
**BEAST ASIA:
PROSPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT**

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**ARE THERE ANY WAYS TO BREAK
THROUGH THE KOREAN NUCLEAR IMPASSE?**

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Abstract. The article attempts to analyze the situation surrounding the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula. Today, the nuclear issue is a whole complex of issues related to security on the Korean Peninsula. These include, first of all, the implementation by the North Korean leadership of programs to create nuclear and missile weapons in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the adoption by Pyongyang of a military doctrine allowing for the possibility of using nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict in Korea, as well as reciprocal steps from the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK), aimed at implementing nuclear deterrence. Considering the reasons for the failure of international negotiations, the author pays attention to the proposals made by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to conclude a peace treaty (non-aggression treaty) with the United States, as well as other North Korean initiatives aimed at normalizing relations with the U.S. By failing to respond rationally to these steps, Washington missed the opportunity to reach an agreement with Pyongyang on a mutually acceptable basis. Particular attention is paid to new aspects in the approaches of DPRK, which declares the "irreversibility" and "legitimate nature" of its nuclear status. Today, the path to a nuclear settlement on the Korean Peninsula appears to be much more difficult than it was a decade ago, and certainly during the Six-Party Talks (2003–2008). Now the states involved are demonstrating mutual bitterness, categorical rejection of each other, and are relying primarily on forceful methods to protect their own interests. Therefore, returning to a normal diplomatic agenda, which alone will create a chance to resolve the nuclear and other problems of the Korean Peninsula, is possible only through de-escalation of confrontation, transition from military-political deterrence to restraint, and restoration of interrupted communication channels between interested states. Apparently, this will require time and considerable effort from all participants.

Keywords: nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization, DPRK, USA, ROK, peace treaty, security guarantees, deterrence, escalation.

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**ЕСТЬ ЛИ ПУТИ ВЫХОДА
ИЗ КОРЕЙСКОГО ЯДЕРНОГО ТУПИКА?**

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Аннотация. В статье анализируется ситуация, складывающаяся вокруг ядерной проблемы Корейского полуострова (ЯПКП). Реализация КНДР своих ядерных программ и жесткая реакция на это со стороны США и Республики Корея становятся причиной эскалации конфронтации, что создает серьезные вызовы миру и безопасности в регионе. Особое внимание уделено новшествам в подходах Пхеньяна, который заявляет о "необратимости" и "легитимном характере" своего ядерного статуса. Рассматриваются причины срыва многочисленных попыток урегулирования имеющихся противоречий посредством двусторонних американо-

северокорейских и многосторонних переговоров. В статье также показаны возможные условия для разблокирования ситуации вокруг ЯПКП и возобновления дипломатического процесса.

Ключевые слова: ядерная проблема Корейского полуострова (ЯПКП), денуклеаризация, КНДР, США, Республика Корея, мирный договор, гарантии безопасности, сдерживание, эскалация.

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue have spanned three decades, beginning with the first serious controversy between the IAEA and the DPRK over North Korea's nuclear development and its subsequent threats to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Despite numerous attempts to address the situation, it has only deteriorated, with the conflict between the DPRK and its external adversaries taking on increasingly dangerous military and political dimensions.

Today, the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue encompasses a broad range of security concerns. These include North Korea's ongoing nuclear and missile development programs in violation of the NPT, Pyongyang's military doctrine that permits the use of nuclear weapons in the event of conflict, and the countermeasures by the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) aimed at nuclear deterrence.

Since the start of negotiation processes on the Korean Peninsula on the nuclear issue in 1993 – including the Agreed Framework, the activities of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the Six-Party Talks¹ and other formats – a new generation of politicians, diplomats, and experts has emerged. Various models, principles, and settlement scenarios have been attempted. Although significant agreements were occasionally reached, they proved short-lived, and the situation inevitably escalated into new crises.

¹ Six-Party Talks – a series of diplomatic meetings in Beijing (2003–2008) with the participation of the PRC, Russia, the DPRK, the USA, South Korea and Japan towards peaceful resolution of the problems related to North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and implementation of the nuclear weapons programme by this country.

The current stage appears to be the most severe compared to all previous ones. The nuclear dialogue between the USA and the DPRK has been suspended since autumn 2019 and has not resumed. This escalation in US-North Korean confrontation parallels growing tensions in inter-Korean relations and an accelerating arms race on the Korean Peninsula, including nuclear and missile components.

Whereas the DPRK leaders in the past, albeit with reservations, supported the denuclearization of the peninsula, this possibility is now categorically ruled out. Pyongyang views its national nuclear capability as the only reliable guarantee of the country's security. Both Korean sides, at least rhetorically, acknowledge the likelihood of a nuclear conflict in the event of a hypothetical military clash.

Given these circumstances, the primary question is whether this outcome was inevitable from the start or if the involved parties missed an opportunity to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue. This remains a topic of debate among researchers [1, 2, 3, 4, 5], with varying opinions and no clear consensus.

SLIDE INTO THE CRISIS

In April 2009, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks and declared its intention to develop both nuclear energy and “nuclear deterrence forces.” This marked the end of years of efforts since 2003 by Korea's neighbors and the two Korean states to resolve the nuclear issue based on Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear programs in exchange for political and economic incentives.

Subsequent attempts to revive the dialogue were hampered by the death of DPRK leader Kim Jong-il in December 2011. However, diplomatic activities resumed after Kim Jong-un ascended to power, emphasizing reconciliation with the United States, a historic adversary. In

February 2012, the two governments announced the Leap Day Agreement, under which North Korea agreed to suspend nuclear tests, halt ballistic missile launches, and invite IAEA inspectors to its nuclear facilities. In return, the US administration made minor concessions, including the supply of 240,000 tonnes of food aid to the DPRK [6].

The agreements reached were initially regarded as a step towards building confidence and renewing international efforts to curtail North Korea's nuclear programs and denuclearize the Korean peninsula. However, this optimism was short-lived. A few weeks later, Pyongyang launched a satellite into Earth's orbit, prompting the USA to announce a suspension of the agreement.

The unsuccessful start of the US-North Korean dialogue at that time had long-term negative consequences, setting the stage for a negative scenario in the years to come. The Obama administration, somewhat dismissive of North Korea from the beginning, firmly rejected any deals with Pyongyang. Believing North Koreans to be uncooperative, Washington assumed that sanctions, military deterrence, and pressure were the best ways to compel the "authoritarian regime" to abandon its nuclear and missile programs.

Although Pyongyang's nonproliferation policy was seen as destructive, the White House believed North Korea's backwardness, limited resources, low economic and technological capabilities, and lack of reliable allies made it incapable of seriously damaging US interests in the region. Convinced that the DPRK was doomed to fail in this race and that the situation would eventually resolve itself, the US saw no point in seeking compromise solutions. These considerations were encapsulated in the "strategic patience" policy pursued by Washington throughout the Obama administration.

This policy kept the door open for six-party talks but stipulated resumption only after receiving firm assurances from the DPRK on "irreversible steps" towards denuclearization. Washington also insisted that the six-party

talks or DPRK-US dialogue be preceded by talks between North and South Korea on denuclearization and improving mutual relations [source 1, pp. 15-16].

In turn, Pyongyang concluded that the United States was uninterested in direct and equal dialogue with the DPRK, considering it a weak and not too dangerous adversary. Consequently, North Korea decided to "raise the stakes" by proving its significance, leading to a large-scale nuclear build-up program. This new course was symbolically marked in February 2013 with a regular nuclear test. In 2012, the preamble to the North Korean Constitution was amended to declare the DPRK a "nuclear-weapon state" [source 2].

In March 2013, Kim Jong-un announced a new national strategy combining parallel economic construction with nuclear weapons development, aiming to become a "full-fledged nuclear power" in terms of both independent nuclear power industry and nuclear weapons for self-defense [7]. These provisions were enshrined in a resolution by the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly.

The differences between the new and old nuclear policies were significant. Kim Jong-il believed that a few nuclear warheads were sufficient to protect the country and negotiate concessions from the United States. The new leader aimed for quantitative and qualitative growth of nuclear weapons (and subsequently the means of their delivery) to pressure Washington into major agreements favorable to Pyongyang.

Practical steps in line with this policy, including several nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, led to a severe crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 2016–2017. The result was the imposition of tough international sanctions by the UN Security Council, which severely impacted the socio-economic situation in North Korea and deteriorated its international standing. Under these conditions, Pyongyang was forced to "backtrack," agreeing to resume dialogue with the USA and South Korea to find diplomatic solutions to the nuclear issue.

The series of US-North Korean summits in 2018–2019 and subsequent inter-Korean meetings were the latest attempt to achieve a comprehensive deal for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, due to various reasons, including disagreements over the scope of disarmament measures and US, reciprocal steps the negotiations broke down, and the deal failed to materialize. This breakdown caused a surge in mutual mistrust, paving the way for increased political and military tensions.

CONFLICT ESCALATION

By using the nuclear factor as a lever of pressure to obtain concessions from its opponents, Pyongyang fell into its own trap, finding it difficult to find a reasonable and salutary way out. In some respects, North Korea achieved its goal: the United States finally recognized the DPRK's actions as a serious military threat. However, instead of conceding, the USA tightened sanctions and proceeded with counter-deterrence measures.

The DPRK leadership drew different conclusions from Kim Jong-un's failed talks with US President Trump than the Americans had expected. Pyongyang concluded that years of attempts to "make peace" with the USA had proven futile and that Washington would likely never accept North Korea "as it is." Consequently, the DPRK prepared for a long-term confrontation, further strengthening its "nuclear deterrent forces." Despite dire internal conditions, including the complete closure of its borders in early 2020 and cessation of all ties with the outside world due to anti-epidemic restrictions, the DPRK regrouped its forces for a new breakthrough in nuclear armament. In January 2021, the VIII Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea adopted a large-scale program to develop, produce, and deploy both heavy and compact nuclear warheads for tactical nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), cruise missiles, and missiles with multiple warheads. Additionally, tasks were set to develop cruise missiles, missile-carrying

submarines, and military reconnaissance satellites [source 3].

Initially, the DPRK's neighbors perceived these plans with distrust, viewing them as part of a propaganda campaign. However, Pyongyang has since demonstrated clear success in achieving its goals.

US and South Korean experts note significant progress in modernizing North Korea's nuclear and missile potential since resuming ballistic missile launches, which had been suspended during negotiations with D. Trump. According to their assessments, Pyongyang now has the capability to deliver nuclear warheads over any distance, owing to its possession of a wide range of land-based and sea-based missiles, as well as those launched from various mobile platforms [8]. While North Korea primarily focused on short- and medium-range ballistic missiles launches designed to hit regional targets from 2019 to 2022, in 2023, it shifted its focus to testing new solid-propellant ICBMs potentially capable of striking the continental United States.

So far, North Korean experimental missile technology has many weaknesses: ICBM launches are carried out exclusively at a high "cosmic" angle; there is no apparent technology for safe re-entry of the warhead into the atmosphere, and accuracy is low. However, experts believe these drawbacks are surmountable within a fairly short time frame. [9].

Unlike the tangible results in missile engineering, much less is known about the DPRK's nuclear program, shrouded in secrecy. Authorities do not publish any official information on stocks of fissionable material, the number and types of nuclear warheads, or their production, storage, or deployment locations. Estimates of nuclear potential parameters published in Western and South Korean sources vary significantly. Most experts agree that the DPRK has accumulated the nuclear material necessary for 40–55 warheads, though it may have produced 20–30 warheads suitable for mounting on mostly medium-range missiles [1]. However, much of this information

is based on guesswork and poorly substantiated assumptions.

It is difficult to assess North Korea's actual progress in nuclear weapon development since it has not conducted tests since the end of 2017. Nevertheless, the possibility of resumption exists. According to South Korea's national intelligence service, the Phunggye-ri nuclear test site is maintained in alert status, so new tests could be conducted anytime after a relevant political decision [10].

Despite ambiguities, Pyongyang has formulated and publicly outlined its nuclear doctrine developed over the past two to three years. In September 2022, the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK adopted the Law on the Policy on Nuclear Armed Forces. The document describes the nuclear armed forces as the basis of the state's defense power and "the last resort to repel external aggression". It prescribes the tasks of the nuclear armed forces, issues connected with command and control, decision-making on their use, principles and conditions of use, and non-proliferation policy.

The document includes points specific to the DPRK. For example, it stipulates that a "nuclear strike to destroy the source of aggression" can be made preemptively if there is a judgment of the possibility of attack by hostile forces with both nuclear and conventional weapons. The nuclear arsenal may even be activated "automatically" if the nuclear weapons command and control system is in danger of being destroyed by the enemy. Additionally, the law allows the use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state if it "joins aggression against the DPRK in collusion with a nuclear state" [source 4].

The adoption of this law was likely a message to the external audience, showing that the DPRK had become a serious military adversary with a low threshold for using nuclear weapons in circumstances affecting the regime's interests. Thus, the country's nuclear status now serves not only as a "political card" for bargaining with Washington but also as a permanent

military factor in strategic calculations regarding the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

Currently, one of Pyongyang's main political theses is "preparation for a war" on the Korean Peninsula. North Korean military propaganda works purposefully and assertively, with assertions about the "inevitability of nuclear war" and goals for "exponential" growth of the nuclear arsenal and tests of newly developed nuclear weapon delivery means. [source 5].

It is difficult to separate purely political declarations and propaganda from the real intentions and capabilities of the DPRK to implement its plans. However, Pyongyang continues to exert massive psychological influence on its opponents using the "nuclear card." In March 2023, Kim Jong-un presented a compact Hwasan-31 nuclear warhead, asserted to be compatible with various delivery systems. Throughout the year, the DPRK conducted regular military maneuvers simulating counteroffensive operations with tactical nuclear warheads [sources 6, 7].

The Korean Peninsula nuclear issue involves not only North Korea's national programs but also the parallel activities of the United States and the ROK, which include a nuclear component. This refers primarily to their joint strategy of "extended deterrence." After withdrawing American tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, Washington provided Seoul with a "nuclear umbrella," assuming that the USA would come to its aid with conventional and nuclear forces in case of aggression against the ROK.

Originally, this commitment was formalized without mechanisms or procedures to coordinate its practical implementation. The USA was assumed to act at its discretion without necessarily informing the ally of its plans to use the "nuclear factor" in wartime.

This state of affairs has changed rapidly in recent years as Pyongyang advanced its nuclear programs and the North-South Korea confrontation escalated. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration's rise to power in May 2022

led to a tougher stance towards the DPRK and adjustments in Seoul's nuclear policy. The new South Korean leader openly spoke about the country's "security deficit" and the insufficiency of existing American guarantees. These gaps were to be bridged mainly by choosing a "nuclear option" in response to North Korean challenges, either in cooperation with the USA or through South Korea's acquisition of nuclear capabilities.

Yoon Suk Yeol became the first ROK president to publicly consider developing nuclear weapons and implementing these plans if the North Korean threat increased. This stance appealed to national public opinion, which has increasingly favored the nuclear option, driven by concerns that Washington might not come to South Korea's aid if attacked by the DPRK, given the risk of a retaliatory nuclear strike on American mainland [11].

These political perturbations initiated discussions on new principles and mechanisms of nuclear deterrence on the Korean Peninsula, to be implemented by the USA with increased participation from South Korea. The results were articulated in the Washington Declaration, adopted after Yoon Suk Yeol's visit to the USA in May 2023. The primary outcome was the agreement to establish a joint Nuclear Consultative Group, which will engage in information exchange, coordination, and joint planning regarding the use of nuclear weapons for South Korea's defense. Another key agreement was the rotational presence of US strategic assets from the nuclear triad (missile-carrying submarines, strategic bombers, and aircraft carriers) in the Republic of Korea. In return, Seoul reaffirmed the inviolability of its nonproliferation commitments [source 8].

Thus, by late 2023 and early 2024, unilateral actions by the DPRK and the USA/ROK led to a rigid nuclear confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. The problem was aggravated by the lack of dialogue on denuclearization, strategic stability, and prevention of accidental incidents, increasing the risk of further escalation

and heightened military and political tensions in the region.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES AND DEFICIT OF IDEAS

When North Korea embarked on nuclear development four decades ago, hardly anyone, including Pyongyang, envisaged the dangerous escalation we see today. The history of negotiations, discussions, and rivalry on the Korean Peninsula is marked by missed opportunities for constructive solutions and long-term settlements. Each dialogue, regardless of its format, invariably ended in failure and breakdowns into confrontation.

While significant responsibility for the current conflict lies with the DPRK, which initiated the "nuclear race," there are also questions for its opponents. South Korean and American experts and even high-ranking officials often claim that they cannot understand what the DPRK seeks or what it wants in return for giving up its nuclear programs. For instance, National Security Council coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs, K. Campbell, described North Korea as "conundrum" that has "flummoxed" US diplomats for decades [source 9].

These statements do not fully align with reality. The DPRK's position on resolving the nuclear problem has long been clear. The issue is that not all of North Korea's demands and proposals have been acceptable to the United States.

During the first round of the Six-Party Talks in August 2003, the DPRK proposed a phased solution: the USA would conclude a "non-aggression treaty," normalize bilateral relations, and refrain from sanctions impeding Korea's economic development. Pyongyang also sought resumption of crude oil supplies, food aid, and completion of a nuclear power plant per the previously signed Agreed Framework. In return, North Korea would dismantle its nuclear infrastructure, cease missile tests, and stop exporting missile and nuclear technologies if the above conditions were met [source 10].

These strategic goals have remained virtually unchanged, although North Korean diplomacy has maneuvered tactically to suit circumstances. Throughout all negotiations, North Korea has shown willingness to compromise on specific issues if it resulted in political and economic benefits. However, such agreements were always seen as temporary and valid only as long as the substantive issues of primary concern to Pyongyang were discussed.

North Korea has consistently avoided committing to completely and unconditionally renouncing nuclear weapons and eliminating its nuclear materials and facilities. The country's leadership and its official representatives have always accompanied their position on this issue with a number of reservations. In particular they exploited the political and legal ambiguity surrounding "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," a definition never clearly defined in mutually agreed terms. The US and ROK interpreted denuclearization as the complete and irreversible cessation of all North Korean nuclear programs and elimination of all relevant infrastructure with exhaustive verification measures.

Conversely, the DPRK's interpretation was broader, encompassing the entire Korean Peninsula and adjacent regions where US nuclear weapons aimed at Korea were located. This included the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons and a commitment to non-deployment and non-use against the DPRK [source 11].

At all stages, Pyongyang avoided specifying its plans for nuclear disarmament, stating only that it would take reciprocal steps towards denuclearization if the US withdrew its nuclear forces from the region. This diplomatic maneuvering led Western experts to conclude that North Korea intended to retain a limited number of nuclear warheads to strengthen its negotiating position with the United States and ensure a minimum deterrence potential if Washington refused to provide "ironclad" security guarantees [12].

For years, the issue of providing full and unambiguous security guarantees has been a key,

yet unresolved, problem in US-North Korean relations. Since at least 2002, the DPRK has sought a non-aggression treaty (or peace treaty) with the United States that would include legally binding provisions on the non-use of nuclear weapons and military force against it and respect for its sovereignty. Such a treaty would have been seen as evidence of the absence of hostile intentions from the United States. In return, Pyongyang promised to address all US security concerns [source 12].

However, this proposal was rejected by the conservative segment of the US political class, which opposed meaningful agreements with the DPRK that could raise its international prestige and legitimacy. Under the Obama administration, discussions reached an impasse as the White House insisted that the DPRK take substantive steps to curtail its nuclear programs first. Following North Korea's nuclear test in early 2016, all contacts on this issue ceased [13].

The issue of security guarantees was revisited during bilateral talks under President Trump, at North Korea's insistence. However, the White House did not move beyond general declarations. The content and form of potential American assurances remained unclear. The Trump administration used the idea of security assurances to achieve a de-escalation agreement with North Korea without sacrificing the sanctions leverage. Publicly, the administration stated it would not lift UN sanctions until complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization was achieved, a stance inconsistent with North Korea's view of settlement principles [14].

Recently, the DPRK has decisively rejected diplomatic solutions to the nuclear issue and abandoned attempts to normalize relations with the United States, which represented a major strategic shift in the DPRK's policy. The course pursued over the previous 30 years has been discarded or postponed, as it failed to meet expectations. The failed dialogue with Trump, which had been a focus of Kim Jong-un's efforts, led him to conclude that the USA would never agree to terms accommodating the DPRK's fundamental interests and would only demand

unilateral disarmament in exchange for minor concessions.

Public statements from the North Korean leadership have shown new points: denuclearization is no longer the ultimate goal. Instead of diplomacy, Pyongyang is preparing for prolonged confrontation with Washington and Seoul. The plans for a quantitative and qualitative buildup of nuclear armaments have taken on new significance. Pyongyang has indicated that it is no longer interested in a non-aggression treaty with its adversaries, now viewing its nuclear shield and strategic offensive weapons as the only reliable security guarantee. This shift was underscored at the end of 2023 when North Korea, amid escalating tensions with South Korea, canceled the inter-Korean military agreement of 2018 [source 13].

Under these new conditions, the task of legitimizing the DPRK's nuclear status became a priority. In September 2023, the Supreme People's Assembly introduced several provisions into the country's constitution "on the accelerated development of nuclear weapons towards establishing the systemic and legal framework to ensure security and protection of the country's supreme interests" [source 14]. Foreign Minister Choi Seon-hee clarified for external audiences that the DPRK is a "responsible nuclear state" exercising its right to self-defense. Consequently, attempts to induce Pyongyang to denuclearize are viewed as attacks on the country's sovereignty and constitutional order [source 15].

Since President Biden took office, the administration has not introduced new solutions to the complex nuclear issue. Washington's proposals include gradually easing sanctions in exchange for the DPRK's steps towards denuclearization. However, North Korea has ignored initiatives for negotiations without preconditions. As tensions on the Korean Peninsula have increased due to missile tests and ICBM launches by the DPRK, the USA and the ROK have supported tightening sanctions and pursuing military deterrence. Given these circumstances, the possibilities for resuming

dialogue seem impractical today [source 16, pp. 18-21].

IMPLICATIONS AND PROSPECTS

North Korea's development of nuclear programs and creation of nuclear weapons has significantly aggravated the situation on the Korean Peninsula, provoking a rapid increase in military activity and arms buildup by the United States and South Korea. Rather than strengthening the DPRK's security, these activities have created serious problems, decreasing opportunities for the country's socio-economic development and deteriorating its foreign policy environment.

While North Korea's security interests and concerns are legitimate, its strategic calculations have been flawed. The policy of blackmail and extorting concessions through "nuclear trump cards" has proven counterproductive. Pyongyang's opponents responded to the blackmail with tough measures, including sanctions and political-military pressure.

But nonetheless, DPRK's adversaries initially underestimated the determination of North Korean leaders to pursue nuclear buildup and ignored the dangers that arose from that. Ultimately they missed the opportunity to make meaningful, long-term decisions mainly due to these reasons.

Numerous mistakes by Washington in negotiations and building broader relationships with Pyongyang are now recognized by many experts, including Americans. The failure to take North Korean proposals seriously, the ultimatum demands for unilateral denuclearization without meaningful counter-steps, and the missed chance for a peace treaty are just a few examples. Collectively, these missteps resulted in growing distrust of American policy by the DPRK, bringing negotiations to a deadlock. Some researchers link the nuclear issue to the unresolved consequences of the Korean War (1950–1953), which technically is not yet over and still affects the region [15].

With significant delay, the US intelligence community now acknowledges that North Korea's nuclear potential poses a serious military threat to US security, given the hypothetical possibility of a missile strike on the continental United States. At the same time, many experts believe that Washington has no remaining incentives to induce Pyongyang to comply [source 17, p. 5].

Conversely, DPRK authorities have recently felt more confident. Despite serious challenges between 2020 and 2022, the economy did not collapse, and internal stability was maintained. The DPRK demonstrated success in developing its military-industrial complex, particularly in producing advanced and diverse nuclear weapon delivery systems. Despite sanctions, Pyongyang managed to secure significant funds and cryptocurrency assets through illegal cyber activity and gained access to necessary technologies, components, and materials for its programmes of weapons of mass destruction. [source 18, pp. 74-78].

The "irreversibility" of North Korea's nuclear status, seen as a major security guarantee, has also become a significant internal issue. Given the enormous financial, material and human resources invested in nuclear and missile armaments over the past decade alone, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would abandon these assets without compelling reasons.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the fact of possessing nuclear weapons is a matter of prestige for Pyongyang, a kind of way of "self-affirmation" in the international arena. Within the country, this is becoming part of the new official ideology, a symbol of state identity, equal in significance to the previous "ideas of Juche", with the help of which the authorities are trying to unite the nation, consolidating it around the ruling dynasty. In addition, the flywheel of the nuclear missile complex, launched at full capacity, includes dozens of various military and other bureaucratic structures, elite army units, enterprises, research institutes, design bureaus, where tens of thousands of people are employed. Stopping this machine,

reorienting it to other, more peaceful goals without risking social stability seems extremely difficult, even if the country's leadership has the necessary will.

At the other end of the conflict is South Korea and its closest allies and partners, including the United States and Japan. Their confrontation with North Korea currently also implies an increasingly active use of the nuclear component. These activities include a nuclear consultative group coordinating Washington and Seoul, combined exercises to practice nuclear weapon use, and the systematic presence of US strategic triad components in South Korea.

While South Korea's development of nuclear weapons has been put on hold, it is unlikely that this decision is final. The topic of nuclear rearmament has now practically disappeared from public discourse. However, apparently, its closed elaboration continues unofficially. Not only right-wing, but also left-wing nationalists in the ROK believe that, given growing North Korean threats and US isolationist tendencies, Seoul may need to start moving towards this goal eventually. If the ultimate goal is seen as the establishments of an "inter-Korean nuclear balance," then experts consider the intermediate task to be creating national nuclear waste reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities [16].

Another, so far inactive, discussion is underway in American expert circles: what to do in conditions when it is no longer possible to achieve a halt, let alone the elimination, of North Korean nuclear programs. The debates are raging between those who advocate a hard-line approach to strengthening containment and those who believe it is necessary to begin fundamentally new negotiations with the DPRK with an alternative agenda. The whole point of such a dialogue is seen as taking into account the existing realities, de facto recognizing North Korea as a state possessing nuclear weapons and trying to reach an agreement with it on establishing control over destabilizing types of weapons, reducing military risks and threats. However, it seems that the current administration of J. Biden has neither the desire nor the intellectual

resources to make fundamental changes to its policy regarding North Korea.

The current stage's peculiarity is the inextricable link between the nuclear issue and unsettled inter-Korean relations, experiencing unprecedented hostility since the Korean War. These crises overlap, reinforcing each other and complicating the situation.

The path to nuclear settlement on the Korean Peninsula is much more challenging today than a decade ago, or even during the Six-Party

Talks. A positive turn in the future remains uncertain.

Currently, involved states exhibit mutual bitterness, alienation, and reliance on forceful methods to protect their interests. Returning to a normal diplomatic agenda, essential for resolving the nuclear and other problems of the Korean Peninsula, requires de-escalation, transition from deterrence to restraint, and restoration of communication channels between concerned states. Apparently, this will take time and considerable effort from all participants.

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