

**THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE:
MAINTAINING DE FACTO PEACE**

Katherine TSENG Hui-Yi

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Executive Summary

1. The Korean peninsula is rattled by the keen pursuit of nuclear and missile weapon technology by the Kim Jong-un administration.
2. The Trump administration claims to consider the use of force to tackle the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) issue. Even though US president's war power is limited, DPRK's nuclear and missile tests are two scenarios that the Trump government could justify the use of force.
3. Inter-Korean relations are now between legal (de jure) armistice and factual (de facto) peace. Efforts are made to further institutionalise factual peace: the 1972 joint Communique, the 1992 Basic Agreement, the de-nuclearisation joint statement and decades of inter-Korean exchanges after the end of the Cold War.
4. After the Cold War had ended, factual peace had been supported by first, recognition of the existence of two independent political entities, denuclearisation of the peninsula and the unification goal. The unification goal has been transformed to one that focuses on the Korean people, instead of the more blatant rhetoric on the political aspect in the 1970s.
5. For the Kim junior administrations (Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un), the nuclear factor has gained increasing momentum to enhance bargaining leverages against US-ROK alliance, rebuild national image, secure regime survival and exercise compellence strategy against the United States.
6. China is a party to the armistice agreement and a critical player in factual peace. After the end of the Cold War, the pursuit of factual peace has gained in strength with an eventual goal of inter-Korean reconciliation, a process where China wants to maintain its influence.

7. DPRK's nuclearisation has interrupted this pursuit of factual peace and greatly shaken the ground of the legal armistice. China may need to consider realistic measures to secure this factual peace.
8. Establishing a buffer zone to cater to a humanitarian crisis and insulate negative externalities from conflicts in the peninsula in the Sino-Korean borderlands is one option.
9. This buffer zone is likely to be a unilateral measure by China, which will not breach China's obligation in the China-DPRK alliance. To avoid allegations of cross-border operations, China would do well to lend humanitarian assistance to the North Koreans in the event of a refugee outflow.
10. There are signs that both the United States and DPRK are taking one step back, despite the still provoking postures of the DPRK. China will have to reassess and adjust its policy towards the Korean Peninsula.