US Policy Toward North Korea: Quo Vadis?

Cory Gardner, Igor Khrestin, and Chris Walsh

As the Trump administration recalibrates America's global priorities, containing Pyongyang should be at the top of its agenda. Despite the progress of North Korea's illicit weapons programs, the United States should still pursue its longstanding goal of Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Denuclearization through diplomatic actions, such as coordination with democratic allies in Seoul and Tokyo, as well as with coercive tools, such as unilateral sanctions and the use of military force. In doing so, Washington should not neglect North Korea's continuing and grave human rights abuses, which Pyongyang is still actively perpetrating against its own people, abetted by Beijing and Moscow. Finally, the United States must take concrete steps to counter the strategic collusion among autocratic regimes in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

As he visited the Republic of Korea (ROK) during the waning days of the Biden administration, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was greeted by a Seoul torn apart by a massive political crisis and yet another missile test from an ever-belligerent Pyongyang.[1] To cap off his trip, Blinken publicly warned that Russia may now be sharing "advanced space and satellite technology" with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).[2]

Blinken's visit concluded another four years of bipartisan failure of US and allied policy toward North Korea. During President Biden's time in office, Pyongyang advanced its illicit weapons programs and built a new strategic alliance with Russia that includes significant North Korean material and manpower support for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.[3] Kim Jong Un also intensified his saber-rattling toward the United States' ally, South Korea, rejecting pursuit of unification and instead declaring South Korea Pyongyang's "primary foe and invariable principal enemy";[4] he later told troops along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) bordering South Korea to be ready for war.[5]

As the Trump administration recalibrates America's global priorities, containing Pyongyang should be at the top of its agenda. Despite the progress of the DPRK's illicit weapons programs, the United States should still pursue its longstanding goal of CVID (Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Denuclearization) of the DPRK. That goal is enshrined in US law, most recently through the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (NKSPEA) and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 (ARIA).[6] Moreover, the United States can still set a course to achieve CVID through diplomatic actions, such as enhancing cooperation with—and between—our democratic allies in Seoul and Tokyo, as well as with coercive tools, such as unilateral sanctions and the use of military force.

The United States should also refocus attention on the DPRK's continuing and grave human rights abuses, which Pyongyang is still actively perpetrating against

1 "North Korea Test Fires Missile as Blinken Visits Seoul, Weighs In on Putin-Kim Ties, Israel-Hamas Truce Talks," *CBS News*, January 6, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/north-korea-missile-blinken-south-korea-russia-putin-kim-jong-un-israel-hamas-war/.

2 Helen Regan et al., "Blinken Warns Russia Is Close to Sharing Advanced Satellite Technology with North Korea," *CNN*, January 6, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/06/asia/blinken-russia-satellite-technology-north-korea-intl-hnk/index.html.

3 Victor Cha, "Crossing the Rubicon: DPRK Sends Troops to Russia," CSIS Critical Questions, October 23, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/crossing-rubicon-dprk-sends-troops-russia.

4 "North Korea Will No Longer Pursue Reconciliation with South, Kim Jong Un Says," *PBS News*, January 16, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/north-korea-will-no-longer-pursue-reconciliation-with-south-kim-jong-un-says; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Inter-Korean Relations: The Yoon Administration in Historical Context," *Korea Observer* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 30.

5 Colin Zwirko, "Kim Jong Un Leads Military Drill Simulating Takeover of South Korean Guard Posts," *NK News*, March 7, 2024, https://www.nknews.org/2024/03/north-korea-conducts-military-drills-in-likely-counter-to-joint-us-rok-exercises/. On growing fears of crisis instability on the Korean Peninsula, see Nicholas Anderson and Darryl Press, "Lost Seoul? Assessing Pyongyang's Other Deterrent," *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2025).

6 See Section 2(a)(1) of Public Law 114–122 (https://www.congress.gov/114/statute/STATUTE-130/STATUTE-130-Pg93.pdf) and Sections 2(7)(b), 102(5), and 210(c) of Public Law 115–409 (https://www.congress.gov/115/statute/STATUTE-132/STATUTE-132-Pg5387.pdf).

its own people, abetted by Beijing and Moscow.[7] Finally, the United States must take concrete steps to counter the strategic collusion among autocratic regimes in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK), and prevent these nations from taking hostile and coordinated actions to undermine the US-led democratic global order.[8]

How We Got Here

More than thirty years ago, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute wrote: "The nuclear drama now unfolding is a problem entirely of North Korea's making. That much is clear. What is also obvious, unfortunately, is that the international response to this mounting menace underscores a failure of American leadership. The United States, after all, is the only country willing—and able—to lead others in concerted action against common threats to international security. Flawed policies toward North Korea are nothing new in Washington. Mistakes in dealing with the nuclear ambitions of this hostile and troublesome regime, moreover, have been distressingly bipartisan."[9]

The recent anatomy of bipartisan failure to stop Pyongyang is well known, but its historical roots stretch back more than thirty years.

His words now seem prophetic. Eberstadt chastised the Clinton administration (and the George H. W. Bush and Reagan administrations before it) for failure to deal with the DPRK's then-nascent nuclear ambitions. How could it be that three decades later, the same words still apply to subsequent US administrations, and we are now left with a much more serious problem?

The recent anatomy of bipartisan failure to stop Pyongyang is well known, but its historical roots stretch back more than thirty years. The current crisis on the Korean Peninsula goes back to at least the colonial period of the nineteenth century, Japanese occupation, and the global wars that followed. These historical factors still shape the DPRK's leaders' thinking today. As Jonathan Corrado and Rachel Minyong Lee observe, "North Korea's decision making has always been affected by the wider geopolitical context."[10] After the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953 and the establishment of the DPRK, the regime's founder, Kim Il Sung, shrewdly played the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union against one another, seeking to extract concessions with one singular goal in mind: regime survival. The removal or reduction of support from both great powers as the Cold War ended contributed to the period of economic collapse, famine, and widespread starvation that racked North Korea in the early and mid-1990s, a period known to North Koreans as the "Arduous March."

After Kim Il Sung's passing, his son Kim Jong Il continued the regime's inexorable march toward nuclear weapons, punctuated only by short-lived attempts by the United States—with occasional Russian and Chinese acquiescence—to bring the DPRK into compliance with its international obligations. In 2003, North Korea became the first country to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); it first tested a nuclear weapon in 2006. The death of Kim Jong Il and succession of his son and current ruler Kim Jong Un in 2011 did not change these dynamics. After six nuclear tests between 2006 and 2017, and ten binding United Nations Security Council resolutions, we are no closer to CVID today—and arguably further away—than in 1994.

Since 2017, Pyongyang has been laser-focused on perfecting the technology and delivery systems to directly threaten the United States, conducting seven intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches.[11] The latest test, on October 31, 2024, was assessed to be a new Hwasong-19 solid-propellant ICBM with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability.[12] Since 2022, the DPRK has conducted a

7 Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," report by the George W. Bush Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2023, https://gwbushcenter.imgix.net/wp-content/uploads/GWBI_2023_NKChinaRussia_Report.pdf.

8 Chris Walsh and Joseph Kim, "Countering the China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea Challenge," George W. Bush Institute policy recommendation, January 13, 2025, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/countering-crink.

9 Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Colossal Failure of US Policy Toward North Korea," *American Enterprise Institute*, June 9, 1994, https://www.aei.org/articles/the-colossal-failure-of-u-s-policy-toward-north-korea/.

10 Jonathan Corrado and Rachel Minyong Lee, "Why Is the North Korea Problem So Hard to Solve?," War on the Rocks, May 31, 2024, https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/why-is-the-north-korea-problem-so-hard-to-solve/.

11 "North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs," Congressional Research Service (updated December 18, 2024), https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10472.

12 Vann H. Van Diepen, "North Korea Tests New Solid ICBM Probably Intended for MIRVs," 38North, November 5, 2024, https://www.38north.org/2024/11/north-korea-tests-new-solid-icbm-probably-intended-for-mirvs/.

total of over eighty ballistic missile tests of various types. Kim Jong Un is "Little Rocket Man" no more.[13]

Another inflection point in the DPRK's trajectory came on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Kim Jong Un immediately sensed opportunity and embraced Russia's illegal war of aggression by recognizing Moscow's claims over vast portions of Ukrainian sovereign territory; providing ammunition and short-range ballistic missiles to be fired at Ukrainian cities; and sending 11,000 troops (with reports that an additional 30,000 could be on the way)[14] to fight alongside Russia's army in the Kursk region. In return, as Secretary Blinken stated in Seoul, the DPRK is getting invaluable help from Moscow to grow its missile programs and enhance its scientific prowess, not to mention other incentives such as cheap Russian energy and foodstuffs. According to Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, the Russia-DPRK security alliance formed after February 2022 is "the gravest threat to the United States since the Korean War."[15]

The Biden Record

Writing in December 2020, Cha outlined six options the Biden administration could pursue to denuclearize the DPRK:

1. incremental "action-for-action" approach;
2. the "Libya model" favored by former US ambassador to the United Nations (UN) John Bolton;
3. comprehensive coercion, or a sustained "maximum pressure" campaign until CVID is achieved;
4. the "Trump model," with its emphasis on leader-to-leader summits;
5. "political transformation"; and
6. "arms control," which emphasized changing the political dynamic of the US-DPRK relationship with smaller trust-building initiatives like "freeze-for-freeze," with a view to "capping the most dangerous elements" of North Korea's nuclear program through verification measures.

Each of these, as Cha admitted, would still be "lousy options" if North Korea were "not responsive to external stimuli," or more simply, refused to play ball and negotiate.[16]

Four years later, the latter prediction regrettably came true. Despite multiple attempts by Washington at outreach "without preconditions" to Pyongyang, Kim Jong Un had no interest in negotiating directly with President Biden.[17] Along with the hardening of policy toward South Korea, Kim Jong Un announced in his 2023 New Year's speech that the DPRK would significantly expand its nuclear arsenal and begin to "mass produce" tactical nuclear weapons; in September 2023, the DPRK enshrined nuclear first-use policies in its constitution.[18] After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the multilateral UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions regime against North Korea collapsed entirely, due to Russia's veto in that body.[19] Alongside the council's fecklessness in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the inability to act to constrain North Korea was another demonstration of the spectacular failure of the UNSC as a body of any import in shaping global security.

The Biden administration's response to Pyongyang's belligerence was to try and shore up US alliances in the Indo-Pacific, especially trilateral coordination among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo—a task that had been made difficult by historical memory and domestic politics, especially in the Korea-Japan relationship. The administration's efforts led to the August 2023 Camp David Summit and the 2024 establishment of a Trilateral Secretariat to coordinate and implement plans for institutionalized policy consultation, information sharing, and future joint

13 Kimberley Leonard, "Trump Had to Explain Nickname to Kim Jong Un, Mike Pompeo Says," *Business Insider*, January 23, 2023, https://www.businessinsider.com/kim-jong-un-didnt-get-trumps-little-rocket-man-nickname-book-2023-1.

14 CNN, "North Korea to Send as Many as 30,000 Troops to Bolster Russia's Forces, Ukrainian Officials Say," July 2, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/02/europe/north-korea-troops-russia-ukraine-intl-cmd.

15 Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "The New Russia–North Korea Security Alliance," CSIS Critical Questions, June 20, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-russia-north-korea-security-alliance.

16 Victor Cha, "Denuclearizing North Korea: Six Options for Biden," War on the Rocks, December 22, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/denuclearizing-north-korea-six-options-for-biden/.

17 "Joe Biden Trying to Meet North Korea's Kim Jong-un 'Without Preconditions,' Senior White House Official Says," *South China Morning Post,* August 18, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3231469/joe-biden-trying-meet-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-without-preconditions-senior-white-house-official.

18 "North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs"; Choi Soo-Hyang and Hyonhee Shin, "North Korea Amends Constitution on Nuclear Policy, Cites US Provocations," *Reuters*, September 28, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-parliament-amends-constitution-enshrine-nuclear-policy-kcna-2023-09-27/.

19 Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "Russia's Veto: Dismembering the UN Sanctions Regime Against North Korea," CSIS Critical Questions, March 29, 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-veto-dismembering-un-sanctions-regime-north-korea.

exercises.[20] While the summit set a positive tone for the future, it was notably short on immediate substantive steps to counter the DPRK threat.

The Biden administration also failed to adequately use the unilateral sanctions tools mandated by Congress to press for changes in North Korea's behavior. Former senior National Security Council official Anthony Ruggiero charged that "botched responses to Pyongyang's other provocations reinforce[d] the fact that the administration [was] not serious about North Korea sanctions." Ruggiero suggested that the administration should have pursued "comprehensive sanctions against North Korea's cyber activities; interdicting vessels carrying prohibited coal exports and petroleum imports; and cutting off access to commerce and financing in China."[21] All of these sanctions activities were already mandated under US law, including under NKSPEA and ARIA. It is unclear why the Biden administration either dismissed these tools, or at minimum failed to use them aggressively.

The Second Trump Administration: Renewed Opportunity?

Dealing with a nuclear North Korea is the true "problem from hell."[22] Multiple administrations have tried—and failed—to bring the DPRK into compliance with its international obligations and to convince Pyongyang to peacefully disarm.

The first Trump administration pushed hard for a deal, but Pyongyang yet again chose to walk away. The second Trump administration, however, has a new opportunity. Unlike his predecessor, President Trump has experience dealing personally with Kim Jong Un at three previous leader summits: Hanoi in June 2018, Singapore in February 2019, and the trilateral meeting that included then-ROK President Moon Jae-in at the DMZ in June 2019. None of these meetings ultimately moved the needle on DPRK's denuclearization, but the existing personal relationship between Trump and Kim may be an asset in future negotiations.

President Trump must keep three main goals in mind in recalibrating United States policy toward North Korea. First, while CVID may not be a realistic first step, it must remain the ultimate goal for any talks with North Korea. The regime in Pyongyang is far too dangerous to be trusted with the world's most fearsome weapons—despite the obvious reality that it already possesses enough fissile materials to make up to ninety nuclear warheads, according to expert estimates.[23] The task of denuclearization is more difficult today than at any other time, but total denuclearization must remain the policy lodestar. The failure to denuclearize North Korea through peaceful means risks the danger of ultimately having to do so through other, even more dangerous avenues, akin to Israel's June 2025 launch of Operation Rising Lion against Iran. The consequences of doing something similar against North Korea could be even more unpredictable and catastrophic, including escalation to a retaliatory nuclear strike against the United States or its allies,[24] the entry of Russia or China into a wider regional conflict, or proliferation concerns with North Korea's nuclear arsenal in a potential scenario of regime transition.

Second, US sanctions against Pyongyang must be fully enforced. Not only are they required under US law, but they provide useful leverage in any future negotiations. This enforcement must include secondary sanctions against Chinese banks and any other financial institutions around the world that facilitate North Korea's proliferation activities, cybercrimes, or human rights violations, otherwise North Korea will simply continue to find loopholes and have no incentive to change its behavior.

Third, President Trump must keep in mind that America's global alliances are key to ensuring that Kim Jong Un gets an offer he can't refuse. The Trump administration must build on the 2023 Camp David Summit and continue to bring Seoul and Tokyo closer together, strategically and militarily. Building the trilateral partnership is likely to remain challenging given the ebb and flow of domestic politics, but the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework provides an important base from which to start. At a minimum, the three partners must continue to conduct regular and robust military exercises—and do so as often as possible after each of Pyongyang's serious provocations. US military force posture in East Asia must—at the very least—remain at current levels, if

20 Joseph Kim, "Historic Camp David Summit Strengthens US Relations with South Korea and Japan, Condemns China and North Korea," George W. Bush Institute, August 22, 2023, https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/historic-camp-david-summit-strengthens-u-s-relations-with-south-korea-and-japan-condemns-china-and-north-korea; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "The US & Asia in 2024: Evolving Contours of Competition & Cooperation," *Asian Survey* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2025): 314.

21 Anthony Ruggiero, "The Robust North Korea Sanctions Mirage," *38 North*, February 13, 2024, https://www.38north.org/2024/02/the-robust-north-korea-sanctions-mirage/.

22 Harry Kazianis. "The North Korea Nightmare," *The Week*, April 17, 2017, https://theweek.com/articles/692117/north-korea-nightmare.

23 "North Korean Nuclear Weapons, 2024: Federation of American Scientists Release Latest North Korea Nuclear Weapons Estimate," Federation of American Scientists, July 15, 2024, https://fas.org/publication/north-korean-nuclear-weapons-2024/.

24 On crisis instability on the Peninsula, see Anderson and Press, "Lost Seoul?"

not be further enhanced to counter both the DPRK and the PRC threats.

Lastly, no option to deal with the North Korean threat should be taken off the table. The first Trump administration briefly contemplated a so-called "bloody nose strategy" to deal with Pyongyang's belligerence, and this option—though unlikely to be used—must remain viable.[25]

President Trump has stated he would like to pursue a Reagan-like policy of "peace through strength" to deter our adversaries. That is exactly how the United States should start in dealing with a nuclear-armed, increasingly dangerous Pyongyang.[26]

The Human Rights Imperative

Beyond the nuclear threat, North Korea also ranks terribly on its respect for human dignity and rights. Perennially among Freedom House's "worst of the worst" rankings in its annual Freedom in the World survey, North Korea is consistently ranked "not free."[27]

Consider the damning words of the 2014 report of the United Nations Committee of Inquiry on Human Rights on the DPRK: "Systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, its institutions and officials. . . . The gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world. Political scientists of the twentieth century characterized this type of political organization as a totalitarian State: a State that does not content itself with ensuring the authoritarian rule of a small group of people, but seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens' lives and terrorizes them from within."[28]

The Kim regime's morally reprehensible human rights record has serious implications for US national security. Linking these often siloed policy areas channels the wisdom of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, who observed, "A country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors."[29]

Today, more than ever, Pyongyang is boosted by the United States' primary geopolitical adversaries in Beijing and Moscow.

A 2016 report from the George W. Bush Institute illustrates Sakharov's prescience, noting that "revenues from North Korean human rights abuses, including the export of slave labor as well as from trading companies engaged in such abuses, are suspected to be used to fund nuclear proliferation activities."[30] Moreover, the report argued, "well-established North Korean practices with regard to food distribution, mass labor mobilization, and prison camp labor all favor the regime and its proliferation over the rights of the citizens."[31]

Today, more than ever, Pyongyang is boosted by the United States' primary geopolitical adversaries in Beijing and Moscow. A subsequent 2023 report from the Bush Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) examines how China, North Korea, and Russia have grown closer through facilitating human rights abuses and other strategic efforts.[32] China and Russia have provided Pyongyang political and economic support, facilitating the DPRK's evasion of sanctions by "aiding the importation into North Korea of refined petroleum; increasing North Korea's maritime export of coal (mostly to China); and changing the appearance of seagoing vessels so that North Korea's involvement in the transaction is obscured (particularly in Chinese ports)."[33] This illicit assistance, along with the

25 Zachary Cohen et al., "Trump Advisers Clash over "Bloody Nose" Strike on North Korea," *CNN*, February 1, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/01/politics/north-korea-trump-bloody-nose-dispute/index.html.

26 Jacob Stokes, "Trump Pushes 'Peace Through Strength' Vision with Defense Picks," Center for New American Security, November 14, 2024, https://www.cnas.org/press/in-the-news/trump-pushes-peace-through-strength-vision-with-defense-picks.

27 "Freedom in the World 2024," Freedom House: North Korea, February 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-korea/freedom-world/2024.

28 "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, February 7, 2014, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/108/66/pdf/g1410866.pdf.

29 Natan Sharansky. "The Essay That Helped Bring Down the Soviet Union," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/opinion/andrei-sakharov-essay-soviet-union.html.

30 Victor Cha and Robert L. Gallucci, "Toward a New Policy and Strategy for North Korea," report by the George W. Bush Institute, November 2016, 4, https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Resources/gwbi-toward-a-new-policy-for-north-korea.pdf.

31 Cha and Gallucci, "Toward a New Policy and Strategy for North Korea," 4.

32 Victor Cha and Katrin Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," report by the George W. Bush Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2023, https://gwbushcenter.imgix.net/wp-content/uploads/GWBI_2023_NKChinaRussia_Report.pdf.

33 Cha and Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses."

importation of North Korean forced labor, bolsters Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and the regime's coercive capacity to repress its own citizens.

To address this threat fully, Washington should recognize that Pyongyang's crimes against humanity are a vulnerability for the regime, as well as its CRINK allies. Any comprehensive North Korea strategy should leverage this reality by integrating human rights and security policies. An effective strategy would provide a vision for the American people that clearly defines how these issues affect American interests and exposes the crimes of these regimes; strengthens values-based alliances; utilizes existing tools that punish human rights abusers; supports North Korean escapees; and ensures that key personnel are in place for coordinating and implementing policy.

Rallying for Policy Action

Articulating a vision around human rights and security for the American people will be fundamental to build a more effective North Korea policy. This approach will require the Trump administration and Congress to create regular platforms that convey solidarity with and highlight the struggles of North Korean human rights advocates and escapees. Practically, that means welcoming more of these individuals to the Oval Office for publicized meetings with the president and key diplomatic and national security officials. Such events can be focal points for news coverage that illustrates and publicizes the Kim regime's depravity, while drawing clear connections with its growing nuclear arsenal. Historically, outlets like Voice of America and Radio Free Asia have served an important role in providing North Koreans inside North Korea with reliable information, and—like defectors meeting with American political leaders—exposing as false the Kim regime's propaganda that paints the United States as an enemy.

Another step is for the State Department to issue atrocity determinations against the DPRK and other countries that facilitate the Kim regime's human rights abuses. Doing so would officially recognize their crimes against humanity, providing moral clarity on these regimes' nature and the threat they pose. This effort could inspire action that increases external pressure on Pyongyang and its enablers, including legislation or similar determinations by allies.

Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Olivia Enos has noted this strategy's success in several cases since 2016, including for Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims targeted by the Islamic State group; China's Uyghur Muslims; and Burma's Rohingya.[34] Moreover, any determination on North Korea should describe China's and Russia's complicity in these crimes, which include exploiting North Korean forced labor, repatriating refugees, evading sanctions, and supporting Moscow's war effort.

On the global front, the United States should exercise strong leadership in rallying democracies across the globe and coordinating responses to mutual threats such as Russian–North Korean military cooperation and Beijing's regional hegemony.

The Republic of Korea and Japan, with strategic positions near China, North Korea, and Russia, should be points of emphasis regarding efforts on North Korean human rights. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo can build on the commitments made during their August 2023 Camp David summit.[35] One potential framework could be the State Department's United States–ROK–Japan trilateral dialogue in October 2024, which focused on North Korean human rights. The gathering saw officials from each country—as well as North Korean escapees providing testimony about the horrors of life in the DPRK—affirm their commitments to integrating human rights into policy.[36] And together, these countries should coordinate efforts to exert maximum pressure on Pyongyang over this issue and support victims of its oppression. This is particularly true of escapees experiencing transnational repression given that the ROK and the United States are primary destinations for North Korean refugees.[37]

Leveraging Existing Tools

Authoritarian governments crave legitimacy. When democracies place targeted sanctions on their individual leaders and families, businesses, or government entities for human rights abuses, these sanctions can discredit or weaken the regimes. Sanctions also impose personal costs—denying access

34 Olivia Enos, "The US Needs to Issue an Atrocity Determination for North Korea," Hudson Institute, April 30, 2024, https://www.hudson.org/human-rights/us-needs-issue-atrocity-determination-north-korea-olivia-enos.

35 "The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States," US Embassy and Consulate in the Republic of Korea, August 19, 2023, https://kr.usembassy.gov/081923-the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/.

36 "Open Session on Human Rights Abuses and Violations in North Korea," US Department of State, October 18, 2024, https://video.state.gov/detail/video/6363607210112/open-session-on-human-rights-abuses-and-violations-in-north-korea.

37 Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "How S. Korea's Next President Should Handle Kim Jong Un," *Journal of Democracy,* May 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-south-koreas-next-leader-should-handle-kim-jong-un/; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "Transnational Repression," June 18, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/transnational-repression.

to desired luxuries, recreation, travel, or personal financial gain—on autocrats who threaten freedom and security.

The NKSPEA and the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) are existing tools that do these very things. These tools should be more robustly enforced against human rights violators—particularly where there are obvious implications for nuclear proliferation.[38] Such legislation should be used to consistently designate Russian and Chinese entities involved in or complicit with practices related to North Korean human rights abuses, including cyber and cryptocurrency theft, and to impose secondary sanctions on their enablers.

Regulators should lean heavily on CAATSA's "rebuttable presumption" tenet, which assumes that any items crafted by North Korean labor were forced and should therefore be banned from importation to the United States. This approach would have serious implications for China and other countries that use forced North Korean labor. And to improve sanctions enforcement, Washington should develop and utilize mechanisms for production-chain mapping that identify the sectors and geographic areas where North Korean labor is being used.[39]

Punishing human rights abusers, though, is only one piece of the puzzle. Legislation that supports those struggling for freedom or fleeing tyranny is another important lever to pull. Reauthorization of the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA), which expired in 2022 but marked its twentieth anniversary last October, should be an easy but critical step for the Trump administration and Congress. Signed into law by President George W. Bush, NKHRA provided a special pathway for North Korean refugees to come to the United States and build better lives.[40] Once here, they became productive citizens who work hard to serve their communities while embracing American values.[41]

Escapee testimony also reveals that these individuals can become transformational agents, changing life for relatives and friends still in the DPRK through

38 See Section 304 of Public Law 114–122 (https://www.congress.gov/114/statute/STATUTE-130/STATUTE-130-Pg93.pdf) and Section 321 of Public Law 115–44 (https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/text).

39 Cha and Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," 12.

40 See Sections 302 and 303 of Public Law 108–333 (https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/4011/text).

41 Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Politics of the North Korean Diaspora* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

remittances and information sent back to family members.[42] The resources and information that North Korea's global "defector diaspora" provide can weaken the Kim regime's control over its people by increasing personal autonomy and exposing the lies of government propaganda.

Washington should put pressure on these internal fractures within the DPRK by further empowering North Koreans through the democracy programs that were funded through NKHRA. These programs included bolstering efforts aimed at breaking Pyongyang's monopoly on information—by injecting more foreign media into the country—and other nonprofit projects aimed at fostering accountable governance.[43] NKHRA provided clear policy direction for supporting these programs, and should not be forgotten (in the absence of reauthorization) as Congress and the administration determine the allocation of resources.

The NKHRA's clear moral and strategic value—along with the fact that it requires only modest resources—makes it baffling that this legislation hasn't been reauthorized since 2022. It was renewed three times prior with strong bipartisan support under both the Obama and Trump administrations. The NKHRA also enjoys influential champions in the government, including the current secretary of state, Marco Rubio, who sponsored the attempted 2023 reauthorization of NKHRA in the Senate, and House Foreign Affairs' East Asia and Pacific Subcommittee Chair Representative Young Kim, who did so in the House.

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Additionally, the law established the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues—an ambassador-level position within the State Department—imbued with Washington's authority to champion North Korean human rights and advocate for North Korean escapees.[44] The special envoy serves as a dedicated advocate for these issues, capable of bridging gaps between the security and human rights policy communities. Prior to Amb. Julie Turner, who served in the position from October 2023 through January 2025, the role went unfilled for nearly seven years;[45] the administration should consider nominating Amb. Turner's replacement quickly, though there is no legal obligation unless the NKHRA is reauthorized.

More generally, Washington should ensure it has other essential human rights and democratic governance personnel in place to implement policy. America's adversaries can't be expected to take US efforts on integrating security and human rights policy seriously if Washington isn't making it a priority. Most notably, these personnel includes the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, a position that has yet to be filled.

The components of a comprehensive and cohesive North Korea policy integrating human rights and security exist today. What is required are the leadership and coordination to utilize them together, more effectively. The reward could be a coherent approach to North Korea that tackles all angles of the threat posed by Pyongyang.

Conclusion

Three decades of policy failure should make us candid about both the nature of the challenge and where the United States and our allies have gone wrong in addressing the multifaceted threat posed by North Korea. The failure to denuclearize Pyongyang does not lie entirely with poor policy execution, given the overwhelmingly hostile, recalcitrant, and totalitarian nature of the Kim regime. Imposing additional sanctions against the regime, executing them more effectively, or increasing multilateral deterrence activities may alter Kim Jong Un's calculus—or it may not. The telltale signs of progress will be the manner in which the United States and its allies finally take concerted policy steps to convincingly indicate to the Kim regime that it must denuclearize—or face existential peril.

The task of persuading North Korea through sanction pressure will not be an easy one, but also not impossible. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, North Korea cut itself off from the world from 2020

42 "How A North Korean Defector Sends Money Back Home," *Liberty in North Korea*, July 22, 2022, https://libertyinnorthkorea.org/blog/how-a-north-korean-defector-sends-money-back-home.

43 See Sections 102, 103, 104 of Public Law 108–333 (https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/4011/text).

44 See Section 107 of Public Law 108–333 (https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/4011/text).

45 Ambassador Robert R. King, "Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Confirmed by Senate, but Still Not in Office at the State Department," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 11, 2023, https://www.csis.org/analysis/special-envoy-north-korea-human-rights-confirmed-senate-still-not-office-state-department.

until the middle of 2023, imposing the severest form of sanctions on itself. Pyongyang may have caved partially on its self-imposed measures before its gradual reopening in 2023. Soon after North Korea had announced its first cases of the disease in May 2022, CNN reported that some aid had "made its way into the country from China. Customs data shows from January to April [2022], North Korea imported more than 10 million masks, 1,000 ventilators and more than 2,000 kilograms of unspecified vaccines."[46]

This example suggests that even Pyongyang has breaking points when it comes to external pressure like sanctions. The United States, in coordination with its allies, should continue trying to exploit this potential vulnerability with a robust and consistent sanctions regime—particularly one that targets government leadership and officials. This approach should be made in concert with efforts to empower the North Korean people, intensifying external and internal pressure on Kim Jong Un.

Since 2022, Putin's support and China's quiet acquiescence to that enhanced partnership have only made North Korea's global outlook more favorable. As a result, if President Trump tries to reengage the North Korean leader in "summit diplomacy," he may succeed with his unconventional tactics where others have failed—but if North Korea continues to rebuff efforts to talk, he also may not succeed.

What we propose here, however, puts the US in the strongest possible position regardless of which path North Korea chooses. We must keep trying, because the threat posed by the DPRK remains complex, multifaceted, and growing. The United States cannot simply give up and accept decades of failure as permanent. Instead, it must continue to pursue a comprehensive—and most importantly, results-oriented—policy to end the threat from Pyongyang and bring the regime into compliance with its international obligations, including complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization.

While doing so, the US must also insist that the Kim regime begin respecting the human rights of its own people. Measurable human rights progress should remain an inextricable part of any US and allied policy toward the DPRK. US officials must not repeat the mistakes of the past, remaining passive while adversaries in Moscow and Beijing grow bolder in their enabling of the North Korean regime's proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and its horrific abuses against its own people.

Cory Gardner *is a former US senator who honorably represented the state of Colorado from 2015 to 2021. During his time in the Senate, Gardner served on the Foreign Relations Committee; the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee; and the Energy and Natural Resources Committee (serving as chair of the Water subcommittee for two years); and chaired the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity. He also served on the Small Business and Budget Committees. During his tenure as Chairman of the Asia and Cybersecurity Subcommittee, Gardner became a leading voice in the great power competition between China and the US, pushing to expand US leadership in the Indo-Pacific. His legislation, the landmark Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, created a generational framework for the US approach to a free and open Indo-Pacific and has already delivered billions of dollars in our effort to develop economic opportunities, strengthen defense, and promote democracy in Asia. Gardner led the effort to impose the first-ever mandatory sanctions against North Korea, along with the first-of-its-kind "cyber-sanctions," as the regime continues to be a leading abuser of human rights and its reckless advancement of nuclear weapons threatens our national security. Prior to being elected to the US Senate, Gardner represented Colorado's 4th Congressional District in the US House of Representatives from 2011 to 2015. During this time, he was an active member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. He also served in the Colorado State House as a state representative from 2005 until 2011.Gardner graduated summa cum laude from Colorado State University and received his law degree from the University of Colorado Boulder.*

Igor Khrestin *is Senior Advisor for Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute, where he previously served as the Bradford M. Freeman Managing Director of Global Policy. Prior to joining the Bush Institute, he served as managing director at FGS Global, a leading public affairs firm. Prior to those, Khrestin served in the US Senate for over a decade as senior advisor to former Senators Mark Kirk and Cory Gardner, including as staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, which Senator Gardner chaired. He served as the lead staffer for major legislative initiatives such as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018; the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016; and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019. Prior to his Hill tenure, Khrestin worked at the BGR Group and the American Enterprise Institute. He received*

46 Paula Hancocks and Yoonjung Seo, "Is North Korea Hiding a Bigger Problem Behind Its COVID-19 Outbreak?," CNN.com, July 6, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/05/asia/north-korea-bigger-health-problems-covid-intl-hnk.

a bachelor's degree in political science from Illinois Wesleyan University, a certificate in government from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a master's degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

***Chris Walsh** is Director of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute. In this role, Walsh manages communications, evaluation, and public policy research projects that advance freedom and democracy in the world. He also develops and implements efforts to make the Bush Institute a welcoming place for today's generation of dissidents and democracy advocates, overseeing visits for training, inspiration, and insight. Prior to joining the Bush Institute, Walsh worked with the International Republican Institute in Washington, DC. As IRI's program officer for Central and Eastern Europe, he coordinated political party building and civic advocacy programs in the Balkans and Turkey. A native of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Walsh is a graduate of American University with a BA in International Studies. He currently lives in Dallas with his wife and four young children.*

***Image:** "President Trump Meets with Chairman Kim Jong Un" by Trump White House Archived, Public Domain Mark.*[47]

47 For the image, see https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse45/48164732141.