

# **Proposals for Denuclearization in Northeast Asia: Toward an Alternative Security Framework to Nuclear Deterrence<sup>1</sup>**

Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

May 2025

## **Introduction**

The security environment in Northeast Asia is currently facing a major crossroads. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and China have strengthened their nuclear capabilities, and the US's relationships with China and Russia have entered an era of unpredictability, with an underlying tone of confrontation and competition. At the same time, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the US are increasingly bolstering their military alliance based on extended nuclear deterrence (nuclear umbrella) while the structure of confrontation is becoming more complex than before. There are some diplomatic efforts to ease tensions, but they are not yielding significant results. If this trend continues, the region will be stuck in a vicious arms race, which can trigger nuclear proliferation.

To overcome these regional divisions and crises, Japan, the sole country that has suffered the use of nuclear weapons in war, should work to unite international society by further upholding international laws such as the UN Charter, as well as emphasizing the necessity of international cooperation and the urgency of nuclear weapons abolition. It also needs to explore an alternative to the conventional security approach based on deterrence theory. Here, we propose a concrete policy for peace and security that combines a "nuclear-weapon-free zone" and "comprehensive, cooperative, and common security (3C security)" that meets Northeast Asia's needs.

## **"Nuclear deterrence" is a dangerous bet**

First, the fundamental dangers and uncertainties of nuclear deterrence should be highlighted. In March 2018, the Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, established by the Japanese government, recommended that "nuclear deterrence, while it may promote stability in certain circumstances, is dangerous as a basis for long-term, global security. Therefore, all nations must seek better long-term solutions."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in March 2025, the successive "International Group of Eminent Persons for a World Without Nuclear Weapons" articulated in its final recommendations, "All states must keep working to

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<sup>1</sup> This document is based on an initial draft (by Professors Suzuki Tatsujiro and Kawai Kimiaki, Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA), Nagasaki University) discussed by participants at the "International Civil Society Forum to Abolish Nuclear Weapons — 80 Years Since the Atomic Bombings" (February 8-9, 2025, Tokyo). The Japan Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons is responsible for the text of this document.

<sup>2</sup> Group of Eminent Persons on the Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, "Building Bridges to Effective Nuclear Disarmament: Recommendations for the 2020 Review Process for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," March 29, 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000349264.pdf>.

move away from dependence on nuclear weapons”. It then continues, “Nuclear deterrence has not proven to be, nor should it be, the final form of security.”<sup>3</sup>

In reality, if an armed conflict occurs in Northeast Asia and the US nuclear umbrella (extended nuclear deterrence) fails to function, the first nuclear attack is likely to be on US military bases in Japan and the ROK rather than on the US mainland. We must think more carefully about the dangers of security dependent on nuclear deterrence and seriously seek a way out.

### **Conceptualizing a security alternative to “nuclear deterrence”**

In order to shift away from dangerous nuclear deterrence, we need to pursue an alternative security policy to the “nuclear umbrella”. The establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free-zone treaty has long been proposed as one such framework. Generally speaking, negotiations toward a nuclear-weapon-free-zone treaty would, in themselves, lead to trust-building among states in the region and the stabilization of their security relations. However, Northeast Asia today faces various challenges, and a concept for a Northeast Asia nuclear-weapon-free-zone (NEA-NWFZ) needs to take into account such regional realities. In this region, at a minimum the following factors need to be considered.

1. Three nuclear weapons states (the US, China, and Russia) recognized under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), along with the DPRK, a nuclear-armed state, exist in the region.
2. Japan and the ROK are under the US nuclear umbrella, which they regard as fundamental for their security.
3. The Korean War is only under a truce, and the countries involved — including the ROK, the DPRK, the US and China — have yet to reach a peace agreement. No formal diplomatic relations have been established between Japan and the DPRK. Territorial disputes remain unresolved between Japan and Russia, China, and the ROK, respectively.
4. Currently, countries in the region are expanding not only their nuclear arsenals but also conventional weapons. An NEA-NWFZ concept is needed that would resolve the current situation in which conventional and nuclear arms build-up are intertwined.
5. There is no institution or framework for discussing security in the region. As a result, mutual distrust increases and countries tend to prioritize domestically oriented policies.

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<sup>3</sup> International Group of Eminent Persons for a World Without Nuclear Weapons (IGEP), “Stepping Back From The Nuclear Precipice: Urgent Actions in Pursuit of a World Without Nuclear Weapons”, March 31, 2025, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100822806.pdf>.

Given the above five issues, the following proposes an NWFZ concept that meets Northeast Asia's needs (it can be called "nuclear-weapon-free zone 2.0") and "comprehensive, cooperative, and common security (3C security)".<sup>4</sup>

### **Nuclear-weapon-free zone that meets Northeast Asia's needs**

Considering the above circumstances in Northeast Asia, a new NWFZ concept that overcomes these challenges is necessary. Such a NEA-NWFZ would have to satisfy the following five conditions.

1. Provision of legally binding negative security assurances (NSAs) based on an agreement among nuclear-weapon states: Until now, NSAs have been considered not credible by non-nuclear weapon states, even though they have declared NSAs as their policies. Therefore, making NSAs legally binding has been an issue. In making a protocol in an NEA-NWFZ treaty, it would be necessary to obtain an agreement from nuclear-weapon states that they commit to legally binding NSAs. Dialogue with nuclear-weapon states would be important in this regard. Additionally, measures to ensure NSAs' credibility, such as arms control and disarmament, changes in nuclear posture and securing transparency would be necessary.
2. Coexistence with other security treaties: It is possible for a country that has a security treaty with a nuclear-weapon state to establish and join an NWFZ. This is true for the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, which Australia, an ally of the United States, is party to. Nevertheless, some believe that the creation of an NFWZ would harm the security cooperation between Japan and the United States or have negative impacts on Japan's defense. Therefore, a multi-layered security approach that combines an NFU and "3C security" (see below) should be developed to reduce threats per se.
3. International system to verify the DPRK's denuclearization: International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards are intended to prevent the peaceful use of nuclear energy for military purposes. Therefore, the agency's ability to verify a nuclear dismantlement process and guarantee the maintenance of denuclearized status is limited. If the DPRK agrees to denuclearize, it must commit to staged dismantling of all its nuclear weapons within a set period of time. It is also required to establish a system to verify the fulfillment of that commitment and maintain its complete denuclearization. This is a common issue with the TPNW, which is working to create a verification system for nuclear disarmament, and hence mutual cooperation between the two frameworks is possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Tatsujiro Suzuki and Jae-Jung Suh, "Proposing NWFZ 2.0 and C3 Regime", presented at the ICU SSRI, Sophia IGC, RECNA Joint Symposium, "War in Northeast Asia? Early Warning, Risk Reduction, and Denuclearization", at International Christian University, Tokyo, December 6-7, 2024.

4. Declaration of the end of the Korean War: Establishing an NWFZ in Northeast Asia would require a proclamation to end the state of war in this region. Ending the Korean War is particularly important for the ROK and the DPRK. It is critical that the parties will seek to ensure their security by concluding a peace agreement and committing to the normalization of diplomatic relations, thereby eliminating reasons for strengthening military capabilities including not only nuclear arsenals but also conventional weapons.
5. Establishment of a framework or institution to discuss security in the region: In Northeast Asia, there has been no forum to discuss security issues specific to the region. In establishing an NEA-NWFZ, a framework or institution should be established to discuss comprehensive security issues, addressing not only nuclear issues but also disarmament and arms control of conventional weapons, as well as economic and environmental issues.

If such an NWFZ concept is proposed, countries can begin negotiations that will lead to an easing of tensions in the region. As a result, it would become possible to more clearly envisage pathways to achieve not only the denuclearization of the DPRK but also for the ROK and Japan to join the TPNW.

### **“3C security”**

An NWFZ cannot be established in isolation from regional security issues. Here, we propose “3C security” as an alternative to conventional security policy based on nuclear deterrence. The 3Cs stand for “common security,” “cooperative security,” and “comprehensive security.”

Common security is a concept introduced in 1982 by the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues (chaired by Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme) during the Cold War. It is an alternative to security based on military force and threats, pursuing common interests and resolving problems through dialogue and diplomacy.

Cooperative security is a concept in which countries cooperate with each other to avoid crises and conflicts while diffusing antagonism and respecting mutual interests. This concept of cooperative security is essential for disarmament and arms control, and accelerates mutual confidence building.

Comprehensive security is a concept that addresses not only nuclear weapons or military issues, but all security issues — including the economy, environment, and poverty — in a comprehensive manner. This comprehensive approach is exactly what is needed to solve regional security problems in Northeast Asia.

The “3C security” proposed above can serve as a promising alternative to conventional security policy based on nuclear deterrence. For example, it is worth considering a proposal to conclude a treaty stipulating “mutual non-aggression and refusal to settle disputes by force” in the region, modeled on the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) concluded by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A bold vision is necessary to transform the antagonistic relations prevalent in Northeast Asia into amicable ones.

### **Conclusion: Reduce nuclear threats through disarmament diplomacy in Asia**

The driving force toward achieving security without relying on nuclear deterrence is recalling the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and war. The fact that the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (Nihon Hidankyo) was awarded the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize provided an invaluable opportunity to share this message with the world.

As interim, concrete steps, we recommend the following to the Japanese government:

1. **Spreading awareness in Asia of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and influence public opinion:** Holding an international conference in Asia on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons, conducting research on the “effects of nuclear war in Asia” in conjunction with the UN Scientific Panel on the Effects of Nuclear War, and supporting disarmament education and dialogue programs in civil society in Asia. We need to strengthen the norm of nuclear non-use in Asia and globally through such efforts.
2. **Measures that can be implemented in one’s own nuclear policy:** Making declarations and implementing policies aimed at reducing the degree of one’s own reliance on nuclear deterrence, expressing support for the adoption of a no-first-use policy by nuclear weapons states such as the United States, and promoting discussion among nuclear-armed states in the region as well as between nuclear-armed states and non-nuclear-weapon states.
3. **Bilateral head-of-state and high-level diplomacy to reduce regional tensions and promote nuclear disarmament:** Initiating further bilateral disarmament and non-proliferation dialogue, implementing measures to reduce nuclear risks and build confidence, engaging in diplomacy to avoid a war between the US and China or a Taiwan contingency, and commencing negotiation on restoring diplomatic relations with the DPRK.
4. **Dialogue aimed at establishing a regional multilateral agreement:** Ending the Korean War and commencing negotiation for a “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Northeast Asia”, facilitating dialogue toward a nuclear missile

disarmament treaty in East Asia as well as dialogue toward the establishment of a regional permanent security dialogue institution, and considering a verification system for the DPRK's denuclearization.

In order to realize these ideas, it is essential to deepen dialogue and cooperation among governments, civil society, and experts beyond national borders.