Rowing Together
Developing Parallel Paths to Stability, Denuclearization,
and a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula

A Compendium Workshop Report
Edited by Weston S. Konishi
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The past two years have witnessed significant political change at both ends of the Korean Peninsula. In Pyongyang, the North Korean regime successfully transferred power from the deceased Kim Jong-il to his young son, Kim Jong-un, while in Seoul, South Korean President Park Geun-hye took over the Blue House from former President Lee Myung-bak. Both leadership changes offered some prospect of a policy shift that might fundamentally affect the ongoing nuclear crisis on the Peninsula. Yet despite these top-level changes, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula appears as intractable as ever, perhaps even worsening as the North engaged in a period of heightened rhetorical threats followed by a third nuclear test in February 2013.

The international community has responded to these developments with increased indignation and international sanctions, but to little effect. In particular, three countries that arguably have the most direct influence on the Korean Peninsula—the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), and China—have at times diverged in their treatment of the regime. Indeed, the lack of a coordinated approach among these three countries, one that focuses on managing near-term nuclear and deterrence
challenges as well as developing a shared vision for the future of the Peninsula, presents a major impediment to achieving peace and stability on the Peninsula over the near to long term.

Perhaps the most striking example of this divergence among Washington, Beijing, and Seoul came in the wake of North Korea’s deadly provocations in 2010—most prominently the sinking of the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan in March 2010 and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November of that year, but also the regime’s disclosure of a uranium enrichment program (UEP), new light-water reactor facilities, and an advanced ballistic missile test site close to the Chinese border. The United States and South Korea responded to these developments with a series of joint military exercises and a renewed push for sanctions against the regime. China, on the other hand, refrained from openly criticizing Pyongyang for its role in the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, adding to the strain already evident in Beijing’s ties with Seoul and Washington.

What has become clear over the past several years is that the divergence among the three powers largely reflects a difference in their priorities in relation to the North Korean problem. While the United States and the ROK have emphasized the importance of denuclearizing the Peninsula, China has for the most part emphasized stability within the North Korean regime in order to preserve a buffer from perceived allied encroachment along its border. Only in recent months has Beijing signaled an increased concern over North Korea’s nuclear development, although it remains an open question whether China has made a strategic decision to prioritize denuclearization over its traditional concerns for stability. Even as the stakes have become higher, the main players have sometimes moved in opposite directions, further frustrating attempts to reach a solution to the nuclear crisis with North Korea.

Given the growing salience of the U.S.-ROK-China dynamic in managing the North Korean crisis, the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (IFPA) dedicated increased attention to the trilateral relationship in the final phase of its Peace Regime Building for a Nuclear Weapon-Free Korea project, a three-year (2009 to 2011) Track 1.5 dialogue that was one of a series of bilateral and multilateral dialogue projects on denuclearizing North Korea undertaken with major funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In particular, the last two workshops for the project included
high-level representatives from all three nations, yielding important U.S.-ROK-China dialogue on common approaches toward confidence building, denuclearization, and regional security mechanisms, perhaps leading to a possible peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

It was plainly apparent from the feedback provided by participants in the Peace Regime Building project workshops, as well as from regional strategic developments, that the U.S.-ROK-China dynamic merited much greater attention and discussion than it had received so far. The fact that, as one Chinese workshop participant noted in an earlier phase of the project, these three countries may “all be in the same boat” regarding the North Korean crisis provides little solace when they often appear in reality to be “rowing in different directions.” The implications of these divergent paths toward regional and global stability, at a time of continued North Korean brinkmanship and nuclear development, is ominous, to say the least—hence the need for a more focused set of trilateral exchanges.

In response to this problem, IFP A, again with generous support from the Carnegie Corporation, launched a major new initiative in 2012 to focus greater attention on the U.S.-ROK-China triangle as the key dynamic in helping to shape a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula. The ultimate goal was to explore potential ways to harmonize and/or better coordinate shared interests and priorities among the three nations with respect to the Korean Peninsula, including on issues related to stability, denuclearization, and an eventual peace structure. Further, an underlying, yet critical, objective of the project was to encourage greater debate among the Chinese participants regarding Beijing’s overall approach to reining in, as opposed to largely tolerating, Pyongyang’s nuclear development.

The project involved two plenary trilateral dialogues of top-level experts and practitioners drawn from all three countries. The first workshop was held in Beijing in April 2012, followed by a second meeting on Jeju Island, South Korea, in June 2013. As suggested above, while the U.S.-ROK-China triangular grouping is widely recognized as a critical component for achieving peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, it is a
relatively unheard-of format for Track 2-type dialogues, a fact that made the organizing of both workshops an especially welcome initiative. That said, it bears mentioning as well that this particular grouping of U.S., Chinese, and South Korean representatives was in no way meant to imply a diminished role for Japan, Russia, and other key regional actors in seeking to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Rather, it was designed to highlight how important the triangular U.S.-ROK-China dialogue had become, and why it should assume a more central position in the broader international community’s efforts to find a viable solution to the ongoing nuclear crisis on the Peninsula.

In order to supplement the workshop discussions, IFPA commissioned three workshop papers (one by a representative of each nation) for each plenary meeting. These papers, written by six leading experts in the field, comprise the bulk of this publication. The authors include Dr. Kim Hyunwook, professor and director-general of the Department of American Studies at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy’s Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS); Ms. Yun Sun, independent consultant and the rapporteur of the Beijing workshop; Mr. L. Gordon Flake, executive director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation; Dr. Ren Xiao, professor and director of the Center for the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy at Fudan University; Dr. Kim Heungkyu, professor of political science and diplomacy at the Sungshin Women's University; and Mr. Scott Snyder, senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. We hope that this compendium of their excellent papers serves as a valuable resource for scholars and practitioners to better understand the complex dynamics of trilateral security cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, where the obstacles to and opportunities for that cooperation lie, and how that triangular dynamic is evolving as events on the Peninsula continue to affect the regional security environment.

The papers also illustrate how fluid developments on the Korean Peninsula have been over the past two years, in turn coloring and shaping the workshop discussions. During the April 2012 meeting in Beijing, for in-
stance, participants were particularly concerned with the still-unfolding leadership transition in North Korea, from the recently deceased Kim Jong-il to his young son, Kim Jong-un. Although the actual handover of power had already taken place by late 2011, questions remained about the ability of the young new leader to consolidate his power within the regime and what that might mean for Pyongyang’s foreign policy. As Kim Hyun-wook analyzes in his Beijing conference paper, “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 that he show that North Korea is a strong and prosperous nation, at least in the political and military senses.”

What was nonetheless clear, even by the time of the April 2012 workshop in Beijing, was that an anticipated paradigm shift in North Korean behavior, which some speculated might accompany the change of leadership in Pyongyang, had failed to materialize. The regime, in fact, was acting much as it had in the past, with provocations and threats to the international community still very much a part of its statecraft. Indeed, another development that overshadowed the Beijing dialogue was the demise of the so-called Leap Day agreement reached between U.S. and North Korean officials on February 29, 2012.

The proposed agreement, the first potential breakthrough in diplomatic talks between the Obama administration and the new regime in Pyongyang, was ostensibly aimed at achieving a moratorium on North Korea’s nuclear and long-range missile tests in exchange for substantial food aid from the United States—something of a departure from the recent U.S. policy of “delinking” food aid from nuclear negotiations. But Pyongyang’s decision to launch a “satellite test” on April 13 scuttled the deal, as the United States accused North Korea of violating the spirit of the Leap Day deal as well as UN Security Council resolutions against such tests. Equally discouragingly, the test dashed hopes that the Kim Jong-un regime would seek to start off on a more positive footing with the international community instead of reverting to the regime’s old habits of nuclear brinkmanship.

With the breakdown of the Leap Day agreement, workshop participants at the Beijing meeting pondered the prospects of a third North Korean nuclear test taking place sometime in the near future. U.S. and South Korean participants generally agreed that the North would conduct such
a test in the relatively near future. As one U.S. expert put it, the North Korean regime is on “autopilot” so would likely carry on Kim Jong-il’s fixation with nuclear weapons development. Most Chinese participants, on the other hand, generally downplayed the possibility of such a test, implying that that would be a step too far for the new leader in Pyongyang. Still, Chinese participants admitted that a third nuclear test would have serious implications for regional stability, and claimed that Beijing would pursue “all channels” to dissuade the regime from moving forward with such a provocative act.

The question of how much influence China really has over the North Korean regime is a hotly debated one, but U.S. and South Korean participants at the 2012 Beijing workshop expressed their frustration with Beijing for turning a blind eye to—and in some cases “enabling”—North Korea’s more egregious recent behavior. Clearly, for these participants, the bitter aftermath of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island incidents—and China’s subsequent shielding of North Korea from UN Security Council sanctions—remained important points of contention. One South Korean expert asserted that China would not get the respect it wants from the international community if Beijing continues to “protect” the North as it has done in the past. Other participants accused China of being dismissive of the North’s nuclear development.

However, Chinese participants countered that Beijing is seriously concerned about North Korea’s nuclear program and, through such efforts as the six-party talks, is committed to achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Reinforcing these claims, Chinese participants predicted that Beijing would react harshly in response to a third nuclear test, including cutting off “essential” oil supplies to the North. But most Chinese participants seemed to suggest that the underlying cause of the nuclear crisis lay with Pyongyang’s fundamental anxieties about a perceived threat from the United States as well as from hardliners in Seoul.

Thus, perhaps not surprisingly, all three parties represented at the Beijing meeting demonstrated major differences of opinion over both the root causes as well as the best policy responses to the ongoing nuclear crisis with
North Korea. These differences, in turn, shaped how participants viewed prospects for enhanced cooperation and coordination among the United States, China, and South Korea over peninsular affairs. As Mr. L. Gordon Flake writes in his conference paper, “Understandably, the division of the Korean Peninsula and the challenges North Korea poses, which are the most compelling justifications for this particular trilateral group, are also the primary obstacles to implementation of meaningful dialogue, let alone effective policy coordination among the United States, China, and the ROK.” Yet, as Mr. Flake continues, “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.”

It is with that goal in mind that the workshop organizers challenged participants and, in particular, the conference-paper writers, to think “outside the box” about the prospects for developing greater U.S.-China-ROK cooperation on peninsular affairs over the near to long term. Participants were further encouraged to focus on realistic and pragmatic avenues for trilateral cooperation, rather than those that might be considered overly idealistic and beyond any reasonable chance of being implemented.

In his chapter, Dr. Kim Hyun-wook outlines several prerequisites for greater trilateral coordination and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. These include:

- A strategic mindset that supersedes the familiar divisions between China on the one hand and the United States and South Korea on the other. Dr. Kim argues that the three countries should engage in a comprehensive dialogue to identify common strategic interests and objectives, which could then be used as a roadmap for further cooperation.
- The recognition by China of South Korea’s critical role in the trilateral dialogue process.
- A separation of nuclear issues from broader peninsular affairs, such as unification issues and other crises that might erupt. In this vein,
denuclearization talks could be held simultaneously with dialogue about economic development and other cooperative measures aimed at the North.

- A broader agenda for trilateral dialogue that includes not only the nuclear problem but a full range of issues, including discussion of a possible peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Mr. Flake, in his chapter, outlines several specific steps that the United States, China, and South Korea could take to enhance trilateral cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. He writes, “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.” Among some of the specific ideas for enhanced trilateral cooperation that Mr. Flake suggests are:

- Coordinate a more “unified voice” among the three parties, particularly under the auspices of the UN Security Council, in response to future North Korean provocations.

- Launch a trilateral dialogue on humanitarian aid to North Korea, including how that aid should be conditioned upon reform in key sectors of the regime.

- Initiate trilateral contingency planning exercises to establish crisis management mechanisms and communications channels and protocols for a range of potential problems in the wake of any potential instability in North Korea.

While these proposals certainly highlight concrete areas for enhanced trilateral cooperation on the Peninsula, Chinese participants at the workshop were less sanguine about such ideas—and even about the prospects for trilateral cooperation per se. For many Chinese experts at the Beijing meeting, trilateral cooperation on the Peninsula, including contingency planning in any kind of post-regime scenario, is a highly sensitive proposition.

As Ms. Sun Yun writes in her chapter, “Although China never openly rejects the idea of U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination on the Korean Peninsula, Chinese participants at the workshop were less sanguine about such ideas—and even about the prospects for trilateral cooperation per se. For many Chinese experts at the Beijing meeting, trilateral cooperation on the Peninsula, including contingency planning in any kind of post-regime scenario, is a highly sensitive proposition. As Ms. Sun Yun writes in her chapter, “Although China never openly rejects the idea of U.S.-China-ROK trilateral coordination on the Korean Peninsula, Chinese participants at the workshop were less sanguine about such ideas—and even about the prospects for trilateral cooperation per se. For many Chinese experts at the Beijing meeting, trilateral cooperation on the Peninsula, including contingency planning in any kind of post-regime scenario, is a highly sensitive proposition.”
Peninsula, its enthusiasm to participate is tepid. Neither does China regard this mechanism as the key to the resolution of the North Korea issue.” She adds, “Several factors contribute to China’s reluctance to participate in a trilateral coordination mechanism on North Korea nuclear issues or 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...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.”

Further, Ms. Sun argues that Beijing remains deeply suspicious of U.S. strategic intentions in the region, particularly those that have any direct impact on China. “As long as Beijing sees the United States and South Korea and their military alliance as China-hostile,” she writes, “the most rational policy China would pursue is to prop up North Korea.” Not only is this the underlying rationale for “propping up” the regime, but also, presumably, for Beijing’s reluctance to impose punitive sanctions whenever Pyongyang engages in provocative behavior. For China, the benefits of using North Korea as a buffer against perceived U.S. strategic encroachment outweigh the strategic liability that the regime poses to China’s security interests.

Yet at the second workshop meeting, on Jeju Island in June 2013, it appeared that Chinese perceptions of the North Korean problem had evolved in the year between the two meetings. Indeed, events on the Korean Peninsula—most notably, Pyongyang’s third nuclear test in February 2013—once again not only animated the workshop discussions, but may also have served as a catalyst for more open debate within Chinese intellectual and policy circles about the wisdom of Beijing’s policy toward North Korea. As Dr. Ren Xiao writes in his chapter here, “The North’s provocative missile test-firings and the third nuclear test in February 2013 greatly disappointed Beijing and highlighted the limits of China’s influ-
ence on Pyongyang. The developments forced Beijing to rethink whether its DPRK policy worked.”

The emergence of an open debate in China over North Korea policy is a striking development for a country that has often been opaque about its deliberations of such matters. But where do the fault lines in this debate fall? Dr. Ren outlines three prevailing schools of thought among policy analysts in China regarding North Korea policy. The first school of thought, according to Dr. Ren, includes those who believe China should “abandon” North Korea. “The ‘abandonment’ school,” Dr. Ren writes, “basically meant that, after so many disappointments, China now had to use pressure to rein in Pyongyang and not to allow it to hurt China’s security interests.” The second school of thought, according to Dr. Ren, includes those who think abandonment of North Korea is “naïve and extreme,” and instead want to maintain China’s current policy of using North Korea as a de facto buffer against U.S. strategic encroachment. Finally, the third school of thought adheres to the notion that Beijing should make policy adjustments based on North Korea’s actions, rather than maintaining close ties with Pyongyang for ideological reasons. Dr. Ren writes, “China should decide to upgrade or downgrade the level of this relationship [with North Korea] according to actual needs, and this has to be clear-cut rather than ambiguous or muddled.”

A consensus opinion has yet to emerge in China about how North Korea should ultimately be perceived.

The emergence of these competing schools of thought is an encouraging sign that Beijing may be in the process of reconsidering its approach to the North Korean problem. And this, in turn, perhaps allowed for a more open exchange of ideas about the prospects for trilateral cooperation during the course of the workshop meeting on Jeju Island. Yet, as Dr. Ren points out, a consensus opinion has yet to emerge in China about how North Korea should ultimately be perceived. He writes, “At the end of the day, is North Korea an asset or liability? This continues to pose a fundamental question for Beijing.” It seems likely that until some consensus is reached at the upper echelons of the Chinese leadership that North Korea is in fact a strategic liability, Beijing’s basic approach toward Pyongyang will remain largely unchanged. As one American expert on China stated during workshop
discussions, “Frankly, at this point, though we see Beijing more willing to apply pressure than ever before—and to apply it more openly—I do not believe China has crossed the line where it is truly willing to risk North Korean stability for the sake of pressing on denuclearization.”

That is not to say, however, that China’s policy is entirely static. Indeed, in the wake of North Korea’s third nuclear test in February 2013, Beijing arguably went further than at any point in recent years to condemn Pyongyang for its provocative actions. As Mr. Scott Snyder notes in his chapter, China went along with the United States and other UN Security Council members to issue resolution 2094, strongly condemning North Korea’s ballistic missile test (this was preceded earlier in the year by a similar resolution condemning the regime for its ballistic missile test on December 12, 2012). Beijing also decided to take unilateral steps to sanction the regime by banning trade with North Korea’s Foreign Trade Bank.

And at the Sunnylands summit with President Barack Obama, President Xi Jinping stated that North Korea’s nuclear development was “unacceptable,” thus, as Mr. Snyder writes, “aligning China’s policy priority on denuclearization with the positions of the United States and South Korea.”

Even though this alignment of priorities may only be rhetorical, it does at least portend a more favorable climate for engaging in dialogue on trilateral cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. This dynamic is further augmented by improved bilateral relations among the three nations concerned. Indeed, another set of developments that colored discussions at the Jeju Island workshop was the recently concluded Obama-Xi summit at the Sunnylands resort in California as well as the summit between President Xi and ROK President Park Geun-hye, which took place on the same dates as these workshop meetings. What both summits lacked in tangible “deliverables” was at least made up for by improved atmospherics in Sino-U.S. and Sino-Korean relations as a result of these summit meetings—a dynamic that seemed to filter into the Jeju Island workshop discussions. Indeed, Chinese participants seemed particularly sanguine about the prospects for enhanced Sino-ROK ties, with one participant stating

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1 By contrast, in the months preceding the Jeju meeting, Pyongyang had engaged in a prolonged period of heightened rhetorical provocations, including threats of a nuclear strike against the United States.
that “there is great potential to elevate [bilateral] strategic relations to a new and historic level.”

Such a development may, in turn, facilitate greater Chinese alignment with South Korean and U.S. approaches to the North Korean problem. As Mr. Snyder writes here about improved Sino-ROK relations, “This is important because China’s loyalty toward Pyongyang has always inhibited the development of strategic cooperation with South Korea, along with Chinese concerns that the U.S.-ROK alliance could also be directed at China. But Presidents Park and Xi seem set to establish a new paradigm in their relationship, and it may mark a significant step forward toward a fuller alignment of South Korean and Chinese priorities in support of efforts to achieve North Korea’s denuclearization.” Dr. Kim Heungkyu, in his chapter, corroborates this assessment of improved Sino-ROK relations, but asks whether this “honeymoon” in bilateral ties is sustainable given ongoing “strategic maneuvering” by North Korea.

Nonetheless, as Mr. Snyder argues in his chapter, there does appear to be an evolving convergence of priorities among Beijing, Seoul, and Washington over the course of the period marked by the last three nuclear tests by North Korea. He writes that the United States was the outlier following the first nuclear test, in 2006, when it prioritized denuclearization of the Peninsula over stability, which was the top priority for China and South Korea at the time. Following the second nuclear test, in 2009, Seoul began to shift its priority toward denuclearization, while Beijing maintained its emphasis on stability. Finally, after the third nuclear test earlier this year, China began to signal a greater concern for denuclearization—albeit, as Dr. Ren suggests, as much due to growing resentment of Pyongyang’s recalcitrance toward Beijing as for its threatening development of a nuclear weapons system per se.

The prospects for trilateral cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, therefore, appear as propitious now as they have been in quite some time. The authors of these papers largely agree that some convergence of priorities among the three countries has taken place since the third nuclear test earlier this year, but that significant challenges remain. This view was
shared by many workshop participants, who came to a general agreement that while there is some degree of convergence of objectives with regard to the Korean Peninsula at the moment, the means toward achieving those objectives are still largely unaligned. As Mr. Snyder writes, “Although the various parties are still formulating their long-term policy responses, North Korea’s nuclear test appears to have catalyzed a more unified response among the three countries...But it remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient unity of response in practice, whether differing policy priorities emerge under the new leaderships despite their consensus in favor of denuclearization that might mitigate pressure on North Korea, or whether international pressure will finally induce North Korean cooperation or further shows of North Korean defiance.”

Writing from the Chinese perspective, Dr. Ren also sees a convergence of goals and objectives but a divergence of methods toward achieving those goals, particularly between Washington and Beijing, noting that “…on the objective of denuclearization, the national interests of the United States and China to a large extent overlap and converge. At the same time, they may diverge on other issues, such as how to achieve the goal of denuclearization and how to bring about changes to the Peninsula.” For instance, Dr. Ren suggests that Beijing remains committed to the six-party process as the main mechanism for addressing peninsular affairs, whereas the Obama administration has chosen to pursue a policy of unilateral “strategic patience”—essentially forgoing further talks with Pyongyang until the regime demonstrates a more serious commitment to negotiating an end to its nuclear weapons development. In the end, as one workshop participant observed, “Common interests alone are insufficient for trilateral cooperation. We also need common approaches. We may now have common interests but not common approaches to the North Korean problem.”

Yet some participants at the workshop questioned whether a common approach was absolutely necessary. One American expert suggested that a division of labor among the three countries, emphasizing certain priorities, could ultimately be a more effective way to achieve their objectives vis-à-vis North Korea rather than being hung up on trying to achieve an
ideal state of trilateral alignment. For instance, the expert suggested, the United States could concentrate on denuclearization issues, while South Korea could focus on North-South normalization talks, and China could promote economic reform within the regime that would support both denuclearization efforts and rapprochement between the two Koreas. In that way, he argued, all three countries could be “rowing together” toward the ultimate goal of a non-nuclear and more stable Korean Peninsula.

In addition to these issues, the workshop group also debated the usefulness of U.S.-China-ROK trilateral dialogues per se, as well as prospects for the development of some kind of peace regime on the Korean Peninsula over the long term. As mentioned earlier, Chinese views of trilateral cooperation have evolved considerably over the course of the two-year project. In Jeju, Chinese participants acknowledged some utility in having trilateral dialogues over peninsular affairs, but suggested that the three sides should proceed cautiously and incrementally. As one Chinese participant stated, the “feasibility” of Track 1 (or official) trilateral dialogue is somewhat questionable, while Track 1.5 (semi-official) or Track 2 dialogues (unofficial) like the one taking place at these workshops might ultimately be more useful. Another Chinese expert added that inter-Korean dialogue is far more important than U.S.-China-ROK dialogue. Korean participants, in general, appeared more sanguine about the purpose and utility of Track 1 trilateral dialogues, with one Korean expert stating that Track 1 dialogues can help enhance communications between the United States and China, in particular.

However, U.S. participants were divided about the merits of Track 1 U.S.-China-ROK dialogues. As one U.S. proponent of the idea put it, “Nothing we’ve done so far has worked and this is something we haven’t done yet so it is worth trying.” However, another U.S. expert countered that official dialogue among the three countries is “premature” and “counterproductive” and should not be explicitly about North Korea or implicitly about excluding Japan. Indeed, many U.S. participants at the meeting argued that Japan must be included in any future Track 1 dialogue on peninsular affairs. This was an emphatic rebuttal to the assertion made by some Chinese and Korean participants that Japan is “isolating itself” in the region because of its ongoing territorial and historical disputes with its neighbors. And they said that even when Japan was at the table,
during the six-party talks, it focused almost exclusively on the abductee issue with North Korea. Yet, as several American participants pointed out, Japan should participate in the dialogue, as it will be an important player on the Peninsula in any type of reunification scenario, and it remains a key player in promoting and maintaining regional stability.

The Jeju meeting also addressed the prospects of whether some kind of peace regime might eventually emerge on the Korean Peninsula. The idea of a Korean Peninsula peace regime has from time to time been raised as a possible long-term solution to the North Korean problem and is something that IFPA has closely examined in previous incarnations of this project. Although there are many conceptual versions of what a peace regime might look like, a common theme is that it would involve the denuclearization of the Peninsula and some kind of comprehensive reconciliation between the two Koreas, possibly including a peace treaty, supported by the United States, China, and other key regional actors. The peace regime could also serve as the basis for a broader regional security architecture that could launch a new era of peace and stability across the Asia-Pacific.

Workshop participants registered varying opinions and observations about the prospects of such an arrangement taking root over time. A key question concerned the sequence of steps necessary to reach such an agreement. Again, the group was divided along familiar lines of debate, with Americans and Koreans generally arguing that Pyongyang would have to take concrete steps to cease development of its nuclear capabilities and to dismantle its nuclear weapons program as a prerequisite for the establishment of some kind of peace regime. However, Chinese participants mainly argued that such preconditions should not stand in the way of a more comprehensive agreement. One Chinese expert asserted that denuclearization and peace regime talks could proceed concurrently, adding

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2 For more on IFPA’s previous projects on Korean Peninsula peace-regime building, including detailed project reports, see http://www.ifpa.org/research/researchPages/peace_regime2009.php.

3 Notably, one U.S. expert at the meeting dissented from this argument, saying that North Korea is fundamentally insecure and would never give up its nuclear weapons program without reassurances from the United States and its allies. He added that a discussion of a peace regime could lead the way toward addressing some of North Korea’s anxieties, while also addressing some of the serious security concerns of the United States and South Korea.
that if denuclearization came first then there would be less impetus for creating a peace regime.

Compared to earlier trilateral projects, however, participants in this latest series of dialogues appeared less concerned with the concept of peace-regime building, instead focusing more directly on trust-building among the United States, China, and South Korea as a core component of a potential regional security architecture over the long term. Here, again, more obstacles than opportunities came to mind among the experts. One scholar from China noted that trust is one of the most elusive characteristics of international politics, and that given the differing political systems represented by the main players in the region, achieving some level of mutual trust would likely continue to be a major challenge. Other Chinese participants also made a point of expressing their concern that joint U.S. and allied military exercises and other maneuvers near the Korean Peninsula were fundamentally unsettling to Beijing and, in effect, eroded its trust with regard to allied strategic intentions in the region.

Workshop participants discussed what kinds of activities might enhance trust-building in the region, particularly among the United States, China, and South Korea. After all, as Korean participants noted, President Park Geun-hye has promised to pursue a policy of “trustpolitik,” aimed at reducing regional tensions and mistrust, through her vision of a Northeast Asia peace and cooperation initiative. One Korean expert suggested that the initiative could first tackle “soft” issues like the environment and climate change, nuclear power safety, and counterterrorism, and then move on to more difficult issues. Contingency planning, often a sensitive issue for Chinese policy analysts, was also raised as a potential trust-building mechanism, although one expert from Beijing contested that “now is not the right time” for the three countries to engage in joint military exercises and the like. He did, however, think that Beijing, Seoul, and Washington could feasibly engage in low-profile discussions about how to cooperate in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations in the future.

Thus, as the workshop meetings and accompanying conference papers reveal, significant challenges remain in the way of achieving some
form of trilateral cooperation aimed at denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula—at least at the official, Track 1, level. Yet, at the same time, there is greater evidence of a trend toward an alignment of priorities among the three nations over the course of the two-year project—and it is that trend that the project has sought to facilitate and nurture since its inception. The following chapters, by some of the leading experts in the field, constitute an excellent collection of analysis that elucidates both the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead on the path toward enhanced trilateral cooperation on denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and achieving a robust and sustainable security architecture for the Northeast Asian region. This collection is an accurate reflection of the quality of the workshop discussions and the overall success of the project in exploring the conceptual parameters of trilateral cooperation toward denuclearization and security of the Korean Peninsula.

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Significant challenges remain in the way of achieving some form of trilateral cooperation aimed at denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.
addition to our Asian partners, we thank Mr. Ralph Cossa, Ms. Christina Hatfield, and their colleagues at the Honolulu-based Pacific Forum CSIS for helping us put together a strategy session in Hawaii in preparation for the launch of the first plenary workshop in Beijing. All of our institutional partners on both sides of the Pacific are a model of what can be done tri-laterally at the Track 2 level, if not at the Track 1 level. The workshop participants are too numerous to name here, but they were universally first-rate—representing some of the best and brightest experts and practitioners (both seasoned and up-and-coming) in all three countries. We are grateful for their input and insights, without which the workshop meetings would have been far less fruitful. Closer to home, several IFPA staff contributed to the project and this final report. The project was ably led by our top leadership at IFPA, including Dr. Charles M. Perry, vice president and director of studies, and Dr. Jacquelyn K. Davis, executive vice president. RADM Eric A. McVadon (U.S. Navy, Ret.), senior advisor of Asia-Pacific studies, as always, lent his expertise and tireless dedication to every aspect of the project—including, most notably, his vast network of contacts in China, many of whom we recruited for the Chinese delegation. Mr. Christian Hoffman, our graphic artist, was responsible for the design and layout of this publication, and Ms. Adelaide Ketchum provided excellent editorial assistance. A final note is that Chinese and Korean names in this report appear with the surname first, as is the custom in their original languages.
The Korean Peninsula is becoming very dynamic. After the death of Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, the new leader of the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), 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 to 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 a violation of the third nuclear deal between the North and the United States. The United States brought this issue to the UN Security Council (UNSC). 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 Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), 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 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, Kim Jong-un 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 that 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 toward 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

Based upon Juche ideology, North Korea endlessly developed its nuclear weapons.
recovery. North Korea was eager to talk with the United States, in the expectation that Obama would be different from Bush. With no clear signs for talks 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 a highly enriched uranium (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 Yeonpyeong 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 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 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 toward the North to a more ambiguous posture, and it began to divide its North Korea policy into North Korean nuclear issues and the North Korean problem itself.

*China’s North Korea policy consists of three no’s: no war, no chaos, and no nuclear.*
In 2009, after North Korea’s second nuclear test, China’s changed North Korea policy became evident. It actively participated in 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, China expressed concerns and worries officially to North Korea. Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun expressed concerns and worries officially to the 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 Policy 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 a South Korean tourist in the Kumkang Mountains, the missile launch and second nuclear test in 2009, and the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island provocations in 2010.
As the North Korean crisis became 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 to accomplish this, there should be a macro-level exchange of complete dismantlement of 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 the 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.

### 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. The Republican candidate for president, 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-il should be used as a chance to change the North Korean regime. Compared to this, President Obama’s North Korea policy is two-track, considering both sanctions and dialogue to be 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 the nu-
clear program first, followed by normalization of the U.S.-North Korea relationship 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 by 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 stability on the Korean Peninsula could be achieved more easily. After the satellite launch, China 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 on 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 on 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 Korean economic openness. In accordance with the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (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 Yeonpyeong Island provocations.

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

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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 Premier 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 the 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 nu-
clear issue. We should broaden the North Korea agenda, which could give more leeway for a diverse bargain and discussions.
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 the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK, or 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 Energy 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 (UNSC) 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 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-il continues to rule from the grave.

The most persuasive explanation for recent North Korean behavior is that in many respects, Kim Jong-il continues to rule from the grave.
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-il’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 it 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 tran-
sition 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 has 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 Yeongpeong Island that took the lives of civilians soon followed.”

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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 Jintao 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 Jintao 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, 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 Non-proliferation 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 parameters 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

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.
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 is that 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 Coun-

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cil 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 countries 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 Presi-
dent Obama and President Hu defining the parameters and focus of that joint statement are important reference points for U.S.-ROK-China 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, the DPRK’s economic in-
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 at 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:

- 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 addressing 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.
China occupies a central position in addressing many of the challenges associated with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or 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 lifelines 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 the 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. 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.” 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, 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

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3 Interview, Beijing, September 2009.

the media and sell China out to undercut Sino-DPRK ties. Seen through 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 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 from 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 Ko-
rea’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 issues 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:

1. 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.
2. Diplomatic normalization between Pyongyang and Washington is impossible until the successful resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue.
3. 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 on one side and China on the other on diplomatic normal-

\(^5\) Interview with U.S. experts on North Korea, Washington, D.C., June 2012.
\(^6\) Interview with Chinese academics, Washington, D.C., June 2012.
ization 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.

The Root of China’s Resistance to Trilateral Coordination

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 (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

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8 Yuan Peng, “China’s Window of Strategic Opportunities Has Not Closed” [in Mandarin], People’s Daily, July 30, 2012.
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.9

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

10 Interview with a Chinese analyst, Washington, D.C., July 2012.
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.
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. In 2010, Chinese leaders openly endorsed the succession plan on multiple high-level occasions. The primary consideration is not necessarily that China prefers a hereditary succession system. In fact, some Chinese analysts have expressed strong opposition to family rule in North Korea and condemned Beijing’s endorsement. 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. There-

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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 anniversary 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.

fore, the joint condolence letter issued by the four supreme institutions in China 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.”

China sees the regime transition in North Korea as a precious window of opportunity for the economic reform that Beijing has long been lobbying for. 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.”

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 recurring theme on Chinese media about North Korea. Both the extensive coverage of economic reform and the high expectations it conveys are unprecedented. 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:

- In January 2012 North Korea sent one thousand technocrats to China to study reform and economic liberalization — ostensibly

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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.


16 Views expressed by Chinese participants at the IFPA conference, “Rowing Together.”

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 Hwanggumyong and Weihua Islands to Dalian Executive College for twenty days of study, 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. "open-mindedness" about foreign culture was 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:

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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.
• 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 economics.24

Further, 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 the 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 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 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

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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.
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,
as a solid, undeniable step toward an economic reform modeled after China, 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.”

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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.
Looking Ahead

In brief, trilateral cooperation among the United States, the ROK, and China seems unrealistic. As long as China remains suspicious and hostile toward U.S. strategic intentions in the region and the China-related utility of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Beijing 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.

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 re-
unification based on North-South negotiation, a reunification by assimili-
ating 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 Tai-
wan 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 con-
sider whether they would be willing to set aside the dead-end denucle-
arization 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.
North Korea’s Third Nuclear Test and Changing Security Environments in Northeast Asia: Implications for South Korea

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The Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) conducted its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013, in spite of strong opposition by the international community including China. North Korean authorities announced that the test was conducted in defiance of UN resolution 2087, adopted on January 22, 2013. However, the test was likely related to the strategic decision of North Korea around 2009, after Kim Jong-il, North Korea’s Dear Leader at the time, suffered a stroke. Kim’s serious illness was considered a tremendous regime crisis. Under the crisis, North Korea’s leadership seemed to make a crucial strategic decision, changing its strategy of “negotiation with the United States while strengthening its nuclear capability” to “negotiation with the United States after completion of nuclear armament.” According to the analysis of Lars-Erik De Geer, North Korea had already conducted two low-yield nuclear tests using uranium in April and May of 2010. Therefore, it was a matter of time for North Korea to carry out the third test (officially) and to be expected to conduct other tests in coming years to complete its nuclear weapon program, including the diversification of nuclear materials for its weapons (plutonium and highly enriched uranium, or HEU), the miniaturiza-
tion of warheads, and its development of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) delivery systems.

Estimates of the magnitude of the explosion vary, but in general, the test is considered to have been successful. As of 2013, no matter how different the estimates are, it will be reasonable to believe that North Korea has already succeeded in becoming the world’s ninth nuclear power and is in possession of multiple nuclear materials that can be used for its weapons systems. The success of North Korea’s third nuclear test has brought a tremendous dilemma to the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) in its foreign and security environments; South Korea is at a crossroads.

**China’s Traditional North Korea Policy**

China has learned lessons from each of North Korea’s nuclear tests and has adjusted its policy toward North Korea accordingly. After the DPRK’s first nuclear test, on October 9, 2006, China vehemently criticized North Korea and agreed to UN resolution 1718 condemning Pyongyang’s actions for the first time. Meanwhile, a broad range of debates on China’s North Korea policies occurred, eventually establishing China’s policy priority of maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula, sustaining the North Korean regime, and denuclearization, in that order. However, the most important lesson that China learned in the process was that it should not take any initiative before the United States takes action. By taking certain initiatives against North Korea, China saw its relationship with Pyongyang suffer and its influence decrease dramatically, while the United States held secret talks with North Korea in Geneva, leading to the February 13, 2007, agreement.

After the second North Korean nuclear test, on May 25, 2009, China agreed to UN resolution 1874. In contrast to its hostile initial responses to the nuclear test, China eventually made a strategic decision to separate the North Korea issue from the nuclear issue around July 2009. Instead of launching harsh sanctions, China adopted comprehensive engagement pol-
icies toward North Korea with the expectation that North Korea would adopt a Chinese style of economic reform and respect Chinese core strategic interests in a stable Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, China was also careful not to provide a “free lunch” to North Korea, by emphasizing four principles of economic cooperation with North Korea, focusing on win-win cooperation and market mechanisms.

In particular, China reformulated its North Korea policies after the shelling incident on South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Islands in 2010. The new policy priorities were no war, no chaos, no unification, and denuclearization [3不一無], reflecting China’s sense of urgency and danger on the Korean Peninsula.¹

However, after Kim Jong-un became the new leader of North Korea in 2012, there has been subtle but evident tension between China and North Korea. The new leader of North Korea has continued to reject China’s invitation to come to China. China also did not offer to treat Kim Jong-un the same way that Kim Jong-il was treated when he visited China. China also refused North Korea’s requests for help in the areas of military modernization and financial support. In return, North Korea slapped China’s face by conducting its satellite test right after the Chinese delegation to dissuade North Korea’s test returned to China, and then conducted the third nuclear test in February 2013, right before two important Chinese meetings in early March where the new Chinese government leaders were elected.

Even before the third nuclear test, China’s North Korea policies remained most alienated from public opinion. Furthermore, the perception gap between Korea-hands and generalists in international relations in China have been widening in China’s policy-making circles.

China’s New Response to North Korea’s Nuclear Test: Changing North Korea Policy?

North Korea conducted its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013. Since then, there has been an obvious change in the Chinese attitude toward North Korea, which was less patient with North Korea’s provocation. Chinese authorities allowed Chinese public protests against North Korea on various occasions. Debates about China’s North Korea policies have also been ignited on various websites and blogs in China. China has strengthened its border control and blocked illegal activities of North Korean banks in China. China was reported to have temporarily stopped bringing in North Korean laborers, despite an agreement signed in 2012 for North Korea to provide, by some estimates, up to one hundred thousand laborers per year to China, for manpower worth the equivalent of about US$80 million annually.

The March 5, 2013, declaration of Kim Youngchul, leader of North Korea’s reconnaissance bureau, nullifying the Korean armistice and threatening the use of nuclear weapons against South Korea had an obvious audience, China. North Korea’s threat certainly challenged China’s top priority on the Korean Peninsula, maintaining stability. With this declaration, Kim was telling the Chinese that North Korea possesses obvious capabilities to destabilize the Korean Peninsula and urging the Chinese, “Listen to me!”

The most famous article in the Financial Times of London came from Deng Yuwen,2 deputy editor of Study Times, the journal of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China. He argued that China should abandon North Korea for the following reasons. First, a relationship between states based on ideology is dangerous. Second, basing China’s security on North Korea’s value as a geopolitical ally is outdated. Third, North Korea will not reform and open up to the world. Fourth, North Korea is pulling away from Beijing. Fifth, once North Korea has nuclear weapons, it cannot be ruled out that the capricious Kim regime will engage in nuclear blackmail against China. Deng goes further by arguing that the best way to abandon North Korea is to take the initiative to facilitate North Korea’s unification with South Korea (in favor of South Korea).

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2 Later, he was dismissed from his position in the Central Party School, as of April 2013.
Xie Tao also wrote an interesting article, “What a Shame for the Chinese Government That Has Been the Most Important Supporter of North Korea.” It says, “The North Koreans like the Chinese could be communists in name and nationalists at heart. The North Koreans have many reasons to be resentful and suspicious of their patron Chinese.” To borrow Ho Chi Minh’s sentiments, “I’d rather sniff the Americans’ excrement for five years than eat the Chinese excrement the rest of my life.” The article concludes that it is time for China to let go of North Korea. Close association with such a regime does no good at all for China’s national interests and international reputation.

The Chinese government agreed to strengthen sanctions against North Korea in the new UN resolution 2094. The resolution embraced almost the full scale of sanctions indicated by the non-military means of UN chapter 7, article 41. However, how seriously China applies the sanctions against North Korea is another question. It is still questionable whether China continues to apply the sanctions against North Korea in spite of North Korea’s emerging policy of accommodating China’s demands to return to dialogues, which has in the past resulted in the vicious cycle of provocation-negotiation-achievement/frustration-provocation. China seems to be working to maintain a balanced approach between promoting stability in North Korea and applying sanctions against it.

It is noteworthy that China’s tough attitude toward North Korea under Xi Jinping’s leadership reflects a change in China’s mainstream of strategic thinking, from the “developing country” school to the “newly rising great power” school. The former, identifying China as a developing country, viewed stabilization of the Korean Peninsula as critical to China’s economic development. However, the latter pays relatively more attention to the strategic interests and roles of China as great power. As a great power, China is obviously sending a strong signal to Pyongyang that it will no longer allow North Korea’s behavior to hijack China’s foreign policy. China hopes to convey a lesson to North Korea: “Who is the big brother?”

Given the potential of China’s North Korea policy change, it is essential to note that China’s strategic milieu has not changed: the Sino-U.S.
strategic rivalry continues; the ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula continue; the level of distrust between South Korea and China is still high; the potential for a trilateral security alliance among South Korea, the United States, and Japan against China exists; and the Taiwan Strait issue has not been resolved. As a result, North Korea is still strategically important to China. In spite of the ongoing distrust and the current friction between China and North Korea, it is reasonable to tentatively conclude that the current discord between China and North Korea will not lead to fundamental change in China’s North Korea policy in the near future. Meanwhile, China’s attitude toward and methods for dealing with North Korea are undergoing a change. Furthermore, Beijing must reexamine its current North Korea policy along with

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Table 1. Policy Orientations of China’s Strategic Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Geopolitics School</th>
<th>Developing Country School</th>
<th>Rising Great Power School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Status</strong></td>
<td>(Old) Great power</td>
<td>Developing country</td>
<td>Rising great power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Status in Northeast Asia</strong></td>
<td>Competing with the United States for dominance</td>
<td>Cooperating with the United States, but competing with Japan for regional hegemony</td>
<td>Competing with the United States for rightful status in the region/world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship with the United States</strong></td>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Hedging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Direction</strong></td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Bandwagoning → hedging</td>
<td>Mix of hedging and soft-balancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Concept</strong></td>
<td>Geopolitics/ buffer zone</td>
<td>Hide capacities and bide time [Taoguangyanghui]</td>
<td>Take necessary measures [Yousuozuowei]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Policy on the Korean Peninsula</strong></td>
<td>Recovery of influence</td>
<td>Status quo</td>
<td>Status quo with a potential of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy on South Korea</strong></td>
<td>Not friendly</td>
<td>Subject for diplomatic inclusiveness and management</td>
<td>Opportunistic: inclusion as well as exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of North Korea</strong></td>
<td>Buffer zone</td>
<td>Trouble maker</td>
<td>Trouble maker/ strategic card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Tools on North Korean Issues</strong></td>
<td>Political support and economic aid</td>
<td>Economic aid and diplomatic persuasion</td>
<td>Complex means including coercion</td>
</tr>
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</table>

China’s new identity as a great power if North Korea continues to take its brinkmanship approach. In this regard, South Korea may find common ground with China in dealing with North Korea and its nuclear program.

Currently, Beijing is under pressure to reexamine its North Korea policies and to deal with Sino-Japan disputes. In the near future, China’s central foreign affairs small leadership group is likely to be summoned and these two issues will be the main subjects of the meeting. It seems certain that more Chinese scholars regard North Korea as a “strategic trap” than a “strategic asset.” However, it is still far from the expectation of many South Koreans that China regard North Korea as a “strategic burden.”

**South Korea’s China Policies under the Park Government**

A rising question is whether South Korea and China will resume the honeymoon that began after new leadership came to power in both countries. The two countries exchanged special envoys right after Lady Park won the Korean presidential election. They have strengthened cooperation on the third North Korean nuclear test, agreed on UN resolution 2094 without considerable friction, and appear to have entered a new honeymoon period. On July 27, 2103, the two countries will hold a summit meeting and announce their strengthening strategic cooperative partnership. They are likely to agree upon the principle of denuclearization of North Korea and further cooperation on this issue.

The political trust between the previous two governments had remained quite low, probably the lowest since the establishment of formal relations in 1992. Therefore, the current relationship can be seen as much better than before, no matter what the reality is. However, a more important reason can be found in a more structural change. Since the world fi-
nancial crisis in 2008–09, South Korea’s strategic value to China has risen dramatically. China suddenly found itself to be a great power and examined its strategic vision and roles in the international security landscape in a different context. China is to be much more active and confident in international affairs. In spite of their low level of trust and their bumpy relations in recent years, China regards South Korea as a “swing state.” South Korea can be an ally in the battle of territorial-sea disputes against Japan, thanks to the two countries’ similar experiences under Japanese imperialism a century and more ago. South Korea must be the major target of its neighbor diplomacy as well as Southeast Asia under the “new great power relationship” foreign policy environment.

The trading volume between South Korea and China will reach up to US$300 billion by 2015. A power shift between China and Japan is in process at the regional level, and between the United States and China at the global level. Japan has mobilized all its resources to challenge China and prove its willingness to play a role as a great power in this region. If South Korea were to side with Japan and the United States against China, China would likely be beleaguered and forced to live in a Cold War-like environment. On the other hand, a South Korean decision to side with China would be a tremendous loss for the U.S. side, psychologically, symbolically, and militarily. South Korea has been the symbol of the success of U.S. engagement policy, military alliance, and bilateral relations in the post-war period. The loss of South Korea would likely be seen as a turning point in U.S. hegemonic power in the world. In this case, it would be almost impossible for the United States to maintain its current hub-and-spoke system in Southeast Asia and Australia in the future. For the time being, South Korea will be a focal point of great-power competition in this region.

Park’s China policy has not yet fully been illustrated and crystallized, although her new government often expresses a willingness to have a good relationship with China. The new Korean government announced plans for materialization of the strategic cooperative partnership with China.
The Park administration fully appreciates China’s importance in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue as well as with the North Korean regime itself. However, Chinese officials appear to have no idea as to how to tackle the problem of integrating North Korea nuclear issues with North Korea issues. The ROK foreign minister, Yoon Byung-se, seeks to promote the establishment of a trilateral strategic dialogue among South Korea, the United States, and China as pledged in the presidential campaign. He got China’s support in his visit to China in April 2013, but Washington is relatively reluctant to endorse such an idea in the face of Japan’s opposition.

The future of the ROK-China relationship is not necessarily optimistic because of the two countries’ differences in strategic interests. During the presidential campaign, Park emphasized a dual-track approach of fortifying national security and strengthening communication with North Korea, and she suggested that “trustpolitik” be built between South Korea and North Korea. However, after being elected, her emphasis moved to the denuclearization of North Korea and fortifying national security, which may heighten China’s apprehension with regard to the fate of North Korea. North Korea has been keen to cultivate policy differences between South Korea and China, widening the schism and forming a new Cold War-like security environment in Northeast Asia under which North Korea can reap the most benefits. In this regard, the bilateral relationship between South Korea and China is vulnerable to strategic maneuvering by North Korea. Fortunately, Xi’s current policy on North Korea and his policy priority of denuclearization dramatically reduce potential policy conflicts between South Korea and China and opens the window for further cooperation.

South Korea’s Security in Danger

South Korea is at a crossroads in dealing with the power transition as well as the threat to its very existence by North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. From South Korea’s perspective, a balance of power and influence between the United States and China would be ideal. Either rapid power transition or chaotic situations would bring a tremendous challenge to South Korea in adjusting to a new environment. Gradual settlements of norms and rules among great powers in the region would be good for all of concerned states.
Taken together, the power transition in both Seoul and Beijing, North Korea’s completion of its nuclear weapons system, Japan’s perception of history and its provocations inciting nationalistic sentiments, and China’s domestic problems and subsequent foreign-policy consequences all brew instability and uncertainty in this region.

The complications of pre-modern and modern political systems dominate political lives in this region, which is still far from entering a post-modern political era. Survival, competition, disputes, and conflicts are dominant features rather than coordination, cooperation, and community-building. In this kind of environment, trust cannot be established by the accumulated experiences of communication, cooperation, and exchanges of resources. Rather, trust is fragile. Without resolving North Korea’s nuclear issue, the South Korean government will be under increased pressure from society to acquire nuclear weapons as a counter-balance to North Korea’s nuclear arsenal. Building security and economic mechanisms to promote trust is required, which needs full cooperation among the states involved.

The subtlety and complexity of evolving U.S.-China relations in the future will be the most critical challenge for South Korea. Seoul must constantly prepare for the future transformation of regional politics in order to be able to respond to it accordingly. Without such dynamic policy preparation, South Korea is likely to fail to draw a positive outcome from the kaleidoscopic changes in this region.

South Korea’s major concern is how to harmonize the U.S.-ROK alliance with its strategic cooperative partnership with China. Although the two relationships don’t conflict in concept, it is still unclear how to balance them in practice. Fortunately, the recent summit meeting in June 2013 between the United States and China illustrates well that both great powers can reach consensus on coordination and cooperation on denuclearization of North Korea and other Korean Peninsula issues. In the short term, such a consensus provides South Korea with a space to escape from the zero-sum nature of security arrangements in Northeast Asia. However, in the long run, South Korea still worries that it may fall victim to
such a consortium, which Korea experienced a century and more ago in competition for the sphere of influence between the United States and Japan. These concerns cannot be resolved bilaterally but rather in more structural and multilateral ways.

In the next decade, the U.S.-China relationship will become much more complex, and it will be difficult to read the subtlety of such relations. South Korea needs to carefully analyze the situation from multiple and strategic standpoints. Seoul must formulate measures to avoid alienation from Korean Peninsula issues as a result of U.S.-China strategic cooperation or a U.S.-China consortium. Seoul also needs to issue a strong message that it would be a failure of U.S. and Chinese foreign policy if either country forces South Korea to choose one over the other.

**South Korea’s Policy Options**

South Korea’s foreign policy in the future will be influenced by the regional configuration of international relations, most importantly by relations between the United States and China. Given the circumstances, South Korea’s policy orientations vary according to the power transition in East Asia as well as in the world: from allying with the United States and communicating well with China [聯美通中], to allying with the United States and harmonizing with China [聯美和中], to allying with the United States and cooperating with China [聯美協中], to acting in concert with the United States and China [聯美聯中]. The policy orientations are not necessarily linear, but will be influenced by changing U.S.-China relations.

South Korea’s policy orientation under the Park government should be toward allying with the United States and harmonizing with China [聯美和中]. During this period, South Korea will make a great effort to reduce differences of policies and interests with China. China’s new attitudes toward North Korea’s nuclear weapons issues and probably to North Korea as a whole may precipitate changes in South Korea’s China policy to the more action-oriented policy of allying with the United States and cooperating with China [聯美協中] sooner than expected.
## Table 2. South Korea’s Policy Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline Domain</th>
<th>Allody with the United States &amp; Communicating Well with China [聯美通中]</th>
<th>Allody with the United States &amp; Harmonizing with China [聯美和中]</th>
<th>Allody with the United States &amp; Cooperating with China [聯美協中]</th>
<th>Acting in concert with the United States and China [聯美聯中]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power Balance</td>
<td>U.S. superiority</td>
<td>U.S. military superiority</td>
<td>U.S. military superiority</td>
<td>Military balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• U.S. military superiority</td>
<td>• Balance in economy</td>
<td>• Chinese economic superiority</td>
<td>• Chinese economic superiority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-China</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Complex relations of competition, coordination, and cooperation</td>
<td>Strategic cooperation</td>
<td>Strategic balance and consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-North Korea Relationship</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Searching for mutual trust</td>
<td>Strengthening coordination and cooperation</td>
<td>Unification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of China and Uncertainty</td>
<td>• Strengthening alliance with the United States</td>
<td>• No-sided diplomacy</td>
<td>• Strengthening cooperation with China</td>
<td>• Dissolution of alliance system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promotion of regional cooperation</td>
<td>• Reducing differences with China</td>
<td>• Institutionalizing regional &amp; multilateral security mechanism</td>
<td>• Regional &amp; multilateral security mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Common interests first policy with China</td>
<td>• Building regional and multilateral security mechanism</td>
<td>• Institutionalization of middle-power cooperation</td>
<td>• Active roles of middle-power mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Searching for middle-power cooperation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Under the threat of North Korean nuclear weapons and military provocations, the South Korea-U.S. alliance must be the pillar for South Korea’s security architecture for the coming decades. However, given the rise of China, South Korea’s foreign policy cannot avoid being more complicated and multi-dimensional. South Korea must work with China to harvest fruits from China’s economic development, promote further cooperation on North Korea, and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. With strong economic interdependence as a foundation, South Korea would work to broaden the scope of its political, social, cultural, and military relations with China. Bilateral relations must be enhanced on all fronts so as to significantly weaken the causal link between the aforementioned issues of potential discord and deficiency of trust.

As a middle power, South Korea cannot play a balancing role in this region. However, South Korea may have a bridging role by promoting further cooperation, initiating a new cooperative mechanism, and seeking to mitigate tension between and among great powers in this region. South Korea hopes to play active and constructive roles in building a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula as well as a peace regime. Of course, we are fully aware that it will be difficult to achieve stability, prosperity, and peace alone.

Establishing a middle-power cooperative mechanism is also required. Middle powers in this region face a similar international milieu and can promote common interests through establishing such a middle-power cooperative mechanism. In the twenty-first century, middle powers have much more resources and influence than in the past. Middle powers as a group can play a positive and important role in promoting stability and peace in this region. South Korea will certainly pay more attention to organizing middle powers in the future.
The most conspicuous phenomenon that characterizes Northeast Asia today is perhaps the entanglement of geopolitics and geo-economics, or, put another way, the interactions between security and economics. On the one hand, the region can by no means resist the dynamic forces of the twin trends of globalization and regionalization, and detach itself from the rest of the world. On the other hand, the relics of the Cold War remain and linger on menacingly in this part of the world. The Korean Peninsula continues to be a heavily armed area and there is a worrying trend for further development of nuclear programs as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) carried out a third test in February 2013, following its provocative rocket launch last December and ignoring all the wishes and warnings from the international community. The “9/19” joint statement that the six-party talks achieved, in which the parties agreed to take substantive steps for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and other related objectives, remains a good deal, yet the talks have been stalled since the end of 2008. Pyongyang's political relations with Washington and Tokyo are still in limbo and have yet to be normalized. However, these are merely part of a broader picture. Regional
Regional dynamics are changing and they are reshaping the regional landscape as well as the various relationships.

The standoff between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyu Islands continues. Before the sovereignty question can be sorted out, which will not happen in the short run, the two countries have to discuss what they should do to avoid military conflict. The deep-seated issues that affect their perceptions of each other remain and will by no means dissipate any time soon. The Sino-Japanese relationship has become a complex and multifaceted one and it entails multiple combinations of various kinds of factors. First, the relationship is based on a mixture of history and present realities. The words and deeds on the part of some Japanese politicians have repeatedly stirred the Chinese people’s collective memory by reopening the wound, which has proved extremely provocative and counterproductive. Clearly they had negative effects on and disrupted current bilateral relations. Second, the relationship involves both domestic politics and foreign policy. The domestic political factors now exert a much greater influence over both Japan’s China policy and China’s Japan policy, perhaps more than any time before. When the Japanese deliberate their China policy or the Chinese their Japan policy, the policy makers of each country have to bear this in mind and seriously consider domestic pressures. Neither China’s Xi-Li leadership nor Japan’s Abe government has much room to maneuver in this regard.

Third, the relationship is an entanglement of sentiments and interests, which often seem to be in conflict. Paradoxically, on the one hand, the mutually beneficial economic and trade relations have reached such a degree that neither side can afford a turnaround. In fact, China has become Japan’s largest trading partner. On the other hand, the two countries’ perceptions of each other have spiraled downward over the past few years. Can Japan adjust its own mindset to adapt to a stronger and more prosperous big neighbor? Will China be able to get beyond history by overcoming its victim complex? Can they manage the Diaoyu dispute reasonably well? These are the crucial questions for the two Asian giants to address.
The future of North Korea also matters considerably for the region. To a large extent, we still can only speculate about many things in the DPRK while it remains an opaque “hermit kingdom.” In essence, North Korea is a one-man state as the country’s supreme power lies in the hands of just one person. The current top leader, Kim Jong-un, who inherited his political power from his father, has consolidated his power base since December 2011 when he took over. Presumably, he controls the party, the army, and the government. The nature of the regime is such that the fate of the whole country has become totally dependent on its top leader. This is potentially risky. In ten years’ time, will significant changes occur within the country? How will they happen? What will they be? There are different scenarios as well as great uncertainties.

As its neighbor and nominal ally, China always hopes for the best and encourages the DPRK to take a new path of reform and opening-up and to achieve change in a gradual and peaceful way. In essence, what is expected is a kind of soft landing and that would be consistent with Beijing’s goal of building a stable and peaceful external environment. For China, the Peninsula has to be a peaceful and friendly one, divided or not. This is all the more important as China strives for a resurgence of its northeastern provinces, a major initiative of the Chinese leadership. With a turbulent and chaotic North Korea, it would not be possible for the “reviving the Northeast” [zhengxing dongbei] drive to be implemented well.

The North’s provocative missile test firings and the third nuclear test forced Beijing to rethink whether its DPRK policy worked. In February 2013 greatly disappointed Beijing and highlighted the limits of China’s influence on Pyongyang. The developments forced Beijing to rethink whether its DPRK policy worked. Currently, the views are very much divided. Some still believe that North Korea is a buffer zone and Pyongyang can “stand sentry” facing the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea). The minority view criticizes the Chinese government’s approval of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2094, as it indicated that China’s policy was losing balance. A stronger view in this line argues that China is essentially abandoning and sacrific-
ing the DPRK for its relations with the United States, which should have never happened. Yet a different school contends that China must maintain its resolute position of opposing North Korea’s provocative and destabilizing acts such as the missile firing and nuclear test, as well as of supporting UNSC resolutions, albeit after some amendments. Obviously, North Korea’s acts were a loss of face for China, particularly when the latter was trying so hard to persuade Pyongyang not to carry them out, for the resumption of six-party talks, and for a peaceful solution by diplomatic means. It should have come as no surprise that China was very unhappy. North Korean defiance ran counter to China’s already strenuous and difficult diplomatic efforts and thus Beijing had to do something to give the North Koreans a warning about its provocative behavior and to caution Pyongyang not to escalate but to return to the talks without any precondition.

The difficult situation will continue for some more time. Yet I would argue that sooner or later the DPRK will not only change but will change dramatically.

**Post-Kim Jong-il Interactions**
Geography is destiny. Since the DPRK is right on the border, Beijing always wants to make sure there is no chaos [luan] that would potentially have adverse effects on its northeastern provinces. It also wants gradual changes in North Korea for reform and opening-up. These desirables require a peaceful transformation of the North and a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. Thus, when Kim Jong-il died in December 2011, Beijing took steps to promote an orderly transition to a post-Kim Jong-il leadership in Pyongyang. Kim’s death marked the end of an era in the DPRK and the inception of the Kim Jong-un period. Immediately following the announcement of the death, China quickly cautioned the relevant players not to try to take advantage of the death and act rashly. Beijing also attempted to establish contact with the Kim Jong-un leadership sooner rather than later. However, face-to-face contact did not take place until July 2012 – seven months after the death of Kim Jong-il – when Mr. Wang Jiarui, director of the Communist Party of China’s (CPC’s) International Liaison Department, traveled to Pyongyang. He was the first foreign guest whom Kim Jong-un greeted, and it was the first high-level contact between the two
countries after the transition. Though exchanges of visit are infrequent, thus far there have been two major visits at the highest level from North Korea since.

In August 2012, Mr. Jang Song-taek, vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and Kim Jong-un’s uncle, who was widely seen as the “regent” at the time, made his way to China in his capacity as chairman of the steering committee for the development of the two economic zones, the Rason Economic and Trade Zone and the Hwanggumphyong and Wihwa Islands Economic Zone in the DPRK. This was the first high-level delegation from the DPRK since Kim Jong-il’s death, and the importance of the visit itself far outweighed that of any businesses in the two economic zones. In fact, the visit was a contact at the highest level to exchange information and get to know each other.

The months since this visit have seen two major developments contrary to China’s wishes: Pyongyang’s rocket launch in December 2012 and its third nuclear test, in February 2013. Clearly, both actions violated the UN Security Council resolutions and caused the Security Council to impose new sanctions. In March 2013, UNSC resolution 2094 was passed unanimously, with China’s consent. Given Pyongyang’s provocative acts, China increasingly lost its appetite for defending the North at the UN Security Council. Moreover, the third nuclear test occurred during the Chinese New Year and inevitably disrupted people’s holidays in China, an additional reason for frustration. After the third test, the Chinese idiom *siwu jidan* [unscrupulously] was frequently used to refer to the way North Korea behaved. Pyongyang had made the move despite China’s wishes and disapproval, and ties between the two supposed allies were hurt. In response, China not only agreed to the UN sanctions against the North but also started to put a squeeze on North Korean banks. Pyongyang lost more and gained less as China increasingly felt fed up with its behavior.

China became more serious about implementing sanctions, a significant change in its DPRK policy. Beijing had been half-hearted before, carefully avoiding being too tough and hoping for some changes on the part of the DPRK. To China’s dismay, Pyongyang seemed to be moving in a different direction. On a few occasions, China expressed its warnings by using strong words, saying China would not allow others to make trouble on its “doorstep.” This was widely seen as a warning to Pyongyang.
The Debate Was Continuing...

The DPRK policy is one of a few foreign policy issues about which people have major differences in China. Over the years, China’s policy toward North Korea has been one of inertia. It included a clear ideological element that regarded the DPRK as a “socialist country.” In terms of approach, the Chinese used the idiom *kukou poxin* – which basically means to urge someone time and again with good intentions – to describe their way of trying to persuade Pyongyang, suggesting that the regime restrain itself with respect to nuclear development and take a new path of reform and opening-up.

North Korea’s recent brazen moves once again caused a policy debate in China. In the research community, policy analysts have been debating about whether China should change course with regard to its North Korea policy. In this context, a challenging question whether the DPRK should be “abandoned” was raised. The “abandonment” school basically meant that, after so many disappointments, China now had to use pressure to rein in Pyongyang and not to allow it to hurt China’s security interests. By playing brinkmanship, the DPRK has offered more than enough reasons for the United States to strengthen its military presence in the region, including the development of a missile defense system, which clearly is not in China’s interests. If North Korea shows no regard whatsoever to Chinese national interests, why should China humor Kim Jong-un’s wayward behavior? While changing policy, China should be prepared to risk the deterioration of the Sino-DPRK relationship.

Opponents of this policy do not accept the phrase “abandonment” and see it as naïve and extreme. According to a *Global Times* editorial, “The North has annoyed most Chinese. Voices pushing to ‘abandon North Korea’ can be heard. They have even become formal suggestions by some strategists. There is no need to hide Chinese society’s dissatisfaction with the North, and the interests of the DPRK and China have never coincided. However, the North remains at the forefront of China’s geopolitics. The U.S.’ pivot to the Asia Pacific has two strategic prongs, namely Japan and

“Whether there is a friendly North Korea toward China will impact the strategic posture in Northeast Asia.”
South Korea, and North Korea is still a buffer closer to them. Whether there is a friendly North Korea toward China will impact the strategic posture in Northeast Asia.” The newspaper believed China’s policy makers will not follow the “abandonment” suggestion.¹ A similar viewpoint cautioned against “demonizing the DPRK and the external forces driving a wedge between China and the DPRK,” stating that this was “simple logic.”

A third view is that China should make policy adjustments. It is irresponsible to be oblivious to the current state of Sino-DPRK relations, which can be dangerous. Those who believe that criticizing the current state of the Sino-DPRK relationship is to demonize the DPRK and split China and North Korea are overly ideological. They are not looking at the relationship as one between two nations, but rather as one between ideological allies. What needs to be stressed is that the relationship must be seen as a normal state-to-state one, and only on this basis can interest choices be made. China should decide to upgrade or downgrade the level of this relationship according to actual needs, and this has to be clear-cut rather than ambiguous or muddled. China can offer Pyongyang what it wants, yet in return Pyongyang has to respect China’s interests. China has given considerable resources as aid to the North. This has played a key role in North Korea’s stability and survival. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang has to care about China’s interests or concerns rather than disregard them and even kidnap or loot Chinese fishing boats and fishermen working in the adjacent seas. In this case, according to this view, to continue to maintain the current level of Sino-DPRK relations would be laughable and wrong, and would not win the other party’s true respect. On the contrary, Beijing ought to be very clear and make Pyongyang face up to China’s national interests by making adjustments regarding state-to-state relations with the DPRK, including respecting the safety of Chinese fishermen and their properties. “China is bound to adjust its North Korean policies, but it doesn’t mean it will side with the U.S., Japan and South Korea. Rather, it will respond to the North’s extreme moves which offend China’s interests and will make the North correct its moves.”²

¹ “Geopolitics Makes Abandoning NK Naïve,” Global Times editorial, April 12, 2013.
² Ibid.
A fundamental question involved in the debate is: Is North Korea actually a buffer zone or is it a time bomb? Some believe that the North is a buffer in terms of China’s security concerns, a counterweight to the U.S.-ROK alliance, and China should not “lose” it. An argument in favor of this was made with regard to the possibility of a contingency on the Taiwan Strait during which the United States might mobilize its troops stationed in South Korea. A different school of thought contends that militarily, a “buffer zone” like the North does not matter at all today. The North has actually become a bomb that could explode at any time. Beijing must disabuse Pyongyang of its belief that China always views the DPRK as a buffer for China’s security. Further, North Korea showed its disregard for China’s interests or concerns by making unbridled moves. Heightened tensions on the Peninsula justified the upgrade of the U.S.-ROK alliance, providing Washington with a further reason to “rebalance to Asia” by shifting more resources to East Asia and the Pacific region. This is not in China’s national interest. At the end of the day, is North Korea an asset or liability? This continues to pose a fundamental question for Beijing.

Amid the tensions, an incident at sea further aggravated Sino-DPRK differences and exacerbated the bad feeling toward Pyongyang in China. On May 5, 2013, a Chinese fishing boat from Dalian, Liaoning, and the Chinese fishermen on it were detained by a North Korea People’s Army unit. The detainees were asked to pay a fine of RMB 600,000 yuan, a large sum of money and in fact a ransom. This kind of incident had happened before, but has become more frequent recently; indeed, it was not the first time in 2013. This time, however, it was reported by a Chinese newspaper, the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis Daily, on May 19, after the representations made by China’s local authorities had had no effect. By longstanding practice, Chinese newspapers and magazines have not criticized North Korea because doing so would cause the DPRK’s embassy in Beijing to issue a “protest,” which would create a diplomatic “incident.” Such an incident resulted in the shutdown of the journal Zhanlue yu guanli [Strat-
egy and Management] in 2004. This kind of “risk” has long reflected the abnormality of the Sino-DPRK relationship.

When the detention of the Chinese fishing boat and its sixteen-man crew by a North Korean armed group was publicized, public outcry over the incident and resentment toward North Korea mounted to a fever pitch after the confirmation of the kidnapping. Angry Chinese “netizens” expressed their strong views by calling the DPRK a “pirate state.” Amid the public anger over the “kidnapping” of the Chinese fishermen, the media in China warned the North to stop detaining Chinese fishing boats. The influential Global Times said the incident had “fuelled outrage” among the Chinese public, with internet users venting “fury” toward North Korea, as traditionally close ties between the nations were further frayed. One editorial suspected that the North Korean army used the ambiguity of maritime borders to “make a quick buck” by detaining the Chinese crew. It stressed, “If North Korea continues to go rogue, China should take actions to push it toward a more measured response...If we don’t set rules for North Korea, the whole image of our government may be seen as being too weak to deal with maritime issues.”

On May 21, 2013, the detained Chinese fishing boat and fishermen were released without any “penalty” or “ransom” being paid. The Chinese side demanded the North launch an investigation into the case, and take action to prevent similar incidents from happening again. For many people in China, this was not satisfactory. After all, the fishermen were detained for two weeks, and it was not the first time this type of “kidnapping” happened. Sentiment among many was that those who infringe on China’s rights and interests should be punished, since compromise will only lead to similar violations in the future.

More broadly, for quite a few Chinese observers, China has not had a clear and wise idea about its relations with the DPRK since the end of the Cold War. Beijing did not adjust its policies over time, and its policy inertia became disconnected from the realities of international and bilateral relations as well as from China’s own development. The emergence of this situation was partially because Cold War legacies lingered, and partially because DPRK policy drifted along and China needed an ideological ally.

As a result, China did not carry out appropriate analyses and planning for the bilateral relationship, which was in limbo and in effect wavering between a relationship between socialist allies and a normal one between two states. The adverse consequences include China’s being towed along by North Korea, Beijing’s diminishing influence over Pyongyang, and a selfish North Korea’s largely disregarding China’s national interests. The recent Chinese fishing boat incident was only the latest example of these trends.

As the debate was going on, it was widely reported that China’s four major state-owned banks ended their business with the North Korean foreign trade banks. Presumably, this would add further difficulties to the North’s nuclear-related activities and beyond. The halting by top Chinese banks of most dealings with North Korea was an unprecedented move to use financial leverage against Pyongyang, which reflected Beijing’s exasperation with Kim Jong-un’s regime. This goes beyond what Beijing had agreed to implement in UN resolutions, with several leading banks stopping all cross-border cash transfers, regardless of the nature of the business. A UN resolution this year only called for sanctions in cases where money might contribute to North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs. This response indicated Beijing’s rising resentment toward the North’s acts, despite being its main lifeline.

The Implications of Choe’s China Visit

Consequently, the context in which North Korea found itself was a changing one. After many years of trying to persuade and induce Pyongyang to take a new path, China had become disappointed and lost patience. Increasingly frustrated by Pyongyang’s third nuclear test, Beijing felt it no longer needed to defend Pyongyang at the UN Security Council, for example. On a number of occasions in the past, China has softened sanctions measures or strong rhetoric at the UNSC in order to achieve more “balanced” resolutions, a kind of action Beijing increasingly found more difficult to justify.

As a result, China became more serious about carrying out UN-imposed sanctions against the DPRK. This could have immediate and pro-

found effects on an already tightly wound and poor DPRK, something Pyongyang could feel concretely. When China, Russia, and the United States drew closer together by narrowing their differences and converged at the UNSC more than before, North Korea could feel the kind of pressure that could have grave consequences over time. This could even pose a threat to Kim Jong-un’s ruling status – too high a price for Pyongyang to pay.

Amid the tensions, on May 22, 2013, Kim Jong-un sent Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae, his right-hand man who served as director of the People’s Army’s General Political Bureau, to China. Choe is a close confidant of Kim Jong-un – often seen at his side when he conducts on-site inspections. Choe is also a member of the Party’s Politburo Presidium. His trip was North Korea’s first serious dabbling in diplomacy after months of bellicose pronouncements, including threats to launch nuclear strikes against the United States and its allies. Choe traveled to China in the capacity as Kim Jong-un’s special envoy. For the DPRK, this was very rare and showed that the mission was an unusual one.

Four people from the Chinese side held talks with Choe: Wang Jiarui, vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and director of the CPC’s International Liaison Department; Liu Yunshan, member of the Politburo standing committee; Fan Changlong, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission; and President Xi Jinping. While meeting with the Chinese leaders, Choe indicated that the purpose of his visit was to “improve, consolidate, and develop the DPRK-China relationship.” The terms used implied a recognition that the relationship had become strained and efforts had to be made to amend and “improve” it. According to Choe, the DPRK wanted to concentrate on economic development and improve people’s standard of living, and would like to build a peaceful external environment. Pyongyang would like to take China’s advice to restart a dialogue with the relevant parties. Those signals were familiar to Chinese ears and were welcome gestures on the part of the North Koreans. While meeting with President Xi, Choe specifically expressed Pyongyang’s willingness to solve the problems “through multiple forms of dialogue, including six-party talks.” Xi stressed China’s three “insistences,” namely, insistence on the objective of denucleariza-

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6 People’s Daily [in Mandarin], May 24, 2013.
tion, on maintaining peace and stability on the Peninsula, and on seeking solutions through dialogue and consultation.\(^7\)

The main purpose of Choe’s visit was to mend the relationship with China and escape further isolation. The North Koreans knew China was very unhappy and the consequences were grave. The basic tone Kim Jong-un set in his letter to President Xi called for clearing up “misunderstandings and differences” and not to allow the “enemies” to drive a wedge between the DPRK and China. Therefore, this was a major step by Pyongyang to alleviate external pressures, especially from China, who was for a long time reluctant to use pressure. In addition, Choe suggested to Chinese leaders that the two sides jointly commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice and renovate the tombs of the dead Chinese soldiers, as if deliberately wanting to remind China of their historical connections. The timing of the visit was before the scheduled Xi-Obama and Xi-Park summits in early and late June respectively, during which the Korean situation would inevitably be a high priority on the summit agendas. In this sense, the visit was also a preventive move.

However, while Choe gave Beijing a promise to “take China’s advice” about coming back to talks, there was no mention of denuclearization. Six-party talks were specifically mentioned, but this did not necessarily mean a return to the substance of the talks. Given North Korea’s decision to promote nuclear force and economic growth in parallel, it is hard to assume that Pyongyang would take measures to step back from nuclear development any time soon. Nevertheless, with Choe’s China visit, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is likely entering a period of contact and dialogue.

### A Peace-and-Security Regime and China-U.S.-ROK Cooperation

How likely is it for a peace and security regime to be created in Northeast Asia? This is an often-asked question, while Pyongyang has repeat-

\(^7\) “Xi Jinping Meeting with Kim Jong-un’s Special Envoy Choe” *People’s Daily* [in Mandarin], May 25, 2013.
edly called for turning the armistice regime into a peace regime. Seeing the North Korean nuclear program as a threat, Washington faced difficulties and lacked the means to deal with Pyongyang alone and thus tried to work with other nations to form a united front in the region. Several years ago, the Bush administration drew a “lesson” from the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework and wanted to avoid negotiating with Pyongyang bilaterally, instead pursuing a multilateral approach. For its part, the Obama administration has adopted “strategic patience” toward the DPRK.

For Beijing, it is certainly desirable to see a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. So, on the objective of denuclearization, the national interests of the United States and China to a large extent overlap and converge. At the same time, they may diverge on other issues, such as how to achieve the goal of denuclearization and how to bring about changes to the Peninsula. Each side may have suspicions about the other’s possibly assuming too dominant a role in Northeast Asia and beyond. Therefore, the formation of any security architecture very much depends on a strategic acquiescence between the United States and China and whether they can work together in the years ahead.

A distinction can be made that, among the four major powers in Northeast Asia, the United States and China are the first echelon while Japan and Russia are at the secondary level in terms of their influence. While the United States continues to be a key Pacific power and China is increasingly playing a significant role in the region, understandably U.S.-China cooperation and synergy are essential if any Northeast Asian security architecture is to emerge. Should the Korean nuclear issue be eventually resolved successfully through the six-party talks process, a rough Northeast Asian security architecture will somehow take shape and can be further employed to deal with other regional issues as well. Therefore, whether such a peace and security regime will arise depends to a great extent on whether the six-party talks succeed or not.

Apparently, difficulties and hopes coexist and time and patience are needed for the talks to make progress. The key questions seem
to be as follows: First, will the six-party talks end up like the four-party talks of 1997–99 and how could that be avoided? Past experience shows that when the DPRK is defiant, it is not likely that a multilateral process on the nuclear issue would succeed. How to overcome the hurdle and move the process forward? Will a strategic decision have to be made by both Washington and Pyongyang? Second, it is in the interest of the United States, without doubt, to solve the nuclear issue by diplomatic means, yet to what extent is Washington interested in institutionalizing the six-party talks and turning the process into a peace and security mechanism? From the U.S. perspective, what kind of security regime does it desire for Northeast Asia and will such a regime complement or conflict with its interests in Asia and its alliances with Japan and South Korea, and how does Washington perceive its own role? Third, will a new security framework be able to help solve other regional problems in addition to the nuclear one, such as regional economic cooperation and environmental issues?

When exploring the concept of a peace and security regime, the issue of whether the regime should be binding or non-binding comes to the fore and has to be figured out. At present, the six-party framework does not address the responsibilities that the parties might bear, let alone an overarching authority to enforce those responsibilities. However, as a regional multilateral security assurance arrangement and cooperative measure, a real Northeast Asian peace and security mechanism must have a certain binding force over its members to ensure its credibility and effectiveness. This is because for a regime to be useful, members must observe certain rules and norms. The binding force for constraining members’ behavior comes from two elements. One is making commitments out of anticipation of future beneficial returns. The other is from the possibility of being punished for violation of the rules of behavior. A workable security regime in Northeast Asia implies that a host of new rules, norms, and institutions need to be created.
Bearing in mind the existing bilateral alliances in the region, inevitably there is the question, how will the future Northeast Asian security regime relate to existing bilateral alliances? Currently there are three such alliances: ROK-U.S., Japan-U.S., and DPRK-China. A Northeast Asian security regime probably would not replace the existing alliances, and allowing the bilateral alliances to coexist with a multilateral regime seems a plausible option. Another question then arises: What is the relationship between the hub-and-spoke structure and a networked structure? Is there a tension here? For some Chinese researchers, bilateral alliances must be constrained to some degree so as to limit their potential negative impact on regional peace and security. This could contradict an arguably mainstream U.S. view that holds that “whatever structures evolve out of the six-party process, the strength of the U.S. position in Northeast Asia will continue to rest on the alliances with the ROK and Japan. The search for peace regimes and peace mechanisms should not put them at risk. The alliances are irreplaceable.”

Thus the tension between the hub-and-spoke structure and a more networked structure has to be addressed.

With respect to viable approaches to a peace and security regime, some Chinese researchers tend to advocate the following principles and approaches for building a Northeast Asian peace and security regime. First, within the regime, parties should nurture equal, friendly, and non-adversarial relationships. They seek common ground and mutual understanding while respecting differences. They do not form core groups against any particular country. Second, the countries should start from the “easier” issues and gradually expand to more “difficult” ones. For example, they can begin with the non-conventional security issues which are less sensitive to carry out in order to build consensus and increase common interests among them. When they have achieved a certain degree of trust, they can expand to more traditional areas, including military. Third, the regime’s working mechanism should be consensus-based. Members try to reach con-

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sensus or agreement through consultations on important security-related issues, and then they implement what they agree upon.

A different view argues that the concerned parties should not stick to one pattern but rather remain fully flexible regarding three approaches. First, they should be flexible on proceeding in either a multilateral or bilateral way. Whichever applies is adopted. When no appropriate form of multilateralism can be found, efforts can be made for bilateral relationships to be improved and therefore the multilateral process is advanced. Second, they should remain flexible enough regarding priority areas. They can move on in whatever realm possible, be it economic, societal, or in security affairs. Third, they should be flexible in terms of putting priority on institutional arrangements or advancing cooperation in functional areas. Generally, the latter is easier than the former to carry out, and it is reasonable to start from functional cooperation. However, that is not always the case. For instance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from its very beginning has been an institution, although the member states have pursued collaboration in functional areas as well as respective reduction of armed forces in the border region. In a word, all can move ahead in parallel and it is not necessary to prioritize the various tasks.

There is a scholarly question, or puzzle, as to how institutions and norms come into being and how this relates to major powers. I argue that cooperative major-power relationships can be the key to the formation of a security mechanism. Without major-power cooperation or coordination as such, the possibility would not be very high for a security regime to grow and succeed. The failure of the four-way talks in 1997—99 was a revealing example. This is especially true in highly political areas, in which the formation of a regional security regime has to include core states or core bilateral relationships as an anchor. Thus major-power cooperation is a necessary prerequisite. In the case of Northeast Asia, if China and the United States do not cooperate, the possibility of a security regime to grow would be slim.
On setting up China-U.S.-ROK trilateral talks, it appears that the Obama administration and the Park government are giving it serious consideration but are facing two major difficulties. One, China is concerned with how Pyongyang would perceive the trilateral talks. For China, the priority is always to resume six-party talks since it was China who initiated and helped invent the process and served as chair until the end of 2008 when the six nations last met. With General Choe’s recent visit to China and Pyongyang’s promise, it seems some light can be seen, despite the reluctance on the part of the United States and the ROK, who want to see, as a premise, real possibilities to make progress in the direction of denuclearization. Another obstacle is a concern for the United States and the ROK that Japan may feel left out. In fact, if Japan wants to discuss the abduction issue, Tokyo’s top concern, this can also take place within the six-party framework, and in this way Japan can avoid criticism from Washington and Seoul. The conclusion is China-U.S.-ROK trilateral talks may happen, but will probably happen on the Track 2 level.

One commentator made an argument that it would be delusional to expect Beijing to sit by while the ROK (with or without the United States) moved to occupy and administer a “collapsed” Kim regime. If the ROK wants to secure full Chinese cooperation, Beijing has to be persuaded or reassured that a unified Korea dominated by the South would not do harm to China’s national interests. Until then, China will continue to be cautious and hesitant, wanting the North Korean regime to survive, with watchful eyes on the United States. Because Beijing wanted to avoid annoying prickly Pyongyang, it was and still is reluctant to discuss the sensitive issue of any “contingency” with the United States and/or the ROK.

**Market Forces and the Prospects for the Region**

China’s strategic goals in Northeast Asia, according to my personal understanding, are three-fold: to ensure and prolong the period of development opportunity for China; to maintain stability on its border for the sake of smoothly carrying out the domestic strategy of reviving its northeastern provinces; and to strive for a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula and for a neighbor on its eastern border who is friendly toward China.
Undoubtedly, Northeast Asia is a crucial part of China’s “neighborhood diplomacy,” by means of which China is able to play a significant role and to demonstrate that it is a constructive and responsible stakeholder in Asia. Out of its own national interests, China, as a stabilizing force in the region, will continue to adopt an incremental approach regarding the future of North Korea. In the past, China has been forced to become involved in wars on the Peninsula and because of that paid a high price and sacrificed greatly. Thus, peace in the area truly is China’s sincere wish. At the same time, Beijing has never given up its efforts to persuade and induce Pyongyang to reform and open up to the outside world.

China also is committed to regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. This is required by its national interest, particularly the need to rejuvenate its northeast. China’s three northeast provinces lag behind in comparison with the more successful areas in the east and the south such as Shanghai and the Guangzhou region. For China to succeed in spreading the benefits of economic development to its northeast provinces, it must first succeed in ensuring peace and stability in that region.

Sluggish regional economic integration, which has much to do with North Korea’s proximity, will possibly gain momentum. Irresistible market forces are penetrating into various societies in the region that cut across the borders of at least China, the DPRK, and Russia. The region is indeed a “natural economic territory,” a term coined by late Robert Scalapino. It is now apparent that even a society as closed as the DPRK will not be able to resist this trend for long, as indicated by societal changes in recent years. The political impediments that have resulted from the nuclear crisis have posed an obvious hindrance and have prevented foreign investment in the country. The nuclear problem remains a huge political obstacle for regional economic integration to overcome.

In the early 1990s, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) initiated the Tumen River Area Development Program (TRADP), and it tried to bring together Northeast Asian countries
for a collective enterprise aimed at regional development. For several years the project was high on the agenda of the relevant governments but it gradually lost momentum and ran out of steam, largely because of the inadequate implementation of the cooperative program, insurmountable political difficulties, and the resultant scarcity of investment. Potential investors were understandably intimidated by the tense political environment, poor infrastructure throughout the region, and insufficient governmental backing.

In September 2005, five Northeast Asian countries – China, the DPRK, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, and Russia – jointly launched the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), with the goal of revitalizing and promoting TRADP. They agreed to take over full ownership of the initiative and adopted the ten-year Strategic Action Plan 2006–2015, focusing GTI activities in four key sectors: transportation, energy, tourism, and investment. If the political situation were stable, the regional collective drive for development would have more favorable conditions in which to prosper. At present, trade among Northeast Asian countries, the “easier” part of the plan, has been growing quite rapidly, although investment is still lacking and more difficult to obtain given the fluid and complex circumstances. Obviously, investment is the key to better combining the large pool of talented and cheaper labor of China and North Korea, the capital of South Korea and Japan, and the enormous natural resources of Russia and Mongolia. Exactly in that context, the Chinese leadership initiated the “reviving the Northeast” drive and it achieved some progress. Presumably, the drive could become a catalyst for regional economic integration, and the GTI and the drive were expected to reinforce each other. However, though various proposals have been on the table, including, but not restricted to, oil and natural gas pipeline construction, railway connections, tourism, and so on, progress is slow and limited. Nevertheless, time is on the side of the forces that represent the future.
Stability, Denuclearization, Peace, and Unification: Can the United States, China, and South Korea Align Conflicting Priorities?

Scott Snyder
Senior Fellow for Korea Studies
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Jeju Island, June 2013

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) is the only country to have conducted a nuclear test in the twenty-first century, having conducted three tests, in 2006, 2009, and 2013. All other countries have forgone nuclear testing, regardless of whether they are categorized as nuclear or as non-nuclear states under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). In this respect as well as many others, North Korea remains as an exception and truly isolated from the rest of the international community. In addition to flouting an emerging international norm against testing of nuclear devices, North Korea through its nuclear testing has presented a progressively severe policy dilemma to its neighbors. A nuclear North Korea has the potential to destabilize the Northeast Asian regional security environment and challenges the preferences of all of its neighbors, which hold a consensus that it is desirable for the Korean Peninsula to remain free of nuclear weapons. This regional consensus regarding the desirability of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula, codified in a 2005 six-party joint statement that North Korea also signed, reflects the sensitivity of neighboring states to the security situation on the Peninsula and
underscores the gravity of the challenge that the emergence of a nuclear North Korea holds for the Peninsula and the world.

However, despite this consensus among North Korea’s neighbors that a nuclear North Korea is undesirable, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), China, and the United States, as well as Japan and Russia, each have other priorities or considerations that have thus far conflicted with each other, making it difficult if not impossible for those concerned countries to forge a united opposition to a nuclear North Korea. Arguably, united opposition to North Korea’s nuclear development is necessary if not sufficient to persuade North Korea to turn back from its nuclear path.

Arguably, united opposition to North Korea’s nuclear development is necessary if not sufficient to persuade North Korea to turn back from its nuclear path. In fact, no country that has tested a nuclear weapon has ever voluntarily given up a nuclear capability absent regime change, further underscoring the difficulty and seriousness of the challenge to the regional consensus in favor of a non-nuclear North Korea and pitting denuclearization versus destabilization and regime change as seemingly diametrically opposed policy objectives.

While each of North Korea’s neighbors favors a non-nuclear North Korea as affirmed in the 2005 six-party joint statement, China, South Korea, and the United States until now have held to differing priorities that have prevented them from showing a sense of common purpose regarding how to stop advancement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. The unity of purpose reflected in the 2005 six-party consensus, or what some might see as a united front against acceptance of a nuclear North Korea, has been regarded by many policy strategists as an essential tool that can be used to dissuade North Korea from continuing to pursue a path of nuclearization or taking accompanying actions that heighten tensions or enhance regional instability. North Korea has historically shown that it is adept at taking advantage of these tensions among neighbors as a way of deflecting attention and creating space to continue to pursue its own priorities, regardless of the wishes of its neighbors. But with North Korea’s current push toward a more sophisticated and longer-range nuclear delivery capability, it appears that the respective policies of the countries most
concerned with North Korea’s nuclear capabilities are beginning to align in ways that might limit North Korea’s room for maneuver, and ideally, would cause North Korea to reverse course and abandon nuclear weapons as it pledged to do in the joint statement negotiated only a year prior to North Korea’s first nuclear test. At the same time, conditions inside North Korea are also changing and those conditions can influence both North Korea’s own strategy and the ordering of priorities of its neighbors.

This paper reviews the respective priorities and policies of the United States, China, and South Korea following each of North Korea’s three nuclear tests along with North Korea’s responses and objectives to assess whether the respective responses to North Korea’s nuclear tests are converging or diverging. By analyzing the relative adjustment of priorities in each country following each of North Korea’s nuclear tests, one can identify trends and a sense of progression regarding the relative ordering of policy priorities in three primary issue areas: commitment to denuclearization versus acquiescence to a nuclear North Korea, relative concern regarding North Korea’s internal stability or instability, and respective positions regarding the desirability of Korean reunification versus a commitment to retaining the status quo of a divided Korean Peninsula.

Response to North Korea’s First Nuclear Test (2006): Rhetorical Condemnation and a Revival of Six-Party Diplomacy

North Korea’s first nuclear test arguably was the moment when North Korea directly challenged and broke away from the consensus in favor of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula codified in the September 2005 six-party joint statement. In advance of North Korea’s first nuclear test, many analysts thought that a North Korean nuclear test would be a game changer that would galvanize a unified regional and international response that would lead to firm opposition to a nuclear North Korea. If such a response did not materialize, it would be a sign of acquiescence to a nuclear North Korea since North Korea itself would be consciously pursuing the path that India and Pakistan had both taken in the 1990s with the expectation that opposition to a nuclear North Korea would dissipate, sanctions would
fail, and North Korea would emerge as a de facto nuclear weapons state with greater bargaining power and a greater sense of security than before. Instead of inviting hand-wringing, fatalism, or an acceptance that the Northeast Asian regional security situation must adjust to a new reality marked by the existence of a nuclear North Korea, the response to North Korea's first nuclear test was to mobilize a consensus in favor of rhetorical condemnation and redoubled efforts to use diplomacy as a means by which to reverse North Korea's efforts to pursue nuclearization. However, beyond this seeming consensus reflected both in the passage of UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1718 condemning North Korea's nuclear test and the renewal of dormant six-party talks including the fashioning of steps designed to implement North Korea's denuclearization, there were arguably deeper differences in priorities among the United States, South Korea, and China that ultimately prevented them from cooperating fully to pressure North Korea to turn back from the nuclear path. These differences probably emboldened North Korea to believe that its Pakistan strategy was working and that eventually the world would have no choice but to accept a nuclear North Korea. On the other hand, the results of the test itself were ambiguous, revealing North Korea's intent to become a nuclear power.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Primary Responses to North Korea’s 2006 Nuclear Test</th>
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<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
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weapons state but leaving some questions among technical specialists regarding the extent of North Korea’s mastery of nuclear technology and especially about its capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon. Table 1 illustrates the differences among the United States, China, and South Korea that are reflected in their respective priorities, preferred instruments, and primary concerns following North Korea’s 2006 nuclear test.

The initial U.S. statement following the first North Korean nuclear test tried to send North Korea a clear message that warned of the consequences of proliferating nuclear materials to other countries. In the days following North Korea’s nuclear test, the two top priorities for the Bush administration were the securing of a strong UN resolution condemning the North’s nuclear test and providing assurances to allies that the United States would fulfill its extended deterrence commitments in the face of North Korea’s nuclear threats. South Korea went along with these actions, but protected its existing cooperation with North Korea and actually continued to increase economic cooperation through the Kaesong Industrial Zone despite North Korea’s nuclear test. China supported the UN sanctions resolution and dispatched Tang Jiaxuan as a special envoy to Washington, Moscow, and Pyongyang in an attempt to urgently bring all parties back to the six-party dialogue table. China’s diplomatic initiative appeared to bear some fruit within weeks of North Korea’s nuclear test as the United States and North Korea announced in Beijing the resumption of six-party talks by the end of the year.

Despite a convergence of interest in resuming diplomacy, each of the parties had differing interests and motives that led them to support six-party diplomacy as a primary mechanism for addressing North Korea’s nuclear test. The United States sought to reverse North Korea’s nuclearization by pressing it to meet its commitments under the 2005 six-party joint statement. South Korea sought to lower the temperature and continued to pursue inter-Korean economic cooperation while seeking to avoid being marginalized in six-party diplomacy. China desired resumption of

Despite U.S.-led efforts to present a united front at the six-party talks, North Korea’s neighbors all had differing top priorities that obscured their ability to work together.
talks as a crisis management mechanism, to prevent the tensions from escalating. Despite U.S.-led efforts to present a united front at the six-party talks and a rhetorical consensus in favor of North Korea’s denuclearization as represented in the 2005 six-party joint statement, North Korea’s neighbors all had differing top priorities that obscured their ability to work together under the consensus on the desirability of North Korea’s denuclearization. Table 2 shows the priorities of the respective parties in response to North Korea’s first nuclear test.

In the end, the differing priorities of North Korea’s neighbors limited their ability to fully unify in opposition to North Korea’s nuclear test, leaving North Korea apparent room for maneuver within the context of the multilateral talks. North Korea begrudgingly signed on to steps designed to implement a partial road map toward denuclearization, but in the process of taking reversible steps toward denuclearization, Pyongyang also obstructed implementation and in practice did not comply with the objective of denuclearization even while providing the least possible cooperation necessary to keep the process going. But this approach changed in late 2008 in the waning days of the Bush administration and after Kim Jong-il allegedly suffered a stroke.

Table 2: Priorities of DPRK and Its Neighbors Following First Nuclear Test, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Denuclearization</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Stability</th>
<th>Status quo</th>
<th>Denuclearization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Stability (peaceful coexistence)</td>
<td>Unification</td>
<td>Denuclearization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>Denuclearization</td>
<td>Cooperate with negotiated denuclearization</td>
<td>Resource extraction</td>
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</table>


The spring of 2009 was a period of political transition in the United States from the Bush administration to the Obama administration. Initially, there were expectations that the Obama administration would pursue more active diplomacy with North Korea. But North Korea’s shift in position away from the principle of “action for action” based on denuclearization in exchange for diplomatic normalization as quid pro quos made it diffi-
cult to return to dialogue. Instead, the DPRK announced just days prior to President Obama’s inauguration that its policy had shifted to one in which the United States would be required to abandon its “hostile policy” toward North Korea first, before serious arms control negotiations could occur, on the premise that the United States and North Korea are both nuclear powers. North Korea’s multi-stage rocket launch and second nuclear test in April and May of 2009 further antagonized the situation, requiring the Obama administration to respond strongly to North Korea’s provocative actions. The result was a policy of “strategic patience” that deemphasized but did not abandon direct dialogue, focused on shaping North Korea’s environment rather than on direct engagement with the regime in Pyongyang, and one that insisted on no rewards for bad behavior and denied North Korea a negotiating forum or tangible benefits from its provocative actions.

South Korea’s leadership in 2009 had shifted from a progressive approach under Roh Moo-hyun to a conservative leadership under Lee Myung-bak. Lee made denuclearization a priority and promised greater assistance to North Korea in the context of denuclearization. The Lee administration sustained the Kaesong Industrial Complex but curtailed other forms of inter-Korean economic cooperation, especially from May 2010, following the determination of a South Korean-led investigation that the sinking of the Cheonan was likely carried out by North Korea. Pyongyang responded poorly to the Lee administration’s efforts to hold North Korea accountable for its provocations, and the relationship progressively deteriorated.

As shown in table 3, China continued to focus on stabilization of North Korea as its highest priority, but this goal took on added urgency in the context of Kim Jong-il’s stroke and Chinese worries about potential North Korean instability in the event of Kim Jong-il’s death. China cooperated with the United States and others at the UN Security Council to pass UNSC resolution 1874, which authorized UN member states to pursue and interdict suspected North Korean shipments of nuclear or missile-related goods and equipment and set up a UN expert panel to investigate and report on such cases. But China also was frustrated with its perceived lack of leverage with North Korea after the 2006 North Korean nuclear test – following the 2006 test, enhanced cooperation with the
United States to reinvigorate the six-party talks seemed to diminish Chinese influence with North Korea and bring relatively little credit for China with the United States. As a result, China revised its policy in the summer following the 2009 nuclear test to one that emphasized North Korea’s strategic value, promoted stability in North Korea, and attempted to sustain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. China interpreted the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution narrowly, and the China-DPRK economic relationship grew rapidly following North Korea’s second nuclear test. China also resisted international cooperation with South Korea and the United States at the United Nations to condemn North Korea for its sinking of the Cheonan, and it completely blocked consideration of a UN response to North Korea’s shelling of South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island in November of 2010. It became clear that China’s stabilization policies toward North Korea were directly at odds with those of South Korea and the United States.

A comparison of responses to North Korea’s 2009 and 2006 nuclear tests provides a mixed picture regarding convergence of American, South Korean, and Chinese policy responses. On the one hand, China’s coopera-

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**Table 3: Primary Responses to North Korea’s 2009 Nuclear Test**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Objective</th>
<th>Primary Tools/Instruments</th>
<th>Primary Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Denuclearization; not rewarding North Korea</td>
<td>Sanctions and no rewards; containment</td>
<td>Proliferation; stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Binding North Korea through increased economic incentives and high-level consultations</td>
<td>Leadership vacuum and reining in aggressive DPRK behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Denuclearization; major support conditioned on North Korea’s denuclearization</td>
<td>Limiting economic flows to North Korea; isolating North Korea in international forums</td>
<td>Growing nuclear blackmail threat and need to strengthen deterrence against provocations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>Establishing itself as a nuclear weapons state</td>
<td>Relentless commitment to pursuit of its program</td>
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China revised its policy in the summer following the 2009 nuclear test to one that emphasized North Korea’s strategic value, promoted stability in North Korea, and attempted to sustain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.
tion at the United Nations yielded a stronger-than-expected UN Security Council resolution that included concrete steps to monitor and interdict nuclear and missile transfers to and from North Korea. In addition, U.S. and South Korean priorities in response to North Korea’s second nuclear test were clearly in alignment with each other under Presidents Obama and Lee. A U.S.-ROK joint vision statement in June 2009 emphasized the priority of North Korea’s denuclearization and also included an unprecedented statement calling for Korea’s reunification as a democratic, market economy (that is, on South Korean terms).

But China’s concerns with North Korea’s internal stability ultimately proved to move China further away in practice from the United States and South Korea, leaving a big gap between China and the international community that in effect gave North Korea protection from efforts to isolate or squeeze it as a punishment for its defiance of international norms under the NPT.

**Response to North Korea’s Third Nuclear Test (2013): Rhetorical Convergence and Expanded Cooperation**

North Korea’s successful launch of an object that achieved earth orbit in December 2012 and its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013, occurred in the midst of simultaneous political leadership transitions in South Korea, Japan, and China, and a transition to the second Obama administration in the United States. The patterns and justifications for North Korean behavior in 2012–13 provide a striking parallel with North Korea’s approach in 2009, despite the fact that North Korea had also undergone a leadership transition in early 2012 from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. North Korea’s provocative defiance of existing UN Security Council resolutions provided an early test of the policies and leaderships in China,
South Korea, and the United States. Although the various parties are still formulating their long-term policy responses, North Korea’s nuclear test appears to have catalyzed a more unified response among the three countries. The relative unity of the response, in turn, is designed to influence North Korea’s nuclear policy and strategy in the direction of denuclearization. But it remains to be seen whether there will be sufficient unity of response in practice, whether differing policy priorities emerge under the new leaderships despite their consensus in favor of denuclearization that might mitigate pressure on North Korea, or whether international pressure will finally induce North Korean cooperation or further shows of North Korean defiance. Let’s explore initial policy responses to North Korea’s nuclear test and spike in provocative rhetoric during February—April of 2013.

The United States responded to North Korea’s nuclear test and rhetorical flurry according to a pre-established framework based on prior dialogue with North Korea, including the negotiations preceding the failed Leap Day understanding of February 29, 2012, and two subsequent rounds of secret dialogue with North Korea. Although we do not know precisely all the contents of U.S.-DPRK secret dialogue, statements from senior officials including President Obama and National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon suggest the following main points: 1) the United States remains open to “authentic” dialogue with North Korea, including a willingness to return to six-party talks, on an agenda that includes North Korea’s denuclearization, but only under conditions where North Korea is also showing “seriousness of purpose” and commitment through actions to the objective of denuclearization; 2) the United States regards continued North Korean nuclear and missile testing as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions and will continue to impose ever-tighter sanctions in response to North Korea’s violations of the resolutions; 3) the United States has conducted intensive diplomatic consultations with South Korea, Japan, and China in an effort to strengthen an emerging consensus that the neighborhood can no longer tolerate continued North Korean nuclear development and will not accept a nuclear North Korea; 4) in response to North Korean provocative rhetoric, the United States has reiterated that it is prepared to defend itself and its allies against any aggression or other attacks
by North Korea and that North Korean provocations would meet a devast-
ating allied response.

As North Korea rejected the passage of UN Security Council resolu-
tions in January and February of 2013, it emphasized that it retains its right
to peaceful satellite launches and that it would conduct further missile and possibly nuclear tests. It also ramped up rhetoric in conjunction with U.S.-ROK joint military exercises in March and April that coincided with Park Geun-hye’s assumption of power in February 2013 and Xi Jinping’s formal assumption of power in March 2013. In response to North Korea’s escalating rhetoric, the United States publicized the deployment of nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers and F-22 fighters as part of exercises on the Peninsula in a “show of force” designed to underscore the credibility of U.S. deterrence toward North Korea and to provide assurances to South Korea and Japan regarding the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Secretary of Defense Hagel also announced new commitments to develop missile defense installations along the West Coast of the United States by 2017 and the immediate deployment of Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) capabilities to Guam. In addition, the United States has faithfully maintained strong U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination through a deepening of military exercises and a series of political meetings that have occurred even despite a frosty bilateral relationship between new administrations in South Korea and Japan. These exercises fed into North Korea’s escalating threats and fed an atmosphere of uncertainty and risk. North Korea tried to exploit this atmosphere by threatening foreign civilians in both Pyongyang and South Korea in an effort to destabilize South Korea’s economic environment. Japan-ROK security cooperation on North Korea has underscored to China the fact that North Korea’s provocative rhetoric and actions have come at a tangible cost to China’s own security interests.
China the fact that North Korea’s provocative rhetoric and actions have come at a tangible cost to China’s own security interests.

North Korea’s escalating threats influenced the initial shape of South Korean policy toward the North. As a candidate, Park Geun-hye had promised to seek dialogue with North Korea based on her principle of “trust-politik,” which essentially emphasized step-by-step mutual confidence building through dialogue. North Korea’s denuclearization remained an objective and a precondition for large-scale assistance, but Park Geun-hye signaled early in her administration a willingness to provide North Korea with humanitarian aid, authorizing the distribution of tuberculosis vaccines through the Eugene Bell Foundation in late March, before the crisis had yet reached its peak. However, the escalation of tensions and threats had the effect of constraining early South Korean initiatives toward the North. South Korea’s new administration also worked hard to coordinate its position with the United States and prepared to step up engagement with China over North Korea-related issues in advance of Park’s first summit meetings with President Obama in Washington in May and with President Xi in Beijing in June. The distinguishing features of the Park Geun-hye approach to North Korea, despite the spike in tensions, were that South Korea remained open to dialogue based on the principle of trust-politik, that she remained committed to the defense of South Korea and gave strong warnings regarding South Korean readiness to respond strongly to North Korean military provocations, and that denuclearization remains a priority and a prerequisite for the expansion of large-scale South Korean development assistance to North Korea, although South Korea was prepared to begin by providing humanitarian aid as part of efforts to build confidence between the two sides. South Korea quickly accepted a dialogue offer from North Korea issued in early June only days prior to the Xi-Obama summit at Sunnylands, but preliminary negotiations over the talks broke down over protocol issues regarding the ranking of the representatives to talks.

China is North Korea’s main patron and provider of energy and food assistance, and all eyes turned to Beijing’s policies under Xi Jinping as an influential if not decisive factor in pressuring North Korea back toward the path of denuclearization. China supported a stronger UN Security Council resolution condemning North Korea’s nuclear test that also included reference to UN Chapter 7 measures toward the North. “China
also publicly revealed that it would ban trade with North Korea’s Foreign Trade Bank as part of its implementation of sanctions toward North Korea. During the May 2013 visit of Choe Ryong-hae, North Korea’s highest-ranking military man, President Xi and China’s top leadership sent a unified signal that “all the parties involved should stick to the objective of denuclearization, safeguard peace and stability on the peninsula, and resolve disputes through dialogue and consultation.” President Xi reiterated China’s commitment to the unacceptability of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state in his summit discussions with President Obama in Sunnylands in June, aligning China’s policy priority on denuclearization with the positions of the United States and South Korea.

An important feature of the evolution of China’s policy toward North Korea has been that China and South Korea under two new administrations appear set to dramatically strengthen their cooperation on North Korea issues. This is important because China’s loyalty toward Pyongyang has always inhibited the development of strategic cooperation with South Korea, along with Chinese concerns that the U.S.-ROK alliance could

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Main Objective</th>
<th>Primary Tools/Instruments</th>
<th>Primary Concern</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td>Denuclearization</td>
<td>Sanctions; shaping North Korea’s environment; direct dialogue conditioned upon DPRK action, not words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>China</strong></td>
<td>Denuclearization; peace and stability; resolve disputes through dialogue</td>
<td>Limited sanctions support; renewed diplomacy; rhetorical common purpose with United States/ROK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Korea</strong></td>
<td>Denuclearization, stabilization of inter-Korean dialogue</td>
<td>Dialogue and pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North Korea</strong></td>
<td>Recognition as nuclear state; simultaneous pursuit of nuclear and economic development</td>
<td>Charm offensive, then provocation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
also be directed at China. But Presidents Park and Xi seem set to establish a new paradigm in their relationship, and it may mark a significant step forward toward a fuller alignment of South Korean and Chinese priorities in support of efforts to achieve North Korea’s denuclearization.

Table 6: Priorities of DPRK and Its Neighbors Following Third Nuclear Test, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Denuclearization</th>
<th>Stabilization of the Korean Peninsula; eventual Korean reunification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Denuclearization</td>
<td>Maintain status quo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Denuclearization</td>
<td>Stabilization of the Korean Peninsula; eventual Korean reunification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>Recognition as a nuclear weapons state</td>
<td>Regime survival/saving face for Kim Jong-un</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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There is no question that there has been an advancement in the alignment of the United States, South Korea, and China behind a unified view that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is an essential step in stabilizing the regional security environment in Northeast Asia. However, it is not clear that this rhetorical alignment will be sufficient unless the parties are able to stick together in response to North Korean efforts to capitalize on remaining gaps or to divide the parties in their efforts to maximize denuclearization pressure on North Korea. Both a North Korean charm offensive and fears of North Korea’s destabilization might create circumstances that would test the apparent U.S.-China-ROK trilateral consensus on denuclearization. Further, it is clear that North Korea’s commitment to a nuclear status, now embodied in the preamble to its constitution and embedded in reality as a result of three nuclear tests, will be difficult to reverse, as a reversal would now arguably have implications for the leadership’s domestic legitimacy. The possibility also exists that conflicting secondary priorities may emerge that could threaten prospects for trilateral U.S.-China-ROK coordination. For instance, the policy response to evidence of North Korea’s destabilization could once again create gaps between China and the United

China and South Korea under two new administrations appear set to dramatically strengthen their cooperation on North Korea issues.
States and the ROK respectively. Table 6 provides a preliminary evaluation of the priorities of North Korea and its neighbors following the third North Korean nuclear test. It shows an alignment of top priorities among the United States, South Korea, and China. This table suggests that North Korea’s current response will constitute a crucial test of the proposition that alignment among the United States, South Korea, and China will be effective in deflecting North Korea’s steadfast focus on nuclear possession as its primary path to achieving security.

**Conclusion: Increasing Alignment of North Korean Policies, But to What End?**

To the extent that North Korea has succeeded in establishing itself as having a nuclear weapons capability, it has depended on conflicting priorities among its neighbors regarding denuclearization. However, North Korea’s tests have also had the effect of closing the gap in its neighbors’ priorities: while North Korea’s threat capacities have grown, the perceptions of these expanded capacities and their implications have ultimately had a unifying effect on the perceptions of its neighbors, resulting in an alignment of views among the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China that North Korea’s nuclear capacities are not only destabilizing, but pose a threat to regional stability that is increasingly intolerable.

However, two primary factors remain as potential problems despite the alignment of regional priorities in favor of North Korea’s denuclearization. First, it is not clear whether North Korea’s response— including its efforts to break the alignment, buy time, and gain breathing space for its nuclear development to continue— will ultimately find the cracks in

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**Even if North Korea were to come back to the path of denuclearization, negotiations on implementation of a denuclearization process would likely prove to be contentious and will inevitably involve continuous efforts on the part of North Korea to crack the united front of pressure to denuclearize.**
the regional consensus or play on conflicting secondary priorities among North Korea’s neighbors that might delay or distract these countries in their efforts to draw North Korea into a peaceful (but likely protracted) denuclearization process. Even if North Korea were to come back to the path of denuclearization, negotiations on implementation of a denuclearization process would likely prove to be contentious and will inevitably involve continuous efforts on the part of North Korea to crack the united front of pressure to denuclearize. Would the United States, China, and South Korea have sufficient staying power to pursue implementation of denuclearization to its natural end despite Pyongyang’s perpetual foot-dragging, or would other priorities intervene to distract North Korea’s neighbors from practical pursuit of their possibly fragile denuclearization consensus?

Second, there is a possibility that the increasing alignment of the parties and North Korea’s inability to find cracks among its neighbors regarding the necessity of denuclearization could cause North Korea to take precipitous and risky actions that would shake up the situation and re-shuffle the deck of priorities toward North Korea, possibly leading to renewed confrontation or contradictions between China, the United States, and South Korea. It is also possible that changed circumstances in North Korea and/or the region could divert the apparent consensus on denuclearization by highlighting conflicting secondary priorities among North Korea’s neighbors, including on the question of the future end state on the Korean Peninsula — that is, the question of how to think about unification versus the perpetuation of the two Koreas and the implications for sustained U.S.-China-ROK cooperation on North Korea-related issues beyond denuclearization.

Against this backdrop, it is worth reflecting on exactly how far the United States and China might be willing to go in cooperating to prevent North Korea from undertaking even more destabilizing actions than it has already. It is clear that North Korea’s over-the-top rhetoric and threats to undertake a preemptive nuclear strike on the United States, America’s perception of heightened political risks on the Korean Peninsula associated with the new leadership of Kim Jong-un (and whether he is a steady or risk-prone leader, whether he has consolidated political control within North Korea, and whether the vulnerabilities of his own system may progressively push North Korea into an increasingly unstable position as it
alternates between provocation and charm to maintain regime stability), and a more nervous political debate about the implications for South Korea and Japan of North Korea’s nuclear acquisition have all combined to work against China’s interest in maintaining regional stability through continued support of North Korea.

These circumstances underscore the need for a reassessment of Chinese policy toward North Korea that must take into account the following factors. First, to what extent has China’s unconditional support for and protection of North Korea indirectly emboldened Pyongyang to become more provocative? Has China’s recent policy approach provided North Korea with cover that has contributed to a decrease in inter-Korean stability (along with other factors)? Second, the U.S.-led response to North Korea’s provocations has included efforts to strengthen missile defense in the Pacific, strengthening of U.S.-Japan-ROK strategic coordination even despite serious problems in Japan-ROK political relations, and an expansion of U.S.-ROK military exercises as a show of deterrence against North Korean aggression. Third, Xi Jinping’s idea of developing a new type of great-power relationship requires China-U.S. cooperation in order to prove that it is “win-win.” North Korea has been advanced through the Sunnylands summit as the most likely area where cooperation is possible, given the relative difficulty of addressing some of the issues that divide the United States and China over maritime claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea or cooperation on cyber security.

Given these circumstances, it appears that there is an expanded opportunity for China-U.S. collaboration on North Korea issues based on the ongoing common interest of the two countries in denuclearization. This interest was stated in the U.S.-China joint communiqué released in January 2011 and has been a central theme of Sino-U.S. joint statements for several years, but now both sides have a greater incentive to take practical steps toward achieving that shared objective. In addition, China appears to have accepted the necessity of using sanctions to punish North Korea through the passage of successive UN Security Council resolutions, as long as those resolutions are not so tightly implemented that they would risk North Korean stability. The emergence of an administration in South Korea that is clearly eager to improve relations with China might also help China to take a tougher stance on North Korea to the extent that Beijing
can be reassured that a better Sino-South Korean relationship might compensate for any loss of a strategic buffer that China might face as a result of taking a tougher position toward North Korea.

However, three sets of limitations could arguably circumscribe the scope of China-U.S. cooperation going forward. First, China must grapple with the question of whether the shared objective of North Korea’s denuclearization can be achieved peacefully or whether it will be accompanied by destabilization. As long as North Korea continues to take actions to improve its capabilities, it may in fact be impossible to separate denuclearization from destabilization, but it is worth trying. As a practical matter, this circumstance gives China great incentive to back up the U.S. demands for no new nuclear or missile tests as a prerequisite for returning to the path of denuclearization. China’s ability to guarantee that North Korea will not conduct such activities would greatly improve prospects for returning to a diplomatic track, while China’s inability to do so would come at a cost and risk to future diplomatic efforts with North Korea.

Second, can China wean South Korea from its security dependency on the United States as part of Beijing’s interest in assuring a Korean Peninsula that is friendly to Chinese interests? Given the strong desire of the Park administration to improve relations with China, it might seem that there is an opportunity for China to advance strategic relations with South Korea at America’s expense; however, such an approach would run counter to the idea of establishing a “new type of great power relations” and undermine China’s interest in establishing a win-win paradigm as a characteristic of U.S.-China interaction. Plus, South Korea has a strong interest in seeing the win-win component of U.S.-China relations further developed, so the current environment is already conducive to strong ROK-China cooperation.

Third, how will North Korea react to China’s adjustment in its policy to emphasize denuclearization? It is likely that North Korea will not
be happy and that this will impose additional strains on China-DPRK relations, especially to the extent that North Korea sees further improvement of the South Korea-China relationship as a form of Chinese betrayal. Given this circumstance, it will be important for China to also offer North Korea sufficient assurances of support but not to the extent that those assurances enable further North Korean provocations. One potential area of joint cooperation in the future might be a strengthened effort to encourage North Korea’s economic development in ways that reinforce steps taken to send North Korea a signal that its only path to survival is denuclearization.
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