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Sustaining Strong Partnerships: The First Trilateral Dialogue Initiative (TDI) Workshop

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Introduction

The dangers posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs remain significant even as countries explore opportunities to improve bilateral relations with Pyongyang in exchange for verifiable denuclearization and resolution of other outstanding issues. This present threat raises the stakes for effective diplomatic policy coordination and security cooperation among Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), and the United States. Trilateral efforts are necessary to help protect all three countries' strategic and security interests, as well as to have any chance at rolling back the North's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Moreover, the pursuit of multiple bilateral dialogues with Pyongyang places a premium on effective diplomatic coordination. Trilateral dialogue can also be an important catalyst to address broader regional foreign policy and regional commons issues with a coordinated effort.

To support trilateral cooperation and regional peace and security, four policy research and education institutions in the three countries formed the Japan-ROK-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue Initiative (TDI) and held its inaugural workshop in January 2019 in Tokyo. The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), the Korea National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA), and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace organized this workshop in collaboration with the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security in Washington, DC. This working paper summarizes the key takeaways and priorities for further study from the two-day workshop, which involved scholars as well as current and former government officials from the four partners.

This workshop was the first in a three-year project consisting of regular track 1.5 discussions in each country, accompanied by policy research, publication of findings and recommendations, and outreach to the public. This track 1.5 dialogue combines financial support from all three countries to support information exchange, collective discussion and analysis, and policy proposals focused on diplomatic coordination vis-à-vis North Korea to promote verifiable denuclearization and peace building that protects shared security interests. Trilateral foreign policy coordination on other pressing regional and global issues is another opportunity to advance mutual interests as a valuable core group within multilateral frameworks in Asia. (More information about the Japan-ROK-U.S. TDI can be found in Appendix A.)

Priority areas for trilateral discussion at the workshop included diplomatic engagement with North Korea (options for coordination and the potential impact of different scenarios, including some related to arms control), the role of trilateralism amid an intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry, and ways to strengthen trilateral cooperation and apply it to a broader Indo-Asia-Pacific context. Overall, the workshop clarified minor points of disagreement regarding diplomatic strategy for North Korea while confirming solidarity on the general direction and key parameters. The dialogue also highlighted

certain political and diplomatic challenges for trilateralism in the future, which the Japan-ROK-U.S. TDI will address as the project moves forward.

Setting the Scene

The first TDI workshop gathered in January 2019, amid expectation for a soon-to-be-announced second summit meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Although North Korea and South Korea had discussed the possibility of Kim visiting Seoul at the very end of 2018 (or beginning of 2019),¹ hopes were fading that the historic trip would take place before Trump and Kim met again. Presumably, Kim wanted some tangible economic benefit from a Seoul visit, and ROK President Moon Jae-in could only offer these incentives if Trump and others agreed to certain exemptions in the strict international sanctions regime established to pressure North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons.

A related development in this multifaceted diplomatic drama was an early January 2019 meeting in Beijing between Kim and Chinese President Xi Jinping—their fourth in a year—featuring continued dialogue on economic development issues and a pharmaceutical factory tour.² The Kim-Xi meeting raised hopes among allied optimists that North Korea might be looking to prioritize economic cooperation and that encouraging words from Xi could give Kim sufficient confidence to make some kind of compromise with Trump at their next summit. Skeptics, however, worried that solidarity with China's Xi might embolden Kim to demand more from the Americans.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been on the outside of diplomatic engagement with North Korea (stymied largely by Pyongyang's reluctance to address its past abduction of Japanese nationals³), but Abe has led a proactive foreign policy that preserves Japan's status as an important player regardless of how North Korean denuclearization and inter-Korean relations progress. Abe's efforts have helped improve Japan's relations with China and Russia, and he has maintained the U.S.-Japan alliance by keeping close personal ties to Trump.

The darkest cloud hanging over the TDI workshop was the dramatic decline in Japan-ROK relations over the past year,⁴ which has clearly had a negative impact on trilateral communication and potential cooperation at the official level. Tensions between Japan and Korea have simmered for decades, fueled by South Korean demands for greater contrition over Japan's 1910–1945 colonization of Korea and Japanese frustration that past apologies have not been deemed sufficient. After some promising efforts by both sides early in Moon's tenure to build more “future-oriented relations,” past agreements that tried to settle colonial and wartime grievances began to unravel in new ways. A military incident at sea, only weeks before this trilateral workshop, just added more fuel to the fire.⁵

Key Takeaways and Next Steps

Diplomatic Engagement With North Korea

Regarding the prospects of peace and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, the TDI workshop revealed perception gaps among the three partners based on different assessments of North Korean intentions and what tactics might be most successful. A U.S. participant observed that, even as recently as 2017, “security cooperation was the number one priority [for trilateral dialogue], but now has taken a back seat to diplomacy coordination.” One Japanese participant pointed out that while the United States seems “cautiously optimistic” and South Korea “positively optimistic” about North Korean intentions, Japan is the most cautious and skeptical among the three countries. A South Korean participant noted that the three sides have different strategies, rather than a perception gap, for how to achieve peace and denuclearization.

Most, if not all, of the South Korean participants argued that, although North Korea still poses a direct security threat to South Korea, Kim has fundamentally shifted North Korea’s grand strategy from nuclear proliferation to economic development. This change, they noted, provides an unprecedented opportunity for the United States, South Korea, and Japan to reduce the North Korean nuclear threat through negotiations. Some Japanese and U.S. participants pushed back on this idea, saying that although there has been some progress on confidence-building measures, there is no significant evidence that Pyongyang’s fundamental position has changed.

In particular, one U.S. participant observed that more high-level summits without substance or preconditions will signal U.S. acquiescence of North Korea as a de facto nuclear power. He noted that many previous U.S. presidents could have met with the North Korean leader but worried a meeting would essentially recognize and legitimize its status as a nuclear state. Despite some concerns raised by South Korean and Japanese participants, American officials reassured the group that U.S. policy remains staunchly opposed to recognition of North Korea as a nuclear state.

There was a divergence in opinions regarding Kim’s 2019 New Year’s address, where he verbally committed to four “no’s”: no testing, no use, no production, and no proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁶ While some interpreted the speech as an unprecedented positive statement, others argued that the exclusion of “no possession” was a thinly veiled expression of Kim’s intention to maintain his nuclear arsenal. One U.S. participant acknowledged that, while the speech was “tempered and different in tone,” there are still fundamental problems regarding North Korea’s demands and sequencing of concessions. A South Korean scholar, however, interpreted these signals as part of North Korean preparation to survive the sanctions regime with the help of China, Russia, and South Korea, even if the United States does not ease sanctions.

Another delegate from South Korea noted that Kim has not clarified what he means by the possibility of taking a “new path,” which has been interpreted by some to mean using China as leverage against the United States. He urged caution regarding a second U.S.–North Korean summit, which ultimately took place in Hanoi, Vietnam, at the end of February. Furthermore, he questioned whether an unverified closing of North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear facility would be worth reopening the jointly operated Kaesong industrial complex (in North Korea), which Seoul withdrew from in 2016 amid North Korea’s escalating nuclear and missile tests.⁷ Instead, he argued that obtaining even a partial declaration from North Korea about its nuclear efforts—clarifying the history and inventory of Pyongyang’s program—would be a better way to build trust and work toward the program’s dismantlement. Reopening the Kaesong complex was one of many goals highlighted by Moon and Kim when they met in Pyongyang in 2018. (A copy of their joint Pyongyang Declaration can be found in Appendix B.)

The trilateral discussion also provided an opportunity for the three sides to address some qualms over their perceived intentions and priorities. For example, South Korean participants reassured the group that a long-term suspension of joint military exercises with the United States would be unacceptable, and they underscored Moon’s firm intent to achieve denuclearization before any major “carrots” are given. At the same time, U.S. and Japanese participants affirmed their support for the peace process, albeit with some reservations over its fast pace. When a South Korean participant clarified that “most South Koreans don’t trust Kim Jong Un, but believe that they still have to work with him somehow,” a U.S. participant echoed the sentiment, saying “you don’t have to like Kim, but we still have to work with him.”

While Tokyo will continue to coordinate with Washington and Seoul, especially on sanctions implementation, there was a sense of pessimism from Japan. The aforementioned abductions issue is a major obstacle to Japan–North Korea negotiations, and most participants doubted that it would be resolved in time for Japan to become a more active player in the current diplomatic dynamic. When asked what it would take to change Japanese pessimism on North Korea into optimism, a Japanese participant stated that simply closing the Yongbyon facilities is not enough. Rather, he said, Japan is more concerned about North Korea’s existing nuclear weapons. North Korea should accept international observers at the Tongchang-ri missile engine test site—which was mentioned in the Pyongyang Declaration but not implemented—the Japanese participant argued.

A Second Kim-Trump Summit

Although the Trump-Kim summit in Vietnam ended early without any notable gains in their bilateral dialogue,⁸ reflecting on the pre-summit workshop dialogue is a useful way to highlight trilateral policy coordination challenges, because it reveals starkly the hopes and fears of the three countries’ specialists. Workshop participants generally expected more progress from the summit meeting, even as they raised

concerns from their varied perspectives that Trump might be either too generous or too inflexible with Kim.

Responding to a question at the workshop about the potential consequences of a failed second Trump-Kim summit, a former U.S. diplomat said that “all summit meetings are by nature considered successful” by the organizers. The number one priority for Trump, the participant noted, is boosting his prospects for reelection in 2020. Regardless of how the second summit might play out, he presumed that a return to maximum pressure would be unlikely and unfeasible. Another U.S. participant, however, predicted that Trump would probably attempt to return to the strategy of maximum pressure if North Korea resumed long-range missile testing. Some participants also noted that even relatively superficial summitry would be preferable to more risky alternatives of escalating tensions and a return to “fire and fury” military pressure.

One South Korean participant raised the idea of having a package deal at the next Trump-Kim summit consisting of a declaration of nuclear weapons and freezing of tests from Pyongyang, while Washington would provide humanitarian assistance and agreement to open liaison offices in return. A U.S. participant with track 1 negotiating experience with North Korea rebutted that a liaison office would not be a great negotiating card because the North already has a line of communication with the United States at its Permanent Mission to the United Nations (UN). At the same time, South Korean participants remained skeptical of Pyongyang’s willingness to eliminate its nuclear arsenal completely because of its asymmetric disadvantage in conventional forces.

One U.S. participant proposed what he called a “reasonable deal” for the next summit: a start to verified dismantling of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and a freeze on fissile material production elsewhere in exchange for reopening the Kaesong industrial complex and Mount Kumgang Tourism Region (and/or some types of infrastructure investment). Other TDI members generally supported this kind of quid-pro-quo deal.

A close adviser to South Korea’s Blue House sympathized with others who were pessimistic about Kim’s intentions in the current negotiations. He noted that North Korea is “addicted” to high-level summitry because it knows Trump is the only one in the United States who is seemingly wedded to a positive outcome regardless of the details. However, he criticized the United States’ sequencing demands, arguing that “as long as Washington holds on to the idea of ‘denuclearization first, security assurances second,’ that is not going to work.” He described Kim’s offer of closing Yongbyon in exchange for “corresponding measures” as a prime opportunity, calling on Washington “to be ready to give something in exchange” simultaneously, such as various forms of sanctions relief or substantive exemptions.

Knowing how events transpired in Hanoi on February 27–28, it is apparent that the TDI workshop participants generally underestimated how much Kim would demand and overestimated what he might be willing to offer in terms of denuclearization. The United States also took a more maximalist position at the talks than some Trump administration officials had signaled beforehand.⁹

Pertinent to future TDI activities is what the Hanoi summit revealed about U.S.–North Korea talks and their impact on South Korea and Japan. It seems clear that, eight months after the first Trump–Kim summit, the two sides have no common definition of denuclearization—if anything, their positions have widened to some degree.¹⁰ This does not mean that continued negotiations are futile, but the prospects for better political relations and sanctions relief seem dim without some compromise by one or both sides. Moreover, the summit seemed to diminish the option of using political gestures—such as an end-of-war declaration or liaison offices—to make incremental diplomatic gains.

As a consequence, Moon’s passionate pursuit of closer inter-Korean relations and a “new Korean Peninsula regime” has been stymied, because Seoul cannot launch the kinds of joint projects it envisions without running afoul of U.S. policy or unanimously agreed upon UN sanctions.¹¹ Meanwhile, China and Russia are likely to intensify calls for sanctions relief and further undermine economic and diplomatic pressure on North Korea, while Japan continues trying to shore up U.S. and global resolve to sustain pressure.

The Hanoi summit, therefore, has sharpened the differences between North Korea skeptics and optimists among the allies: the former are more convinced that compromise cannot be offered early, while the latter are motivated to accelerate reconciliation efforts so as not to lose momentum. Beijing and Moscow might exploit this divide between allies to serve their own interests. There is still a chance that some workable solution can be created, but the brokering of a cooperative approach among the allies has become both more difficult and more important, lest this diplomatic window of opportunity with North Korea close for good.

U.S. Forces in Korea

Several U.S. and South Korean participants agreed that an indefinite quasi-moratorium on joint military exercises between ROK and U.S. forces is unsustainable and should not be viewed as a blanket freeze-for-freeze status quo. One U.S. participant asked, “Will we continue to suspend exercises indefinitely for the sake of summitry?” Another worried about the long-term negative impact that an indefinite freeze could have on force readiness and alliance cohesion more broadly. Another participant called the suspension of exercises a mistake, since it was a unilateral concession at the 2018 Singapore summit with no concessions from Pyongyang. There was strong agreement that Pyongyang needs to understand that some resumption of allied exercises, which is inevitable, is not fully linked to the

freeze on North Korean missile testing. More than one South Korean participant tried to reassure others that the Moon administration understands this (despite a strong desire to avoid upsetting Pyongyang), especially because training with U.S. forces would be necessary to ensure the smooth transition of wartime operational control of ROK forces.

In general, Japanese participants welcomed the current process of inter-Korean reconciliation and even the possibility of a peace declaration, but they were concerned about Pyongyang's intentions and the potential impact on future U.S. force posture in the region. Despite U.S. and ROK assurances, many believed that some sort of end-of-war declaration will likely lead to a reduction of U.S. forces in Korea that would put Japan more squarely on the front lines should conflict return to the peninsula. Furthermore, they expressed concern that Moon's eagerness to expedite the peace process may end up detracting from the maximum pressure campaign on Pyongyang, which is already fraying due to the current "freeze-for-freeze" dynamic.

Most participants, including the ROK delegation, were steadfast in their support for keeping U.S. troops in South Korea and did not think that the peace process with North Korea will have an impact on U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) in the near term. An official based on the peninsula added that, in his opinion, any worries about the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance and U.S. forces in Korea were unfounded. Rather, he noted that U.S.-ROK cooperation has not only continued but actually deepened throughout the peace negotiations and enjoys a high level of governmental and public support in both countries.¹²

The future of the UN Command (UNC) was also discussed, with most participants highlighting the value and versatility of this multilateral institution. One Japanese participant argued that because Japan is now "on the front lines" of any conflict with North Korea, it should have greater access to related military information and decision making, suggesting that a closer link to the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in South Korea might be warranted. An American participant agreed that there is room for more Japanese Self-Defense Forces involvement in Korean Peninsula security issues, but he thought that the UNC is probably a better vehicle than CFC because there is already a UNC presence in Japan (in the form of UN-flagged rear area bases). When a South Korean participant raised the possibility that China might demand an end to the UNC if a peace treaty were signed to end the Korean War, an American pushed back, saying that Seoul might prefer having "eighteen countries support its defense" rather than one, at least in the early stages of peace building.

Separately, a U.S. participant suggested that some kind of U.S. regional command-and-control arrangement might be a useful way to take into account Japan's expanded defense capabilities and greater operational flexibility with regard to North Korean contingencies. In addition, cooperation on defense in new domains such as cyberspace, outer space, and the electromagnetic spectrum could become more important in the future. Because physical proximity matters so little in these emerging

domains, they offer multiple new avenues for collaboration and information sharing in a trilateral context.

A Japanese participant agreed with this suggestion, arguing that the current regional command and control arrangement “is just a legacy of the Korean War. Japan should have access to U.S.-ROK defense planning at CFC because Japan is vulnerable to North Korean nuclear strikes in the case of a war on the Korean Peninsula. The current Japanese position is like taxation without representation, except involving human lives.” He added that “it is impossible for Japan to keep a neutral position on the Korean Peninsula if it continues to permit U.S. use of its bases without any Japanese say in the matter.”

South Korean participants clarified that inter-Korean developments are not linked to any withdrawal in U.S. forces, which Moon has confirmed multiple times. Both American and ROK members of the workshop asserted that the Moon administration’s track record—including his responses to North Korean missile launches and consent to U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense deployment¹³—shows that there is strong support for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Looking back at the Hanoi summit, it seems that concerns over U.S. troop withdrawals from Korea were premature. U.S. officials have been unequivocal that USFK has not been a part of negotiations. The shaky conclusion to the summit, however, means that the unofficial “freeze-for-freeze” truce is practically the only thing keeping the process afloat. North Korea’s move to reassemble its rocket launch facility at Tongchang-ri raises the possibility that Kim is willing to risk this truce to demonstrate self-confidence in pursuit of new negotiating options.¹⁴

This puts a spotlight on the U.S.-ROK decision to cancel their high-profile spring military exercises and replace them with smaller scale activities.¹⁵ For the allies, it will become increasingly important to find a mutually acceptable balance between maintaining readiness—and risking North Korean ire—versus providing some incentive for Kim to keep refraining from nuclear and missile testing. Japanese delegates in the TDI workshop made it clear that they believe Tokyo also has an important stake in those decisions.

Reversible vs Irreversible Measures

One important takeaway from the discussions was the importance of discerning between reversible and irreversible measures in negotiations with North Korea. For example, both South Korean and Japanese participants noted the ambiguity of the Trump administration’s primary objective with regard to North Korean denuclearization. “Is it CVID [complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization], FVID [final fully verifiable denuclearization], or simply an elimination of ICBM [intercontinental

ballistic missile] capabilities?” one ROK participant asked, warning that North Korea can easily replicate ICBMs with its existing knowledge and infrastructure.¹⁶

A U.S. participant questioned whether Trump’s thinking on North Korea had evolved from satisfaction with a short-term freeze to a more complex understanding of the long-term road map required to achieve full denuclearization. Most participants, however, expressed serious concerns that, contrary to the exhortations of his advisers, Trump is ready to accept the status quo with North Korea as a political trophy and a better alternative to war.

A South Korean scholar identified the divergent views on a road map for denuclearization. Instead of the so-called Libya model for denuclearization,¹⁷ he argued that North Korea seeks a “voluntary” or “active” denuclearization based on their own pace and agenda. He used the analogy of an onion to symbolize North Korea’s nuclear program: while the United States wants North Korea to cut to the core of the onion (i.e. surrender a full declaration and destroy all its facilities), North Korea prefers to yield just one slice at a time. Thus, the United States and its allies should not force North Korea to surrender its entire program in one blow, but rather focus on accelerating and continuing the process of piecemeal denuclearization.

One Japanese participant stated that “we shouldn’t be in a hurry to get to a detailed agreement [with North Korea], though it is frustrating,” reminding the group that it took almost two years following the start of the Six-Party Talks in 2003 for a deal to be reached. A South Korean participant noted that normalization of relations can be a “useful card” that could be leveraged in case Pyongyang suddenly returns to hostile behavior, citing the way former president Barack Obama normalized relations with Cuba while partially maintaining the sanctions regime.¹⁸

Both Japanese and South Korean participants conveyed worry about Trump’s volatility and potential unreliable commitment to denuclearization—and even alliances. One discussant raised the possibility of Trump’s eagerness to strike a “grand deal” with Kim leading to major concessions, such as U.S. troop withdrawal or lifting of the nuclear umbrella. A U.S. participant expressed long-term confidence in the U.S. political system’s ability to repair itself in the long term, advising that the priority now should be to “minimize any damage to alliances” and focusing on “maintenance.” Others, however, argued that the Trump phenomenon is symptomatic of a more deeply rooted problem in the United States that will linger long after this administration.

Ensuring a High Standard of Multilateral Verification

All three sides affirmed the importance of having a multilateral negotiation formula that sets a high standard for verification of North Korean denuclearization, and participants lamented the lack of progress in its preparation. Simply easing sanctions without a strict verification system, a U.S.

participant warned, would allow Pyongyang to dictate the process solely on its own terms. This has arguably been the experience to date, with North Korea deciding what steps it wants to take to fulfill its pledge to “work toward denuclearization” and then specify the means and extent of outside verification that it is willing to accept.

Going forward, a more professional and accountable process of verification will be necessary, which requires organization and funding. The United States, Japan, and South Korea can play a vital role as the core group supporting the verification mechanism, in close collaboration with China, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and possibly Russia and the European Union. Workshop participants noted that while some discussion about verification options took place among the three governments early in the negotiation process with North Korea, there has been no concerted follow-up—this is something that should resume as soon as possible. Trilateral cooperation on the verification front is a legitimate and effective way to increase information sharing with Japan on North Korea issues, and it can contribute to building confidence in Northeast Asia at this sensitive time.

A U.S. participant proposed allowing temporary exemptions from sanctions as an incentive for tangible progress on denuclearization by North Korea, using the verification process to determine eligibility. Although Pyongyang has traditionally sought bilateral negotiations with Washington instead of multilateral mechanisms like the Six-Party Talks, Kim’s call for a “multilateral negotiation that will turn the armistice system on the Korean peninsula into a peace system” in his New Year’s speech perhaps signaled a more flexible attitude.¹⁹

Japanese and South Korean participants agreed that, in theory, a four-party negotiation framework—as it would be difficult to exclude China from any meaningful resolution—would be acceptable to deal with peace-building issues. Japan and others, however, could be party to the verification regime. In addition, participants from all three countries urged caution in the current negotiations with North Korea and the need for trilateral policy coordination on preparing contingency plans in case the process suffers setbacks.

Beyond North Korea, China Looms Larger

Separate from North Korea, virtually all participants agreed that the greatest long-term challenge for trilateral policy coordination was how to deal with a more influential and assertive China. Several participants from all three countries acknowledged the relative decline of U.S. influence in Asia, though few believed that China will overtake the United States in the short term. One U.S. expert on China observed that “we are currently in a great power transition in the Asia Pacific, with the U.S. shifting from its familiar role of unchallenged primacy.” Noting the “absence of a clarifying event such as the defeat of Napoleon in the nineteenth century or the end of World War II in the twentieth century,” he warned of the risks of ambiguous national priorities and a high level of uncertainty in the

outcome of this inflection point. Another participant observed that the current geopolitical environment in the Asia Pacific is much more complex than the relatively simple security landscape of the Cold War.

Regarding Tokyo's policy priorities, a Japanese participant noted that, for the first time in recent history, the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) identified China as a greater security threat than North Korea or Russia.²⁰ Furthermore, a South Korean scholar observed that Tokyo seems to be "enjoying the rising rivalry between the United States and China because it could increase the strategic value of Japan," while Seoul is worried that it might be squeezed between the great powers. A South Korean participant remarked that "the United States and China still maintain a common interest in regional stability, but competition will continue to grow if China keeps using its economic leverage for political influence."

In response to a South Korean participant's question of Japan's stance on the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, a Japanese participant said that, while it is relatively easy to be either a "dragon slayer" or "panda hugger" (referring to his perception of the Trump and Obama administrations' policies on China), Japan is now trying to be a "dragon hugger." This participant described the current rapprochement in Japan-China relations as "normalization," or an attempt to "bring [the relationship] back to zero." In another participant's words, Tokyo recognizes that it must "have both cooperation and competition with Beijing in the foreseeable future." Abe's recent visit to Beijing with a large delegation of Japanese businesspeople and the announcement of a joint rail project with China in Thailand demonstrates that Tokyo is walking the line between deterring Chinese aggression while maintaining economic and political engagement with Beijing.²¹

Both Japanese and South Korean participants expressed the need for the United States to remain involved in the Asia Pacific to "keep China in check," as one South Korean participant described. There was a notable split in the South Korean delegation's attitudes toward China. Some of them mentioned that Seoul cannot afford to aggravate relations with Beijing because of economic dependence and geographical proximity. As a result, Seoul is forced to pursue a much more "cautious" China policy compared to Tokyo or Washington. Another South Korean participant added that "ROK cooperation will be "subtle and long-term because we need China's help to deal with North Korea." Participants on both sides of the spectrum agreed that there may be a divergence between the United States and South Korea on China, accelerated by Beijing's efforts to weaken the alliance.

To some extent, framing trilateral cooperation appropriately is a key factor in generating South Korean support; as one ROK scholar put it, "When trilateral cooperation is aimed against China, it is natural for Korea to resist. But if it's about regional peace and stability, Korea is ready to jump in." At the same time, another South Korean participant affirmed the necessity of trilateral cooperation despite possible perception gaps on China, noting that "each side [of the three] has valid interests and

philosophies, but for the sake of regional security and trilateral cooperation, we must come to mutual understanding.”

However, other South Korean participants expressed greater alignment with Japanese and U.S. views, calling for trilateral cooperation as a necessary mechanism to counter the rapid rise of China and noting the increasingly negative sentiments among the South Korean public toward China’s trade practices and use of economic coercion. A Japanese participant pointed out that North Korea should also be concerned with growing Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula, noting that when Kim visited Singapore, he was reportedly interested in how the city-state was managing Chinese attempts to shape Singaporean behavior.²²

One U.S. participant suggested that trilateral mechanisms offer an opportunity for the three countries to explore new rules of governing technology and controls on technology transfer, so that China will not benefit disproportionately. Another offered that it could go as far as something like a modified version of the Cold War–era Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls.²³ The participant explained that “though we’re a long way from an internal consensus on this, it’s an area that will vitally affect our economies and security strategies, and where trilateral cooperation can make a contribution.”

On trade issues more broadly, there was a consensus that Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership was a costly mistake that weakened efforts to raise the standards of China’s economic behavior.²⁴ The group was generally pessimistic about the possibility of the United States rejoining the agreement under Trump, but some U.S. participants believed that Japanese leadership on free trade was helping to maintain openness and would put pressure on others to follow suit.

Security Implications of Nuclear Policy

The TDI workshop also included a focused discussion on the broader security implications of the Trump administration’s decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.²⁵ One participant described this as an “800-pound gorilla in the room” that carries potential implications for U.S.-China strategic stability and separate efforts to reassure North Korea that the United States would not be a nuclear threat if Pyongyang completely dismantled its nuclear program. A U.S. participant remarked that “we have entered a second major nuclear era” with exponential increases in nuclear capabilities by countries like North Korea as well as nonstate actors. Other discussants agreed that the status quo requires a different kind of strategic assessment because of the rapidly changing security environment.

While some participants criticized the Trump administration for its short-sightedness on withdrawing from the INF Treaty, others, who were more supportive of the move, raised doubts about the

applicability of the treaty today and pointed out the opportunity to rethink arms control policy in the region. Several discussants noted how China could exploit this asymmetric advantage over the United States, which has been unable to install conventional land-based medium-range missiles because of INF Treaty restrictions.

One Japanese participant argued that

“China and North Korea will not give up [their] intermediate-range missiles in response to U.S. deployments. This creates new opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance and deployments. The allies can complicate Chinese strategic options in the western Pacific if the United States deploys new missile capabilities such as cruise missiles and longer-range strike options, or extension of army base long-range precision strike forces in Guam or in Japan’s southwest island chain. Furthermore, the new NDPG mentions Japan’s own strike capabilities, reflecting Japan’s pursuit of ‘denial technology’ through ways such as deployment of anti-ship missiles in Okinawa in response to the prevalence of Chinese vessels. Post-INF, we need to utilize these lifted restrictions to engage in greater strategic competition with China.”

However, a South Korean commentator described U.S. withdrawal from the treaty as a “nightmare.” If Washington wants to deploy new ballistic missiles in South Korea, the participant said, Seoul will be caught between Washington and Beijing like in the THAAD crisis. Furthermore, he argued that if the Trump administration really wants to restructure the U.S. military presence in the region, the current capabilities of USFK or United States Forces Japan (USFJ) might change. He noted that this might lead to a “prioritizing of alliances for the United States, since the Abe administration seems to be much more willing to host U.S. capabilities compared to Moon, who is much more hesitant.”

But both U.S. and Japanese participants doubted that U.S. missiles applicable to the INF Treaty would be deployed in South Korea, given the close range. Instead, a more pertinent issue for Seoul would be steps that the United States might take to counter Russia or China in the region, such as seeking the positioning of ground-based cruise missiles on Japanese islands in the East China Sea. This might be misinterpreted by North Korea as a threat, which could complicate the denuclearization and peace-building processes. In the case of China, it could exacerbate Beijing’s fear of U.S. alliance relationships in East Asia and put pressure on Seoul to distance itself from closer U.S.-Japan security cooperation.

Challenges to Future Trilateral Cooperation

Another broad topic of discussion at the workshop was considering various challenges and opportunities for trilateral cooperation going forward, so that the group could prioritize areas for further study and help prepare a road map for future collaboration. Multiple participants warned that

nationalism coupled with a potential economic downturn could pose serious challenges to trilateral cooperation in 2019.

In addition, one Japanese participant, who had extensive trilateral experience with the previous two South Korean administrations, shared what he called a “pessimistic takeaway” on trilateral cooperation: “There used to be two motivations for trilateral cooperation: geostrategic (based on shared threats) and institutional (U.S. alliance structure). Now, we have a weakened geostrategic motivation toward China and North Korea as well as rumors over U.S. force reduction in South Korea and Japan.” A former U.S. diplomat noted that there is an ongoing change in the dynamics of the international system from a “liberal international order” to “predatory unilateralism,” presenting a challenge for—and sometimes divergent responses by—the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia.

The weakest link in the Japan-ROK-U.S. triangle has always been the strained bilateral relationship between Tokyo and Seoul. Discussants openly recognized that historical and political issues between Japan and Korea remain perhaps the greatest obstacle to trilateral security cooperation. Virtually all participants bemoaned the current deterioration in Japan-ROK relations, calling it “unfortunate” and “difficult,” despite it being over twenty years since the Kim Dae-jung–Keizo Obuchi summit, when the two leaders “shared the view that there was a need to enhance the relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in a wide range of areas to a balanced cooperative relationship of a higher dimension, including in the political, security and economic areas as well as in personnel and cultural exchanges.”²⁶ At the TDI workshop, Japanese and South Korean participants “agreed to disagree” on different interpretations of the 1965 normalization treaty, providing no direct short-term or long-term solution to the dispute.

A Japanese participant noted that, given the three countries’ common values and interests, the United States, Japan, and South Korea are naturally aligned to tackle critical challenges for the international community concerning free trade, the liberal international order, and checking the spread of terrorism and extremism. However, the speaker argued that the lack of a systemic regional security framework in the Asia Pacific as well as a common strategic vision for the region may lead to a rise in low-intensity hybrid warfare and dangerous “gray zone” conflict situations.

One U.S. participant proposed that in order to generate political will for trilateral cooperation, the three sides should focus on common interests and values instead of the traditional approach of identifying threats and challenges. As one speaker quoted, “Love does not consist of gazing at each other but instead looking together in the same direction.” A South Korean participant added that “common values don’t automatically make parties cooperate. Some countries have common values but still fight every day. It is more important to identify common interests, because even parties with different values can cooperate.”

Another Japanese participant who participated in the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTTs) argued that there are three conditions that have justified trilateral defense coordination: DPRK provocations, “tough” ROK responses to those provocations, and Chinese noncooperation with the United States.²⁷ He argued that the first two conditions are currently lacking, which makes trilateral cooperation, especially on an institutional level like intelligence sharing, much more difficult.

Regarding scenarios for mid-to-longer-term coordination, one Japanese participant laid out two plans: a “conventional plan A” that emphasizes deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea and strategic competition regarding China, as well as an “unconventional plan B” if Seoul prioritizes peace with Pyongyang over trilateral defense cooperation, if Washington allows alliance decoupling for the sake of denuclearization, or if Japanese-ROK tensions increase. In the case of plan A, the speaker encouraged further trilateral security cooperation on intelligence sharing; USFK-USFJ cooperation on contingency planning; joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations to “keep Chinese maritime behavior in check”; and global outreach through capacity building and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) in countries like the Philippines and Sri Lanka. However, South Korean participants reassured the group of Seoul’s commitment to trilateral cooperation, explaining that, even in the case an “unconventional plan B,” South Korea will continue to perceive North Korea as a potential threat and recognize China as a long-term challenge.

An American participant, who was also involved with the DTTs, pointed out that “plan B can be what we make it,” suggesting the possibility of a more regionally integrated and mobile form of U.S.-ROK security cooperation compared to the army-centric and peninsula-focused USFK. He added that the rapid evolution of trilateral dialogue and activity following extraordinary North Korean provocations in 2010 was “a high watermark of expansion of security cooperation. The sense of shared mission led us to accomplish quite a lot, such as a special ‘Tiger Team’ for rapid disaster relief coordination and an initiative on countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,” suggesting that collective action in support of regional security as a core group was always possible.

However, the participant also noted the general inability to sustain robust trilateral cooperation, saying that “we never saw the disaster relief Tiger Team really come into fruition, when you see examples like response to the Haiyan typhoon disaster in the Philippines, which never involved a trilateral core team.” Though Washington plays a critical role, another U.S. participant stated that the demand for trilateral cooperation has to ultimately come from Tokyo and Seoul. But a South Korean participant noted that, in the past, it was U.S. leadership on facilitating trilateral dialogue that allowed tangible security cooperation to happen.

Opportunities for Trilateral Cooperation

Despite the challenges that persist regarding trilateral dialogue and cooperation, workshop members saw some opportunities and brainstormed ideas for reinvigorating their countries' collaboration. One American participant remarked, "There is no need to reinvent the wheel because the infrastructure and institutional memory from trilateral initiatives, such as trilateral dialogues on space, cybersecurity, or public-private partnerships on gender issues and journalism implemented by the previous administration remain. There are still people at the State Department in the building who have expertise and are willing to work on these issues. It's just that there's no comprehensive push from top leadership to get it done."

On the security front, another U.S. participant identified four areas where South Korea could be included in existing areas of strong cooperation between the United States and Japan: defense equipment cooperation, capacity building in third countries, strengthening defense institutions through intellectual and personnel exchanges, and deepening the interagency footprint in diplomatic and security cooperation. There was also a high level of interest in expanding cooperation in functional areas such as maritime security, counterpiracy efforts, nuclear security, peacekeeping operations, and noncombatant evacuation operations.

More broadly, the group thought that HA/DR, public health, and other regional infrastructure development were good candidates for relatively noncontroversial trilateral and ROK-Japan cooperation. As noted earlier, many participants believed that the economic and trade realm was a promising avenue for trilateral policy coordination, in particular where it concerned the establishment of rules of governance in cyberspace, outer space, and newly emerging technologies. Wider international collaboration was also recommended, as one U.S. participant remarked, "cooperation off the peninsula is a prerequisite to build trust for cooperation on the peninsula." One scholar labeled this "outside-in" trilateralism.

Although trilateral cooperation has traditionally been limited to the defense and foreign ministries of the three countries, expanding cooperation to other departments could provide opportunities to build greater trust through more frequent interactions and facilitate a higher level of traditional security cooperation. Furthermore, the participant proposed leveraging increased defense innovation from the governments and private sectors of the three countries into trilateral cooperation, as well as deepening opportunities for joint professional military educational exchanges. One South Korean speaker described third party joint projects as the "last hope of security cooperation between the two countries," reasoning that it is "high time that Seoul cooperates with Japan on these peacekeeping issues because it could help promote cooperation without provoking Beijing."

A South Korean scholar argued that Northeast Asia lacks a formal mechanism for regional disaster relief cooperation, noting that there were key missed opportunities after the Fukushima disaster in Japan, the Sichuan earthquake in China, or the MERS epidemic in South Korea. Another shared interest that participants identified was demographics, given that all three countries face aging societies and declining birth rates in the short to middle term.²⁸

Participants from all three countries agreed on the benefits of “building a bigger tent where not all countries in the region have equity in the game.” A South Korean participant pointed out that North Korea could also eventually play a positive role in multilateral regional cooperation, given that Pyongyang currently wants to find a middle ground between Washington and Beijing. Furthermore, one speaker suggested that hosting “trilateral plus” activities with other parties, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, may also benefit the core objectives of regional stability and security. Another scholar termed this “open trilateralism.”

A number of participants also mentioned the high potential for trilateral cooperation on economic integration in the Asia Pacific. Moreover, a South Korean scholar questioned why the high level of ROK-Japan economic cooperation (including eighty-seven joint projects between Japanese and South Korean companies²⁹) couldn’t translate to closer security cooperation. One participant noted that, “given the complexities of political histories and difficulties in getting public support in both countries, perhaps it is better to focus on the economic side.” With the “terrific foundation to create a coalition of interests in the Asia Pacific like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership,” he argued that “we should take this to a new level of economic integration to which China would want to aspire.”

Building on the results of this first workshop and associated research, the TDI project will continue through 2020 with a focus on three related areas of activity. Diplomatic coordination vis-à-vis North Korea remains a top priority, which includes sharing information and assessments, fostering consensus—or, at least, acceptable flexibility—regarding policy responses, and looking ahead to verification challenges or other aspects of implementing tentative agreements. A second area of focus will be maintaining high-quality trilateral security cooperation in a fickle environment that could see greater confidence-building efforts on the peninsula—or renewed military tensions. The third area involves developing general agreement—and possibly coordinated action—around regional diplomatic challenges, such as arms control, crisis management, or mitigating the negative side effects of globalization. The project partners will choose a few priority issues and dive deeper through research and dialogue to promote more effective trilateral cooperation.

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About the Project

The **Japan-ROK-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue Initiative (TDI)** is a collaborative project carried out by the Japan Institute of International Affairs, the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security to assist trilateral cooperation in support of East Asian peace and security.

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Appendix A: TDI and Other Trilateral Initiatives

Defense and foreign policy officials from the United States, Japan, and South Korea have long understood the potential value of trilateral security cooperation. They began taking steps in pursuit of this goal as North Korea's nuclear and missile programs advanced in the late 1990s and particularly after North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. Track 1 DTTs began tentatively in 2003, followed by Joint Staff (J5) strategy talks from 2004. Both were energized with new purpose in 2008. A couple of years later, the three countries commenced annual Trilateral Chiefs of Defense (Tri-CHOD) video teleconferences or meetings to discuss North Korea-related security issues, and trilateral defense minister-level meetings commenced in 2009. During this time, the frequency and sophistication of trilateral military exercises has increased incrementally (and haltingly).

Trilateral diplomatic coordination really began in earnest during the first nuclear crisis with North Korea in the 1990s, eventually resulting in the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) in 1999.³⁰ While the TCOG and its less formalized successors focused exclusively on North Korea, the three countries later organized regular meetings of their foreign policy planning offices to discuss a wider range of diplomatic challenges, including counterterrorism, public health, and reconstruction in Afghanistan. More recently—particularly under the leadership of deputy secretary of state Antony Blinken during the Obama administration—trilateral foreign policy cooperation was raised to a higher level and expanded to address cybersecurity, civil space exploration, and other emerging domains.

Despite some progress over the years, the three countries have often been stymied by political sensitivities between South Korea and Japan, as well as some misalignment in strategic, operational, and budgetary priorities. At times, these obstacles have blocked trilateral security cooperation altogether, though persistent efforts by Washington and the growing North Korean threat have usually nudged the three back together.

Over the past two decades, a critical support feature of this framework has been various track 1.5 trilateral dialogues. Less formal than track 1, these efforts bring academic and former government officials together with those currently serving in the government and military. This has helped push the envelope of ideas and proposals in parallel with track 1 talks, and it helps keep trilateral dialogue alive when top-level talks fall flat. Over the years, track 1.5 dialogues have introduced new military exercise ideas, promoted the exchange of observers at bilateral exercises to add a trilateral dimension, and highlighted the need—and proposed the means—for greater sharing of confidential information—all of which were later adopted by track 1 talks.

The Trilateral Dialogue in Northeast Asia (TDNA) was a prominent track 1.5 project organized from 2008 to 2013 by the U.S. Institute of Peace, Japan's Institute for International Policy Studies, and

South Korea's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security. TDNA brought together current and former diplomatic and defense officials—usually at the deputy assistant secretary or deputy director general and director levels of the ministries concerned—as well as think tank participants from the three countries. It convened a total of eight times over six years and covered a wide range of topics, such as North Korean nuclear issues, the rise of China, the U.S. rebalance to Asia, and trilateral alliance cooperation.

There have been a handful of other semi-regular trilateral track 1.5 or track 2 initiatives involving think tanks from the United States, Japan, and South Korea over the years. Among them, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted two trilateral maritime security workshops in Washington (one in 2015 and the other in 2016) in collaboration with the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis and the Naval War College. In addition, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA convened two security cooperation trilaterals (called Tabletop Exercises) in 2017 and 2018.

Workshop Participants

(all names are listed using the American convention of surnames last)

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TDI's Goals

- Provide a high-quality forum for Japan-ROK-U.S. policy leadership, intellectual exchange, and networking to help deepen and widen trilateral foreign policy and security cooperation in critical areas of shared interest.
- Jointly explore ideas and proposals for more substantive and sophisticated trilateral cooperation relatively free of political constraints but with the benefit of inside government and military knowledge.
- Look collectively “over the horizon” at potential future challenges and opportunities related to shared national interests. Scenario-driven discussions and exploration of options could be included, which might provide opportunities for avoiding future problems or addressing them before they become too entrenched.
- Make private and public policy recommendations and highlight opportunities for effective trilateral security cooperation that serves their national interests, based on the results of trilateral research and dialogue.

Appendix B: Text of Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018

Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea and Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea held the Inter-Korean Summit Meeting in Pyongyang on September 18-20, 2018.

The two leaders assessed the excellent progress made since the adoption of the historic Panmunjeom Declaration, such as the close dialogue and communication between the authorities of the two sides, civilian exchanges and cooperation in many areas, and epochal measures to defuse military tension.

The two leaders reaffirmed the principle of independence and self-determination of the Korean nation, and agreed to consistently and continuously develop inter-Korean relations for national reconciliation and cooperation, and firm peace and co-prosperity, and to make efforts to realize through policy measures the aspiration and hope of all Koreans that the current developments in inter-Korean relations will lead to reunification.

The two leaders held frank and in-depth discussions on various issues and practical steps to advance inter-Korean relations to a new and higher dimension by thoroughly implementing the Panmunjeom Declaration, shared the view that the Pyongyang Summit will be an important historic milestone, and declared as follows.

1. The two sides agreed to expand the cessation of military hostility in regions of confrontation such as the DMZ into the substantial removal of the danger of war across the entire Korean Peninsula and a fundamental resolution of the hostile relations.
 - a) The two sides agreed to adopt the “Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain” as an annex to the Pyongyang Declaration, and to thoroughly abide by and faithfully implement it, and to actively take practical measures to transform the Korean Peninsula into a land of permanent peace.
 - b) The two sides agreed to engage in constant communication and close consultations to review the implementation of the Agreement and prevent accidental military clashes by promptly activating the Inter-Korean Joint Military Committee.
2. The two sides agreed to pursue substantial measures to further advance exchanges and cooperation based on the spirit of mutual benefit and shared prosperity, and to develop the nation's economy in a balanced manner.

- a) The two sides agreed to hold a ground-breaking ceremony within this year for the east-coast and west-coast rail and road connections.
 - b) The two sides agreed, as conditions ripe, to first normalize the Gaeseong industrial complex and the Mt. Geumgang Tourism Project, and to discuss the issue of forming a west coast joint special economic zone and an east coast joint special tourism zone.
 - c) The two sides agreed to actively promote south-north environment cooperation so as to protect and restore the natural ecology, and as a first step to endeavor to achieve substantial results in the currently on-going forestry cooperation.
 - d) The two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in the areas of prevention of epidemics, public health and medical care, including emergency measures to prevent the entry and spread of contagious diseases.
3. The two sides agreed to strengthen humanitarian cooperation to fundamentally resolve the issue of separated families.
- a) The two sides agreed to open a permanent facility for family reunion meetings in the Mt. Geumgang area at an early date, and to promptly restore the facility toward this end.
 - b) The two sides agreed to resolve the issue of video meetings and exchange of video messages among the separated families as a matter of priority through the inter-Korean Red Cross talks.
4. The two sides agreed to actively promote exchanges and cooperation in various fields so as to enhance the atmosphere of reconciliation and unity and to demonstrate the spirit of the Korean nation both internally and externally.
- a) The two sides agreed to further promote cultural and artistic exchanges, and to first conduct a performance of the Pyeongyang Art Troupe in Seoul in October this year.
 - b) The two sides agreed to actively participate together in the 2020 Summer Olympic Games and other international games, and to cooperate in bidding for the joint hosting of the 2032 Summer Olympic Games.
 - c) The two sides agreed to hold meaningful events to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the October 4 Declaration, to jointly commemorate the 100th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement Day, and to hold working-level consultations toward this end.

5. The two sides shared the view that the Korean Peninsula must be turned into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats, and that substantial progress toward this end must be made in a prompt manner.

- a) First, the North will permanently dismantle the Dongchang-ri missile engine test site and launch platform under the observation of experts from relevant countries.
- b) The North expressed its willingness to continue to take additional measures, such as the permanent dismantlement of the nuclear facilities in Yeongbyeon, as the United States takes corresponding measures in accordance with the spirit of the June 12 US-DPRK Joint Statement.
- c) The two sides agreed to cooperate closely in the process of pursuing complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

6. Chairman Kim Jong Un agreed to visit Seoul at an early date at the invitation of President Moon Jae-in.

September 19, 2018

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