



US-China-Japan-Korea-Russia: Promoting Multilateral Cooperation

**By Ralph Cossa
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On May 22, 2019, the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) conducted its first-ever five-party dialogue in New York City involving roughly 40 scholars and current and former officials from the United States, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), and Russia, all acting in their personal capacities. Participants focused on the prospects for bilateral and broader multilateral cooperation in addressing Northeast Asian security challenges, especially but not exclusively on dealing with the North Korean nuclear challenge. The discussion, held under the Chatham House Rule, was candid but constructive.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of the ongoing trade war and deepening overall tensions between Washington and Beijing, continuing Washington-Moscow difficulties, and a troublesome deterioration of Japan-ROK relations. Twelve days before the meeting, President Trump announced the imposition of 25 percent tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese imports to the US with Beijing promising countermeasures to come. Meanwhile, Russian President Putin and DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or North Korea) Chairman Kim Jong Un had just met two weeks prior in Vladivostok for their first summit, leaving Japanese Prime Minister Abe as the only one of the five leaders not to have yet met face-to-face with North Korea's supreme leader, despite Abe having recently offered to conduct such a meeting "without preconditions."

US-DPRK negotiations were at a stalemate with each blaming the other for the lack of progress at the February 2019 Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi and Chairman Kim announcing in mid-April that the US had until the end of the year to "adopt a new approach" or else Pyongyang would "pursue a different path." The week before the NCAFP's conference, the North, on two occasions, conducted short-range ballistic missile tests; this was a clear violation of UN Security Council Resolutions but below the threshold that normally results in or demands a strong UNSC response.

On a more positive note, China-Japan relations were on the mend, although still well below what would be considered cordial, and the other bilateral relationships were more-or-less normal. All five countries were looking ahead to the G20 Summit in Osaka, then scheduled to begin in one month's time, as an opportunity for bilateral and broader consultations and cooperation.

Key Takeaways

The five-party relationship consists of ten different sets of bilateral relations and the above-mentioned tensions within several of these relationships were a complicating factor in promoting—much less, achieving—broader quintilateral cooperation.

Of these, ongoing and increasing tensions between China and the United States were of the most concern in part because the spillover was affecting many of the other states and relationships.

Nonetheless, overlapping national interests in bringing about Korean Peninsula denuclearization while preserving regional stability created both the opportunity and the need for greater multilateral cooperation, and most argued that their own nation would not let bilateral difficulties stand in the way of broader cooperation when dealing with common security challenges.

Regarding the diplomatic process with North Korea, there was general support for both a US-preferred “big deal” where both sides would agree upon a mutually acceptable end state (and a mutual definition of what constitutes “complete denuclearization”) and the DPRK-preferred step-by-step approach, recognizing that the achievement of the end state would require a series of incremental steps with inducements and concessions on both sides. In other words, the comprehensive package and incremental implementation approaches were seen as mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive.

While Kim Jong Un’s end of year deadline was of concern, few believed that Washington should allow itself to be pressured into making major concessions absent some significant movement toward denuclearization on the part of Pyongyang. There was widespread concern, however, that as the US-DPRK stand-off slides into US election year politics, a solution will become more difficult. Pyongyang would be keeping a close eye on the US election process and would likely seek to exploit it, but how this would be done was not clear.

There was also debate over the general effectiveness of sanctions, both regarding their role in bringing Kim to the negotiating table and in getting Pyongyang to change its behavior. There was no consensus on if or when sanctions should be reduced or how they might be traded for DPRK concessions; there was also widespread skepticism regarding the vigor with which “maximum pressure” was being or could be applied.

US allies in particular cautioned that any agreement or quid pro quo with the DPRK must not serve to undermine the US extended deterrence or be seen as addressing US security needs at their expense. If US summitry with North Korea fails to end the North’s nuclear program or does not adequately address Japanese and South Korean security concerns, this could lead to increased pressure in both countries to go nuclear and spell the end of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Conflicting long-term objectives in some cases made cooperation on overlapping near-term objectives—denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and regional stability—more difficult. Nonetheless there were a number of actions that the five states could take, individually or in concert with one another. First and foremost was an end to the on-going trade disputes and efforts to improve the most troubled bilateral relationships.

Perspectives on the North Korean Nuclear Issue

This session began with presentations by specialists from each country giving their personal views of the current situation and their own views on future paths. None professed to be speaking for his or her government.

The opening US presentation began with a summary of the “lessons learned” from the Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, admittedly from a hardline perspective: the fact that sanctions were the only issue on Kim’s agenda indicates that sanctions are working; Kim Jong Un’s refusal to agree on denuclearization as the end state suggests North Korea is not prepared to ever completely give up its nuclear weapons; the hypothesis that top leader meetings would solve the problem was tested and proven to be wrong; ROK interpretations of the DPRK’s willingness to denuclearize have also been proven wrong; and President Trump’s unilateral decision to curtail or constrain US military exercises has not been reciprocated.

Many of these points were contested during the discussion period but no one argued that the top-down approach followed by Kim and Trump had been any more successful than the traditional bottom-up approach that had been employed by previous US administrations, despite the need for top-level buy-in on the general parameters of any agreement. There was widespread agreement that good working-level discussions were essential to lay the groundwork and spell out the details of any real solution.

From a Russian perspective, the current situation, while still worrisome, was much improved over the situation in 2017. Russia still supports the three-phased Russia-China roadmap which called for a double freeze of tests and exercises (which *de facto* was underway), then bilateral negotiations, and then denuclearization in exchange for sanctions relief and security guarantees. Neither an all-at-once big deal, nor maximum pressure, nor a military option seemed realistic.

The North Koreans argue that sanctions did not bring them to the table; it was their nuclear and ICBM security blanket that allowed them to negotiate. Pyongyang rejects unilateral concessions and will not denuclearize first. It is waiting for the US to change its policy and propose a “realistic phased approach.” Kim was surprised by the addition of chemical and biological weapons to the denuclearization discussion. He wants a step-by-step, action-for-action reciprocal approach and believes the North has taken steps and the US has not (while the US believes the opposite).

From a Russian perspective, everyone wants the DPRK to denuclearize as well as a stable Korean Peninsula, and all are against proliferation and military action. Sanctions alone will not work; engagement is needed as well. There also needs to be a discussion of security arrangements and guarantees since North Korea's nuclear weapons program is for deterrence and regime survival. The Putin-Kim summit reminds others that Russia is also a key player that has a stake in the outcome. Russia believes some sanctions should be lifted in response to the North's positive actions (ICBM/nuclear test freeze) to create conditions more conducive to denuclearization. Russia wants to be more engaged in Asia, and Korea is one of the few areas where the US and Russia can and potentially may cooperate. As a result, Russia wants a voice in the process and can provide technical assistance once a step-by-step approach has been agreed upon.

The Japanese perspective was quite different. While there was some "breakthrough euphoria" after the Singapore Trump-Kim summit, this was not sustainable since no real progress or movement toward denuclearization took place. Most Japanese were relieved after Hanoi, believing (as did most others) that "no deal is better than a bad deal." The Japanese presenter was skeptical of US Forces Korea (USFK)'s assertions that the current freeze in US-ROK major exercises has not resulted in any erosion of military capabilities and was also concerned about the continued credibility of the US extended deterrence and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) assurances. This could force Japan to consider developing its own deterrence capabilities. Meanwhile, Japanese Prime Minister Abe seems to be toning down his criticism of North Korea and dropped his abductee-related preconditions in hopes of bringing about a Japan-DPRK summit.

From a Japanese perspective, the danger of nuclear war is increasing while Japan remains "a frustrated bystander." The presenter argued for a "mutual down payment approach" where the UNSC would offer partial sanctions relief in return for a partial turnover of nuclear assets.

The Korean presenter's views were closer to those expressed by the US than by the Russian presenter. While the US wants a comprehensive roadmap/big deal, the North is still insisting on a step-by-step approach. The North's game plan centers around a top-down approach aimed at separating Trump from his advisors. The North will accelerate its nuclear and ICBM production while sticking to its Yongbyon offer, resist verification efforts, pressure the South to be a shield against a US attack, and push Trump to withdraw US troops in return for a seemingly complete but actually only partial denuclearization.

While President Trump may believe that sanctions are working and there is no political pressure to move forward with North Korea as he focuses on domestic issues prior to the 2020 election, the North's recent missile tests sent a message that Trump will face a "difficult moment" if he continues to ignore the DPRK. Meanwhile, ROK President Moon's efforts are going nowhere and it is not clear if Trump's post-G20 visit to Seoul will lead to a third Trump-Kim summit or a promised Kim visit to the ROK. Kim appears intent on maintaining more than the minimal deterrent capability needed to ensure the North's survival (i.e., a half-dozen or so weapons) in the hopes of being tacitly accepted as another bona fide nuclear weapon-capable state like Israel,

India, or Pakistan. The ROK (and Japanese) concern is that Kim may cut a deal with Washington that essentially trades away his capability to target the US (i.e., no ICBMs) in return for recognition or acceptance of the North as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state.

The Chinese presenter agreed with previous presenters that, even with the current US-DPRK stalemate, things were better off today than two years ago. While Kim has promised to wait until the end of the year before changing his policy, the international community, including the five parties involved in this discussion, should not be complacent; the recent missile tests are a warning that additional low-level provocations may be planned and it is doubtful that Kim has already decided he will give up all of his nuclear capabilities.

From a Chinese perspective, we are at a crossroads. Previous periods of apparent cooperation were followed by renewed crisis. There are two probabilities: either this time is different and we will enter a truly new era, or we will repeat the past with a new crisis; given the current stand-off, the latter is more likely. Washington wants a big deal with flexible implementation while Pyongyang wants small, step-by-step deals with no ultimate locked-in goal but with full or at least partial denuclearization possible. There is room for slow progress however, perhaps along the lines of the mutual down payment approach suggested by the Japanese presenter.

Kim's "Plan A" is to get all of what he wants in terms of economic assistance and security guarantees without fully denuclearizing. He could accept partial denuclearization but would want to retain some limited capability. Like almost everything else in life, there is a Chinese proverb that applies: He is prepared to fully cut the grass, but not to pull out the roots. If he cannot achieve this, he might agree to complete denuclearization as a last resort, but getting him to this "Plan B" requires full cooperation among the five states represented at this quint conference.

The general discussion centered around several themes. Foremost among these was the topic of sanctions. No one argued that sanctions alone would be sufficient to compel the North to denuclearize. There was some debate on whether sanctions relief was really the North's top priority or to what extent sanctions played a role in bringing Pyongyang to the negotiating table. There was no question, however, that sanctions relief was important in order for Kim to keep his promise of economic development; the question was not if they provided leverage but only how much. There was also disagreement, largely along national lines, as to whether DPRK "concessions" to date merited some limited sanctions relief; the Chinese and Russians generally argued yes, many (but not all) in the other delegations saw the need for continued "maximum pressure," even though few believed it would/could be restored to pre-summit levels. Most argued that any easing of future sanctions should be time-bound and conditional, with snap-back provisions if Pyongyang failed to deliver or backtracked on promised tangible steps toward denuclearization.

One clear conclusion from the Hanoi summit was that the US did not believe the proposed demolition of Yongbyon was worth the level of sanctions relief that Pyongyang was requesting. While participants disagreed over just how vital Yongbyon was or how much of the entire complex was included in the North's offer, clearly its elimination would be a step in the right direction. The appropriate quid pro quo for Yongbyon's total elimination seems an important topic if and when negotiations resume.

Those possessing insights into the nature of the Hanoi deliberations argued the main point of contention was over the DPRK's lack of willingness to clearly specify that the end state would be the total elimination of its nuclear weapons capabilities. While some have blamed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and/or National Security Advisor John Bolton's hardline attitude for the breakdown—a narrative popular in the press and played up by Pyongyang in an apparent attempt to keep the door to President Trump open (or split him from his advisors)—this misses the broader point: Kim has thus far refused, either publicly or privately, to commit to the North's total denuclearization, instead talking about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which must begin with the elimination of the US nuclear threat to the North before Pyongyang will put its own “treasured sword” on the table.

If Kim were to make this commitment, there was a general consensus that phased implementation and a “big deal” were not mutually exclusive; a comprehensive agreement will have to be implemented step-by-step. But, to move forward, an agreed upon end state is needed. It's hard to draw a roadmap if the final destination is unclear. It's also true that sanctions and diplomacy are not mutually exclusive; both are tools aimed at achieving the same end.

There was some discussion over how to appropriately respond to the latest round of low-level violation of the UNSC Resolutions. Traditionally, the UNSC has condemned but not instituted new or tougher sanctions in response to short-range missile activity, even though UN resolutions prohibit *all* ballistic missile activity. There is also concern that a UNSC ultimatum would result in further provocative actions. But, accepting short-range missile launches may only encourage Pyongyang to move up the escalation ladder. No clear consensus has emerged among the five states as to how to respond to further provocations, up to or including a resumption of ICBM or nuclear weapons tests.

Finally, there was discussion regarding the potential impact US presidential election year politics might have on the prospects for a good deal. Some were concerned President Trump might be tempted to give in to Kim Jong Un's demands in the face of renewed provocations in order to have a “victory” prior to the 2020 elections. Others saw the current stalemate as easier to defend politically than any potential deal and believed Trump would focus his attention domestically rather than toward the Korean Peninsula. To the extent Asia would factor at all into US domestic politics, China would likely be a bigger topic than North Korea.

That said, Pyongyang has a habit of trying to play US (and ROK) politics, not always successfully, and is no doubt keeping a watchful eye on the election process. On the one hand, they may try to exploit a vulnerable Trump. On the other, they may see little value in proceeding if any deal would be subject to the approval of his successor anyway. All we can say here is “stay tuned.”

Potential for Cooperation

On North Korea:

The second and final session centered on the potential for cooperation among the five participants both collectively and bilaterally, with the latter focused primarily on the US-China, Korea-Japan, and Russia-US relationships. Again, the views expressed did not necessarily represent the views of the speakers’ respective governments.

The Korean presenter focused on the need for a common definition of complete denuclearization among all the parties while expressing concerns about the viability and credibility of extended deterrence under a freeze-for-freeze arrangement or in the case negative security assurances are provided or a peace agreement is signed.

The US speaker argued that the potential for cooperation was much more likely and useful at the bilateral or trilateral level with one important exception, and that is vis-à-vis the DPRK. Official five-party talks are needed to send a unified message to Pyongyang and to counter its traditional divide and conquer approach. Unilateral moves by each can also help promote deeper multilateral cooperation.

The Japanese presenter wondered if broader multilateral cooperation was possible given the current state of US-China, US-Russia, and ROK-Japan relations. To the degree five-party cooperation was possible, it must be based on a consensus view that North Korean wrongdoing is the cause of the problem. What Pyongyang calls “hostile policies” are really reactions to North Korean threats and provocations. “No tests” does not equal no missiles or nuclear weapons; the threat remains and is still growing. Japan has thus far refrained from obtaining nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles but whether that can be sustained depends on how the parties deal with North Korea; even a limited North Korean residual nuclear capability will have consequences regarding Japan’s future intentions.

The Chinese presenter focused on trilateral and broader multilateral cooperation, looking at the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Six-Party Talks, APEC, and more recently the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as important vehicles for cooperation, while echoing calls for five-party talks such as this conference. Economics needs to be separated from politics and in this regard, China should consider joining the TPP-11 while continuing to promote RCEP and AP-FTA. Meanwhile, the WTO is at a crossroads and needs reform along the lines proposed by China. Finally, a concert of maritime powers is needed to deal with sensitive maritime issues such as Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs).

The Russian presenter did not express much hope for a five-party consensus since the “parties don’t trust each other very much.” President Putin has stressed that he wants to have a say in what is happening vis-à-vis the DPRK and wants Russia to be seen as an equal player around the table. A new Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) agreement is needed but it should also include China.

The discussion once again focused largely around the DPRK nuclear challenge. There was broad agreement that denuclearization remained the common goal and that no one wanted to see a military conflict or further North Korean progress in its pursuit of nuclear weapons or advanced delivery systems. Few took exception to President Putin’s assertion that Pyongyang would require some sort of security guarantee in order to feel safe enough to denuclearize. While Russia could play a leading role in pursuing this guarantee, it would need to be a multilateral approach to be persuasive. Even then, many questioned whether any guarantee would be sufficient enough to cause Kim Jong Un to completely denuclearize.

Participants also cautioned not to confuse Pyongyang’s demand for an “end to US hostile policy” with a request for security guarantees. What Kim really wants is for the DPRK to be recognized and accepted as a state possessing nuclear weapons (like India, Pakistan, or Israel). What he seeks is normalization, including normalized relations with the US and Japan without having to give up the North’s nuclear capabilities. Kim sees a peace mechanism as another vehicle for normalization. He is unlikely to seek and even more unlikely to accept or rely upon multilateral guarantees, especially after seeing the Iran deal fall apart or after Gaddafi’s fate in Libya. Pyongyang has frequently stated that “our security can only be guaranteed by ourselves.”

Between the US and China:

An easing of tensions between the US and China is made more difficult by differing perceptions as to the source and nature of the problem. The Chinese tend to blame President Trump’s unpredictable style and confrontational approach for the current trade difficulties. While many Americans are unhappy with Trump’s approach to the problem, there is broad consensus between both major political parties and within the US business and security communities that China has not lived up to its own promises and commitments and refuses to create a level playing field.

Even if a mutually acceptable trade deal is reached, tensions are likely to continue. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy identifies China and Russia as revisionist powers and the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, while calling for cooperation with China where possible, also cites the need to confront Chinese aggressive actions. American FONOPs, which have been performed for years even against US allies such as the Philippines or friendly archipelagic states like Indonesia, are likely to continue in the South China Sea until Beijing clarifies its territorial claims and bring them into accordance with UNCLOS definitions.

Despite these continuing differences, participants concluded that China-US cooperation on bringing about North Korean denuclearization and enhancing regional stability is in both nation's interests. Differences are largely over how to accomplish these goals, not the goals themselves. Resolving these differences over long-term visions for the region will require compromise on both sides, so that China's enhanced role in the region (and globally) can be recognized without threatening long-standing US interests and objectives.

Between Korea and Japan

Deteriorating relations between Seoul and Tokyo consumed most of the bilateral discussion. Current disagreements over wartime compensation are particularly thorny since it is a legal issue that leaves little room for compromise on either side. Koreans claim that the issue is in the hands of the courts which limits the government's influence over the process. Meanwhile, the Japanese believe it has been dragged into a ROK domestic issue, noting that Tokyo originally offered to pay individuals and the ROK government at the time wanted the payment to be made to the state.

Participants from both countries acknowledged that bilateral cooperation is in both country's national interest and see the need to move beyond or set aside this issue. A special task force has been established to try to address and/or defuse the issue, but greater political courage is needed on the part of both leaders to build public support for improved relations. Both need to think strategically, not just domestically. Many called for an enhanced US role in defusing current tensions as well.

Between Russia and the US

President Putin's desire to play a greater role in Asia opens the door for potential cooperation but the role he is prepared to play remains uncertain. Russia appears to be the most trusted—or more accurately the least distrusted—of the five by Pyongyang and could potentially take the lead in offering security assurances in return for progress toward denuclearization. There is still a perception among some Americans that Putin is more intent on showing he can be a problem in Asia rather than demonstrating he can be part of the solution. Nonetheless, North Korea is one of the few places where Moscow and Washington's interests overlap, providing an opportunity for cooperation if both sides are willing. In addition, while Washington and Moscow disagree on who

is to blame for the abrogation of the INF Agreement, both seem to agree that any future agreement must also involve China, thus opening the door for potential trilateral cooperation if Beijing is willing.

Recommendations

No attempt was made during this one-day meeting to develop a list of coordinated, mutually agreed upon recommendations, but the above narrative contains numerous suggestions that all (or most) sides generally agreed upon. The following are additional recommendations drawn from the dialogue by the author and should not be seen as representing a consensus view.

President Trump needs to make a clear, definitive, and unambiguous public statement that normalization of relations between the US and North Korea is contingent on full denuclearization; there will be no diplomatic recognition of the DPRK until the denuclearization process is complete. This statement should be endorsed and repeated by the ROK and Japan and endorsed and supported by Russia and China (and by all Democratic US presidential candidates). The statement needs to come from Trump himself, not from Secretary Pompeo or John Bolton.

Senior-level five-party talks need to be established to craft a common approach to dealing with the DPRK. This should include common agreement on what constitutes meaningful progress toward denuclearization and what are the appropriate quid pro quos to reward progress or to punish transgressions. Since all seem convinced that additional provocations are likely, there should be advanced agreement on what the appropriate reaction should be. To be most effective, the consequences of future acts of provocation should be privately relayed to Pyongyang, perhaps by Russia or China, since they were the actors that most often sought to soften the international response to past provocations.

Another Kim-Trump summit appears likely at some point but must be preceded by sufficient working-level discussions to ensure that both leaders enter the dialogue with a clear understanding of the other's desired end state, what is and is not ultimately acceptable, and a common definition of critical terms such as "complete denuclearization."

North Korean negotiator flexibility should not be anticipated. The author's favorite take-away quote from the dialogue was: "Being creative in North Korea is a shortcut to execution." If recent ROK rumors are true, so too is miscalculating US flexibility.

Washington needs to be especially attuned to Japanese and Korean concerns about the credibility of the US extended deterrence. If DPRK denuclearization is not achieved, both allies may see indigenous nuclear programs as the only alternative. As a result, any agreement with Pyongyang must keep the credibility of US security assurances in mind.

The same holds true for US reactions to DPRK provocations. Comments dismissive of short-range missile tests, while perhaps intended to downplay North Korean capabilities, can be interpreted by allies as lack of concern for the threat such missiles pose to their nations and play into their “America first” concerns.

Finally, it would not have been unexpected if this dialogue had assumed a bilateral flavor, with the US and its Korean and Japanese allies on one side and Russia and China on the other, and there was a divide along these lines when it came to attitudes and approaches toward North Korea. The allies were much more supportive of continued sanctions, maximum pressure and up-front DPRK concessions while the Chinese and Russians were more “flexible” in their approach to sanctions and to the North in general, as well as more sympathetic to Pyongyang’s concerns. But three-part harmony was difficult to sustain, in part due to concern (and frustration) over deteriorating relations between Seoul and Tokyo but most importantly over growing allied concerns about US unpredictability, Washington’s commitment to the alliances, President Trump’s transactional approach toward allies as well as adversaries, and the credibility of US extended deterrence. Meanwhile, Russian concerns about being treated as an equal partner seemed aimed at least in part at Beijing as well as Washington, and there was a clear divergence of views on the necessity of China’s involvement in future arms control deliberations.

**THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY'S
FORUM ON ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY (FAPS)
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