The Chinese Perspective on U.S.-China-ROK Trilateral Coordination on the Korean Peninsula

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China occupies a central position in addressing many of the challenges associated with North Korea. Politically, China shields North Korea from international pressure and crippling sanctions for its nuclear program and military provocations. Economically, the food, energy, and financial aid provided by China anchor the life-lines of Pyongyang’s survival. Despite the repeated claims by Beijing denying it has determining influence over Pyongyang’s decision making, people widely speculate that what China actually lacks is not the capacity, but the will, to exercise such influence.

These positions of Beijing have for a long time frustrated Washington and Seoul, who are increasingly vocal about how China’s policy damages its own interests. In their view, China’s policy on North Korea is illogical and self-defeating: it enables North Korea’s bad behavior, undermines international norms and non-proliferation regime, tarnishes China’s international image, and poses serious threats to its neighbors and regional stability. Most importantly, China’s policy is counterproductive with regard to its own security interests because it strains China’s relationships with South Korea, Japan, and the United States and contributes to the strengthening of U.S. military alliances in the region.

In their search for a mechanism to engage China and bring Beijing into a more meaningful dialogue about North Korea, the United States and South Korea have raised the possibility of a U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination mechanism on the Korean Peninsula. This essay seeks to analyze China’s calculations about such a coordination mechanism and, more broadly, its perception of the future of the Korean Peninsula.

China’s Perception of U.S.-China-ROK Trilateral Coordination

Although China never openly rejects the idea of U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination on the Korean Peninsula, its enthusiasm to participate is tepid. Neither does China regard this mechanism as the key to the resolution of the North Korea issue. Such reluctance is not unprecedented. As early as 2009, when the deteriorating health of Kim Jong-il created major uncertainty about the stability of North Korea, the United States and South Korea
had attempted to engage China in a conversation about North Korea contingency plans. However, over the years, China has consistently rejected such attempts.¹

Several factors contribute to China's reluctance to participate in a trilateral coordination mechanism on North Korea nuclear issues or on contingency planning. Most notably, China does not wish to be seen as associated with dialogues or mechanisms about the Korean Peninsula that exclude North Korea. Such an arrangement inevitably creates the impression that China is working with other powers to decide the fate of North Korea behind Pyongyang's back. China believes that North Korea is an intrinsic and indispensable participant in the resolution of any issue related to the future of the Korean Peninsula, and there are few things, if any, that the United States, China, and South Korea could jointly decide and resolve without Pyongyang's cooperation. In addition, since conclusions or actions exclusively reached among the United States, China, and South Korea about North Korea's politics, security, foreign policy, or economy would constitute “interference in North Korean internal affairs,” China sees them as counter-productive by further alienating and antagonizing Pyongyang.

Contrary to what Washington and Seoul have assumed, China has to give priority to Pyongyang's perception of a U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination mechanism about the Korean Peninsula and how it may affect the Sino-DPRK relationship. North Korea already has suspicions about China's intentions and is on the alert for a scenario in which China sells North Korea out for the sake of an enhanced Sino-U.S. relationship.² In 2006, when China cooperated with the international community to punish North Korea harshly after its first nuclear test, the result was what Beijing sees as a “disastrous deterioration” of Sino-North Korean bilateral relations and a major fear in China that a desperate North Korea “might just risk anything.”³ Therefore, if China does participate in a coordination mechanism that excludes North Korea, it will have major difficulties in explaining its actions to a suspicious Pyongyang.

Proposals for a secret dialogue among the three parties would be instantly dismissed. After Wikileaks revealed embarrassing comments on North Korea by senior Chinese officials,⁴ China lost much confidence in Washington's ability to keep any secret. What makes things worse is that in Beijing's eyes, even if Washington could keep a secret, it may choose not to. If there were to be a secret trilateral dialogue, there is no guarantee that Washington or Seoul would not “accidentally” leak information to the media and sell China out to undercut Sino-DPRK ties. Seen from Beijing's eyes, such a possibility cannot be ruled out if the United States and the ROK see that tactic as beneficial to their interests.

China's objection to trilateral coordination also stems from its preference for the existing mechanism. Since the Six Party Talks (SPT) already serve as the primary coordination and negotiation platform on the North Korea nuclear issue, Beijing sees no need to set up a new mechanism to replace it. The fact that the SPT have failed in denuclearization and have been suspended only strengthen Beijing's opposition to a trilateral mechanism: if even the most inclusive dialogue could not produce a solution, a discussion among limited participants without the most critical country — North Korea — will certainly fail. Although the SPT have been stalled since 2009, for Beijing, this means that countries should be working on bridging differences for an early resumption, rather than abandoning the SPT altogether and establishing new mechanisms.

Beijing's attachment to the Six Party Talks lies in China's central role and the “balanced” structure of the mechanism. As the host and chair of the SPT, China occupies an advantaged position in setting the agenda and

³  Interview, Beijing, September 2009.
deciding the pace and shape of the negotiations. The structure of the SPT makes it possible for China to coordinate and align its positions with like-minded North Korea and Russia, maintain a de facto balance against the U.S.-ROK-Japan triangle to ensure that China will not be outnumbered or outmaneuvered. A trilateral coordination mechanism offers no such benefits. Indeed, as viewed from Beijing, the setting of the proposed trilateral coordination mechanism is naturally China-hostile — China will be the odd man out even before any talks start.

Some Chinese analysts agree that, arguably, a potential trilateral coordination mechanism could have a different agenda than the SPT, which focuses only on the nuclear issue. For example, in the near term, trilateral coordination could focus on aid, refugees, economic reforms, or North Korea's military provocations, which are all pressing issues that require multilateral coordination. In the longer term, trilateral coordination could address the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, which U.S. analysts increasingly believe will be driven and dominated by the South.5

The problem with this design, as the Chinese see it, is that the nuclear issue already precludes any cooperation by Washington and Seoul on economic cooperation or aid as they refuse to “reward” North Korea's bad behavior — a view most recently reinforced through the aborted Leap Day agreement after the April 2012 North Korea satellite/missile launch. Therefore, China expects that any trilateral coordination on economic issues would not be about how to enhance economic cooperation or improve aid to North Korea, but about how to dissuade China from doing so.6

Similarly, the nuclear issue also precludes discussion about reunification unless the North Korean regime collapses or changes. In Beijing’s view, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under current circumstances will have to be based on a chain of necessary conditions:

- Reunification will be based on a normalized, country-to-country relationship between Pyongyang and Seoul, which is contingent on the diplomatic normalization between North Korea and the United States.

- Diplomatic normalization between Pyongyang and Washington is impossible until the successful resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue.

- The successful resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue is contingent on Pyongyang’s changing its threat perception and perceived vulnerability through economic reform, political reform, and/or an improved external environment.

Therefore, for China, unless North Korea either collapses or becomes more secure, bypassing the nuclear issue, diplomatic normalization, and economics and jumping directly to the reunification issue is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. Since a nuclear dialogue already exists (SPT) and there is little consensus between the United States and South Korea one side and China on the other on diplomatic normalization and the economics, there is truly little the three parties could coordinate on.

Hence, the only issue left for potential U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination would be about North Korean conventional military provocations such as the Cheonan incident and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in 2010. The risk is indeed high for China, as such provocations currently stand as the most plausible catalyst for a military conflict between Pyongyang and Seoul and, in turn, raising the possibility of direct involvement and conflict between the United States and China. However, China's current approach to crisis prevention is to deal bilaterally with North Korea to block such a disastrous scenario, rather than to work with the United States or South Korea on how to respond to it.

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5 Interview with U.S. experts on North Korea, Washington, D.C., June 2012.
6 Interview with Chinese academics, Washington, D.C., June 2012.
The widely accepted assumption in the policy community about China’s policy toward North Korea is that China has three goals on North Korea: stability (no implosion and no war), peace (the diplomatic normalization between the United States and North Korea), and denuclearization and nonproliferation. Among these three goals, China prioritizes stability over peace and denuclearization. The secondary status of denuclearization on Beijing’s agenda is a particular sore spot for Washington and Seoul, who see this as the most important goal. In recent years (especially since the North Korean provocations in 2010), North Korea’s behavior has been the most destabilizing factor on the Korean Peninsula, which consequently undermines China’s top priority of stability. In contrast, a unified Korean Peninsula, driven and dominated by South Korea, would almost certainly be much more stable and economically prosperous. Therefore, the logical conclusion people draw based on China’s own priority is that China should stop “enabling” North Korean bad behavior and embrace collaboration with the United States and South Korea.

However, since China’s policy is contrary to this common wisdom, the argument must have missed other overarching considerations for China. Indeed, as U.S. policy and regional dynamics in the Asia Pacific evolve, the mainstream analysis of China’s priorities has begun to miss a more fundamental strategic aspect in China’s assessment of its security environment and the North Korea issue. That is, Beijing is increasingly anxious and concerned about the strategic intention of the United States with regard to China and the China-related dimensions of its military alliances in East Asia. Senior Chinese officials have openly stated that the United States is China’s greatest national security threat. Such distrust is deeply embedded in the history of U.S.-China relations and in Beijing’s perception that the United States is trying to keep China divided, instigate ethnic unrest and revolution inside China, and encircle and contain China’s growth and influence on the world stage.

Several developments have contributed to China’s deepening distrust of U.S. strategic intentions under the Obama administration. Since 2010, President Obama has renewed arms sales to Taiwan, openly met with the Dalai Lama, strengthened security ties with a number of neighboring nations that have territorial disputes with China (India, Vietnam, Japan, and ROK), and enhanced joint military exercises with them within China’s periphery. Beijing sees all these moves as open provocations and challenges to China’s national interests. The recently announced U.S. pivot to Asia has further intensified such anxiety. For China, the pivot, including but not limited to the “meddling” in the South China Sea disputes and the increasing military deployments in the Asia Pacific, are simply specific steps to counter China’s rise and confront China on maritime disputes.

In China’s view, the U.S.-ROK alliance is an intrinsic element of this strategy (with or without the North Korea problem). For most Chinese, the United States and the ROK have, in the past, consistently cited the North Korean threat to justify the existence and strengthening of their military alliance, leading to an impression in China that the alliance will lose its raison d’être after the North Korea issue is resolved. However, in recent years, the United States and the ROK have worked vigorously in seeking to build the alliance beyond its traditional North Korea focus and to “regionalize” and “globalize.” In China’s view, as early as 2009, even before the North Korean provocations in 2010, Washington and Seoul had pledged to develop the alliance’s vision for future defense cooperation. Since then, the two sides have only accelerated steps to transform the alliance from defending against a North Korean attack to a regional and even global partnership. They also announced the Strategic Alliance 2015, a plan to relocate U.S. troops on the Peninsula and boost ROK defense capabilities.

8 Yuan Peng, “China’s Window of Strategic Opportunities Has Not Closed” [in Mandarin], People’s Daily, July 30, 2012.
For China, such developments certainly ring a warning bell. Seen from Beijing, there is no indication from either Washington or Seoul that their future alliance would not target or affect China. For many Chinese analysts, given Seoul's historical distrust of China and America’s hostile intentions, China may very possibly be the new justification and aim of the U.S.-ROK military alliance. To them, if North Korea, not China, is the ultimate target of the United States and the ROK, they should have pursued a more China-friendly approach to gain China's cooperation. The fact that they refuse to do so only proves that China, not North Korea, is the eventual target of their military alliance.10

Hence, China’s logic on North Korea policy is rather clear: Beijing sees no reason to help the United States and the ROK solve the North Korea problem or facilitate a China-hostile resolution, since China itself is the “next on the list.” As long as Beijing sees the United States and South Korea and their military alliance as China-hostile, the most rational policy China would pursue is to prop up North Korea. It is not only a military buffer between China and the U.S.-ROK military alliance, but also a security threat that preoccupies Washington's diplomatic resources and diverts its attention, and useful policy leverage against the United States and South Korea.

Many Chinese analysts, in particular, see Seoul's ambiguity in addressing China's concerns as unfortunate. In their view, Seoul is sidestepping China's concerns to maximize its own policy flexibility, play the United States and China against each other to improve its own returns, and act as a middle-power balancer between the two. Therefore, when South Koreans openly criticize China's North Korea policy, Chinese experts often respond with the official party line while thinking to themselves, “You cannot have your cake and eat it too.”

**China’s Perception of Developments in North Korea**

In addition to fundamentally distrusting the United States and South Korea about their strategic intentions toward China, China does not share their views about the roots of the North Korea problem either. Although China agrees that North Korea's nuclear weapons program is illegitimate, it does see legitimate reasons for its nuclear ambitions. In Beijing's view, North Korea's nuclear aspirations originate from a profound sense of insecurity and vulnerability in a hostile environment (the absence of diplomatic normalization with the United States, the prosperity of South Korea in contrast to the poverty of North Korea, the military alliance between the United States and South Korea, and so on) Therefore, in China’s view, any attempt to denuclearize North Korea or reunify the Peninsula will have to start with addressing Pyongyang's sense of insecurity. Resorting to pressure, sanctions, even the threat of force will only achieve the opposite result. In this sense, a secret trilateral dialogue among the United States, China, and ROK would only add to the suspicion and vulnerability of North Korea, therefore making things worse.

While China understands North Korea's rationale and props up the regime out of its own national interests, North Korea, as a provocateur, costs China dearly — financially, politically, and in terms of security. The numerous debates within the Chinese policy community on what it should do about North Korea are a powerful demonstration of how serious the issue has become and how uncomfortable China is. However, when China puts the issue in the broader context of U.S.-China relations and regional dynamics, North Korea does not stand out as the most serious or most fundamental challenge to China’s national security and strategic interests. The current policy is problematic, but the alternative seems worse. That is why China chooses to muddle through on North Korea while hoping that economic reform will eventually bring change to North Korea, following China’s model.

Indeed, after the heightened tensions in 2010 and the unexpected death of Kim Jong-il in late 2011, China’s priority on North Korea has undergone a significant shift, from managing tensions after the conventional provocations...
and trying to resume the Six Party Talks to monitoring the power consolidation of Kim Jong-un and promoting
economic reforms inside the North.

Despite rampant speculation in the West about the imminent instability, or even collapse, of the Kim Jong-un
regime, China never publicly questioned the capability of the young leader.\(^{11}\) In 2010, Chinese leaders openly
endorsed the succession plan on multiple high-level occasions\(^ {12}\) The primary consideration is not necessarily that
China prefers a hereditary succession system. In fact, some Chinese analysts have expressed strong opposition
to the family rule in North Korea and condemned Beijing’s endorsement.\(^ {13}\) However, in addition to adhering to
its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, China does see Kim Jong-un as the
candidate most likely to maintain the internal stability of North Korea given the ground Kim Jong-il had paved
for him. Therefore, the joint condolence letter issued by the four supreme institutions in China\(^ {14}\) after the death
of Kim Jong-il, unequivocally conveyed Beijing’s support for Kim Jong-un:

We believe that the people of the DPRK will definitely carry on at the behest of Comrade
Kim Jong Il, closely unite around the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), turn their grief into
strength under the leadership of comrade Kim Jong Un, and make unremitting efforts for
the construction of a strong socialist country and the realization of sustainable peace and
stability on the Korean Peninsula.”\(^ {15}\)

China sees the regime transition in North Korea as a precious window of opportunity for the economic reform
that China has long been lobbying for.\(^ {16}\) Since the succession, China has observed promising signs of potential
policy reform in Pyongyang. According to the government mouthpiece Global Times, “The economic change
of North Korea is gradual. But no matter [whether] it is Pyongyang or special economic zones, pre-planned
changes are taking place.”\(^ {17}\)

Since the beginning of 2012, China’s enthusiasm for and encouragement of economic reform in North Korea
have replaced the nuclear issues and the Six Party Talks as the top reoccurring theme on Chinese media about
North Korea. Both the extensive coverage of economic reform and the high expectations it conveys are unprec-
edented. For example, the most emphasized area is the sizable study delegations that North Korea is dispatching
to China to study China’s experience of reform and opening up:

\(^ {11}\) Some Chinese analysts had privately expressed doubts about Kim Jong-un’s experience and ability to rule, and most believed
that Kim Jong-il had paved the way for him by reinforcing a group of close relatives and confidantes.

\(^ {12}\) These occasions include the visit on October 9 – 10, 2010, by Politburo Standing Committee Member Zhou Yongkang to
Pyongyang for the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Korean Workers Party; the October 23-26, 2010 trip by Vice Chairman of
the Central Military Commission Guo Boxiong to the North to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of China’s Volunteer
Army’s joining the Korean War; Xi Jinping’s October 8, 2010, attendance at the North Korean embassy in Beijing’s anniver-
sary meeting of the Workers Party; and a series of high-level Chinese visits to Pyongyang. International Crisis Group, “China
and the Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea, ” January 27, 2011, 8.

\(^ {13}\) Zhou Huilai, “North Korea’s Three-Generation’s Rule Damages China’s International Image” [in Mandarin], LianHeZaoBao,
October 25, 2010.

\(^ {14}\) These are the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress,
the State Council, and the Central Military Commission.

\(^ {15}\) Xinhua News, “Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party Sends Condolences on Kim Jong Il’s Death” [in Mandarin],

\(^ {16}\) Views expressed by Chinese participants at the IFPA’s conference, “Rowing Together.”

\(^ {17}\) Cheng Gang and Zhou Zhiran, “North Korean Economic Changes Quietly Take Place” [in Mandarin], Global Times, March
19, 2012.
In January 2012 North Korea sent one thousand technocrats to China to study reform and economic liberalization — ostensibly to implement similar policies in North Korea to reduce the economic difficulties. 18

North Korea sent twenty management officials from the special economic zones (SEZs) of Hwanggumpyong and Weihua Islands to Dalian Executive College for twenty days of studies, from March 29 to April 18, 2012 19

From May to July 2012, at the invitation of Chinese Ministry of Commerce, twenty trade officials and scholars from North Korea received training in Tianjin to study how to operate and manage SEZs and how to attract foreign direct investment. 20 After one month of theoretical studies, they also toured Chinese SEZs, including Shanghai-Pudong and Shenzhen for on-the-ground experience.

In the first half of 2012, North Korea dispatched a group of women to Huaxi village to study “capitalist hotel management.” 21 Huaxi village has been the most prominent model of success of China’s economic reform in rural areas.

At the same time, China has been quite enthusiastic about the opening up of human exchanges that allow outside information and knowledge to flow into the long-isolated North Korea. Kim Jung-un’s “open-mindedness” about foreign culture is also emphasized and welcomed in China when Disney icons including Mickey Mouse appeared for the first time on official artistic performances and the government removed prohibitions on women’s capitalist dressing. 22 Examples of increased exchanges between China and North Korea include these:

- In June 2012, Chinese official media cited a South Korean report that before 2013, North Korea will send 120,000 industrial workers to work in China. 23
- In July 2012, North Korea sent six economics professors to the University of British Columbia in Canada to study capitalist economies. 24
- It is currently reported that the Pyongyang Science and Technology University has hired fifty professors from Europe, the United States, and Australia to teach economics, including finance, investment, insurance, stock markets, and trade in English. 25

Besides signs of North Korea’s embracing Chinese-style economic reform and economic know-how of the outside world, China sees the North Korean regime adopting measures within the system, even at the top level, to promote a reform agenda. Most strikingly, the removal of the reportedly anti-reform army chief, Ri Yong ho, in early July 2012 is believed to be Kim Jong-un’s move to take over the economy from the military, clearing internal

18 Li Junze, “Twenty North Korean Officials and Scholars Came to China to Learn Reform and Opening Up with China Covering All Expenses” [in Mandarin], DuShiKuaiBao, July 8, 2012.
20 Li Junze.
21 “South Korean Media: North Korea Sent Officials to Study Huaxi Village, Signaling Reform” [in Mandarin], CanKaoXiaoXi, July 21, 2012.
24 “South Korean Media Says North Korea Sent Six Professors to Canada to Study Market Economy” [in Mandarin], Global Times website, July 20, 2012.
25 “Japanese Media: North Korea University Hires Foreign Professors to Teach Economics” [in Mandarin], CanKaoXiaoXi, July 21, 2012.
obstacles to economic reform. 26 Immediately after the surprise personnel reshuffle, North Korea announced plans to reform the agricultural sector by contracting with each household for an output quota to boost the labor morale and productivity. 27 Contracting output quotas to households is of special historical and emotional significance to China as one of the first most important agricultural reform measures China adopted in early 1980’s. As of today, it still marks a fundamental economic principle in rural China. 28 Pyongyang’s adopting this practice is viewed as a solid, undeniable step towards an economic reform modeled after China, 29 and a wise, strategic choice to start with the agricultural sector. According to Lv Chao, the director of the North and South Koreas Studies Center at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences, “Agricultural reforms carry the least risk. It won’t cause major damage, is safe, fast and effective.”

China acknowledges that the success of North Korea’s economic reform is by no means guaranteed. As long as the “military first” national strategy remains unchanged and the military dominates the regime’s decision making, the future of economic reform in North Korea is uncertain. However, China overcame similar difficulties in the early days of reform and certainly does not believe that North Korea’s economic reform is destined to fail. Kim Jong-un’s willingness to reform is a perfect opportunity for China — indeed, it is viewed as a rare opportunity after decades of rejection of reforms.

Under the circumstances, China’s hopes for North Korea lie in the success of gradual economic reform that will boost the regime’s confidence and legitimacy, enhance its interactions, exchanges, and interdependence with the outside world and eventually bring about changes to its perception of its security environment. The resolution of issues such as denuclearization and reunification of the Korean Peninsula will be most likely under a legitimate, confident, and viable North Korean government and least detrimental to China’s national interests (certainly compared with the regime change envisioned by Washington and Seoul). To boost this formula, senior Chinese analysts are calling for the international community to “use substantial aid to encourage North Korea to enhance the scope of the market economy to overturn the stagnation of its economy… and help it to achieve long-term stability.”

Looking Ahead

In brief, trilateral cooperation among the United States, the ROK, and China seems unrealistic. As long as China remains suspicious and hostile towards U.S. strategic intentions in the region and the China-related utility of the U.S.-ROK alliance, China does not see the need to help the United States and South Korea in pressuring North Korea. However, given the current policies in the United States and the ROK, pressuring North Korea is what Washington and Seoul will most likely ask China to do at such a trilateral meeting. China has its own logic and plan to manage the North Korea situation, a plan anchored on prospects for gradual and successful economic reform of North Korea.

28 The arrangement of fixing output quotas on a household basis acknowledges private ownership after handing in the contractual amount, and this opened up a way for farmers who are not pestered by the tradition of equal division according to population to form private properties. Deng Zhenglai, China’s Economy: Rural Reform and Agricultural Development, (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2009), 383.
29 Interview, Washington D.C., July 2012.
30 Jiang Wei.
31 Lai Hairong, senior researcher, and Sun Zhaopeng, researcher, Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, “North Korean Economy and Prospect for Reform” [in Mandarin], Caixin, April 27, 2012.
To dissuade China of its logic will be extremely difficult. It will require serious and reliable reassurances by the United States and South Korea that the continuation of their alliance would not come at China's expense. This could be strategically unwise and politically impossible. Given the amount of distrust China harbors, it may not even work. However, without addressing the strategic elements of Beijing’s concerns, lobbying China for a policy change on North Korea most likely will fail.

China might change its calculation if North Korea launches new provocations and drags the region into a military conflict. China may not be willing to step into a direct conflict with the United States, hence will seek to manage tensions through other channels. However, as evidenced by Beijing’s response to the two nuclear tests and the 2010 provocations, China’s tolerance for North Korea could go quite far. Indeed, people often wonder what China will not tolerate from North Korea.

Therefore, any plan to work with China on the future of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula will have to begin with a serious discussion about the future security arrangement between the United States and South Korea, and China's deep concern, anxiety, and suspicion toward them. To begin with, the United States and the ROK will need to clarify the scale, deployment, and scope of work for their future alliance and what really constitutes its “regionalization” and “globalization.” If necessary, they could provide details for different scenarios, such as a reunification based on North-South negotiation, a reunification by assimilating the North into the South, or the status quo. More importantly, the United States and the ROK will have to discuss what their future alliance intends to cover with regard to China, including key issues such as Taiwan and territorial disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

For China to be part of a trilateral dialogue, the United States and South Korea will have to at least be open-minded about economic reform inside North Korea and the changes that will be possible, even though gradual. China would welcome discussions on how the outside world might achieve goals other than denuclearization by facilitating economic changes inside North Korea. This requires Washington and Seoul to consider whether they would be willing to set aside the dead-end denuclearization issue temporarily and instead focus on changes, or at least give China and North Korea the opportunity to try. They could of course stick to the existing policy and try to coerce China into changing its policy (and fail). However, for Beijing, anything short of these two conditions won’t be worthy of its consideration.