When U.S. officials and scholars speak of trilateral cooperation and coordination in Northeast Asia, they are most commonly referencing the dynamic among the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Japan as allies. Though often strained by historical legacy issues between Korea and Japan, the Cold War alignment among the three countries, which is based on the parallel bilateral alliances between Japan and the United States and between the Republic of Korea and the United States, has continued in the form of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), subsequent coordination during the six-party talks process, and more recently in the form of coordinated responses to North Korean actions including the most recent missile launch.

On broader global and regional issues, there is often talk of the necessity of a “trilateral” among the United States, China, and Japan as the three largest economies in the world. This dynamic however, has been more concept than reality and even in concept has focused more on broader global concerns such as climate change than upon more sensitive regional issues. Also worth noting is the nascent trilateral dynamic among China, Japan, and South Korea as manifest in several trilateral leaders’ meetings over the past half-decade.

Of the potential trilateral groupings among the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea, the one that has received the least attention and which has not yet been implemented on any official level has been among the United States, China, and the Republic of Korea. Understandably, the division of the Korean Peninsula and the challenges North Korea poses, which are the most compelling justifications for this particular trilateral grouping, are also the primary obstacles to implementation of meaningful dialogue, let alone effective policy coordination among the United States, China, and the ROK.

Such challenges aside, it is worth considering the possibility that it is this very U.S.-China-ROK dynamic that will be key to peacefully ending the division of the Korean Peninsula and thus opening the door to broader regional coordination and cooperation in Northeast Asia.
Assessing the Current State of Play

Since the normalization of ROK-China relations in 1992, a primary objective of Seoul’s policy toward China has been to secure China’s support for South Korean efforts to both engage with and at times defend against North Korea. As ROK-China trade has dramatically increased over the two decades since normalization (China has been South Korea’s largest trading partner since 2010), South Korean officials were increasingly hopeful that this economic activity would translate into influence related to China’s policy toward the Korean Peninsula. Despite the very real estrangement between Beijing and Pyongyang during the 1990s, there was little that Seoul or Washington could do to engage with Beijing on an issue that was still too sensitive for Chinese officials to broach in a meaningful way. China was largely a bystander during the engagement era that began with the October 1994 conclusion of the Geneva Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea and even resisted participation in the resulting Korean Peninsula Development Organization (KEDO).

However, by the beginning of the last decade, which was marked by the collapse of the Agreed Framework, heightened concerns about the North Korean uranium enrichment program, and ultimately long-range missile launches and nuclear tests by North Korea, China had assumed a much more proactive role both in the Six-Party Talks and in the related web of bilateral talks including frequent diplomatic interactions with both the South Korean head of delegation to the Six-Party Talks and more senior diplomats. By mid-2009 China had signed on to three separate United Nations Security Council resolutions against North Korea, something that would have been unimaginable even ten years prior. By this point, while not trilateral in nature, the positions of China, the ROK, and the United States were more characterized by cooperation than by discord.

Against this backdrop, the events of 2010 were a shock to South Korea. Not only had China apparently decided to be more proactive in backing its erstwhile ally in North Korea, but it actively blocked South Korean and international efforts to hold North Korea accountable for the sinking of the ROK corvette the Cheonan in March of 2010 as well as the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November of the same year — both acts which by any measure would be considered acts of war. In that environment, China even blocked any reference, let alone criticism, in the United Nations of North Korea’s openly revealed uranium enrichment program, a program that was unambiguously in violation of standing UN Security Council resolutions and the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks, all signed on to by China. These developments contributed to a dramatic shift in South Korean views of and expectations toward China, and by the end of 2010 the prospects for any meaningful trilateral efforts also involving the United States seemed further away than ever before.

This shift in South Korea expectations of China in many ways mirrored the shift in expectations taking place in Washington, D.C., during the same period when for many China had gone from being part of the solution as a leader in the Six-Party Talks to part of the problem by reverting to a more traditional position of shielding North Korea from the consequences of its actions. There is a direct correlation between shifting views of and expectations regarding China’s role and the prospects for a meaningful trilateral dialogue among the United States, China, and the Republic of Korea.

Though it is still early to draw any firm conclusions, the uncertainties and tensions surrounding the death of Kim Jong Il, the ascension of his son Kim Jong Un, and the DPRK regime’s unfortunate decision to go forward with a satellite launch (in defiance of prior UNSC sanctions resolutions and the opprobrium from China, the United States, and South Korea) have once again forced Beijing’s hand and thus re-opened the prospects for some type of trilateral coordination. In order to understand the prospects for any future policy shift on the part of Beijing, however, it is first necessary to understand the underlying interests and obstacles that have prevented meaningful trilateral coordination to date.
National Interests and Obstacles to Trilateral Coordination

The most common doubts expressed about the Six-Party Talks process and by extension the prospects for trilateral cooperation among the United States, China, and South Korea are due to divergent national interests and national priorities related to North Korea and the future of the Korean Peninsula. In this narrative, China is seen placing priority on stability and the preservation of North Korea as a buffer state. South Korean priorities are naturally seen as focusing first and foremost on the avoidance of war. And the United States in turn is seen as placing first priority on North Korea's nuclear program, missile program, and proliferation activities, all of which have global ramifications.

While there are clearly differences in degree among the three countries' priorities, it is important not to exaggerate the divide. In truth, all three countries share concerns about instability in North Korea, about the risk of conflict, and about the regional and global implications of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

Prospects for Change in North Korea

For an all-too-brief period following the announcement of the February 29, 2012, agreement between the United States and North Korea, now termed the “leap-day deal,” there appeared to be the prospect for improved relations between the United States and the DPRK and a pathway for returning to the Six-Party Talks. Following North Korea’s April 13 attempt to launch a satellite however, it appears that the potential pathways to conflict on the peninsula have increased while the potential pathways to a diplomatic resolution of longstanding tensions on the peninsula appear to have diminished even further. The United Nations Security Council responded to the failed launch with uncharacteristic speed and issued a presidential statement on April 16, 2012, that builds upon, clarifies, and strengthens a similar statement issued in April 2009 after the last DPRK launch.

Much remains unknown about developments in and the decision-making process in Pyongyang. By all appearances the succession process following the death of Kim Jong Il in late 2011 has gone far more rapidly and smoothly than anticipated. In the course of a few short months, Kim Jong Un appears to have demonstrated a very different public persona than that of his father Kim Jong Il, one that by design is much closer to that of his grandfather, North Korea’s founder Kim Il Sung. Not only has he delivered a lengthy speech in public, something his father never did, but his smiling, glad-handing visage which is now ever present in North Korean propaganda would seem to suggest that he is much more comfortable in his own skin and certainly much more comfortable around people than was his father. While early, these differences have led to some speculation that Kim Jong Un might have more flexibility in determining North Korea’s direction than originally anticipated. Suggestions from DPRK officials before and after the February negotiations with the United States that this was a new era and that they were implementing a “Kim Jong Un strategy,” coupled with the fact that it was the DPRK who re-initiated talks with the United States even before the end of the mourning period for Kim Jong Il, furthered this impression.

These initial impressions may yet prove to be accurate. However, thus far the substance and content of what is emerging from Pyongyang suggests more continuity. In fact, the most persuasive explanation for recent North Korean behavior is that in many respects, Kim Jong II continues to rule from the grave. In other words, in the less than five months since the passing of Kim Jong Il, most of North Korea’s actions are best understood as those of a country on autopilot wherein the safest course of action for individuals and institutions is to be seen to be faithful in carrying out the expressed wishes of their departed Dear Leader. To date the only decision made in Pyongyang that does not appear to have been made in advance of Kim Jong II’s passing is arguably the decision to admit to failure of the attempted satellite launch — something Pyongyang was clearly unprepared for but, having invited scores of foreign journalists into North Korea to observe the launch preparations, was not in a position to deny outright as they had done in the past.
When North Korea announced its satellite launch plans mere weeks after completing negotiations with the United States on the “leap-day deal,” the United States, China, and South Korea did all possible to persuade North Korea to change course. Analysts in all three countries scrambled to explain why North Korea would proceed with such a launch when it would so obviously scuttle the nascent diplomatic progress. Predictably, there were suggestions of a divide between the Korean People’s Army and the DPRK Foreign Ministry, of some grand strategic trap on the part of North Korea’s top leaders to trick the United States into talks and then blame them for their demise, and even suggestions that the neophyte Kim Jong Un believed North Korea’s own propaganda about the distinction between a satellite launch and a missile test — despite that same rationale having been roundly rejected by the United Nations Security Council, including China, in 2009.

In retrospect, many were asking the wrong question. At issue was not why North Korea would attempt another satellite launch. They had already spent hundreds of millions of dollars developing the program and had recently completed work on the new west coast launch facility. To be sure, the plan for the launch in conjunction with the one hundredth birthday of Kim Il Sung as evidence of North Korea’s status as a strong and prosperous nation was already set in stone. The appropriate question is why, knowing that the missile launch was a given, and clearly knowing how the international community was likely to react to such a launch, did the DPRK reach out to U.S. officials so soon after the death of Kim Jong Il to resume negotiations which, had Kim Jong Il not died when he did, would likely have produced the same results on December 21, 2011, rather than on February 29, 2012, just weeks before the satellite launch was to be announced. Here again the most plausible answer is that North Korea was on autopilot. Like the April celebration of Kim Il Sung’s one hundredth birthday, the rush to bestow titles and honors upon Kim Jong Un, the decision to launch a satellite, and possibly the decision to test another nuclear weapon, the decision to engage with the United States — at least partially in response to pressure from China — had been made by Kim Jong Il and in the post-Kim Jong Il era the safest course of action for officials at the Foreign Ministry was to stick to the plan.

It may yet prove true that Kim Jong Un has more flexibility than expected. So far it is difficult to identify a single action or policy direction that can be conclusively linked to a decision by Kim Jong Un. However, even if such a promise of flexibility is borne out, it is likely to be too little too late. As difficult as the challenges that Kim Jong Il handed off to his son already were, he has certainly made them worse posthumously. North Korea’s recent display of vitriol toward the government of South Korea has reached new rhetorical heights (depths) that border on self-parody. China, despite having backed North Korea so strongly during the transition, is put in an extremely difficult position by the satellite launch and will have even less latitude should North Korea go ahead with a nuclear test as appears likely. For the United States, after having gone out on a limb to engage North Korea in a difficult political environment it is almost inconceivable that the Obama Administration would be willing to return to the negotiating table in the foreseeable future. This means that regardless of the internal dynamic taking place in North Korea over the next year or so, much of the region’s response has already been functionally predetermined.

**Likely Domestic Policy and Political Direction of China, South Korea, and the United States**

Any serious effort to assess the prospects for meaningful trilateral coordination among China, the United States, and the ROK in regard to addressing the challenges posed by North Korea must of a necessity begin with an understanding of the likely political trajectories of those three countries. In the short run, all three countries will experience a political transition in the second half of 2012, and this transition has the potential to affect national perspectives on and approaches to dealing with the DPRK.
China

With an anticipated transition within the Party between Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, on the surface China might appear the least likely to change its approach to North Korea. However, several factors make the Chinese transition the most interesting. While it is still playing out in an unprecedentedly public manner, some analysts have argued that the dramatic fall of Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai has the potential to provide more reform-minded forces within China with more leeway in dealing with North Korea.

By any measure, China’s national interests have been greatly damaged by North Korean actions in recent years. China’s role as a global leader been questioned as it both failed to enforce existing UN Security Council sanctions and actively blocked further action in the United Nations. Certainly U.S. perspectives of China as a partner in dealing with North Korea began to shift, particularly after 2010. During most of the Bush administration cooperation on North Korea was held forth as one of the primary benefits of the U.S.-China relationship. Yet by the end of 2010 U.S. officials were openly questioning whether China was not part of the problem. Most pointedly, on December 11, 2010, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that North Korea’s “reckless behavior” had been “enabled by their friends in China.”

In an early January 2011 speech at the State Department, Secretary Clinton drew a similar conclusion, noting that “…China, as a country with unique ties with North Korea and chair of the Six-Party Talks, has a special role to play in helping to shape North Korea’s behavior. We fear and have discussed this in depth with our Chinese friends, that failure to respond clearly to the sinking of a South Korean military vessel might embolden North Korea to continue on a dangerous course. The attack on Yeongpyeong Island that took the lives of civilians soon followed.”

Nor was this just a case of U.S. officials bashing China. Numerous Chinese scholars expressed their discomfort with their nation’s policy toward North Korea, the “blogosphere” was rife with critical comments about Pyongyang, and even diplomats when pushed would admit in private that China’s image and interests suffered during 2010 in particular. Yet through it all, since China’s relationship with North Korea is a relatively unique “Party-to-Party” relationship, there was little indication of a change in China’s approach.

During much of the 2000s China played an important role in the Six-Party Talks in an effort to curb North Korea’s nuclear program. The Chinese leadership arguably maintained a “three no’s” policy toward North Korea — no nukes, no collapse, and no war — and they tried to maintain a balance among the three priorities. As Kim Jong Il’s health deteriorated, however, China began to place ever greater priority on avoiding instability in North Korea at all costs, even if it meant supporting a third-generation hereditary succession that was anathema to Communist ideology and China’s own policy. This decision to be more proactive in backing Kim Jong Il appeared to move into full force in the early fall of 2009, when China backed away from implementing sanctions it had agreed to after North Korea’s second nuclear test a few months before. Even after the sinking of the Cheonan, China opted to double down on its bet on Kim Jong Il and resist attempts to censure or punish North Korea for this act — something that some in the United States considered “enabling behavior” that might have contributed to the North’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010.

While China again blocked any meaningful international response to the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, when President Obama and President Hu Jin Tao met in Washington in January 2011 it did appear that China may have been willing to recalibrate its support for North Korea. While it may seem arcane, there was some cause for optimism in how the issue was framed in the joint statement issued by President Obama and President Hu Jin Tao at the conclusion of their January summit. While there was but a single paragraph’s reference to Korea


in that statement, it contained both a clear reference to the uranium enrichment facility and the broader strategic context:

The United States and China agreed on the critical importance of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula as underscored by the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005 and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. Both sides expressed concern over heightened tensions on the Peninsula triggered by recent developments. The two sides noted their continuing efforts to cooperate closely on matters concerning the Peninsula. The United States and China emphasized the importance of an improvement in North-South relations and agreed that sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue is an essential step. Agreeing on the crucial importance of denuclearization of the Peninsula in order to preserve peace and stability in Northeast Asia, the United States and China reiterated the need for concrete and effective steps to achieve the goal of denuclearization and for full implementation of the other commitments made in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. In this context, the United States and China expressed concern regarding the DPRK’s claimed uranium enrichment program. Both sides oppose all activities inconsistent with the 2005 Joint Statement and relevant international obligations and commitments. The two sides called for the necessary steps that would allow for early resumption of the Six-Party Talks process to address this and other relevant issues.³

Of note, in this short statement, the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks was mentioned three times. Such a reference to an obscure unimplemented agreement of talks that increasingly appeared defunct may seem a bit odd. However, one of the fundamental challenges of dealing with North Korea has been its frequent and continued assertion that it is a nuclear power and must be dealt with as such. When North Korea makes vague references to its support of denuclearization, its definition of denuclearization should be clarified and challenged. The apparent North Korean interpretation is that, as a nuclear power and an equal with the United States and the other nuclear powers in the world, it is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, including the removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and overall global disarmament of other nuclear powers’ positions. This interpretation understandably does not concur with that of the United States, China, any other member of the Six-Party Talks, or ostensibly any other signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) from which North Korea is the only country in history to withdraw. This being the case, a clear reference to the September 19, 2005, joint statement in which North Korea committed to “abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards” helps set a clear definition of what the United States and China now jointly mean when they refer to “denuclearization,” including the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Related to this is the question of the parameter of the Six-Party Talks. With the September 19 joint statement, the Six-Party Talks are now more than format, but also have function and content. Given that in the joint statement “the Six Parties unanimously reaffirmed that the goal of the Six-Party Talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner,” by focusing upon this joint statement the United States and China once again jointly defined the parameters of— and indirectly a core requirement for— the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Also of note, the January 19, 2011, Obama-Hu joint statement also placed U.S. and Chinese “concern regarding the DPRK’s claimed uranium enrichment program” clearly in the context of the September 19, 2005, joint statement.

Despite this agreement, however, Chinese support for the Kim regime intensified over the course of 2011. Some would argue that such support stems from the fact that China’s relationship with North Korea is handled on a Party-to-Party basis rather than by the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. Another possible interpretation is that the dramatic changes in the Middle East manifest in the Arab Spring unnerved the Party leadership in China and made them even less inclined to consider the possibility of instability in their long-standing ally in North Korea. Thus far, however, an apparently stable succession process in North Korea has not brought stability but rather more of the same in terms of North Korea’s attempted satellite launch, threats of an impending nuclear test, and an alarmingly specific and heretofore unseen level of threats toward South Korea. It is in this climate that China appears to once again be recalibrating its position. Without overstating the case, the speed with which China signed on to the April 16, 2012, United Nations Security Council presidential statement condemning the DPRK satellite launch, strengthening sanctions, and warning against future provocations, was remarkable.

A final factor to consider is whether the upcoming political transition in China will have any impact on China’s support of North Korea. Despite the strong Party-to-Party ties, it would seem that the longer-term trend of Chinese public, scholarly, and officials’ views of North Korea are all moving in a negative direction for North Korea. With each successive generational change in China, North Korea becomes more of an anachronism and an albatross for a modern China attempting to play a more active and respected role on the global stage. While largely speculative at this point, there is some suggestion that the recent political turmoil surrounding Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai might have ramifications for China’s policy toward North Korea. If even in a small way this development contributes to a recalibration of China’s approach to North Korea and a more balanced approach to the broader nuclear and security challenges posed by the regime in Pyongyang, it would bode well for U.S.-ROK-China trilateral cooperation.

South Korea

With South Korea facing presidential elections in late 2012 there is also the very real possibility that a progressive candidate will win and that ROK policy toward North Korea will change accordingly. Given the volatility of South Korean politics, where six months is a lifetime, it is difficult to predict what will happen in December. However, given the current disarray in the opposition parties and the unexpectedly strong showing by the recently renamed ruling party (the New Frontier Party), if the election were held to today Assemblywoman Park Geun-hye would be elected as Korea’s first woman president. While there would be some differences between a Lee Myung Bak administration and a Park administration, and some nuanced distinctions have already been made regarding the attitude of a potential Park policy, the policy would likely be marked more by continuity than by change. Furthermore, the North Korean propaganda machine that has heaped such over-the-top vitriol on President Lee Myung Bak for the past several years began to focus its wrath on Park Geun-hye in the weeks leading up to the Korean National Assembly elections this past April. North Korea has clearly written off dealing with the Lee administration in any fashion and, absent a change of course in Pyongyang, it appears unlikely that they would welcome or be capable of dealing with a Park government in a fundamentally different manner.

What then of the prospects for the return of a progressive government and presumably of the prior South Korean engagement policies of the decade before 2008? Though North Korea’s reaction would indicate otherwise (the reaction was more driven by domestic politics and uncertainties in Pyongyang than by any changes in Seoul), the Lee administration’s policy toward North Korea was hardly hardline in any historical context, particularly compared with the prior conservative government of Kim Young Sam. Likewise, even should the political pendulum in South Korea swing once again to the relatively progressive parties in South Korea, it is unlikely that they will return to the North Korea policies of the Kim Dae Jung administration or the Roh Moo Hyun administration. Simply put, there is too much water under the bridge. Following the killing of a South Korean tourist in the Diamond Mountain resort in 2008, the long detention of a South Korean manager in the Gaesong Industrial Park in 2009, the sinking of the Cheonan, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, and most recently the
North Korean missile test, South Korean public opinion toward the North is in a very different place than it was under previous administrations. With a majority of South Koreans remaining opposed even to the provision of humanitarian food aid to North Korea, it is difficult to imagine that an incoming progressive administration in Seoul would be able to return to the relatively unilateral policies of providing large scale assistance to North Korea absent any reciprocity from Pyongyang even if they were so inclined. There is also little evidence that the DPRK is willing or interested in the type of conditional and reciprocal approach that is most likely to characterize even a new progressive government’s policy toward the North.

It is no longer 1998. North Korea’s nuclear tests, missile tests, uranium enrichment program, and of course conventional actions such as the Cheonan and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling cannot be wished away and will be major factors for whichever party or candidate takes over the Blue House in early 2013. One other factor that should be considered is the growing salience in South Korean politics of North Korean human rights and issues related to North Korean defectors. There are now over twenty-three thousand North Korean defectors living in South Korea. In an historic first, Cho Myung Chol, a defector and former professor at Kim Il Sung University, was elected to the National Assembly, along with two other passionate activists focused on human rights in North Korea. Unlike in the recent past, the question of human rights in North Korea is gradually becoming a non-partisan issue in Korea. One example of this trend was the tremendous outpouring of public support for efforts to call on China not to repatriate North Korean defectors arrested in China to North Korea. The vigil in front of the Chinese embassy in Seoul included a hunger strike by a ruling party parliamentarian, visits and endorsements by South Korean actors and other entertainers, and even a visit by Ahn Chul Soo, a potential progressive candidate for the presidency.

Again, it is no longer 1998 nor 2007. Regardless of the results of the presidential elections in December, any effort to craft a trilateral dialogue with China will require dealing with a South Korean body politic that was deeply disappointed by China in 2010 and is increasingly aware of and critical of China’s decision to forcibly return defectors to an uncertain fate in North Korea. A trilateral dialogue also will involve a South Korean government that, while implementing nuanced changes, is unlikely to reverse recent policy toward North Korea.

United States

Since the North Korean launch of a satellite on March 13, 2012, a common narrative in the media has been that, in the face of the upcoming U.S. presidential elections, the Obama administration is unlikely to re-engage with the DPRK. It is true that the Romney campaign has already been criticizing the administration’s approach to North Korea, and after the missile test any new attempt to engage proactively would be fodder for even harsher criticism. However, this narrative misses the underlying structure of the administration’s approach to North Korea, at least since 2010.

During the course of a joint press conference with President Lee Myung Bak at the Blue House in Seoul in November 2010, President Obama was asked about the prospects for the Six-Party Talks. He responded that “…there will be an appropriate time and place to reenter into six-party talks. But we have to see a seriousness of purpose by the North Koreans in order to spend the extraordinary time and energy that’s involved in these talks.” A careful analysis of U.S. meetings with the DPRK in August, October, and December 2011, as well as the February 29 deal itself, makes it clear that recent diplomacy initiatives by the United States were all carefully structured as part of a strategy to probe North Korean intentions. As U.S. officials are quick to point out, the “leap-day deal” was not even a formal agreement, but rather the coordinated announcement of contingent unilateral actions that both sides were willing to implement, depending on the actions of their counterpart.

Regardless of the reason why, and inside-baseball questions of who knew what when regarding the DRPK decision to launch a satellite and thus render the “leap-day deal” stillborn, the end result is the same; at least for the foreseeable future North Korea has failed the “seriousness of purpose” test. It is true that the political team in the White House and the president’s re-election campaign would strongly oppose any attempt to re-engage North Korea before the elections. However, by some accounts the president responded personally and strongly to what was almost certainly viewed as a failure for North Korea to follow through with their side of the deal. Then there is the issue of the credibility of the DPRK negotiating counterparts. U.S. officials have long been skeptical of the relative influence of officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in North Korea, but this most recent episode is likely to have longer-term implications for U.S. strategy if and when there is ever a return to the negotiating table.

In the short run, the direction of U.S. policy is clear. The United States worked closely with its allies, China, and others on the UN Security Council to produce a presidential statement that is notable because of the clarity of its language in proscribing any type of future launch: “[T]his satellite launch, as well as any launch that uses ballistic missile technology, even if characterized as a satellite launch or space launch vehicle, is a serious violation of Security Council resolutions 1718 (2006) and 1874 (2009).” Perhaps more significantly, the statement warns North Korea against further provocation above and beyond the narrow parameters of nuclear and missile tests and “expresses its determination to take action accordingly in the event of a further DPRK launch or nuclear test.”

This toughly worded statement was clearly intended to pressure North Korea not to proceed with its threatened nuclear test, further missile launches, or even aggressive actions toward the South by making it clear that such would require a further response by the Security Council. From a U.S. and South Korean perspective, the statement has the added benefit of pressuring China into steps that it would likely rather not pursue. The fact that China did sign on to this statement so quickly is perhaps an indication that China may be once again recalibrating its approach to its troublesome ally, and as a result there may be more room for U.S.-ROK-China coordination on the issue.

Interim Prioritization of Trilateral Agenda

In the near- to medium term, the focus of any communication or coordination among China, the United States, and the ROK is likely to be reactive in nature. The pace of North Korean provocation will demand as much. The challenge for all three counties is to move beyond mere crisis management and to attempt to shape the trajectory of events on the Peninsula. The first step in this process is resisting efforts by North Korea to prevent trilateral coordination. The homeland of Sun Tzu is certainly aware of the importance of resisting efforts on the part of North Korea to divide and survive…if not conquer.

As mentioned above, the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks and the January 19, 2011, joint statement between President Obama and President Hu defining the parameters and focus of that joint statement are important reference points for U.S.-ROK-trilateral cooperation. Here too the growing body of international law and precedent embodied in three separate UN Security Council sanctions resolutions (1695, 1718, and 1874) and two separate presidential statements (April 2009 and April 2012) form a solid basis for common understanding and common standards for responding to future North Korean provocations.

These, however, remain largely reactive measures. Meaningful trilateral coordination requires a proactive effort to improve the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and to promote needed change in North Korea. Since the United States and its ally South Korea are largely in sync in their approach to North Korea, the challenge is
to identify those areas in which China would like to see a change in U.S. and South Korean tactics and strategies, and likewise to identify those areas in which the United States and the ROK would like to see a change in China’s approach. Possible ideas include:

• Present a unified voice related to future missile tests/satellite launches and nuclear tests by issuing trilateral statements voicing support for the decisions of the UN Security Council.

• Convene a trilateral working group in support of the work of the UN Security Council’s special Sanctions Committee.

• Initiate a trilateral discussion of humanitarian needs in North Korea, particularly food aid with increased transparency in assistance being provided by China. This dialogue should include a discussion of standards for distribution and monitoring as well as possible conditionality of aid on key reforms for a sector that has seen chronic food shortages for over two decades.

• Initiate a trilateral dialogue on appropriate procedures for handling North Korean defectors.

• Initiate a separate trilateral dialogue that would craft a vision for North Korean economic development, its economic integration into the regional economy as well as a specific list of actions that must be taken by North Korea to facilitate meaningful economic engagement.

• Initiate a trilateral contingency planning exercise related to North Korea with a focus on establishing crisis management mechanisms and establishing communication channels and protocols for dealing with issues related to securing weapons of mass destruction, civilian policing/societal stabilization, and humanitarian assistance in the event of instability in North Korea.

Each of these measures is understandably sensitive, yet they are all the heart of meaningful trilateral coordination with regard to North Korea.

The Ideal State of Trilateral Cooperation?

Any serious discussion of an ideal state of trilateral cooperation among the United States, China, and South Korea must of necessity look beyond North Korea, at least in its current configuration.

On August 13, 2010, with support from SAIC and the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the Mansfield Foundation convened a meeting in Whitefish, Montana, in an effort to further refine a previously drafted notional “ideal” security state for Northeast Asia in the year 2025. While this ideal was geographically focused upon Northeast Asia, the discussion incorporated the role and interests of the United States and broader international factors that impact upon the region. A core group of participants from Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, Russia, and the United States identified the following nine characteristics as representative of an ideal security state for Northeast Asia in 2025:6

• In the context of regional harmony, all countries are satisfied that their national interests are being respected and that effective mechanisms exist to address common security and other interests.

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• Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been eliminated. In particular, the North Korea issue is no longer a source of contention or instability and the Korean Peninsula as a whole participates in regional cooperation and economic development.

• Northeast Asia has developed an effective framework or institutional mechanisms for addressing and managing security concerns, including territorial issues.

• Northeast Asia as a region upholds common and mutually accepted international rules, norms, and standards. The security of the region is enhanced by respect for democratic governance, social and economic justice, and human rights.

• Economic interaction in the region is characterized by open trade and investment, lower barriers to cooperation and development, and integration within the broader regional and global economies.

• Bilateral relationships in the region are characterized by cooperation and complement regional relationships.

• All countries in the region strongly support international efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and work collaboratively in pursuit of that goal. The region is characterized by the low salience of nuclear weapons, the absence of nuclear competition, and the successful development of civil nuclear energy infrastructures that do not create proliferation risks.

• The region plays a leading role in addressing long-term issues such as energy security, climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion.

• Governments and civil society in Northeast Asia collectively address non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, pandemics, demographic change, and natural disasters.

A quick review of each of these nine points raises an interesting question. Each and every point above is equally applicable to a longer-term vision for U.S.-China-ROK trilateral relations. What then is unique about this trilateral grouping that might justify a separate effort excluding Russia and Japan? When dealing with the relatively immediate task of dealing with North Korea one might argue that Japan’s particular focus on the issue of abductees hobbles its ability to participate proactively in engaging North Korea, although that same factor makes it much easier for Japan to play a leading role in coordinating international pressure on North Korea. Likewise, there are questions about Russia’s relative capacity to contribute when the question is strictly limited to Korean Peninsula issues. However, if the agenda for U.S.-China-ROK relations is expanded beyond the Peninsula, perhaps the most appropriate ideal is for this trilateral relationship to be subsumed into a broader regional mechanism or grouping.