



USIP SENIOR STUDY GROUP FINAL REPORT

China's Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations



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This is the second in the Senior Study Group (SSG) series of USIP reports examining China's influence on conflicts around the world. A group of fifteen experts met from September to December 2018 to assess China's interests and influence in bringing about a durable settlement of the North Korean nuclear crisis. This report provides recommendations for the United States to assume a more effective role in shaping the future of North Korea in light of China's role and interests. Unless otherwise sourced, all observations and conclusions are those of SSG members.

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org

Web: www.usip.org

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Executive Summary

For decades, North Korea's nuclear program has ranked among the top security challenges for the United States. This threat increased in urgency following a sharp uptick in North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in 2016 and especially with its first intercontinental ballistic missile test in July 2017. Then, in June 2018 in Singapore, President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met for the first time, marking a new chapter in US engagement with North Korea. In a joint statement, the two sides agreed to work toward a new bilateral relationship, the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," and a "lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula," as well as to cooperate on recovering the remains of Americans who had died in the Korean War.¹

Since the diplomatic opening created by the Singapore summit, the key challenge for the United States and its partners has been to develop a negotiation process capable of sustaining momentum toward those objectives. This has proved difficult, and negotiations are at a stalemate. The two sides were most recently unable to come to an agreement at Trump and Kim's second meeting, which was held in February 2019 in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Washington and Pyongyang are divided over the definition of denuclearization and how to sequence steps toward achieving denuclearization, creating a new bilateral relationship, and establishing a peace regime. North Korea has called for a "phased and synchronous" approach in which reciprocal concessions are traded between Washington and Pyongyang in a step-by-step manner. In Hanoi, Kim demanded the lifting of five of the eleven UN sanctions imposed on the regime, which focus on the civilian economy, in exchange for dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear complex, an offer Trump was unwilling to accept. Since the Hanoi summit, Washington has said that it rejects an "incremental" approach and instead expects both a "big deal" in which North Korea denuclearizes "fully, finally and verifiably" in return for complete sanctions relief as well as progress on the other pillars identified in the Singapore statement.²



US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un prepare to shake hands at the Capella Hotel on Sentosa Island in Singapore on June 12, 2018. (Photo by Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

As North Korea's largest neighbor and main trading partner, China has an enormous role to play in this process and a significant stake in the outcome. China's influence and leverage over North Korea were evident in the four visits Kim made to China in 2018 to consult with President Xi Jinping. China seeks a negotiated, diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear issue and does not want to see a return to the cycle of escalatory rhetoric and accompanying tensions. Beijing has therefore supported direct Washington-Pyongyang negotiations. It has avoided direct involvement in them, seeking instead to shape them from the sidelines in its own separate discussions with Washington, Seoul, and Moscow.

Washington should encourage Beijing to use its influence with Pyongyang to push for denuclearizing North Korea and establishing sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula. Two factors complicate this goal. First, rapid developments in US–North Korea engagement have come at a time of increased tensions between Washington and Beijing. Second, the two powers advocate different approaches to negotiations. Beijing endorses Pyongyang's preference for a phased and synchronous process, whereas Washington seems to have moved to a denuclearization-first, all-or-nothing approach.

North Korea's Border with China



Within this context, this report considers how the United States can best engage China to advance progress on denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula. It first provides an assessment of China's core interests and priorities, and then discusses how China's bilateral relationships with other countries affect its policies toward the Korean Peninsula. Based on this assessment, the report considers what role China might play in three possible scenarios for denuclearization talks with North Korea: if they move forward with tangible progress toward denuclearization and improved relations, if they remain stalled, or if they collapse and tensions escalate.

Observations

China shares Washington's desire for North Korea's denuclearization but does not believe it is achievable in the short term. Beijing considers a nuclear North Korea to be inherently destabilizing because it provides a rationale for US military deployments and possible intervention in the region, prompts regional actors such as Japan and South Korea to strengthen their defensive capabilities, and raises calls for the development of indigenous nuclear capabilities in these countries—all of which are inimical to China's interests and security. Beijing, therefore, continues to favor a step-by-step, dual-track process for both advancing denuclearization and creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

China is a vital player in efforts to denuclearize North Korea and must be encouraged to play a constructive role. Because of Beijing's outsized economic relationship with Pyongyang, its cooperation—or lack of cooperation—in sanctions enforcement largely determines the effectiveness of economic pressures. Moreover, North Korean leadership consults regularly with China and seeks its support in negotiations with Washington, even as it seeks to play Washington and Beijing off one another. China's ability to shield Pyongyang from economic and political pressure makes Beijing an important factor in efforts to influence North Korea. The United States should work with China to ensure that Beijing wields this influence constructively, recognizing that Washington and Beijing will never be in lock step.

Nevertheless, China will not “resolve” the North Korea crisis for the United States. North Korea seeks security assurances, sanctions relief, and diplomatic recognition from the United States. China can offer its own security assurances and sanctions relief, but it cannot provide what Pyongyang wants in either respect from Washington. Beijing, moreover, has shown that there are limits on the pressure it will exert on Pyongyang. It believes that pushing too hard would only reduce its ability to shape North Korea's behavior and potentially provoke more risk-acceptant behavior should such pressure prove destabilizing. The United States, therefore, should not place undue reliance on resolving the North Korean nuclear conundrum solely through Chinese pressure.

North Korea depends heavily on China. Under growing isolation from global sanctions, North Korea has become increasingly dependent on China for trade. **To diversify its economic and diplomatic relationships, Pyongyang therefore seeks improved relationships with the United States and other countries.**

Recommendations

Given the high level of distrust between the United States and North Korea, Pyongyang is unlikely to agree to an all-or-nothing approach that requires its immediate and complete denuclearization in return for full sanctions relief and other diplomatic concessions. **The United States should instead pursue negotiations based on a step-by-step, parallel-track process that can build the trust necessary for reciprocal measures toward denuclearization and a peace regime.** This approach is the most practical way to achieve progress toward US national security objectives.

The step-by-step approach is in broad terms close to the phased and synchronous approach that both China and North Korea prefer, but adopting their preferred approach does not also require adopting their preferred measures. Within such a process, China and North Korea can be expected to push for reciprocal de-escalation. **Washington should identify measures that it can offer Pyongyang in return for steps toward denuclearization without reducing (or with minimal reduction in) US readiness and force posture on the Korean Peninsula.**

The United States should work with China as well as regional allies to implement a coordinated approach to this process. China could be especially helpful by clearly signaling to Pyongyang that the price of seeking to be a de facto nuclear power will be continued heavy sanctions and international opprobrium, and that full denuclearization, over time, is the best alternative. Moreover, **a road map that Washington and Beijing jointly endorse would send a strong signal to Pyongyang that efforts to exploit differences between them will fail.**

Although defining a road map with China will be neither quick nor easy, Beijing supports a dual-track approach and is likely to engage in discussions based on such a premise. China could further contribute—alongside the United States and South Korea—to the long-term negotiating process by offering North Korea security and economic incentives, technical assistance on arms control, and assurance that it is committed to helping sustain peace on the Korean Peninsula.

US policymakers should avoid linking the North Korea issue to other issues in the US-China bilateral relationship, including the trade war and Taiwan. Such linkage would be ineffective, likely create a host of new problems, and make the fundamental challenge of nuclear weapons in North Korea even more intractable.

The United States should continue to urge China to strictly enforce international sanctions imposed against North Korea until Washington and Beijing—as well as the international community—agree fully on a process for sanctions relief.

Washington and Beijing should discuss, in both bilateral and multilateral contexts, how to prevent a nuclear-armed North Korea—even one that is theoretically denuclearizing—from sparking a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the region. Inadequate consideration of Japan's and South Korea's security concerns, especially in regard to medium-range missiles, could strengthen the

»» Washington should begin bilateral and multilateral conversations with Pyongyang, Seoul, and Beijing, and later with Tokyo and Moscow, on the contours of a peace regime for the Korean Peninsula.

arguments of those in both countries who favor acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

US policymakers should increase efforts to reduce frictions between Japan and South Korea, bearing in mind that some US strategic objectives, such as increasing Japan's regional security role, contribute to these frictions. Widely divergent priorities among US regional allies regarding negotiations on the Korean Peninsula will complicate—even undermine—US strategy and create openings that China could exploit. Disputes between South Korea and Japan that are unrelated to North Korea could also compromise effective coordination.

If relations between Washington and Pyongyang return to heightened tensions but relations between the two Koreas continue to improve, it could create a rift in the Washing-

ton-Seoul alliance that Beijing could exploit. **Washington must strive to remain as supportive as possible of Seoul's approach to building a peace regime on the Peninsula, yet guard against excessive exuberance in the Blue House.** Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul have a common agenda (inter-Korean dialogue and rapprochement) that might compromise US preferences and leverage in the negotiating process.

Washington should also begin bilateral and multilateral conversations with Pyongyang, Seoul, and Beijing, and later with Tokyo and Moscow, on the contours of a peace regime for the Korean Peninsula. Given the many interests at stake, starting the conversation early to establish baseline understandings and work toward a consensus far in advance of formal negotiations will contribute to the sustainability of the final outcome.

If US–North Korea talks remain stalled indefinitely or completely break down, Washington should work with Beijing to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. In that regard, **it is important for China to believe that North Korea, not the United States, is primarily responsible for the impasse.**

China– North Korea Relationship

Beijing and Pyongyang have a complex relationship marked by both cooperation and distrust that stretches back to the early days of both regimes. Since the Korean War, in which the two countries fought alongside each other, Chinese leaders have described their relationship at times as a “blood alliance” and at other times as “normal state-to-state relations.”³ China is North Korea’s largest trading partner and main provider of critical commodities, including food and oil. Tougher sanctions in 2017 and 2018 appeared to reduce trade, but more recently China has come under scrutiny for easing off sanctions enforcement and failing to prevent sanctions violations by Chinese companies.⁴ Although the North Korean regime may resent its level of reliance on China, it has looked to China as a confidant and advisor during its negotiations with the United States since 2018.

Although Beijing has long been North Korea’s primary patron and shielded Pyongyang from outside pressure for its own purposes, relations have rarely been intimate. The relationship hit its lowest point in many decades after Kim Jong Un rose to power in late 2011 and Pyongyang began to engage in increasingly destabilizing behavior. North Korea’s growing number of missile and nuclear tests, some—intentionally or not—coinciding with important Chinese diplomatic occasions, raised Beijing’s ire. The proximity of North Korea’s Punggye-ri nuclear test site to the Chinese border also raised fears of radiation among Chinese citizens, putting regional and central authorities on the defensive.⁵

The Chinese estimation of the Kim Jong Un regime tumbled further as Kim purged top officials—including his uncle Jang Song Thaek, who was known to have managed North Korea’s relations with China—and assassinated his exiled half-brother Kim Jong Nam, who had been living in Macao under Chinese protection. North Korea’s actions prompted unprecedented debate in China’s security policy community and blogosphere about the utility of a close relationship with



People watch news from a meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on March 28, 2018. (Photo by Kim Hong-Ji/Reuters)

North Korea. In 2017, China implied that it would not come to the defense of North Korea if Pyongyang launched a unilateral attack on the United States (but that the possibility was open if the United States or South Korea attacked first).⁶

However, following the news in early 2018 that President Donald Trump would meet with Kim, Beijing and Pyongyang rushed to upgrade their relationship. China's clear intent was to signal that Beijing was not prepared to play a passive role while the United States launched a major diplomatic initiative in China's backyard. This sudden shift was undoubtedly inspired by a calculation on both sides that resetting bilateral relations and coordinating positions before Pyongyang began negotiations with Washington would benefit both China and North Korea. For Pyongyang, a display of coordination with Beijing would show Washington that the United States was not the only game in town. For Beijing, bringing in Kim was a show of China's primacy in North Korea—that nothing could be resolved in North Korea without China's green light.

In 2018, President Xi Jinping and Kim met three times in a hundred days; they met again for a fourth time in January 2019. All four meetings took place in China, underscoring China's position



The train transporting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to Hanoi via China for the summit with US President Donald Trump leaves the station in Dong Dang, Vietnam, on February 26, 2019. (Photo by Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters)

as the dominant partner in the relationship. Reinforcing this dynamic was China's loaning Kim a plane to travel to Singapore to meet with Trump and, more recently, the long train journey through the Chinese hinterland to Hanoi for the second meeting with Trump. Through these meetings, Xi demonstrated that China had not lost its influence over its neighbor and that it would have a hand in shaping developments on the Korean Peninsula. Following the first Trump-Kim meeting, Xi met with Kim and praised the "positive results" of the summit, reaffirming China's support for North Korea "no matter how the international and regional situations change."⁷

Pyongyang will continue to consult with Beijing and seek its support in negotiations with Washington and Seoul, and Beijing will continue its role as confidant and advisor to Pyongyang. As a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stressed following the failed Hanoi summit, China will "continue to make efforts and contributions" to uphold the momentum for dialogue.⁸

Key North Korea Summits



China's Strategic Interests

China will remain determined to shape key developments on the Korean Peninsula. China's core priorities include avoiding war and chaos on its border, working toward the long-term denuclearization of the Peninsula, maintaining a friendly and stable relationship with North Korea, and, ultimately, removing the US troop presence from the southern half of the Peninsula. Although Beijing can use its influence on Pyongyang in constructive ways when it suits its interests, it can also take a back seat or even act as a spoiler when it believes certain actions or policies do not align with its priorities.

No war and no chaos. Chinese officials sum up the country's basic North Korea policy as the three no's: "no war, no chaos, no nuclear weapons." China cannot abide instability on its border with North Korea or tolerate security threats from it; avoiding these contingencies is its top priority for the Peninsula. Threats of potential concern include any military conflict on the Peninsula, sudden collapse of the North Korean regime, an outpouring of refugees, disease outbreak, natural disaster, collapse of the North Korean economy, nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction falling into unreliable hands, and radioactive fallout from a nuclear strike on the Peninsula or North Korean nuclear tests, any of which would be damaging to China's interests. Moreover, as seen in the Chinese negative reaction to the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile system in South Korea, Beijing is acutely sensitive to any use of South Korean territory in ways that affect China's security interests.

Avoiding war on the Peninsula also means avoiding potential unification of North and South Korea under exclusive US influence. Beijing might accept some US influence in a unified Korea, but not if it excluded Chinese influence. As in 1950, China will not tolerate the stationing of US troops north of the 38th parallel.

Denuclearization. As the third pillar of the three no's, elimination of the North Korean nuclear program is an important priority for Beijing, but a longer-term one that takes a back seat to



A man looks through binoculars toward North Korea on the Yalu River Broken Bridge, which connects the North Korean town of Sinuiju with Dandong in Liaoning Province, China. (Photo by Damir Sagolj/Reuters)

immediate concerns about stability on China's border. Beijing's primary concern about Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities is that they function as a salient pretext for outside intervention. North Korea's denuclearization would erode the rationale for a US presence on the Peninsula. Beijing is less concerned that North Korea's nuclear weapons could one day pose a direct threat to itself, though some Chinese analysts warn that nothing would prevent North Korea from targeting China in the future.

Another reason Beijing prefers denuclearization is that the existence of North Korea's nuclear program increases the possibility that South Korea or Japan might one day develop their own nuclear weapons. But, more urgently, China believes that the United States and its allies are using the North Korea nuclear issue to ramp up their individual and collective conventional capabilities in the region that also target China, as demonstrated by China's virulent response to the THAAD placement in South Korea in 2016.

Some observers suggest that, in order to create problems for the United States, China wants North Korea to retain its nuclear weapons, but this assessment fails to take into account the extent of the

»» Communist comradery and historical ties are less important to Xi than a predictable relationship that allows Beijing to maintain influence with the regime in Pyongyang.

security problems the weapons pose for China. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders are reluctant to place massive pressure on North Korea or to take coercive action that might destabilize the region or diminish China's influence over the North Korean regime.

A friendly, stable relationship with North Korea. China seeks a relationship with North Korea that will help it maintain stability on its border and influence events on the Peninsula. China does not view such a relationship as incompatible with support for North Korean denuclearization. To a limited extent, historical and ideological notions that China should have a friendly and fraternal relationship with its communist "younger brother" means that many in the Chinese political system value a friendly relationship with

North Korea. But communist comradery and historical ties are less important to Xi than a predictable relationship that allows Beijing to maintain influence with the regime in Pyongyang.

Further, although the two countries have a treaty of mutual assistance, the status of this treaty remains unclear, and efforts to clarify it in recent years led to a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement stressing that China has normal state-to-state relations with North Korea. As a result, it is unclear how, or whether, China would provide assistance to North Korea in a crisis. China has also indicated that in responding to events in North Korea, it will act in accordance with its own interests. The Chinese state-backed *Global Times* indicated as much in a 2018 editorial that said China would not come to North Korea's aid if Pyongyang launched missiles threatening US soil and suffered retaliation.⁹ If conflict breaks out on the Peninsula, the Chinese military may get involved not to protect the North Korean regime but rather to protect its own interests and to ensure that it has a seat at the negotiating table to shape the Peninsula in the aftermath.

Influence and prestige. China seeks a key role in any peace negotiations with North Korea because it wants influence over how the situation on the Peninsula develops, both for its immediate security interests and as part of its broader geopolitical competition with the United States. By remaining a key player in international negotiations, China will be able to maintain some influence in the process. At the same time, it would like to use the North Korea issue to enhance its own regional and international reputation as a balanced and honest broker that can help solve the most pressing global problems. In particular, Xi sees addressing the denuclearization problem as part of China's growing international responsibility and in line with his foreign policy vision of building a "community of shared future for mankind."¹⁰

The United States and China on the Korean Peninsula

Washington's and Beijing's perspectives on end states for the Korean Peninsula overlap to some extent, which provides a foundation for possible collaboration to help shape denuclearization and peace in the region.

Neither China nor the United States wants the Peninsula to prove a catalyst for violent conflict or a source of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Both hope that it instead functions as an engine of economic growth for Northeast Asia, which would also include industrial Chinese provinces across the border, the Russian Far East, and even Japan. The two sides also seek a Korean Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons, economically open, and led by leaders who maintain good relations with both Beijing and Washington.

In practice, China tolerates the US presence, even if its ultimate desire is to end the US–South Korea alliance. Chinese interlocutors have often posited that if Beijing were confident that the United States would not station substantial US forces or US-centered networked missile systems on the Korean Peninsula, and that Seoul would have generally positive relations with China, it might eventually accept a unified and democratic Peninsula, perhaps even one with a loose preferential security arrangement with the United States. A more sobering assessment is that China will continue to see a US–South Korea alliance as intrinsically anti-China under any circumstances.

Similarly, for China, the role of the United States is a key factor in Korean Peninsula unification calculations. Beijing is not opposed in principle to a unified Korea, as long as it poses no threat to China's security interests (that is, as long as it remains relatively weak, friendly, and responsive to China's interests). China opposes reunification, however, if it does not see a way to get there peacefully, and if a unified Korea might remain closely allied with the United States. China is constrained in openly opposing Korean reunification given the high importance Beijing attaches



South Korean (blue headbands) and US Marines take part in a joint landing operation drill in Pohang, South Korea, on March 12, 2016. (Photo by Kim Hong-Ji/Reuters)

to China’s own reunification of Taiwan with the mainland, and that it does not want to alienate either Seoul or Pyongyang.

US-CHINA RELATIONS AND COORDINATION

The current efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue come against the backdrop of an increasingly antagonistic relationship between Washington and Beijing. The United States has labeled China a “strategic competitor” and the two countries are embroiled in a trade war and a technology rivalry.¹¹ A key challenge for the United States is to keep coordination with China on efforts regarding North Korea separate from discussions on other bilateral issues.

No clear consensus has been established on how bilateral tensions may ultimately affect negotiations with North Korea going forward and whether they should be used to spur progress on denuclearization. One view is that China may aid US efforts if it believed that its cooperation could lead to concessions from Washington on other issues such as trade. Others think that China will act in its interests on North Korea regardless of US preferences and concessions, and that any linkage is weak or nonexistent. But it would be wiser for Washington not to take a transactional approach

when dealing with Beijing and to resist any temptations to link the two issues. US leaders are better off maintaining that China's cooperative efforts on North Korea are not a favor for the United States but are in China's own interests.

Evidence is ample that China understands this message. For instance, despite worsening relations between the two countries in 2017 and 2018, Beijing tightened sanctions enforcement in ways that aligned with Washington's maximum pressure against North Korea. China had historically been reluctant to impose sanctions on North Korean commercial goods, but in 2017 took the unprecedented step of voting at the UN Security Council three times in favor of new sanctions banning a variety of North Korean exports—including coal, iron ore, marine products, and textiles—and placing a significant cap on oil imports.¹² Beijing also significantly curbed its trade with Pyongyang to enforce the sanctions.¹³ This proactive behavior was likely partly motivated by China's frustrations with North Korea's growing provocations, including a missile test that detracted from Xi's signature Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, and the seemingly credible threat of US military action that these provocations elicited.¹⁴ Local concerns also mattered. China worried about radiation contamination and sought the shutdown of the Punggye-ri test site near the Chinese border.

» CHINESE POLITBURO MEMBER LI ZHANSHU:

“Thanks to the efforts of all parties concerned, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has seen a major turnaround this year. China has made its own contribution. We are committed to denuclearization, peace and stability on the Peninsula, as well as a solution through dialogue and consultation, and have made enormous efforts to this end. The positive developments we are seeing now are exactly what China has pursued and hoped for. China supports all-round improvement in inter-Korean relations, and continued dialogues between the DPRK and the US, and encourages the DPRK to continue moving in the right direction toward denuclearization. At the same time, we also believe it is necessary for the US to make timely and positive responses to truly meet the DPRK halfway. An effective settlement of the issue requires complete denuclearization as well as the establishment of a peace mechanism on the Peninsula. Only when both 'wheels' move in tandem can the issue be truly resolved and can peace have a chance.”

Source: Li Zhanshu, “Follow Historical Trend and Uphold World Peace” (speech at the opening dinner of the 8th Beijing Xiangshan Forum, Beijing), Xiangshan Forum, October 24, 2018, www.xiangshanforum.org.cn/mobile/arteight/forumeight/eightjbfy/hhwy/201810/2255.html.

China's Regional Bilateral Relationships

China's actions regarding North Korea will be shaped by its bilateral relationships with key players in the region, including South Korea, Japan, and Russia. Given that China views the Korean Peninsula through both local and regional lenses, it is important to consider how these countries affect China's policies and priorities.

CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

Although public opinion in each country, but especially in South Korea, remains skeptical of the other, China and South Korea have mostly repaired their official ties in the two-and-a-half years since the 2016 deployment of a US THAAD missile defense system in South Korea. Summits between Xi and South Korean President Moon Jae-in focused on North Korea were part of the repair effort. China has applauded Moon's unprecedented initiatives to advance inter-Korean dialogue and broker a détente with North Korea, including inviting the North to participate in the Pyeongchang Olympics, meeting with Kim at Panmunjom, and visiting Pyongyang.¹⁵ Still, the South Korean public remains unassuaged. Their memories of China's overwhelming economic retaliation against South Korea and its business interests will take considerably more time to fade.

Moon's government, which has made a rapid improvement in ties with North Korea the top priority for his administration, believes that China is serious about denuclearizing North Korea in light of concerns about a nuclear proliferation cascade in Northeast Asia, and sees Beijing as important to advancing that effort. However, given China's growing influence in South Korea and increasing strains between the United States and China, Moon sees that calibrating Washington and Beijing is now a daily headache for South Korean policymakers.

Still, recognizing that China remains the most influential power over North Korea, Seoul will always want Beijing to exercise a moderating influence over Pyongyang. At the same time, South Korea



A man cycles past a North Korean soldier in Sinuiju, North Korea, on September 9, 2018, the seventieth anniversary of North Korea's founding. (Photo by Jacky Chen/Reuters)

does not want to involve China in the process any more than necessary, instead viewing inter-Korean negotiations as a national matter to be decided among Koreans, and denuclearization negotiations as primarily between Pyongyang and Washington.

In the past, Beijing saw Seoul's primary contribution as providing economic inducements for Pyongyang once the parties reach agreement. More recently, however, China has not only come to recognize how much Moon has done to drive recent inter-Korean engagement, it now views South Korea as a helpful player and believes that maintaining a good relationship with South Korea is useful. China fears that a more conservative South Korean government succeeding Moon's progressive administration would lose the momentum on engagement. China also looks for opportunities to move Seoul away from Washington and split the alliance, which would advance Beijing's goal of limiting or eliminating the US military footprint on the Korean Peninsula.

CHINA AND JAPAN

The current negotiations with North Korea come at a time of warming bilateral relations between China and Japan, a thaw accelerated by Japan's desire for better coordination with China to

»» While Kim has met with his South Korean, Chinese, and American counterparts, Japan has remained on the outside looking in.

address the increased threat from North Korea. The China-Japan relationship had been deeply strained since 2012, when the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands prompted fierce anti-Japanese protests in China. In October 2018, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe made a visit to Beijing, the first by a Japanese leader in nearly seven years, for a summit with Xi that marked the start of a thaw in the relationship.¹⁶ The summit and improvement in relations was partly driven by Abe’s concerns about US policies on North Korea, including fears that the United States was considering pulling troops out of the Peninsula.¹⁷

The future of the Korean Peninsula is a key political and security issue for Japan, which would like to have a stable relationship with North Korea. Japan’s ideal scenario would include a denuclearized North Korea without medium-range missiles that can reach Japan and with a continued US troop presence in South Korea. This would remove an existential threat for Japan and allow it to focus its military efforts on countering the strategic threat that China poses.

For domestic political reasons, however, Abe’s government must prioritize the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. Japan has long insisted North Korea must investigate and apologize for the abductions before relations can be normalized, and the abductees are one of three hot-button issues that Abe’s government has pledged to resolve before his term ends in 2021. (The others are amending the constitution and ending an island dispute with Russia).¹⁸ For this reason, Japan seeks simultaneous “comprehensive resolution of outstanding issues” in the Japan–North Korea relationship, including the abductee issue, denuclearization, and reduction of the missile threat.¹⁹ Japan is wary of US–North Korea talks moving too fast and isolating Japan, such as by reaching an agreement on removal of US troops or putting pressure on Japan to accept normalization of North Korea–Japan relations before resolution of the abductee issue. With this in mind, Japan is relatively comfortable with the status quo of slow-moving negotiations that maintain reduced US–North Korea tensions and a pause in North Korean nuclear and missile tests.

Japan views China as somewhat helpful to its immediate priorities for the Korean Peninsula, even if China’s interests diverge from Japan’s in the longer term. In the short term, Japan sees China as useful in putting pressure on North Korea by supporting and enforcing sanctions, and for providing Japan with readouts of discussions with Kim regarding the abductee matter and other issues directly related to Japan. In the longer term, Japan views China as seeking control over the Korean Peninsula and the eventual removal of US troops, which would be negative outcomes for Tokyo. Abe has repeatedly expressed his interest in meeting with Kim, who has met with his South Korean, Chinese, and American counterparts. Japan has remained on the outside looking in with few direct channels of communication with North Korea.

China views Japan as having little role to play in talks with North Korea at this stage, but recognizes that if progress is made toward denuclearization, Japan will play a greater role in talks on regional security issues and in providing economic assistance to North Korea. Beijing remains concerned that a lack of progress on North Korean denuclearization would trigger additional Japanese missile defense capabilities and, in the long run, could advance Japan's nuclear ambitions.

CHINA AND RUSSIA

North Korea is a key area of China-Russia coordination on global strategic issues, which bolsters the broader entente between Moscow and Beijing that has emerged under Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.²⁰ Like China's approach to North Korea, Russia's reflects a desire to counter the US system of alliances in Asia. Russia joined China's proposal for a "dual suspension" or "freeze-for-freeze" framework for US–North Korea negotiation, which assumes a relatively long-term approach toward North Korean denuclearization.²¹

Like China, Russia would like to see North Korea denuclearize because Moscow does not want to further dilute the prestige and exclusivity of being a nuclear power. However, Russia balances those preferences against preventing a destructive war on the Peninsula or collapse of North Korea that could result in a unified Peninsula allied with Washington. Russia and China have also been in near lockstep on North Korea matters in the UN Security Council. In addition, Russia's willingness to violate sanctions has at times helped ease economic pressure on North Korea while allowing China to maintain the appearance of closely adhering to UN agreements.²² Russia and China have also hosted North Korean workers, including forced laborers, who are the target of sanctions.

Russia's North Korea policy is shaped by economic interests that align with Chinese interests in boosting trade and connectivity in China's northeast. Moscow wants to build energy pipelines through the Peninsula as part of its larger plans to find new energy markets in Asia and facilitate economic development in the Russian Far East, although plans for such pipelines remain in the very early stages and could face technical hurdles. Another promising prospect is expanding trade links between Russia and the North Korean port of Rajin in the Rason special economic zone near both the Chinese and Russian borders. Lifting sanctions could have a significant benefit for reviving anemic trade levels with North Korea and regional trade and investment overall—a goal that Beijing also supports.

On the negotiations, Moscow is wary of being sidelined in Peninsula diplomacy. Prior to the China–North Korea diplomatic warming in early 2018, Moscow maintained the most robust working-level contacts with Pyongyang of any major power. Since early 2018, however, Beijing has assumed that role. Russia tried to regain its influence with a Putin–Kim summit in April 2019. Going forward, Moscow will still likely defer to Beijing as Pyongyang's main backer in negotiations with Seoul and Washington. Both Russian and Chinese officials want to avoid recreating a Cold War dynamic where North Korea plays them off against each other. In furtherance of that approach, deputy foreign ministers from Russia, China, and North Korea met in Moscow in October 2018 to coordinate their negotiating positions.²³

China's Role in the Road Map

The most practical path forward for US–North Korean talks is in a step-by-step, parallel-track process. This approach would blend the phased and synchronous model that North Korea, China, and Russia prefer with Washington's willingness to discuss peace and denuclearization "simultaneously and in parallel."²⁴ The parallel tracks would include measures progressing toward final, fully verifiable denuclearization and measures to put in place security arrangements that support peace and stable relations.

China can be expected to endorse and support this parallel-track approach, which closely mirrors the dual-track process Beijing has advocated since 2016.²⁵ So far, China has not been directly involved in negotiations on actions to be taken on peace and denuclearization, but it could soon play a more formal role if processes and forums for multiparty talks are put in place to support this road map.

China has long insisted that it must play a significant role in any process that determines the future political and security environment on the Korean Peninsula. Its immediate role may include technical assistance on denuclearization steps, support for an end-of-war declaration, and suggestions for partial sanctions relief. In the longer term, it will have an important role to play in providing security assurances and economic incentives that can underpin a peace regime and changed security dynamic on the Peninsula.

In the denuclearization realm, if and when North Korea begins to take concrete steps toward denuclearization, China will see itself as having a key role in providing technical assistance to support Pyongyang in reducing its nuclear arsenal and dismantling facilities. China will want and should be encouraged to send inspectors to nuclear sites, perhaps alongside those from other countries, and to aid in the transfer of nuclear material out of North Korea's borders. Indeed, as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China should be closely consulted. Before



Trucks cross the Friendship Bridge over the Yalu River from North Korea to Dandong, Liaoning Province, China. (Photo by Natalie Thomas/Reuters)

North Korea takes such steps, however, China's role will be to enforce the UN sanctions imposed in response to North Korea's nuclear program.

On peace and security issues, China will have a central role in peace negotiations and shaping peace mechanisms. The first step in this area will likely include a signed declaration ending the Korean War, in which China will want to participate as one of the belligerents. China has urged the "timely release" of an end-of-war declaration and all indications are that China will want to be party to it.²⁶

Likewise, China has also urged the start of multilateral negotiations on a peace treaty that would put in place new security arrangements on the Peninsula, such as agreements on conventional arms control, border demarcation, normalization of North Korea's foreign relations, and nonaggression pledges. North Korea has made clear from its emphasis on multilateral negotiations that it wants China to be part of this process, and Beijing would expect to be centrally involved. China would likely use any progress toward a peace regime to pressure the United States to reduce its military footprint on the Peninsula.

To support a peace regime in the long term, China can provide security guarantees for North Korea, such as support for North Korea’s conventional forces. This guarantee would likely not include an extension of China’s nuclear umbrella, given that North Korea has indicated it does not want the umbrella (though this might change in the context of denuclearization), and Beijing also seems opposed to providing it. China does not see its role as providing financial assistance as South Korea or Japan might, but rather as providing North Korea access to the benefits of China’s economic strength and the Belt and Road Initiative.

To implement this two-track road map, Beijing and Washington should work toward a coordinated approach. In developing and implementing a road map for a peace regime and denuclearization, Beijing will probably want to move faster than Washington in easing or removing sanctions and would likely interpret North Korean signs of compliance as more significant than Washington might think. Similarly, Beijing will likely call for greater or more significant incentives to reassure and entice Pyongyang to move forward than Washington might accept. This suggests the need for a high level of prior mutual clarity and understanding in defining the range of quid pro quo steps required to reach common goals, and the means used to verify them—and makes a strong argument for a road map for the entire process.

» STATE COUNCILOR AND FOREIGN MINISTER WANG YI:

“This year has seen a major turnaround of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, as the US-DPRK summit in Singapore broke the impasse of the nuclear issue and three DPRK-ROK summits brought a thaw to the inter-Korea relations. The turnaround, which is the result of the concerted efforts of the relevant parties, is what China has been calling for. For decades, China has played an irreplaceable, constructive role in advancing the denuclearization process and safeguarding peace and stability on the Peninsula. Under the new circumstances, we, committed to preserving the hard-won momentum of de-escalation, encourage the North and the South to seize the current opportunity to improve relations, and support the US and the DPRK in working together to kick off the process of settling the issue. After careful thinking, we crafted a fundamental solution to the nuclear issue that can help ensure the long-term stability and security of the Peninsula and address the legitimate concerns of all the parties. This is the dual-track approach that we proposed and encouraged, which seeks to promote synchronized progress of both denuclearizing the Peninsula and establishing a peace mechanism. Only if progress is made on both tracks at the same time, can the issue be fully resolved and there be any hope of lasting peace.”

Source: State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, addressing the opening of the Symposium on the International Situation and China’s Foreign Relations in 2018, December 11, 2018, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1621221.shtml.

China's Role If Talks Stall or Collapse

For much of the year following the Singapore summit in June 2018, US–North Korea negotiations remained at an impasse, primarily over differences in sequencing of denuclearization steps and corresponding measures such as sanctions relief. This largely remains the case given that the second summit at Hanoi ended without a deal, after which North Korea threatened to suspend future negotiations and consider resuming nuclear and missile tests.²⁷

In the absence of progress in negotiations, the United States will need to elicit Beijing's support to use its economic and diplomatic leverage with North Korea to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. Measures China can adopt range from strengthening the enforcement of existing sanctions to imposing more of its own economic pressure, such as blocking North Korean businesses from operating within its borders and further cutting exports of critical commodities such as oil to North Korea. Beijing can also exert diplomatic pressure through the various channels of communication it maintains with Pyongyang. If Beijing is unwilling to resume sanctions pressure, Washington will need to consider the possibility of elevating sanctions enforcement to include secondary sanctions against Chinese entities, particularly larger Chinese banks. Meanwhile, Beijing will push hard for the resumption of US–North Korean dialogue and especially for Washington to offer more concessions to Pyongyang—as opposed to endorsing an approach that includes only pressure from China and the United States.

During 2016 and 2017, China was an effective, if not always enthusiastic, partner in the pressure campaign. For another such campaign, China must see clearly that its interests will be served by using its nonmilitary leverage with Pyongyang to sustain momentum for the diplomatic track, maintain stability, and prevent the chance of military escalation in its neighborhood.

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