



The Korean Peninsula in Bilateral and Trilateral Relations: How Can the US, the ROK and China Foster Peace and Stability?

By Rorry Daniels
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In June 2021, the NCAFP held bilateral US-ROK and trilateral US-ROK-China Track II discussions to discuss the results of the Moon-Biden summit and the prospects for diplomacy on the future of the Korean Peninsula. The following report summarizes the key takeaways, policy recommendations and major points of discussion of these virtual conferences, and the attached appendices are records of selected talking points from participants.

Key Takeaways:

- The May 2021 summit between President Biden and President Moon was a great success both in advancing concrete goals of the bilateral alliance and in the optics of US-ROK relations, with details of the Biden administration's North Korea policy review and statements of support from the ROK on US regional security priorities. However, significant obstacles remain in reconciling each country's approach to the security priorities of the other, and the summit was seen as a first step toward, and not a final resolution of, those differences.
- American and Korean participants were more surprised than Chinese participants were about the inclusion of concerns related to maritime issues and Taiwan in the US-ROK joint statement. Chinese participants thought the statement was less provocative than the US-Japan joint statement and remained focused on common interests with regard to North Korea.
- The North Korean nuclear issue is in a suspended state, with the DPRK in a prolonged period of isolation and retrenchment. Participants saw little urgency to push this status quo given other competing priorities, including COVID-19 management and recovery.
- The issue of what North Korea wants is paramount to finding a path forward with the DPRK, but requires the DPRK to reconcile competing priorities and make concrete asks. Sanctions relief may be a starting point, but the international community is unlikely to completely remove sanctions before a process of denuclearization is established and underway.

- The sense in Washington is that the Biden administration has outlined its conditions for resumption of dialogue and the ball is the DPRK's court to respond. The US will coordinate with other stakeholders on its North Korea policy, but expectations of progress are low.

Policy Recommendations:

- The US and ROK should consider regional scenario planning for a crisis with China or the DPRK to preview the expectations of both sides for each other's participation if crises arise. This allows both sides to flesh out specifics related to the broad strokes of the US-ROK joint statement.
- The US could extend invitations to key DPRK officials for non-traditional diplomatic tours of the US, perhaps in conjunction with September's United Nations General Assembly meeting. Similarly, China could make a strong case for the DPRK to attend the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as an opening for international engagement.
- The US, ROK and China should have trilateral Track 1.5 discussions on preferred end states for the Korean peninsula and a roadmap to achieve these goals. Though roadmaps have been proposed in the past, having such discussions at this time would be a significant signal of investment in cooperation and diplomacy by all three sides.
- Discussions on a roadmap could also take into account the complexities of domestic politics on all three sides. This thought exercise may surface potential roadblocks that can be addressed ahead of a formal policy process with the DPRK.

Biden-Moon: Best. US-ROK. Summit. Ever?

These discussions occurred just after the Biden-Moon summit, which a Korean participant described as the greatest version and vision of US-ROK relations to date with a comprehensive program and future-oriented joint statement. Other participants agreed that the summit was managed well and highly successful, noting the strong optics of the ceremony honoring a US Korean War veteran with the Medal of Honor as a powerful sign of the two countries' shared history. Korean participants described developments in advance of the summit, such as the settlement of the burden-sharing negotiations and the 2+2 meetings in Seoul in March, as giving the ROK government and public confidence that the Biden administration's approach to alliances would revert to more traditional support and diplomacy than was practiced in the Trump administration. The summit further cemented these views, with one Korean participant noting that the alliance seems to be starting a new chapter in its history. The future-oriented practical cooperation on cybersecurity, technology supply chains, space development and COVID-19 vaccines further reinforced a message that US alliances are essential to addressing 21st century challenges and the US is reinvesting in these relationships.

Each side seemed to acknowledge and respond to the primary security priorities of the other. Participants from both sides were encouraged that the US recommitted its support for both the Panmunjom Declaration and the 2018 US-DPRK Singapore statement. This continuity across bitter domestic partisan lines was seen as an important signal of US reliability. American participants were also happy to see the Biden administration make public some details of its North Korea policy review, including preconditions for a Biden-Kim Jong Un meeting and the willingness to engage in negotiation at the working-level. Participants also noted the ROK's willingness to include statements related to China in the joint statement, including a first-ever mention of the interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, as developments related to a US strategy toward Asia and China that depends on alliance solidarity.

However, some questions lingered about the strength of each side's conviction in following words with actions. The appointment of Ambassador Sung Kim as the US Special Envoy for North Korea policy was welcomed by American and Korean participants, but his location in Jakarta and full-time position as Ambassador to Indonesia raised questions about the Biden administration's commitment to active negotiations with the DPRK. Meanwhile, President Moon's timeline to make progress on inter-Korean relations is urgent, before the ROK presidential election campaign is in full swing this winter. And while the ROK did register concern about instability in the Taiwan Strait and regional maritime territorial disputes, the ROK's continued economic dependence on China may affect its commitment to confronting Chinese behavior in a crisis. A participant further noted that the DPRK's economic reliance, and the leverage this gives to Beijing, might also be a factor in how far Seoul is willing to go.

Participants were most surprised at the lifting of restrictions on short-range ballistic missiles but generally thought the logic of this move made sense given the increasingly complicated strategic environment in Northeast Asia and the long-term goal in the ROK to rebalance alliance asymmetries. This move, built on shared interests, was also a way to advance the Moon-Biden priorities in the absence of prospects for engagement with the DPRK. Coupled with other outcomes, it may also have helped perceptions that the Moon administration leans too heavily toward China and the DPRK at the expense of a very popular US-ROK alliance, with Moon receiving a hefty approval-rating bump just after the summit.

The strong private sector involvement in key summit outcomes on vaccine and technology cooperation was also seen as particularly effective and useful, not only in highlighting the depth of the bilateral relationship but also as a reminder that the US-ROK alliance was a factor in Korea's development of a modern, prosperous, democratic society. One American participant noted that this message may be particularly salient in Southeast Asia, as developing countries consider which economic, political and security paths to take in the wake of China's rise.

While American and Korean participants felt that the US-ROK joint statement was much closer to the US-Japan joint statement from the Biden-Suga April summit than expected, a Chinese participant saw huge differences in tone and approach. The Chinese policy community saw the US-Japan joint statement as much more aggressive on Taiwan, the South China Sea and the COVID-19 origin issues. While some Chinese analysts do consider the US-ROK statement as a turning point for the ROK's future stance toward China, many others expect relative continuity.

An American participant also wondered if Moon's commitments on these issues were credible or if he would walk them back in future discussions with President Xi.

North Korea

Though the US and ROK seemed to be in lockstep regarding a path forward with the DPRK, according to an American participant, it is unclear what progress could be made if the DPRK is unwilling or unable to return to the negotiating table. The DPRK remains in a prolonged period of extreme isolation, presumably due to the risk of COVID-19 exposure and has prioritized closed borders over economic activity and humanitarian assistance. The DPRK did not respond positively to the results of the US policy review, but outside analysts can only speculate as to the drivers of DPRK policy and behavior when so little is known about the DPRK's domestic anxieties.

A Korean participant felt the North Koreans were confused about the direction of US policy when some officials emphasize human rights while others are talking about diplomacy. This participant urged Americans not to think of human rights and diplomacy as mutually exclusive and to recognize that a long-term US-DPRK relationship could address human rights in a step-by-step process. North Korea does not want to be dependent on China. Perhaps the normalization of ties between the US and Vietnam would be instructive to managing relations with the DPRK.

Americans had several different theories for the DPRK's reluctance to respond to either the US or ROK appeal to resume talks. The DPRK may assess that inter-Korean relations can go no further without changes in the international sanctions regime. The top North Korean leadership may still be unsettled by walking away with nothing from its gamble on personal diplomacy with President Trump. For whatever reason, the Biden package is not attractive enough for the DPRK to return to the table at this point. Meanwhile, the perception in Washington is that the ball is in North Korea's court and there is little that can be done without a positive signal from North Korea.

Discussion on how to move forward if and when the North Koreans return to engagement focused on what the DPRK will want in return for limits on its nuclear program, with participants agreeing that the regime's first priority is security and maintaining a nuclear deterrent. Participants noted a great deal of competing priorities and confusion in the DPRK's strategic objectives—on one hand, the DPRK wants to participate in the international economy; on the other, it seems reluctant to open to foreign business and investment. Similarly, the DPRK wants security assurances but has never outlined the parameters of what it considers a 'hostile policy' beyond US-ROK military exercises.

Though the North Koreans have closed the door to attendance at the 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics, Beijing's 2022 Winter Olympics are just around the corner. Participants thought it would be worthwhile to probe the DPRK's willingness to attend and thought that bilateral discussions on COVID-19 assistance, especially provision of vaccines, might pave the way for larger breakthroughs. These are offers that can likely be justified based on humanitarian concerns and global interest rather than seen as concessions to a belligerent DPRK.

Trilateral Cooperation

In the absence of information about the DPRK's priorities, objectives and timelines for engagement, what can the US, the ROK, and China do to prepare for the next phase of diplomacy? A Korean participant outlined common interests of the three parties—peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and denuclearization—but noted that each side had their own prioritization and tactics to support these interests.

However, while there is a common perception in the US that China would accept a *de facto* North Korean nuclear state, a Chinese participant vehemently denied that doing so is in China's interests. In this participant's view, a permanent North Korean nuclear state would greatly upset the regional balance of power by encouraging the ROK, Japan and possibly others to go nuclear. These countries all surround China's borders, not that of the US, and could add a previously unseen nuclear dimension to any regional conflict or tension. China has even more reason than the US, in this participant's view, to deny the DPRK a long-term nuclear status. And increasingly, the idea that North Korea is a convenient buffer for China is breaking down as land borders become less important in wartime strategy.

American and Korean participants acknowledged China's legitimate concerns and interests in denuclearization and non-proliferation while still pointing out that the threat perception of the DPRK is radically different for China than for the US, the ROK or Japan.

Chinese and American participants agreed both that the Korean Peninsula should be an area of cooperation based on mutual interest and, along with Korean participants, that the three sides should talk simultaneously about their preferred end states and a roadmap toward those goals. Closing gaps in both objectives and tactics would accelerate opportunities for progress at the right time. These talks could start in Track 1.5 or Track II to explore all possibilities before official dialogue. There was some discussion over the viability of these talks leading to progress with the DPRK: a Korean participant thought trilateral discussions would be the most efficient format to build a viable roadmap at present; an American participant reminded the group that the North Koreans have rejected a four-party negotiation formula in the past.

An American participant encouraged the group to expand their thinking about a roadmap as one about the future of the Korean Peninsula and not just the DPRK nuclear issue. The real issue that needs to be addressed is that the US perception of denuclearization as an end state is not shared by China or the ROK, which sees denuclearization as part of a larger process. This participant also noted the improbability of building a Washington consensus on approaching North Korea after more than 30 years of failed negotiations with the DPRK. A Korean participant cautioned against a more ambitious roadmap, noting that denuclearization is enough of a challenge without adding to the agenda. However, a Chinese participant felt a good first step among the three sides would be commitments not to use the DPRK threat as a reason to change regional security posture, suggesting that there is an appetite to discuss broader issues in a trilateral format.

A Track 1.5 discussion on a roadmap would also serve as an important signal to regional stakeholders and the world. It would show that all three governments are invested in finding common cause and promoting cooperation despite tensions in other aspects of the bilateral relationships in this triangle.

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Next Steps in US-ROK relations

By CHO Eunil

US-ROK Summit

President Moon Jae-in has visited the United States a total of four times since taking office, and during his visit in May, he held a meeting with President Biden for the first time. Against this background, expectations were high in Korea for this summit between Korea and the United States. Through this meeting, the two leaders announced a joint statement, which included various agendas for North Korea policy, regional issues related to China, the termination of the US-ROK missile guidelines, and new frontier cooperation. As the two leaders promised to open a new chapter, the Moon Jae-in administration's evaluation of the summit itself was particularly positive. For example, President Moon Jae-in posted on Facebook that it was the best visit. In addition, President Moon Jae-in's approval rating exceeded 40%, indicating that the Moon administration has regained confidence in pursuing foreign policies.

From South Korea's point of view, the 2+2 summit held in March and this summit in May were opportunities to show the direction in which the new administration of the United States will lead Korea-US relations. This is because Korea had a strong desire for policy continuation. In the case of Japan, for example, since Prime Minister Abe Shinzo changed to Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, it may be easy for both the US and Japan to emphasize cooperation in the new government. On the other hand, in the case of South Korea, since the Moon administration is in office until May next year, it is natural to want to maintain the direction of China policy, North Korea policy, and alliance cooperation as an extension of existing policies.

The US-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement made the joint announcement of the 2+2 talks a little more concrete and contained some new content. First, the end of the missile guidelines. The Moon administration revised the missile guidelines with the United States in 2017 and 2020, respectively, and declared the termination of the guidelines this time. However, the termination of this guideline will not be more important in terms of expanding South Korea's participation in high-tech industries, including space development, rather than have military implications.

Second, the interests of both Koreas and the United States converge on the direction of North Korea policy that succeeds the Panmunjom Declaration and the Singapore Joint Statement. North Korea's actions for denuclearization depend on two means—dialogue and sanctions—and the fact is that the May joint statement was able to present the inter-Korean agreement and the North Korea-US agreement as basic principles.

Such declarations by the US and ROK leaders appear to be important signaling to North Korea. However, follow-up measures on the Panmunjom Declaration and the Singapore Statement are very important, and the fact that working-level negotiations with North Korea have not been properly carried out since 2019 poses a high risk that it may end up as an empty promise without concrete actions.

Third, it is an expression of Korea's strategic interest in the stability of the maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region, including in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Since this part was also not specified in the 2+2 meeting, there was a discussion about how to interpret these phrases in Korean domestic media immediately after the summit meeting. Personally, I think that the declaration does not directly refer to China, but broadly addresses China's offensive actions.

In other words, the United States is strengthening alliance cooperation while emphasizing the strategic advantages of the alliance. When South Korea expands the scope of future alliance cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula to the Indo-Pacific region, strong support from the United States should be emphasized. The role of the ROK-US alliance in Indo-Pacific regional security has not yet emerged as a concrete measure, and this is an agenda that the ROK and the US should continue to discuss in the future.

North Korea Policy

An important strategic concern for both the ROK and the United States is North Korea. As always, this problem is difficult to solve in the short term, so a long-term approach is important. There were times when dialogue with North Korea was possible for several years, but the stalemate has continued since 2019. The level of military tension on the Korean Peninsula is maintained as North Korea continues to be indifferent to South Korea's outreach or continues to criticize it through government statements, all while continuing low-level provocations such as short-range missile launches. Whenever something happens, the possibility of North Korean provocations is considered. This is because, although North Korea has suspended its nuclear and ICBM tests, the possibility of resumption is always open.

In the ROK, important negotiations between the US and North Korea, such as the Singapore summit, were held during the Trump period, so I hope that the agreements made during that time will continue to be followed. In that sense, the fact that both the Panmunjom Declaration and the Singapore Declaration were included in the contents of the summit meeting suggests that concerns about the severance of US policy toward North Korea could be alleviated to some extent.

Therefore, the focus of future discussions will be on the Biden administration's North Korea policy. It is known that the US' North Korea policy review is over, but at least based on the information currently available, nothing has been disclosed. Even through there are various informal meetings, the US side is only talking to the extent that it will not make a great bargain or resume strategic patience. There is uncertainty about this formula. The ripple effect of inaction is far greater than that of action. North Korea is currently inactive. Policy concerns about how to approach the ultimate goal of complete denuclearization of North Korea are likely to grow further in the future.

In addition, the Biden administration continues to raise the point that South Korea-US-Japan cooperation can be utilized in responding to North Korea. I think that this flow is similar to the function of Korea-US-Japan cooperation in the Perry process established after the North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990's. The Perry process resulted in the creation of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) and it functioned for a period of time.

The problem, however, is that the late 1990's was a period when Korea and Japan improved political relations considerably. In other words, it was a period in which President Kim Dae-jung and Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo discussed cooperation between Korea and Japan in a new era. In comparison, Korea and Japan are not in a very friendly mood for mutual cooperation in domestic politics at present. Therefore, in order to facilitate trilateral coordination, we need a clearer picture of whether these differences can be overcome and how the United States intends to contribute to this process.

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A New Era of the Alliance contained in the ROK-US Joint Statement

By KIM Ki-jung

A Balanced Match of the Top Priorities of Each Side

For Strategic Cooperation:

- We can see the US wanting to reaffirm its strategic coalition with South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea, on the other hand, prioritizes its plan for peace on the Peninsula, and needs the staunch support of the US in order to revive it. Diplomatically, the priorities of these two domains tie in neatly with each other. Both states operate on the principle of a “rules-based international order” and envision a free and open Indo-Pacific. There is a shared understanding that Korea’s New Southern Policy and the US’ vision for the Indo-Pacific can align.
- The US understands that South Korea has unique economic ties with its neighbor, China. Therefore, in regards to issues surrounding China and Taiwan, both sides agreed to make a joint statement that was broad yet comprehensive. South Korea is standing at a half-step behind the line of scrimmage with China.
- The US welcomes South Korea’s hope to revive the peace process on the Peninsula. It is particularly worth noting that the US supports South Korea’s attempts at ‘engagement’ along with dialogue and cooperation in inter-Korean relations. This means South Korea can resume the reins to a new and improved Driver’s role (2.0). It is also significant that the Biden administration accepted the Panmunjom Declaration and the joint statement from the Singapore Summit, displaying their intention to take a practical approach.
- Strategic cooperation allowed both sides to strike a well-balanced compromise in addressing priorities. Therefore, there is a profound implication in expanding the scope of the alliance from a localized capacity to a regional and global one.

For Cooperation on Values and Principles:

- Both countries champion democracy, human rights, the rule of law at home and abroad, open and inclusive regional multilateralism, public health, the importance of climate change and clean energy, among other shared values. The meeting demonstrated an equivalence in priorities.

For Cooperation on Public Health:

- For South Korea, procurement of vaccines from the US was a priority—a proposal in which the US embraced. It resulted in agreeing to the establishment of a global vaccine partnership, paving the way for South Korea to become a hub for vaccine production and distribution in the Asia-Pacific region. As for the future of the alliance, setting up an international public goods distribution network and assigning roles for each country will later have far-reaching implications.

For Cooperation on Technology and Innovation:

- In the past, South Korea was a recipient of US economic support that helped grow its own economy. Now, South Korea invests in many sectors of the US, with South Korean companies playing an active role in the US production of semiconductors and batteries. As a result, South Korea was able to respond to priorities set forth by the US, making it a win-win for all.

General Critique of the Korea-US talks: South Korea's Perspective

- As the joint statement suggests, the talks ushered in a new chapter for the relationship, marking an important diplomatic and historic moment for South Korea. Since the late 19th century, Korea's foreign policy strategies can largely be summed up as a balancing strategy, neutrality, and its alliance with the US, the first two of which resulted in failure. After the Korean War, the alliance was a strategic necessity for South Korea's survival—its very own success story was possible because of it. South Korea continued to cultivate its position by enlarging the scope of strategy on the basis of the bilateral alliance.
- A theory once described the ROK-US alliance is the security-autonomy trade-off theory. Yet the theory has lost its relevance. The term, such as 'patron-client' relations, to describe the identity of the alliance is not valid either. The nature of the alliance was altered as the scope and responsibilities and capacities of South Korea grew. In terms of national strength, the two countries may still have an asymmetric alliance; but in terms of contributions, their roles correspond. This shift in dynamic has allowed South Korea to overcome its own dependency complex. Koreans take pride in this fact, feeling that the alliance has evolved.
- As the US-China competition intensifies, South Korea is increasingly facing pressure to pick sides, often in the political domain. From a strategic point of view, these impositions seem unfair. South Korea has passed the stage of "choosing sides." Operating on this premise, South Korea aspires to expand its diplomatic activities. Called the strategy of diplomatic flexibility, Korean diplomacy hopes to operate on the principles of proactivity, inclusivity, adaptability, and maneuverability. This new chapter of the ROK-US alliance and Korea's diplomatic flexibility are not mutually exclusive concepts. In this vein, the ROK-US talks served as Korea's first test of its diplomatic flexibility, resulting in success.

Next Steps for Policy on North Korea

- The Biden administration's practical, calibrated, and diplomatic approach to North Korea was indeed timely and appropriate. Together with the US, South Korea will now explore ways to jointly engage North Korea. It is critical that both sides fully coordinate and roles are well-distributed.
- A gesture should be made to encourage North Korea to accept the US proposal, which puts a lot of weight on the initial measures taken. The US already recognized the necessity of establishing a new relationship with North Korea as stated in the Singapore Summit's joint statement. This had more to do with security assurance. Instead of emphasizing the partial lifting of sanctions, it should be signaled to North Korea that their regime is not under threat, and an end-of-war declaration should be revisited. It is also encouraging to note that Ambassador Sung Kim was appointed as US Special Representative for the DPRK, before a human rights ambassador.

Contribution to Regional Public Goods

- If South Korea is assigned as producer and distributor of vaccines with US cooperation, it will be able to work as a contributor of public goods that ensures health security in the region. If South Korea is able to rise to the position itself as a US partner in the Indo-Pacific region, it will be instrumental in stabilizing Southeast Asia as well. And the success of South Korea's New Southern Policy would be a symbol of diversification of South Korea's economic partners beyond China.
- Geographically, Korea exists as a middle power between China and Japan. Korea's core strategy lies in becoming a hybrid peace-facilitator instead of a target of pulling and hauling. It is in America's interest to reinforce Korea's middle position, as it will help lighten its own burdens in Northeast Asia. This trend was well shown in the decision of the termination of Revised Missile Guidelines. If the US is to induce a soft-landing for China instead of containing it, South Korea could play a critical role. America's firm commitment coupled with Korea's flexibility can in fact be an auspicious match. Therefore, a full policy-coordination process is of paramount importance.
- Should US-North Korea relations progress, China will have to modify its diplomatic strategies. Thus, in the context of America's grand strategy, the Korean Peninsula plays an important role in its successful execution.

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US-ROK Track II Strategic Dialogue

By KIM Youngjun

Top Policy Priorities for the US and North Korea's Side

- The US government should be consistent in carrying out a policy. Different messages should be ended to stop confusion. Frequently, counterparts, such as North Korea, have misunderstood the policy of the US government because of inconsistent messages from the US side. For example, one day, one agency of the US government detailed human right abuses of North Korea and another day, another agency of the US government discussed diplomacy. Under the Trump administration, the attitude of the White House to North Korea was different from one of the State Department, the Defense Department and the intelligence agencies. Different institutions clearly have different interests, but, for a successful foreign policy, the US government should have the same voice on North Korea policy.
- The US government should understand that the normalization of US-DPRK relations does not mean to give up human rights of North Korean people. The most important human right to the North Korean people is the right to have food and live in good condition, such as having enough water. In general, when people talk about human rights of North Korea, most of the issues have been about the right to vote or removing political prison camps. They are absolutely important issues, but before that, the things that most North Korean people who suffered from famine desire is a right to have food and hot water, not political rights. The US government should recognize that a negotiation with the North Korean regime does not mean to give up North Korean people's human rights, but to save the North Korean people. Like a step-by-step denuclearization roadmap, human right issues could be solved by a step-by-step roadmap. For instance, the first step to such a human rights roadmap is to provide food, clothes, housing and hot water shower facilities to the North Korean people. The second human right is freedom of North Korean people to move. And then a final step will be a North Korean version of democracy and the right to participate in governance.
- The North Korean government should stop making inappropriate statements like “make the boiled head of a cow laugh” and stop committing human rights abuses. As a member of the international society, North Korea should become a normal country.

Next Steps on North Korea Policy

- Restart the Hanoi Deal with the Singapore Agreement. North Korea already suggested a destruction of Yongbyon nuclear facilities as the first step. Accept it as the first step and starts to talk with North Korea on verification.

- Build Confidence and Trust. Invite Kim Yo Jong to the White House and on a trip to see Broadway shows in NYC and Disney World. And then a delegation of US corporation leaders should visit Pyongyang and Wonsan.
- Invest in North Korea and create jobs in North Korea for the American middle class. If hundreds of thousands of American students and workers study, work and live in Pyongyang or Wonsan, and branches of McDonalds, Five Guys, Starbucks, Holiday Inn, Best Western, Walmart, Costco, Facebook, Amazon and Disney World open in North Korea, it will help bring peace and prosperity, whether or not North Korea hides their nuclear weapons or missiles.

Vietnamization of North Korea: A Paradigm Shift, A New Balance of Power

- North Korean history shows that North Korea has wanted to be independent from China politically, economically and psychologically. That is why there has been no combined military exercises between the PLA and the KPA, and no PLA military units in North Korea. It is natural that North Korea does not join China's One Belt One Road Initiative because of North Korea's fear of China's colonialization of North Korea. Start a Vietnamization of North Korea and build a new balance of power in Northeast Asia. North Korea will want to join us.

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Next Steps for the United States and South Korea

By Jean H. LEE

Rebounding from the difficult discussions during the Trump administration that raised questions about the strength of the US-ROK alliance, President Biden and President Moon Jae-in of South Korea prioritized a show of unity at their May 2021 summit aimed at telegraphing to the world that the alliance is not only intact but also thriving. The summit set the stage not only for US-ROK relations but also for broader cooperation on global public health, the global economy, as well as foreign policy, giving us early insight into the next steps ahead envisioned by the two administrations.

Significantly, the show of rapport at their first summit served as an important early step for the Biden administration in demonstrating its determination to put alliances at the center of diplomacy. The strategic show of unity was deft in conveying strength, commitment and promise to multiple audiences: not only in South Korea and the United States but also in nations in the broader Indo-Pacific. And it was also designed to reach two key adversaries: North Korea and China, giving us insight into how the Biden administration intends to utilize the rebuilding of alliances in its foreign policy strategy, starting with South Korea and Japan. The message to adversaries was clear: the United States stands with its allies and will strengthen those relationships to reestablish and deepen leadership in the region.

Finally, with agreements on jointly producing vaccines and filling gaps in the supply chain, the leaders also demonstrated how productive two democracies can be when working collaboratively. The pacts provided an opportunity for South Korea to show its potential as a partner of growing influence.

The signaling started with a reminder of their shared history. Before the summit, President Biden awarded the Medal of Honor to a Korean War veteran in an emotional moment of living history. The ceremony was not only a moving tale of heroism but also a vivid reminder of the shared history of war that underpins the relationship between South Korea and the United States. The moment served as a reminder, particularly to Americans, that this conflict, the Korean War, remains unresolved, reinforcing the need to maintain readiness against potential aggression from its Korean War adversaries.

On North Korea, both leaders emphasized that the US policy review was coordinated closely with Seoul, and that the allies would remain in sync on North Korea. This summit allowed President Moon to show Kim Jong Un that he has President Biden's ear as Moon seeks to re-engage Kim. There are already signals from the Biden administration that show they are listening to the South Koreans. These signals are likely designed to prevent North Korean provocation and to encourage engagement.

In a key development, the presidents announced that Sung Kim, a former US ambassador to South Korea who currently serves as US ambassador to Indonesia, would also take on the role of US special envoy for North Korea. Kim is a career diplomat with deep experience on North Korean negotiations during both the Obama and Trump administrations, and the announcement alone to fill this position should reassure the South Koreans—and perhaps the North Koreans—that North Korea is a foreign policy priority for the Biden administration. His “part-time” role as envoy is likely to raise concerns in Seoul; it remains to be seen if having an envoy with one foot in the Indo-Pacific will prove a strategic advantage.

Use of the language adopted during the Singapore Summit of 2018 calling for the “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” also was designed to signal that the Biden administration will not completely jettison Trump administration policies on North Korea but move forward from diplomatic progress made in recent years. It is another strategic concession, given the complicated nature of the phrase, designed to appease Seoul and perhaps to entice Pyongyang.

However, how to handle North Korea will remain a challenge for Seoul and Washington. President Moon is more committed to the promise of direct engagement with North Korea than President Biden is and has the pressure of just a year left in office to accomplish his campaign promises on reshaping the relationship with North Korea. Moon supports summits with North Korean leader Kim, but President Biden has said a summit will not happen unless Kim meets certain conditions and only as the culmination of working-level diplomacy.

The Biden administration’s “calibrated, practical approach” to diplomacy with North Korea has the potential to contrast with the vision put forth by the Moon administration that has included a declared end to the Korean War and an ambitious roadmap for inter-Korean economic integration, especially if their timelines do not match. The Biden administration’s call for full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea, and support for the use of sanctions as a diplomatic tool, continue to restrict South Korean ambitions to engage North Korea with economic incentives. Additionally, the Biden administration has said human rights will be part of the discussion, in contrast to the decisions by the Moon and Trump governments to avoid raising human rights concerns with Pyongyang. Indeed, the naming of a North Korea human rights envoy may be the next step announced by the Biden administration.

The two presidents demonstrated with their robust joint statement that communication has been restored between Seoul and Washington. It will take continued communication at all levels to maintain coordination to balance the sense of urgency expressed by the Moon administration and the need for deliberation demonstrated by the Biden administration. Any future provocations by Pyongyang could challenge Washington and Seoul’s ability to stay coordinated. As preparation for a return to negotiations, Pyongyang may seek to improve its position and create leverage by testing missile and nuclear technology. The allies must work in concert on a response, as well as possible sanctions, coming up with a strategy to ensure sanctions are effective and leave room for diplomacy. Finally, they must work together on the growing threat of cyber, which already is undermining the impact of sanctions in addition to providing Pyongyang with an opportunity for asymmetric warfare.

Also mentioned during the Biden-Moon press conference was an agreement to lift US restrictions on South Korean missile ranges, which previously limited South Korean missiles to a range of 800 kilometers. For Moon, it achieved his party's progressive objective to enhance South Korea's sovereignty and his conservative opponents' goal for more robust military capabilities. Yet it also reflected adjustments to US strategy, which now are less concerned with the potentially disruptive effects of South Korea's missile capabilities (especially in the face of North Korea's progress in this area) and are more concerned with presenting China's military planners with a more complex and challenging security environment.

China will remain a delicate issue. In press remarks, President Biden described a reinforced US and South Korean commitment "to expanding cooperation and shaping our shared future in accordance with our democratic values that have made our nations strong and agile and highly competitive in the 21st century economies." The language, particularly the emphasis on "democratic values," could be seen as an oblique alignment against the rise and influence of China. As the United States continues to shift its focus toward competing effectively with China, South Korea will be forced to reconcile the interests of its ally with fears of retaliation from Beijing.

The presidents' announcement of a raft of joint initiatives highlighted US efforts to align allies in the mission to re-establish global leadership and counter China's rise. That included pledges to strengthen cybersecurity, space, green energy, and cooperating to build an open and secure 5G network—an implicit comparison to China's 5G initiative—as well as 6G technologies, and to jointly strengthen secure supply chains in the production of semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and electric vehicle batteries. They also announced plans for the United States to provide vaccines to the South Korean armed forces and to establish a "KORUS Global Vaccine Partnership," in which the South Korea's production capabilities would be supported by US technology to boost global vaccine supply. It is a vaccine diplomacy strategy designed to counter similar efforts by China and Russia to distribute vaccines to needy nations.

For South Korea, the summit provided a moment to step into a larger role on the global stage and to show its potential to play a leadership role, not only in the global pandemic but also in the global economy, particularly with rising South Korean firms committing to help filling supply chain gaps. Highlighting South Korea's growth and influence is a show of the power of an alliance with the United States and the result of investment in that relationship. South Korea has the potential to serve as a role model for developing nations, particularly across Asia and the Indo-Pacific, that are seeking to make similar economic transformations. That is a message that the Biden administration will want to promote across the Indo-Pacific as part of the larger strategy to bring nations on board with the US vision of democracy and global leadership. Both the North Korea policy review and the recent summit with President Moon reveal how the Biden administration is implementing that vision, and how they are seeking to enlist allies and partners to play their part in this broader regional, global strategy. We should begin to see the administration taking further steps, and how adversaries such as North Korea, China and Russia fit into the strategy.

With the Biden-Moon summit, we were reminded of the history of the US-South Korean alliance, the threats facing the allies today and the future that positive partnership offers. We also saw in the summit a recognition of South Korea's growth since the days as well as the transformation of its role as a poor country in need to help to an advanced nation capable of giving back to the United States—and beyond—in spades. The message was that the US-ROK alliance is strong with potential for deeper collaboration, and that the partnership can serve as a model for other nations debating how to handle the rise of China. While the two presidents laid out next steps on the US-ROK partnership—which include joint initiatives the two governments have already begun to execute—it will be even more interesting to see how the allies carry that vision to the broader region as part of a bid to restore US leadership, and how this will give middle powers like South Korea an opportunity to play a leadership role as well.

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The Biden-Moon Summit: Assessing the Results

By Scott SNYDER

The Biden-Moon May 21 White House summit provided an opportunity for both leaders to establish and consolidate the US-South Korea alliance relationship and to meld respective priorities into a unified and comprehensive approach. The summit proved effective for the Biden administration in shoring up South Korean support for its global priorities and to coordinate China-related policies, while the Moon administration received valued assurances and support for its priorities on policy toward North Korea. The exchange of views and pledges of support largely served efforts to forge a unified approach rather than a division of labor, with both leaders signing on to a comprehensive set of actions designed to underscore a common viewpoint and commitment to peninsular, regional, and global security.

The US-ROK fact sheet and joint statement provided comprehensive discussion and coverage of alliance management, regional, global, and economic issues, serving in many respects as a *de facto* US-ROK Joint Vision Statement for the Alliance that might be compared closely with prior Obama-Lee and Obama-Park vision statements in 2009 and 2013. This is significant because it constitutes the first comprehensive statement of commitment to a shared alliance vision between a progressive South Korean president and a US leader. This serves to depoliticize alliance issues as part of South Korea's increasingly polarized political debate in the run-up to the 2022 ROK presidential election.

In the course of affirming shared objectives and melding priorities, some distinctive patterns have emerged from the summit. First, the ROK strongly prefers promotion of functional cooperation toward a common public good over alignment of objectives in response to shared threats as the primary framing mechanism for alliance-based cooperation. Second, a private-sector involved approach has assisted in generating tangible deliverables in the context of the alliance, and has enabled the US to compete and provide business opportunities for Korean large firms that *de facto* compete with China-focused economic opportunities. And third, the utilization of the private sector in combination with strong public support for the US-ROK alliance has reduced any temptations the Moon administration might have to step back from the alliance in pursuit of a more balanced approach to rising Sino-US rivalry.

Having noted these trends and appreciating the importance of words on the page, it is realistically plausible to imagine that some South Korean commitments will be used selectively as concessions in future interactions with China, as South Korea tacks back toward China in response to perceptions that South Korea has hewed rather closely to the United States through the Biden-Moon summit. Close US-ROK cooperation serves in part as leverage for Moon to gain larger offers from China in the context of a future summit with President Xi.

On North Korea, the two allies reaffirmed a common objective of complete denuclearization and a shared prioritization of the instruments of diplomacy and deterrence, with diplomacy taking center stage in the Moon-Biden meeting following a turn by deterrence in the Biden-Suga summit. Biden's forward-leaning words on diplomacy, and his apparent verbal softening of the bar North Korea would have to clear for Biden to meet with Kim, were tempered by references to human rights and emphasis on conditional rather than unconditional legitimation of Kim. In the past, North Korea has insisted on affirmation of its sovereignty and equal footing with the US as a mutually-acknowledged fact rather than as a privilege to be earned.

North Korea's initial focus on the missile guidelines revisions and its references to SRBMs suggest the possibility of renewed short-range missile testing or some other North Korean actions designed to show that North Korea is entering into diplomacy from a position of strength. North Korea is likely to take this step prior to opening the door to renewed dialogue with the United States. In addition, there are no public indications that North Korea has an interest in denuclearization-centered diplomacy with the United States, though the North would likely welcome diplomatic talks with the US framed toward a different set of objectives. Realistically, the Biden administration cannot achieve much diplomatically without a willingness by Kim to engage as a dialogue partner.

Although Moon may want North Korea to use South Korea as an intermediary and as a foil for renewed engagement with the US, the Kim family has not perceived South Korea as essential, or even useful, to its diplomacy toward the United States since the Hanoi Summit. Since the Biden administration is unlikely to authorize South Korean economic incentives as carrots, Moon has little tangible to offer to a partner that most clearly values tangible and unconditional rewards.

Since the Biden administration is framing its competition with China primarily in terms of new technology development, the South Korean private sector has valuable contributions to make to that effort, and its willingness to join in enhancing US capabilities will be greatly appreciated and financially rewarded. The headlines of the summit focused on pandemic-focused global cooperation that may enable US technology to be paired with ROK manufacturing capability and the willingness of the South Korean private sector to engage actively in US-based investment in semi-conductors and electric batteries as part of the focus on supply chain resiliency.

The scope of cooperation in many different fields, from climate change to international development to space to the possibility of revitalized nuclear cooperation, is impressive and provides a long agenda of items to work on. Most notably, South Korea has lots of opportunities to speak through actions rather than words on issues like China; what remains to be seen is whether the United States ultimately can allow itself to be satisfied by actions alone, or whether it will also insist on words from South Korea despite South Korean reluctance.

If the Moon administration is willing to proactively implement elements of the US-ROK joint statement, this will be very positive for the alliance as long as there is not too much post-summit foot-dragging on issues like Moon's commitment to holding joint military exercises. Such contradictions against the major thrust of alliance cooperation featured at the summit not only generates bad optics, but also will dim the luster of the joint commitments made at the White House and damage Moon's credibility as a partner in the eyes of some overseas observers.

In sum, the Biden-Moon summit provided a solid return to functional cooperation as a driver for cementing shared alliance aims, and constituted a welcome corrective to the corrosion in the relationship during the Trump-Moon era of alliance management.

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US-ROK Strategic Dialogue

By Jenny TOWN
June 2021

The Biden-Moon summit on May 21, 2021 appeared to signal a turning point in US-ROK relations, expanding cooperation beyond bilateral military cooperation and North Korea to explore in earnest greater economic cooperation and integration, and cooperation on tackling some of the most pressing global issues. While the overall mood of the summit was positive, questions remain as to whether commitments were more symbolic than substantive, and how far cooperation can progress with the short time Moon has left in office.

How Were the Top Policy Priorities for Each Side Matched?

For the US, the top priority for this and the previous summit with Japanese Prime Minister Suga was to demonstrate active engagement of US allies to start to repair the damage done over the past four years. This is important not only for the maintenance of the alliance system, but also in strengthening the US position amid intensifying competition with China—preserving US interests and a sphere of influence in the region and demonstrating a united front against Chinese military adventurism.

US alliance relations under Trump were trending in the wrong direction, raising serious questions about US extended deterrence commitments and leading to both ROK and Japan cultivating new levels of diplomacy with China as a hedge against an unpredictable US. In the South Korean case, questions were even raised about the mandate and structure of the alliance, as it had lost the sense of being a strategic partnership. A transactional relationship with exhortative demands was not going to be sustainable in the long run. In this sense, the summit was a success, both in demonstrating a renewed energy and confidence in alliance relations, renewed respect between parties, and a renewed sense of strategic cooperation.

Another high US priority for this summit was to demonstrate South Korean endorsement of the Biden administration's new North Korea policy. In order to prevent the kind of push and pull that the previous round of negotiations experienced as a result of parallel, bilateral, uncoordinated negotiations taking place; with Seoul so far out ahead of the US in its commitments to North Korea, undercutting opportunities for collective bargaining. On this matter, the US seemed willing to address South Korea's concerns about a delayed appointment of a Special Envoy for North Korea policy, appointing Sung Kim to the post during the post-summit press conference, and securing President Moon's endorsement of the new "calibrated and practical approach" to North Korea. Although later clarification that the position will be only part time raises questions about how actively Ambassador Kim is working to restart negotiations.

On the South Korean side, the priority was demonstrating that the alliance “is back” and that the dark days of the Trump administration’s antagonistic approach to allies, especially Moon, were over. Security cooperation is a big part of that optic. Quick resolution of the prolonged and aggravating SMA negotiation prior to the summit was a welcomed development, especially returning to the five-year agreement to avoid reentering negotiations in the near future. And while Moon was unable to achieve the conditions for wartime OPCON transfer during his term, the lifting of missile guidelines provide a win in demonstrating growing sovereignty of the Korean military.

North Korea was an equally high priority for Moon, who still hopes to resume inter-Korean relations before the end of his term. The inter-Korean process is currently being held hostage to stalled US-DPRK relations, with little room for South Korea to maneuver without US cooperation and some level of sanctions easing. This raises questions about whether South Korea’s new willingness to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific strategy is a reflection of renewed confidence in the US as an ally (to provide greater protections to South Korea against potential Chinese backlash to such decisions), or whether it is simply being leveraged in the short term to try to gain influence on the US’ approach to North Korea.

Unique to Moon’s agenda was gaining some cooperation on COVID vaccines to help alleviate domestic pressures to accelerate South Korea’s vaccination program. The commitment of 550,000 vaccines from the US for the South Korean military, later upped to 1 million to cover related personnel, provided a sizable contribution to help Moon show progress toward that goal.

Next Steps on North Korea

There will obviously be continued pressure from Seoul on Washington to be proactive on North Korea policy as the agreement to “full implementation of security council resolutions” leaves little room for South Korea to independently re-engage North Korea, and as Pyongyang is fully aware that there is little Seoul can deliver on the agenda under the current conditions.

But while the new North Korea policy may be more productive once negotiations resume, there is little clarity on how actively the US is willing to try to convince the North Koreans to reengage. Waiting for Pyongyang to make the first move simply maintains the status quo in the near term. If the US is not willing to make the kind of unilateral concessions Pyongyang did in 2018 to demonstrate a different approach to relations, the administration should consider modifying the process. Instead of trying to start with talks about talks, jump start negotiations by floating a new proposal to North Korea—an initial calibrated and incremental deal that embodies the principles of the new policy and clearly outlines what the US would like and what it is willing to offer in return.

The challenge will be how to coordinate that kind of approach with allies and still conduct quiet diplomacy—as the Biden administration prefers to do—rather than the Twitter diplomacy of the past. While South Korea has been known to leak information about what the US administration is doing, or what it would like to see the US administration do, this type of public attention will be counterproductive to negotiations, discouraging cooperation and or continued efforts.

New Opportunities

The COVID-19 outbreak proved that in our inter-connected world, no one is exempt from infectious diseases, and infections can spread quickly and easily around the world. Preparations and precautions need to be taken by all countries, not just the rich countries and not just countries of a certain region, to be prepared for future pandemics. This is one area where the US and ROK can cooperate both on better preparing their own populations, as South Korea did in the aftermath of MERS, and sharing information and best practices globally.

Additionally, on climate change, US-ROK cooperation can be robust and impactful, as there is much for the two countries to learn from each other as they work toward meeting their goals on clean energy and emissions reductions. However, South Korea needs to be careful about making ever increasing commitments on these issues without realistic energy plans that support that the ability to meet them.

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US-China-ROK Trilateral Conference Presentation

By CHUNG Jae Ho

First on the Moon-Biden summit in May 2021:

- The balance sheet on the Biden-Moon summit is a *complex* one. To be brief, four points can be made:
 1. At a glance, the Moon government has gotten much closer to the US compared to its stance over the last four years. Yet, in contrast with the Suga-Biden joint statement, no mention of ‘China’ appears in the ROK-US joint statement. There seems to be discernible traces of moderation, ambiguity, and subtlety as Seoul sought hard to minimize contents of explicit offense to Beijing. Interestingly, the official responses from the PRC government have also been rather restrained.
 2. While optics (most importantly, President Moon’s participation in the medal-of-honor conferment ceremony for a Korean War veteran) and rhetoric (as in the joint statement as well as the post-summit joint press conference) seem ideal from Washington’s viewpoint, how Seoul’s concrete actions will follow through in the next ten months remains to be seen.
 3. A simple comparison with the Suga visit is a non-starter as there was no comparable business delegation there due to the different situation with COVID-19.
 4. In short, it might have been a “healthy” compromise between Moon’s Pyongyang focus and Biden’s China focus.

Second, on trilateral coordination on the issue of North Korea’s denuclearization:

1. As for aligning priorities: While it is clearly a top priority for Moon, who is pressed for time, to do something about the issue before his term expires, is this also the case for Biden and Xi? Commonsensically speaking, wouldn’t they rather wait until the presidential election in Seoul?
2. Despite the completion of the North Korea policy review and the appointment of the envoy for North Korean affairs in both the US (Sung KIM) and China (LIU Xiaoming), what is going to be really “new” this time? (Wine, bag, or what?)
3. Equally importantly, how about the resilience of the sanctions regime, without which the whole paradigm that the US approach relies upon is bound to falter?

4. Who is going to be the real “driver(s)” this time around? Given that since 2018, the US, ROK and China all worked around the premise that North Korea was determined to denuclearize, the ball is now in Pyongyang’s court.

Third, on the time frame:

1. As far as the North Korean nuclear issue is concerned, as we are so accustomed to say, is time still a key factor? Or, on the contrary, is *management* (i.e. sustaining the status quo and preventing its worsening) going to be deemed more important at this point? How does the answer to this question play out for each of the countries involved?
2. Moving forward, the most important domestic political calendar seems to be that of the presidential election in the ROK next March (assuming President Xi takes up his third term in the fall of 2022). If a shift of power should occur in Seoul, will that be a game changer?

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US-China-ROK Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula

By CHUNG Kuyoun

While the prospect of denuclearizing North Korea is looming large, the North Korea issue becomes relegated in US and Chinese foreign policy priorities as the two countries compete over global issues from trade to high-tech protection, regional strategies, and international orders that project incompatible values. At this moment, both prefer maintaining the stability of the Korean Peninsula without any further missile tests or nuclear provocations, which makes South Korea's Korea Peace initiative less appealing. Given that North Korea has not responded to any US attempts to restart a dialogue after it declared a self-reliant strategy during the 8th Congress of the Worker's Party of Korea last January, the scope of potential trilateral cooperation among the US, China and South Korea vis-à-vis North Korea is substantially limited, more so because the three parties are less likely to agree on a common roadmap to build a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Barriers to Trilateral Cooperation

Barriers to the trilateral cooperation can be analyzed through a triad.

US-ROK Side: For the Moon Jae-in administration, North Korea still remains the core driver of South Korea's foreign policy, which makes the Moon administration want maintain a good relationship with China, the biggest trade partner and main benefactor of North Korea. Therefore, Seoul has mostly refused the Trump administration's attempts to conscript it against China and attempted to maintain foreign policy of autonomy between two great powers. South Korea's foreign policy dilemma vis-à-vis the US-China rivalry, therefore, lies in how to implement the Korea Peace Initiative while hedging against great power competition. In this regard, US-ROK cooperation has been mostly bilateral so far as Seoul hopes to build a more inclusive regional architecture in its attempt to avoid any decoupling between the US and China.

However, the recent ROK-US Summit in May 2021 represents the Moon administration's nascent willingness to join the Biden administration's multilateral efforts to rebuild the regional architecture with like-minded democratic allies, as represented by its recognition of the importance of the Quad, maintaining peace in Taiwan strait, and its participation in reshaping semiconductor supply chain, etc. On the Korean Peninsula, the US seemed to share the urgency of the matter, as evidenced by the appointment of Sung Kim as special envoy for North Korea. However, disparity over approaches and assumptions of each player's role among them will need to be addressed. US prioritizes deterrence and diplomacy in denuclearizing North Korea. Further emphasis of the US on strengthening allies' deterrence-denial capabilities to address the regional revisionist powers' A2/AD across the western Pacific will be obviously met by North Korean criticism as "hostile policy." Meanwhile, South Korea's economic engagement toward the North will be frustrated by economic sanctions as the US assumes that improving inter-Korean relations

will not facilitate US-DPRK dialogue. Besides, North Korea even does not recognize the role of South Korea over the dialogue between the US and DPRK.

Increasing coordination among US-ROK-Japan and their degree of alignment beyond the North Korea issue will be instrumental in preventing North Korea from exploiting differences among three countries.

Lastly, the political cycle of South Korea—the presidential election in 2022—needs to be considered, as domestic polarization over how to address the North Korea issue remains intact.

US-China Side: The barrier is over how the US and China perceive the end-state on the Peninsula in the long term. While the US and China seem to perceive the denuclearization of North Korea as an area of cooperation in the short term, they envision different end-states on the Korean Peninsula. Plus, how does the US-China rivalry affect each country's expectation? It is also necessary to understand how the two countries will address a list of 'flash spots' in the Western Pacific, which includes the Korean Peninsula, and especially how China would carve out the contours of influence in the region with strengthened A2/AD. That said, what could be the disincentive for China when adjoined by nuclear North Korea instead of unified (by South Korean terms) Koreas? As long as the US and China maintain strategic stability in Northeast Asia, will China accept the scenario of unified Koreas?

North Korea Side: This could be the major barrier. What is North Korea's preferred end state—two Koreas (*de facto* nuclear North and non-nuclear South) or unification? North Korea is not willing to start any dialogue at this moment due to COVID-19, economic sanctions, and floods, etc. Trilateral persuasion without any seamless coordination on a roadmap for denuclearization does not seem to be a viable option to begin any dialogue.

Bilateral meeting with North Korea

There is a need to convince North Korea of the three countries' commitment for denuclearization and for maintaining the stability over the Peninsula. These three countries, instead, need to seamlessly coordinate on the measures to maintain the stability on and around the Korean Peninsula, and on the messages and signals toward the North.

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US-China-ROK Trilateral Cooperation: Searching for Common Ground

By Ralph A. COSSA¹

Basic argument: The US, ROK, and China have a number of near-term, overlapping, or compatible interests and objectives, which should make it possible for the three sides to develop a coordinated, consistent approach in dealing with the DPRK and broader Korean Peninsula issues. However, the significant difference in long-term objectives or desired eventual outcomes on the Peninsula, especially between the US and the ROK on the one hand and China on the other, creates limits to such cooperation and produces fissures that Pyongyang is all too eager to exploit. To obtain true cooperation, an effort must first be made to develop common long-term objectives or acceptable (even if not totally desirable) outcomes. This can be accomplished, at least initially, via informal Track II trilateral dialogue and/or a joint research effort.

What are the common interests of the US, ROK, and China in bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table?

None of the parties involved, including the DPRK, wants war. While threats and brinkmanship remain favorite go-to tactics for North Korea (and briefly for the Trump administration as well; aka “fire and fury”), Pyongyang understands the prospects for success in a conventional war with the ROK and the US are extremely low. The prospect for success would become even lower, to include the high probability of regime extinction, were the conflict to go nuclear. Thus, all four sides want to avoid either a conventional or a nuclear conflict.

The US, ROK, and China also have a common interest in countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This is a long-standing global concern and priority for the US. The ROK is perhaps less worried about proliferation *per se* but understands that a “dirty bomb” exploding anywhere, but especially on the territory of the US or its allies, could result in military strikes against the North if it was determined it was the source of the radioactive material. There is also (well-founded) concern that the inability to pinpoint the source could lead to the assumption that the North was responsible. Finally, China should understand that the most likely buyers of DPRK plutonium would be Islamic non-state actors who might be as or more inclined (or at least find it easier) to use it in western China than in the US.

¹ Prepared for a National Committee on American Foreign Policy June 2021 Track II video teleconference. Opinions expressed are exclusively those of the author.

All three also see denuclearization as a common objective and worry that even *de facto* recognition of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons status could cause other nuclear dominoes to fall. While all seem to agree that the prospects of getting the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons range from improbable to impossible, this must remain a common goal. With the advent of the Biden administration, it appears that all also agree that a “step-by-step” approach remains the most promising.

Regional stability is another common objective. All three nations are, to one degree or another, still struggling to cope first with the handling, and then with the aftermath, of COVID-19. Tied closely to this is the high priority attached by all three to economic recovery. As a general rule, when the North is at the negotiating table, this creates a sense of stability and a (real or imagined) non-crisis atmosphere so all three can focus on the considerable domestic challenges remaining in COVID's wake (not to mention non-COVID-related domestic challenges and concerns).

What are the barriers to trilateral coordination on these common interests?

The most immediate barrier is a lack of trust, not only among the three parties involved but between North Korea and the others. Even when the three agree on objectives, they often disagree on how to get there and, at the end of the day, finding a formula that will also be acceptable to the North remains problematic.

That said, one common characteristic, especially in the US and China, that perhaps regrettably but realistically argues against a quick return to the negotiation table is the absence of a sense of urgency, other than President Moon's ticking legacy clock. North Korea does not seem to be a high priority issue for either President Biden or President Xi, and the urgency in Seoul is more political than security-driven. It is hard to argue against the pre-Hanoi Summit mantra that “no deal is better than a bad deal” and even harder to argue convincingly that Pyongyang is prepared to accept anything other than a very good deal for them, which would likely be a bad (or at least politically untenable) deal for Washington.

More fundamentally, the main barrier to cooperation on overlapping interests has been, and will likely continue to be, conflicting long-term objectives or desired outcomes. The US stated outcome has always been clear: the (hopefully peaceful) dissolution of the North Korean state and a reunified, non-nuclear Peninsula under the political, economic, and social system that exists in Seoul today. It has traditionally been assumed that this reunified Korea would remain allied with the United States.

While South Koreans, who have calculated the cost of reunification, may not be eager for this to happen immediately, reunification remains the only politically acceptable long-term goal for the ROK, even if peaceful coexistence through some form of federation/confederation is seen as an acceptable mid-term step. Given the neighborhood in which they reside—the so-called “shrimp among whales” scenario—most Korean strategic thinkers also see the need, not only today but after reunification (full or especially confederation-style), of an outside balancer. Kim Dae-jung made this argument many years ago, stating that Korea needs good relations with all its neighbors

and the only way to ensure that was to have a continued alliance with the United States. History has taught Koreans that not only Japan (which they dwell upon) but also China (which they sometimes conveniently forget) have invaded the Peninsula for centuries past, and that the Peninsula is divided today thanks in large part to the Russians/Soviets (and remains divided thanks to the Chinese).

One assumes the Chinese dream is quite different although far less often articulated. China seems quite content with a divided Peninsula, and its worst nightmare would be a unified Peninsula still closely aligned with the United States, with the possibility of US bases or listening posts along the Yalu. While China accuses the US of having a “Cold War mentality” for wanting to sustain its alliance with the ROK, one could likewise accuse China of having a 20th (or even 19th) century mentality for wanting to preserve a North Korean buffer zone in the cyber age. Nonetheless, one hears this argument from the Chinese, who also express concern about the impact of refugee flows on regional stability, should the North collapse.

While a middle ground is possible (i.e., the development of a common acceptable, as opposed to preferred, mid- to long-term outcome), little has been done in this area. (Truth in advertising, this is a stalled former Pacific Forum project I am currently reviving.) Suffice it to say, without some agreement on mid- and long-term outcomes, true cooperation remains problematic. This also implies that attempts to find a common “North Korea Roadmap” are bound to fail. What is needed is a Korean Peninsula Roadmap, which would contain, but not be limited, to a North Korea chapter.

How should bilateral meetings with the North Koreans be incorporated into larger strategies for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula?

The short answer is openly and transparently, and with close pre- and post-meeting coordination. Whether true or not, there is widespread suspicion in the US that President Xi’s bilateral meetings with Kim Jong Un were aimed at impeding, rather than advancing, US-DPRK cooperation. Meanwhile, the Singapore Declaration and more importantly, Trump’s side pronouncements (like the halting of military exercises), seem to have caught the ROK (not to mention many in the US) by surprise. Unless the three countries are on the same page regarding objectives and desired outcomes—i.e., embrace or at least accept a common Korean Peninsula Roadmap—bilateral meetings are just as likely to divide as to unite the three parties.

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NCAFP US-ROK-China Trilateral VTC Talking Points

By Patricia M. KIM

What are the common interests of the US, ROK and China in bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table?

- North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities pose a direct threat to the US homeland, US troops in Asia, and US allies—especially South Korea and Japan.
- Despite China's poor record of sanctions enforcement and apparent lack of urgency on denuclearizing North Korea, North Korea's nuclear weapons also directly threaten China's strategic interests in three ways:
 - First, North Korea's growing nuclear and missile programs are driving the United States and its allies to strengthen their individual and joint capabilities by, for example, developing and deploying increasingly sophisticated missile defense systems to counter the threats posed by Pyongyang. Moreover, the prospect of living indefinitely with a nuclear-armed North Korea is invigorating voices within South Korea and Japan that are in favor of acquiring indigenous nuclear weapons, threatening a nuclear cascade in the region. None of these developments are in China's short- to long-term strategic interests.
 - Second, although China and North Korea share a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance and maintain stable relations today, there is no guarantee that North Korean weapons will never be pointed in China's direction given Pyongyang's unpredictability, the overall lack of trust between the two states, and a history of rocky relations that stretches back to the early days of both the DPRK and PRC.
 - Third, intentional or unintentional WMD proliferation by North Korea threatens regional and global strategic stability, and therefore the peace and security of China.
- Given these realities, the US, ROK and China, along with other regional stakeholders, share a fundamental interest in jointly curbing the further expansion of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs and ultimately working toward the complete denuclearization of North Korea and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

What are the barriers to trilateral coordination on these common interests?

- The greatest challenge to bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table is the fact that Pyongyang has shown little interest to date in diplomatic reengagement following the failed Hanoi Summit and despite efforts by Washington and Seoul to restart working level discussions. While Pyongyang’s reluctance to engage with the outside world may be driven in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also based on a fundamental unwillingness to denuclearize and concerns about regime security that no outside party can ultimately guarantee.
- A key barrier to trilateral coordination among Washington, Seoul and Beijing is rooted in differences in priorities and timelines between the three players. These differences include the urgency each side places on the denuclearization of North Korea, views on the appropriate extent and timing of sanctions relief and the necessary reciprocal steps that Pyongyang must take for the lifting of sanctions, and whether and how North Korean human rights issues should factor into negotiations.
- There is a lack of urgency that once spurred greater coordination during the height of tensions in 2017, when China demonstrated willingness to endorse and enforce greater sanctions vis-a-vis Pyongyang to avoid “fire and fury” in its backyard. Now that it has been widely established that a preventive military strike is not a viable option, there seems to be less motivation in Beijing (and to some extent in Washington) to address the North Korea challenge. This will only strengthen perceptions in Pyongyang that it can continue to push the envelope and expand its nuclear and missile programs without triggering a cohesive, punitive response from Washington, Seoul, Beijing and other key stakeholders.
- In addition, a heightening focus on US-China competition, and Beijing’s greater interests (perceived or real) in gaining leverage in strategic competition with Washington by exploiting rather than cooperating on the North Korea challenge, are also hindering trilateral coordination on North Korea. Beijing seems to have rejected the Biden administration’s proposed framework for a US-China relationship that is simultaneously competitive in certain domains, adversarial when necessary, and cooperative on global challenges. Beijing has demanded instead that the United States and China agree to only cooperate and not to interfere in each other’s “core interests,” which is an unrealistic proposition and not in either state’s ultimate interests. There is an opportunity for US-China cooperation on North Korea that will not only directly benefit both states and the greater region, but can also serve as a proof of concept that Washington and Beijing can indeed compete and coexist in a responsible and sustainable manner.

How should bilateral meetings with the North Koreans be incorporated into larger strategies for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula?

- It is preferable for Seoul, Washington, and Beijing, in consultation with other key stakeholders like Tokyo and Moscow, to coordinate on the broad contours of a realistic roadmap for denuclearizing North Korea and advancing peace on the Korean Peninsula. Agreeing on benchmarks and mutual expectations for sanctions enforcement and relief, and the concrete steps that North Korea must take in response, can help manage frictions among the disparate stakeholders and set expectations with North Korea. A coordinated approach that leverages each stakeholder's unique relationship with Pyongyang can check North Korea from exploiting differences among the parties and create more favorable conditions for constructively shaping North Korea's choices.

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