The Korean Peninsula is becoming very dynamic. After the death of Kim Jong Il, the new leader, Kim Jong Un, is focusing on consolidating his power. Right after his inauguration, he resumed the third U.S.-DPRK denuclearization talks that had been temporarily halted upon Kim Jong Il’s death. During the talks, both parties agreed that North Korea would stop its uranium enrichment program (UEP) and the United States would provide food to North Korea. However, North Korea launched its satellite on Kim Il Sung’s one hundredth birthday. This launch disrupted and undermined all the endeavors of surrounding countries to persuade the North dismantle its nuclear program, thus the hope for the resumption of the six-party process has been dormant.

After the satellite launch, U.S. policy became more hawkish, with officials arguing that the satellite launch of the North is violation of the third nuclear deal between the North and the United States. The United States brought this issue to the UN Security Council. But the Obama government is again trying to bring the North to a dialogue. In light of the coming presidential election in the United States and a power transition in China, both countries are now focusing on how to manage the Korean Peninsula situation.

Against this background more needs are emerging for trilateral cooperation among the ROK, the United States, and China. The three parties have some commonalities but more differences in their North Korea policies. This essay attempts to elucidate the current state of the Korean Peninsula, each country’s North Korea policy, and ways in which to encourage trilateral cooperation.

### Current State of North Korea

**Kim Jong Un’s Current Priority Lies in His Power Consolidation**

Currently Kim Jong Un’s succession system seems to be properly operated. For about the next year, he will need to focus on consolidating his power. This requires Jong Un that he show that North Korea is a strong and prosperous nation, at least in the political and military senses.
For example, he achieved the positions of the Party secretary and chairman of the Defense Commission. The recent satellite launch was also for the purpose of domestic power consolidation. But his current task is to show the economic robustness of North Korea. A strong and prosperous nation has three elements: political strength, military strength, and economic strength. The first two elements are now in place. Whether Kim Jong Un will take measures to strengthen the country economically is still unclear. That is, Kim Jong Un’s priority is his power consolidation, which means that he would still focus on political and military aspects. He would continuously rely on his father’s dying wishes, which would be centered on nuclear program development. This situation would make the regime not focus on economic reform measures.

North Korea’s External Strategy Could Be Two-Fold for the Purpose of Consolidating the Kim Jong Un Regime’s Power: Resumption of Military Provocations and Negotiation

- Kim Jong Un’s current strategy would be two-fold in order to consolidate his power: military provocation and dialogue. He would use these two strategies simultaneously. Even though his domestic focus lies in power consolidation, his foreign policy is still alive. Based upon this two-track policy, his regime attempts to achieve both: power consolidation and maximizing his deal with the United States. For now, his dependence upon military provocations would not cross any red lines, which would jeopardize North Korea’s relationship with China.

- But the possibility of a nuclear test remains. Three reasons exist. First, North Korea would want to wait for next year’s power transition in South Korea and the United States. Until then, he might want to improve his bargaining position so that he could get more from negotiation. So this year he may engage in frequent provocative behavior.

Second, North Korea has been developing nuclear weapons for more than twenty years, and its ultimate goal is to become a nuclear power. This status could guarantee North Korea the ultimate security and a better position to deal with the United States. The deal could be a disarmament process which could be more complicated and more major. To be a nuclear state is North Korea’s goal and would serve to make the country invincible.

Third, the new leader doesn’t want to be swayed by China. During the Kim Jong Il regime, China pushed hard to bring North Korea under its control, but Kim Jong Il did not listen to China. Based upon Juche ideology, North Korea endlessly developed its nuclear weapons. Even after the first nuclear test, when China pushed and criticized North Korea hard, it leaned towards the United States and had a secret meeting which resulted in the February 13, 2007, agreement between the two nations. So, the new leader Kim Jong Un would continue to test the North’s nuclear weapons as a way of resisting China’s efforts to tame him.

U.S., Chinese, and South Korean DPRK Policies

U.S. North Korea Policy

The Obama administration’s North Korea policy has fluctuated. As a presidential candidate, Obama mentioned the possibility of a dialogue with the North but after he began his term, his main focus was domestic economic recovery. North Korea was eager to talk with the United States, in expectations that Obama would be different from Bush. With no clear signs for a talk with the North, Kim Jong Il launched a satellite, fired missiles, and tested the DPRK’s nuclear weapons. Kim Jong Il had a health problem in 2008, after which he was very eager to establish his son’s power base. He tried hard and worked fast to reach some kind of a deal with the United States, which would help to solidify his son’s hold on power.
However, these provocative actions by the North caused the United States to become more hawkish in its policy toward North Korea. A “strategic patience” emerged after Special Representative Bosworth visited Pyongyang and discovered the North’s development of HEU-based nuclear program. Ever since then, U.S. policy toward North Korea has been based on sanctions and no dialogue. But 2010 changed U.S. policy. After the Cheonan ship and Yeonpyong Island provocations, many in the United States began calling for a change in the U.S. North Korea policy. Two reasons supported this. First, as North Korea continues to undertake military provocations and tensions continue to mount, can the United States tolerate this instability in the Korean Peninsula? Second, how can the United States reach its goal of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula without talking with the North?

The U.S.-China summit meeting in January 2011 focused on stability on the Korean Peninsula. At the summit, the United States emphasized peace and stability on the Peninsula, sincere and constructive North-South dialogue, and a denuclearized Peninsula. It also restated its call for the early resumption of the six-party process. After that, the dialogue was very smooth. The United States and North Korea had a dialogue throughout 2011 and the six-party talks seemed very near. But the demise of Kim Jong Il changed everything.

U.S. policy toward North Korea after Kim Jong Il’s death did not change much. It actually reinforced American emphasis on stability on the Peninsula. Official statements by the United States implied that the United States acknowledged the new North Korea regime, which signifies that it still considers stability important. In this vein, the United States agreed with North Korea on a provision of food aid in exchange for an interim halt to North Korea’s UEP. The satellite launch by North Korea automatically broke Pyongyang’s agreement with the United States. This changed the Obama administration’s North Korea policy; there followed various sanctions measures, and the administration became more hawkish.

As witnessed, there are many obstacles in the U.S. policy toward North Korea. Currently, President Obama is having difficulty reconfiguring the administration’s North Korea policy. The United States knows that it does not want to repeat the past negotiation pattern with the North, but because of his reelection focus, Obama cannot be immersed in the North Korean issue. For the United States, an important obstacle is China. China always has been a partner to the North, and even in the post-Cold War period, the two countries’ relationship cannot easily be transformed. This underscores the need for greater trilateral cooperation in a more efficient approach towards North Korea.

**Chinese Policy toward North Korea**

China’s North Korea policy focuses on stability and maintenance of the status quo. China’s North Korea policy consists of three no’s: no war, no chaos, and no nuclear. The reason why no-nuclear is the third priority is that China knows North Korea’s dismantlement of its nuclear program is not possible in the short term. This comes from China’s experience after the North Korea’s first nuclear test. After the North’s nuclear test in 2006, China’s response was very active and it criticized North Korea with sanctions. It actively participated in the UN Security Council resolution in partnership with the United States. China tried to change its position from arbitrator to a more active player in North Korea issues. But the result was weakened leverage over North Korea. The United States and North Korea had a secret negotiation in Geneva. The United States lifted its sanctions on North Korea, softened its relationship with the North, ultimately resulting in the February 13, 2007, agreement. China changed its policy towards the North to a more ambiguous posture, and it began to divide its North Korea policy into North Korean nuclear issues and North Korean problem itself.

In 2009, after North Korea’s second nuclear test, China’s changed North Korea policy became evident. It actively participated in the UNSC resolution 1874, but it did not emphasize nuclear issues vis-à-vis North Korea issues. Also, after the first nuclear test, it took more than one year to restore China-North Korea relations, but after the
second nuclear test this took only four months. This signifies that China began to recognize Kim Jong Il’s decision and began to soften its response to North Korea in order not to lose its influence on the North.

Today, China’s North Korea policy still depends upon the three-no’s policy. In order to achieve these policy objectives, China now gives top priority to the stability of the Kim Jong Un regime, tries to induce economic reform in North Korea, and attempts to continue nuclear negotiations with North Korea.

But after the North’s satellite launch of North Korea, China expressed concerns and worries officially to North Korea. Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun expressed concerns and worries officially to North Korean ambassador to China Ji Jae Ryong. Some speculate that China could reduce its economic aid to North Korea if it conducts a third nuclear test, but this is only a current possibility.

**South Korean toward North Korea**

South Korean North Korea policy under Lee Myung Bak began with emphasizing both denuclearization and economic aid: Denuclearization-Economic Reform 3000, which means that in exchange for North Korean denuclearization South Korea will assist North Korea in achieving a per capita GNP of $3000 within ten years. This initial North Korea policy was a balanced approach, but the pursuit of these two simultaneous goals has been thwarted by North Korea’s military provocations. These provocations froze the North-South relationship in 2010. The provocations included the 2009 death of South Korean tourist in Kumkang mountain, the missile launch and second nuclear test in 2009, and the Cheonan and Yeonpyong Island provocations in 2010.

As the North Korean crisis becomes worse, President Lee Myung Bak proposed a grand bargain initiative in June 2009. This means that the South needs to break the cycle of negotiations and breakdown of negotiations. In order accomplish this, there should be a macro-level exchange of complete dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear weapons for the provision of security guarantees and large-scale economic aid to the North by the international community.

In 2009 and 2010, President Lee Myung Bak proposed the National Unification Plan which aims to achieve unification through a peace community, economic community, and national community. But 2009 – 2010 provocations froze the North-South relationship and were followed by the South’s imposition of economic sanctions on the North on May 24, 2010.

After the 2011 U.S.-China summit meeting, South Korea tried to use this as an opportunity to improve the North-South relationship. There has been a series of North-South denuclearization dialogues, along with the U.S.-North Korea dialogues. But after Kim Jong Il’s death and the North’s satellite launch, relations deteriorated.

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**Issues of Trilateral Coordination**

**Dismantlement of North Korea’s Nuclear Program**

Current U.S. policy toward the North Korean nuclear program demands complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID). This is a common policy regardless of which party is in the White House. Mitt Romney has said that the United States needs more sanctions against the North Korean regime. He mentioned that there should be strengthened IAEA inspections, and the death of Kim Jong II should be used as a chance to change the North Korean regime. Compared to this, Obama’s North Korea policy is two-track, considering both sanctions and dialogue to possible. But if he is reelected, his policy is expected to be tougher in his second term. The
U.S. CVID policy will be tougher now that the North has been discovered developing a uranium enrichment program and long-range missiles, which would threaten the U.S. mainland.

South Korean policy is tougher than U.S. policy. Seoul clearly supports CVID, and it argues that there should be dismantlement of nuclear program first, followed by the U.S.-North Korea relationship normalization and a Korean Peninsula peace treaty. In reality, South Korea is the one standing right next to North Korea, feeling most threatened by the North. In 2010 South Korean public opinion signaled the possibility of reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or development of South Korea’s own nuclear program. In a 2006 public opinion poll, 67 percent answered that South Korea needs to have its own nuclear program. In 2005, before North Korea’s first nuclear test, 66.5 percent answered that they support development of a native nuclear program.

China officially supports North Korean denuclearization, but not as assertively as the United States and the ROK. North Korean denuclearization is the third priority among China’s three no’s. China considers that denuclearization would not be achievable in the short term, for several reasons. First, China has experienced that Kim Jong Il did not listen to Chinese objections to the North’s possession of nuclear weapons. Second, China recognizes that at present North Korea has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons. This won’t be possible until Korea is unified. Third, China’s pressures on North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons had unfavorable consequences for China. After the first nuclear test of the North, China reacted harshly, but the North leaned toward the U.S. and struck a secret deal. China’s efforts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons have all resulted in a weakening of Chinese influence on the North. After the second nuclear test, Chinese policy toward the North changed. It did not push hard because it did not want to lose more influence with the North.

But some within China maintained that China should treat the North harshly. Since Kim Jong Il’s death, China is trying to tame the new leader so that achieve stability of the Korean Peninsula could be achieved more easily. After the satellite launch, Chinese communicated its reaction through official channels, which was not the case before. If a third nuclear test takes place, according to Chu Shu Long at Chinghwa University, China could reduce its economic aid to the North. There are two reasons. First, as Chinese global interests become more important, China should be aware of its reputation in the international community. It recognizes a need to change its policy toward the North. Second, as witnessed in the 2010 provocations in the Korean Peninsula, China is using the Peninsula case as a test of its policy vis-à-vis the United States. In areas such as the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea, China needs to be very cautious because those areas are core interests of China. The Korean Peninsula case is very sensitive but it is not among China’s core interests, so this is the area where China can test its U.S. policy. But 2010 showed that China’s assertiveness toward the United States did not work very well. It brought about severe damage to its national interests. After that, the two countries held the summit meeting, which was a rebalancing juncture in their relationship. Throughout the 2010 experience, China tried to avoid conflict with the United States and maintaining stability in North Korea is a key point for this purpose.

**Peace Regime Building**

The ROK and the United States argue that the North should join the six-party process and if some progress can be made in denuclearization, then there can be discussion of moving from the armistice to a peace treaty. In contrast, the North argues that it possesses nuclear weapons because it feels threatened by the United States, thus there should first be a peace treaty that guarantees confidence building with the United States. This would ultimately make denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula possible.

China places more importance on peace than on the nuclear issue. Peace on the Korean Peninsula is not only a matter of denuclearization but entails more complex elements. China supports a peace regime, which would enable North Korea’s denuclearization. That is, the Chinese position is that a peace treaty would broadly enable peace, which includes denuclearization, so there should not be preconditions before talking about a peace treaty.
All of these debates were finalized in the September 19, 2005, joint statement from the six-party talks. It says that the six parties agreed to work together for enduring peace and stability. In due time, relevant parties should have a separate forum within the six-party process to discuss a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. But it is still not clear exactly when they will discuss this issue.

Inducing Economic Reform in North Korea

The United States has provided economic aid to North Korea, but nothing has been done to induce North Korea economic openness. In accordance with KEDO, President George W. Bush proposed several programs to support economic cooperation with North Korea, but no action has been taken on these proposals.

South Korea’s economic policy was most active under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments. The Lee Myung Bak government’s policy to induce North Korea’s economic reform has not been successful, because of Kim Jong Il’s nuclear development and anti-economic-reform policies.

The current ROK government supports Chinese-style economic reform policies as a model for North Korea, but it has not been successful in acting on this support because of the Cheonan and Yeonpyong Island provocations.

Chinese economic policy toward North Korea is based upon the principle of the central government’s initiative and support and market-system-based business activities. In November 2009, China officially announced cross-border development between North Korea and China: the Changchun-Jilin-Tumen program aims to use the East Sea and stabilize the North Korean regime. This plan was announced after Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang following North Korea’s second nuclear test in 2009.

Before the satellite launch, the three countries seemed to agree on the importance of North Korean economic reform as a way to stabilize Kim Jong Un regime. But after the satellite launch, these commonalities no longer exist.

How to Coordinate Trilaterally?

Strategic Mindset Is Needed

Among South Korea, China, and the United States, there still remains a Cold War based mindset. The trilateral meeting also showed that discussions have been divided into China vs. U.S.-ROK. There should be new strategic mindsets that could broadly encompass our interests into one. The three countries should get together and think about what are the three parties’ strategic interests and objectives, which could come out as an unofficial roadmap.

ROK’s Role Is Important

In trilateral cooperation, China’s position is not comfortable, given its long-time relationship with North Korea. Especially on issues like the North’s contingency plan, China cannot express any indication of cooperation with the international community. Trilateral meetings are still necessary, and ROK should take a mediating role in them. These can be closed-door meetings.

Separation of the North Korea Problem from Nuclear Issues

In order to address broader issues like North-South cooperation and unification issues, there should be a divided approach, with the North’s nuclear issue being treated separately from the North-South cooperation issue. In 2011, a series of dialogues began on the Peninsula after the U.S.-China summit meeting. The North-South dialogue had been brought to a standstill by the North’s 2010 military provocations. At that time, the two countries,
on the advice of the United States began to divide the dialogue between denuclearization and other military issues, which created an efficient process for the dialogue.

This divided approach should be applied to the trilateral meeting. As we take on the North’s denuclearization issue, simultaneously we have to open the dialogue for the cooperative measures which ultimately could bring about economic reform in the North.

_Broaden the Agenda_

The trilateral dialogue always has been focused on the nuclear issue of North Korea. The peace regime issue has also taken a backseat to the nuclear issue. We should broaden the North Korea agenda, which could give more leeway for a diverse bargain and discussions.