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**THE KOREAN PENINSULA AFTER U.S.  
ELECTIONS: ROLE OF RUSSIA AND  
CHINA**

October 7, 2020 | Live Online

**SPEAKERS:**

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**Gabuev:** Good morning, everyone who is joining us from the Moscow, Russia, time zone! Good afternoon, everyone who is joining us from Asia! My name is Alex Gabuev, I'm a senior fellow at the Moscow Carnegie Center, and I'm going to be the host of this meeting. I'm very sorry for being late. I think that we are all stuck in this pandemic madness, and you know that technology, the Zoom that we live on, sometimes has issues, so I'm really sorry about that.

Today we have a really important topic that is somehow overshadowed by the ongoing drama of the U.S. election campaign, by various issues around the world, new war in Southern Caucasus, revolution in Kyrgyzstan, skirmishes on the China-India border. There are many things that go on now in this wonderful year of 2020, and it's not over yet, but there is one crisis which made a lot of headlines last year and the beginning of this year to some extent, but which is overshadowed by the pandemic in global dynamics, and that's the situation on the Korean peninsula. Although, I think that this is still one of the key and crucial elements of the global stability, and one of the key flash points that global powers, regional powers, the business community should watch very closely, because that's a source of tangents, where we have the interests of two superpowers at stake; we have a lot of competing interests between regional powers; and we have a very fluid situation on the peninsula itself.

Today I'm very honored and happy to be joined by two senior colleagues and friends, who are among the most knowledgeable people on this planet on everything Korean and North Korean. I'm happy to introduce my colleague Lee Chung Min, who is a senior fellow with the Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment, and Andrei Lankov, who is a professor at Kookmin University in Seoul.

I want to structure this conversation, I will probably give the floor first to Chung Min and then Andrei, and they will talk for roughly 10 minutes each; then we jump into Q&A, and talk among ourselves; and then we'll have about 20 minutes for taking questions from the floor, and I think that in the description of this video there are various features how you can leave the questions, and they will be passed to me and I'll discuss that with our speakers.

So, Chung Min, I guess—so far, the situation on the peninsula looks stable or more quiet, at least compared to what it has been a couple of months ago, like 2018. Is that a deceiving picture, is there much going on that we should be worried about, and what are the key things that you would watch till the end of this year and probably beyond?

**Lee:** Well, first of all, Sasha, it's a real honor and pleasure to be here with you and my dear friend Andrei Lankov; he is a real master on North Korea, not me. So, if there's anybody on the planet who knows anything about North Korea and who knows everything in Pyongyang that's going on, I would say it is Dr. Andrei Lankov.

My take on this, let me begin just to put the Korean Peninsula issue in a global context. The first is we have U.S. elections, as you mentioned, in November 2020, and it looks likely that Biden is going to win, knock on wood, but regardless I think even if Biden wins or Trump wins another election, the broader strategic trends in the world will remain fairly unchanged. In other words, I see that the U.S. is slipping in relative terms in its global posture. In Asia you will see a much more powerful China, a much more assertive China, and in that sense the Russian-Chinese entente, for the time being, means that the strategic interests of Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi Jinping are aligned, and so long as these two leaders remain in power, and so long as Moscow and Beijing see the U.S. as a common adversary, I believe that the broader geopolitical template will remain fairly, I guess, consistent from that perspective.

Of course, you see what will be the most important factor that will determine events on the Korean Peninsula, I see a couple of really important trends. The first is the emerging U.S.-China Cold War, some people have called it a new Cold War, some have said it's not a Cold War but it is a de facto Cold War, and what I see happening over the next five-ten-year time frame, throughout the 2020s, is a very robust and a much more assertive China than ever before—militarily, economically, and, I think, the whole Huawei dispute that the Trump administration really pushed into the face of the Chinese, and all American allies in the EU and Asia as well, that will be a watershed moment because this will convince the Chinese: “We must have a new source of technology, R&D other than the Americans.” And I think the next ten-fifteen years the Americans will be forcing China to become much more self-reliant on technology.

So, that is one thing that's happening. So, U.S.-China rivalry is going to become one major driver. The other driver is that all of the Asian powers—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and so forth—they've all had very long ties with America, but those ties are being rapidly changed, except Taiwan. You see a very different mix in Asia, because this is what I call the China dilemma. All of American allies have crucial trade ties with China, and despite the U.S.-China trade dispute, no American ally is going to decouple itself from the Chinese market. That's going to be almost impossible to do. So, unlike any other time in U.S. foreign policy, Sasha, the Americans want its allies to become much more anti-China, but the problem is none of the Asian allies, maybe except for Japan, and maybe Australia because of the Quad, are willing to create a so-called Asian NATO to counter China. That, I think, is the wrong move, and it is very, very impractical.

So, if you look at those two broad trends, how does this all impact what's happening on the Korean Peninsula? First of all, I think, in 2021, this will be Kim Jong Un's tenth year in power; in that time he has shown to be a very savvy leader, a modern leader. He has reached out to the Chinese and Russians; he reached out of course to Donald Trump. Had two major summits, one mini-summit on the DMZ. He had three meetings with President Moon Jae-in, met with Xi Jinping five or six times. So, he is now on the world stage, but Kim Jong Un suffers from three, I guess, complex converging problems. Number one—the economy is not really doing very well; the sanctions are crippling the North Korean economy as we speak, despite so-called de facto market reforms over the last several years. So, sanctions, and the economy are doing fairly poorly. Number two—his dependence on China is becoming bigger and bigger and bigger, and I think, I'm sure Andrei has some notes on this, but I believe that as China's power becomes much more greater than, of course, North Korea by any stretch of the imagination, what you will see is Kim Jong Un being drawn into the Chinese orbit, even if he doesn't want to. But he has no other choice. In other words, North Korea has no other ally except China on military and economic issues and, parenthetically, of course, Russia supports it in the UN and elsewhere, but in a much different way. So, in that sense, North Korea doesn't want to become a Chinese satellite, but I think, over time it has no choice but to do so.

In South Korea what all this means, that Mr. Moon, President Moon Jae-in's North Korea initiatives have really hit a brick wall. There were major successes in 2018, but I think after the summit in Pyongyang that created the South-North military accord, and then you had the June 2018 summit in Singapore with Trump and Kim Jong Un that was a highlight of Moon's diplomacy. But I think now, at the end of 2020, there is no October surprise. Kim Jong Un, or his sister Kim Yo Jong, is not visiting Washington because of the pandemic, and so we will see a very different political landscape in 2021.

And my last comment is, you know, South Korea has a five-year presidential term. Mr. Moon's term ends in May 2022, so he only has about a little over a year to do anything concrete in

South-North relations, but I don't think Kim Jong Un is going to deliver some type of a rosy picture for him in the remaining year and a half of his term.

**Gabuev:** Many thanks, Chung Min, that's a very kind of overarching, 360-degree view of what's going on in and around the Peninsula. Andrei, turning to you, where do you see kind of the flash points or the things that should keep us awake at night both on the Korean Peninsula and around it?

You don't... I can't hear you.

**Lankov:** Yes, sorry. Yeah, again, another technical mistake. I was quite good in making mistakes today, sorry. It was because of me why we started five minutes late. Having said that, personally, I believe that there are no immediate concerns right now, but on one hand I don't expect any kind of serious confrontation to happen. It's not impossible, but not likely, because for the time being North Koreans are probably going to remain quiet. They are making some preparations for a possible ICBM test, which will happen sooner or later, they are working hard to improve their nuclear capabilities, which they will demonstrate sooner or later, but probably not right now.

To start with, they want Donald Trump. They would much prefer Donald Trump to be the next U.S. president, because they will have to deal with sanctions, whether it's going to be Biden or Donald Trump, but they probably have some expectations. Some hope that Donald Trump probably, just probably, would be able to accept some deal, which will accept North Korea implicitly, not explicitly, as a de facto nuclear state, and, or at least, will be willing to swap some part, a part of their nuclear potential for some sanctions. Biden is much less likely to accept any kind of such a deal, so for the next few months, I would say, for a month at least, they are likely to remain quiet. And on top of that we have a China factor, because, probably, because professor Chung Min already said about it, and I think it's probably the key factor. I probably would have to add something, but basics have already been mentioned by Chung Min, and I just follow.

So, to start this, I would say that the foreign policy of Kim Jong Un has been basically a big success over the last few years. In 2016–2017, it looked like he was cornered. I was optimistic or pessimistic, it depends, I was pretty sure and kept saying that he would somehow make out, find a way out of this corner, and this is indeed what happened. But things looked pretty tense, he made a lot of promises, very imprecise, to win time, and he did win time and managed to diffuse tensions with the United States by all the summits. With very little actual content, because I believe it was an American mistake—back then, Americans could squeeze some significant concessions from North Korea. Of course, denuclearization has never been and will never be a part of agenda. North Korea is a nuclear power, period. No amount of promises, they have no reasons to believe, will change it, no amount of money will change it, because they remember what happened to Gaddafi, no amount of pressure will change it, but some concessions were possible. They managed to outsmart President Trump by making some very imprecise concessions, dragging their feet and winning time. It was a big success, but it was not a perfect success, because they ended up facing massive sanctions on the scale they have never seen before. And, as Chung Min has already said, sanctions are gradually undermining their economy, together with COVID, and really, really, a great deal of typhoons and floods this year. But sanctions is vital and they don't see how to get out. Donald Trump gives them a little hope that they would negotiate some relaxation, but it's highly problematic.

With Biden, it's even more problematic, so they will have to live under sanctions and it's not good. They are lucky to avoid serious trouble, but they still get themselves into minor but long-

term trouble, and this is something they will have to deal with. But they were quite lucky because when the situation looked pretty much hopeless, when even China essentially created a united front with the United States on the North Korean issue, it's forgotten, but in 2017 China was acting together with the United States, putting unprecedented pressure on North Korea. It changed because of the Cold War to the point zero as a new Cold War, I would probably dare to call it Cold War, which suddenly led to restoration of the old block-based logic, sphere of influence logic, and North Korea suddenly became a vital buffer zone for China. And it's brought good and bad news for North Korea and for everybody around, because now North Korea can count on the Chinese aid, I'm pretty sure that in spite of the excessive, really excessive measures related to the current time, all these measures around COVID, in spite of the natural disasters, and above all in spite of sanctions, no major famine is going to happen in North Korea. It will be prevented by the Chinese; if China sees that famine is about to start, they will probably ship enough food, not enough to keep everybody well fed but enough to keep everybody alive. They have essentially basic security guarantee now. And China will do it not because of humanitarian concerns, which are not necessarily alien to China, I don't want to be nasty, but largely because of geopolitical concerns. It's not going to cost much Chinese budget, we are talking about small change for China, but it will increase chances of stability, and they need a stable and divided Korean Peninsula. Stable and divided.

And this is good news for the North Koreans. North Koreans understand that they now have Chinese backing; if something gets really bad, they will get Chinese food assistance. If they face a local rebellion or people on the streets, not likely but possible, Chinese tanks will come. It's far more likely now because for fifteen years it has been debated whether China would intervene or not in case of some kind of domestic crisis or revolution, or coup in North Korea. Until maybe 2018, one could say probably not. Now I would say almost definitely, it will intervene and crush all kind of anti-government movement because they need a stable North Korea, and it means that probably we should for the time being forget about any probability of regime change. Well, things happen still, but probability went down dramatically because of the change, it's a changing situation.

It looks good for North Korea, but there are also two bad things, as professor Chung Min has already correctly remarked. North Koreans don't want to become a Chinese satellite. For decades, the basics of North Korean policy was not to be anybody's satellite. They were very hostile to the Soviet Union, they were very hostile to China, and practical policy in spite of all rhetoric of friendship, and they understand, and Kim Jong Un understands, that China needs a stable and surviving North Korean state, right. But it does not mean that China necessarily needs a state presided by the Kim family or at least by him, Kim Jong Un. He remembers that for long, for many years, China was sheltering and protecting and quietly sponsoring his half-brother, whom he had to basically poison, assassinate in Malaysia, because he saw this half-brother Kim Jong Nam as a possible contender, and this contender clearly had Chinese backing, and it was a good reminder that China probably needs a unified, not unified, divided Korean Peninsula. It clearly needs a reasonably friendly government in the northern part of the Peninsula, but it depends on who is going to run the government and they have seen many cases in the past when, you know, friendly quote-unquote countries arranged coups and change of power.

So Kim Jong Un personally would feel much more comfortable had he been able to maneuver between United States, South Korea, China, but he does not. It's not going to happen, because I don't see any chances for Americans changing their position or lifting sanctions, or seriously relaxing sanctions unless it will be done by Trump—you can expect everything from him, but even this is not very likely, everything else. So, they will face sanctions.

South Korea, and the current South Korean government would do everything possible to have good relations with North Korea. They are going to send truckloads of money. Moon Jae-in administration would be happy to send truckloads of money to North Korea, but they cannot do it because Moon Jae-in, in spite of all attacks against him from the South Korean right, he is a very realistic politician, and he understands that troubles with the United States will create far greater damage for his country, his administration, and his party than possible improvement of relations with North Korea. So, he will lose more if he gets in trouble with the United States, and he is very careful not to break sanctions, and sanctions are very comprehensive—any kind of meaningful interaction apart from purely humanitarian food aid is essentially banned.

So, North Koreans are pushed towards becoming essentially a Chinese satellite, which is not necessarily good for the current government, for Kim Jong Un. One question: is it good for North Koreans? Big question. On one hand, it's good that they are not going to starve to death, it's good news. But the last few years, Kim Jong Un has shown that he is interested in quiet reforms, China-style, not as radical as in China, but he is going to encourage market relations, which have emerged under his father more than twenty years ago. And it's not clear whether he will be more willing to advance such policy if he has Chinese backing or not, because encouraging economic reforms is politically risky.

Now, when he has a kind of Chinese, if you like, safety net, if you like, basically a welfare check, the big question is whether he is going to take these risks or not. If he is not, it means that North Korea is going to be frozen, maybe for decades—sounds excessive, but you never know. It can be something which will last for a few months, or maybe something which will last for ten, fifteen, twenty years, but still, probability of reforms exists. Exists and I hope that reforms will continue. Yes, it's all. Might be actually two minutes overstay.

**Gabuev:** Thank you for a deep dive in all the issues of North Korea. Before we jump into Q&A, I just remind our viewers that you can ask questions, and you can either do that commenting on the YouTube stream, or you can do that on Twitter, and in order to do that you need to hashtag #CarnegieRussia and then your question might be transferred to me.

So, Chung Min, I think that talking about Trump's strategy is unnecessary, it's very hard to figure out whether there is a strategic approach and methods behind the madness, but you said something interesting. You said that under President Joe Biden, if Biden wins, there might be a different approach. What's your sense of the optics and of the options that might be available to the Biden administration? What would be kind of the guiding principle, will it be just about the nuclear issue, or will it be viewed as a broader issue that involves deepening competition with China?

**Lee:** You know, Sasha, I think amongst every U.S. president that I've been able to track and follow for the last thirty-forty years, Donald Trump without a doubt was the worst possible U.S. president for the Korean-American alliance. Here you have a sitting U.S. president who says that the U.S. and South Korean military exercises are too expensive and threatening to Kim Jong Un. This was music to Kim Jong Un's ears. The only good thing I would say about Trump's North Korea policy is that he made an effort to meet with Kim Jong Un one-to-one, and I think that was something you have to give this guy credit for, but the problem is what did he do with it. This was a bromance, as we know from John Bolton's memoirs. In the more recent book written by, you know, Bob Woodward, we see that, for example, Trump was fixated with the idea that Kim Jong Un was going to somehow bolster his image back at home as the U.S. president who brought peace to the Korean people.

So, you know, Donald Trump's mind works in a very different space than Joe Biden's. What I think Joe Biden will face are three critical challenges relating to Korea. Number one, as Andrei correctly pointed out, North Korea, whether we say it or not, is a de facto nuclear weapon state. She has between 60 and maybe even 90 nuclear warheads, nobody really knows, based on open sources, but North Korea is basically maturing its nuclear arsenal, she might have very soon a nuclear-tipped SLBM, which will be a game changer for South Korea and Japan, and the U.S. North Korea has other arrays of long-range and mid-range ballistic missiles, so this is something that Kim Jong Un will never, never change. So, from Biden's perspective, he realizes that despite thirty years of diplomacy, whether it's, you know, the nuclear earlier agreement with the light-water reactors and so forth, American, Korean, and Chinese, and Russian efforts to dissuade North Korea from going nuclear have failed. So, what Biden will do, he'll take six months to review the North Korea policy, he will not go back to the Trump regime, what he will go back to, I think, is some type of a new so-called strategic ambivalence or ambiguity that was practiced by President Barack Obama. In other words, the Americans do not really want to engage North Korea fully; they will maintain sanctions, but for the most part, I think, we'll see very little change from Barack Obama's approach to North Korea and Biden.

The second big factor, however, is China. Biden realizes that if he becomes president, he will deal with the most powerful China since China opened up in 1978, and the U.S. has made a fundamental mistake because they thought, if we engage China, if we embrace China, foster its opening, China will be more like us; China will not be a full-fledged democracy, but she will be a much more friendlier state to the U.S. And the fundamental mistake Americans made is they did not expect China to have great power ambitions. This is very funny because America has had great power ambitions, so has Russia; historically other powers have gone up and down. Why do you make an exception for China? So, for Biden, he will be the first American president, Sasha, who will face a very powerful, strong, assertive China. Especially after the pandemic, and the pandemic has done so much damage to American soft power throughout the world that even with China's really gross mistakes beginning with the virus in Wuhan and that spread all over the world, China comes out much better in terms of its pandemic management than the Americans. So that's what Biden has, and that will impact the Korean Peninsula because the Chinese will now say, if you want us to support your program on the Korean Peninsula, well, I cannot do this for free, you must give me something in return, and that's what Xi Jinping will tell Mr. Biden.

**Lee:** The third and final factor that will, I guess, push Biden is U.S. relations with Japan. Japan has a new prime minister—Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who was a number 2 for the last eight years. He will not do anything drastic because the LDP faces elections next fall. And so, in the next year, Suga is not going to do anything to hurt U.S.–Japan relations. And, of course, Biden is very supportive of U.S.–Japan relations. But what I think Biden will do if he becomes president, Sasha, is he will push the Koreans and the Japanese to come to some type of a modus vivendi despite the bilateral discord that's been peaking for the last three-four years. So, in that sense, what Biden will do is he will push North Korea to the side a little bit after he does a policy review. He will ask for the Chinese support, but he realizes he won't get much, and then he will also ask the Koreans to work more closely with the Japanese over North Korea and other critical issues.

**Gabuev:** Do you think that de facto recognition—not official recognition, but de facto recognition—that North Korea is a nuclear state, that it's impossible to change, and the last thing that Kim will give up is the nukes? So why wouldn't the Biden administration after doing its review try to come up with a kind of more modest version of the deal that India and Pakistan got in order to be brought back in the international community?

**Lee:** Well, that is two major problems. I think the anti-nuclear proliferationists within the Biden team are very, very strong. And so they would argue that although North Korea is a de facto nuclear weapons state, we cannot recognize it as such. The second problem is if you do recognize North Korea, as the U.S. did with India, for example, as a de facto nuclear weapon state—although they never used that term—well, what about South Korea and Japan? Are they going to go nuclear? Will they consider nuclear options? So, from a Biden perspective, if you recognize North Korea's nuclear weapons as a legitimate source of national defense, then of course you would have to give the same type of assurance that maybe the Japanese and South Koreans could have their own nuclear arsenal which—in my personal view—would go against their own security interests. So, in that sense, I think despite all the problems—and you're absolutely right—I don't think Biden will recognize (even half-heartedly) a nuclearized North Korea.

**Gabuev:** And even the risk of North Korea slipping deeper into China's pockets won't prevent him because that's the situation that he can actually manage...

**Lee:** Right. But the key thing here is—I think one thing the North Koreans want from Joe Biden, or Trump, is sanctions relief. That's what's really hurting their economy and Kim Jong Un's legitimacy. But this is the biggest card that Joe Biden has. And remember, under Trump, although the U.S. supports sanctions on North Korea, what has happened is because he wanted to please Kim Jong Un, he really hasn't pushed China, or Russia for that matter, to become more stringent on sanctions vis-à-vis North Korea. So, in that sense, I think Biden realizes that he doesn't really have that much leverage when he deals with North Korea.

**Gabuev:** Thanks. Andrei, I think that what I hear from Chung Min is that if Biden is elected, the Biden policy towards North Korea will be very much Barack Obama's strategic ambiguity approach 2.0. What do you think, how will the Kim regime react to such a policy? So there will be no openings for such large diplomatic gains like summits with the U.S. president as he had under Trump. So what will the regime do?

**Lankov:** Without China, without considerations in the past—when China was not as important as now and the sanctions were largely symbolic—I would expect that North Koreans would quietly resume tests of their ICBM and nuclear weapons. First of all, to remind the United States that they do exist. Second, to improve their capability. And now they probably would like to do it. But there is a serious restriction—that is China. It's not clear for me and I would not dare to give any certain answer to the question. Whether currently North Koreans are willing to—well, to which extent China is capable of preventing North Korea from having another test—I don't know... in the past—say, without sanctions, without what we saw, without all this bloody-nose rhetoric, without all these summits, countless summits, broad smiles, no agreements, no substance... without it I would say Biden would probably live... well, will be occasionally awakened in the middle of the night with the news about another ICBM launch and nuclear test. Now I'm not so sure. But it has nothing to do with the U.S. policy, it's because of China—because China doesn't want this type of things. China doesn't want North Korea to advance its nuclear program because it's unnecessary complications and because China, like United States, like Russia, does not want to see proliferation.

So, it's a bit of a question mark. And this is why they would prefer to deal with Donald Trump: he's risky, he's unpredictable, but there is some probability of breakthrough. And talking to basically what Chung Min has already said, I would add another reason why Biden would be very careful with pushing this kind of implicit acceptance of North Korea—domestic politics. Because my understanding—I've been talking to the Americans on this issue for nearly twenty

years and I can see what's happening. When I was saying that North Korea would never, ever surrender nuclear weapons fifteen years ago I was seen as a maverick Russian pessimist. Now it's pretty much a mainstream view among the expert community. Problem is they cannot explain it to the generalists who are really running policy. And if, say, Biden is somehow persuaded... even if he's persuaded, it'll be extremely difficult to win any kind of support for such a deal at the Congress, with media, with the general public. It will make the president very vulnerable for all kind of domestic critique, and he probably is not going to see why he should do it, because achievements are dubious, attacks will be real, and another difference is that unlike Pakistan and India and Israel—three other de facto nuclear states—North Korea is specifically and explicitly targeting the United States. This is nuclear weapons—not only but largely.

**Gabuev:** Thank you. We start to receive questions from the audience and again I remind you that you can either text them in comments under the YouTube streaming that you're watching or you can do that via Twitter by hashtagging #CarnegieRussia. Before we go to the questions from the audience, I think I have two more questions and we'll try to torture Chung Min and Andrei and abuse my power as a moderator. Chung Min, I think that we covered the Chinese and the U.S. angle pretty well, but one of the events that's around the corner is the election in Republic of Korea. So, what would you expect might change if right-wing candidates win and there's a change of administration in the Blue House?

**Lee:** That's a great question. We have a presidential election in May 2022. So, in about a year and a half. The problem is the current ruling party in the Korean parliament—that has 300 seats—has about a 180-seat majority, and it is a supermajority. So, as a result, president Moon's party, the Democratic Party, they've been able to move their agenda on domestic issues, on the economy, on taxation, on labor laws—whatever—much to its heart's content. The one thing that Moon cannot do is control Kim Jong Un, or China, or the U.S. elections.

So I think Moon is maximizing his domestic agenda, although this is hitting a brick wall because of the pandemic. And so therefore going into the next election the key thing the Koreans will ask is what will the ruling party do for the Korean economy—well, not much. And so therefore the opposition conservatives will say: “We gave you guys a chance to rule Korea for five years. You basically had détente with Kim Jong Un that didn't result in anything specific. What has happened—a South Korean citizen was killed by North Koreans. We've had tragedies across the border. What have you really achieved with the North Koreans?” Then they will say: “You have damaged relations with the U.S., and you have also been unable to prevent Chinese pressure on South Korea because of the THAAD and so forth.”

However, having said all this, there's no guarantee that the right will win election, it's because of the changing Korean demography. The aging population of sixty-five and above are the most conservative, and they are growing in number. But the most active are those in their thirties, forties, and fifties. And these people have very different views of the Korean government and democracy than ever before. So I think what will happen, however, is many South Koreans now realize that the love fest with Kim Jong Un cannot go on forever. It's time for reciprocity.

The second issue that I think many Koreans realize, Sasha, going into the next Korean poll is that 73% of South Koreans in the PEW global poll said they don't trust China. This is remarkable, right? This is higher than the anti-Chinese sentiment in Japan. So although Koreans do not vocalize their anti-Chinese sentiments like the Japanese, I assure you there's much more anxiety on China in South Korea than perhaps anywhere else in Asia. So that will also play into the elections in 2022. So, regardless of who comes in the power... if the left regains power in 2022—yes, they will want to go back to the same old story—more detente, more meetings as Andrei

said—you know, giving them busloads of cash, but that's not going to happen. South Koreans now see a very different North Korea under Kim Jong Un. They had higher expectations that he will be like a mini-Gorbachev or a mini-Deng Xiaoping, but that is not happening.

**Gabuev:** Thank you. And I also see that there are kind of objective limitations, the shifting public mood with regard to China, the existing sanctions regime, and if Biden is in power, actually, a more engaging and more traditional approach towards dealing with allies that will not alienate South Korea. Okay, point taken.

Andrei what about Russia? Russia has never popped up in this conversation which to me shows that Russia might be a great power or a great power that's insignificant on the Korean Peninsula. You have a terrific piece out yesterday at Carnegie—I encourage everyone to go and check it out—where Andrei discusses the shifts in Russia's policy towards North Korea. What's your take? Is Russia present in this discussion, or is it just a junior partner of China and is very happy to toe Beijing's line?

**Lankov:** Yes, I think it's a junior partner of China. Maybe not happy and, frankly, maybe I'm supposed to say something critical, but I think it's a pretty rational attitude. Because, first of all, Russian goals in Northeast Asia are very similar to that of China. Russia would like to see, first, stability—it's a major goal, not because Russia is a great, peace-loving country (well, every country is peace-loving here), but, having said that, it's more complicated—a bit.

In this area, if there is any kind of a serious problem, Russia is not in a position to benefit. It's not going to be good news. Russia would like to see this region stable. Second, it's not officially repeated too much because of clear diplomatic considerations, but Russia would like to see Korea divided. Stability is more important than division. If there is unification, even under South Korean control, Russia will accept it, gradually accept it. But in an ideal world, the second goal is division because the emergence of a unified Korean state, which is likely to be—first of all—an ally of the United States (not necessarily so, but an ally of the United States), which might be very assertive and highly nationalistic and because there will be a great deal of chaos in post-unification Korea, probably in order to sort of mobilize the popular support. Future united Korean government will probably use usual nationalist card, which works very well in Korea like elsewhere—Korea is a very nationalist place, by the way. And maybe some of this territorial claims—everything's not good. American alliance—not good. Acceptable! Russia can live with that, but prefers to not live with that. And third is denuclearization. But the problem is that basically it has been long accepted in the Russian expert community that denuclearization is not going to happen. No matter what. North Korea will remain nuclear, so it's a dream which is not going to become a reality any time soon. So if it's kept under control, it's good. You see—it's essentially Chinese goals.

Differences: Stakes. Before all this sanctions mess began, China's trade with North Korea was about 6 to 7 billion U.S. dollars. I usually test my students and class and ask: what is Russia's trade with North Korea, how do you think? They usually say 1 billion, 2 billion. No. Before the sanctions it was 100 million. Sixty times, not sixteen, sixty times less than trade with China. If you calculate indirect trade—well, some people say it's not correct, actual trade is much larger. Well, maybe 2 or 3 times larger because of indirect trade via China and because of some illegal deals. But, still, China also does a great deal of semi-legal, illegal unregistered trade and much more smuggling than Russia. Before sanctions, because, well, it was a smuggling paradise (these border rivers). So, basically, still, 50–60 times...

So, if you have a country with which you have a sort of quasi-ally entente agreement, I would say, the country which has, in a particular region, similar goals as you have, but a country whose stakes are much-much higher, I think it's quite reasonable to let this country take the driver's seat and feel comfortable in the back seat—and this is exactly what Russia is doing. So, China is leading the Russian policy and it's rational, it's expected, and I think that given the situation it's unavoidable and basically rational choice. And I don't see it changing. As a matter of fact, very briefly, all these stories about, you know, massive brilliant future of economic trade, about these great projects, about railways and natural gas pipelines... don't take it seriously, don't take it seriously. It's just a media mess. These projects do have great future, but maybe forty or fifty years from now.

**Gabuev:** Okay, and again, Andrei elaborates on this point in his article just published by Carnegie, so I encourage everybody to go and take a look. Okay, questions from the audience time! The first question I think probably goes to Chung Min, and it's about Japan: "Although the main powers that can influence the situation in North Korea are China, Russia, and the U.S., what's the role of the regional powers and especially what might change with regard to Japan's policy towards North Korea with prime minister Suga in charge?" What's your take?

**Lee:** Well, I don't think it's going to change much. The biggest issue for the Japanese government on North Korea is the abductees' issue. As you know, a number of Japanese citizens, including high school students, were abducted about twenty-thirty years ago to serve as teachers, and so forth, for North Korean spies. And some have come back, but many have remained in North Korea. And so former Japanese prime ministers worked on this. Suga is not going to be able to bring back the abductees to Japan. So, in other words, the Japanese want to normalize relations with Pyongyang, but I don't think Kim Jong Un will give the Japanese that present in the next year in the Suga administration. If Suga wins the reelection next year and has a fresh mandate, then he will be able to put in a much more comprehensive North Korea policy.

The other key issue here is the Japanese have very little impact on what's happening in North Korea, as well as South Korea, because of the historical interests and ties and discord. So, amongst all the great powers in the region—U.S., China, Russia—they are all permanent members of the UN security council, so all three have a permanent place in whatever happens in Korea. Japan is not going to become one of the four major powers that decides whatever happens on the Korean Peninsula, but the one area where the Japanese have a huge advantage is in capital investment and technology. And that's something that if the North Koreans are able to open up, the Japanese will be able to put in a lot of their capital and technology, which will boost the North Korean economy, but, of course, that will only happen if there is a political normalization.

**Gabuev:** Thank you so much. And there is a question to Andrei as well, and it sounds like: "What options do we have left in dealing with North Korea and is there anything left that Washington, Beijing, and Moscow agree on with regard to North Korea? Is there any agenda that three big members of the UN security council, permanent members, agree on with regard to North Korea?"

**Lankov:** Well, if you want me to be optimistic, I would say they all agree that nuclear North Korea is bad. It's bad because it can do something silly, not necessarily against the United States, against other participants too. Bad because it creates a bad precedent for proliferation. Bad because it creates many opportunities for nuclear technology and nuclear material moving to very wrong hands. But on this point... so everybody says it would be nice to have a non-nuclear North Korea. And then we have contradictions of the real interests, because the United States are willing to exercise a great deal of pressure on North Korea. If it provokes domestic discontent or

a small civil war, for Americans it will be something which will happen across the ocean—not a big deal. For the Russians it will be something which will happen very close to the Russian borders—sort of a big deal. For the Chinese it will be something which will happen next to their major urban and industrial centers—a really, really big deal.

I believe that the Americans would care about the political stability in Mexico much more than they care about political stability in North Korea. So, for the Americans, for the United States, the only concern related to North Korea is nuclear. For them, North Korea is essentially a nuclear state—period. Nothing else. Everything else they don't care much. For the Chinese it's an important buffer zone, it's a strategically important region. And as a result, when Americans face a choice between a nuclear North Korea and an unstable North Korea—Syria-like, Libya-like situation in North Korea, which will however create real chances for denuclearization—their choice is obvious: it's a country far away, let's take the risks. Well, actually, I'm simplifying—not everybody in the United States, many people in the United States will say “crisis is risky.” Especially the more nuclear warheads North Korea gets, the more risky it becomes.

But for the Chinese and Russians—and increasingly for the South Koreans—stability is a price. Well, actually, absence of denuclearization is a price they are willing to pay for stability. Because for them a stable, nuclear but stable, North Korea is a lesser evil than unstable North Korea. And there is a sort of paradox: the more nuclear weapons North Korea gets, the more reasons its neighbors have to worry about its stability, because a serious-style civil war in North Korea of say 2005—just before the first nuclear test—would be bad news. Serious-style civil war in a country which has well over 50 nuclear devices is really, really bad news. So, there is such thing as disagreements, so Americans are willing to exercise sanctions and push North Korea to possible crisis. Not all, again, not all, there are disagreements about it among the U.S. experts and policymakers, but all other participants would definitely prefer to live with a nuclear North Korea as long as it remains stable and not especially dangerous.

**Gabuev:** Thanks. And there is a very brief last question to Andrei: “What do the U.S. and South Korea expect Russia to do in case of Biden's win?”

**Lankov:** Well, on theory, they expect Russia to be cooperating with the UN security council and keeping all the resolutions, following all these resolutions and putting some pressure on North Korea. I don't see Russia, or for that matter China, openly challenging the UN security council resolutions. But, active cooperation—I wouldn't expect it to happen because, once again, nobody in the Russian leadership is happy about North Korea as it is now. Nobody is happy about nuclear weapons. But, as I have said, stability and division are much more important (especially—stability) than denuclearization, so nobody is going to take risks, you know, risks of massive confrontations, civil war nearby, which will create serious damage for the Russian interests and will create some outcome which will probably not be very favorable for Russia because a pro-Chinese government in North Korea, complete puppet—not good. Unified government, which will be an ally of the United States—may be even worse, definitely not much better. And chaos—really bad. So, stability is a favorable option, so Russia is not going to hit North Korea too hard or push North Korea too hard. On the other hand, however, the North Koreans shouldn't count on significant support from Russia because it's very much an issue.

**Gabuev:** Okay, point well taken. Well, you didn't manage to be optimistic, gentlemen, but you managed to be you. That means very insightful, deep, and sober analysts and very experienced people. I thank you very much for being with us today. I thank everybody who has watched this video. And I also want to express my sincere gratitude to the Korea Foundation, which supports a project researching the situation on the Korean Peninsula and Russia's role in it. I hope that we

will be able to catch up and compare notes in not such a distant future. Thank you so much, Andrei and Chung Min.

**Lee:** Thank you! It was my pleasure. And it was great to be on air with you and with my very good friend Andrei.

**Lankov:** Thank you! Thank you, it really was a pleasure to be with all of you. Yes, thank you!