



## **A United States-Republic of Korea-People's Republic of China Trilateral Meeting**

**June 2017**

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The National Committee on American Foreign Policy held a U.S.-ROK-PRC trilateral meeting at The Korea Society in New York City on June 8, 2017. At this one-day event, experts, scholars, and current and former government officials engaged in an intense discussion of the rising nuclear and missile threats from North Korea, exchanged views on the efficacy of current policy approaches dealing with this challenge, and discussed new ways to end North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles. This conference and report preceded the late June 2017 summit meeting between Presidents Trump and Moon; as well as the release and untimely death of U.S. detainee Otto Warmbier.

Participants from the three countries agreed that the growing sophistication and size of North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenals, together with the likelihood that Pyongyang would eventually test a nuclear-tipped ICBM capable of hitting the United States, had created an unprecedented sense of urgency in all three countries. They concurred that the expansion and intensification of the threat could destabilize the Northeast Asia region. They also agreed that increased trilateral consultations among the three are indispensable as they contend with the rising North Korean threat.

There was agreement that dialogue and diplomacy represent the ideal way to deal with Pyongyang, but participants had little confidence that North Korea would respond to such an approach by giving up its nuclear and missile programs. Pessimism and concern were the dominant themes as this gathering of experts contemplated the options the three countries would face if Pyongyang continues its nuclear and missile development. All participants seemed to agree with the assessment of one American that the situation is "dire."

Several U.S. participants noted that Pyongyang's eventual development of a missile targeting the U.S. homeland did not fundamentally change the military balance—America's deterrent and missile defenses are strong and becoming more so. It is important, they stressed, not to overestimate what Pyongyang can do. Nevertheless, the U.S. is determined not to allow North Korea to increase its threat against U.S. allies or to threaten the United States itself. U.S. determination to prevent these developments is manifested in the Trump Administration's statement that all options, including military measures, are on the table.

Several U.S. participants urged that regime change should also be included on the menu of options, especially since neither sanctions or diplomacy are likely to be effective in ending Pyongyang's nuclear program. Regime change could be defined as a change in top leadership, rather than a wholesale change of the political system. But there is no assured method to achieve such a policy goal and other participants were wary of a regime change approach given the challenges in the Middle East over the last decade or so.

The official policy of the United States includes four principal elements: the U.S. will not accept the DPRK as a nuclear state; the situation needs a peaceful resolution; the U.S. does not seek regime change or collapse; the U.S. is open to meaningful dialogue when the DPRK is ready to abide by the UN Security Council resolutions and their past promises. The U.S. is actively coordinating a pressure campaign, with international friends and partners, which includes both economic efforts to fully implement sanctions and diplomatic efforts to isolate the DPRK by downgrading diplomatic relations and expelling DPRK guest workers who provide a vital cash flow to the regime. There is also military pressure shown by increased exercises and drills.

However, the policy of “maximum pressure and engagement” is intended to bring the DPRK back to the negotiating table—to “bring North Korea to its senses, not to its knees,” in the recent words of Admiral Harry Harris, Commander of U.S. Pacific Command. The U.S. understands that it will need China's help in this endeavor but it would be a mistake, in the words of one participant, to assume the U.S. is naively expecting China to ‘deliver’ North Korea. Instead, cooperation should focus on shared goals that arise from the national interests of each country to prevent further proliferation of the North Korean nuclear program.

A PRC expert said the increased sense of urgency in China about North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities is a “new development” and a byproduct of Beijing's frustration over its inability to affect North Korean behavior. Chinese representatives reassured the gathering that Beijing is prepared to do more in the sanctions and pressure areas to deal with Pyongyang. They noted that North Korea's economic “opportunity costs” are rising as they boost their nuclear and missile programs, and China wants to raise these costs further through pressure. However, they acknowledged that how to deal with North Korea remains a divisive policy issue inside China.

Several American and South Korean participants expressed deep skepticism that Beijing would do enough to make a difference, especially since the PRC continues to prioritize stability in North Korea over denuclearization. They cited numerous examples of China's failure to implement current UN Security Council sanctions, including allowing DPRK firms to violate sanctions on Chinese soil. They stressed that expectations of China are high and Beijing is unlikely to live up to them. A Chinese participant urged the U.S. and ROK to provide Beijing with evidence of possible Chinese sanctions violations.

A Chinese participant worried that Pyongyang's May 14, 2017 medium-range missile test was intended to simulate the forces that a nuclear warhead would experience on reentry into the Earth's atmosphere as it headed toward the United States. He also shared his concern that the United States might carry out a large-scale "pre-emptive strike" or smaller-scale strike against the North's nuclear facilities. A South Korean scholar expressed similar concerns, adding that North Korean fear of U.S. military action was strengthening the regime's resolve to increase its nuclear and missile capabilities. Most ROK representatives, however, stressed the need for a strong deterrent, as well as the need to keep all options open to deal with the threat.

A South Korean expert estimated that North Korea could already have as many as 30 nuclear weapons. He said that easing or lifting sanctions under these circumstances or freezing the North's program at the current level would be tantamount to accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. He urged China to act strongly, including by cutting off fuel to North Korea and sending DPRK laborers home. He also shared a South Korean concern that U.S. efforts to exert "maximum pressure" on the North are flagging. He urged the application of overwhelming pressure—an approach strongly endorsed by some of the Americans.

A ROK expert opined that by developing the ability to strike the United States, Pyongyang hopes to compel the U.S. to choose between its own security and that of its allies. The wrong choice by the United States might compel the ROK and Japan to go nuclear. He wondered whether this might be enough to convince China to regard Pyongyang as a liability instead of an asset.

Another South Korean said ROK President Moon hopes to become the "inheritor" of the Sunshine policy developed by the late President Kim Dae-Jung. He thought Moon would pursue a two-track policy towards Pyongyang: simultaneously pressing for denuclearization while pursuing an "updated" engagement policy designed to increase the ROK's economic leverage. Acknowledging U.S. concerns about Moon, he said Moon would consult closely with the United States, accept the deployment of THAAD, and focus engagement with Pyongyang in areas outside the scope of international sanction—such as health, medical and environmental cooperation.

An American participant questioned the United States' capacity to handle the current crisis in light of the decline in the number of Korea experts in the U.S. government and the Trump administration's slowness in filling important Executive Branch positions. He noted rising concerns among U.S. allies about the reliability of the U.S. defense commitment. In this regard, Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson's reassurances are helpful but not sufficient in light of President Trump's emphasis on a nationalistic, America-first world view.

The Chinese expressed familiar concerns about the U.S. Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system being deployed in South Korea. A Chinese participant added that the main worry about THAAD is the system's potential to enhance trilateral U.S.-ROK-Japan defense cooperation, not its technical capabilities against the PRC's offensive nuclear forces.

The Chinese also pressed the United States and the ROK to consider seriously Beijing's "freeze-for-freeze" proposal calling for a halt in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests in exchange for a halt in U.S.-ROK military exercises. When the U.S. and ROK representatives strongly rejected this idea, the Chinese side urged Washington to come up with alternatives.

Looking to the future, participants agreed that Pyongyang is likely to launch a "peace offensive" for tactical reasons once it achieves its desired level of missile and nuclear capability. Once this happens, we will need a "plan B." One approach would be to conclude a multi-stage agreement with Pyongyang that would begin with a "freeze" or "pause" in nuclear and missile programs and end with the elimination of those programs and conclusion of a peace treaty. Such an agreement may be impossible, however, in light of the DPRK's determination to remain a nuclear power.

A U.S. participant listed the major uncertainties as we try to understand the threat posed by the North's programs. We do not know how much fissile material the North has produced, and the likely development of additional uranium enrichment facilities and lack of on-the-ground verification have compounded this concern. We do not know the degree to which the North has weaponized its nuclear material, nor do we know how close the North is to an actual ICBM capability. Finally, we do not know the full extent of past nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, or more recent or ongoing cooperation with Iran, including in the development of solid-fuel missiles.

Participants agreed that if talks become possible, we would need to agree in advance what we should demand of Pyongyang in return for talks. What are we prepared to offer, for example, in return for a pause or freeze in nuclear and missile testing? We must have a clear understanding of the elements of a possible deal and what inducements are available to support one. A U.S. expert stressed that any inducements should be modest and easily reversible if, as he expects, the North reneges on its commitments. For a South Korean view, see the paper by Former Vice Foreign Minister Sung-han Kim which follows this report.

As it became clear that most participants saw little hope that Pyongyang would agree to denuclearization through dialogue, a ROK participant urged China to consider a "grand bargain" in which the United States and the ROK would offer Beijing assurances that a unified Korea would not be a threat to the PRC's security, including by establishing a "buffer" on the Korea-China border. The Korean expert implied that the only way to achieve denuclearization might be to end the North Korean regime and reunify the peninsula.

Chinese participants found the proposal intriguing, but reiterated the PRC's official policy to support Korea's peaceful reunification and to avoid supporting any specific reunification plan. Korea's reunification is a matter for the Koreans, a Chinese expert said.

As the meeting concluded, a Chinese expert expressed his certainty that any new attempt to negotiate denuclearization will fail. He criticized the idea of reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex as "putting money in the hands of North Korea." Echoing a view held strongly by several Americans and Koreans, he said, "Only when Kim Jong Un realizes he can't survive if he continues the nuclear program will he give it up. We need to convince him that only his destruction will result from his pursuit of nuclear weapons." He expressed skepticism that the international community could do this, which is why "Pyongyang is laughing at us." He suggested focusing on new sanctions and other measures and giving them time to work, as well as avoiding a rush to new talks or to a new "Sunshine" policy. "It is too late for carrots," he said, "Kim Jong Un has no interest in them."

In a comment that captured the mood of many in the room, an American expert said, "It may not be possible to bring Kim Jong Un to his senses without first bringing him to his knees." Another American added, "We have to give North Korea a choice between nukes and survival."

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FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY (FAPS)  
AND THE KOREA SOCIETY  
*PRESENT***

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**A U.S.-CHINA-REPUBLIC OF KOREA TRILATERAL CONFERENCE**

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**JUNE 8<sup>TH</sup>, 2017**

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# Thinking of a New Strategic Mix for Resolving the North Korean Nuclear Problem \*

By Sung-han Kim (Professor, Korea University)

## 1. North Korea's Game Plan

With a view to ensuring the long-term consolidation and survival of his regime, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is pursuing the so-called *Byungjin* policy of simultaneously pursuing nuclear and economic development. His game plan is as follows:

North Korea 1) should accelerate the miniaturization of nuclear warheads and ICBMs capable of hitting the mainland of the United States; 2) may return to a “tactical” dialogue with the U.S. and South Korea when North Korea suffers from international pressure; 3) will resume nuclear and missile development when the pressure is eased; 4) will declare a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests right after the North has accomplished its strategic mission, or the possession of nuclear ICBMs; and 5) will come to the negotiating table and pretend to negotiate over denuclearization while consolidating the stability of the regime.

If North Korea develops capabilities to hit the United States, do extended deterrence calculations change? How might the regional players react in terms of developing their own capabilities? The impact will be higher than expected. The United States may be ready and have the will to defend regional allies, but its national survival is unlikely to be threatened by a conflict on the Korean peninsula. For North Korea and its neighbors, survival may well be on the line in a potential war. This apparent asymmetry of interests could expose the fundamental challenge for extended deterrence against a nuclear-armed North Korea. Not the United States itself but the U.S. alliance will be threatened. North Korea might think that by threatening a nuclear attack they can raise the potential costs of a conflict beyond what the United States is willing to accept so that the United States will agree on Pyongyang's terms.

If North Korea can target U.S. cities with nuclear weapons, as Shane Smith of the U.S. National Defense University pointed out, a “triangular decoupling” strategy would be made possible. First, by having South Korea suspect whether the U.S. would risk San Francisco and LA to defend Seoul or Busan, North Korea could decouple the ROK-U.S. alliance. In addition, North Korea might think that by threatening Japan with the mid-range Nodong nuclear missiles, the United States would be forced to choose between allies and that it would be reluctant to risk Japan over a fight on the Korean peninsula.

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When North Korea develops capabilities to hit the United States, the U.S. will try harder to assure its allies—South Korea and Japan—while reinforcing its deterrence and defense capabilities to North Korean nuclear missiles. In particular, the U.S. will try to establish Missile Defense (MD) integrating U.S.-Japan-Korea in order to neutralize North Korea’s triangular decoupling strategy.

In light of the rapidly deteriorating situation of the North Korean nuclear crisis, it is not a surprise for the South Korean media and opinion leaders to suspect the reliability of U.S. extended deterrence for South Korea. The South Korean government will strengthen its precision-guided munitions capability. e.g., the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and the Joint Stand-Off Weapon (JSOW). It will accelerate the development of Kill Chain (a preemptive strike system) and Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD). The deployment of THAAD will become irreversible.

Former UK Defense Secretary Denis Healey said in his memoir that during the Cold War it took only 5 percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but 95 percent to reassure the Europeans. If the South Korean people, particularly the conservatives, are not assured by the U.S. about its extended deterrence, they will demand the government to take one of three nuclear options: 1) completion of nuclear fuel cycle; 2) redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons; and 3) South Korea’s nuclear armament.

## **2. Explore the ZOPA**

In light of the fact that the North Korean nuclear problem still remains unresolved, even getting worse, for more than twenty years since the nuclear crisis broke out in 1993, the key is not whether we can come up with the brilliant new ideas, but whether we have the political will to resolve the problem. Nevertheless, we can think of a new mix of ideas or approaches to resolve or slow down the North Korean nuclear problem.

Against this backdrop, we can explore the ZOPA (Zone of Potential Agreement) between the concerned parties: (1) North Korea suspends its nuclear and missile tests while the United States suspends the implementation of its unilateral sanctions since North Korea’s first nuclear test; (2) The Six-Party Talks are resumed and the UN Security Council suspends implementing its resolutions against North Korea in return for North Korea’s promise on the “verifiable freeze” of the nuclear weapons development; (3) While the freeze is being verified, the five parties of SPT prepare a package of economic assistance for North Korea and start a “peace forum” where the two Koreas and the U.S. and China will discuss how to establish a peace regime on the Korean peninsula; and (4) North Korea will denuclearize itself in return for a peace treaty (between the two Koreas endorsed by the U.S. and China), U.S.-North Korea/U.S.-Japan diplomatic normalization, and a mini-Marshall Plan for North Korea.

It would not be easy for us to go into even the first stage. Once we roll the ball, however, we could quickly move to the second stage of the verifiable freeze that makes the freeze reliable and sustainable. In the first stage, the United States alone had better act in suspending its sanctions because the UNSC and South Korea's involvement may make agreements delayed and complicated. The key is whether we (South Korea, U.S., China, Japan, and Russia) will reach a consensus on the roadmap and whether China will make its utmost effort to bring North Korea to the negotiating table.

Rewards for the freeze may include the lifting of UN and unilateral sanctions, which will be negotiable. As long as North Korea's nuclear freeze is verified, South Korea could lift the 2000 May 24 sanctions and resume the Kaesong industrial park and the Kumgang Mountain tourism. Before the freeze is verified, inter-Korean contacts and exchanges should be confined to humanitarian activities.

In particular, we need to think about the Chinese proposal of moving denuclearization and a peace treaty in parallel. If North Korea agrees on a verifiable freeze at the second stage, we can discuss how to establish a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula. A peace regime, however, should be distinguished from a peace treaty in the sense that a peace regime refers to the broader concept which includes not just a peace treaty but also denuclearization, arms control, and diplomatic normalization. The main parties of the peace treaty should be the two Koreas while China and the United State may endorse the treaty when the two Korea agree on it. But, at the end of the day when a peace regime is to be firmly established, Japan and Russia should also be involved.

### **3. Appoint Ban Ki-moon as High-Level Special Representative**

Then, the next step is how to implement the roadmap based on the above ZOPA. The UN Secretary General, with the endorsement of the five parties of Six-Party Talks, may designate former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as the high-level special representative of the United Nations for North Korean affairs with the mandate that he will meet and negotiate with Kim Jong Un with a view to bringing North Korea to the negotiating table. If the United Nations does not want to get involved, the five parties of SPT may directly ask him to play the important role. Mr. Ban appears to be the only person who will be rarely denied by those five parties, if not welcomed.

For this thing to happen, however, the "maximum pressure" strategy is the primary condition. Before Mr. Ban goes to Pyongyang, the five parties—the U.S, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea—should implement the maximum pressure strategy on the condition that we will discuss whatever necessary at the negotiating table for ensuring the security of the North Korean regime. In light of the game plan mentioned above, North Korea would not accept Mr. Ban unless its regime security is seriously threatened. Maximum pressure may include the full implementation of UNSC resolutions and unilateral sanctions of individual countries, prohibition of commercial activities on the China-North Korea border area, the secondary boycott, etc.

#### **4. Transform Tactical Dialogue into Strategic Dialogue**

At some point when the maximum pressure works, North Korea will come to the negotiating table for tactical purposes as enumerated by its game plan. Our mission is to transform the “tactical dialogue” into a “strategic dialogue” so that North Korea may not move to the next stages of its game plan. To that end, we need to agree on what we can demand and what we can give to North Korea beforehand. That is why we need a common roadmap that will be imposed on or negotiated with North Korea when North Korea comes to the “tactical” dialogue to ease the maximum pressure against itself.

One caveat, however, is that we may agree on freeze, but we will have to accept it only when it is a “verifiable freeze.” We have purchased the same horse twice since the first nuclear crisis broke out in 1993. The first was when the U.S.-North Korea Geneva Agreed Framework was signed in October 1994, and the second was when we agreed on the September 19 Joint Statement in 2005. These efforts failed because we did not impose the verification of the freeze. When we are ready to purchase the horse for the third time, North Korea has to re-invite IAEA inspectors to Yongbyon and allow them to verify that all nuclear facilities are frozen. What about the other areas where North Korea is suspected to be hiding nuclear materials and warheads? It would be technically and politically impossible to expand the area of verification immediately to other areas. We may gradually expand the verification to other areas as our negotiation proceeds.

#### **5. Implement Regime Transformation**

Our policy should be aimed at regime transformation. It is different from regime change and it refers to the promotion of change in the North Korean behavior. Regime security is a higher priority than national security in North Korea. Our North Korea policy should be focused on the regime transformation of North Korea which means changing the behavior of the North Korean regime by threatening the regime security of North Korea. Only when Kim Jong Un perceives the nuclear development as choking his own regime, will he accept denuclearization. So, we have to weaken his regime security to that extent, if not to regime change.

However, if our regime transformation policy does not show tangible results, we need to increase our pressure further by imposing low-level military actions such as a naval blockade, a no-fly zone, etc. against North Korea. Some Chinese security experts recently began to mention the so-called “leadership change.” That means the replacement of the current North Korean leader with a new leader who will give up nuclear weapons development while maintaining the current system. In this scenario, South Korea is not supposed to try to use the leadership change as an opportunity to realize Korean reunification. This would be an extremely dangerous option which needs to be avoided by all means, but things could move toward that direction when the key stake-holders, particularly the United States, are frustrated. If the United States stops at the stage of freeze, not denuclearization, it will have to see South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan going nuclear.

In order to avoid this dangerous scenario, the U.S.-China-ROK trilateral group should embark on a strategic dialogue among themselves at the Track I or Track 1.5 level. It can be aimed at coordinating our North Korea policy and assessing the effect of our actions. When our game plan is set, China should no longer raise the THAAD issue which has been hindering the tripartite cooperation since the THAAD will be withdrawn from South Korea when the North Korean nuclear problem is resolved.

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In 2013-2014, Dr. Kim was the Chair of World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on WMD. He is now the Chair of the Korean National Committee of CSCAP (Council on Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific) after having completed his service as a Vice President of the Korean Association of International Studies; President of Korean Association of American Politics (KAAP); and Chairman of the Vision Council for the ROK-U.S. Security Policy Initiative.

After the North Korean military attack to the *Cheonan* naval corvette in March 2010, he served as a member of the Presidential Commission for National Security Review (May–August 2010) and the Presidential Commission for Defense Reform (July–December 2010). He also advised the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Assembly, the Ministry of Unification, the Ministry of Defense, and the National Intelligence Service. From May 2008 to January 2012, he participated in the Presidential Advisory Council for Foreign Affairs and National Security, which consisted of ten security experts.

Dr. Kim specializes in U.S. foreign policy and international security with a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, U.S.A. in 1992. His recent contributed articles to scholarly journals include "The Day After: ROK-U.S. Cooperation for Korean Unification," "From Blood Alliance to Strategic Alliance," "The End of Humanitarian Intervention?" "North Korea: Between Survival and Glory," and "Exploring a Northeast Asian Peace and Security Mechanism." He is married and has one daughter. (Email: [ksunghan@korea.ac.kr](mailto:ksunghan@korea.ac.kr))