



Five-Party Talks on North Korea and the International System

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In June 2021, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy's (NCAFP) Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) held a series of virtual quintilateral (five-party) Track II discussions with participants from the US, China, Japan, the ROK and Russia. Sessions focused on North Korea policy and the future of the international system. The following report details the key takeaways, policy recommendations and discussion points from both sessions.

Major takeaways:

- Each country in this grouping has organizing principles and narratives that clash with the organizing principles and narratives of the others. These differences in how to describe and approach the international system are manifesting in a competitive framework that stymies cooperation on specific issues.
- At their core, the differing narratives have supported domestic political legitimacy during seismic societal changes arising from the process of globalization and the advancement of information technology.
- However, because the narratives are so closely tied to domestic political legitimacy, competing visions are threatening and each state feels compelled to escalate when their identities are challenged, even while claiming their moves are defensive in nature.
- So, even in areas where the five countries have broad agreement on objectives and considerable momentum for policy coordination—such as the denuclearization of North Korea—there is little agreement on how to proceed cooperatively and a widening gulf of strategic distrust on the ultimate aims of policy changes.
- Underneath the sense that every country believes it is reacting to the aggression of another country or group of countries is an assumption that change is the responsibility of other actors. Coupled with a framework of strategic competition, this will inhibit prospects for practical cooperation on shared interests.
- Addressing the North Korean nuclear issue and fostering peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula requires a division of labor between countries and institutions with stakes in the long-term outcomes. Current international dynamics are hindering conversations on long-term outcomes as countries cannot find a way to compartmentalize the North Korean issue from the broader geostrategic competition.
- As a result, most participants felt that, as long as the DPRK is quiescent, other parties will live with the status quo while they focus on more immediate or pressing concerns.

Policy recommendations:

- There is no substitute for diplomacy to explain positions, manage differences, and simultaneously find areas of mutual interest for further cooperation. All countries could do more to find pragmatic channels of communication to promote a mix of competition and cooperation.
- The goal of dialogue should be to find opportunities for mutual restraint. Pressure through punitive measures—whether through economic, political or military pressure—has done more to escalate tensions than to change the behavior or organizing principles of the target country, and have reduced the space for dialogue.
- Policy coordination on the North Korean nuclear issue needs to start with reaffirming existing commitments. The US has taken the first step of affirming the 2018 US-DPRK Singapore statement and the Panmunjom Declaration; it would be equally useful for the DPRK to affirm its commitment to both the Singapore statement and inter-Korean agreements, and for the remaining members of the Six-Party Talks to affirm their commitment to the principles outlined in the September 19, 2008 joint statement.
- Discussions among the five countries should be flexible and ad-hoc in format. The goal is to delineate a division of labor between countries and institutions with stakes in the long-term outcome. For example, participants suggested that the human rights situation be handled at the United Nations, rather than as a bilateral issue between the US and the DPRK. The key to negotiating this type of roadmap will be to anticipate and manage the domestic political issues that would arise from such divisions.

International Context

Scholars and former officials from each of the five countries were asked to describe their country's approach to major power relations in the Asia Pacific and how this approach was justified by national interest; this topic quickly expanded to how each country sees the future of the international system. On one side, the US, Japan, and the ROK see enduring national interests in a rules-based order based on shared values that include freedom of political participation and adherence to consensus-established international law—the so-called 'liberal international order.' There is a sense in these countries that this order is under threat from the rising relative power of autocracies and attempts to change the status quo by use of force or coercion contrary to international law. Underlying this preference for the liberal international order is not only a sense that it best serves the national interest of the US and its allies but also that most people in the world share enthusiasm for this order.

However, a Russian participant rejected the assertion that most countries in the world share this perspective, calling the liberal international order a myth that is not only rejected by many throughout the world but always existed as an aspirational ideal, not a description of the current era. Such an order could not be under attack since it never truly existed. This participant described Russia's posture in the world as primarily defensive, arguing that Russia uses force only when its traditional sphere of influence is threatened. Failure to act in these scenarios would imperil the Russian leadership's hold on power and maintaining power is its highest national interest.

A Chinese participant offered a similar perspective on China's recent actions in the Asia Pacific. China would ideally like to peacefully co-exist with the US and its allies, but its domestic political atmosphere is nationalistic. The Trump administration's highly confrontational and punitive approach to China's economic growth and territorial ambitions, and the Biden administration's continuation of these policies while also adding human rights as an area of contention, has convinced many in China of the narrative that an anxious and declining US is willing to do anything to contain China's rise. This participant also noted that the Biden administration's focus on systems competition between democracy and authoritarianism has as much to do with US domestic political divides and the appeal of the Trump presidency as it does with China or Russia; still, such emphasis on both sides is creating a more dangerous situation.

Despite the appeal of the rules-based global economic and political order in South Korea, the ROK perspective is less aligned with defense of this order and more oriented toward resolving its own major existential threat—the division and state of war between itself and a nuclear-armed DPRK.

In short, each country is focused on defense against what it sees as existential or potentially existential threats without considering how those defensive moves provoke existential concerns in the other countries. The framework of great power competition, which may be helpful to explain some of the relative global shifts in power, is also funneling attention toward zero-sum thinking. How could the US and China cooperate on any issue if each is convinced the other is determined to undermine the stability and legitimacy of their preferred domestic and international orders?

A US participant outlined two major factors in US conclusions about Chinese ambitions: China's behavior in the East and South China Seas, and rising technology competition. A Japanese participant also felt that China's assertiveness in pressing maritime territorial claims was the key factor in Japan's decision to take a more confrontational stance toward China in recent years. This view, that it is undesirable for China to upset a rules-based order by using force—military, paramilitary, economic and political—to resolve sovereignty disputes in its favor, is now shared by many European countries. Issues related to China's sovereignty claims that many countries addressed ambiguously, such as tensions in the Taiwan Strait, are now being incorporated into official statements and policy planning.

A Russian participant offered a different perspective on China's growing power. This participant felt that expectations of China's behavior were developed under a false and tacit assumption in the West that China would trade opportunities in economic development for responsibility to uphold US interests. The combination of technology competition and systems competition has pushed Russia closer to China, as Russia is unlikely to become technologically independent but does not have full access to American technology due to sanctions and strategic mistrust.

A Korean participant noted that the ROK has seemingly chosen, particularly in light of the recent Biden-Moon summit, to adhere closely to the US on security issues. However, Korea's strong economic ties with China complicate its position in technology competition. Though the US wants to organize its allies to defeat China in the tech space—on 5G, for example—the ROK will only want to do so where the security implications are clear. Otherwise, it is important to remember that technology competition is multifaceted—US allies are also competing with the US. The ROK is also looking toward Southeast Asia to escape some of these thorny strategic choices by reducing its reliance on China without ceding advantages to US tech.

A Chinese participant thought that China was willing to move the paradigm from talk about competition and rules-violation to talk about the rules themselves, noting that the rules are still being written in many emerging areas of concern, such as space and cyber. The problem is that other countries are unwilling to engage in serious dialogue about these issues. China has developed rapidly and, from this participant's perspective, is still figuring out how to adjust to its new position as number two in the global economy. This process of adjustment, and the outside focus on China's political system as inherently dangerous, makes China particularly sensitive to external factors.

North Korea

Managing the North Korean nuclear issue and stabilizing the Korean Peninsula should be an area where all five countries represented in this dialogue share common interests. All five countries would prefer both a non-nuclear DPRK and a reduction in the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula. While there are some differences over the prioritization of those objectives, and the best policy path to achieve these end states, the current impasse on the Korean Peninsula has less to do with major power competition and more with the DPRK's self-imposed isolation.

A Russian participant outlined several factors that could be contributing to the DPRK's seeming tolerance for isolation and continuing the status quo. First, the DPRK is likely to be highly sensitive to the possibility of a major COVID-19 outbreak, given the relatively poor state of domestic healthcare facilities and equipment. Second, the strict border closures to manage the pandemic are creating economic consequences and there are reports of shortages and inflation. Third, further stress has been put on the economy and food supply by natural disasters over the past year. And finally, the DPRK may still be reeling from the failed personal diplomacy between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump in 2019 and unsure of the best way forward.

A Korean participant pushed back on some participants' analysis of the DPRK as under significant stress domestically. The DPRK could also assess that the Biden policy review was unsatisfactory, that the ROK government is on the way out, and that it has what it needs to ride out the pandemic without outside assistance or intervention due to good harvests in the prior year, notwithstanding this year's disasters. In the meantime, the DPRK seems able to continue the development of its nuclear program, which may bolster its position when it decides to reenter negotiations. This period of quiet might be a continuation of the DPRK's regular cycles of provocation and retrenchment.

An American participant also felt that there is little urgency in the DPRK or the US to move forward with negotiations. The scant details offered on the US North Korea policy review and the appointment of Ambassador Sung Kim as a part-time Special Representative, while welcomed by each of the countries, is indicative of the Biden administration's pessimism on prospects for substantive negotiations in the short term. A Chinese participant agreed, noting that for both the US and Japan, the most important factor of urgency is whether the DPRK is actively threatening the US and its allies. If the DPRK retrenchment means no provocative behavior, then the status quo is relatively acceptable to most of the major stakeholders.

Meanwhile, the participants felt that the Moon administration has the greatest sense of urgency to resume a dialogue with the DPRK. With less than a year left in office, and even less time before the presidential election dominates news coverage, a Korean participant thought that the Moon administration would like to solidify President Moon's legacy by exchanging an end of war declaration for a nuclear freeze. Whether or not this agreement is possible in a short timeframe remains an open question.

There are several steps participants felt the five countries could be taking now to prepare for eventual engagement with the DPRK. First, an American participant and an ROK participant both suggested that the new Special Representatives of the countries meet in various formats to establish relationships and understand each other's positions. A Korean participant felt a US-Japan-ROK meeting of Special Representatives would be particularly useful; an American participant thought the Biden administration was very flexible on formats to address the North Korean issue moving forward. The other participants agreed that flexible formats were the most likely path forward (rather than resuming a dominant geometry like the Six-Party Talks).

Second, a Russian participant thought that the five countries should be thinking about what kind of assistance could be reasonably offered to the DPRK, if needed. Vaccines might be part of this package, as well as food assistance and humanitarian aid. At the same time, a Korean participant emphasized the importance of keeping the last leverage—the economic sanctions regime—to the very end of the denuclearization process. Still, a Japanese participant and others felt there was much that could be done on aid, an end of war declaration, and opening of liaison offices that could be managed within the existing sanctions regime.

Third, it would be useful to have general discussions on the division of labor on various issues between different actors and institutions. The US still needs to and will appoint a Special Representative on North Korean Human Rights, an issue that the Japanese are anxious to advance. A Japanese participant thought the Biden administration's overall emphasis on human rights protections boded well for inclusion of this issue into eventual negotiations. Other participants felt that this issue was best addressed at the United Nations or in other broader, multilateral fora. Pre-negotiation discussions on a division of labor can help manage expectations about each country's prioritization and approach to resolving the various buckets of issues that will inevitably arise from engagement with the DPRK.

Finally, all five countries and the DPRK could reaffirm existing commitments. From a Chinese participant's perspective, the September 19 joint statement of the Six-Party Talks contains many of the right elements to bolster future negotiations. A Japanese participant felt that it would be confidence-building for the DPRK to reaffirm its commitments to the most recent inter-Korean agreements, including the military agreements, and the Singapore statement. There was a general sense among participants that a conversation could be restarted on a freeze of the Yongbyon facility for some inducements or targeted sanctions relief, if all sides were ready to reset to their positions when this offer was tabled in 2019.

The key to moving forward on practical steps to coordinate policy on the Korean Peninsula is whether the US and China can find ways to compartmentalize strategic rivalry and mistrust from pragmatic cooperation. Though the official rhetoric of both sides welcomes cooperation while acknowledging greater areas of friction and competition, the lack of productive communication channels between the two sides is allowing greater domestic attention to the risks of dialogue, rather than its potential benefits. The US and China both bear responsibility for finding a path back to pragmatic cooperation.

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