



THE MAUREEN AND MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION

# **Navigating Uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula: In Search of a Roadmap**



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## **The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation**

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization that promotes understanding and cooperation in U.S.-Asia relations. The Foundation was established in 1983 to honor Mike Mansfield (1903-2001), a revered public servant, statesman and diplomat who played a pivotal role in many of the key domestic and international issues of the 20th century as U.S. congressman from Montana, Senate majority leader and finally as U.S. ambassador to Japan. Maureen and Mike Mansfield's values, ideals and vision for U.S.-Asia relations continue through the Foundation's exchanges, dialogues, research and educational programs, which create networks among U.S. and Asian leaders, explore the underlying issues influencing public policies, and increase awareness about the nations and peoples of Asia. The Foundation has offices in Washington, D.C.; Tokyo, Japan; and Missoula, Montana.

## **The Korea Foundation**

The Korea Foundation (KF) was established in 1991 to promote awareness and understanding of Korea and to enhance goodwill and friendship among the international community through its cultural, academic and intellectual exchange activities and programs. As a leading organization of Korea's international exchange and public diplomacy initiative, some of its major works include: providing support for Korean studies overseas; organizing/supporting international forums; assisting research institutions/think tanks around the world in their research, conferences and publications; promoting exchanges of performing arts and exhibitions; and establishing Korean galleries in museums abroad. Currently, the Korea Foundation has 7 overseas branches in major cities, which are Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow, Berlin, and Hanoi.



**THE MAUREEN AND MIKE MANSFIELD FOUNDATION**  
*Promoting Understanding and Cooperation in U.S.-Asia Relations since 1983*

# Navigating Uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula: In Search of a Roadmap

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## Executive Summary

With new governments in Washington and Seoul, and in light of North Korea's aggressive pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, the Korea Foundation asked the Mansfield Foundation to assemble a team of young scholars and veteran Korea hands to take a fresh look at Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. policy coordination on the Korean Peninsula. Our main objectives included examining core national interests and concrete policy goals and identifying underused or overlooked policy tools to advance common objectives. We hope our findings can serve as a roadmap with which Washington and Seoul can better chart a path towards peace, security, and denuclearization.

## Key Findings

Our working group sought consensus on the current state of play in North Korea, generating the following key findings:

- Kim Jong-un appears to have consolidated power, eliminating rivals and promoting followers.
- The North Korean economy is likely growing — fueled by market reforms, Chinese investments, and a budding private sector — although considerable uncertainty exists about the pace of growth and its sustainability, particularly in light of international sanctions.
- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear stockpile and ballistic missile forces are growing steadily in size and capability, and its conventional forces, particularly its long-range artillery, also pose a serious threat to Seoul.

## Core Interests

Examining the core national interests of the ROK and the U.S., we saw much alignment on long-term goals, including:

- Bolstering respect for the armistice and deterring DPRK aggression;
- Eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons;
- Promoting stability on the Korean Peninsula;
- Maintaining alliance solidarity;
- Promoting the liberal democratic international order and respect for international norms, including respect for rule of law and human rights; and
- Creating conditions under which North and South could peacefully unify.

But we also saw considerable differences over how Seoul and Washington prioritize various policy objectives, with the ROK under President Moon Jae-in prizing stability and inter-Korean engagement while the United States remains laser-focused on denuclearization. These differences must be carefully managed to avoid a rift in the alliance that the DPRK would be quick to exploit.

## Roadmap

As we examined the concrete policy objectives that flow from allied interests, we coalesced around the idea that taking small steps to establish dialogue, improve security, improve our understanding of the DPRK, and enhance our leverage is preferable to attempting giant leaps (such as launching preemptive military strikes or signing a peace treaty with a nuclear-armed DPRK). Such bounds would require the allies to embrace great risks or make politically and strategically unpalatable concessions to Pyongyang. The path to peace, security, denuclearization, and ultimately unification does not have navigable shortcuts.

Once we settled on an incremental, holistic approach, we were surprised by how many policy tools we could identify for what has been described as a “land of lousy policy options.” We grouped the approaches according to their mode — **Independent Steps** (i.e., to be pursued without regard to DPRK cooperation); **Coercive Measures**; **Cooperative Proposals**; and **Transformative Initiatives**. Our report includes more than three dozen approaches, many of them new. A few of the more creative ideas are:

- Conduct joint maritime search and rescue tabletop or field training exercises, to include the involvement of North and South Korean fishermen.
- Attempt to negotiate the return of the USS Pueblo.
- Establish reciprocal diplomatic liaison offices in Washington, Pyongyang, and Seoul.
- Encourage the DPRK to send a delegation to the Special Olympics, and highlight progress being made by the DPRK to protect the rights of the disabled.
- Resume the joint U.S.-DPRK search-and-recovery program for MIAs from the Korean War.
- Send a joint ROK-DPRK-U.S.-China astronaut mission to the International Space Station.

## Conclusion

The DPRK is neither inscrutable nor immutable. The ROK-U.S. alliance can influence the DPRK’s behavior, and, over time, encourage Pyongyang to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. While there are no easy answers to the challenges posed by the DPRK, it is not accurate to say that diplomacy is hopeless or that no good options exist to advance common ROK-U.S. interests. The allies must draft a policy roadmap that leads toward peace and stability along multiple parallel tracks. That roadmap must be flexible, to accommodate the inevitable detours along the way and to afford the DPRK an off-ramp from their current path. The sooner we have a map in hand, the sooner we can begin to make progress.

# Navigating Uncertainties on the Korean Peninsula: In Search of a Roadmap

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On June 4–6, 2017 the Mansfield Foundation, with generous support from the Korea Foundation, brought together nine young American and Korean scholars for a three-day closed workshop. Participants gathered at the Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia to take a fresh look at Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. policy coordination on the Korean Peninsula in light of increasing challenges presented by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and new governments in Seoul and Washington. Deliberations were conducted under “Chatham House Rules” — no attribution of remarks — to ensure a free and candid exchange of views. The group was advised by three senior former government officials: Keith Luse (Executive Director, The National Committee on North Korea), Bob Carlin (Visiting Scholar, Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University), and Randy Shriver (Armitage International, LLC). Mansfield Foundation President and CEO Frank Jannuzi also served as an advisor and moderator.

The main objectives of our workshop included testing assumptions, identifying core interests and prioritizing them, discussing concrete policy goals, and examining underused or overlooked policy tools to advance shared alliance objectives. We placed special emphasis on ROK-U.S. relations and the difficulty of coordinating DPRK policy across the Pacific. This report does not pretend to present a comprehensive set of DPRK policy options. There are many DPRK policy papers available produced by reputable scholars and practitioners. We hope our findings will serve as the beginning of a roadmap for Washington and Seoul as both governments work

to navigate the existing challenges on the Korean Peninsula and chart a path for what comes next.

The situation on the Korean Peninsula is changing rapidly. In the weeks since our workshop, Presidents Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in held a summit in Washington, the DPRK successfully tested a Hwasong-14 missile with intercontinental range, and the Trump administration announced a travel ban for individuals attempting to travel on U.S. passports to the DPRK. Our workshop participants did not have the opportunity to exchange views on these recent developments, and this report was largely drafted prior to the Hwasong-14 tests and their aftermath. However, our analysis of the peninsula and the interests in play there was never meant to provide immediate, tactical advice for policymakers. Rather, we hope to offer more general guidance with a longer shelf life — helping policymakers differentiate between symptoms and underlying conditions, and between short-term approaches and longer-term strategies that might illuminate the path to a more peaceful, stable, secure Korean Peninsula.

*This report was prepared by Mansfield Foundation staff. We have attempted accurately to present the key findings from the workshop and, where possible, capture the consensus of the group. This report may or may not reflect the views of any individual member of the workshop. 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.*



Tallest building and skyline of Pyongyang, North Korea

## Overview: North Korea Situation Report

Participants first looked into the current situation to establish a common understanding of contemporary North Korea — its economy, leadership, conventional military power, nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and human rights conditions. This exercise quickly revealed critical knowledge gaps about North Korea. Bearing in mind that many of the “facts” we think we know about the DPRK may sometimes be little more than informed speculation, the participants nonetheless concluded with reasonably high confidence that North Korea is far from static. In fact, the DPRK is undergoing a significant political and economic change. Kim Jong-un’s *byungjin* policy line — adopted in March 2013 — has delivered progress on the parallel tracks of economic development and nuclear weapons capability.<sup>1</sup>

Kim Jong-un appears to have successfully consolidated power, removing (and in some cases executing) potential political opponents or rivals, promoting loyal high-profile elites, tightening border controls, and intensifying internal controls on the general population.<sup>2</sup> Although it is always possible that the DPRK could experience political unrest, the workshop participants found little evidence to suggest that North Korea or the Kim regime are heading toward collapse. To the contrary, our participants discussed that, despite a significant current account deficit, abundant evidence now available suggests the DPRK economy is growing. Evidence suggests that a nascent middle class comprised of entrepreneurs is profiting from de facto relaxation of some control on markets and an emerging mixed economy is developing even through international economic sanctions.<sup>3</sup> Signs of prosperity — cell phones, private autos, stylish clothes, taxis, and expensive

restaurants populated by locals — are growing on the streets of Pyongyang.<sup>4</sup>

As for the DPRK’s overall military capabilities, participants noted the accelerated pace of ballistic missile testing, fissile material production, and nuclear weapons testing under Kim Jong-un. North Korea is estimated to have enough nuclear material for a dozen nuclear bombs and continues to produce more. It has conducted five nuclear weapon tests and could conduct additional tests with little or no warning. The DPRK is steadily enhancing its ballistic missile capabilities, deploying new solid-fueled road-mobile missiles and extending the range of its missile force to threaten even the continental United States.<sup>5</sup>

The uptick in the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) program intensity appears to reflect both a security objective — to deter any potential aggressor by deploying long-range nuclear-capable ballistic missiles — and a political imperative — to ensure that the Kim government is respected at home and abroad. While it was hard for our workshop participants to judge the readiness of the North’s conventional forces, continued investment by the DPRK in its large-scale winter training exercises, with a special emphasis on special forces, suggests the Korean People’s Army (KPA), though antiquated, retains the ability to mobilize quickly. Moreover, the KPA’s large number of long-range self-propelled artillery pieces poses a significant threat to Seoul and to allied forces located within sixty kilometers of the border.

## Core Interests: Similar Lists, Different Rankings

After setting the scene, the group took a fresh look at the core interests of the United States and South Korea, not just at this moment in time, but also looking into the future. We sought to identify the common interests that help animate and consolidate the ROK-U.S. alliance, and discussed the near-term and mid-term policy goals and priorities for the new administrations in Seoul and Washington. In addition, we considered “the view from Pyongyang” in an effort to assess the DPRK’s likely response to various allied policy

initiatives. We also touched on the challenges of coordinating DPRK policy with regional players China and Japan. Finally, we held a “brain-storming” session to compile a list of tools (both cooperative and coercive) available to advance the common goals of the ROK-U.S. alliance on the Korean Peninsula.

Starting with the United States — taking nothing for granted, and trying our best to question assumptions and scrape away the “barnacles” that encrust current policy toward North Korea — we generated the following list of U.S. core interests, roughly in descending order of importance:

- Ensuring DPRK respect for the armistice and deterring DPRK invasion of the ROK;
- Achieving the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear program;
- Promoting stability on the peninsula and the region;
- Maintaining ROK-U.S. alliance solidarity to safeguard the ROK and also to bolster U.S. influence in East Asia; and
- Protecting human rights and advancing human security for the citizens of North Korea, and more generally working to maintain the liberal democratic international order with its respect for international norms and rule of law.

Not surprisingly, we judged that the United States is most concerned about the security threats posed by the DPRK nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Figuring out how best to eliminate those threats drives almost every North Korea policy debate in Washington, and maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia is a top U.S. foreign policy objective. Consistent with the “Rebalance to Asia” and the threat posed by the DPRK, the U.S. has stationed 60 percent of its naval forces, 55 percent of its army assets and personnel, and roughly two-thirds of its marines in Asia. In addition to defending its security interests, the U.S. alliance network in East Asia serves the broader purpose of reinforcing U.S. core values, including upholding the liberal democratic order and the rule of law.

Despite having several participants with professional backgrounds in the protection of human rights, our group was somewhat slow to highlight the role of human rights as a component of U.S. policy toward North Korea. The UN Commission of Inquiry findings on North Korea and the imprisonment of several Americans by the DPRK did not result in our group putting human rights issues on the top of our agenda. *We think our group was hardly unique in this regard.* U.S. officials have a tendency to see human rights issues to be of secondary importance until it impinges directly on the lives of U.S. citizens, as in the tragic death of Otto Warmbier. Participants noted frankly that Washington has rarely listed protecting human rights as a core national interest of the United States on the peninsula. We believe this tendency is unfortunate and short-sighted. Improving DPRK respect for human rights should be an integral and enduring part of any comprehensive DPRK policy, and should not vary with changes of administrations in Seoul or Washington. Making progress on the human rights challenges is closely aligned with ROK and U.S. values, and could also facilitate progress in other areas.

As for how best to address human rights concerns, our group strongly prefers an integrated approach. Policymakers have created a separate policy structure to address human rights issues — e.g., appointing a special envoy for human rights in the DPRK, while not including that person as a routine member of the Six Party Talks. Human rights issues should not be segregated from the other difficulties the United States faces on the peninsula. Rather, human rights issues are woven into everything else — national security, economics, nonproliferation, values, liberal democratic order, and the opportunity to change North Korea's behavior and therefore our threat perception of the North. We find that promoting human rights — broadly defined to include both political freedoms and economic, social and cultural rights — should be situated *within* any comprehensive strategy designed to advance allied interests on the peninsula, and should not be “stove-piped.”

Turning to ROK interests, we found them to be largely in alignment with those of the United States when it comes to security. The ROK under the Moon administration seeks to deter any North Korean aggression, and recognizes that the North's nuclear program constitutes a grave threat to the people of South Korea. That said, the Moon government has prioritized some core interests that are fairly distinct from those of the Trump administration. These include resuming bilateral dialogue and people-to-people exchanges, opening up North Korea's border, and minimizing the impact of instability on the ROK economy.

The Moon Jae-in administration has attached great importance to resuming inter-Korean dialogue. This is not just an outgrowth of Moon's preference to avoid volatility. It also signals Seoul's strong desire to take charge of the future of the Korean Peninsula — to play a *leading role* in determining its own future. Since the 1980s, Seoul has sometimes wanted to play a leading role in DPRK policy and sometimes preferred to play a supporting role. President Moon seems intent on seizing the initiative.

When asked to contrast the core interests of the United States and South Korea, the workshop participants zeroed in more on the different *priorities* attached to various goals than on divergent interests, *per se*. Participants also noted different preferences on the *means* employed to pursue common interests. For example, the United States has set a high bar for the resumption of dialogue with the DPRK, and has generally opposed “talks for the sake of talks.” Dialogue has historically and perhaps unfairly been viewed as an act of bestowing legitimacy upon the DPRK. Obama administration officials often equated engagement with making concessions to the North or recognizing them as a nuclear power. From the U.S. perspective, dialogue should be accompanied with a clear purpose and credible goals. The Moon government sees great value in the *process* of engagement itself. President Moon and his supporters believe inter-Korean dialogue is the only way to yield meaningful results on many of the issues that divide the peninsula.

## Unification: A Divisive Issue

The ROK is more likely than the United States to list unification (or at least peaceful coexistence with the hope of *eventual* unification) on its short list of core interests. The United States has expressed support for a unified Korea — democratic, capitalist, and allied with Washington. But unification has never been a high priority for Washington, and ironically, the issue of unification is itself divisive. The allies cannot control when or how unification will take place, so the ROK-U.S. alliance has always had to plan for a variety of unification scenarios and hope for the best. Even within South Korea, views on unification are mixed. According to Gallup polls, roughly two-thirds of South Koreans support unification. But younger people are generally more skeptical about unification, concerned about the cost and whether they will be able to maintain their quality of life. Accordingly, many South Koreans prefer a long period of “peaceful coexistence” to give the North a chance to close the economic development gap rather than outright absorption.

After a lively discussion, our workshop participants agreed unification was a common long-term interest of the U.S. and the ROK; a goal which, if achieved, promises to unlock the prospect for complete denuclearization of the DPRK. However, the leadership of the DPRK understands that South Korea and the United States will do their best to dictate the terms of unification, and Pyongyang may interpret allied planning for unification as a threat to their existence. Our participants recommend that the ROK-U.S. alliance should emphasize that unification should be achieved through a process of mutual accommodation, and must not be imposed on either the North or the South. The ROK-U.S. alliance should embrace practical steps that will make unification more likely — steps such as expanding the access of the North Korean people to reliable information about the outside world — without assigning a high priority to the goal of unification, *per se*.

Our discussion of unification illustrates an important point about the interests of the major stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula. As already mentioned, the U.S. and ROK largely share

common interests on the Korean Peninsula, even if they sometimes attach different priorities to those interests. But when we shifted our discussion from broad national interests to policy objectives, we quickly realized that just because a particular interest enjoys high-priority status does not mean that it should be pursued *first*. In fact, policymakers have often fallen into the trap of attempting to address a high-priority interest without laying the proper groundwork for success by accomplishing a few lower priorities first. *Sequencing* does not necessarily imply lower or higher priority. Proper sequencing is a matter of tactical necessity. Getting the sequencing right can remove roadblocks to advancing core interests at a later date.

## The View from Pyongyang

Our workshop focused on examining U.S. and ROK interests and approaches to the DPRK, but this necessarily involves consideration of the interests of the DPRK and other major interested parties. [Scope note: a previous Mansfield Foundation study group concentrated on the U.S.-Japan alliance and its role. Their report is available on the Mansfield Foundation’s website at [http://mansfieldfdn.org/mfdn2011/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Reexamining-North-Korea-Policy\\_A-Blue-Sky-Approach.pdf](http://mansfieldfdn.org/mfdn2011/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Reexamining-North-Korea-Policy_A-Blue-Sky-Approach.pdf).] Our workshop participants spent time trying to view the current situation as it must appear to Kim Jong-un and the leadership of the DPRK. The North Korean regime’s highest priority remains self-preservation. We judge it highly unlikely that North Korea would launch a large-scale strike against South Korea or the United States without serious provocation. Such an act would be suicidal. Thus, it is essential that the U.S. seeks to avoid a military confrontation, which could rapidly escalate into a devastating war.

U.S.-DPRK relations are marked today by high tension, harsh rhetoric, sanctions, and belligerence, but the mood was not always so bleak. There was a period from 1991–2001 when Washington often found itself “pushing on an open door” in Pyongyang. During that decade, the DPRK appeared ready to abandon its nuclear weapons

ambitions and normalize relations with the U.S., seeking a hedge against two dangerous neighbors — China and Russia. The North even suggested that U.S. forces — long described by Pyongyang as a menace — could stay on the peninsula in the context of a U.S.-DPRK peace mechanism. But the demise of the 1994 Agreed Framework and all that followed— the U.S. invasion of Iraq, DPRK ballistic missile and nuclear tests, UN sanctions regimes — have increased tensions to a level not seen since the crisis preceding the 1994 Jimmy Carter mission to Pyongyang.

It is hard to imagine that Pyongyang believes in a “reset button” for DPRK relations with the U.S. after sixteen years of failed diplomatic efforts. To the contrary, the leaders of the DPRK are likely as pessimistic as many in Washington about the prospects for negotiating a solution to the security challenges on the peninsula. Events in Libya and Syria have only reaffirmed the view in Pyongyang that nuclear weapons are essential if the DPRK is to prevent the U.S. from attempting to overthrow the Kim Jong-un government by force. And repeated leadership transitions in Washington and Seoul, with resulting shifts in DPRK policies, have taught Pyongyang that commitments by one U.S. or ROK administration may not be sustained by the next government. Put simply, there is an enormous trust deficit between the DPRK and the U.S.-ROK alliance.

That said, we cannot know for certain what the leadership of the DPRK might be prepared to offer on denuclearization and other issues of concern to the allies in the context of comprehensive peace talks. To dismiss all that has come before — the 1994 Agreed Framework, the October 2000 Clinton-Cho Joint Statement, the 2005 Six Party Talks Joint Statement, the 2012 Leap Day Deal — as abject failure is to handcuff ourselves, denying the possibility for progress because we’ve thrown diplomacy out the window.<sup>6</sup> Diplomats will never achieve 100 percent of their objectives in any negotiations, let alone with the DPRK. Those charged with managing DPRK policy should approach the challenge with sober resolve and reasonable objectives, not pessimism and an “all or nothing” attitude. With the right mix of pressure and diplomatic engagement, it remains

possible for the United States and South Korea to reduce tensions and put North Korea on the path to halting and even reversing its nuclear and missile programs.

One takeaway from our exploration of the view from Pyongyang is our recommendation that *listening* to the leadership of the DPRK is as important as *talking* to them. This may sometimes mean paying attention to what is *not* said. For example, DPRK official media have not yet criticized President Trump by name or explicitly acknowledged a single thing he has said. This suggests the DPRK is keeping the door to dialogue open with the United States.

## Calling Beijing

Both the Obama and Trump administrations have turned to China to help address the North Korea nuclear problem, hoping that Beijing would use its influence both to moderate the DPRK’s behavior and coax the North back to the negotiating table without giving up too much. Washington’s outreach has been complicated by strategic mistrust that characterizes contemporary U.S.-China relations. Beijing views the U.S. hub and spoke alliance network in East Asia with suspicion — calling it a legacy of the Cold War that ought to be dismantled. For its part, Washington views China’s growing economic, military, and political clout as a direct challenge to eight decades of U.S. preeminence, and worries that China would like to drive the United States out of the region, or at least replace the current U.S.-led regional architecture with one more Sino-centric.

This competition for influence has long shaped events on the Korean Peninsula. There is no doubt that China retains considerable influence over the DPRK. China is the North’s largest trading partner (accounting for roughly 90 percent of total trade volume), and hundreds of Chinese firms have invested in the DPRK. Yet China’s influence may not be as great as many believe.<sup>7</sup> Party-to-party exchanges have occurred during Kim Jong-un’s tenure, but at a lower level than during the rule of his father, and Kim himself has yet to travel to Beijing (or anywhere else) as leader. Military links

have also deteriorated with the passing of the Korean War generation of officers and China's decision to support UN sanctions on the Korean People's Army and its associated missile and nuclear entities.

As convener of the Six Party Talks, China sought to play a consensus-building role in Northeast Asia, but since the suspension of that process in 2008 and the rise to power of Kim Jong-un in 2012, Beijing's role in attempting to broker a solution to the nuclear crisis has diminished. China increasingly views the DPRK as an irresponsible neighbor — a source of instability and an invitation to the U.S. to meddle in China's backyard. China is particularly miffed by moves the United States has made to bolster its military forces in the region (e.g., the deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense system to the ROK and the dispatch of advanced fighter aircraft to bases in Japan).

When it comes to enlisting Chinese support for ROK-U.S. initiatives, our group considers China to be a critical player, but a nation upon which neither Washington nor Seoul truly can rely. *Making North Korea policy is a job that Washington should not outsource to China.* Although China shares the alliance's objectives of dismantling the North's nuclear program and preventing instability on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing's long-term interests and those of the United States and South Korea diverge — especially on the issues of unification (and its formula) and human rights. China also seems willing to live with a nuclear-armed DPRK for the foreseeable future. By contrast, in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, discussions about North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear and ballistic missile programs are marked by a sense of urgency bordering on crisis.

## **Policy Goals of the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Playing Small Ball**

After examining the core interests of the ROK-U.S. alliance and considering the perspectives from Pyongyang and Beijing, our scholars worked to translate those long-term interests into concrete, achievable policy goals. The past three U.S.

administrations have focused most of their energy on goals related to denuclearization, such as shutting down the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, halting, or at least monitoring and limiting the scope of, any uranium enrichment efforts, and getting an accurate accounting of the North's stockpile of fissile material. Focusing on denuclearization has its advantages — simplifying the agenda for talks and ensuring political support at home. But it also has its drawbacks. The nuclear problem is enmeshed in a larger web of security challenges. Although a top priority, the downside of sequencing denuclearization first and demanding progress on denuclearization before moving on to other objectives is that denuclearization takes time. It is a process, not a single event. Making a frontal assault on the nuclear issue — identifying denuclearization as the primary goal and focusing all energy upon it — may ultimately be a less effective tactic than flanking the issue, approaching it indirectly.

The more we struggled to come up with new tools with which to attack the goal of denuclearization, the more convinced we became that placing *denuclearization* first in line is a mistake. Given the DPRK's current negotiating posture — resisting talking about denuclearization unless the United States demonstrates its own willingness to abandon its “hostile policy” toward North Korea — we recommend that the allies learn a lesson drawn from their common affection for baseball and play “small ball,” trying for a single rather than a home run.

Focusing first on more modest objectives would allow the allies greater room for creativity. The allies should set near-term goals with the longer-term goals in mind, but should not shy away from steps that fall short of the ultimate objective. For example, negotiating a nuclear test moratorium would be a logical step in line with the long-term goal of CVID. Policymakers in Washington and Seoul have been reluctant to adopt more limited (but still meaningful) policy objectives out of fear that the DPRK will pocket any benefits (such as sanctions relief) and then halt all future progress. This is a legitimate concern, but one that can be mitigated through

careful sequencing of steps according to a policy roadmap agreed by all parties.

What might that roadmap look like? The earliest policy goals might sidestep the nuclear issue completely, for example:

- Stabilizing adherence to the armistice;
- Reaching an accommodation on the West Sea boundary line dispute;
- Adopting confidence-building measures on conventional exercises; and
- Normalizing military-to-military dialogue at Panmunjom.

From the perspective of the allies, it is important to show improvements in the security situation early to shore up political support for what will almost certainly be a lengthy and tough diplomatic slog. Once the parties have established some minimal level of trust, they could then turn to goals such as halting missile testing, freezing nuclear weapons tests and the production of fissile material, and bringing Yongbyon back under International Atomic Energy Agency inspection. For the foreseeable future, these goals are more realistic than convincing the DPRK to declare all of its nuclear weapons related facilities or provide a full accounting of its fissile material production, to say nothing of dismantling nuclear facilities or handing over fissile material and weapons.

Work on these security objectives should proceed in concert with efforts to address other high-priority objectives consistent with promoting long-term peace and stability (and ultimately, peaceful unification). Here too, there are challenges associated with proper sequencing. Some have suggested attempting to negotiate a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War. But just as denuclearization is a process that will take time, so is making peace after seventy years of war and division. An indirect approach here might again be more successful than a frontal assault. The ROK-U.S. alliance could help set the stage for successful peace talks by first articulating intermediate goals, such as resuming family reunification visits, restoring inter-Korean economic cooperation (to include possible reopening of

the Kaesong Industrial Complex on market terms and with greater transparency), and regularizing inter-Korean political and security dialogue.

Pursuing these objectives would allow the parties to reduce tension and promote peaceful coexistence. Progress would not require the allies to drop their interest in denuclearization or abandon the targeted sanctions imposed by the UN to punish the DPRK for its nuclear and missile activities. Expanding cultural exchanges, official and informal dialogue, mail and telephone links, humanitarian assistance, and economic ties would strengthen the channels of communication that are essential to tackling the tough security challenges and their underlying political dynamics. Our working group believes a broad array of principled engagement mechanisms could be launched without undermining the existing economic sanctions or signaling any lack of resolve on the part of the alliance to persuade the DPRK to change course and abandon its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. Further, the two allies need not pursue the exact same policies vis-a-vis North Korea. A division of labor, as long as it is well communicated and coordinated between the United States and South Korea, would double the number of options available for principled engagement.

Many grassroots and humanitarian initiatives depend on at least some minimal level of mutual accommodation and trust. The travel ban announced by the State Department at the end of July 2017 forecloses many people-to-people avenues for U.S. citizens for the foreseeable future. This will complicate U.S. efforts to engage the DPRK, and also introduces a new wrinkle to ROK-U.S. policy coordination. The ROK has long banned travel to the DPRK by its citizens without special permission. As of mid-August, the ROK had not yet announced what if any *new* restrictions Seoul might impose. The Moon government had seemed poised to relax, rather than tighten, restrictions on humanitarian and people-to-people outreach — e.g., Mt. Kumgang tours or reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex — but recent events have taken those options off the table.

## Information Gaps

When considering which objectives to sequence early in any process designed to change North Korea's conduct, policymakers should not overlook the basic goal of gathering reliable information on conditions inside the DPRK. Policymakers don't generally list improving understanding of the DPRK as a formal objective in its own right, but plugging some of the knowledge gaps — DPRK's rate of economic growth (or contraction), leadership cohesion and popular support, military morale and overall readiness — should definitely be a top priority. Moves that would reduce our current level of uncertainty about the DPRK and allow us to better assess Kim Jong-un's intentions should be a top priority.

## Tools

The international community has used a vast array of tools to advance its objectives with North Korea, and our group did not want merely to reiterate what has been tried before. Suffice to say that we believe Washington and Seoul will make more progress if they have a full tool box. We endorse retaining (and in some cases "dusting off") all the tools already in the kit, including targeted economic sanctions, deterrence, missile defenses, humanitarian assistance, people-to-people ties, cultural and scientific exchanges, "Track Two" dialogue, information collection, broadcasting, and various forms of diplomatic pressure (e.g., at regional fora and the UN). However, we believe the international community must become much more creative — as it was in crafting the reciprocal steps envisioned under the Agreed Framework — if it really hopes to make progress.

For more than a decade the United States and South Korea have relied heavily upon economic sanctions and deterrence to persuade the DPRK to change course. Sanctions remain the U.S. tool of choice. Congress is considering a raft of new sanctions, and the Trump administration has signaled a willingness to impose secondary sanctions on Chinese firms doing business with the DPRK. While it is still too early to judge

whether the sanctions recently imposed or being considered will bite, we find little evidence to believe the "maximum pressure" approach will be any more effective at convincing the DPRK to halt its nuclear and ballistic missile programs than were previous coercive measures. Sanctions *alone* are unlikely to work, especially given China's reluctance to impose pressure so severe as to threaten North Korea's economic survival. The DPRK leadership was willing to see as many as one million citizens die from famine and disease rather than divert significant resources from its nuclear program to feed the country. It is unlikely to bow to pressure. Used as one component of a *comprehensive diplomatic strategy*, however, sanctions can provide negotiators with leverage and influence a state's understanding of its self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

Our working group focused on assembling a broad array of menu options — under-utilized tools that could be used singly, or in combination, and methods that run the gamut from coercive to cooperative. We concentrated more on collaborative approaches than on new flavors of economic sanctions, in part because our limited time was better spent exploring the path less traveled. We tried to identify techniques that could be employed to advance meaningful, concrete policy goals — especially approaches that might help the process of change inside the DPRK. *We recognize that many of the steps outlined below will not be "unlocked" until the parties first take preliminary steps to reduce tension, establish dialogue, and build some measure of mutual trust.*

Our menu is listed below, grouped loosely according to four basic characteristics:

**Independent Steps** — to be pursued without regard to DPRK cooperation, primarily to deepen our understanding of the North, enhance deterrence, or simply improve allied capability to respond to any contingency.

**Coercive Measures** — designed to put economic, military, or political pressure on the DPRK to raise the cost of their current behavior and encourage them to change course.

**Cooperative Proposals** — designed to encourage the DPRK to appreciate the true value of improving relations with the international community.

**Transformative Initiatives** — designed to build constituencies and conditions for change inside the DPRK, enhancing allied leverage, and, over time, creating the necessary conditions for the North to reevaluate its national interests and change from within.

We consider a few of these ideas to be particularly innovative, daring, forgotten, or “hidden in plain sight,” depending on one’s point of view. These are initiatives that we believe have the potential to significantly alter the public mood or political landscape that could signal a major shift in approach and reframe the policymaking environment. We have highlighted them in **green**.

### Independent Steps

- Conduct ROK-U.S. joint research on the impact of sanctions on the North Korean economy. This could help inform the alliance strategy and ensure the UN can accurately assess compliance with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.
- Enhance intelligence sharing arrangements with “Five Eyes” countries, and even China, with special emphasis on hard targets, such as DPRK leadership intentions and cohesion.
- **Strengthen allied cyber capabilities, improving the ability to both monitor and counter DPRK cyber-attacks, degrade DPRK WMD programs, collect intelligence, and conduct psychological warfare operations.**
- Improve contingency planning of all forms (especially human rights and public health dimensions) to facilitate rapid response in the event of a crisis.
- Conduct regional joint military exercises (ROK-U.S. plus Japan, Australia, China, and even Russia) to simulate a response to a DPRK attack or other contingency on the Korean Peninsula, to include a refugee crisis or Yongbyon nuclear safety emergency.

- Conduct joint missile defense system table top exercises and field training.
- Hold ROK-U.S.-PRC discussions on peace treaty simulations to envision what a peaceful Korean Peninsula would look like. Share results in multilateral meeting with DPRK.

### Coercive Measures

- Impose secondary economic sanctions on foreign firms doing business with DPRK entities already under UN sanctions.
- **Tighten the Proliferation Security Initiative, to include seeking UN authorization to board and inspect DPRK vessels suspected of violating UN sanctions.**
- Intercept DPRK missiles launched toward the territory or exclusive economic zones of the ROK, U.S., Japan, or another allied country.
- Threaten to destroy any long-range DPRK missile on the launch pad, or being readied for launch from a mobile TEL (transporter erector launcher).

### Cooperative Proposals

- Implement confidence and security building measures (CSBMs), to include:
  - a) Encouraging senior Korean People’s Army personnel to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum, and holding bilateral and/or trilateral pull-aside meetings;
  - b) Inviting DPRK military officers to visit U.S. and ROK military academies and think tanks to discuss mutual interests, such as counter-terrorism operations;
  - c) **Conducting joint maritime search and rescue table top or field training exercises, to include the involvement of North and South Korean fishermen;** and
  - d) Conducting joint maritime training in the Yellow Sea and coordinating patrols along the Northern Limit Line — long a flash point in inter-Korean relations.

- Attempt to negotiate the return of the USS Pueblo (perhaps by offering up something in return, such as the DPRK submarine that ran aground off the east coast of the ROK).
- Resume inter-Korean family reunification visits, but on a sustained rather than “one-off” basis.
- Improve diplomatic communications channels with the DPRK, to include:
  - a) Encouraging more “Track Two” and “Track 1.5” dialogues;
  - b) Establishing regular diplomatic and security talks at DMZ, the UN, and multilateral fora, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum; and
  - c) Establishing reciprocal diplomatic liaison offices in Washington, Pyongyang, and Seoul.
- Establish a high-level bilateral dialogue channel with Kim Jong-un to facilitate leader-to-leader talks.
- Conduct ROK-PRC-DPRK multilateral economic dialogues to promote development of special economic zones within which the DPRK would experiment with market reforms and international trade and investment procedures.
- Expand NGO operations, scaling up operations and enlarging their geographic footprint.
- Invite the DPRK to march with ROK athletes under a unified Korean banner when they attend the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games.
- Encourage the DPRK to send a delegation to the Special Olympics, and highlight progress being made by the DPRK to protect the rights of the disabled.
- Resume the joint U.S.-DPRK search-and-recovery program for MIAs from the Korean War (suspended by the United States in 2006).

## Transformative Initiatives

- Expand defector radio programming broadcasts into the DPRK.
- Expand electronic media smuggling into the DPRK — flash drives, DVDs, etc. — with a broad range of educational and entertainment programming.
- Engage the next generation of future leaders and policymakers from the DPRK, ROK, and U.S. to forge sustainable relationships and dialogue channels by conducting study tours and workshops over a sustained period of years.
- Conduct joint archeological research projects in the ROK and DPRK, followed by a global tour by the scholars and joint conservation and preservation efforts.
- Expand educational exchanges and higher education scholarships for DPRK students to study abroad in all fields — science, technology, literature, the arts.
- Invite DPRK scholars to international think tank conferences.
- Provide internet links for DPRK educational facilities and research institutes.
- Provide training for North Korean economists to improve the DPRK’s ability to meet eligibility requirements for World Bank, IMF, and other multilateral financial institutions.
- Encourage third party intermediaries such as Mongolia, Pakistan, and European countries with embassies or accredited representatives in North Korea to explore issues of mutual interest with DPRK authorities.
- Engage DPRK’s middle class and the business community to gain knowledge of economic circumstances by providing training and tracking goods injected into the informal market and track the flow of goods and information within North Korean society.
- Open the international space station to the DPRK, train a DPRK astronaut, and send up a joint ROK-DPRK-U.S.-China mission team.



PHOTO: JACK HOYES / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Military tanks parade in front of waving crowds through the streets of Pyongyang,

## Concluding Observations

North Korea has sometimes been called the “land of lousy policy options.” This pessimistic (some would say realistic) assessment is based in part on the reality that many policy roadmaps have led to dead ends. There are plenty of reasons to doubt whether the DPRK will fulfill any new obligations it agrees to in good faith. But there are also examples from the Agreed Framework and the operations of the Korean Energy Development Organization that suggest the DPRK will honor commitments so long as Pyongyang believes they serve their self-interest, and as long as we watch closely. It is the job of diplomats to turn the impossible into the improbable.

While there are no easy answers to the challenges posed by the DPRK — nuclear proliferation, armistice violations, illicit activities, human rights

— our workshop gave us greater confidence that creative tools exist that can mitigate the risks and make meaningful progress on issues that matter. The Trump administration has declared that the Obama policy that came to be known as “strategic patience” is dead, but perhaps it can be replaced with some *patient strategy*. We know from experience that the DPRK, when threatened, often behaves like a porcupine until the danger passes. But as one workshop participant put it, “If you beat a dog often enough, don’t be surprised if it bites.” The last place the United States and South Korea should want to place the leaders of the DPRK is in a corner where they have nothing to lose. That is when the DPRK will be most dangerous, not most pliant.

Mounting evidence suggests the people of the DPRK are motivated to improve their lot, and have to a certain degree embraced a market economy

as one means to improve their lives. Kim Jong-un himself has placed great emphasis on economic modernization even as he has also driven military advances. We must have a roadmap of our own. While there are clearly areas where the ROK-U.S. alliance must constrain the DPRK — e.g., nuclear and ballistic missile development — there are other areas where we might encourage the DPRK to behave more like a “normal” country, and thereby encourage the kinds of changes

in the North that one day could lead either to a reassessment by the Kim regime of its own self-interest, or to a transformation of the DPRK itself. A policy roadmap with many parallel routes and connections that envisions the use of many tools is more likely to allow progress toward the goals of peace and security than one containing a single highway relying almost exclusively on coercive measures to achieve its ends.

## Workshop Participants

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## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.38north.org/2016/10/gtoloraya102016/>
- 2 <http://www.38north.org/2016/07/mmadden070616/>
- 3 <http://www.38north.org/2017/04/rfrank040617/>
- 4 <http://www.38north.org/2017/07/hferon071817/>
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