



ALLIANCE POLICY COORDINATION BRIEF

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Staying in Sync on North Korea's Nuclear Program

Evans J.R. Revere and Mataka Kamiya

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China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

How should the risks and opportunities presented by a continually rising, increasingly self-assertive China be addressed? This is a pressing issue for the international community, particularly for the United States and Japan, whose alliance has proactively helped form and maintain the liberal, rules-based international order for the past several decades.

To enhance mutual understanding and encourage effective policymaking, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have convened a small group of U.S. and Japanese scholars to examine the risks and opportunities accompanying China's ascendance. This group includes China specialists, alliance experts, and authorities on trade and security issues in the Asia Pacific.

Led by Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, the group has conducted research and facilitated dialogue since April 2017 through private roundtables and public symposia that seek to further U.S.-Japan cooperation and coordination on China policy. The project examines different perspectives between the alliance members and discusses ways in which Washington and Tokyo can effectively respond to China's rise. An accompanying series of policy briefs explores various China-related risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the areas of regional and international order, trade and technology, security, and foreign relations. To learn more about the project, [click here](#).

JFIR, together with the project's U.S. team members, wish to thank the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership respectively for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.

—Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, Project Leaders and Co-editors

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Issue Background

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent U.S. President Donald Trump a powerful message at their February 2019 summit in Hanoi: Pyongyang is determined to keep its nuclear weapons. Faced with Kim's attempt to exclude parts of his nuclear weapons program and other weapons of mass destruction from any agreement, Trump walked away from the negotiating table, surprising many critics and supporters alike.

The future of diplomacy between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is now unclear, particularly as North Korea has threatened to go its own way if the United States does not meet its demands by the end of 2019. At the same time, Pyongyang's ongoing test firing of new short-range ballistic missiles suggests North Korea could use launches and other provocations to pressure the United States to change its negotiating position.

The breakdown of the Hanoi summit left Pyongyang still able to manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, the international sanctions regime is fraying, giving North Korea some respite from economic pressure, despite its inability to convince the United States to ease sanctions. Kim may find this status quo palatable for now.

For its part, China has kept a low profile since the summit, treading carefully as trade talks with the United States have become increasingly contentious. Nevertheless, Beijing has made clear its opposition to further economic pressure on North Korea. Despite the breakdown of the Hanoi summit and the uncertain prospects for U.S.-DPRK working-level talks, the current situation serves Beijing's interests, although further missile launches by North Korea could complicate China's position.

Going forward, China will likely tread a familiar path: urging Pyongyang to avoid provocations, maintaining enough loopholes in the sanctions regime to keep the DPRK on life support, assuring Washington of its good intentions on North Korea, and pressing the United States and North Korea to be flexible. But the possibility of further DPRK missile or nuclear tests presents an important opportunity to enlist Beijing's support for increased pressure on Pyongyang.

Finally, for the U.S.-Japan alliance, South Korea's determination to prioritize reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea over denuclearization is a key concern, especially now that President Moon Jae-in has doubled down on this approach. Another challenge is U.S. President Donald Trump's mercurial temperament and unpredictability. A politically embattled U.S. president in need of a so-called win who remains an admirer of the North Korean dictator and is keen to turn the North Korea question into a legacy issue could reverse course yet again.

Recent Developments

The outcome of the summit in Hanoi surprised most analysts. It may also have surprised both Trump and Kim. The U.S. president arrived supremely confident that he could do what none of his predecessors had done: convince North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. Kim, having extracted major concession from Trump at their first meeting in Singapore in June 2018, arrived confident that he could do so again. Both leaders were wrong, and both left Hanoi empty-handed.

Trump's deal-making talents could not bridge the gap between the U.S. and North Korean positions on denuclearization. Leadership summitry and personal chemistry were of little use when the two sides could not even agree on the goal of their talks. And Kim appears to have seriously overestimated Trump's domestic political weakness and the U.S. president's need for an agreement.

In retrospect, there were signs of trouble well before the two leaders arrived in Hanoi. Prior to the summit, the heads of the U.S. intelligence community declared that Pyongyang's nuclear and missile arsenal was growing, contradicting Trump's [claim](#) that "there is no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea."

In the eight months between the Singapore and Hanoi summits, North Korea failed to take any significant denuclearization steps, despite the U.S. president's assurance that Kim was committed to doing so. In December 2018, Pyongyang's official news agency issued a [statement](#) warning the United States that the denuclearization language Trump and Kim had agreed to in Singapore did not mean *North Korea's* denuclearization. This was a stark reminder that Pyongyang's definition of denuclearization bore no resemblance to that of the United States. And on the eve of the Hanoi summit, Andrew Kim, who had served as Trump's secret liaison with Pyongyang, [said](#) that North Korea wanted to be recognized as a nuclear-weapon state.

Prior to the summit, the contradiction between the president's upbeat assurances about denuclearization and the reality of an expanding North Korean threat was generating widespread skepticism about Trump's diplomacy, both in the United States and Japan. There were concerns that a politically troubled U.S. president, in desperation, might agree to a bad deal. He was under considerable pressure to show substantial results in Hanoi.

As Trump traveled to Hanoi, U.S.-DPRK preparatory talks for the summit were in trouble. North Korean negotiators were reportedly evasive and in no rush to close gaps in their talks with U.S. counterparts. The North Koreans may have believed that their leader could get a better deal by talking directly to Trump. And as the summit neared, it was clear that the two sides still [did not even agree](#) on what "denuclearization" meant. The signs were ominous.

The Breakdown

In Hanoi, Kim demanded the removal of the major UN Security Council economic, financial, and trade sanctions. These measures have been stifling economic growth, limiting Pyongyang's access to the international banking system, and restricting its trade in key commodities and luxury goods. The sanctions ban natural gas imports, cap imports of oil and refined petroleum products, and prohibit the export of a wide range of North Korean products. The burden of these sanctions has been significant.

But Kim's position made clear his intention to prevent any deal with the United States from affecting North Korea's ability to make and deploy nuclear weapons. In return for the elimination of all nonmilitary sanctions, Kim offered to close the country's main nuclear weapons complex at Yongbyon. Shutting down the complex would slow Pyongyang's ability to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons, but for Kim it was a step worth taking because he would still be able to expand and enhance his arsenal using secret production sites outside Yongbyon.

Notably, a major resolution the North Korean party-state adopted on April 20, 2018, only a week before Kim and Moon adopted the Panmunjom Declaration, [stated](#) that “the DPRK will never use nuclear weapons nor transfer nuclear weapons or nuclear technology under any circumstances unless there are nuclear threat and nuclear provocation [sic] against the DPRK.” Yet the document did not mention denuclearization at all.

In post-summit [remarks](#), U.S. officials said Kim's insistence on major sanctions relief in return for closure of the superannated facility at Yongbyon aroused U.S. suspicions. Of particular concern was the fact that North Korea was not even offering to close all the facilities at Yongbyon. Equally concerning was that the North Korean negotiating team had declined to agree on a common definition of denuclearization with the United States, and that Pyongyang had also rejected the idea of establishing a timeline and roadmap for denuclearization.

In response to the North Korean proposal, Trump and his team called for Pyongyang to freeze and eventually dismantle all of its nuclear facilities, including secret sites outside Yongbyon, in return for the elimination of all sanctions. The North Korean leader refused, and at this point, the negotiations collapsed.

Trump proved unwilling to give up the all-important leverage of sanctions in exchange for a tenuous denuclearization step that would have excluded much of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. Summing up U.S. concerns, a senior State Department official [told](#) the press that the North Koreans were “unwilling to impose a complete freeze on their weapons of mass destruction programs, so to give many, many billions of dollars in sanctions relief would in effect put us in a position of subsidizing the ongoing development of weapons of mass destruction in North Korea.”

The Morning After

Even with the collapse of the summit, Washington and Pyongyang have agreed to stay in touch. But there will be a necessary pause in U.S.-DPRK diplomacy while the two sides consider their respective approaches and weigh options. The U.S. negotiating approach has been based on the assumption that denuclearization is possible in return for incentives, inducements, and presidential assurances. That assumption has now been proven wrong. And North Korea's belief that the United States would settle for a deal falling well short of denuclearization was incorrect too.

Pyongyang has adamantly rejected Washington's expansive definition of denuclearization and threatened to end future talks and reconsider its nuclear-weapons-testing and missile-testing moratorium unless the United States relents. North Korea has said it will wait only until the end of the year for U.S. concessions, after which it will go its own way. This could be a bluff to test Washington's will, but it is impossible to be sure, especially since Pyongyang's repeated test firing of short-range ballistic missiles since early May could presage a more confrontational posture by North Korea later this year.

Importantly, Kim's refusal to freeze, much less eliminate, his entire nuclear weapons program, even in return for major sanctions relief, [confirms](#) the [judgment](#) of the U.S. intelligence community that North Korea intends to keep its nuclear weapons. As a result, there may be renewed calls in the United States to increase pressure on the regime, including by imposing additional sanctions and taking other measures to isolate it.

U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton has [expressed confidence](#) that current sanctions have compelled the DPRK to accept the U.S. position. But a recent UN Security Council Panel of Experts [report](#) suggests that loopholes in the sanctions regime are allowing Pyongyang to survive despite economic pressure.

Since the summit, the Trump administration has sanctioned two Chinese entities that were doing illicit business with North Korea. But, in a puzzling and controversial move the next day, Trump seemed to reject a U.S. Treasury Department move to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, citing his good relationship with Kim. It now appears that the U.S. president sought, and failed, to reverse the two new sanctions imposed the previous day. Trump's action bears careful watching, since it appears to signal his opposition to further sanctions.

It remains to be seen whether Trump will continue to hold off on imposing additional sanctions, especially if North Korea declines to change its position. So far, the U.S. president's response to North Korea's test firing of short-range missiles has been low-key. While Bolton took a strong line over the launches, [saying](#), "there is no doubt" that the shootings violated the UN Security Council

resolutions that prohibit the launch of any ballistic missiles, Trump downplayed the tests, [tweeting](#) on May 25 that “North Korea fired off some small weapons, which disturbed some of my people, and others, but not me. I have confidence that Chairman Kim will keep his promise to me” with regard to the denuclearization of his country. Trump has continued to downplay the launches, even though the pace of testing has accelerated. It is also unclear whether Trump will want to further complicate U.S.-China relations by taking additional measures against Chinese firms that are violating UN Security Council sanctions.

China and North Korea: Risk, Opportunity, and Self-Interest

China has frequently made clear its preference for the easing of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea. This does not sit well with U.S. and Japanese policymakers, who want China to do more, not less, to pressure Pyongyang. For now, Beijing appears content that, despite the failed summit, the double freeze of both DPRK nuclear and long-range missile testing and U.S. military exercises that China has long advocated has now taken hold. Beijing is equally pleased that its ties with both North and South Korea remain strong, while strains are appearing in the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Because of its satisfaction with the current situation, China will have little incentive to change its posture of effectively resigning itself to living with a nuclear-armed North Korea for the foreseeable future. This represents a risk factor for the United States and Japan.

Beijing has reacted cautiously to the collapse of the summit, exhorting both sides to continue dialogue and focus on resolving their differences diplomatically. This is in keeping with China’s traditional caution and desire to preserve a status quo that works to its advantage. But Beijing may also be treading carefully because its trade ties with Washington are now in a much more complicated and dangerous state, and China may wish to avoid intensifying competition and confrontation with the United States.

China is nevertheless concerned about what North Korea will do next. Beijing has so far reacted in a restrained manner to Pyongyang’s short-range missile launches. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [said](#) on May 13 that the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue “has not come off the tracks, and remains within the framework for a political resolution,” and that it was still possible to resolve the issue through dialogue. But further, more provocative North Korean missile tests or a nuclear test could upend diplomacy and recreate the potential for U.S.-DPRK military confrontation that drove Chinese policy in late 2017. That concern prompted Beijing to support a series of tough UN Security Council resolutions, which raised the cost of North Korea’s continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Since then, China’s enforcement of sanctions and other measures has not been as rigorous as many wished, including its propensity to look the other way as Chinese-flagged ships transfer oil to North

Korean vessels in violation of UN sanctions, and as China-based merchants conduct illicit border trade with their North Korean counterparts. Nevertheless, Beijing's willingness to enforce most UN Security Council sanctions probably contributed to Pyongyang's decision to propose dialogue with the United States and South Korea in early 2018.

Beijing's support for and participation in the international sanctions regime led to a downturn in relations with Pyongyang. But intense Chinese diplomacy has since restored cooperative China–North Korea ties, which remain a Chinese priority. Beijing's focus on maintaining close ties with Pyongyang is a reminder to the United States and Japan that there are limits to how far China is prepared to go in pressuring North Korea, and that Beijing's interests and priorities on the Korean Peninsula do not necessarily accord with those of Washington and Tokyo.

Nevertheless, China's past willingness to support international sanctions served Beijing's interests well, winning the country plaudits from the international community for lending its influence to the pressure campaign. This approach also reminded North Korea that China is the regime's indispensable lifeline and that Beijing's interests must be taken into account. And this Chinese policy stance left Pyongyang with little choice but to deescalate tensions with Washington or face even greater isolation. If tensions again escalate because of North Korean provocations, the United States and Japan should be prepared to work with China again to manage Pyongyang's behavior.

North Korea's move toward diplomacy in 2018 resulted in even more positive outcomes for China. Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons-testing and missile-testing moratorium eased tensions on the Korean Peninsula, removing an important Chinese concern. This shift has allowed Beijing to refocus its North Korean diplomacy on reducing tensions and pressing Pyongyang to avoid provocative behavior, including missile and nuclear testing. But if the DPRK conducts further missile or nuclear tests, that would be a major challenge for Beijing. China has a major stake in preventing the current situation from deteriorating. This presents Washington and Tokyo with an opportunity to press Beijing to use its influence with North Korea to dissuade it from doing so, although the United States and Japan should keep in mind that China will continue to pursue its own carefully defined self-interest.

Trends and Future Risks

The collapse of the Hanoi summit caused many Japanese and U.S. experts to breathe a sigh of relief. Many Japanese observers widely agreed that no deal was a much better outcome for the country than an easy concession to nuclear-armed North Korea. Nevertheless, there are numerous challenges and uncertainties for the U.S.-Japan alliance going forward.

The greatest one lies in Pyongyang's intentions. Sanctions are taking a toll, and North Korea wants them removed. Having failed to convince the United States to do so in Hanoi, Kim may now try to

force Washington's hand by threatening to resume nuclear and missile testing. Before the summit, Trump said, "We just don't want testing"—a [remark](#) many observers felt gave away his bottom line. By firing short-range ballistic missiles, Kim may now be trying to determine just how much the U.S. president doesn't want testing in the coming days. North Korea should be expected to press the United States even harder in the future, including by conducting additional, even more provocative tests.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang may not have won in Hanoi, but neither did it lose. In fact, North Korea has little incentive to give more than it offered at the summit. Kim has gained legitimacy as an equal of the U.S. president. He can take satisfaction in the fact that he has come to the negotiating table as the leader of a de facto nuclear-weapon state, and he can relish the thought that Japan is also pursuing dialogue with him. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has repeatedly said that he is willing to hold unconditional and candid talks with Kim. And after Trump removed the timeline, and therefore the urgency, for Pyongyang to denuclearize, North Korea may have judged that there is less pressure to act.

Pyongyang has completed its necessary nuclear testing and medium- and long-range missile testing. At a major North Korean [party meeting](#) on April 20, 2018, Kim reportedly indicated that "no nuclear test and intermediate-range and inter-continental ballistic rocket test-fire are necessary for the DPRK now." The current impasse allows North Korea to expand and develop its nuclear and missile arsenals, even without testing. For Kim, this situation is satisfactory, until he decides that it is not.

Another major uncertainty lies in Seoul. South Korea is perhaps the biggest loser from the summit's collapse. The Blue House had hoped the summit would lead to the easing of sanctions on economic cooperation between South Korea and North Korea, allowing the Mount Kumgang tourism project to resume and the Kaesong Industrial Complex to reopen.

Moon has put on a positive face after the summit, but his efforts to expand economic cooperation and integration with North Korea have suffered a major setback. Pyongyang understands Moon's disappointment and may once again try to convince the South Korean president to carry its water and urge the United States to be flexible, including by dangling the prospect of another summit between Seoul and Pyongyang. North Korea's brief withdrawal of its staff from the North-South liaison office in Kaesong was an effort to pressure Seoul in this regard. Japan and the United States will need to be wary of a South Korean president who remains determined to prioritize reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea over denuclearization.

Washington is another source of uncertainty. Some experts believe the Trump administration may resuscitate its confrontational approach from 2017. This seems unlikely. There is little support in Washington for a return to bombastic rhetoric and military threats that could lead to war. South Korea has also made clear its opposition to any such approach. And with a U.S. presidential election

on the horizon, the administration seems more likely to try to quietly manage the North Korea issue until after ballots are cast. So Trump may opt to muddle through for now, including by keeping the illusion of Pyongyang's possible denuclearization in play—a tactic that Kim may also rely on, albeit for different reasons.

But the possibility cannot be ruled out that Trump might see fit to surprise observers again. On the eve of the Hanoi summit, there was widespread expectation that an unpredictable, unconventional U.S. president was poised to deliver major concessions to North Korea in return for little. Only Kim's obstinacy seems to have prevented this scenario from playing out.

By his own admission, Trump remains enamored of the North Korean dictator, eager to do business with him, and fascinated by the potential of making North Korea his legacy issue. So Trump still could make another stab at a deal with Kim, even over the objections of his advisers, although so far he has not backed away from the approach he took at the Hanoi summit. Also, Trump's domestic political challenges could once again tempt him to grab the limelight provided by personal diplomacy with North Korea. The U.S. president is skilled at using drama, uncertainty, and mystery to advance his personal brand, and the world may not have seen the end of his unique approach to diplomacy with Pyongyang. An example of this occurred on June 30, 2019, when Trump suddenly arranged a meeting with Kim in Panmunjom, including a brief stroll by Trump across the Military Demarcation Line into North Korea.

Finally, Japan and the United States should work together to ensure that China does not become more supportive of North Korea. No less importantly, Washington and Tokyo should cooperate to ensure that Seoul's single-minded focus on reconciliation with Pyongyang, and the U.S. president's desire for a success story with North Korea, do not create conditions under which the United States would agree to coexist with a nuclear-armed North Korea. In the coming months, there is ample reason for Japan and the United States to be at least as concerned about the risks South Korea and Trump pose as those that China poses.

Next Steps

The hastily arranged Trump-Kim summit in Panmunjom in June captured international attention and prompted renewed hopes in some quarters for progress on denuclearization. But it did not change the judgments and analysis here. Indeed, it reinforces them, particularly the assessment that Trump's mercurial temperament and deeply unconventional approach to diplomacy are major risk factors.

The Panmunjom meeting, which again allowed Kim to occupy the world stage with the U.S. president, took place even though there had been no change in North Korea's opposition to the U.S. definition of denuclearization and Pyongyang's refusal to accept a denuclearization roadmap

and timetable. After the meeting, Trump emphasized his personal relationship with Kim, expressed his hope to invite him to the White House, and hinted at his willingness to ease sanctions on North Korea, but he failed to mention the nuclear issue or Pyongyang's ballistic missile threat.

Meanwhile, a [major press report](#), citing U.S. officials, indicated that the Trump administration is considering changing its negotiating goal from denuclearization to seeking a so-called freeze on North Korea's nuclear weapons program—a step that would amount to effectively accepting the permanence of Pyongyang's nuclear-armed status. This report highlights the aforementioned judgment that Trump's approach remains a major risk and central concern going forward.

Acceptance by the U.S. government of North Korea's status as a nuclear-weapon state has long represented a nightmare scenario for Japan. The stability of the security order in East Asia has been based on the stability of the nuclear order in Northeast Asia, which has largely rested on Japan's maintaining a policy of not possessing nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles. If North Korea is allowed to keep its nuclear weapons, so to speak, that could make it more difficult for Tokyo to sustain its traditional policy of nuclear self-restraint.

Finally, Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang—the first by a Chinese leader to North Korea in fourteen years—which occurred ten days before the Panmunjom meeting, also is a reminder of the risk and opportunity presented by China. Xi's visit demonstrated that Beijing can still exercise influence on Pyongyang. Xi, however, spent a minimum amount of time in Pyongyang. While his rhetoric was filled with praise of the traditional relationship between China and North Korea, his words rang somewhat hollow in light of the serious downturn in ties between Beijing and Pyongyang witnessed in 2017. Xi did not offer North Korea any concrete new aid or support.

The visit seemed largely designed to continue Beijing's efforts to refurbish and restore normal ties with Pyongyang, remind North Korea and the United States that China has interests on the Korean Peninsula that must be respected, and encourage North Korea to rely on diplomacy and dialogue (not provocations) in dealing with the United States. Whether Xi's visit will result in new forms of aid to the DPRK remains to be seen. Meanwhile, Japan and the United States have an opportunity to work together to ensure that China does not undermine existing sanctions and press Beijing to be a constructive actor on North Korea, although this may not be an easy task for the two allies, particularly in the face of the increased risk posed by Trump.

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