

HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS: WHEN AND WHY DOES SOUTH KOREA TALK ABOUT NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS?

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SUMMARY

South Korea's approach to North Korean human rights has become a key indicator of its broader North Korea strategy, alliance posture, and domestic ideological alignment. Understanding when and why Seoul foregrounds human rights is therefore essential for designing a stable and credible Korea policy.

South Korea's discourse on North Korean human rights has shifted across the Moon Jae-in, Yoon Suk-yeol, and Lee Jae-myung administrations. While the Moon administration deprioritized human rights to preserve diplomatic space, the Yoon administration has been outspoken on this issue, and it intensified tensions with Pyongyang. These shifts reflect deeper domestic ideological divisions and alliance pressures shaping Seoul's approach to North Korea. The Lee Jae-myung administration is now pursuing a middle ground, maintaining human rights advocacy while separating it from inter-Korean engagement. As Seoul recalibrates its North Korea policy under Lee Jae-myung, institutionalizing a consistent human rights strategy is critical to preventing future policy reversals and reducing diplomatic volatility.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **South Korea's human rights discourse toward North Korea is politically contingent rather than structurally institutionalized.** The salience of human rights shifts depending on the governing coalition's ideological orientation and strategic priorities.
2. **Progressive administrations tend to subordinate human rights advocacy to inter-Korean engagement.** Under the Moon Jae-in administration, human rights were treated as a potential obstacle to dialogue and denuclearization diplomacy, leading to strategic restraint in multilateral forums.
3. **Conservative administrations integrate human rights into deterrence and alliance strategy.** The Yoon Suk-yeol government framed human rights as inseparable from national security and rules-based order, actively co-sponsoring UN resolutions and linking abuses to DPRK militarization.

KEY FINDINGS

4. **The Lee Jae-myung administration is pursuing a calibrated dual-track approach.** Human rights advocacy is maintained at the multilateral level while being partially decoupled from frontline inter-Korean diplomacy, positioning rights discourse as negotiation leverage rather than confrontation.
5. **Alliance dynamics significantly influence Seoul's positioning.** Alignment with the United States and the European Union reinforces sustained multilateral engagement on North Korean human rights and embeds the issue within broader security cooperation.
6. **The absence of institutional continuity generates credibility gaps.** Policy reversals between administrations undermine long-term diplomatic trust with Pyongyang and weaken South Korea's normative consistency internationally.
7. **A sustainable Korea policy requires institutionalizing a dual-track framework.** Separating human rights advocacy from crisis management, while maintaining predictable multilateral engagement, would reduce volatility and enhance South Korea's credibility as both mediator and normative middle power.

INTRODUCTION

North Korea's human rights situation has been under intense international scrutiny since 2005, when the UN General Assembly began adopting annual resolutions addressing human rights violations in the country. These resolutions have consistently expressed serious concern over widespread abuses, including political prison camps, restrictions on freedom of expression and religion, and the absence of accountability mechanisms. The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report further underscored the severity of these violations. Since then, international attention has been reinforced through defector testimonies and ongoing monitoring by international institutions.

For the Republic of Korea (ROK), however, human rights advocacy presents a persistent policy dilemma, and their advocacy often conflicts with the necessity of maintaining inter-Korean stability. Moon Jae-in administration, emphasizing coexist without conflict, refrained from supporting UN human rights resolutions during key periods of inter-Korean engagement. By contrast, the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, emphasizing reflect on universal human values, the government has resumed co-sponsoring UN resolutions addressing human rights abuses in North Korea. Navigating the middle ground, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung seeks to uphold humanitarian principles while avoiding policies that could prevent opportunities for dialogue.

This analysis stems from the recognition that human rights discourse toward North Korea is shaped by shifting domestic political alignments and evolving regional security dynamics. As inter-Korean relations shift amid nuclear tensions and alliance pressures, South Korea's approach to human rights has become an increasingly strategic policy choice. Accordingly, this CAA Paper examines how the Moon Jae-in, Yoon Suk-yeol, and Lee Jae-myung administrations have emphasized or downplayed human rights in response to changing diplomatic priorities and how domestic ideology and alliance considerations influence the framing of human rights.

WHEN AND WHY SOUTH KOREA TALKS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA?

Each administration functioned on human rights as a strategic tool. For liberal administrations, the strategic objective of enhancing inter-Korean relations is prioritized over the human rights of North Korean people. For these administrations, advocating human rights is viewed as a potential "security threat" that could endanger closer ties with the Kim regime. In contrast, the conservative administrations have been proactive in international efforts to document North Korean human rights violations [1]. This strategic variation reflects the broader divide between "peace first" and "freedom first" approaches in South Korean policy.

- **The Moon Jae-in Administration (2017-2022): Human Rights as a Barrier to Peace and Engagement**

Moon Jae-in's vision of "peaceful coexistence and co-prosperity" formed a strategy in the face of North Korea's nuclear and missile threat. In this context, "peace" is the fundamental approach to national interest and economic prosperity. This approach aimed to create a sphere of engagement that did not threaten the North regime [2]. In inaugural address, President Moon Jae-in pledged to pursue dialogue with Pyongyang, address the North Korean nuclear issue, strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance, and lay the foundation for a Northeast Asia peace regime [3]. Moon further elaborated this vision in his policy remarks at the Körber Foundation and identified the nuclear issue as the primary obstacle to stability on the Korean Peninsula. His policy framework seeks permanent peace, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with step-by step approach. He reaffirm close cooperation with United States, emphasizing two countries has no hostile act toward North Korea [4]. Rather than demanding immediate denuclearization as a precondition for engagement, the Moon administration aimed to preserve diplomatic space and facilitate a solution-oriented negotiation process because nuclear disarmament as a strict precondition would completely shut down dialogue. Therefore, the government followed a step-by-step and comprehensive path [5]. The aim was facilitating dialogue rather than provoking the regime's collapse. For this aim, the administration balanced condemnations with a call to return to denuclearization.

Kim Jong-un responded to this stance in his New Year's address, hinting at the possibility of a return to peaceful dialogue by raising the issue of North Korea's participation in the Pyeongchang Olympics but also asserted the "nuclear button is always on my desk." However, Moon Jae-in responded immediately, and the two sides met first time and agreed that North Korea would send a delegation to the games [6]. This peace framework later led to inter-Korean summits in 2018. In the result of Panmunjeom, Moon and Kim adopted the Panmunjeom Declaration, declaring a new era of peace and agreeing to completely cease all hostile acts and transform the DMZ into a peace zone [7]. After that, two leaders agreed to a meeting of the Red Cross for the reunion of separated families and were further committed to advancing inter-Korean connectivity through railway and road projects [8]. President Moon also had to navigate U.S.-DPRK relationship to pursuing denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. For this purpose, Moon positioned South Korea as a mediator between Washington and Pyongyang, but this role proved increasingly difficult as U.S.-DPRK negotiations stalled. The breakdown of the Hanoi Summit in 2019 marked a decisive turning point that led to a rapid decline in diplomatic progress [9].

While the Moon administration did not reject human rights norms outright, it refrained from co-sponsoring United Nations resolutions. This approach generated significant criticism by civil society organizations. In a joint public letter, a coalition of non-governmental organizations and prominent human rights defenders argued that the Moon administration's "peace and prosperity" policy failed to secure durable peace while leading to a retreat from South Korea's human rights commitments at the United Nations [10]. On the other hand, conservatives and defectors groups critics the government as protect the Kim Jong Un regime. Especially administration has faced criticism for ban on anti-Pyongyang leaflets, emphasizing that it is unconstitutional and would violate the right to freedom of speech [11]. Within this peace-first framework, human rights were deprioritized in favor of sustaining inter-Korean dialogue and denuclearization efforts.

The DPRK portrayed human rights criticism as a "smear campaign" aimed at undermining its social system. In 2020, North Korea blew up the inter-Korean joint liaison office and cut off official communication channels. Media reported that a "terrific explosion." and it

said, "had come in response to widespread public anger over anti-regime leaflets sent by defectors in the South" [12]. Kim Jong Un explicitly demanded that Seoul withdraw as its "biased perspective" and "unfair double standards" as a precondition for restoring communication channels [13]. Disagreements between North Korea and the US, North Korea's continued missile tests, and criticism have led rapidly deteriorated relations between the two Koreas.

- **The Yoon Suk-yeol Administration (2022–2025): Human Rights as Moral Diplomacy and Alliance-Based Deterrence**

For the president Yoon, human rights are not only a moral concern but also a component of national security. The National Security Strategy emphasizes adapting the principle of flexible reciprocity that are mutually beneficial for the two Koreas. Based on this principle, while reiterating openness to dialogue, Yoon conditioned engagement on practical denuclearization. These benefits were strictly contingent on the North taking "genuine and substantive" steps toward denuclearization. President Yoon also prioritized an alliance-based deterrence strategy. Besides United states and Japan, the government committed to expanding strategic dialogue on economic security with key partners, including the EU, and Australia, and to participating in new platforms such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework [14]. In contrast to the Moon's deprioritization of human rights in favor of denuclearization, Yoon argued that human rights are universal principles that cannot be traded for tactical diplomatic gains. Through strengthened allies, the administration aimed to not only deter North Korea's military aggression but also to raise global awareness about the human rights situation in North Korea.

In the speech of UN General Assembly, Yoon has internationalized this North Korean threat by calling on Russia to uphold their responsibilities in the context of alleged DPRK–Russia arms cooperation. The ROK criticized Russia for protect Pyongyang's illegal activities, especially through its veto of the resolution to extend the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts tasked with monitoring sanctions enforcement against North Korea [15]. President Yoon also warned APEC leaders about the risks of the Russia-North Korea arms deal, emphasizing that this military cooperation is not only a serious threat to the security

of the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and Europe but also undermines the universal rules-based international order [16]. In international stage, the president continued to sending warning of an unprecedented joint response with allies if North Korea conducts a nuclear test and his call on China to fulfill its responsibilities as a permanent UNSC member [17]. The government aimed to raise awareness of the international community on the DPRK's human rights abuses in the context of its nuclear threat and militarization. In addition, reversing the 2019–2021 policy of abstention, South Korea resumed co-sponsoring UN resolutions condemning North Korean human rights abuses.

ROK expressed concern over DPRK's militarization effect on human rights with growing suffering of North Korean residents amidst the regime's neglection of their livelihoods and pursuance of nuclear and missile development. The Minister released a report on NK economy/society based on 6,351 defectors. The report highlights the collapse of the state distribution system, increased reliance on markets, worsening corruption, and growing negative perception of hereditary succession among residents [18]. The Yoon Suk-Yeol administration redefined the inter-Korean relationship by asserting that the defense of universal values. This shift significantly heightened tensions with Pyongyang, but it is seen as the cost of pursuing accountability, alliance cohesion, and a rules-based international order.

For North Korean defectors, while some view him as a defender of human rights, others are concerned that actions especially declaring martial law threaten South Korea's democratic values. Yoon approach has drawn criticism from progressive actors who argue that human rights have been instrumentalized as a pressure tool [19] Pyongyang viewed human rights rhetoric as a direct threat to its regime survival. North Korean state media and officials have denounced Yoon's speeches at the UN and other multilateral forums as "hysterical," "hostile," and labeled President Yoon a "puppet of Washington". The regime has rejected joint declarations on denuclearization, condemned UN-led human rights resolutions as "provocations,"[20]. North Korea responded to ROK-led human rights pressure with military provocations. For example, North Korea sent trash-carrying balloons to South Korea, and to send threats of retaliation in response to allegations of drone infiltration and leaflet campaigns [21].

- **The Lee Jae-myung Administration (2025-Present): Human Rights as Conditional Engagement and Negotiation Leverage**

The main opposition leader Lee Jae-myung opposed martial law and played a major role in Yoon's impeachment. Lee considered Yoon's declaration of martial law unconstitutional, which earned him popular support. During his election campaign, he defends the promise of leading the country out of its divisive political crisis and embracing all citizens.

The inauguration of the Lee Jae-myung administration in 2025 marked a transition toward a balanced approach. In inauguration speech, President Lee characterized this shift with the philosophy that "true security lies in peace that makes war unnecessary" [22]. Under the leadership of Unification Minister Chung Dong-young, the administration initiated a "great transformation" in North Korea policy, moving from the previous "strength-for-strength" confrontation to a "goodwill-for-goodwill" approach focused on peaceful coexistence and reconciliation [23]. President Lee emphasizes a new era of peaceful coexistence at 80th liberation day speech and highlighted principles of respect for the North's system, no pursuit of unification by absorption, and no intention of engaging in hostile acts. The administration vowed to restore the spirit of past cooperation agreements and to reopen communication channels and end the era of hostility [24]. Within this principle, the administration is more cautious in criticizing DPRK's internal affairs to preserve dialogue potential.

The administration codified its approach into the E.N.D Initiative, focused on "Exchange" "Normalization," and "Denuclearization," called for an end to the period of hostility and conflict on the Korean Peninsula by expanding inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation. For denuclearization, President emphasized needed realistic and rational solutions which cannot be achieved in the short-term [25]. In practical terms, this approach translated into confidence-building measures aimed at reducing tensions. President Lee ordered the suspension of loudspeaker broadcasts along the border to "open the door to rebuilding mutual trust and suspended all radio and TV broadcasts targeting the North [26]. At a high-level plenary meeting convened during the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, the ROK Ambassador emphasized the "deep link" between systemic abuses

such as forced labor and the DPRK's nuclear weapons development. The ROK Ambassador emphasized continuing its multi-faceted endeavors to foster meaningful discussions regarding the human rights situation in the DPRK at various arenas, including the UN [27]. Lee administration has sought to avoid a return to the strategic silence associated with earlier progressive governments. Rather than sidelining human rights entirely, it has pursued a strategy of decoupling human rights advocacy from frontline diplomacy. Reversing the Moon government's policy of abstention, the administration continued to co-sponsor UN resolutions condemning North Korean human rights violations.

President Lee has situated inter-Korean relations within a broader Northeast Asian Stability framework. In remarks following separate summit meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, Lee stressed that peace and stability in the region are increasingly vital and pragmatic diplomacy is essential in an era of heightened geopolitical uncertainty. This "pragmatic diplomacy" aims to call for a domestic bipartisan consensus to ensure the durability of the policy across future administrations [28]. This calibrated posture illustrates the internal division within South Korea's progressive camp. While sharing Moon Jae-in's preference for dialogue and humanitarian engagement, the Lee administration demonstrates greater willingness to sustain multilateral human rights advocacy. Human rights under Lee thus function neither as a moral stance nor as a confrontational pressure tool, but as negotiation leverage.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DRIVERS OF SOUTH KOREA'S HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE ON NORTH KOREA

South Korea's approach to human rights in North Korea is influenced by its domestic political ideology. In this context, conservative governments emphasize freedom and human dignity to draw a sharp moral distinction between the ROK and the DPRK. By contrast, progressive leaders focus on dialogue and reconciliation to prevent escalation. Defectors' organizations, civil society groups, and conservative media outlets have played a key role in sustaining public attention on North Korean human rights abuses. Their

activism, such as sending information leaflets across the border, publishing reports on the North's internal corruption acts as a driver that can force the government to react. Under conservatives, these groups are often as defenders of freedom, while under progressives, their activities are sometimes restricted for inter-Korean dialogue.

Seoul's approach is also a reflection of its commitment to international alliances. There is significant pressure from the United States and the European Union for Seoul to maintain a consistent stance on human rights. At EU-Korea summit 2023, both partners expressed grave concern over violations and abuses of human rights in the DPRK. DPRK's support of its illegal weapons programs exacerbates the humanitarian situation of its population and reaffirms that human rights are an essential element in building sustainable peace and security on the Korean Peninsula [29]. Both the Yoon and Lee administrations have sought to align with the West by co-sponsoring UN resolutions. A key driver in the international arena is the effort to establish an "inextricable link" between human rights abuses and the DPRK's weapons programs. The ROK and its allies argue that the regime uses forced labor and illicit cyber activities to fund its nuclear ambitions, thereby framing human rights not just as a moral issue, but as a matter of global security.

UN mechanisms including General Assembly resolutions, Human Rights Council debates, and special rapporteur mandates have reinforced a global "freedom" narrative. South Korea's participation in these forums has therefore become a visible indicator of its broader foreign policy orientation. North Korea consistently frames this international pressure as "psychological warfare" or a "politically motivated provocation" intended to topple its social system.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The politicization of human rights has created a strategic credibility gap, undermining both inter-Korean trust and South Korea's domestic policy coherence. The "Peace First" Dilemma under Moon's administration, which de-prioritized human rights in favor of short-term diplomatic engagement, created temporary space for dialogue but signaled tolerance for Pyongyang's domestic repression and failed to institutionalize a durable peace framework. Conversely, Yoon's administration's explicit prioritization of human

rights has been perceived by the North Korean regime as an existential threat, triggering asymmetric retaliation, including psychological warfare tactics such as the “trash balloon” campaigns, which aim to destabilize South Korean public opinion and bypass substantive diplomatic engagement. Consequently, Seoul is caught in a strategic bind: advancing the North Korean human rights agenda is essential for consolidating its role as a principled global actor, yet it risks hardening Pyongyang’s position and shutting down vital channels for diplomatic engagement.

Seoul should institutionalize a dual-track strategy that separates human rights advocacy from crisis management while maintaining consistency across administrations. First, South Korea should maintain principled and predictable human rights engagement through multilateral platforms, including continued UN resolution co-sponsorship and support for documentation mechanisms, while insulating military de-escalation and humanitarian cooperation from political conditionality. The Lee Jae-myung administration’s parallel pursuit of military confidence-building talks, and multilateral rights advocacy provides a promising model for this approach.

Second, Seoul should diversify diplomatic venues beyond the U.S.–ROK alliance framework by prioritizing engagement through the EU–Korea partnership and ASEAN Regional Forum. These forums offer lower-escalation environments for addressing humanitarian protection and refugee issues, reducing Pyongyang’s perception of rights advocacy as regime-directed pressure.

Third, South Korea should institutionalize domestic support for North Korean human rights through sustained funding for civil society organizations, defector assistance programs, and information dissemination initiatives. This would strengthen accountability mechanisms while reducing the burden on frontline diplomacy.

Finally, Seoul should integrate human rights more closely with humanitarian and socioeconomic engagement, particularly in food security, public health, and labor protections. Framing rights advocacy through livelihood and welfare concerns can advance normative objectives while lowering regime threat perceptions.

Together, these measures would allow South Korea to uphold human rights standards, preserve diplomatic flexibility, and enhance its credibility as both a stakeholder and mediator on the Korean Peninsula.

CONCLUSIONS

South Korea's discourse of the human rights demonstrates that it is politically contingent. When human rights are sidelined for dialogue, peace remains fragile. Conversely, when human rights are prioritized, they risk triggering escalation rather than accountability. The central challenge for Seoul is therefore not whether to address human rights, but how to do so in a way that sustains credibility, reduces volatility, and preserves diplomatic space. The Lee Jae-myung administration's emerging approach offers a pragmatic model that avoids both strategic silence and confrontational overreach. For long-term stability, South Korea should institutionalize a human rights policy that integrates humanitarian engagement with normative advocacy and leverages diverse diplomatic platforms beyond alliance-based frameworks. Doing so would allow Seoul to uphold universal values while maintaining its unique role as both stakeholders and mediators on the Korean Peninsula. How Seoul integrates human rights into its North Korea policy will shape not only inter-Korean relations, but also its credibility as a regional stabilizer and normative middle power in the Indo-Pacific.

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