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NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR DILEMMA: A THREAT FOR NORTH-EAST ASIAN SECURITY

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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
27TH FEB 2025

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SECURITY

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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS ON 27TH FEBRUARY 2025

North Korea poses an unprecedented threat to the regional security architecture of North-East Asia. North Korea's nuclear ambitions have been a persistent threat to the security landscape of Northeast Asia. The origins of this program can be traced back to the timeline prior to the before the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. Initial Soviet assistance helped build nuclear infrastructure, with the Yongbyon reactor playing a key role in later nuclear developments. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 influenced North Korea's perception of nuclear weapons as a critical security guarantee.

Ms Roy highlighted the major developments that shaped North Korea's nuclear trajectory through the decades. The developments are enlisted below:

- **1960s–1980s:** Early nuclear experiments began in the 1960s. North Korea joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1974 and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985.
- **1990s:** The 1991 START treaty and the denuclearisation declaration of the Korean Peninsula were overshadowed by continued missile tests and diplomatic tensions.
- **2000s:** North Korea admitted to a secret nuclear weapons program in 2002 and withdrew from the NPT in 2003. The first nuclear test occurred in 2006, followed by another in 2009. The six party talks led by the US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas' also failed owing to failure of negotiations and North Korea's continued nuclear tests.
- **2010s–Present:** Long-range nuclear missiles were developed, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were tested from 2017 onwards.

Diplomatic attempts, including the Trump-Kim and Moon-Kim summits, have failed to yield lasting denuclearisation.

Additionally, North Korea's approach to nuclear weapons is deeply intertwined with its national ideology and governance structures. The two primary ideological frameworks that drive Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are **Juche (Self-Reliance)** and **Songun (Military-First Policy)**. Both serve as political, economic, and security doctrines that justify the country's continued pursuit of nuclear capabilities. Juche (주체) is North Korea's official state ideology, established by Kim Il-Sung in the late 1940s and solidified as the guiding principle of the regime. It emphasises self-reliance in politics, defence, and the economy, rejecting dependence on foreign powers. The ideology is designed to ensure that North Korea remains sovereign and independent, free from the influence of external forces such as the United States, South Korea, and even its historical allies like China and Russia. Songun (선군), meaning "military-first," is another central doctrine that governs North Korea's policies. Officially adopted under Kim Jong-Il in the 1980s, Songun prioritises military strength over all other aspects of governance, including economic development and diplomatic engagement. This doctrine justifies the disproportionate allocation of national resources to the military, ensuring that the Korean People's Army (KPA) holds significant power in domestic and foreign affairs.

Countering North Korea's nuclear threat involves distinct strategies by key global players. South Korea, under President Yoon Suk-yeol, has adopted a hardline approach, strengthening military deterrence through pre-emptive strike strategies like the Kill Chain and Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR). Additionally, the THAAD missile defence system remains a cornerstone of its defence posture.

The US continues to seek complete denuclearisation through a mix of diplomatic engagement, economic sanctions, and military alliances with South Korea and Japan. While past negotiations, such as the Trump-Kim summits, showed temporary progress, North Korea's continued missile tests have led Washington to maintain pressure-based deterrence. Russia, while officially adhering to UN sanctions, has strengthened ties with North Korea, particularly through technology exchanges and

strategic cooperation. As Moscow's tensions with the West escalate, its alignment with Pyongyang grows.

Meanwhile, China sees North Korea as a buffer against U.S. influence in South Korea. While Beijing has previously supported sanctions, it has shifted towards reinforcing North Korea's economy, reducing the impact of international restrictions. These differing strategies reflect global geopolitical tensions, making denuclearisation increasingly complex as North Korea continues its weapons advancements and strategic manoeuvring.

North Korea's escalating missile tests and threats of pre-emptive nuclear strikes have heightened security concerns across Northeast Asia. In response, South Korea and Japan have strengthened their relations, recognising shared threats and the need for closer security cooperation. Meanwhile, North Korea's growing ties with Russia suggest a shift towards bloc politics reminiscent of the Cold War, with Moscow and Pyongyang deepening their strategic partnership. Amid this volatile landscape, some South Korean policymakers are debating the possibility of developing nuclear weapons as a countermeasure, reflecting the increasing pressure on Seoul to bolster its own deterrence against North Korea's expanding arsenal.

Ms Roy highlighted that a balanced approach combining military readiness, economic sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and international cooperation is necessary to deter North Korea effectively. While deterrence through force remains crucial, sustained diplomatic efforts and strategic economic measures can provide pathways to long-term stability in the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, fostering stronger alliances among regional players, enhancing cybersecurity measures to counter North Korean cyber threats, and leveraging humanitarian diplomacy could further weaken North Korea's ability to sustain its aggressive military posture while opening avenues for peaceful negotiations.