



## **U.S.-China-Japan-Korea Relations: Managing Expectations and Concerns A Summary of Discussions from the NCAFP Quadrilateral Conference**

**By Ralph A. Cossa  
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### **Introduction**

On May 22-23, 2018, the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) conducted its annual quadrilateral dialogue in New York City involving 36 scholars, current and former officials from the United States, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.

Topics discussed included an overview of the security situation in the Asia Pacific (or Indo-Pacific), North Korea policy under Trump, and relations among the major powers, followed by a discussion of policy recommendations. Several participants also took part in a public panel on “After the Olympics Detente: Policy Coordination on the North Korean Nuclear Issue” organized by NCAFP and the Japan Society, which can be viewed [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

The meeting took place shortly after North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un’s summit meetings with ROK President Moon Jae-in and Chinese President Xi Jinping (twice) and prior to the anticipated historic summit between Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Secretary Mnuchin’s cease-fire announcement notwithstanding, the steady deterioration of U.S.-China relations was seen as the most troubling development over the past year with broad regional implications.
- Chinese participants tended to see the deterioration in bilateral relations as a result of U.S. “misunderstanding” of Chinese intentions and actions or (misplaced?) concerns about a rising power by the established power. China, they insisted, was not trying to overthrow the established rules-based order or “push the U.S. out of Asia” as many Americans seemed to fear.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/2LK8h7z>

- Americans tended to see the increased tensions as a direct result of aggressive Chinese military, diplomatic, and economic actions that are drawing a (long-overdue) U.S. response or pushback. Japanese and Korean colleagues likewise worried about increased Chinese aggressiveness and actions that did not match Chinese words, but also worried about U.S. unpredictability and perceived policy inconsistencies.
- All agreed on the need for more careful transparent management of Sino-U.S. relations given its spillover effect on broader issues of regional peace and stability.
- Somewhat related to the above were expressions of confusion from all sides regarding America's "Indo-Pacific strategy" which many viewed more as a slogan or concept with no apparent strategy yet attached.
- All participants were at least mildly encouraged by the current round of summitry and the apparent willingness of all parties to engage in dialogue while generally avoiding the inflammatory rhetoric of recent months in dealing with the North Korea nuclear issue.
- Few, if any, believed that CVID was a realistic short-term (or perhaps even long-term) possibility or that an "all at once" as opposed to a phased action-for-action approach was likely to be accepted by Pyongyang.
- While most believed that the U.S.-DPRK Summit would be held, few expected it to "solve" the problem. At best, the two sides might be able to establish overall principles and objectives that would then guide the ensuing diplomatic process. A clear understanding of what constitutes "complete denuclearization" was an essential element of any agreement or joint statement.
- There was no consensus on what would constitute a successful summit but general agreement that no deal or an agreement to try again later was better than a "bad deal" (which was likewise in the eye of the beholder).
- All agreed on the need to be prepared for an unsuccessful summit and the challenge this would pose to the continuation of the U.S. "extreme pressure" campaign, which some feared was already being weakening based on (largely secondhand) promises and hopes rather than any tangible progress toward denuclearization. Future solidarity would depend on consensus over who was to blame for any breakdown in negotiations. Prior consultation among all four is essential to prevent Pyongyang from employing its traditional "divide and conquer" approach.

## Overview of the Security Situation in the Asia Pacific

The two most significant developments affecting four-party relations over the past twelve months have been the steady decline in Sino-U.S. relations and the improved prospects for resolution, or at least more successful management, of the North Korean nuclear challenge. The second issue will be discussed in more detail in the following section. We will focus here on what most saw as a significant and troubling increase in tensions between Washington and Beijing and its impact on regional security.

Broadly speaking, from an American perspective, the basic tenets of American foreign policy in the region have remained relatively constant: the centrality of U.S. alliances, adherence to a “one China” policy, continued (albeit considerably enhanced) pressure on Pyongyang to bring it to the negotiating table, and general support for regional security architecture (with President Trump attending the East Asia Summit and U.S.-ASEAN Summit and then-Secretary Tillerson attending the ASEAN Regional Forum ministerial). While President Trump proclaimed America’s continued commitment to a “free and open” trading system at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting, he also signaled his clear preference for bilateral versus multilateral trade deals, as symbolized by his rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) multilateral trade pact negotiated by the Obama administration.

As promised, President Trump has taken a tougher line regarding the growing trade deficit between the U.S. and PRC, including the threat of tariffs and a trade war. He blamed his predecessors, rather than his “good friend” Xi Jinping, for allowing China to take advantage of the U.S. but declared it must stop now. More significantly, a series of policy documents, including the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, and 2018 *National Defense Strategy* and *Nuclear Posture Review*, have branded China (along with Russia) as a “revisionist power” based largely on China’s more aggressive maritime behavior in the East and South China Seas (including the militarization of man-made islands), its predatory economic practices, and its increased diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, on South Korea as well. As a result, Americans tended to see the increased tensions as a direct result of Chinese behavior that is drawing a (long-overdue) U.S. response or push back.

Chinese participants tended to see the deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations as a result of U.S. “misunderstanding” of Chinese intentions and actions or (misplaced?) concerns about a rising power by the established power. China was not trying to “push the U.S. out of Asia” or overthrow the established rules-based order which has benefitted China as well as the U.S. and others. Many Chinese believed the relationship was on the right track following President Trump’s visit to Beijing last fall and have been surprised by his various policy twists and turns since then. There was also a concern that, with direct contact being established between Washington and Pyongyang, Beijing’s importance or value to Washington might be diminished. While noting that the relationship has suffered but weathered serious ups and downs in the past, some felt today’s relationship was as bad or worse than it’s ever been. Nonetheless, there did not appear to be a concerted anti-China strategy emerging (yet) in the U.S. so, hopefully, there was still time to manage the problem.

Japanese and Korean colleagues likewise worried about increased Chinese aggressiveness and actions that did not match Chinese words, and about the spillover affect this could have (and in some cases was already having) on their own relationships with both powers or on regional stability in general. Koreans in particular were concerned about China's heavy-handed response to Seoul's decision to introduce the THAAD air defense system to protect itself and U.S. forces from a North Korean missile attack. They also worried that Sino-U.S. relations were becoming a zero-sum game with Seoul caught in the middle. Japanese participants were even more direct in worrying about the challenge posed by China, noting a recent defense study that worried about "the re-emergence of a Cold War framework" and increased Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. Nonetheless, Chinese and Japanese participants both noted some improvement in Sino-Japanese relations; both nations have also been the target of threatened U.S. steel and aluminum tariffs.

Japanese and Korean interlocutors also worried about U.S. unpredictability and perceived policy inconsistencies, especially regarding America's long-standing commitment to its Northeast Asian allies. Americans understood these concerns and sometimes shared them, even while trying to assure the two allies of the depth of bipartisan U.S. commitment to the existing alliance framework.

All agreed on the need for more careful transparent management of Sino-U.S. relations given its spillover effect on broader issues of regional peace and stability.

The "Indo-Pacific strategy" was defined by participants, including Americans, as a slogan or a concept rather than a policy. Japanese interlocutors in particular were comfortable with the new regional designation since it was consistent with Prime Minister Abe's formulation of a broader region or concert of democracies, including the so-called Quad countries (which included Japan, along with Australia, the U.S., and India). Americans understood the desire to include the Indian Ocean (and India) in regional calculations but generally believed that no strategy encompassing the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions had as of yet been formulated. One described it, tongue in cheek, as "Obama's pivot, without TPP." Korean participants worried that Asia and the Asian landmass were being overlooked in what was more of a maritime designation.

Many Chinese saw the "Indo-Pacific strategy" and formulation of the Quad as specifically aimed against China. They acknowledged, however, that it was still "emerging thinking" and not mature, noting that all four Quad members wanted to maintain a stable, productive relationship with China. While few Chinese would argue that the United States or Quad countries were pursuing a containment policy (and some argued that containing China would not be possible even if that was the aim), there was widespread concern among all participants about the downward trend in Sino-U.S. relations and its negative impact on the region.

## **North Korea Policy under Trump: Is There a Deal?**

There was widespread agreement by all four parties regarding many of the essential issues and objectives related to Korean Peninsula denuclearization. All welcomed the trend since the beginning of the year on peacefully negotiated diplomatic solutions as opposed to earlier threat-based diplomacy. All also agreed on the ultimate objective of a completely denuclearized Korean Peninsula and on the difficulty involved in achieving this goal. Few, if any, believed that Kim Jong Un was prepared to accept CVID now or perhaps even in the future and most worried that a hastily or ill-prepared Kim-Trump summit would be worse than none at all. Nonetheless, all participants were at least mildly encouraged by the current round of summitry and the apparent willingness of all parties to engage in dialogue while generally avoiding the inflammatory rhetoric of recent months in dealing with the North Korea nuclear issue.

Few, if any, believed that the “all at once” or rapid up-front denuclearization being called for by the Trump administration at the time was likely to be accepted by Pyongyang. A phased action-for-action approach toward denuclearization was more likely to prove successful, despite the pitfalls inherent in a longer, more drawn-out process.

Despite the “will they, won’t they” drama unfolding during the conference, most believed that the U.S.-DPRK summit would be held since both Kim Jong Un and President Trump saw value in their meeting, even if for completely different reasons. No one expected the U.S.-DPRK summit would “solve” the problem or result in immediate denuclearization, however. The best anticipated outcome would be one in which the two sides established overall principles and objectives that would then guide the ensuing diplomatic process.

Many participants observed that there was currently no consensus or common understanding of what constitutes “complete denuclearization”; Washington and Pyongyang clearly had different interpretations. An essential element of any agreement or joint statement would be some consensus or clarity regarding this reportedly agreed upon objective.

There was a great deal of discussion but no consensus on what constituted a “successful” summit and a recognition that what might look like a good deal to one or more of the parties might not look good to others whose objectives or desired outcomes differed. For example, while all agreed on the need to get rid of nuclear weapons, one Chinese used a cutting the grass analogy to demonstrate the difference in interpretation of what constitutes success. Pyongyang, he argued, might be willing to get rid of the grass, but was unlikely to agree to also pull out all the roots. Would an agreement that killed all the grass but allowed the roots to remain be acceptable to all?

North Korean missile capabilities were another area of potential disagreement. Washington’s first concern was ICBMs while Japan and Korea were worried about short- and medium-range missiles. A deal that eliminated one system while “allowing” others would be viewed differently by the various parties concerned. How the chemical-biological weapons threat was addressed was another area of concern. In addition, Prime Minister Abe would also be hard-pressed to endorse any outcome that did not make at least some reference to the abductee issue.

A number of participants expressed concern that there had not been enough advanced preparations and that a delay could help both sides (especially Washington) better prepare and reach prior agreement on some fundamental issues and definitions. There was also the concern that President Trump would be inclined to brand any deal as an “outstanding success” even if it fell short or required a significant amount of follow-through to be brought to fruition. There was general agreement that no deal or an agreement to try again later was better than a “bad deal” even if there were widespread differences of opinion as to what would constitute a bad deal.

All agreed on the need to be prepared for an unsuccessful summit. There was widespread concern that U.S. hawks in particular would see a military solution as the next step should there be a breakdown in negotiations before or during the summit or during any implementation phase. U.S. policy is to continue exerting “maximum pressure” until denuclearization is achieved and all UNSC sanctions remain in place and there was general agreement that the concerted (by all parties) sanctions effort had been a major contributor to bringing Pyongyang to the negotiating table. However, some fear that the sanctions regime has already been weakened as several parties (especially China and the ROK) may be tempted to ease up as a result of currently improved atmospherics. Revitalizing, much less tightening and strengthening sanctions would prove especially difficult if there was disagreement among the various parties as to who was primarily to blame for any breakdown in negotiations.

North Korea over the years has perfected the art of playing various parties against one another to its own benefit. Whatever happens next, increased consultation and consultations among all four will be essential to prevent Pyongyang from employing its traditional “divide and conquer” approach.

### **Relations Among the Major Powers**

This session focused on challenges to the international liberal order. Participants discussed the effects of both structural changes, such as the rise of China and relative decline of the U.S., and changes in the status quo which include populist political movements and other domestic factors. The term ‘revisionist’ was parsed in detail as one presenter outlined how each major player in the region is questioning the value and utility of international institutions and norms that were largely put into place by the United States following World War II.

The conversation revealed a sort of ambivalence among the major players toward the current international order. Each side is seeking to revise the system to better suit its domestic needs, but none has clearly defined what a new and better system would look like. Wanting to change or adjust the status quo does not necessarily make one a “revisionist” power, however, provided one was willing to work within the established system to bring about the adjustments. It was also clear that being a “status quo” power was largely in the eye of the beholder and that the status quo itself was ever changing. Ideology also matters. While the ideological confrontation of the Cold War is thankfully behind us, ideological differences between China and the others add to concerns about China’s rise and its acceptance (in contrast with post-WWII Germany and Japan, which peacefully rose as democratic societies).

Frank discussion over how the U.S. and China see each other's behavior within the current system focused on whether intentions to work together in a cooperative manner can withstand pressures from changes in the status quo, including the DPRK's development and potential proliferation of nuclear weapons, possible Japanese constitutional changes that would allow limited offensive military capabilities, and the Trump administration's break from a traditional U.S. foreign policy stance to an explicitly "America First" model, as well as China's military modernization and aspirations to settle maritime territorial disputes. What most Americans, Japanese, and Koreans see as increased Chinese aggressive behavior (economic and political, as well as military activity opposite Japan and Taiwan and in the South China Sea), Chinese interlocutors see as Chinese reactions to the actions of others or "misunderstandings" or "overestimations" about Chinese actions and intentions. That said, few disagreed with the notion that President Trump's general unpredictability and apparent abrupt shifts in policy (not to mention sometimes contradictory and often inflammatory tweets) have added to tensions not only between the U.S. and China but also between Washington and its allies.

In the near term, the DPRK nuclear issue was seen as the most potentially damaging of the various challenges to the international liberal order; one Korean participant described it as a cancer that infects the system and could eventually tear down the structure. All agreed on the need for close coordination and policy transparency and consistency in dealing with this mutual challenge.

While the topic was the role of the major powers, there was little discussion of Russia's role. As one commentator noted, Russia was a major power in the world but not a major player in Northeast Asia. Nonetheless, President Putin's "pivot" to Asia should not be underestimated since Russia provides the DPRK with "strategic diversity" vis-a-vis China, and Russian North Korea specialists can offer unique insights into the Hermit Kingdom's policies and priorities. One commentator lamented that Putin was repeating the mistake made by the USSR by focusing on military power rather than economic development. Russo-Japanese relations are also worth watching, given Prime Minister Abe's determination to recover some if not all Japan's lost Northern Territories.

Conversely, while South Korea may not be a major power, it is a major player in the region and President Moon is determined that it will take a leading role in dealing with the challenges posed by the DPRK. While President Moon wants to be in the driver's seat, there is still some confusion or suspicion as to the direction in which he wants to drive. This is exacerbated by continued ROK-Japan antagonism over history and territorial issues. During earlier efforts to deal with North Korea, a Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) was formed to help keep Japan, the ROK, and U.S. in lockstep in dealing with the North. Perhaps the time has come to revive this effort.

## **Policy Recommendations and Conclusions**

The one word that best expressed the atmosphere surrounding the 2017 NCAFP Quadrilateral Dialogue was anxiety; while the context this year was somewhat different, that description still applies. Last year there was concern about what Trump's overall national security policy and priorities would be and whether he might rush (or stumble) into a war with North Korea. This year there was anxiety that he might rush or stumble into a bad peace agreement or one that did not take the concerns of America's allies (or even traditional U.S. national security interests) into account. Concerns over a war of words with China have been replaced by concerns about a trade war with traditional allies no less than China being the target.

Americans, along with their Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean colleagues, called for greater consistency, predictability, and transparency in U.S. foreign policy and highlighted the need for increased cooperation and coordination, especially when it came to dealing with Pyongyang. Cooperation among the three allies was especially important and this underscored the need for Seoul and Tokyo to not allow differences over the past to inhibit cooperation on an issue critical to the future of both countries. In this regard, Washington should seek to reestablish a TCOG-like mechanism to ensure that all three remain on the same page in dealing with Pyongyang (and with Beijing for that matter).

All eyes would be on any Joint Statement or Vision Statement that comes out of the Trump-Kim Jong Un summit. At best, it should include a commitment by both leaders to pursue step-by-step denuclearization and an eventual normalization of DPRK-U.S. and ROK-DPRK relations once denuclearization is achieved. While details are best left to diplomats and experts on both sides to iron out, the overall goal should be clearly specified and, if possible, a desired end date should be specified.

While all participants supported CVID as the ultimate goal, an action-for-action approach seemed to hold the most promise, front-loaded as much as possible with tangible steps toward denuclearization. One Chinese colleague recommended CRID—conditional, reciprocal, incremental denuclearization—as the first step toward CVID.

It is important for all four countries to agree on a common definition for success and also to a common definition of failure. An outcome that is branded a success by some parties and a failure by others would be worse than no agreement at all. Timing is also critical. It is especially important to avoid any agreement or sequence that results in de facto acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. This could undermine the non-proliferation regime and cause additional dominos to fall.

Trump administration trade policies, and especially the overemphasis on trade deficits as the (false) problem and tariffs as the (equally false) solution, was a cause of common concern among many participants, even as many Americans and Japanese and a growing number of South Koreans expressed concern about China's predatory economic practices that do in fact need to be addressed. If Chinese actions more closely matched Xi Jinping's words uttered at Davos and elsewhere, trade issues could be more effectively managed.

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**A U.S.-CHINA-JAPAN-REPUBLIC OF KOREA QUADRILATERAL  
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