Russia is increasingly concerned about tensions on the Korean Peninsula while focusing on supporting the Korean Peninsula's disarmament efforts, the reassumption of the Six-Party Process, and collaboration with China for a "moratorium for a moratorium" proposal to ease the current crisis (Streltsov et al., 2018).

5.4. Lessons from other global cases

It is evident that the Indo-Pacific requires to have strong mechanisms for denuclearisation due to the prevalence of a genuine nuclear threat and the increasing rivalry between states in the neighbourhood. It is important to note that denuclearisation as an international political goal is not a mere ideal but has been historically achieved. Thus, these past examples of denuclearisation serve as important examples of both the possibility of successful or partly successful denuclearisation. It may also guide governments and alternative parties towards strategies which are applicable to other denuclearisation efforts.

An assessment 04 selected cases of denuclearisation between 1972 – 2021 demonstrates that denuclearisation is not a monolithic concept. These four global cases emphasise the importance of multilateral, bilateral, and national measures for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

The *US-Russia engagement* provides a case study of strategic post-Cold War denuclearisation. During the Cold War, the US and the USSR were at the peak of their tensions involving nuclear weapons was a possibility. Understanding the danger of nuclear weapons, both the US and USSR leaders used a progression of bilateral agreements and other measures to limit and reduce their nuclear stockpiles and strategic missile and bomber arsenals (Kimball, 2022). This illustrates that, despite strong political rivalry between nations, structured engagement and mutual commitment to participating in disarmament processes are critical. This may also be reflected in the efforts by the US and the ROK to denuclearize the DPRK. However, due to tensions between these authorities, these effects have so far failed. The US and the USSR provide evidence that these countries can progressively build trust and focus on a structured and phased dialogue to resume the disarmament process.

South Africa is the only country in the world to have developed and then dismantled its nuclear programme (Council of Foreign Relations, 2023). This example offers insight as to how a leader of a country can give up a nuclear programme. South Africa's nuclear weapons program spanned the 1970s and 1980s and led to the development and production of six nuclear bombs (Kimball, n.d.). Following a decision made by then President FW de Klerk in 1991, South Africa shut down its nuclear test site and uranium enrichment facility. Later, it joined the NPT as a non-nuclear country (Council of Foreign Relations, 2023). In a speech on 24 March 1993 to joint session of parliament President Klerk emphasized, “to normalize South Africa’s international relations, an important aspect is, the significant contribution that South Africa can and will have to make towards peace, stability and progress in Southern Africa. With this objective in mind the Government has – in addition to many other initiatives in a variety of other spheres – taken far-reaching and drastic decisions with regard to the non-proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction. This includes nuclear, as well as chemical and biological weapons” (FWdKadmin, 2022). This led South Africa to normalize relations with the global community demonstrating that denuclearisation is possible when there is a strong political will. Applying this context, leaders of nuclear states within the Indo-Pacific can work on reducing or limiting nuclear weapon proliferation.

When *Ukraine* declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it had the world's third biggest nuclear arsenal, with an estimated 1,900 strategic warheads, 176 ICBMs, and 44

strategic bombers (Kimball, 2014). By 1996, Ukraine had handed over all of its nuclear weapons to Russia in exchange for economic help and security guarantees, and in December 1994, Ukraine became a non-nuclear weapon state party to the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) by signing the Budapest Memorandum following the assistance and security guarantees provided by the US, the UK and Russia (Bunn, 2020). Ukraine's last strategic nuclear delivery vehicle was decommissioned in 2001 as part of the 1991 START. The removal of Ukraine's weapons and nuclear infrastructure required years of political manoeuvring and diplomacy, beginning with the Lisbon Protocol in 1992. This memorandum is particularly significant because it emphasizes the fundamental difference between political commitments and legal obligations (Adamson, 2025). The Budapest Memorandum is a non-legally binding treaty that expresses political commitments, rather than international law (Adamson, 2025).

The Iran Nuclear Deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an agreement signed in 2015 between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the PRC, France, Russia, the UK, and the US), Germany, and the European Union (EU), with the main aim of limiting Iran from producing nuclear weapons, in return for the removal of economic sanctions previously imposed (Robinson, 2023). The key lesson learnt from the Iran Nuclear Deal is the possibility to achieve Denuclearization through multiple stakeholder negotiation. In this case economic incentives were the key driver to denuclearisation. The Indo-Pacific could draw from similar economic incentives being pursued within a multilateral forum to prompt feasible avenues towards Denuclearization.

Table 3: Comparative Overview of Prevalent Denuclearisation efforts (1972 – 2021)

Case	**US & Russia (1972 – 2021)**	**South Africa's voluntary denuclearisation (1989)**	**Ukraine Denuclearisation (1994)**	**Iran Nuclear Deal (2015)**
Parties	US and Russia	South African Government	Ukraine, US, UK and Russia	Iran, the PRC, France, Russia, the UK, the US, Germany and the EU
Status	Bilateral commitment	Commitment by state leadership	Multilateral commitment	Multilateral commitment
Lessons	Illustrate the importance of structured dialogue and mutual commitment	Demonstrate that disarmament is possible when there is a strong political will	Pointed out the political commitment of major powers	Highlighted the importance of involving multiple stakeholders to address the issue
Implication	Phased agreements with mutual trust	Reaching negotiations with international parties and considering gradual denuclearisation	Emphasized major power's role on denuclearisation and security guarantees for the relevant state	A multilateral approach involving China, the US, Russia and regional actors

Source: Developed by the author

6.0 Conclusion

This policy brief has brought out the complexities of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, focusing on regional and international efforts, particularly in Northeast Asia. It has also examined the role of key multilateral treaties and agreements such as the NPT, the UN's involvement, and regional initiatives like NWFZs, in addressing nuclear threats and promoting global peace. Despite these efforts, regions like Northeast Asia remain outside NWFZ agreements due to ongoing geopolitical tensions, particularly the nuclear ambitions of the DPRK. These tensions complicate efforts to achieve global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation goals.

The critical area of focus here has been the Korean Peninsula, where the division between the DPRK and the ROK, coupled with the DPRK's nuclear weapons development, has created a security dilemma with regional and global implications. The DPRK views its nuclear arsenal as a tool of deterrence and national pride, while its nuclear weapons program exacerbates tensions with its neighbours, including the ROK and Japan.

In response, the ROK and Japan have reinforced their security alliances with the US, creating a polarized geopolitical environment which complicates collective efforts toward disarmament. In recent years, they have expanded joint military exercises with the US, increasing defense budgets, and enhancing missile defense systems. At the same time, domestic political debates within these countries have shifted toward deterrence over diplomacy, further limiting the space for constructive dialogue. The ensuing security environment is characterized by increased mistrust and strategic competitiveness, making regional disarmament efforts more complicated.

Despite numerous attempts at bilateral and multilateral negotiations, progress has been slow, with setbacks such as the breakdown of the 2019 Kim-Trump summit and continued DPRK missile and nuclear testing. The lack of trust and the deeply entrenched security concerns of all parties involved have stymied meaningful progress. However, the paper stresses the need for renewed diplomatic efforts focusing on confidence-building measures, multilateral dialogue, and the provision of incentives such as economic aid and sanctions relief. These measures could help address the security concerns that drive the DPRK's nuclear ambitions and foster the conditions for successful negotiations.

The paper also draws on other global cases in order to inform efforts in Northeast Asia. The experiences of the US and Russia in strategic nuclear disarmament, South Africa’s voluntary denuclearisation, Ukraine denuclearisation and the Iran Nuclear Deal, serve as important case studies in this regard. These examples highlight the importance of structured diplomacy, mutual trust-building, and leveraging economic and security incentives in the denuclearisation process. While the geopolitical context in Northeast Asia is unique, these cases demonstrate that nuclear disarmament is achievable with the right combination of political will, diplomatic engagement, and international cooperation.

In conclusion, denuclearisation in the Korean Peninsula and broader Northeast Asia remains a challenging but attainable goal. Achieving this will require a multifaceted approach, balancing diplomacy, security assurances, and confidence-building measures. The lessons learnt from past global cases provide valuable guidance for future efforts and underscores the need for sustained commitment to peace and security in the region.

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