



THE MAUREEN AND MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION

# Reexamining North Korea Policy: A Blue-Sky Approach

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On February 3-5, 2017, nine young scholars – Japanese, American, and European – gathered at the Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia for a two-day closed workshop to take a fresh look at challenges on the Korean Peninsula. The Japan-US Task Force on a New Approach to DPRK was advised by three veteran hands: Keith Luse (Executive Director, The National Committee on North Korea), Alexander Ilitchev (Senior Fellow, Mansfield Foundation), and Seoul-based scholar Andrei Lankov. The task force explored new ideas for addressing the challenges presented by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), paying special attention to how the U.S.-Japan alliance could better and more deeply engage the Republic of Korea to achieve common goals for the Korean Peninsula. The task force members were asked to decouple their approach from all that has preceded it – the 1991 North-South Denuclearization Agreement, the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Six-Party Talks Joint Statement of September 2005, the Leap Day Deal, etc. The goal was to start fresh – with a blue sky – and to identify the interests, policy goals, tools, and constraints as they are today, not as they were thirty years ago or as we might hope they would be.

The task force members set the scene by examining North Korea to establish a common understanding of the country – its leadership, economy, conventional military power, nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and human rights situation. This helped the group define facts, assumptions and unknowns about North Korea. The exercise revealed critical gaps of knowledge and an abundance of uncertainties, especially with regard to the impact of sanctions on the DPRK economy and the efficacy of sanctions to curtail its nuclear weapons program.

The group then worked to identify core interests, priorities, goals, and policy tools, from the perspective of the Japan-US alliance. We also considered the domestic and international obstacles to achieving different goals, including both practical and political constraints. Finally, we strove to identify some low-hanging fruit – initiatives that we believe could help advance the core interests of the Japan-US alliance, close critical knowledge gaps, reshape the political environment, bring fresh resources to bear, establish new points of leverage, or unlock new tools currently not available to policymakers.

Drafting a new DPRK policy was far beyond the scope of this three-day seminar. Our objectives were more modest – to test assumptions, identify knowledge gaps, spot critical factors, and hopefully generate a few modest policy proposals to advance core interests. We anticipate our findings will be helpful to Washington and Tokyo as both governments undertake a comprehensive North Korea policy review.

This report was prepared by Mansfield Foundation staff. We have attempted accurately to present the key findings from the workshop and capture the consensus of the group. This report may or may not reflect the views of any individual member of the task force. The views expressed herein should not be attributed to any individual participant or the organizations with which they are affiliated. All members of the workshop attended in their personal capacity. Conversations were conducted off-the-record to ensure an open and supportive environment.

## Taking Stock: The Land of Lousy Options

Former NSC Director for Asian Affairs Victor Cha famously called Korea – specifically, the challenges posed by the DPRK and its pursuit of nuclear weapons – the “land of lousy policy options.” Cha’s pithy conclusion captures the frustration of two generations of policymakers who have struggled to curtail North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, forge a lasting peace, and advance the broader goals of peace, stability, economic development, and human rights on the Korean Peninsula. His pessimism is infused with a healthy dose of realism. ***If completely, verifiably, and irreversibly eliminating the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program; ending the Korean War; solving the Japanese abduction issue; and promoting greater DPRK respect for human rights were easy tasks, they would have been accomplished by now.***

But Cha’s formulation should not become an excuse for inaction. Obama’s “Strategic Patience,” like the British “Masterful Inactivity” approach to foreign policy upon which it was based, may be an acceptable strategy when time is on your side or when the time for decisive action has not yet arrived. But when patience morphs into *indifference* or *benign neglect*, it ceases to be a viable policy approach. Time does not appear to be on our side when it comes to preventing the DPRK from consolidating its de facto status as a nuclear weapons state. And when neglected, the DPRK has a long history of taking actions designed to command our attention. The DPRK is not a geographically isolated country that we can quarantine. It exists at the intersection of two nuclear powers and four of the world’s top ten economies. As recent events have underscored, we don’t have the luxury of ignoring the DPRK and hoping it will die a quiet death.

The Mansfield Foundation’s approach to the challenges of the Korean Peninsula implicitly rejects the notion that Korea is a land of lousy policy options. If all of the options appear “lousy,” perhaps we need to reexamine our interests and

goals and embrace a less ambitious, but still meaningful, policy agenda? Or perhaps we need to scrape the barnacles off our policy vessel – the accretions of thirty years of (mostly) failed attempts to convince the DPRK to change course – and see if the hull or keel need to be modified in order for the boat to get underway? These are the questions we asked ourselves at the outset of our workshop.

## Core Interests and Priorities of the Japan-US Alliance on the Korean Peninsula

Rather than importing the interests, goals, and policy tools articulated by the United States, Japan, and the ROK since the DPRK nuclear issue first surfaced in the mid-1980s, we chose to take a fresh look, questioning everything. Since the allies first become concerned about the DPRK’s nuclear ambitions, the international environment has changed dramatically, but our basic approach has rarely varied more than a few degrees. The transformative developments since the mid-1980s include: the Tiananmen Crisis; the end of the cold war; the collapse of the Soviet Union; the removal of US nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula; the establishment of normal China-ROK diplomatic and economic ties; China’s emergence as a major global economic power; the ROK’s emergence as a global economic player; major revisions to the US-ROK and US-Japan alliances; the Agreed Framework and its demise; the addition of Pakistan to the list of nuclear weapons states and Iran to the list of nuclear threshold states; the death of two Kim family leaders and the crowning of a third; the launch and suspension of the Six-Party Talks; and five DPRK nuclear tests. These developments clearly merit a “reset” of DPRK policy.

We asked our scholars to identify the core interests of the United States, Japan, the ROK, China, and the DPRK. The following table shows our results. The national interests are not listed in any particular order. Two “+” signs indicate our assessment that a given nation attaches an exceptionally high priority to that particular interest.

Table One: Core Interests of Major Players on the Korean Peninsula

COUNTRIES	JAPAN	US	ROK	DPRK	CHINA
<b>INTERESTS</b>					
<b>Denuclearization</b>	++	++	+		+
<b>Nonproliferation</b>	+	++	+		?
<b>Stability</b>	+	+	++		++
<b>Avoid New War</b>	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Unification</b>	+ Conditional	+ Conditional	+ Conditional	+ Conditional	Opposed
<b>Own Regime Survival</b>	++	++	++	++	++
<b>Economic Growth</b>	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Economic Integration</b>	+	+	++	Conditional	+
<b>Protection of Human Rights</b>	++ Abductees	+	+		
<b>Peace Treaty</b>	Conditional	Conditional	+	+	+
<b>Democracy</b>	+	+	+		

This core interest exercise revealed a few “30,000 foot” observations. First, Japan and the United States tend to be most concerned about *denuclearization*, while the ROK and China are most concerned with preserving *stability*. Second, each country has at least one interest of special concern: *nonproliferation* for the US; abductees for Japan; North-South *economic integration* (to promote peace and stability and eventual unification) for the ROK; and *regime survival* for the DPRK. Finally, it appears at first glance that the interests of Japan, the United States, and the ROK are largely in alignment. Deeper analysis revealed that while Tokyo, Washington, and Seoul do indeed share many core interests, there are

important, if subtle, differences in how these interests are prioritized and defined.

We found a few interests that appear common for all of the states, including the DPRK. All want to avoid the resumption of hostilities, and we assess that all are interested in promoting economic growth and ensuring the survival of their political regimes. All would likely support a peace treaty ending the Korean War, but the United States and Japan would almost certainly insist on several conditions, to include complete and verifiable denuclearization. The other parties would likely be more flexible on the point of denuclearization.

***It is worth highlighting that China's interests are noticeably out of alignment with those of the United States and its allies. It's not only that China values stability over denuclearization, but that Beijing's views on unification and "values" – democracy and human rights – are at odds with those generally shared by Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. Those who argue that China should take greater responsibility for resolving the nuclear crisis on the peninsula should carefully consider the implications of outsourcing DPRK policy to Beijing. There is a strong likelihood that China, if motivated to do more, will strive to orchestrate a solution inconsistent with the long-term interests of the allies.***

Two final high-level observations came as a surprise to many of the task force participants. We judge that the DPRK may actually have a preference for a degree of instability – *outside its borders* – as this can afford Pyongyang greater diplomatic maneuvering room. And while the DPRK does seek trading relationships, we assess that Pyongyang will do its best to minimize the risks of “cultural pollution” associated with true economic integration, maximizing political control and domestic tranquility rather than economic growth. Pyongyang does not value economic engagement – particularly with Japan, the US, and the ROK – as highly as many Westerners believe. This helps to explain in part why the promise of sanctions relief in exchange for concrete steps toward denuclearization has failed, up until now, to persuade the DPRK to change course.

As already mentioned, when asked to *prioritize* interests from the joint perspective of the Japan-US alliance, the task force participants generally agreed that *security* issues trump all others. By contrast, Seoul places a premium on maintaining stability, as instability negatively (and disproportionately) affects the ROK's economic prospects and by extension the political popularity of the government. ***This means that Seoul may at times be more risk averse than either Washington or Tokyo, with important implications when it comes to policies ostensibly designed to enhance security, such as joint military exercises, pre-emptive strike options, or force enhancement options such as THAAD.***

Some participants argued that the United States and Japan are keenly interested in protecting human rights on the peninsula, pointing to the passage of the North Korea Human Rights Act, the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry, and the personal commitment of Prime Minister Abe to the abduction issue. Most workshop participants agreed, after deliberation, that efforts by the United States and the ROK to promote human rights in the North have been inconsistent and often low-priority, and have rarely matched those of Japan in terms of intensity. ***Of special note, we judge that the oft-overlooked issue of South Korean abductees remains politically salient for Seoul, opening up the possibility of Tokyo-Seoul collaboration on a human rights issue (abductions) of mutual concern.***

## **Unification: A Seductive Illusion**

When asked to rank “unification” against other core interests, most workshop members placed it *last*. They did so even though many also expressed a belief that denuclearization of the peninsula may only be possible after unification. We found this surprising, and so delved a bit more deeply into the issue to try to determine *why* unification was not judged to be a more urgent priority. The bottom line? ***Although most nations in the region pay lip service to the goal of unification, there is no consensus on what unification should look like.***

The United States and Japan have expressed support for a unified Korea under a democratic, capitalist system that remains a US treaty ally. We judge that the United States is more eager to see Korean unification than is Japan. As for the ROK, views on unification are mixed. Some political leaders and parties are largely aligned with Tokyo and Washington. Others may prefer to see Korea unify as a neutral state, with US bases closed and troops sent home. In the North, the Korean Workers Party under the leadership of Kim Jong-un remains committed to unification as the regime's ultimate goal. As a practical matter, however, the DPRK appears to have largely abandoned the dream of unification. In

any case, the DPRK's formula for unification is not compatible (at least at the end stage) with any resolution acceptable to the ROK.

Perhaps no country has greater ability to influence the course of Korean unification than does China. China controls more than 90% of all trade with the DPRK, and is the source of almost all of North Korea's fuel oil. Beijing could literally turn out the lights in Pyongyang. But as previously mentioned, Beijing fought a war to prevent a unified democratic Korea, sacrificing tens of thousands of lives, including Mao's son. We judge that for all of its disappointment with the DPRK, Beijing remains opposed, at least for now, to most unification scenarios, including peaceful absorption of the North by the South or conquest of the South by the North. A divided peninsula, for all of its inherent risks, remains preferable for Beijing to having a US treaty ally bordering the Yalu River.

Given these disparate interests, we see no realistic near-term or mid-term pathway to unification, and hence judge that the Japan-US alliance should not attach high priority to this objective. Rather, the allies should ensure that their near and mid-term policies remain consistent with the long-term goal of unification, to avoid putting themselves on a collision course with the ROK.

## Realistic Policy Goals of the Japan-US Alliance

After examining interests, we turned our attention to more concrete policy goals for the Japan-US alliance. In recent years, the international community's main policy goals have been to convince the DPRK to stop testing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, reaffirm its commitment to denuclearization, and resume dialogue under the auspices of the Six-Party Talks for that purpose. The US, Japan, and the ROK have recently relied more heavily on sanctions to isolate the DPRK economically and politically in an effort to convince the DPRK to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, or, failing that, to at least make its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction more costly and difficult. The sanctions were designed to force the DPRK to make a "strategic

choice" between nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them on the one hand and the promise of security assurances and normal diplomatic and economic relations with its neighbors on the other.

However well-intentioned, this approach has failed, at least so far, to bring about a "strategic choice" by the DPRK. Worse, it may even have perversely served one of the core interests of the DPRK, making it easier for the DPRK to insulate itself and defend its vulnerable *juche* ideology against Western influence. Despite sanctions, the DPRK remains firmly committed to its *byungjin* policy line: pursuing both nuclear weapons and economic modernization, facilitated by Chinese investment and modest market reforms.

Given these realities, and keeping in mind the underlying core interests of the Japan-US alliance across three dimensions – security, economy, and human rights – we asked the workshop participants to identify achievable goals, with a special focus on low-hanging fruit; objectives that could fill knowledge gaps, enhance the effectiveness of existing sanctions, generate even modest diplomatic momentum, create political "space" for other initiatives, attract new resources, or put new tools into the utility belts of diplomats. The task force members also discussed ways to strengthen trilateral (Japan-US-ROK) collaboration. With the above criteria in mind, and emphasizing approaches we judged to be high-impact, low-cost, and currently under-valued, we generated the following list of policy goals:

1. Improve quality of information on DPRK WMD programs, economic performance, and leadership cohesion;
2. Improve trilateral Japan-US-ROK coordination, especially by strengthening Japan-ROK diplomatic and intelligence-sharing exchanges;
3. Convince China to coordinate more closely with allies on strict sanctions enforcement and contingency planning;
4. Enhance joint allied ballistic missile defense capability;
5. Enhance joint allied cyber security defensive and offense capability;

6. Establish regular, trusted, sustained communication channels with the DPRK;
7. Identify new economic tools – incentives and disincentives – to encourage the DPRK to resume dialogue and to reassess its commitment to building nuclear weapons;
8. Promote stronger nuclear safety and security procedures for DPRK nuclear facilities;
9. Increase DPRK responsiveness to international human rights concerns;
10. Elevate the abduction issue on the global stage and pursue a multilateral approach, e.g., joint Japan-ROK efforts on behalf of Japanese and ROK abductees; and
11. Increase access of DPRK elites and ordinary citizens to reliable information through both direct (e.g., broadcasting) and indirect (e.g., human networks) means.

This list is not exhaustive, and it excludes some common-sense goals – such as ensuring UN Security Council attention to the peninsula – that we believe should be a part of any comprehensive DPRK policy. Again, our goal was not to tread familiar ground, but to try to highlight overlooked factors that could help jump-start a more effective policy.

## Key Unknowns

We judge the number one goal above – improving the quality of information we have about the DPRK – to be essential. No DPRK policy can succeed if crafted without adequate intelligence about even basic facts about the situation in the North. Is the economy growing, or shrinking? How close is the DPRK to developing an ICBM? What is the status of DPRK military readiness? How cohesive is the Korean Worker’s Party under the leadership of Kim Jong-un? What are Kim’s long-term objectives? Are any Japanese or South Korean abductees still alive, and if so, what is their disposition? Without answers to these and other fundamental questions, policymakers cannot hope to make much progress on their nation’s core interests. Although our working group was relying only on open sources, we judge the answers to all of these questions are currently shrouded in

considerable uncertainty. Getting greater clarity is vital, and there is no time to lose.

## Innovative Policy Tools

Equipped with a fresh appreciation of the core interests and policy goals of the alliance partners, the task force members identified several policy tools that we believe could be tailored to fit the current situation. Other tools could be rolled out if the DPRK finds a way back to the negotiating table and the talks make some limited progress. We considered a wide range of coercive and cooperative approaches, and whittled the list down to those we thought most innovative or original. Some are designed to bring greater direct pressure to bear on the DPRK, while others are designed to advance peripheral goals – such as enhancing alliance cohesion or securing greater cooperation from China – to create a more favorable overall negotiating environment. Some steps could be taken unilaterally by the United States and/or Japan. Others would require careful multilateral preparation and coordination among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. The tools can be used singly, or in packages, and again, the list is not intended to be comprehensive.

## Near-term steps

- Energize dialogue channels with the DPRK. Possible steps include:
  - a) Inviting DPRK to rejoin multilateral “Track 1.5” Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD);
  - b) Enhancing outreach to EU diplomatic missions in Pyongyang, sharing information and analysis;
  - c) Appointing senior special envoys (intelligence, military, economics, humanitarian) to reach different branches of DPRK society and government;
  - d) Opening direct, high-level bilateral communication with head of state Kim Jong-un; and
  - e) Opening reciprocal diplomatic liaison offices in Pyongyang and Washington.

[Note: Dialogue is the most important tool we have for gathering accurate information necessary to achieve every other policy goal established by the alliance partners. Dialogue with the DPRK should be pursued on many levels to gain a deeper understanding of the DPRK and its current situation.]

- Resume the joint US-DPRK search for the remains of US soldiers left behind at the end of the Korean War, deploying military personnel to the North for extended periods to work alongside their counterparts;
- Seize the Olympic sports diplomacy opportunity presented by 2018 ROK-hosted winter games and 2020 Japan-hosted summer games, inviting the DPRK to participate and march under a unified Korean flag in the ROK and Japan, as they did once before;
- Establish among allies a regular senior dialogue channel just beneath the head-of-state level (Pence-Aso-ROK) to coordinate DPRK policy options. This new channel would complement and augment the deputy secretary/vice-ministerial level foreign ministry and defense ministry talks that were launched by the Obama administration, and would build on the Bush-era Trilateral Coordinating Group (TCOG) mechanism;
- Strengthen allied trilateral military cooperation, to include joint Aegis system missile defense exercises, joint cyber security exercises, and table-top contingency planning for various “black swan” contingencies;
- Tighten enforcement of the Proliferation Security Initiative, drawing on satellite and maritime assets to enhance maritime domain awareness;
- Consider secondary economic sanctions on Chinese entities unless Beijing agrees to more strictly enforce UN sanctions; and
- Open more private news service offices in DPRK.

## Mid-term steps, to complement a possible resumption of dialogue

- Resume people-to-people exchanges with the DPRK to foster better understanding between countries at the grass-roots level. Emphasize family reunification visits and tours by veterans of the Korean War;

[Note: Engagement by veteran’s groups was instrumental in facilitating the normalization of US relations with Hanoi after the Vietnam War.]

- Expand educational outreach programs within the DPRK, e.g., Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) or a new model based on the Fulbright School in Vietnam. Simultaneously seek dramatically to expand the number of DPRK students studying abroad by providing scholarships and other incentives;

[Note: Education, including in the areas of science and technology, has “dual-use,” which provides civilian value but nonetheless can be translated into military purposes. For this reason, the content of educational exchanges must be consistent with restrictions imposed under all relevant sanctions regimes.]

- Open a science channel to the DPRK on nuclear safety education and training, relying on the IAEA or domestic nuclear power “Centers of Excellence,” and incorporating specialists from the National Academies of Science in respective countries;

[Note: We see this as a less confrontational way to get at the inevitable issues of verification that will be raised if ever the DPRK returns to the Six-Party Talks and agrees to place its nuclear facilities under some sort of international monitoring.]

- Provide equipment and training to improve North Korea’s ability to forecast the weather, reducing its vulnerability to periodic floods and other violent weather;

[Note: Weather forecasting is a “dual-use” science, which gives it value as a civilian-side engagement that nonetheless constitutes a military confidence-building measure.]

- Offer support for market-based renewable energy in North Korea. This could improve economic relations among Japan, the United States, ROK, and the DPRK, and bolster North Korea's energy security and independence – core concerns for Pyongyang;
- Launch market-based entrepreneurial and vocational training programs for North Koreans willing to study in China (considered less threatening by the DPRK), funded by the US and Japan;
- Offer a pilot program designed to familiarize the DPRK with the role of the US Peace Corps, and signal a willingness to establish a Peace Corps presence inside the DPRK on a strictly humanitarian basis;
- Support UN and NGO multilateral disaster relief and prevention efforts, with emphasis not only on emergency response but also on training, warning, and advance planning; and
- Encourage international NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to conduct outreach to the DPRK on less controversial human rights issues, including protecting the rights of children and the disabled.

[Note: In 2013 Amnesty International was welcomed to visit Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War.]

## Concluding Observations

The situation on the Korean Peninsula is not what it was when the international community began its efforts to prevent the DPRK from becoming a nuclear weapons state in the 1980s. Washington and Tokyo are wise to take fresh stock of their interests, their policy goals, and the tools at their disposal to advance their core interests. As the Trump administration conducts its own comprehensive DPRK policy review, we hope a few of our key findings and innovative policy initiatives may prove useful. No one of our suggested policy tools will by itself significantly alter the diplomatic situation on the peninsula. But we see a few promising initiatives scattered among more traditional “lousy options” – steps that Washington and Tokyo could take not only to improve coordination with Seoul, but also to signal Pyongyang that the allies are equally prepared to intensify pressure or to take meaningful steps to lessen the North's isolation.

US, Japanese, and South Korean officials have recently been debating whether the ball is in North Korea's court or our court. From our vantage point, the ball is stuck in the net, and someone needs to go get it and put it into play.

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## Japan-US Task Force on a New Approach to DPRK: Forging a Collaborative Japan-US-ROK Policy Framework

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