

North Korea's Missile Tests and the Escalatory Dynamics in the Korean Peninsula, an interview with Veronika Bedenko



Veronika Bedenko is the Regional Issues Strategist for Open Nuclear Network (ONN), a programme of One Earth Future, where she focuses on developments on the Korean Peninsula, North East Asia and Russia. Veronika is an expert in the use of open-source information to understand military capabilities and support nuclear risk reduction. Her research interests include peaceful applications of nuclear energy, dual-use technologies, nuclear safety and security, nuclear disarmament and US-Russian relations.)

The most recent North Korea's missile tests and the missile exchanges between the two Koreas are only the last alarming episodes of the escalation that the Korean peninsula, and North-East Asia as a whole, has witnessed since the end of last year. How high is the risk that this conflict can spiral into an open confrontation?

The recent missile tests and military exercises have led to an environment in Northeast Asia where one accident, misunderstanding, or miscalculation could move the tensions into active conflict. The present situation in the region could evolve in several different ways, including, but not limited to: (1) further escalation of tension as the DPRK enters its winter military training season; (2) a seventh DPRK nuclear test and/or further ICBM tests; or (3) the possible triggering of small-scale armed conflicts with the ROK. A failure to control such conflicts could increase the risk of nuclear weapon use on the Peninsula, especially in light of the DPRK's revised nuclear law, which expands the scope of potential nuclear use.

What can the two great powers in the region - China and the US - do to facilitate a de-escalation and promote a renewed dialogue aimed at conflict management and, possibly, resolution?

The DPRK's recent spate of military activities can be viewed in the broader context of its pivot to China and Russia and a possibly larger shift in its US policy since the invasion of Ukraine. This would indicate that both China and the US still have the potential to contribute to de-escalation. As the recent tests have been held in response to multiple joint and individual military exercises of the US, ROK and Japan, it is clear that to avoid misunderstanding of actions and intentions, the US must ensure that it communicates clearly the limited nature of these exercises, including demonstrating that the exercises are not pretext. It is particularly important to keep communication backchannels open to avoid any miscommunication and misunderstanding of US intentions and to lay

the groundwork for the resumption of diplomacy when Pyongyang is ready to reengage Washington. North Korea experts who have had direct in-person communications with North Korean officials for years have unanimously underscored the importance of keeping information flowing into North Korea so that the latter can make informed decisions. Regarding China, while it vetoed additional UNSC sanctions against the DPRK in May and again in November and is clearly concerned with its strategic competition with the US, it does maintain an interest in avoiding escalation in the region. However, de-escalation and eventual peaceful resolution will require a compromise between China and the US—such compromise will likely be a significant challenge in the near term as power dynamics and alliance shifts become more pronounced in the region.

What role can the European Union play in the international efforts to de-escalate the growing tensions in the Korean peninsula and in the wider regional context?

The EU could use its extensive experience in international development and diplomacy to offer to the DPRK a platform from which it could engage with the broader international community on matters of domestic concern not directly related to security. The DPRK has historically engaged with international and regional organizations on issues including food security and nutrition, as well as the environment and climate change. In times of crisis, having established such channels of communication could help to ensure there are no misunderstandings that lead to inadvertent escalation. Furthermore, EU Member States have historically played the role of an interlocutor between the DPRK and the US in times of prolonged tensions, and it could play that part in the coming months, possibly even years, to help break the diplomatic deadlock.

Ukraine, Nuclear Injustice, and Future Generations

While intergenerational justice is front and center in debates about climate mitigation, the same is not yet true about nuclear debates. With the war in Ukraine ongoing, nuclear debates mostly revolve around the effectiveness and scope of Russian nuclear threats and suitable Western reactions. While these debates are important, they miss the point that Russia's war of conquest is also the result of an unjust global nuclear order.

In the past, Ukraine contributed significantly to the global nonproliferation regime. It gave up the Soviet era nuclear weapons on its territory and joined the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in exchange for security guarantees by its depository states. As Russia openly leverages its nuclear weapons for imperial conquest against the very country it promised not to attack, the deterrent effect of Moscow's arsenal vis-à-vis the West is facilitating its continued aggression.

The NPT, anon, is the result of a global security architecture based on hierarchical spheres of (in)security. Only a few pivotal states and their allies rely on nuclear deterrence to discourage large-scale aggression between them. This 'nuclear peace' for the Few, however, negatively affects the Many at the nuclear periphery, including Ukraine. Throughout the Cold War, proxy wars under the nuclear shadow – in Korea, Vietnam or Afghanistan – and the testing and mining legacy of nuclear-weapon states resulted in staggering human costs.

Further undermining the treaty's basic bargain, the five NPT nuclear-weapon states have been staving off their promises for complete disarmament for decades. This behavior ultimately leads to intergenerational injustice. With little progress for disarmament in sight, successive generations will have to deal with the long-term risks of a perpetuated unjust nuclear order. In the worst case, this could translate to inheriting an inhabitable planet torn by nuclear winter. More imminently, the political and financial opportunity costs of the war in Ukraine and subsequent arms races may hamper their efforts to organize peace and security in more just and egalitarian ways. The same generations will also bear the brunt of the multiple effects of climate change.

Connecting the dots between past and ongoing injustices in Ukraine and beyond, I have recently [argued](#) that a renewed scholarly debate about 'Nuclear Injustice' is overdue. The Nuclear Injustice lens may also help scholars problematize the transfer of injustice costs to future generations and critically reflect on the sustainability of the current nuclear order. A thorough discussion on the nuclear implications of the war in Ukraine, focusing on the war's broader effects on international justice, legitimacy, and power, could get the ball rolling. We, as scholars, owe future generations an honest debate and subsequent actions.

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Network Calls

The British American Security Information Council (BASIC) is recruiting a researcher director to oversee our growing Policy Team and their programmes, contributing to the overall strategic direction of the think tank, particularly in the nuclear weapons policy field.

More info: [here](#)

IFSH Hamburg is looking to fill two vacancies, based in Hamburg. They are looking for a researcher on emerging tech (BMD, space, AWS, AI, machine learning or new delivery systems) with a keen interest in their regulation through arms control and a researcher from natural sciences background with a keen interest in escalation dynamics caused by fast kinetic weapon systems, the effects of nuclear use, or the verification of the absence of nuclear weapons.

More info: [here](#)

EU NEWS

2022 EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium Annual Conference

The eleventh EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference (EUNPDC) was held on 14 and 15 November 2022 in a hybrid format at the SQUARE - Brussels Convention Centre in Brussels (Belgium). The Conference was organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) on behalf of the [EU Network of Independent Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Think Tanks](#), gathering experts on non-proliferation, disarmament, arms control and conventional weapons from public institutions, governments, international organisations, independent think tanks and civil society. Over 254 experts from more than 50 countries – EU members, associated states and third countries – took part in the conference in person. The 2022 edition addressed numerous topics of central importance for the work of the EU, notably the [European External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#), as well as several pressing arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament issues.

The EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference proved to be, once again, a central event for the international discussion on the future of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. It also contributed to reaffirming the strong EU commitment towards a rules-based global order and showed the increased awareness of EU non-proliferation and disarmament policies among government officials, academics and civil society representatives of third countries. Moreover, the debate explored new ways and means of improving capacities in areas of the world with limited expertise in countering the threats stemming from SALW, WMD and their means of delivery. Finally, as every year, the Conference served as a venue to highlight the role played by European think tanks specialised in non-proliferation and disarmament and the efforts undertaken by the EU Consortium to promote and coordinate their work.

NETWORK NEWS

Peace Research Center Prague (PRCP) has launched a "Nuclear Taboo Database"

The purpose of this new, fully searchable online database is to provide a complex overview of academic and expert literature that examines why have nuclear weapons not been used in military conflict since 1945. From classic book-length accounts of the "nuclear taboo" by Nina Tannenwald and "tradition of nuclear nonuse" by T.V. Paul to newer survey experiments by Scott Sagan, Benjamin Valentino, and others, the database includes short descriptions and links to excellent publications that address this very question. On the website, you can filter the database by year, type of publication, category, and sort the results alphabetically or by year.

More information: [here](#)

The European Studies Unit of the University of Liège will host The Journal of Strategic Trade Control (JoSTC)

The topics covered by the Journal deal with the entire spectrum of strategic trade controls, from both the political and legal framework, all aspects of its developments and implementation to its specific features and compliance. Some examples of the main topics are: dual-use items trade, non-proliferation, sanctions, conventional weapons, illicit strategic trade, emerging technologies and torture-related items trade.

More information: [here](#)