

# Korea

# Focus

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Berlin Forum on Korea:

Korea at a Crossroads: At the Intersection of  
East-West and North-South

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# **Berlin Forum on Korea: Korea at a Crossroads: At the Intersection of East-West and North-South**

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Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles relevant to Korea. This issue is written by Minho Jo, scholarshipholder at the KEC, and summarises the event “Berlin Forum on Korea- Korea at a Crossroads: At the Intersection of East-West and North-South” which took place from the 19-21 November 2025.

# Introduction

In an emerging geopolitical landscape often characterized as a “new Cold War”—marked by the erosion of U.S. hegemonic primacy and intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry—Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula have reemerged as pivotal theaters of confrontation. Against this backdrop, the 2025 Berlin Forum on Korea convened to examine the historical legacies of the 1975 Helsinki Accords and the 1955 Bandung Conference, assessing their potential insights for constructing a more stable and constructive regional order.

These two historical frameworks offer complementary approaches: Helsinki provides a model for managing great-power competition through institutionalized dialogue, while Bandung exemplifies South-South solidarity beyond traditional power blocs. The Forum explored the strategic choices and orientations for Korea and the broader East Asian region by revisiting these key historical experiences. This inquiry provided the principal rationale for the Forum.

Accordingly, thirty experts from academia, international organizations, research foundations, politics, and diplomacy—representing Europe, the Asia-Pacific region including Korea, and North America—gathered in Berlin from 19 to 21 November 2025. They engaged in a three-day forum under the theme “Korea at a Crossroads: At the Intersection of East–West and North–South.” The conference comprised four thematic panels held over three days, each featuring presentations and in-depth discussions that built upon these foundational concepts.

## Panel 1: Fifty Years After Helsinki

The year 2025 marks both the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Accords, offering an important moment to reflect on the postwar international order and the historical significance of East–West détente during the Cold War. Both the Potsdam Conference and the Helsinki Accords simultaneously solidified the division of Germany and Eastern Europe while introducing the dual principles of human rights and respect for sovereignty. This dual legacy—division alongside normative framework—makes the Helsinki experience particularly relevant for Korea today.

Efforts to apply such historical experiences to the Korean Peninsula have generated diverse—and often ideologically polarized—interpretations within contemporary South Korean society. Recent developments, such as the rise of “Republic of Korea nationalism” in the South and North Korea’s formal abandonment of unification discourse in favor of defining the two Koreas as mutually hostile separate states, highlight a new phase in inter-Korean relations. Against this backdrop, the forum sought to examine how the Korean Peninsula’s political order should be defined and how to balance the overarching values of unification, coexistence, and human rights.

In this session, the panel examined that although the historical conditions surrounding the “Helsinki Process” seventy years ago differ from today’s political landscape on the Korean Peninsula, Europe’s long-accumulated security experiences still offer meaningful insights. The discussion highlighted the need for a multilateral approach that integrates security, human rights, and diplomacy. Unilateral measures—such as the North Korean Human Rights Acts of the United States and South Korea—face inherent limitations because they lack reciprocal participation from Pyongyang. The panel therefore suggested that a Northeast Asian version of the Helsinki Process, with North Korea included as an equal participant, could function as a multilateral platform capable of simultaneously addressing both security issues and normative concerns.

Furthermore, the panel moved beyond traditional realist and liberal frameworks to explore peace strategies for the Korean Peninsula from a social-constructivist perspective. Drawing on the Helsinki Process as a key example of how peacebuilding is intertwined with social construction, the panel underscored the need for a comprehensive peace strategy that goes beyond purely military and security-centered approaches. This would entail developing political and economic cooperative platforms that can generate shared interests and foster the conditions necessary for durable peace.

The discussions also engaged with the experiences of the CSCE/OSCE, which played a central role in mitigating and ultimately overcoming the East–West divide in Europe. While the German case cannot be directly applied to the Korean Peninsula, core elements—such as process-oriented negotiation, consensus-building with neighboring states, and sectoral cooperation—may be adapted to fit regional realities. These elements could help create flexible and pragmatic strategies that make mutual benefits visible and facilitate gradual inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation.

Notably, the panel pointed out that both North and South Korea face structural challenges in managing their relationships with the United States, China, and Russia in the current context of a new Cold War. They stressed the importance of carefully recognizing that “unification” is no longer an immediately achievable policy goal for either regime. In this regard, acknowledging that long-term peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas has become a realistic and shared objective is more important than ever. The panel further noted that, to this end, South Korea may need to accept the reality of nuclear power North Korea as a starting point for future policy formulation.

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

Building on the multilateral approaches discussed in Panel 1, Panel 2 shifted focus to Korea's engagement with the Global South through the lens of Bandung principles. Seventy years after the 1955 Bandung Conference—an anchor of Global South solidarity and postcolonial autonomy—its principles confront renewed challenges amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. South Korea's Global South policy likewise remains shaped by U.S.-centered alignment and an ODA system still oriented toward concessional loans, while North Korea continues to utilize Global South networks within its multipolar foreign policy.

Within this context, the session examined what diplomatic identity South Korea should pursue, how it might balance middle-power autonomy with broader international responsibility, and how historical ties with the Global South should inform contemporary ODA and development strategies. Revisiting Bandung's legacy, participants discussed ways for Korea to enhance development cooperation, economic diplomacy, and its role in promoting a more inclusive global order.

The panel also explored how development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and human-rights engagement intersect on the Korean Peninsula. Starting from Bandung's normative foundations—sovereignty, peaceful cooperation, and shared responsibility—participants emphasized the need for context-sensitive, community-centered approaches to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

The panel explored the acute challenges facing humanitarian assistance to North Korea. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pyongyang has denied entry to most international agencies that previously provided essential medical and nutritional aid. This refusal specifically encompasses any assistance originating—directly or indirectly—from the United States, Japan, or South Korea.

Despite official rhetoric emphasizing modernization of the health sector, North Korea continues to suffer from severe shortages, including treatments for tuberculosis and hepatitis. The problem does not lie in assessing needs, which are well documented, but in identifying politically acceptable delivery mechanisms. One proposed solution was the establishment of an international trust fund. This approach would enable indirect access to resources without direct engagement with Seoul, potentially lowering political barriers to humanitarian cooperation.

Furthermore, the panel analyzed North Korea's strategic engagement with the UN human-rights system. Despite emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and multipolarity—and presenting itself as aligned with Global South positions—Pyongyang continues limited participation in treaty-body reporting, special procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review. This selective cooperation offers insight into the DPRK's broader diplomatic strategy and directly affects the prospects for humanitarian access and development cooperation.

During discussion, participants cautioned against the "weaponization" of human-rights discourse that frames the DPRK as uniquely exceptional, noting that selective acceptance of UPR

recommendations is common among many states. Such reflection was considered essential for identifying more constructive avenues for engagement.

The panel then examined Korea's cooperation with Africa through the lens of Bandung principles—sovereignty, equality, and solidarity. While South Korea's historical ties with Africa were limited compared to North Korea's early involvement in anti-colonial movements, Seoul has become an important donor in the region.

Presenters also emphasized improving the quality and sustainability of development projects by strengthening contextual analysis, transparency, community participation, and transferability. Situating Korea's ODA within the longer trajectory of Global South and South–South cooperation, participants argued that Korea could serve as a "bridge-builder," supporting triangular cooperation and aligning its aid practices with partner-country priorities. Discussion also highlighted opportunities to combine human-capacity development with emergent AI technologies to address health, education, and crisis-response challenges.

Furthermore, the panel emphasized that Korea's Global South strategy should be grounded in Bandung's core principles while adapting to today's geopolitical realities. Humanitarian engagement with North Korea requires innovative, politically feasible mechanisms. Understanding the DPRK's selective diplomacy is essential for crafting realistic pathways for cooperation. In Africa, Korea faces the opportunity—and responsibility—to design more context-sensitive, sustainable development partnerships and to act as an intermediary between traditional donors and Global South partners. Integrating humanitarian, political, and technological dimensions will be crucial for shaping Korea's future ODA and its role within an evolving global order.

## Panel 3: Eighty Years after Division – Next Generation Panel

While Panels 1 and 2 focused on state-level approaches, Panel 3 expanded the discussion to include non-traditional actors and bottom-up perspectives. This panel, featuring emerging scholars, provided a forward-looking perspective by highlighting the role of non-traditional actors in peacebuilding. Four studies presented a multi-faceted vision for the future:

*"Literary Memory and National Healing: From Colonial Division to the Dream of Unity"*

Analysis of early 20th-century Korean literature demonstrated how narratives of division and reconciliation form a moral and emotional basis for contemporary peace discourse. The works of Han Yongun, Yi Gwangsu, and Kim Sowol serve as sustainable tools for fostering inter-Korean dialogue through shared empathy and cultural continuity.

*"Peace Visions of South Korean MZ Generation – based on a Q study"*

A survey of South Korea's MZ generation identified five distinct conceptualizations of peace, revealing its pluralistic nature. This underscores the need for inclusive reconciliation approaches that account for diverse youth perspectives and everyday understandings of peace.

*"Small States Seeking Shelter: Theory, Challenges, and Mongolia's Role in Korean Peace"*

Applying "shelter theory" to Mongolia's role highlighted how small states can transform geopolitical vulnerabilities into diplomatic assets. Mongolia's "3rd Neighbor Policy" and the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue provide a neutral platform for engaging both Koreas and major powers in regional security discussions.

*"Beyond Traditional Diplomacy: What Polish-German Local Partnerships Can Teach Korea and Japan about Reconciliation"*

A comparative analysis of Germany-Poland and South Korea-Japan city cooperation demonstrated that sustained, depoliticized collaboration at the local level serves as a key mechanism for practical reconciliation. This bottom-up approach builds tangible networks of cooperation that can withstand political fluctuations.

These diverse perspectives demonstrate that sustainable peace requires engagement at multiple levels—from cultural and generational to local and regional. The studies indicate that future peace discussions must expand beyond state-centric diplomacy and all the studies in this session illustrate that new actors—cultural memory, generational perspectives, small- and middle-power diplomacy, and urban networks—will exert growing influence in shaping the future international order. The findings indicate that discussions on peace in Korea will need to expand beyond state-centered diplomacy toward a multi-layered, multi-actor peace infrastructure. They highlight the importance of next-generation scholars actively engaging in redefining future trajectories at the center of these transformations.