

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Outlook for North Korea Policy under the Second Trump Administration and South Korea's Response

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South Korea's Response

South Korea's key national interests in North Korea policy are preventing war, achieving denuclearization, and laying the foundation for unification. It must recognize that denuclearization of North Korea is essential to national security and work closely with the United States to completely dismantle the North's nuclear program, while securing U.S. backing for a Seoul-led unification process.

It must also lock in denuclearization as the end goal and principle with the United States, Japan, and Europe, opposing any "stopgap measure" regarding North Korea's nuclear threat. To this end, South Korea should push for a tightly coordinated ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral framework, ensuring its full participation in all stages of talks. Alongside U.S.-North Korea bilateral efforts, South Korea must push for ROK-U.S.-DPRK trilateral talks to prevent any backroom deals between Washington and Pyongyang, and promote broader multilateral talks including China, Japan, Russia, and the EU for international legitimacy.

South Korea should craft a comprehensive negotiation proposal for denuclearization and share it with the United States. The core premise of the proposal should be centered on the irreversible dismantlement of North's nuclear and missile programs—offering phased sanctions relief and economic aid in return. If Pyongyang commits to a denuclearization roadmap, Seoul could support measures such as diplomatic normalization with the United States and Japan, an inter-Korean non-aggression pact, and a U.S. "no-first-use" pledge against North Korea. Oversight and reciprocal steps are key. Meanwhile, sanctions must be

tightened with tools like a Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) and potential U.S. secondary sanctions.

If the U.S.-DPRK deals undermine South Korea's deterrence capabilities, Seoul must oppose such deals. If unavoidable, it must secure strong compensatory measures—such as redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons—and consider developing its own indigenous nuclear capability if U.S. forces withdraw without coordination with the South or if the United States de facto recognizes North Korea's nuclear status.

South Korea and the United States should pursue a dual-track strategy: combining pressure and isolation with diplomacy to raise the cost of North Korea's nuclear program and drive it to negotiate. Seoul must also work with Washington to encourage gradual change in North Korea by separating the regime from the people—expanding aid and cultural exchanges to build hope and admiration for the South and the West. To strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance coordination, Seoul must embrace “strategic clarity” and align with U.S. global strategy, especially in countering China. It should position itself as a key Indo-Pacific partner and prepare for Trump-era defense cost demands, using them to negotiate strategic concessions like nuclear submarines or fuel cycle rights. All of these responses must ultimately be underpinned by South Korea's commitment to strengthening its autonomous national defense—building robust missile defenses and strike systems, strengthening its naval power including building nuclear submarines, expanding its air force capabilities that would enable strikes across the entire Northeast Asian region, and enhancing intelligence and surveillance infrastructure.

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