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Back to Reality: Prospects for Peace on the Korean Peninsula in 2026¹

Seksan Anantasirikiat²

As a Thai scholar working on the two Koreas issue, my colleagues and students always ask me: is there any possibility for the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to be unified in the future? The response is not easy as prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula goes beyond the two Koreas. The role of regional key players, namely China, Japan, Russia, and the US always matters for navigating the course of changes. However, this does not mean that the two Koreas should take a “wait-and-see” approach and let other states shape their own agenda over the two countries' aspirations.

In this article, I argue that the international community should be realistic about what they can do and should do. A precedent condition is to understand ongoing developments and emerging prospects for the future of peace on the Korean Peninsula. It is time to respond to strategic shift in

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² Senior Researcher, International Studies Center (ISC) and Director of Public Relations, Korean Association of Thai Studies (KATS).

a practical manner. There are two major trends that define surrounding environment in 2026. First, the ROK's government under President Lee Jae Myung recognised “*de facto* two states” in the White Paper on Unification, implying that Seoul shifted its approach from immediate unification to pursue long-term peaceful coexistence. President Lee has rarely used the word “unification or *Tongil*” (in Korean) in his speech since inauguration in June 2025. The administration also allows the public access to DPRK's media such as newspaper *Rodong Shinmun* and information provided by the DPRK's side. At the operational level, the Ministry of Unification executed a threefold approach: respecting the DPRK's system, abstaining from unification by absorption and avoiding hostile activities. At the same time, the ROK strengthens credible deterrence by advancing trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan. On 7 July, foreign ministers of the three countries met at a sideline meeting of NATO in Ankara. They agreed on efforts to denuclearise the Peninsula and continue dialogue with the DPRK.

Second, there has been increasing alignment between the DPRK, Russia and China. The DPRK and Russia have become a *de jure* alliance following the signing of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty. Moscow relies heavily on Pyongyang for munitions, ballistic missiles, and manpower for its operations in Ukraine, while the DPRK receives critical military and technological assistance in return. On relationship with China, President Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to the DPRK for the first time in 7 years on 8-9 June. The state visit began with a massive red-carpet welcome at Kim Il-Sung Square featuring a 21-gun salute and a guard of honor. Discussions focused on deepening exchanges in diplomacy, the military, trade, agriculture, technology and construction. The key message is clear. Beijing remains Pyongyang's primary economic lifeline, providing essential energy, food and dual-use technology. Chairman Kim Jong Un declared that consolidating their relationship was the unchanging strategic choice of the DPRK.

It is expected that China's support for the DPRK's economic development could chart an alternative path for the DPRK so that it would not be a de-stabilising factor for regional security.

There are two implications of these ongoing developments for policy practitioners. First, geopolitical competition in this region will be intensified. The Korean Peninsula issue has always been acknowledged as one of the three main flashpoints in Asia. The other two are Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. There is a possibility that the Korean Peninsula issue could be politicised as a bargaining chip to attain other strategic objectives of any regional key players. In addition, there is a concern about interlinkages of the three flashpoints that any major military conflict in one area will inevitably affect the other two areas. Therefore, it is time to think about effective preventive diplomacy such as early-warning mechanism and confidence-building measure. The international community should be more proactive in being "bridge-builder" between the two Koreas through multi-track diplomacy. I always promote the idea of "ASEAN+2 (Koreas)" mechanism, bringing together scholars and practitioners to discuss creative entry points to engage with the DPRK, such as climate adaptation, disaster management, humanitarian assistance and sustainable development. In ASEAN way of thought, dialogue and engagement is necessary for any de-escalation of conflict and peaceful dispute settlement.

Second, the ROK has a high stake in shaping a conducive environment on the Peninsula. As Jeffrey Robertson argues, analysts on the Korean Peninsula issue should "reject the outdated, attention-seeking fascination with North Korea, and started to assess and analyse South Korea *before* turning to North Korea". Seoul has put various efforts on accommodating different views and interests of regional key players and international community. At the 80th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2025, President Lee underlined the importance of multilateral cooperation and proposed the idea of "E.N.D. Initiative" – Exchange, Normalisation and

Denuclearisation – to end the Cold War on the Peninsula. To achieve this goal, there is an urgent need to build “trust” with the DPRK. Since the first Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, Seoul has adopted several efforts to engage and build trust with its counterpart in Pyongyang, including high-level visits, economic assistance and socio-cultural activities. Responses to Seoul have been strategic, depending on the objectives Pyongyang wishes to achieve at a particular point in time, mostly economic benefits or international recognition. Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan paid a visit to the DPRK in May. In his public interview to the media, it seems that the DPRK is not ready to open significant communication channels with the US, the ROK or Japan. He also observed remarkable development in Pyongyang, including modern buildings and infrastructure. There is another “new reality” that the DPRK will be more introvert. The country will pay more attention to develop domestic capacity rather than seek external engagement. The sense of insecurity was also provoked by the US’s military operations in Iran.

It is unlikely that the path toward peace on the Korean Peninsula will be a bed of roses under an intensifying geopolitical competition. In this context, President Lee’s inauguration speech is the best conclusion for this article. He says, “[n]o matter how expensive, peace is better than war. It is better to win without fighting than to fight and win – and a peace that requires no fighting is the most secure form of security”.