North Korea Remains to Be an Agenda for the NPT Review Conference

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Statements by the Representatives of North and South Korea

Shortly after the Eleventh Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) concluded its opening general debate and entered its second week, Kim Song, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) Representative to the United Nations, issued a press statement on May 6, 2026 [1]. Since the DPRK has withdrawn from the NPT, this statement was, of course, made from outside the conference.

The statement was presumably issued in direct response to the "Joint statement on addressing the North Korean nuclear challenge" that was released at the Conference the same day. Joint statements with the same title had been issued under French initiative at successive NPT meetings. In fact, however, the conference referred to North Korea on more than one occasion. Representatives of many countries, including Japan, the United States, and the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) —which jointly issued a working paper for the first time this year— described North Korea as a major challenge to the NPT regime, alongside Iran, and as a single country that had broken a long-standing moratorium on nuclear testing and gone on to acquire nuclear weapons. In his statement, Kim Song criticized the United States and others on these points, stating as follows:

"I denounce and reject in the strongest tone the brigandish and shameless acts of the specific countries including the U.S. which are taking issue with the DPRK's realistic and just access to nuclear weapons through the legal route and exercise of its inherent defensive rights as a sovereign state."

Underlying the DPRK's claim is the assertion that it exercised its right to withdraw from the Treaty transparently and in accordance with Article X of the NPT. Elsewhere in the statement is expressed a strong confidence of the State in its current status.

Meanwhile, the opening statement by the ROK's representative at the Review Conference, Jeong Yeon-doo, Vice Minister for Diplomatic Strategy and Intelligence, rightly identified the key issues.

Published in *Voice for Peace*, Issue 2 (Japanese version), on August 31, 2026; English version published online on November 10, 2026.
http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/

After recalling the nuclear disarmament obligations of the nuclear-weapon States under Article VI of the NPT, as well as the P5 Leaders' Joint Statement, "Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought," issued in January 2022 shortly before the previous Review Conference, which was subsequently postponed until August 2022, he reaffirmed the "Action Plan" agreed upon at the 2010 NPT Review Conference [2]. He then drew attention once again to the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. He described the DPRK as the only country that has benefited from the NPT regime, declared its withdrawal, and continued to develop nuclear weapons openly, thereby remaining the most pressing challenge to the non-proliferation regime [3].

Status under the Treaty

This section briefly reviews the history and current status of the DPRK-NPT relationship.

As is well known, the DPRK acceded to the NPT on December 12, 1985, but has since declared its withdrawal from the Treaty twice. However, it remains unclear whether either declaration has had legal effect.

The Treaty stipulates that all non-nuclear-weapon States Parties to the NPT must conclude comprehensive safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The DPRK's safeguards agreement entered into force on April 10, 1992, well after the prescribed deadline. However, the DPRK and the IAEA came into conflict over inspections intended to verify the initial declaration of nuclear material and nuclear facilities required under the agreement. As a result, on March 12, 1993, the DPRK declared its withdrawal from the Treaty under Article X, citing an "extraordinary situation" that had "jeopardized its supreme interests." At that time, the DPRK notified the UN Security Council of its withdrawal but did not notify all NPT States Parties. It therefore did not fully comply with the procedures stipulated in Article X. This left room for disagreement over Kim Song's assertion, mentioned at the outset, that the DPRK had "exercised the right of withdrawal in a transparent manner."

Because withdrawal was set to take effect three months after notification, the US and DPRK held urgent consultations repeatedly to dissuade the DPRK from withdrawing. On June 11, 1993, just before the deadline, the two sides agreed on three principles, including a security assurance that "the United States would assure the DPRK that it would not use or threaten to use force, including nuclear weapons, against the DPRK." On that basis, North Korea stated that it would "voluntarily suspend the effectuation of its withdrawal," and the withdrawal did not take effect at that time [4].

However, during the implementation of the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) established pursuant to it, the United States failed to fulfill its commitments. As a result, on January 10, 2003, North Korea made its second declaration of withdrawal, claiming that it would "immediately effectuate the withdrawal from the NPT that had been temporarily suspended in 1993."

Several months after this second declaration, the Second Preparatory Committee for the 2005 NPT Review Conference convened on April 28, 2003. At the opening of the session, Ambassador Molnar of Hungary, who chaired the Committee, made the following statement concerning the treatment of the DPRK:

"Accordingly, I carried out these consultations [with States parties to the Treaty in preparation for the meeting], which revealed diverging views on the status of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the NPT. … In light of the above, the Chair has the intention, under his own responsibility, not to open a debate on this issue and to retain the nameplate of the said country temporarily, in his custody. . …" [5]

The Preparatory Committee adopted this approach. The Chair's factual summary, attached to the Committee's final report, records the acceptance of the Chair's opening statement concerning the DPRK's status under the Treaty as follows:

"The Preparatory Committee took note of a statement by the Chair at the first meeting of the session related to the views of States parties on the DPRK's status in the Treaty." [6]

In other words, the States parties decided to set aside the issue of the DPRK's status under the Treaty, judging that it would lead to an unproductive debate.

At the Third Preparatory Committee, held the following year in 2004, the Chair adopted the same approach and reported it to the 2005 Review Conference [7].

The 2005 Review Conference placed the Preparatory Committee's discussions on the record, and Chair Duarte of Brazil once again confirmed, by a decision of the Chair, that the issue would remain set aside [8].

The situation has not changed since then. In essence, the DPRK's January 10, 2003, withdrawal declaration remains unaddressed, and little has changed in the 23 years since. The database maintained on the website of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, which serves as the secretariat of the NPT, currently contains the following note:

"On 10 January 2003, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) announced its withdrawal from the Treaty in a public statement. States parties to the Treaty continue to express divergent views regarding the status of the DPRK under the NPT." [9]

In the schedules of assessed contributions submitted by States parties at the three Preparatory Committee meetings for the 2026 NPT Review Conference, the DPRK has consistently appeared in the list of States parties, accompanied by the note: "The status of the membership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is uncertain." [10] Furthermore, the schedule of assessed contributions submitted by the Preparatory Committee to the plenary meeting of the 2026 Review Conference also includes the DPRK in the list of States parties, with the same note [11].

In other words, the DPRK's status under the Treaty remains unresolved even today.

Withdrawal and Denuclearization Issues

Since the DPRK's withdrawal, NPT States Parties have focused on two issues concerning the DPRK: the question of its denuclearization after becoming a nuclear-armed state, and the question of its withdrawal from the NPT. The 2026 Review Conference was no exception. The French-led "Joint statement on addressing the North Korean nuclear challenge" exemplifies this focus.

The first of the French-led joint statement appeared in May 2017 at the first Preparatory Committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, which was eventually held in August 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic postponed it. It has since been submitted to every NPT meeting, making the 2026 statement the eighth in the series.

Two developments prompted France to take the initiative on the statement in May 2017. First, North Korea's nuclear development, including the two nuclear tests it conducted in 2016, had emerged as an urgent challenge to the NPT regime. Second, the initiative coincided with France's presidential transition: Emmanuel Macron was elected president in May 2017 at the age of 39. The NPT thus provided an opportune forum for a new French policy initiative. France submitted the first proposal jointly with the ROK. Sixty-two countries joined the 2017 joint statement [12].

On April 23, 2018, at the second Preparatory Committee—the first NPT meeting at which the Macron administration can be said to have taken a full-fledged approach to NPT issues—the DPRK conducted its sixth and largest nuclear test in 2017. At the same time, France welcomed

the moves toward denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula that began in 2018 and called for continued efforts to make this a top priority at the NPT Review Conference [13].

Eighty-two (82) countries and the European Union joined the 2026 joint statement. It criticized the DPRK's uranium enrichment and reprocessing for plutonium extraction, as well as Kim Jong Un's statement about exponentially increasing the country's nuclear arsenal. It stated: "We demand that the DPRK change course, take concrete steps to completely dismantle all its nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and related programs, and immediately cease all relevant activities in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions."

On the withdrawal issue, the joint statement also reaffirmed "our unwavering commitment to the goal of the DPRK returning to and fully complying with the NPT and IAEA safeguards at an early date."

The Absence of a Vision for Resolving the Problem

The joint statement thus repeatedly makes clear its principled position: it criticizes the DPRK's current situation, calls for its return to the NPT, and reaffirms the conclusion reached to date that the DPRK cannot acquire the status of a nuclear-weapon State under the NPT. Both Japan and the ROK joined the statement. However, it offers no clear path toward resolving the problem. The statement also expresses concern about countries that support or tolerate the DPRK's nuclear weapons program, or treat the issue as a "done deal." As the statement acknowledges, the international community has been unable to develop a clear path to resolve the issue. The international community has been unable to develop a clear prospect for resolving the issue.

According to the final report, 148 countries actually participated in the 2026 Review Conference [14]. Thus, the 82 countries that joined the statement represented only about 55 percent of the participating States; the European Union also endorsed the statement.

What is needed is not simply another statement of condemnation and principle, but a proposal backed by a medium-term vision for resolving the problem. We have long been argueing that Japan and South Korea could help break the current impasse and open the way to a new situation by ending their dependence on US nuclear weapons for their national security and proposing a Northeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NEA-NWFZ) encompassing the Korean Peninsula and Japan. In such a NEA-NWFZ treaty, they can stipulate a legally binding security assurance provided by the nuclear weapon states.

In his address to the United Nations General Assembly last year, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung put forward a three-stage policy toward North Korea known as the END Initiative—Exchange, Normalization, and Denuclearization [15]. At this year's NPT Review Conference, the ROK representative presented a three-stage approach to denuclearization: "suspension through dialogue and negotiations," "medium-term reduction," and "eventual dismantlement" [16]. The Lee Jae Myung administration's approach appears highly compatible with the concept of such a NEA-NWFZ.

Notes

[1] Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), May 7, 2026.

[2] The full Japanese translation of the Action Plan was published as a booklet by Peace Depot, Inc., and a PDF version is available on its website.
http://www.peacedepot.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2010.book.pdf

[3] Opening Statement by Jeong Yeon-doo, Vice Minister for Diplomatic Strategy and Intelligence, Republic of Korea, April 27, 2026.
https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2026/statements/27April_ROK.pdf

[4] For details of this history, see Hiromichi Umebayashi's Japanese book, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: A Mirror Reflecting the World* [*Kitachōsen no Kakuheiki: Sekai o Utsusu Kagami*] (Kobunken, 2021), pp. 53–58.

[5] NPT/CONF.2005/PC.II/SR.1, paragraph 9.

[6] NPT/CONF.2005/PC.II/50, Annex II, paragraph 28.

[7] NPT/CONF.2005/PC.III/SR.1, paragraph 9.

[8] NPT/CONF.2005/1, paragraph 11. See also NPT/CONF.2005/57 (Part III), p. 9, paragraph 38.

[9] "Declarations, statements, reservations and notes" relating to the NPT, United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs website.
https://treaties.unoda.org/t/npt/declarations/PRK_moscow_ACC

[10] NPT/CONF.2026/PC.I/5 (July 24, 2023); NPT/CONF.2026/PC.II/6 (July 22, 2024); NPT/CONF.2026/PC.III/7 (May 7, 2025).

[11] NPT/CONF.2026/1 (May 9, 2025), p. 38.

[12] NPT/CONF.2020/PC.I/13 (May 11, 2017).

[13] General Debate Statement by Ms. Alice Guitton, Representative of France, April 23, 2018. https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom18/statements/23April_France.pdf

[14] According to the final scale of assessments. NPT/CONF.2026/50.

[15] General Debate Statement by President Lee Jae Myung at the United Nations General Assembly, September 23, 2025. An excerpted Japanese translation is available on p. 137 of *Peace Almanac 2026* (Ryokufu Shuppan, 2026).

[16] Same as Note 3.

About the Author



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Published in *Voice for Peace*, Issue 2 (Japanese version), on August 31, 2026; English version published online on November 10, 2026.
http://www.peacedepot.org/dp_report/voice-for-peace-issue-1-may-2026-2/