

THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA & RENEWABLE ENERGY: POTENTIAL AS TRUST BUILDING ENGAGEMENT?

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In 2025, re-engaging the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has returned to the political agendas in Seoul and Washington. Nevertheless, with the DPRK's geopolitical position having improved tremendously since the Kim-Trump Summits in 2018, the playing field is very different. As Washington and Seoul continue to prioritize complete denuclearization, misalignment of interests between the ROK, U.S., and DPRK makes it difficult to actualize re-engagement, with a potential deadlock being the most likely outcome. As a result, options outside of the regional framework and disarmament negotiation approach must be considered if the status quo is to be disrupted. This issue brief explores Nordic-DPRK renewable energy collaboration as a low-risk, confidence-building measure to stabilize engagement, in alignment with the policies in Washington and Seoul. It does not intend to promote itself as the exclusive solution, but rather as a means to broaden the discussion on how to approach the DPRK today.

Introduction

With the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump and Republic of Korea (ROK) President Lee Jae Myung in 2025, re-engaging the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has once more emerged on the two countries' political agendas. Nevertheless, with the DPRK's geopolitical position having improved tremendously, as a direct consequence of increased

economic, technological, and military cooperation with Russia, with the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024,¹ the playing field for engagement and negotiation have changed drastically since the Kim-Trump Summits in 2018. With the DPRK currently meeting the majority of its security and financial needs solely through the DPRK-Russia-China trilateral cooperation, the question that arises is what the U.S.,

the ROK, and other countries could offer Pyongyang in exchange for re-engagement with the goal of reducing regional tensions and normalizing relations.

To achieve this, innovative and new-thinking approaches may be needed. Furthermore, to increase the success of future engagement measures' with the DPRK, the international community must confront the reality of the DPRK's military capabilities, as any future engagement that ignores this aspect is sure to fail. Previous unsuccessful attempts to denuclearize the DPRK through coercion, which may have paradoxically exacerbated the DPRK's nuclear ambitions,² highlight the need to reassess past efforts and adapt to the new status quo when strategizing how to engage the DPRK in the future. That said, financial sanctions and deterrence measures should not be disregarded as critical instruments when other diplomatic tools fail, as the consequences of not using coercive measures may outweigh the possible benefits of alternative diplomatic measures.

This issue brief explores Nordic-DPRK renewable energy collaboration as a low-risk measure to establish trust and stabilize engagement, in alignment with the policies in Washington and Seoul. It does not intend to promote itself as the exclusive solution, but rather as a means to broaden the discussion on how to approach the DPRK today. As such, it provides an overview of the feasibility of renewable energy cooperation between the DPRK and Nordic nations, particularly Sweden, as an alternative diplomatic tool for engaging in dialogue with Pyongyang. A brief overview of the potential pitfalls connected with this type of action is also provided.

Non-negotiables & Re-engagement

In a KCNA press statement on July 29, Kim Yo-jong, Vice Department Director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea and sister to DPRK leader Kim Jung-un, emphasized the need for the international community, particularly Washington, to engage the DPRK through "new thinking" diplomatic tools, as discussions on the state's nuclear status and

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denuclearization remains non-negotiable.³ Reaffirming his sister's proclamation, DPRK leader Kim Jung-un stated on September 21 that "if the United States, freeing itself from its absurd pursuit of other people's denuclearization and recognizing reality, wants genuine peaceful coexistence with us, there is no reason for us not to come face to face with it,"⁴ implying the possibility of dialogue with the U.S on premises other than denuclearization negotiations.

However, with the U.S. State Department reaffirming Washington's goal of pursuing the DPRK's "complete denuclearization,"⁵ only a few days after Kim Jung-un expressed willingness to meet with President Donald Trump if the idea of denuclearization was disbanded, a Trump-Kim summit in the near future appears doubtful. Nevertheless, if Washington were to abandon denuclearization talks given Trump's well-known propensity to alter his policies at the eleventh hour, the next questions would be what the two leaders might discuss as an alternative, and whether Trump can build long-term ties with Pyongyang and achieve tangible

results, or if everything will fall apart as it did at the Hanoi summit.

In contrast to the U.S., despite the new ROK administration's introduction of goodwill measures towards the DPRK by rolling back hard-line policies in 2025, such as dismantling propaganda speakers in the Demilitarized Zone and officially pledging Seoul's intention to respect the DPRK's political system and not to pursue "unification by absorption,"⁶ Pyongyang categorically rejected future dialogue with Seoul in official statements on July 28 and September 21, 2025.⁷ The rationale was based on the two countries' history of bad-faith relations, as well as the ROK's status as the DPRK's "invariable principal enemy," a designation it acquired in 2024, simultaneously with Pyongyang official abandonment of its long-standing policy of peaceful unification with the ROK.⁸

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Despite this dismissal, the Lee administration continued to demonstrate its willingness to improve relations with its northern neighbour. These efforts included expressing potential openness to negotiating Seoul's position on the DPRK's nuclear arsenal and expanding engagement efforts beyond disarmament talks. In contrast to the U.S., Lee voiced the potential necessity of adopting more "realistic goals", such as securing the DPRK's agreement to stop acquiring nuclear weapons, rather than continuing what he described as "fruitless attempts" to compel Pyongyang to give up its existing nuclear arsenal.⁹ This apparent shift in Seoul's approach to inter-Korean relations became clear during Lee's September 24 address to the UN General Assembly, in which he announced his "END" initiative, an acronym for "exchange," "normalization" and "denuclearization."¹⁰ The initiative suggests a dual approach that places diplomacy at center stage, with objectives extending beyond disarmament and emphasizing the resumption of broader engagement. This change in Seoul's approach may stem from Lee's openly expressed assessment that previous pressure and sanctions on the DPRK failed to achieve their intended outcomes and instead further incentivized Pyongyang to pursue its nuclear aspirations. Nonetheless, despite Seoul's apparent willingness to approach Pyongyang in various ways, the long-term goal remains the total denuclearization of the DPRK.

However, the publicly released fact sheet on the new U.S.-ROK MoU in November 2025 may render Seoul's 2025 inter-Korean efforts largely futile. In the MoU, the U.S. and the ROK reaffirmed the alliance's continued pursuit of the complete denuclearization of the DPRK. The immediate reaction from DPRK leader Kim Jung Un characterized this as "the true colors of the confrontational will of the US and the ROK to remain hostile towards the DPRK to the end and predicts the future of the US-ROK alliance that will get more dangerous and warns in advance the regional security situation that will become more unstable owing to it." Furthermore, Pyongyang described the U.S. approval for Seoul to build nuclear-powered submarines as a "serious development that de-stabilizes the military security situation in the Asia-Pacific region beyond the Korean

Peninsula [...].”¹¹ With Seoul, at least in Pyongyang’s eyes, continuing to send mixed signals and failing to show commitment to improving inter-Korean relations, it is difficult to envision constructive engagement in the near future.

The combination of the DPRK’s non-negotiables and misalignment of interests for engagement between the ROK, U.S., and DPRK makes it difficult to actualize re-engagement currently, with a potential deadlock being the most likely outcome. As a result, options outside the existing regional framework and beyond traditional disarmament negotiations may need to be considered if any meaningful change to the status quo is to be achieved.

Reassess and Adapt

Building on the demonstrated mismatch of policy objectives between the DPRK, ROK, and U.S., the international community must reassess their approach and switch to a more adaptable strategy in which the benefits of engagement exceed potential drawbacks, if it seeks to build trust and foster future friendly interaction with the DPRK. To accomplish this, following aspects should be taken into consideration when engaging the DPRK in the future:

1. The international community must confront the new reality of the DPRK’s improved position, including its growing nuclear arsenal, and decreasing likelihood of being coerced into agreements that conflict with its political objectives. This recognition does not imply that states publicly acknowledge the DPRK as a nuclear power, but rather a shift in mindset when approaching Pyongyang in the future.
2. In this context, with Russia and China already violating UN Security Council sanctions¹² imposed on the DPRK, the use of financial coercion has become increasingly ineffective and no longer provides the intended leverage. Moreover, given that the DPRK already possesses nuclear weapons sufficient to ensure regime survival,¹³ the existing legal framework of sanctions no longer serves its original purpose and could instead hinder

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constructive interactions with Pyongyang. Therefore, the overall value of sanctions must be re-evaluated, particularly in light of the possibility that engaging with the DPRK in certain areas could have more benefits than drawbacks.

3. Furthermore, approaching the subject of denuclearization without first addressing the underlying sense of insecurity and threat perception that motivates Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear capabilities seems somewhat naive and unrealistic, especially given entrenched bad-faith interactions among actors on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴ As long as Pyongyang believes that its nuclear arsenal is the main guarantor of the nation’s survival, denuclearization is likely to remain a non-negotiable issue for many years to come

Based on these arguments, future efforts that fail to account for these three observations are likely to be unsuccessful. Consequently, the status quo will persist

if coercion and deterrence are the only tools available to the international community for engaging the DPRK, coupled with a persistent reluctance to pursue engagement beyond denuclearization.

The Nordic Countries as Bridge-builders

To increase the likelihood of a positive shift in the status quo and to advance the long-term goal of stability on the Korean Peninsula through trust-building efforts, other options for resolving the current impasse should be explored. Among these, the potential role of the Nordic nations warrants particular attention.

As close bilateral and multilateral allies of both the U.S. and the ROK, while also maintaining relatively stable relations with the DPRK,¹⁵ the Nordic states are well positioned—at least in comparison to many other countries—to act as bridge-builders between the DPRK and the Western world during the early stages of trust-building and diplomatic engagement.

With its long-standing reputation for mediation and established diplomatic ties, Sweden in particular could prove to be a key actor in efforts to re-engage the DPRK through various diplomatic channels. The presence of a DPRK embassy in Stockholm and a Swedish embassy in Pyongyang, which reopened in the fall of 2024,¹⁶ further underscores Sweden's unique position. Sweden has previously facilitated critical diplomatic meetings between the DPRK, the United States, and other Western nations, by leveraging its perceived impartiality and long relationship with Pyongyang. One of the most recent examples occurred in 2019, when the US and the DPRK met in Stockholm for disarmament negotiations.¹⁷ In addition, Sweden is a member of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC)¹⁸ and has served as a neutral observer and mediator between the DPRK and ROK on issues in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), since its establishment. Given its current relations with the DPRK, Sweden is positioned as a trustworthy interlocutor capable of moving beyond denuclearization talks, building confidence through diplomatic

engagement, and potentially serving as a conduit for future communication between the DPRK, U.S. and the ROK when political conditions allow.

Currently, the most significant political impediment to Nordic engagement with the DPRK is Pyongyang's involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. All Nordic countries support Ukraine's right to self-defense and have provided Kyiv with armaments,¹⁹ some of which might be used against DPRK combatants fighting on Russia's side as of April 2024.²⁰ Nonetheless, the likelihood that the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, would remain willing to build relations with the DPRK as part of broader Western efforts to promote normalization and engagement remains relatively high. This assessment is supported by Sweden's historical record of engaging with difficult actors and complex conflicts. Besides its engagement with the DPRK, notable examples include Sweden's consistent involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the efforts of Swedish diplomats during WW2 to save lives in Nazi-controlled territories through diplomatic efforts.²¹

Renewable Energy – Fundament for Engagement?

Since its establishment, the DPRK has faced persistent energy shortages, with most of its energy mix relying on two domestic sources of commercial energy: coal and hydropower. The country's long-standing energy deficit is likewise demonstrated in previous denuclearization negotiations, including the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Six Party Talks (2003-2006), where energy assistance constituted a recurring premise for DPRK participation in denuclearization efforts. The DPRK has been forced to resort to a rationing system as a result of the country's electricity deficit and frequently endures prolonged blackouts and large power losses because of an outdated transmission grid. While the DPRK's hydropower generation takes advantage of the country's vast mountains and rivers, it also suffers from a significant drawback. During winter, severe temperatures freeze rivers or limit water flow, reducing

electricity generation when the country needs it the most.²² This seasonal vulnerability underscores the need to diversify the country's energy mix by incorporating additional renewable energy sources to stabilize supply throughout the year.

In 2007, the “Renewable Energy Act” was introduced as a means to solve the country’s energy deficiency with the objective of promoting the development and expanded use of renewable energy within the national energy balance. In 2025, the law was revised to include, among other provisions, more detailed stipulations about civil, administrative and criminal liability, including specific fines and suspensions as well as the inclusion of solar energy and biomass as potential renewable energy sources.²³ Currently renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, make up only a fraction of the national energy supply, and could prove to be a viable solution to the DPRK’s energy fluctuations.

Given that the Nordic countries are globally recognized

as leaders in renewable energy, including wind and solar—the region as a whole meets more than 60 percent of its gross final energy consumption from renewable sources, which is more than double the European Union average²⁴—this could be an area of immediate synergy for potential cooperation. Furthermore, Pyongyang’s consistent openness to cooperate multilaterally on environmental issues, as evidenced by its participation in a number of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and regular attendance at international climate meetings,²⁵ lends credence to the argument that such cooperative initiatives between the Nordics and the DPRK are feasible in practice. Pyongyang has among others signalled willingness to engage in multilateral cooperation on environmental concerns, as seen by its signing and ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2016,²⁶ and its most recent participation in the COP30 climate conference in Brazil in November 2025.²⁷ The same commitment to multilateral climate cooperation can be said for the Nordic countries, who have also signed and ratified the Paris Agreement, in addition to focusing on leveraging shared strengths in green energy, climate solutions, and the circular economy to maintain a leading global role in sustainability.

With clear policy overlap in renewable energy, cooperation in this domain presents a viable pathway for engaging Pyongyang as an alternative to, or even concurrently with, any prospects for U.S.-ROK-DPRK cooperation. Such collaboration could be institutionalized into a standardized platform, ensuring long-term exchanges and serves as a confidence-building measure, potentially reducing perceptions of insecurity on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, a standardized platform could facilitate the documentation of ideas and technology transfers while streamlining communication in a minilateral context, thereby enhancing the continuity of engagement.

Why Not Partner with China?

While China can also be regarded as a global leader in renewable energy production and technical advancements in 2025, evidenced by its competency

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and rapid installation of solar and wind power infrastructure, the Nordic nations remain the best possible partner for the DPRK in this field. Despite increased friendly interactions following Kim Jung Un’s participation in China’s 2025 Victory Parade, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang remain strained,²⁸ and the growing resentment in Pyongyang toward its economic dependence on Beijing further elevates the Nordic countries as a strategic alternative.

The DPRK has showed a significant propensity to seek alternatives to its trade reliance on China in 2024 and 2025, by re-establishing or expanding diplomatic and commercial ties with countries outside its immediate neighborhood. Besides the most obvious strategic pivot toward Russia, since the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024, the DPRK has also expanded trade links with, among others, Argentina, Austria, and the Netherlands.²⁹ This trend underscores a diversifying political agenda in Pyongyang and a window of opportunity for Nordic engagement. As such, despite Beijing’s capabilities to provide Pyongyang with the necessary technology and assistance, the Nordic nations would be able to offer renewable cooperation with the added benefit of the DPRK finding a way to reduce or at least maintain the status quo of its hyper-dependence on China, in alignment with its diversification strategy.

Legal Considerations

Nonetheless, to facilitate such cooperation, existing United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), particularly Resolutions 1718 (2006) and 2375 (2017), must be taken into consideration, as the sanctions they impose would render DPRK-Nordic cooperation in renewable energy legally difficult.

Following the DPRK’s first nuclear test in October 2006, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718, which became the first of nine sanctions resolutions targeting the DPRK’s nuclear and missile programs. A ban on the “direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer” of “items, materials, equipment, goods and technology, determined by the Security Council or the Committee, which could

contribute to DPRK’s nuclear-related, ballistic missile-related, or other weapons of mass destruction related programs” was introduced in Article 8 of UNSCR 1718³⁰ in order to limit the DPRK’s access to foreign capital or technology that could be used to advance its nuclear program. Consequently, any assessment of DPRK-Nordic cooperation in renewable energy must take into account Article 8’s ban on technology transfer. Any forms of technology transfers to the DPRK which could contribute to its nuclear program are therefore prohibited under current UNSC sanctions. In continuation of UNSCR 1718, UNSCR 2375 further restricts cooperation with the DPRK by introducing Article 18 on “Joint Ventures” which decides that “[...] all joint ventures or cooperative entities, new and existing, with DPRK entities or individuals” are prohibited.³¹

In the end, it is difficult to guarantee that the transfer of renewable green energy technology from the Nordics would not at least have the potential to indirectly benefit the nuclear program in the DPRK. Given the possibility of securing the nation’s energy supply through renewable energy cooperation and potential technology transfers in this sector, this cooperation could be used to both provide electricity to the population as well as to factories that support the DPRK’s nuclear program, hence having a dual usage nature. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the potential advantages of raising living standards for civilians through better access to electricity, increased support for global sustainability development, and—above all—building trust and confidence with Pyongyang to increase the likelihood of achieving denuclearization as a long-term goal, outweigh the potential negative dual-use effect of this type of collaboration, with some of the electricity generated being used for military purposes.

In order to enable renewables cooperation between the DPRK and the Nordic countries, political commitment and persuasion of the Security Council and/or the UN-established DPRK Sanctions Committee would be necessary in order to prevail over some of the current UN sanctions imposed on the DPRK. This seems to be the most challenging obstacle to overcome. As such, a

significant amount of work would be required to make such a project legally feasible; nevertheless, given the potential positive impact of engaging the DPRK through the proposed framework, such an effort is worth investigating and working towards.

Conclusion

If the international community's primary goal is to stabilize the situation and reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, they must begin to treat engagement with the DPRK as a relationship to manage on an equal footing rather than as a problem that needs to be solved. As such, diplomatic initiatives other than denuclearization negotiations should be investigated and implemented. The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula should continue to be perceived as a long-term objective that does not impede short- and medium-term development in other areas, while trust building efforts pave the way for constructive dialogue on the future of the Korean Peninsula.

The prospect of building trust through diplomatic measures in a low-risk area, such as green energy cooperation, should not be discarded as an alternative to previous failed coercive measures. While there are some potential drawbacks, such as the indirect supply of energy to production that could help the DPRK's nuclear program, the advantages of this possible engagement outweigh the disadvantages. These advantages include enhancing the standard of living of the country's population, supporting global sustainability development, and most importantly, fostering trust and confidence with Pyongyang. Consequently, creating a framework wherein the Nordic countries, especially Sweden, and the DPRK could exchange ideas and technologies to be used to modernize the renewable energy infrastructure in the DPRK should be further investigated and perceived as a low-hanging fruit of engagement.

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