Reducing Major Stakeholder Misalignment on the Korean Peninsula: Shoring Up the Foundation for Peace and Denuclearization
Overview
Purpose, Scope, and Assumptions

In early 2020, the Mansfield Foundation convened a small working group of scholars and foreign policy practitioners to take a fresh look at the current alignment, or lack thereof, of major power stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula. Participants assessed the core interests and priorities of the United States, Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), China (PRC), and Russia as each grapples with the security challenges facing the Korean Peninsula, especially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them.

The two-day workshop grew out of the findings of a March 2017 study group which found significant overlap among major power interests on the peninsula and a Summer 2017 policy retreat to draft a rough roadmap for next steps to promote peace and denuclearization on the peninsula. Participants at those events agreed that all key stakeholders seek to end the Korean War, denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, and establish durable peace there, as well as promote economic growth, both on the peninsula and in the region. But they also found that this rough alignment on broad objectives masks significant points of divergence, not only on how nations define and prioritize the common goals of peace, denuclearization, and sustainable economic growth, but also in their assessment of the most effective tools to make progress toward those goals.

Our 2020 workshop was designed to revisit these findings in light of recent developments and to sharpen our analysis, limiting our timeline to the next 2-3 years and encompassing potentially important political transitions on the near horizon. This shorter timeframe avoids the guesswork regarding the behavior of key stakeholders over the long term. No over-the-horizon radar can resolve all of the variables that will affect issues such as the best formula for unification of the two Koreas, the endurance of the U.S. alliances with ROK and Japan, its relationship with China and Russia, the resilience of extended deterrence, or the likelihood the United States will withdraw its military forces from the peninsula in the wake of a successful peace and denuclearization process, to name just a few. Limiting our timeframe allowed the participants to focus not only on the perceived core objectives for each power, including the DPRK, but also their risk tolerances and appetites for different means to achieve their goals. Ultimately, we sought to identify common ground upon which the United States,

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Japan, China, South Korea, and Russia could build coordinated action, shoring up the skeletal framing of the Singapore Declaration\(^3\) and the 2018 inter-Korean agreements so that they might yet provide a foundation upon which to build a lasting peace and security mechanism for the Korean Peninsula.

We rooted our time-bounded project in five common sense assumptions, which for all of their obviousness still bear amplification for the sake of transparency:

1. Unity of vision and coherent action by the “five” powers of the “Six Party Talks” would make progress toward the common objectives of peace and denuclearization more likely, while continued misalignment on priorities, tactics, and end goals will hinder progress. Some “good cop, bad cop” differences can play out to the advantage of all concerned, but absent an agreed overall course of action, the DPRK will exploit differences to obstruct progress toward denuclearization while gaming the peace process to maximize movement on its core interests (e.g. sanctions relief, neutralizing military threats, and security assurances).

2. None of the core stakeholders on the peninsula is willing to accept North Korea as a de jure nuclear weapons state, even though all have tolerated living with a nuclear-armed DPRK for the past 14 years. For the foreseeable future, the international community will be managing a nuclear-armed DPRK.

3. It appears inconceivable that the DPRK will abandon its nuclear weapons unilaterally (particularly in the near term), but it is the job of diplomats to turn the seemingly impossible into the unlikely.

4. Even if the DPRK decides one day to abandon its nuclear weapons—presumably as part of a diplomatic deal to secure lasting peace and normalization of relations with its neighbors—the complex processes of denuclearization and diplomatic/economic normalization will require years, not months, to complete. A careful study by Siegfried Hecker, Robert Carlin, and Elliot Serbin determined that even an expedited denuclearization effort would likely require 5-10 years to accomplish.\(^4\) Lifting multilateral and unilateral sanctions would also require concerted action by many parties, including the UN Security Council, the U.S. Congress, the ROK National Assembly, and the Japanese Diet.

5. Although the United States, ROK, and Japan have often been out of sync with respect to their appetite for diplomacy with the DPRK, Donald Trump (and his possible successor, Joe Biden), Moon Jae-in, and Shinzo Abe are all willing to pursue diplomatic engagement with Kim Jong-Un. Trump shares at least some sense of urgency about the endeavor given his political timeline, although the priority attached to DPRK engagement has dropped precipitously with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic recession in the United States.


Uncertainties
A global pandemic and its effect on resolving Korean Peninsula security challenges

We convened our workshop in early February in Northern Virginia under unseasonably warm and clear blue skies, infusing our dialogue with a spirit of optimism. Participants were encouraged to think creatively and to be open to new ideas. Nobody could then have anticipated the full severity of COVID-19, but it is clear now that the COVID-19 pandemic will occupy the world’s attention for the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. The Korean Peninsula will not escape the virus, but swift action by both North and South Korea has limited the spread of COVID and spared at least South Korea from the full brunt of the pandemic. COVID-19 need not preclude diplomatic progress on the peninsula—indeed, under certain circumstances, the virus and the global response to it could actually catalyze a peace process. But there is no doubt that the pandemic is commanding the attention of many governments, making high-level engagement on the persistent challenges posed by the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program even harder to obtain. The pandemic has also altered certain ground truths—postponing the Olympics and draining state treasuries—in a way that will almost certainly make progress with North Korea more difficult.

Even prior to the pandemic, the leaders of the United States, Japan, ROK, China, Russia, and the DPRK all had many tasks on their “to-do” lists. The final year of the Clinton presidency illustrates that many factors exogenous to the Korean Peninsula—including especially political terms of office and competing foreign and domestic policy priorities—can intrude on diplomatic efforts and cause leaders to miss opportunities. Our workshop participants were asked to take into account the practical political and resource limitations on all the parties. We tried to assess each nation’s maneuvering room and each leader’s political strength. We did this to ensure that any recommendations flowing out of our deliberations would be as realistic and implementable as possible. Nonetheless, we faced certain practical constraints; most critically, our limited ability to observe, in full, the policymaking processes in China, Russia, and the DPRK. These nations, by virtue of their governing structures, controlled media, and concentrated political power structures, are not transparent enough for any outside observer to have high confidence when assessing the true objectives of declared policy initiatives.

COVID-19 screening procedures being conducted at U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys, South Korea in early 2020. U.S. Army Photo by Pfc. Kang, Min-jin
Framing the Issues
“Don’t Think of an Elephant”

As George Lakoff famously observed, the framing of an issue—to include the words and metaphors used to describe it—can affect whether political leaders can marshal support for a particular policy initiative. Congress can enact “Estate Taxes,” but may have trouble gathering majority support for a “Death Tax.” Framing matters on the Korean Peninsula too. As an artifact of the Cold War, the divided Korean Peninsula lends itself easily to Cold War, zero-sum metaphors. It is not hard to imagine the Korean Peninsula as a game of chicken, with the United States, Japan, and ROK steering an eighteen-wheeler hurtling down a Texas highway toward an oncoming Chinese-made Volkswagen Passat sedan carrying China, Russia, and the DPRK. There will be no winners if the two vehicles collide, even though the drivers of the truck may think themselves in a superior position.

Cold War “us/them” thinking is becoming more popular in both Washington and Beijing. Some U.S. experts go so far as to assert that the United States should view the peninsula almost exclusively through the lens of U.S.-China competition, and should therefore reject any approach that fails to deprive China of a sphere of influence in Northeast Asia. The rationale behind this framing is clear enough. It echoes rhetoric found in core Trump Administration policy documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy, dividing the world between the forces of repression—China, Russia, and the DPRK—and the forces of freedom and openness, led by the United States, its treaty allies, and those states qualifying for membership in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” The geometry of this applied to the Korean Peninsula is three versus three.

This framing is antiquated, misleading, and ultimately self-defeating. The United States, Japan, ROK, China, and Russia are surprisingly well-aligned when it comes to the nuclear issue—especially when it comes to their unified opposition to any North Korean nuclear tests. All have supported robust UN Security Council Resolutions imposing severe economic sanctions and export/import controls on the DPRK in response to Pyongyang’s nuclear and ballistic missile testing. Although their motives may differ, none want to see perpetuation of the status quo or a return to the heightened state of military tension that marked the peninsula throughout most of 2017 until the 2018 Winter Olympics inter-Korean engagement and its follow-up. All powers hope the DPRK will adopt market-based economic reforms, curtail illicit activities such as smuggling and cybercrime, and bring itself into closer alignment with broadly respected international norms of behavior. In sum, they are looking in the same general direction, but since the Six Party Talks came to naught, they are traveling in separate vehicles and following different roadmaps. Their approaches are not coordinated enough to induce the two main protagonists to reach diplomatic compromises. This has proved to be inefficient, if not counterproductive, maximizing the chance that one or more parties will take a wrong turn, get lost, or break down and get left behind.

To make progress on the Korean Peninsula, multilateral cooperation is not optional; it is essential. Although the geometry for multilateral negotiations is more complex than for bilateral talks, a multilateral framework for dialogue does not necessarily mean multilateral negotiations. From its inception, the Six

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5. Linguist and philosopher George Lakoff explored how metaphors and linguistic construction can affect outcomes in political debate in his brilliant 2004 manuscript, Don’t Think of an Elephant.


Party Talks served more as a platform for an ever-changing constellation of two and three-party talks than as a true six-sided game of diplomacy. In the face of the DPRK’s stance, only closely coordinated actions by Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow have a chance to succeed. Provided such actions help the main protagonists engage and move towards meaningful agreements, tight cooperation is particularly important among the United States and its allies (Japan and ROK) and between the United States and China.

When Japan-ROK relations are on the rocks, as they have been in recent months, collaboration on DPRK policy becomes more difficult. And if the United States government demonizes China—suggesting that Xi Jinping is undermining U.S. diplomacy, heaping criticism on China for its failure to faithfully implement UN sanctions, or even blaming China for the Coronavirus—it only undermines its own efforts to maximize international pressure on Pyongyang to denuclearize.

Washington should certainly press Beijing to faithfully implement UN sanctions on the DPRK, but should try to do so quietly. China’s recent track record on peninsula affairs is actually promising, notwithstanding cheating at the margins with respect to sanctions on the export of coal, petroleum, and luxury goods.
To better understand how the interests and priorities of the key stakeholders align or diverge, participants in our workshop were asked to imagine how each nation might assign finite resource points across fifteen tasks associated with forging peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula (see chart below). We conducted this thought experiment not to divine numerical values of scientific value, but rather to sketch the scene in hope that patterns would emerge in areas of alignment and misalignment.

Among the five parties, significant gaps are evident with respect to how to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The United States and Japan are more inclined to impose new sanctions and less willing to lift existing sanctions on the DPRK than are ROK, China, and Russia. This is especially true with respect to DPRK missile tests. Japan has consistently objected strenuously to any DPRK missile launches and favored the imposition of new sanctions in response to these violations of UN Security Council Resolutions. Washington has generally aligned itself with Tokyo on the missile issue, although President Trump has differentiated between short-range and long-range missile tests, describing the former as permitted under the understanding he reached with Kim Jong-Un in Singapore. By contrast, China and Russia seem to have concluded that UN sanctions have outlived their usefulness, particularly in the absence of a meaningful peace process. They have even floated a proposal to relax sanctions as an incentive to induce cooperation from the DPRK.
A somewhat surprising result was our assessment that five of six stakeholders are sufficiently aligned on the broad goal of denuclearization (to include eliminating nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems) to marshal coordinated action toward a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. As much as China prefers to maintain stability on the peninsula, it also seeks denuclearization. And although the ROK hopes to advance toward the twin goals of ending the Korean War and normalizing relations with the DPRK, it is not prepared to overlook North Korea's nuclear weapons capability. None of the key stakeholders, apart from the DPRK, will be satisfied by a long-term outcome that sees North Korea emerge as a de jure nuclear weapons state.

A third finding is that the DPRK is badly out of alignment with the United States and Japan with respect to the emphasis it places on the peace and normalization components of the Singapore Declaration compared to the priority it attaches to taking concrete steps toward denuclearization. This misalignment helps explain why the DPRK has responded sluggishly, if at all, to recent offers of engagement by the United States, Japan, and ROK for talks, and why Pyongyang continues to develop its military programs, prohibited by the UN Security Council (as demonstrated by its periodic launches of ballistic missiles). The DPRK sees little, if any, evidence that the United States, Japan, and ROK are prepared to address its core interests. Pyongyang also seems to have concluded that Seoul, with all its stated intentions, is not in a position to deliver on its commitments or exercise sufficient pressure on Washington to make the latter move toward compromise. The North demands that the United States, Japan, and ROK relax sanctions and remove other measures the DPRK considers part of the United States' “hostile policy.” [Kim Jong-un's frustration with Seoul likely drove the North's moves in June to suspend communication links and destroy the North-South liaison office in Kaesong—actions that happened after our conference and shortly before publication.]

The greatest gap in priorities/emphasis is certainly between the DPRK and the United States, with Pyongyang focused on peace and economic normalization while Washington concentrated almost exclusively on eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Although Washington and Pyongyang broadly agree (at least in principle, consistent with the Singapore Declaration) to “work toward” the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, they have not yet agreed a common definition for the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Many questions remain to be answered. Must the DPRK eventually abandon all its nuclear weapons and come into full compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty? Must the United States forego the deployment of strategic weapons systems such as Trident-armed submarines or B-2 bombers to Northeast Asia? Can the DPRK maintain a civilian nuclear energy program after “denuclearization”?

Finally, great misalignments can be found when exploring the “human dimension” to the challenges of the Korean Peninsula. The five parties differ markedly when it comes to their willingness to invest time and resources to address humanitarian issues (e.g. food security and public health), to promote reunion visits for divided families, or to stand up for the human rights of North Koreans, including those working abroad. Notably, Japan attaches paramount importance to the abduction of its citizens by North Korea. Prime Minister Abe has conditioned his government’s willingness to normalize relations with DPRK on an issue of human rights—namely, getting a full accounting of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea’s security services.

The consequences of the misalignments outlined above are to a large extent scenario-dependent. During periods of diplomatic engagement and progress, a spirit of goodwill and incremental steps toward peace tends to mask any underlying disagreements. But when diplomacy falters—as it has during the past 18 months—the misalignments take on greater significance, threatening the consensus required for sustained progress toward peace and denuclearization. The many dimensions to the DPRK conundrum—nuclear, missile, conventional military, economic, political, diplomatic, human—are all interactive, although to a varying degree.
If the current stalemate continues for 2-3 years, with the DPRK resuming nuclear and missile testing, it is not impossible that one or more countries may try to move independently, with potentially disastrous results. The United States could resort to a new round of “maximum pressure,” to include fresh sanctions, the deployment of strategic forces to Northeast Asia, and re-invigorated conventional military exercises. Such moves are likely to provoke Pyongyang and rankle Beijing. They also might alienate many in South Korea. For its part, China might try to impose its own political-military solution, perhaps strengthening its moribund military alliance with Pyongyang in an effort to persuade the DPRK to stand down from further nuclear/missile development. Such an outcome might provide short-term relief to the international community, but at the expense of the long-term goals of denuclearization and unification.

Pyongyang’s Tong-il Market in 2004.

There is a human dimension to the challenge of forging peace on the Korean Peninsula—economic development, food security, human rights—that cannot be separated from the security dimensions of the problem.
How Much Maneuvering Room?

Each of the key stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula operates within certain boundaries, set by economic and military resources and political strength. We sought to estimate the location of these boundaries to better assess the freedom of action enjoyed by the key stakeholders.

**DPRK**  
*Weak, Yet Flexible*

Paradoxically, the weakest of the parties in terms of resources probably enjoys the greatest overall maneuvering room, and has a leader who can act swiftly to change the trajectory of his nation. Kim Jong-Un faces many constraints, including a meager economy, food and energy insecurity, no access to international credit or much foreign direct investment, and brutal economic sanctions. But no other leader enjoys the ability to turn on a dime that Kim Jong-Un enjoys. He controls all the levers of power in the DPRK, including the Korean Workers Party and the Korean People’s Army. He doesn’t have to contend with opposition political parties, requires no legislative approval for a peace treaty, and does not need to worry that his domestic media outlets will criticize him for cutting a “bad deal” with President Trump. In frustration, Kim can lash out at the South, Japan, or the United States – testing missiles, developing new weapons systems, launching cyber attacks, etc. But Kim also has the authority to hold a third summit with President Trump, notwithstanding his disappointment at the Hanoi debacle. In fact, he knows that U.S. Presidents facing re-election—especially if the race looks close or uphill—may be more pliant than those just starting their terms.

**DPRK Bottom Line**

Kim Jong-Un enjoys maximum flexibility. He faces few limitations in staying his current course, nor has he reason to change it. He can escalate tensions to test the U.S./ROK/Chinese response, calibrating his military actions to the political blowback, if any. Or he can offer an olive branch, reopening talks to see what if any concessions he can extract as President Trump mounts his reelection campaign.

**United States**  
*Massed Resources, Limited Bandwidth*

The United States enjoys massive asymmetric advantages over the DPRK in every resource area except one: political maneuvering room. President Trump could choose to escalate military exercises and economic sanctions, returning to something akin to his “maximum pressure” campaign of 2017. But having already declared success in his effort to denuclearize the DPRK, and having touted his special friendship with Kim Jong-Un, President Trump has been reluctant to characterize the current stalemate in talks as anything other than a minor setback. Following the collapse of the Hanoi summit, the Trump administration has taken pains to keep the diplomatic door open. President Trump has ordered his diplomats to press hard for progress, and in late March 2020 even wrote a letter to Kim underscoring his continued support for the peace process and reportedly offering assistance to the DPRK in light of the COVID epidemic. But in a frustrating turn of events for special envoy Steve Biegun, Pyongyang has shown no willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations in the absence of a specific and bold proposal by the United States. The DPRK abruptly ended working-level talks in Stockholm last October while accusing the United States of acting in bad faith and failing to put any new ideas on table. No new working-level talks have been scheduled.

Politically, President Trump is engaged in a desperate re-election struggle, and his administration must also contend with a looming recession brought on by COVID-19. These challenges argue against taking any risky moves in the realm of foreign policy. President Trump has repeatedly downplayed the likelihood of making rapid progress with the DPRK. Trump made no mention of North Korea in his 2020 State of the Union address and has not tweeted or issued
public statements about the situation in months. Nonetheless, President Trump is not an ordinary leader and these are not ordinary times. While COVID-19 and the looming U.S. economic downturn will certainly command most of the administration's attention, President Trump could still seek opportunity abroad to burnish his reelection prospects.

**U.S. Bottom Line**

Although an “October Surprise” is always possible, it would likely require President Trump to make significant up-front concessions to Pyongyang, leaving the administration vulnerable to claims it had capitulated to North Korean blackmail. It would be a risky move, as Trump’s political opponents would likely characterize any alleged “breakthrough” as a political stunt.

**ROK**

*Keep Hope Alive*

President Moon Jae-in finds himself far out on the limb of engagement with DPRK, hoping no one will saw it off behind him. Moon has staked his entire legacy on making peace with the DPRK, and no leader in the region has invested more political capital in the endeavor than has Moon. Term-limited and scheduled to leave office in early 2022, Moon’s personal political future is not at stake, and his party made significant gains in the Korean National Assembly elections in April 2020. Despite some progress implementing confidence- and security-building measures with the DPRK, Moon must confront the reality that the ROK acting alone cannot convince the DPRK to denuclearize, nor can he ignore the fact that there is not much appetite in Washington to support further inter-Korean rapprochement. A U.S.-DPRK deal is imperative if the DPRK is ever to take the dramatic steps necessary to eliminate its nuclear weapons program.

**ROK Bottom Line**

President Moon has gone about as far as he can in improving North-South relations without overstepping the limits imposed by the UN Security Council. He can continue to seek U.S. support for limited steps on humanitarian issues that are technically still permitted under the comprehensive sanctions regime, but cannot fundamentally alter the international posture on sanctions absent concrete steps by the DPRK toward compliance with UN Security Council Resolutions. At the other end of the spectrum, President Moon cannot significantly harden his position toward the North without alienating his progressive base, nor can he afford serious friction with Washington over his approach to the North while he is also trying to resolve differences over South Korea’s financial support for U.S. forces stationed on the peninsula.

**Japan**

*Trying to Get Off the Sidelines*

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is one of the longer-serving leaders among the Six Parties. He also is among the more politically secure of the Six Party leaders, enjoying comparatively high approval ratings despite the adversity created by COVID-19 and the resulting global economic downturn and postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics. Although term-limited, Abe is currently in a strong position to determine his successor, and the Liberal Democratic Party maintains a favorable position vis-à-vis all opposition parties. Japan’s international situation is also strong. Japan-China relations are improving despite tensions sparked in part by China’s actions in the South and East China Seas. Prime Minister Abe has also managed to stabilize Japan-ROK relations after months of deterioration, convening working-level talks on export control issues and, in partnership with Washington, managing to convince ROK not to withdraw from the GSOMIA intelligence-sharing arrangement. Although currently operating on the sidelines of the DPRK issue (among the five leaders, only Abe has not held a summit meeting with Kim Jong-Un), Abe has the maneuvering room to engage if an opportunity presents itself. He has repeatedly offered to hold talks with the DPRK without preconditions. So far, Pyongyang has rebuffed these offers, but Kim could take up Tokyo’s offer at any time.

**Japan Bottom Line**

The Government of Japan has no intention to ever abandon its commitment to secure a full accounting for the abductees, but Prime Minister Abe has some flexibility on how he and his government
approach the “human dimension” of the Korean Peninsula challenges, particularly if engagement on human security issues (food aid, public health) can leverage greater attention by partners (ROK, China, Russia) on the abductee issue and the national security threats (including DPRK missile tests) of paramount importance to Tokyo. However, all of this ultimately depends on having a willing North Korean negotiating partner, and that is not yet in evidence.

China

Xi’s flexibility with a balanced approach

President Xi Jinping has moved decisively over the past seven years to consolidate his hold over the Communist Party of China. In March 2018 the National People’s Congress reappointed Xi as President without term limits. With power unrivaled since the era of Mao, President Xi enjoys broad latitude over all foreign and domestic policies of the PRC, although by marginalizing his rivals, he also is more likely to be held accountable if China’s economic performance tumbles in light of the global economic slowdown associated with COVID-19.

Despite the worsening of China-U.S. relations and Beijing’s heavy-handed approach towards the U.S.-ROK decision to deploy THAAD, President Xi Jinping has steadily enhanced China’s influence over events on the Korean Peninsula over the past two years. He has met four times with Kim Jong-Un, and has sustained, and arguably increased, China’s economic leverage over the DPRK. He has walked a careful line on UN sanctions, allegedly allowing some leakage along the border and at sea, but making a show of returning many guest workers and cracking down on the trade in sanctioned dual-use and military goods. After an initial period in which China seemed to be distancing itself from the Kim government, President Xi seems to have accepted the fact that China must, as former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry counsels, deal with North Korea as it is, and not as they might wish it to be.

Xi’s approach to the DPRK challenge is marked by realism, a recognition that the DPRK will not quickly or easily abandon its nuclear weapons, balanced by China’s strong opposition to any DPRK actions that might spark a return to U.S. “maximum pressure” or military moves endangering stability in Northeast Asia. Having consolidated power at home, and having apparently weathered the worst of the COVID-19 epidemic in China without catastrophic results, Xi emerges in a relatively strong position to gradually increase China’s role shaping the future of the peninsula.

Perceiving U.S. leadership to be in decline, President Xi has moved to fill the vacuum, authoring proposals for limited UN sanctions relief designed to coax the DPRK into fresh steps on peace and denuclearization. He has tried to shore up relations with President Trump by signing a phase one trade agreement, and to restore more normal relations with Japan, though a long-awaited trip by Xi to Tokyo was postponed due to COVID-19. Relations

Chinese Customs office Yanbian, China, built in 2000 in anticipation of large-scale trade with DRPK
with ROK began to recover with the Xi-Moon meeting in December 2019, and the two leaders exchanged messages of solidarity with respect to COVID-19 in late February 2020.

**China Bottom Line**

Xi Jinping seems poised to resume a leadership role on the peninsula not seen since the PRC last hosted the Six Party Talks more than a decade ago. President Xi is largely immune from domestic political constraints on his freedom of action. He can calibrate China’s foreign policies to the situation, tightening or loosening sanctions enforcement depending on Beijing’s assessment of conditions inside DPRK and Pyongyang’s responsiveness to China’s core interests and directives. He will likely also take into account the overall state of U.S.-China relations, and Xi could greatly complicate U.S. diplomacy on the peninsula if he seeks leverage on other issues.

**Russia**

*Reasserting itself…Spoiler alert*

As Artyom Lukin wrote at the end of last year, “Russia’s policy toward North Korea has followed the pattern well-established since the early 2000s: maintaining friendly ties with Pyongyang, while closely coordinating with China and generally following Beijing’s lead on Korean Peninsula issues. The Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang trio has clearly emerged, with China as its core, and it has effectively negated Washington’s maximum pressure campaign on the North.”

Nonetheless, after years of generally following China’s lead, Russia has begun to raise its own profile. President Putin’s *modus operandi* has generally been to support non-proliferation and peace initiatives on the Korean, even while occasionally looking for areas where he can disrupt U.S. initiatives or play the spoiler. President Putin has held his own summit with Chairman Kim Jong-Un, and Moscow has become a surprising *de facto* interlocutor between Washington and Pyongyang, while maintaining close coordination with Beijing. To the disbelief of many, given the overall sour state of U.S.-Russia relations, Washington and Moscow maintain regular, quiet diplomatic dialogue about the Korean Peninsula.

Russia’s interest in peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula is linked to its aspirations to develop the vast oil, gas, and other natural resources of the Russian Far East and to bring those resources to the marketplace of Northeast Asia. Russia has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in rail, port, and other infrastructure projects designed to position Moscow to profit from progress toward peace and stability in the region.

**Russia Bottom Line**

Russia, like China, believes that the only pathway towards a denuclearized and truly peaceful Korean Peninsula lies through a comprehensive deal between Washington and Pyongyang. Russia sees this as a step-by-step process, with the two protagonists taking simultaneous steps towards each other. From Moscow’s vantage point, the DPRK will not give up its nuclear ambitions in the absence of a major course adjustment by Washington, normalizing bilateral relations and offering serious economic incentives and security guarantees to incentivize concrete denuclearization steps by Pyongyang.

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Notwithstanding their different priorities, resources, and political maneuvering room, the core interests of the five key stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula overlap sufficiently for them to pursue a joint diplomatic effort to persuade the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons and forge peace. The adjustments required to harmonize the disparate approaches are not as dramatic as some observers have claimed. Each party will have to make some concessions to bring their approach into greater harmony with those of the other four stakeholders, but through mutual accommodation, a more cohesive approach by the five stakeholders could persuade the DPRK to alter its trajectory.

**Recommendation One: Seize the Day**

DPRK is today *de facto* a nuclear weapons state. As mentioned above, we assume that DPRK will stubbornly resist efforts to convince it to abandon its nuclear arsenal. If the international community, led by the United States, does not put a persuasive proposal on the table soon (meaning over the next 2-3 years), the prospect of ever seeing a non-nuclear DPRK may vanish completely. Over the next few months, there still exists a window of opportunity for the United States, Japan, and the ROK to put a floor under the denuclearization and peace processes and make a return to “fire and fury,” high-tension, environment less likely in 2021. Even that narrow window may slam shut after the U.S. elections, at least temporarily. If Trump wins reelection, an emboldened Trump may heed the advice of current and former administration officials such as John Bolton, who advocated not only for stiffer sanctions, but also military options to degrade the North’s nuclear capabilities. If presumptive Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden prevails in November, he will likely conduct a policy review before launching any new diplomatic initiatives. Under this scenario, Washington will almost certainly sustain all existing sanctions for months. No matter who wins in November, the DPRK seems likely to continue developing its nuclear “deterrent.”

In sum, the passage of time does nothing to advance the peace and denuclearization process. In fact, absent vigorous diplomatic moves, time favors the perpetuation of the North’s nuclear arsenal.

**Recommendation Two: Avoid Cold War Thinking**

Assuming it can summon the energy to revitalize DPRK diplomacy, Washington’s next step should be to change its framing of the dynamic at play on the peninsula; imagining a joint road trip for all six parties rather than a game of chicken between two Cold War superpower adversaries and their respective allies. The powers off the peninsula must take into account Korean fears that great powers have always called the shots and meddled in ways unhelpful to Korean unity and peace. For that reason, a “G-2” diplomatic configuration, with Presidents Trump and Xi sharing leadership duties, will immediately run afoul of both South Korean and North Korean sensitivities.

Conversely, North and South Korea cannot by themselves steer talks to a successful conclusion. The United States will not tolerate being relegated to a subordinate position; the U.S.-DPRK security dynamic is at the core of the denuclearization issue. Just as the United States and China cannot bring peace and denuclearization to the peninsula absent buy-in from the ROK and DPRK, North and South Korea cannot solve the security dimension of the problem without concurrence by the United States and, ultimately, China.

These realities suggest that Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-Un must set the pace and tone for the peace process, but the United States should navigate and ensure from its vantage point that Japanese interests are also taken into account throughout the journey. Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe should each play supporting roles, with China reassuring the DPRK about its security and Japan holding in reserve significant financial resources that could help to transform the DPRK if a peace deal can be reached. Vladimir Putin, for now, has not earned a major role, but it would be a grave mistake to try to exclude them from the peace process. That would only ignite Moscow’s proclivity to play a spoiler role.
This framing echoes the role differentiation that was a part of the Six Party talks—a specialization largely lost with the suspension of those talks—and the preference exhibited by Presidents Moon and Trump for bilateral engagement with the DPRK.

As a practical matter, moving away from the Cold War framing requires a significant change in the tone of U.S.-China relations. Tensions are currently high, with each blaming the other for COVID-19, and public sentiment in both countries is deteriorating amidst trade tensions, tariffs, human rights concerns, suppression of democracy advocates in Hong Kong, etc. With no message control in Washington, different parts of the U.S. government and different voices within each part have created cacophony. The White House needs to restore central control over China policy and prioritize cooperation over competition, at least for the duration of the global COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump should lift tariffs and mute criticism of China’s COVID-19 response. These moves make sense for economic recovery and public health, and they will pay dividends on foreign policy coordination as well.

**Recommendation Three: Initiate Regular Multilateral Consultations**

The United States, ROK, Japan, China, and Russia should initiate regular dialogue, however informal, with a view toward harmonizing their respective approaches and better aligning their short- and long-term objectives on the peninsula. Absent such an effort, the differing vectors of the major players could, over time, lead to unbridgeable gaps. By contrast, careful nurturing of relations now can bring the parties into closer alignment, reducing mistrust and creating a basis for both coordinated efforts and complementary independent actions. These consultations would carry minimal risk of alienating the DPRK given the respective stances of the ROK, China, and Russia. In fact, under the current circumstances, closer interaction among the five parties is needed not only to work out a realistic approach to alter the DPRK’s behavior, but to help the United States alter its course as well. Regular consultations should also revive discussions among the five parties regarding any future peace and security architecture in Northeast Asia.

One of the first outputs of this new consultation mechanism should be a joint statement of all the parties affirming the Singapore Declaration and pledging to work together with the DPRK to implement it. Each nation should also reaffirm and pledge to uphold whatever bilateral commitments they have made to the peace and denuclearization process; e.g. the September 2006 *Six-Party Joint Statement*, the April 2018 *Panmunjom Declaration*, and the September 2018 *Pyongyang Declaration*. Regardless of the outcome of elections in the United States and South Korea, the new administrations should reaffirm the commitments of their predecessors and consider them binding. Finally, the five parties should arrive at a common approach to the “human dimension” of the Korean Peninsula challenge.

**Recommendation Four: Make Common Effort on the “Human Dimension”**

Our analysis of the interests of the key stakeholders revealed deep differences in how they approach the human dimensions of the situation in North Korea. In part, those differences are the reflection of a fundamentally different overall approach to human rights by those countries. The human dimension includes at least three elements: humanitarian issues (including food aid and public health assistance to the DPRK), human rights concerns, and abductees. All require attention, and *all should be delinked, as much as possible, from the political and security challenges on the peninsula*. The sole objective of any humanitarian engagement with DPRK should be to help those in need—be they hungry and sick

11. “Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018.” Document hosted by the National Committee on North Korea. [https://www.ncnk.org/node/1633](https://www.ncnk.org/node/1633)
North Koreans, grieving Japanese families missing their loved ones, separated families, relatives of U.S. servicemen MIA from the Korean War, or DPRK laborers being exploited or abused in third countries.

As a first step toward closer international harmonization on the human dimension, the five parties should narrow their difference on humanitarian assistance. Specifically, Washington should consult with Seoul and Beijing on ways the United States could significantly intensify its support for foreign aid programs, leveraging that move to extract greater Chinese adherence to global norms on the treatment of DPRK refugees/guest workers in China. China should halt all repatriations of DPRK citizens. The second step should be for the international community to support in earnest inter-Korean engagement, including family reunifications and regular cross-border communication and people-to-people exchanges. To date, only the ROK has devoted much in the way of diplomatic resources toward addressing these issues, even though thousands of ethnic Koreans in China, the United States, Japan, and Russia have relatives in the DPRK with whom they have lost contact.

With respect to the sensitive matter of the abduction of Japanese citizens by the DPRK, the United States, ROK, China, and Russia should support DPRK-Japan sustained dialogue with a view to satisfying Japanese concerns regarding the abduction issues in question. Concerted action by each of the key stakeholders offers the best hope of convincing Pyongyang to resume cooperation with Tokyo. To facilitate progress, Japan should set the bar at securing full cooperation from Pyongyang, which in any case is a necessary first step toward eventually arriving at a full accounting. In this regard, Tokyo could usefully draw on lessons learned by the United States from the process of normalization between the United States and Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. Washington discovered that the best way to make progress toward full accounting for American POW/MIA was to place emphasis on cooperation and transparency, and then to provide such assistance to Vietnam as was required to facilitate joint recovery and investigation operations. A similar model has been used by the United States with some success in working with Pyongyang on the recovery of U.S. MIA from the Korean War. Notably, in both cases, it was a quiet cooperative effort.

Finally, when it comes to the DPRK’s human rights issues, the focus should be on securing DPRK cooperation with UN mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review. The DPRK is more likely to respond to multilateral initiatives on human rights than to unilateral actions. The DPRK invariably views unilateral criticism by Washington as a manifestation of the United States’ “hostile policy” toward North Korea. To signal its enduring commitment to advancing human rights in the DPRK, Washington should appoint and confirm a full-time Ambassador for Human Rights in the DPRK, as authorized under the North Korean Human Rights Act. That individual should then focus on coordinating policies among the other four key stakeholders on the peninsula.

**Recommendation Five: Differentiate COVID-19 Aid from Sanctions**

As the Trump Administration quickly realized, the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for key stakeholders on the peninsula to send a message of goodwill to Pyongyang. Managed shrewdly, the health crisis could also give the United States and Japan a chance to close the existing gap between their strict approach to sanctions enforcement and the more lax posture adopted by the ROK, China, and Russia. Washington and Beijing should stop exchanging barbs on COVID-19 and seize this opportunity to open a door to the DPRK. The five parties should mount a unified humanitarian response to COVID-19, utilizing existing NGOs with field operations inside the DPRK and international organizations such as the WHO. UN sanctions were never meant to impede humanitarian aid deliveries, and yet NGOs have found it nearly impossible to navigate the new maze of regulations governing the movement of goods and people to the DPRK. Critical health supplies sit in warehouses in China and elsewhere, awaiting approval for delivery, while aid workers find it nearly impossible to secure permission to travel to North Korea to administer aid. The international community should streamline the rules restricting aid flows even while it tightens...
enforcement of sanctions most likely to impede the North's nuclear weapons program: those targeting military items, dual-use goods, and energy.

By providing more support for public health and nutrition aid to the DPRK, the United States and Japan will bring themselves into closer alignment with South Korea and will finally do something meaningful in terms of building trust with North Korea. Japan will enhance its leverage in any direct talks with DPRK on abductions while also finding itself in closer alignment with Seoul, boosting Tokyo's voice in any future peace and denuclearization process.

As with the reciprocal actions recommended on the human dimension, the international response to COVID-19 provides an opportunity for the international community to close ranks and articulate a "shared vision" for the future of a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula. States emphasizing strict sanctions enforcement need to make allowances for NGOs to provide aid (provided sufficient monitoring/transparency can be assured), while those more focused on people-to-people engagement need to shore up enforcement actions designed to prevent the DPRK from acquiring the money and material it needs to sustain its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

**Recommendation Six: Reaching for an Interim Security Deal**

The current situation does not indicate any immediate prospect for a "grand" diplomatic breakthrough regarding the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. Even a modest "small deal" appears unlikely at this time. This does not preclude the possibility of movement forward in the next 2-3 years. For this to remain possible, however, international engagement with the DPRK needs to gather some momentum. The best chance to do that lies in the crafting of a U.S.-DPRK interim denuclearization agreement. Such an agreement would be a bridge that should save the modest diplomatic accomplishments of 2018-19, revive the recent inter-Korean agreements, ensure the sustainability of diplomatic engagement, and provide a springboard from which to launch dialogue on the tough security issues at the core of the dispute between North Korea and the international community.

Our working group was not tasked with revisiting the many sensible studies that already exist on what an interim/phase one security deal might look like. Rather, we sought to identify the primary obstacles to convincing the DPRK to take additional concrete steps toward fulfilling its promise to work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. We perceive three primary challenges.

The first is the absence of an agreed definition on the end state—the United States and DPRK do not share a common vision for what a "denuclearized" Korean Peninsula looks like. It is hard to start a journey when one is uncertain of the destination.

The second obstacle is the lack of cohesion among the five powers on the parallel processes of peace and denuclearization. We believe this obstacle can be at least partially addressed by implementing the preceding recommendations for collective action by the five key stakeholders on the human dimensions of the North Korean problem. The five need to enhance mutual trust and move closer to each other, limiting the opportunity for the DPRK to sow divisions or play one off against the other. Of course, even more importantly, the United States and Japan should prove their readiness to build mutual trust with the DPRK.

The final obstacle is frankly in the realm of the unknown: will the DPRK ever take "yes" for an answer? In other words, are there any conditions under which the DPRK would trade the security it derives from possessing nuclear weapons for external security guarantees, enhanced by normalized relations with the United States, Japan, and others and the economic benefits that would flow from normalization. The answer to this question can be found only after there is a comprehensive proposal on the table for North Korea to consider. It would certainly help if such a proposal could come from the concerned parties speaking with one voice.
This report was prepared by Mansfield Foundation staff. We have attempted to accurately 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 group. 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.

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