# Living with the bomb

North Korea is nuclear-armed. Seoul is adapting: freeze first, disarmament later. But realism comes with risks

*Freeze – reduction – denuclearisation*: with this three-step approach, the South Korean government under Lee Jae-myung aims to give fresh impetus to peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula. Rather than obliging North Korea to dismantle its nuclear arsenal straight away, the plan is to first halt development, followed by a reduction and, finally, complete denuclearisation.

President Lee had already floated the idea of linking a freeze to the easing of sanctions as early as 2025. In the run-up to this year's United Nations General Assembly, he has now taken this logic a step further: the easing of sanctions as a concrete quid pro quo for a halt to the further development of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Lee Jae-myung's proposal acknowledges an uncomfortable reality: North Korea possesses nuclear weapons, and the strategy pursued to date has failed to prevent their development and expansion. The strength of this approach lies in taking this reality as its starting point and reopening a political process in the first place. However, realism must not be confused with acceptance. A freeze can be a necessary first step, provided that recognition of the status quo does not become its permanent legitimisation. Recognising reality – without capitulating to it – is essential. This is precisely where the opportunity, but also the risk, of South Korea's initiative lies.

## The tables have turned

Despite the 1953 armistice, North and South Korea have remained in a state of war for over 70 years. Most recently, the summit meetings during Donald Trump's first term brought some movement to the Korean Peninsula. The initiative ultimately failed in Hanoi over the issue of the nuclear programme: what concessions would North Korea make in exchange for which sanctions relief? Trump called off the summit before lunch: 'No deal.' A significant loss of face for Kim Jong Un. In the years that followed, Pyongyang carried out a strategic U-turn.

Since then, the situation has changed. North Korea has gradually expanded its nuclear weapons programme and is estimated to possess 60 nuclear warheads. Added to this is fissile material sufficient for significantly more warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the US mainland. The goal of reunification as a state doctrine has since been abandoned, and South Korea has been declared an enemy state. Nuclear weapons have become the regime's life insurance, and its own nuclear status is described as irreversible.

North Korea is now in a significantly stronger position than it was in 2019. Above all, its relations with Russia provide Pyongyang with strategic depth: arms supplies and the deployment of North Korean soldiers in the war of aggression against Ukraine bring in foreign currency, military experience, technological advances in its own weapons systems and political backing. Alongside its complicated relationship with China, North Korea thus has a second partner. At the same time, economic ties with Russia and China have grown, bringing tangible economic benefits for North Korea.

*The idea that international economic pressure could eventually simply force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme is naïve.*

In an interview with the New York Times, the South Korean President, of all people, called into question the decades-long sanctions doctrine. In doing so, he has hit a sore spot. Even though the UN sanctions regime formally remains in place, its practical enforcement has been significantly weakened. In 2024, Russia used its veto to end the mandate of the UN panel of experts tasked with monitoring sanctions. China abstained. A new monitoring mechanism, involving Germany amongst others, has since been attempting to close this gap. It documents extensive military and economic cooperation between Russia and North Korea in breach of existing UN resolutions. Added to this are revenues from cybercrime: in 2024 alone and in the first nine months of 2025, nearly three billion US dollars are said to have been stolen in this way.

Nevertheless, sanctions are not entirely ineffective. US financial and secondary sanctions, in particular, impose considerable costs on North Korea. An easing of sanctions therefore certainly offers an incentive. But the idea that international economic pressure could eventually simply force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme is naïve.

Whilst Lee Jae-myung therefore demonstrates the necessary realism, the key question remains: why should North Korea, in exchange for limited sanctions relief, freeze something that, strategically speaking, is the most valuable asset at the regime's disposal?

In fact, even a freeze on the further expansion of its nuclear arsenal would be a success. After all, a North Korea that produces additional warheads and delivery systems every year becomes a greater threat. Seeking to halt this process is the right thing to do. The question, however, is how this can be achieved and what the consequences might be.

## A difficult dilemma

In January 2003, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has been the cornerstone of the international non-proliferation regime since 1970. In October 2006, North Korea carried out its first nuclear weapons test. Recognising the reality of a nuclear-armed North Korea is therefore a strategic necessity. But what happens if this is accepted publicly and de facto? What happens to attitudes towards nuclear weapons in the immediate neighbourhood?

In South Korea, these questions are no longer merely theoretical. Even now, a clear majority is in favour, in principle, of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons capability. Admittedly, this support drops significantly as soon as specific costs and consequences are mentioned, but even then the approval ratings remain high. In Japan, too, there is a shift in attitudes towards nuclear policy, albeit at a significantly lower level, likely fuelled by the growing uncertainty under Trump regarding the reliability of American security guarantees. The problem is not merely the risk of a chain reaction of nuclear armament, but also the political and societal consequences of de facto recognition of North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state in a complex geopolitical situation. These must also be considered beyond the region.

And therein lies the real dilemma: how can one deal with a de facto nuclear-armed North Korea without recognising its nuclear status as the new normal? A freeze would not constitute formal recognition. Politically, however, it could have the effect of one – a possibility that must be taken into account from the outset.

*Despite all the uncertainties, a window of opportunity is opening up*

There are also practical difficulties. There have been no inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency in North Korea since 2009. A robust agreement would require North

*with Lee Jae-myung's government and also the current US administration.*

Korea to declare its facilities, allow monitoring and grant international inspectors at least limited access to the regime's inner sanctum. A freeze is therefore not a straightforward starting point. Even initial steps would require complex negotiations. Following the latest developments in Iran, at the very least, North Korea is unlikely to have much interest in disclosing sensitive nuclear facilities.

Added to this is the high volatility of South Korean policy towards North Korea. Progressive governments place greater emphasis on dialogue and rapprochement, whilst conservative governments focus on deterrence, alliance-based policy and, most recently, maximum pressure. Agreements reached by one government can be called into question by the next within a matter of years. A process based largely on Lee Jae-myung and Donald Trump would therefore be structurally fragile. What will happen at the next change of government in Seoul or Washington? Mechanisms would therefore need to be put in place that can withstand political changes.

This does not mean that South Korea's initiatives should simply be dismissed. On the contrary. Despite all the uncertainties, a window of opportunity is opening up with Lee Jae-myung's government and also the current US administration. At the very least, channels of communication could be reopened. The complex international security situation, with its overlapping conflict dynamics, virtually demands that all options be seriously and consistently examined.

*After all, peace on the Korean Peninsula and stability in North-East Asia remain of strategic interest to Europe as well.*

A key element lies in regional integration, taking the US into account. Rather than banking on a major deal, what is needed is a long-term, institutionally underpinned process. However, neither the US nor China is currently prepared to do this. So, as long as there is little scope for this at government level, informal dialogue formats can build trust, test the limits and pave the way for future negotiations. Europe can do more than simply comment on developments from the sidelines. It should make more strategic use of existing channels of engagement. These include not only the Swedish and Polish embassies in Pyongyang but also civil society initiatives.

Europe should take Lee Jae-myung's proposal as an opportunity to develop a joint strategy. After all, peace on the Korean Peninsula and stability in North-East Asia remain of strategic interest to Europe as well. Of course, a freeze would not constitute peace, nor would it resolve the nuclear issue. However, it could be a realistic first step – provided it is understood as the starting point of a process and not as an acceptance of a new nuclear status quo. This is precisely what the strategy must reflect: taking North Korea's nuclear reality seriously without allowing it to become a political dead end.

---



**Christoph Heuser**
Seoul

Christoph Heuser heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) office in South Korea. Previously, he headed the FES office in Brazil.