

2025 BERLIN FORUM ON KOREA

Korea at a Crossroads: 50 Years After Helsinki, 70 Years After Bandung

Seung Hwan Ryu & Suhon Lee
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Article history

Published: 23 Dec 2025

Introduction

The 2025 Berlin Forum on Korea: Korea at a Crossroads revisited two significant moments in international history, the 1975 Helsinki Accords and the 1955 Bandung Conference, using them as an analytical “toolbox” for rethinking the Korean Peninsula’s position within a rapidly shifting global order. Rather than presenting these events as prescriptive models, the forum examined how political actors historically managed conflict, created diplomatic norms, and sustained dialogue across Cold War divides. This framing situates the Korean Peninsula within both the renewed great-power confrontation and the evolving dynamics between the Global North and Global South, raising questions about how South Korea and other international stakeholders might constructively engage North Korea amid shifting geopolitical circumstances and accelerating technological change.

In his keynote address, Dan Smith emphasized a central paradox despite the Korean Peninsula’s strategic importance, it remains underrepresented in major global assessments. Referring to the concept of the “security dilemma,” originally developed in the 1950s, Smith argued that Northeast Asia exemplifies this dynamic with exceptional intensity. Defensive measures by one actor are routinely interpreted as offensive by others, producing action-reaction spirals and embedding permanent insecurity. This zero-sum logic, as the speaker highlights, is heightened by the leadership styles of key regional actors: the US president’s deliberate cultivation of unpredictability, China’s exploitation of the “false predictability,” and North Korea’s existential reliance on nuclear weapons as instruments of regime survival. Under such conditions, expectations of North Korean denuclearization are unrealistic. Dialogue therefore becomes not simply desirable but analytically necessary for reducing regional insecurity.

One of the keynote’s most significant contributions was its critique of teleological

readings of the Helsinki Accords. Contemporary narratives often present Helsinki as the first step toward ending the Cold War, obscuring the fact that the process was designed not to resolve the conflict but to manage and endure it. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) aimed to mitigate fear—of invasion, escalation, and nuclear conflict—through mutual confidence-building measures and sustained dialogue. The success of Helsinki rested on procedural norms: careful listening, respectful dialogue, and a shared recognition of mutual security concerns, even in the absence of political and ideological convergence. Smith suggested that, in principle, Northeast Asia could achieve more concrete outcomes in securing peace, with fewer stakeholders than Cold War Europe, if similar norms of dialogue and mutual listening can be institutionalized.

Panel 1: Fifty Years After Helsinki

The chair opened the session with a fundamental question. “What does it mean for us to learn from the Helsinki experience? Are we referring to Helsinki as a framework, or as a philosophy?” In response, a panelist remarked, “Helsinki is more a toolbox than a model.” While it does not present a ready-made blueprint, Helsinki supplies a set of practical instruments for the analysis and management of contemporary challenges.

We recognize meaningful parallels between 1975 Germany and 2025 Korea that justify revisiting the Helsinki experience. The Helsinki Accords’ dual commitment to both the inviolability of borders and the promotion of human rights remains relevant for the Korean Peninsula today. Progress toward reconciliation between the two Koreas could foster not only the regional stability but also constructive engagement between an increasingly divided world.

At the same time, we acknowledge three major differences — rooted in causes, contexts, and consciousness — that prevent the “Helsinki model” from being transplanted wholesale. First, the causes of division have distinct historical roots. Korea endured colonial rule and a civil war, experiences Germany did not share. Longstanding hostility between the two Koreas and persistent distrust between Korea and Japan have hindered the emergence of regional institutional frameworks in East Asia. Second, the geopolitical context has shifted. The year 1975 was an era of *détente*, 2025 finds us facing a new Cold War. Third, differences also lie in the consciousness of the actors. Germany has been a great power in Europe since 1871, while no Koreans believe that unification will “make Korea great again.” This small-state identity heightens the perception that diplomatic risks are not affordable. Moreover, North Korea has already learned from the potential risks associated with a Helsinki-style process. In this respect, East Asian actors are navigating a more complex strategic environment.

These differences might prompt the hasty conclusion that Seoul has little to learn from Helsinki. Wise observers, however, understand that it is precisely these divergences that illuminate which lessons are transferable and which are not. So then, what does the “Helsinki toolbox” contain? Drawing on the deliberations conducted over the three-day forum, we have derived Seven Lessons from Helsinki.

1. Be realistic.

Face reality. Avoid moralism that shuts the door to negotiation. Given the current

¹
E.N.D. Initiative: Exchange -
Normalization - Denuclearization

circumstances, prioritize coexistence over unification. Never abandon human rights, but begin with human contacts. Navigate among practical, feasible resolutions. Speaking of resolutions...

2. Be more than a realist.

Be realistic in assessing current conditions, but be more than a realist when searching for paths forward. Staying away from moralism does not mean clinging to myopic reciprocity or hostile worldviews. Draw inspirations from multiple paradigms. Where structural realists see power transition and ideological conflict, liberal institutionalists find the mitigating effects of economic interdependence, and social constructivists emphasize both the limits of material sanctions and the importance of norm-building. Helsinki teaches us that the international toolbox contains more than coercion; at times, we can socialize and acculturate our adversaries.

3. Think outside the box.

“Give and take” may seem intuitive — but in counterintuitive times, resolutions may themselves be counterintuitive. Thinking outside the box takes imagination and decisiveness; for example, in moving from a “denuclearization first” approach to E.N.D.¹, or, as one participant proposed, even to N.E.D.

4. Make it big.

Make it multilateral rather than bilateral. A multilateral regional framework makes it easier for North Korea to come to the table.

That said, given current US-Russia and US-China tensions, major powers are likely to prefer unilateral approaches. We cannot even rule out the possibility that Russia at this moment may act as a spoiler. Which leads us to the fifth point...

5. If you cannot make it big, make it flexible.

As an alternative to both big-scale multilateralism and bi- or uni-lateralism, our expert panel suggested *multiplexity* and *minilateralism* among like-minded second-tier actors, particularly on non-traditional security agendas. Accentuate areas of shared interest, including academic exchange, labor, women, children, the environment, disaster prevention and relief, and nuclear energy safety. Seek to involve smaller actors beyond the EU, such as ASEAN or Mongolia, for they can play disproportionately bigger roles in promoting regional stability.

6. Bridge the two-level game.

Do not limit your own options. South Korea is already more than a middle power. But diplomacy is, as Robert Putnam put it, a two-level game. Persuade the domestic audience to support proactive diplomacy. With a strong domestic backing, South Korea would have far greater opportunities to engage constructively with North Korea, Japan, and other international partners.

North Korea is also playing a two-level game. South Korea should carefully adjust its language on unification to avoid giving the North Korean regime a pretext to depict Seoul as militarily aggressive, which it could exploit for domestic propaganda to reinforce its legitimacy through fear-mongering.

7. Listen.

In the logic of the arms race, North Korea fell far behind in conventional capabilities and thus came to rely entirely on asymmetrical power. The result? Nuclear weapons that now pose an existential threat to us.

Yet North Korea is an existential threat to us precisely because we have also been an existential threat to them. For decades, the two Koreas have been shouting past each other, so loudly that it has become deafening. Now, at this crossroads, the question is: can we finally begin to listen?

Panel 2: Seventy Years After Bandung (Rethinking Korea's ODA and Global South Policies)

In the second panel, we revisited the legacy of the 1955 Bandung Conference to assess South Korea's evolving approach to the Global South and North Korea. As a former aid recipient turned OECD-DAC donor, South Korea continues to grapple with persistent dilemmas involving sanctions, humanitarian imperatives, and development cooperation in a shifting global order. Panelists and discussants identified both opportunities and constraints that now shape Seoul's engagement with North Korea and with the Global South more broadly.

One major challenge concerns North Korea's refusal to accept humanitarian aid funded directly or indirectly by the United States, Japan, or South Korea. Despite the regime's declared interest in modernizing its health sector, the panel underscored that the core issue is both what North Korea needs and *how* assistance can be delivered in a politically acceptable form. This difficulty, however, may also open new possibilities: South Korea could work through an international trust fund to create indirect but viable channels for humanitarian cooperation.

In addition, the issue of human rights could also serve as an opportunity for engagement. North Korea selectively engages with the UN human-rights system. Pyongyang remains only partially involved—submitting treaty-body reports, selectively cooperating with special procedures, and responding strategically during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Rather than viewing these selective measures solely as an obstacle, it may be more productive to interpret them as a pattern that reveals limited but tangible entry points for dialogue. This approach also helps clarify the tension between the DPRK's rhetorical alignment with the Global South and its resistance to sustained human-rights monitoring, while recognizing that

human rights constitute internationally agreed norms applicable to all member-states. As the Global South gains influence within the UN human-rights system, South Korea and the broader international community may encounter opportunities to invite the DPRK for conversation more strategically within these normative frameworks.

Another challenge lies in South Korea's limited historical ties with the Global South. Whereas North Korea cultivated deep connections with anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements during the Cold War, South Korea has emerged only recently as a significant donor. Panelists emphasized the need for community-based approaches that address local development challenges more effectively and enhance the sustainability of South Korea's engagement in the Global South.

Drawing from these challenges and opportunities, the historical experience of Bandung offers inspiration in five ways:

1. Design indirect channels when direct channels are closed.

Respect for sovereignty is not an obstacle but a doorway. Humanitarian mechanisms must preserve political space, not collapse it. The trust-fund model reminds us that when North Korea cannot accept assistance directly, the proper response is to redesign the architecture, not renounce the effort.

2. Use human rights as a lens, not a verdict.

Bandung warned against moral and political hierarchies among nations. The second panel echoed this principle: moralizing risks "weaponizing" human rights and foreclosing engagement. Human rights should therefore be approached as a set of internationally negotiated and universally applicable norms, rather than an instrument of bilateral political leverage. Understanding North Korea's selective participation through this lens reopens analytical and diplomatic space for sincere dialogue.

3. Understand the DPRK's Global South identity as strategy.

Pyongyang is not simply acknowledging the rise of the Global South; it is strategically positioning itself within it. Invoking sovereignty and Global South discourse enables the DPRK to resist external pressure while remaining within multilateral forums. Engagement becomes more feasible when this identification is understood as strategic rather than emotional.

4. Recast South Korea's contribution as that of a bridge-builder.

South Korea's strength lies less in its material resources than in its capacity for translation, which connects available tools with Global South priorities. This requires an understanding of the history of Global South and South-South cooperation, attentiveness to partner needs, and a deliberate rejection of development paternalism. South Korea can play a more expansive role when it positions itself as a connector within the Global South networks.

5. Anchor cooperation in sustainability and future capacity.

Development should not merely be symbolic but durable. Projects must integrate contextual knowledge and community participation to become sustainable. At the same time, cooperation should incorporate emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, to strengthen health systems, educational platforms, and crisis-response tools, thereby supporting the development of human intelligence at the global level. Such integration could help reduce structural inequalities and generate more sustainable outcomes in Global South development.