

North Korea model shows how delay nearly made Iran's nuclear threat irreversible

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 23.04.2026

The current nuclear reality in East Asia is not the product of a sudden escalation, but rather the outcome of a cumulative process in which warning signs were identified in time, yet not translated into decisive action. North Korea's nuclear program illustrates how delay, uncertainty, and reluctance to act can transform a preventable threat into a permanent and irreversible strategic condition.

The roots of the program lie in the decades following the Korean War. Already at an early stage, troubling indications emerged regarding technological progress with clear military potential. Nevertheless, the international community, particularly the United States, especially under the Clinton administration, refrained from taking decisive action. The combination of intelligence uncertainty and fear of regional escalation, above all – the prospect of a full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula, led policymakers to favor a diplomatic track.

The agreements reached in the 1990s succeeded in slowing the program, but not in stopping it. In retrospect, they provided North Korea with valuable time, enabling it to develop alternative pathways and move closer to full nuclear capability. Once that capability was achieved, the strategic landscape changed fundamentally: the option of prevention largely disappeared, and the international community was forced to shift toward managing the threat through deterrence alone.

Subsequently, North Korea moved from concealment to demonstration. Missile launches became a central instrument of policy—not merely for technological testing, but as a means of political signaling and coercion. Some of these launches passed directly over Japanese territory, vividly illustrating the vulnerability of a modern state, even one protected by strong alliances with a superpower such as the United States.

Japan, as a key US ally and host of major American military bases, finds itself in a structurally complex position. On the one hand, it benefits from American

protection; on the other, it is exposed to threats arising from the broader confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang. The quasi-pacifist doctrine Japan adopted after World War II, despite important modifications over time, continues to limit its ability to act independently and places its security largely on the credibility of US extended deterrence.

Against this backdrop stands the Israeli approach, which differs in fundamental ways. Since its establishment, Israel has developed a strategic doctrine based on self-reliance, early prevention, and a refusal to depend exclusively on external actors. The underlying assumption has been that existential threats cannot be managed once they mature; they must be neutralized at the earliest possible stage.

This approach has been applied over the years, particularly in relation to nuclear threats in Iraq and Syria. In recent years, Israel has defined Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat and has consistently warned that delaying action could create an irreversible reality. Nevertheless, in recent years Israel itself has leaned toward managing the threat through agreements, covert operations, and deterrence rather than decisive early action.

From this perspective, a deeply troubling insight emerges. Looking back, especially in light of the extensive military actions recently undertaken by the United States and Israel against Iran and its nuclear infrastructure, it is difficult not to wonder how close this reality came to becoming irreversible. A combination of factors, foremost among them – changes in leadership in the United States, appears to have prevented the crossing of the point of no return.

In retrospect, it is indeed chilling to consider how close we came, regarding Iran, to replicating the North Korean model.

In this sense, the Iranian case demands renewed reflection on the limits of restraint, the timing of action, and the responsibility of leadership in recognizing decisive moments.

Published in Israel Hayom, on April 23, 2026.

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