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**THE KOREAN PENINSULA AFTER THE U.S.
ELECTIONS: VIEWS FROM WASHINGTON,
BEIJING, AND MOSCOW**

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SPEAKERS:

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Haenle. Welcome, everyone, to another live interactive recording of the China in the World podcast. I want to extend the special thank you to the Korea Foundation for sponsoring this discussion as part of a joint project between the Korea Foundation and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This is our second live interactive recording of the China in the World podcast, which is a new initiative inspired, of course, by the need to adapt to these challenging times and to go online, and to go virtual with our events. I hope all of our listeners are staying safe and healthy during these challenging times.

For those that are tuning in for the first time to the China in the World podcast, this show is a series of discussions between myself as well as other Chinese and international experts, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center in Beijing, China. And our aim with the China in the World series is to educate and promote greater understanding on transformational issues surrounding China’s shifting role in the world. We discuss China foreign policy issues, China’s international role, and anything else, everything else involving China’s relations with the world. We’ve recorded now over 150 episodes with listeners around the world, and I’d encourage those interested in Chinese foreign policy to check out the show at the Carnegie–Tsinghua website.

Today, I’m delighted to welcome back to the China in the World series two of my favorite Carnegie colleagues: Alexander Gabuev, who is coming in from Moscow, Russia, and Dr. Tong Zhao, who is with us coming in from Beijing, China. Both of them have made multiple appearances on the China in the World podcast, and I’d encourage our listeners to go back and listen to some of those previous conversations.

Alex Gabuev is a senior fellow and inaugural chair of the Russia in the Asia-Pacific Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He is the Carnegie Endowment’s resident, Russian China hand, or Zhongguo tong, as we like to say. His research is focused on Russia’s policy toward East and Southeast Asia, political and ideological trends in China, and China’s relations with its neighbors, especially those in Central Asia. Prior to joining Carnegie, Alex was a member of the editorial board of Kommersant publishing house and served as the deputy editor-in-chief of Kommersant Vlast, one of Russia’s most influential newsweeklies. Thank you for joining the program this morning, Alex.

Gabuev. Pleasure, and too bad we can’t do that live, but that’s the reality.

Haenle. It is the reality. Dr. Tong Zhao is a senior fellow at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, and he is working in the Carnegie Endowment’s Nuclear Policy Program with colleagues in Washington, DC and across the globe. In addition to Carnegie he is on the Board of Directors of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. He is also an associate editor of the journal Science & Global Security, and he is a member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials. He was previously a Stanton Security fellow, with the Managing the Atom Project at the International Security Program at the Belfer Center at Harvard University. Thank you, Tong Zhao, for joining us today.

Zhao. Thank you, Paul, it’s always a pleasure.

Haenle. You know, I did mention that both Alex and Tong Zhao have been on the program previously, but in addition Dr. Tong Zhao has even hosted some of his own guests on the China in the World podcast. So, again, please feel free to go back and check out some of those episodes.

Before we kick off our discussion, I want to quickly just go through a few housekeeping items. First, we really want to give the audience the opportunity to ask questions during our discussion today. In order to submit a question for the event, please use the YouTube chat, or you can tweet to @CarnegieRussia, and we’ll make sure to get to your questions. Second, we’ll be posting this episode to our China in the World podcast platform, after we finish the live recording, you will be able to listen to the recording on whatever app that you use to listen to podcasts, and we’ll also post a video recording on YouTube as well.

So, with that, let's kick things off. Our discussion today is focused on the shifting dynamics between Russia, China, the United States with respect to the North Korea issue and their implications for geopolitics in the region more broadly.

This year, as our listeners will likely know, marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, an event that brought North Korea, China, and the former Soviet Union together in a three-year struggle on the Korean Peninsula. While trilateral ties have undergone significant changes over the past seven decades, relations between North Korea, China, and modern-day Russia remain fairly stable, I would argue, if not increasingly amicable, on the surface at least, and we can get into that in some of our discussion. Just last week, President Xi of China commemorated China's participation in what is remembered as the war to resist American aggression and to aid Korea. President Xi upheld the war as an example to inspire the Chinese nation to overcome all difficulties and obstacles and prevail over all enemies. Earlier in the year, President Putin of Russia awarded Kim Jong-un a World War II medal for his role in preserving historical record of Soviet soldiers that fought on the Korean Peninsula.

This year also marks the 75th anniversary of the ruling party in North Korea. Many of you likely saw the clips of Pyongyang commemorating its anniversary with a military parade in Kim Il-sung Square earlier this month. There we saw the Korean People's Army unveiling for the first time a new intercontinental ballistic missile, an ICBM, that looks to be the largest transportable ICBM ever deployed by North Korea. And again, I would like to get into that in our discussions as well.

So while North Korea, we have seen, has done more than a dozen missile tests since talks with Washington broke down in early 2019, the Trump administration in the US is downplaying, has downplayed these provocations. President Trump and his administration haven't responded in any meaningful way to Pyongyang's continued development of nuclear capabilities, stockpiling weapons-grade nuclear material, and after a flurry of summit diplomacy between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, between June of 2018 and June of 2019, there is been no progress in reaching the US-stated goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And in fact, as evident in the US presidential debate last Thursday, Trump's primary focus seems to be on his good relationship with the leader of North Korea.

At the same time there are critics in Washington suggesting that China has ignored the development of North Korea's missile program. Former national security advisor John Bolton accused Beijing of using North Korea missile capabilities as a wildcard, so to speak, a geopolitical wildcard to strengthen China's hand vis-à-vis the United States. Other observers have criticized Russia as one of the what they call the foremost sanction busters vis-à-vis North Korea, that is to say, supplying North Korea with much needed resources, which, many argue, works to undermine the sanctions. And we have Alex here today who can share with us his views on these questions, and Tong Zhou for the Chinese perspective.

And of course back in the US, with presidential elections in just one week from today, what can we expect from future US policy toward North Korea, either under a Trump-2, a second administration for President Trump, or a first administration under a President Joe Biden.

Looking forward to hearing each of the insights from Tong Zhao and Alex on these important and incredibly complex issues. Many analysts maintain that, despite their differences, China, Russia, and the US all share a common goal, and that is to see Pyongyang abandon its nuclear ambitions and programs. Yet they also note how each country views the North Korea issue is different through its own lens, strategic interests and long-term objectives.

And so to kick things off I'd like to give our audience a better understanding of both Chinese and Russian views on recent developments in the Korean Peninsula and where the situation stands in the perspective of our experts here.

So, Alex, let me begin with you. How does Moscow view its current relationship with North Korea and the situation on the Korean Peninsula more broadly? What are Moscow's primary objectives and strategic interests when it comes to the North Korea issue?

Gabuev. Thanks, Paul. I don't think that North Korea is the place on the world map that is among the top three priorities for Moscow, because it's mostly perplexed about its neighborhood in the west, its border with NATO countries, and many other issues, but definitely that's one of the important places that the Kremlin follows closely. And Russia's overarching priority there is maintenance of stability and keeping the status quo.

I don't think that, despite Moscow's stated goal of resolving the nuclear issue of North Korea and making the Korean Peninsula a nuclear-free zone, anybody serious in Moscow believes that it's possible to take away the nuclear bomb from the Kim regime. We can talk about the reasons for Moscow to believe that, but I think that people in the Russian security establishment believe that resolving the issue is impossible, so the obligation of international community and Russia's interest is to manage that and to make it that things don't go out of control. So, provocations of North Korea are unwelcome, and hence the international community should exercise pressure for North Korea to stop developing its program and maintain its current level, and then probably wind it down in exchange for some sanctions relief. But nobody believes that this program can be totally dismantled. That's the consensus view in Moscow.

And there is a risk that Moscow is addressing here, is that tensions might go out of control, a regional war without using a nuclear weapon is catastrophe, and if nukes are used, that's a global catastrophe. Moscow is like, the Russian decision-making centers are far away, the major centers of economic activities are far away from the border, but Vladivostok, a city of roughly 600 thousand people, is just next door to border with North Korea. That's also a logistical node which connects Russia with Asia-Pacific, that's the largest concentration of ports, that's the export hub for Russian coal and various commodities. So if there is an armed conflict in the region, that's a total disaster for overall Russia's engagement with the region, and that's why this needs to be prevented.

And then the other side of this is that Russia sees North Korea as a pretext for deeper and more robust US military posture in Northeast Asia, including antiballistic missile systems, radars, and something that Russia views as part of the sophisticated plan or plot by the Pentagon and the US to develop a system that would be able to intercept Russian and Chinese ICBMs going forward like 10-15 years down the road and undermine Russia's strategic advantage here. So they see a diplomatic tactics of maintaining peace and stability as a serving Russia's goal.

I believe, that might be changing right now, because Russia is eyeing the US-China conflict and thinking that if the conflict is to deepen and if the Korean Peninsula is to become one of the battlegrounds of the new cold war, Russia might be forced to be joining more the Chinese approach and to support more China in this competition with the United States. So it will be joining as a junior partner and will be more serving Chinese interests in a joint struggle against the US. So here a lot will depend on what Beijing's strategy is and what the state of US-China relationship is with the new administration or with the Trump administration if Donald Trump is to be re-elected.

Haenle. Thank you for that. It's very clear, as you say, not a top priority but an important issue, Russia would like to see stability maintained and the status quo continue, provocations unwelcome, and we can talk about whether we might see some provocations after the new president is inaugurated in January. But can you give me a sense, one final question, on the relationship between Putin and Kim Jong-un and just the bilateral relationship in general? Is the state of relations between Russia and North Korea right now, in your view, pretty good, or are there things that North Korea is doing, or not doing perhaps, in the way of denuclearization that is causing strains? How would you describe the state of bilateral relations and the relations between the two leaders?

Gabuev. I think the relationship between the two leaders is pretty amicable, it's not deep, they have met once, in Vladivostok, but still the channel is established, and there is a pretty sophisticated network of channels with the embassy and security services that talk to each other.

So Russia has somewhat good insight of what's going on in Pyongyang, as much as any power can have good insights.

Russia doesn't have much leverage over North Korea, unlike China. The economic relationship is pretty small, the official figures for last year stand at a trade turnover for roughly 16 million US dollars. We can imagine that the actual number is bigger due to smuggling that you've mentioned, and there are very good and credible reports by Polina Nikolskaya from the Moscow Reuters bureau on how Russia uses various sophisticated schemes to smuggle in fuel. It's unclear whether that's state-sponsored or that's more private initiative of someone, where the government is aware of that, but it's not part of a very big design. So Russia allows that to happen, but that's not a very well thought through strategy. But we have well-documented incidents and evidence for some illegal activity to go on, and we know that part of Russia's trade with North Korea is going through China as well. But overall the economic relationship is very small, it is heavily impacted by the recent round of UN sanctions, so Russia doesn't have much leverage, and North Korea also knows that Russia is not overly important for its survival. They believe that China is much more important.

At the same time they understand that Russia is perhaps the one great power in its neighborhood that doesn't view North Korea as a sphere of influence, that doesn't seek a regime change or doesn't seek control over North Korea foreign policy or pace of its domestic reform. So it's interested only in stability delivered by the Kim regime. And that provides a certain amount of good will and amount to share information and discuss some issues.

At the same time there are * issues, like the abductee issue when it comes to Japan, and the North Koreans understand that Russia's sitting on the UN Security Council as a permanent member plays an important role in passing all the resolutions or watering down some of the sanction designs, so Moscow is definitely the capital that they want to talk to. And same for Russia, because North Korea is one key issue where the Kremlin still has a pretty robust and productive relationship with the United States, and these issues are very few, and the numbers are shrinking. So Moscow wants to be there and wants to sit at the table.

Haenle. Thank you. Dr. Tong Zhao, according to Alex, China is much more important to North Korea, so let's talk about China–North Korea relations. What, in your view, is the current state of relations? We all remember, two years ago, after a long period where President Xi had not met with Kim Jong-un, there was a meeting when Kim Jong-un came to Beijing to meet President Xi, before Donald Trump's first summit with Kim Jong-un. And it seems that the Chinese leader and Kim Jong-un have had series of meetings, and relations seem to have gotten back on track. But what is the current state today, in your view, and have Chinese priorities and policies towards North Korea shifted, how have they shifted in recent years, and what, in your view, is the outlook for those relations?

Zhao. Thank you, Paul, for your question. As you mentioned, the bilateral relationship improved very substantially since 2018. I think, that was mostly driven by mutual interests. China at that time was a little concerned that after North Korea launched its charm offensive, starting to talk with the United States and South Korea, China might be sidelined and might lose its geopolitical influence, so China needs to maintain a close relationship with North Korea to secure its influence.

And North Korea badly needed Chinese support, it needs China at its back when it negotiated with the United States, it needs Chinese support on sanction issues, et cetera. So, mutual interest brought the two countries together after several years of very cool relationship, when North Korea was testing nuclear weapons, missiles, and China was really unhappy, there was very rare high-level engagement * between the two countries.

And I think, since maybe second half of last year, and certainly this year, North Korea again dropped off the radar of China, when China was really preoccupied by the tensions with the United States, there was multiple fronts that China has regarding its foreign relations,

security relationship, there was tension with India, there was tension in South China Sea, there is a growing tension across the Taiwan Strait, so North Korea becomes less important.

And I agree with Alex, Chinese priority is very similar to that of Russia, which is to maintain stability and status quo. So, for more than one year there was less development on the Korean Peninsula. Of course North Korea was still testing short-range missiles, but those were low-level provocations. So China was happy that the situation was generally stable and therefore was paying less attention.

I think this may change for the future, as North Korea paraded new and much more powerful strategic weapons this month, and there was a possibility that North Korea might actually flight-test some of the new long-range missiles. If those high-level provocations happen, I think Chinese attention will again increase very quickly, and China, as Russia, does worry a lot about the long-term security implications of North Korean pursuit of nuclear deterrent. China worries that US and its regional allies will use North Koreans' growing nuclear capability as a reason to increase their security cooperation, and for the United States to enhance its military footprint near China. So I think there will be a growing uncertainty, and China will pay much closer attention in the near-term future.

There is still a debate, I think, within the Chinese security community about the fundamental issue of denuclearization. Some people genuinely believe that North Korea is still open to a grand bargain, Kim Jong-un is willing to trade away his nuclear weapons for security and economic benefits, and therefore there is still hope for diplomacy, as long as US, South Korea can cooperate, we can work together to achieve it, to achieve the goal of denuclearization.

But I think there is also a second school of thought, whose influence is growing, which is North Korea is unlikely to denuclearize any time in the foreseeable future. Instead, China should face the reality of a nuclear-capable North Korea and prepare for its consequences, and maybe China should therefore prioritize what China can benefit from this reality, looking at the geopolitical game.

In the near term, I think, the overall relationship is still improving, which is demonstrated by the warm messages exchanged between the two leaders this year. The economic relationship is also developing. Because of sanctions North Korea has become even more dependent on China economically. I don't think North Korea likes that, I don't think China likes that, because China will be responsible for maintaining North Korea's economic stability. So that's a situation both countries feel uncomfortable. So it's a very interesting relationship to watch.

Haenle. Thank you for that, Tong Zhao. And then one follow-up question and comments on John Bolton, who implies that China is now using the North Korea issue as a geopolitical chip, and you mentioned in your comments that there are some who think China can benefit geopolitically from the North Korea situation. Are we seeing that dynamic play out more in China? Is there more of an effort by China to keep North Korea as a strategic card in dealing with an increasingly strained US–China relationship, and if that's the case, do you see that as preventing any cooperation on the issue between the US and China?

Zhao. Well, there is the sense that one's enemy's enemy is one's friend. That sense is certainly growing within quarters of Chinese security community. As US–China tensions grow, the potential value of North Korea is also increasing. And North Korea very cleverly also tries to please China by supporting Chinese positions on a wide range of foreign policy issues: Hong Kong, Xinjiang, South China Sea, et cetera. So China feels it may be increasingly useful to keep North Korea close. And even looking into the future in terms of the bigger picture issues, what will the security regime on the Korean Peninsula look like, how the negotiation between North Korea and the United States on the nuclear weapon issue would develop, I think China senses a chance to maximize its own security interests in this process. For example, I think maybe part of the reason that China supports North Korean position that North Korea has legitimate security concerns to be addressed is because China feels that's an opportunity to let the United States withdraw its THAAD system from South Korea and to reduce US military deployment of troops

and also military assets. So there are opportunities China can exploit to advance its own interests regarding North Korea.

Haenle. Thank you for that. You've both talked about North Korea–Russia relations and North Korea–China relations; I'll just add my perspectives on the US–North Korea relationship. Despite all of the summitry and the reality TV type of diplomacy we've seen between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, my own senses were the US–North Korea relationship is in a worse state in many ways than when Trump entered the Oval Office.

He repeatedly claims, number one, that he has prevented a major war, and number two, that he has made tremendous progress on the North Korea issue. He has met Kim Jong-un three times, but there has been really, in my view, little tangible progress, with the exception of just the meeting itself. The joint statement that President Trump and Kim Jong-un produced at the first Singapore Summit in June of 2018 had four areas that it covered: it covered bilateral relations, it covered the peace regime, it covered denuclearization, the key issue for many, and it covered the repatriation of remains of American prisoners of war. Of those four, we've really seen progress only on the repatriation of POWs, which is an important issue, but the other three really remain unaddressed. And we haven't seen meaningful progress on any of those.

Trump had an opportunity, and I recognize the value that he saw in meeting with Kim Jong-un in person to try to advance US efforts and other efforts with regard to regional players, but, in my view, he hasn't really gotten a lot from it. And he has given up a lot of US leverage in doing that, both by legitimizing Kim Jong-un's regime, but also in getting Kim to make pretty meaningless denuclearization commitments that were even more vague than previous administration had achieved with North Korea.

And then I would also add that in the process of ingratiating himself with Kim Jong-un he's made some bad deals that I think have negatively impacted US relations with our important allies, South Korea and Japan, and undermined any form of sanction cooperation with Beijing and Moscow. And as a result, I think, the US finds itself in a much worse situation, I would argue the nuclear threat is much worse today than it was when President Trump came into office, and therefore I think that challenge that we've had for some time has only become more intense and more complex.

Alex, I want to turn to you. There are some that argue now, as you had mentioned in your opening comments, that the notion that we are going to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program is probably unachievable in the eyes of many in Russia, yet the official policy, of course, remains denuclearization. And so, talk a little bit more about how you see that notion. Tong Zhao just talked about the debate in China, that there are two schools of thought: one that there is a way to put pressure and incentives toward North Korea that could result in North Korea abandoning elements or all of its nuclear program, but there's a second school of thought in China as well that says, "We are beyond that point, and we need to figure out how to live with a nuclear North Korea." How do you see this issue playing out over time? Because the longer this goes on and the more Kim Jong-un develops his nuclear weapons program, the harder it's going to get for us. But in the United States there's a lot of resistance to this notion of accepting North Korea as a legitimate or illegitimate nuclear power. And so this will be an issue I expect we'll see in the next administration, whether it's Biden or Trump. So, what's your perspective on how this will develop over time?

Gabuev. I think that the consensus view in Moscow is pretty simple. They believe that the regime develops nuclear weapons as a sort of assurance and that that's basically an insurance for the regime survival. That's the major goal of the Kim family. And after watching what happened to the regimes that entered this negotiation to abandon weapons of mass destruction, and Libya is cited frequently in all the conversations in Moscow, that there was a Gaddafi regime, which has concluded deal with the US, that's abandoned its program, and after all it has been destroyed. And there might be two schools of thought. One says: well, the Americans are there just to destroy these type of regimes deliberately, looking for a pretext. And there is

another school of thought which says: okay, something might happen, like the uprising in Benghazi and killing of innocent civilians, that the most powerful democracy in the world sometimes has to interfere. So, when the Russian decision-makers are trying to put themselves in North Korean shoes, they believe that if you abandon your weapons, but you remain a poor country, there might be a popular uprising somewhere, and you send in tanks and machine guns, and start to kill innocent civilians, and then the US, despite the agreements, might have to intervene at some point. So in order to prevent that, you need to have weapons of mass destruction, preferably with means of delivery to the United States shore. And this is the last thing that the North Korean regime will abandon. It's just a fact of life.

There is an undercurrent which says: okay, if there would be a big agreement between the players that can exercise enough pressure on the North Korean regime, that means China and the United States first and foremost, to say, "We are going to impose sanctions as painful and as costly for you that losing power as a result of a big upheaval and big kind of revolt of people or the elite turning against you, because you are leading your country into economic misery, and the surest way for you to walk out of this vicious cycle is to abandon your nuclear program," that could be an option. But that requires a very high degree of coordination and trust between Beijing and Washington, which is not in the cards, which wasn't in the cards for now, and it is definitely not in the cards as the US-China relationship is going downhill for various other reasons. So if there is no trust between China and Washington on a growing number of issues and their relationship is becoming increasingly confrontational and multifaceted, the confrontation is multifaceted, so there is no way that this particular issue can be encapsulated and then be addressed by decision-makers in both capitals.

So, Moscow believe that it's impossible to resolve and that's why it needs to be managed rather than... But, again, at the same time we cannot just accept nuclear North Korea and say that we have all failed. Unfortunately, that's impossible. And we cannot agree with them a type of deal that the international community gave to India or Pakistan. So we will most likely have to live with that kind of de facto status of North Korea as a nuclear power, we need to talk to them, that's the Russian proposal, about not smuggling or not trying to redistribute the technology and the materials they produce, that these technologies and these materials don't end up in hands of really bad guys, like non-state actors. And possibly that issue can be addressed, if not resolved, through multilateral talks about arms control and strategic weapons in Northeast Asia and broader region that would involve various elements, including ICBMs, shorter and mid-range missiles, radars, cyber capabilities and stuff. So, addressing the North Korean issues could be one of the steps to a broader conversation about arms control in Northeast Asia.

Haenle. Thank you for that, Alex. I want to move on to trilateral dynamics, but before I do, we do have a question from one of our listeners, Sarah Lee Lu, who would like to ask about, as I mentioned in the onset, the China wrapping up its week-long commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, and one of the messages seems to be China's ability as a poor and developing country at the time standing up to the United States. And Xi Jinping was quoted as saying, "China smashed the myth that the American military was invincible," and that a major lesson from the war was that sometimes one must stop a war by fighting a war. Sarah asks: "Dr. Tong Zhao, how do you read into the commemoration over the past week in China, and what does it show about China's relations with the US and with North Korea?" And following your brief answer we'll move on to the trilateral dynamics, so we can make sure to cover that.

Zhao. Sure. I think President Xi Jinping's message to the US is very clear. China needs to show that it has the resolve to go to extremes to defend its national interests. President Xi thinks all the troubles in recent couple of years in the US-China bilateral relationship are caused and started by the United States, because the US is concerned about rising China and wants to do everything to slow down and contain China's further development. So, given that the US is on the offense, China has to demonstrate its resolve to use every means at its disposal to deter US aggression.

The second part of the message is to domestic audience. There is growing economic hardship, and there is also foreign policy challenges, but it needs something to rally the Chinese population, so the message to the Chinese people is: we have the means to push back against American aggression, we did so 60 years ago with much weaker capability, in a much worse situation, and today we certainly can and should defend ourselves.

Regarding North Korea, I think, the message is more interesting. Because I did go back and checked previous messages exchanged between Chinese leaders and North Korean leaders, and this time I think it's different, because Chinese President Xi really emphasized the shared socialist ideology and the shared socialist values between North Korea and China. He also emphasized that both countries were socialist countries governed by communist parties. And he really commended North Korea for sticking to the socialist system. I think that's interesting, because, as international observers probably know, in recent years President Xi also strengthened socialist ideology domestically within China. So, I think, in addition to the mutual interest I referred to previously between the two countries, there is growing a common ideological value between the two countries. I think that will add to bilateral cooperation and certainly will add to Chinese sympathy to North Korea, not only on the nuclear issue, but more broadly.

Haenle. Thank you for that. Let's move to trilateral dynamics, starting with you, Alex. Many have argued that President Putin, when it comes to North Korea, defers to President Xi and China, perceiving that the Korean Peninsula is a region that falls more neatly under China's sphere of influence. Do you agree with that? And, secondly, how does Moscow, in your view, perceive its role in resolving the North Korea issue, and to what extent, if any, does Moscow defer to Beijing when responding to North Korea's nuclear ambitions?

Gabuev. I think that, first of all, Moscow is pretty realistic in estimating its ability to control and shape North Korean behavior. It knows that it doesn't have that much of a leverage. At the same time it still wants to be at the table, because of prestige considerations and because it's technically a permanent member of the UN Security Council. So, to be perceived as a great power and to sit at the table when one of the most consequential crises in international relations is being discussed and addressed is definitely of interest to the Kremlin, which is trying to make Russia great again.

At the same time you are right in saying that Moscow believes that the reasons for Beijing to be involved are far greater, because the stake for China is far greater than it is for Russia. Yes, proximity of Vladivostok and avoiding a conflict is important, but, again, Beijing is just next door to North Korea, and then whatever shorter or medium-range systems the US might deploy in Japan or South Korea, they would reach Beijing. So there is a far, far more at stake for China than it is for Russia. And then Beijing has bigger leverage.

But at the same time I think the level of Moscow's involvement and desire to help China to achieve its objectives with regard to North Korea is really different and depending on how much there is at stake in Beijing–Moscow relationship, and how deep that is, and how much Beijing is willing to pay Moscow in a way or to compensate Moscow for an extra effort to do something that Beijing cannot do itself, but wants Moscow to do. And I think what we saw, this “good cop, bad cop” routine in the run-up before Singapore Summit, where Beijing appeared to be willing to help Washington to address the North Korean issue, the trade war was not in the cards, back then North Korea seemed to be the major issue where Trump wanted Xi's help, and China appeared to be helpful. At the same time China has some of its core interests, that Tong Zhao has so eloquently outlined, and they needed to be defended, but Beijing couldn't afford to be very overt in pushing back against some of Trump's demand. So it was Russia which was doing that in the UN Security Council, advocating for both China and itself.

So, whether Moscow continues to do something for Beijing will be really determined by the state of Russia–China relationship going forward and by the state of Russia–US relationship going forward. And that's to be determined with the upcoming administration, because so far, with Trump in power, Russia believes that it has nothing to lose in US–Russia relationship,

because it's so terrible, and it's getting from bad to worse, that basically the upside is to improve relationship with China and to get more trade, more loans, more technology from the Chinese side. If there is something that Russia can do together with the United States, then probably the approach will be more balanced and more cautious the way it is now.

Haenle. And as you said, that will depend in large part on the outcome, next week, of the US presidential election, and we'll talk about that in a second, but before we do, I want to ask Tong Zhao a similar question. From your view, how does China interpret Russia's involvement in the North Korea challenge? And in addition to Russia, how China looks at Russia's role, how do you see more broadly Seoul and Tokyo, two other key players, how do they factor into the picture here as well?

Zhao. I think Alex has really excellently explained the China–Russia angle in the North Korean nuclear issue. I very much agree. As China–Russia overall relationship continues to improve, in fact recently President Putin said publicly that there is no ceiling to US–Russia cooperation, I think the trend will continue. China and Russia will get closer and will be waiting and able to cooperate even more substantially going forward. So I think they will support each other, both at UN and other places, to advance their very much shared interests on the Korean Peninsula. I think we will see a joint effort from the two countries to push back against US alliance in this region, including the deployment of more advanced missile defense assets on and around the Korean Peninsula.

I think Russia and China really worked hard to draft a roadmap for denuclearization a couple of years ago. I think, looking forward, this is a key effort that can be broadened to include more stakeholders. As I mentioned before, there is an internal debate within China about which path to choose regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons. And I think there is no strategic thinking here. People are basically reacting to new developments, and they are not thinking long-term about Chinese position on North Korea's nuclear status. I think many people, including very senior officials, they still are very reluctant to accept a permanent nuclear-capable North Korea. And they understand very well that nuclear North Korea will cause greater proliferation risks in South Korea, in Japan, and maybe other countries. Those are huge concerns for China. So they won't accept a nuclear North Korea, but they also haven't thought deeply of how to achieve a nuclear-free North Korea. Some Chinese scholars talked about a China-led approach to achieve nuclear-free North Korea, but there is no substance in that concept.

So I think the reason there is a lack of strategic thinking is because the attention was very much on the US–China troubles. So I think one way to draw greater Chinese attention to this issue, and also to stimulate greater and very necessary domestic debate, is to have a broader regional discussion on the issue of roadmap. That's key to coordinate positions and also to put real pressure on North Korea, to clarify North Korean position on what security and economic benefits it wants in order to get rid of nuclear weapons or to reduce nuclear weapons. I think that's one issue that greater regional coordination can happen. And Russia and China has played a key role in the early stage of this effort, and they can certainly lead this process in the near-term future.

Haenle. Tong Zhao, let me ask a quick follow-up. It's a question from Johannes Ahlefeldt, who is in the audience today, and he asks a question about whether or not nuclear developments in North Korea have the potential of prompting China to join Russia and the US in talks on the limitation of strategic nuclear arms.

Zhao. So far I don't think China is making a connection between the two issues. Although I think in theory there is certainly a connection there. One of the key drivers of American strategic missile defense program is American concern about growing North Korean nuclear threat. And the increasingly advanced American strategic missile defense, on the other hand, is the greatest external driver of China's nuclear buildup. So in order to stabilize the nuclear relationship between Beijing and Washington, somehow we need to contain the

continuous development of North Korea's nuclear weapons and therefore find a solution on the issue of American strategic missile defense.

So I think there is real need for US and China to discuss their dispute on missile defense and what role North Korea plays in this equation. Personally I think there are easy near-term steps to be taken. I have recommended US and China technical experts to conduct a joint study about the technical feasibility for the United States to develop a strategic missile defense network that can intercept North Korean ICBMs without serious effect to Chinese ICBMs. I think, that joint study, using open-source information, without any need to disclose classified military secrets, can be a useful confidence-building measure, so that US and China can stabilize their nuclear relations and therefore pave the way for arms control discussions, without being destabilized by developments regarding North Korea.

Haenle. Thank you. Alex, I want to just ask the same question to you, and very briefly your response in terms of developments in North Korea's nuclear program. Do you see any way for that to prompt discussion between China, Russia, and the US on limitation of strategic nuclear arms?

Gabuev. I think that the Russians want to have a broader conversation on various armed systems in Northeast Asia, leading to a kind of more comprehensive security mechanism that would not only cover the ICBMs, but will probably cover some short and medium-range missiles and maybe some other elements of strategic weapons, including cyber. I don't think that the Russians have a very clear blueprint on this, but that's the idea, and that's basically, if we are talking about the three-step plan that Moscow and Beijing have put forward like a broader conversation on arms control regional stability, is the step three.

The problem is that when you sit down with Russian diplomats, they say that these issues are very complicated, and bunching them together makes them even more complicated. Because we can have, probably, an agreement between the three great powers – Russia, China, and the US, and we can talk about bringing in various allies, like Russia wants France and UK to be part of the conversation, and then China has legitimate interest to bring India and Pakistan into conversation, because it doesn't want to be limited while other parties in the region are not limited by any kind of treaty. So it's manageable to have among great powers and their allies, it's very difficult to have this conversation with North Korea at the table.

That's one, and (b) I think that President Putin was pretty eloquent recently when he said: "We understand and we also want China to be part of this broader conversation, but at the same time why would you imagine China limiting its capabilities where there is still this huge gap between China's nuclear capabilities and the capabilities of Russia and the US?" So, probably only when China is at the same level with other great powers, it might be interested in entering these negotiations. And it's very kind of legitimate for him, and he says: "If the US wants them to be part of this serious conversation, they should find incentives to bring them to the table, but not kind of pointing their fingers at us and ask us to bring them to the negotiation table."

Haenle. Thank you. In the last few minutes here, we've had a number of questions about the impact of the upcoming US election and everything that we've just been talking about. Questions from Nicole Sukiyansans(?), as well as someone with the username Tschandrashekar, as well as a number of others. So I want in our last couple of minutes just to talk about that. And my question is to both of you, starting out: who do you think Kim Jong-un wants to win the US election and why? And let me start with Dr. Tong Zhao.

Zhao. I think Kim wants Trump's second term. He thinks Trump is easier to manipulate. Maybe part of reason Kim has refrained from conducting flight tests of long-range missiles over the last couple of years was because he still had hope that he could reach some interim deal with Trump, so that he would only give up a little of his nuclear program in exchange for some substantial economic sanction relief.

Haenle. Do you expect some sort of provocation from North Korea in either case, if Trump is elected or Biden is elected, early on after the inauguration?

Zhao. Given what North Korea paraded on October 10th, North Korea has a long-term plan to build and maintain a very credible nuclear deterrent capability. North Korea needs to have a bigger ICBM and eventually to have solid-fueled ICBMs. And that requires flight tests. So North Korea has an internal technical need to do flight tests, the question is only about timing. I think if Biden is elected, there is a greater chance that North Korea will use this opportunity to both fulfill its technical need to build a credible deterrent, but also to send a strong political signal to Biden that time is not on the American side, it's better for the US to soften its position in the denuclearization negotiations.

Haenle. Thank you. And in our final minute, Alex, I'm going to give the last question to you. Do you agree with Tong Zhao that Kim Jong-un wants Trump re-elected? And secondly, what is the impact if we see a President Biden, from your perspective?

Gabuev. I agree with Tong Zhao that probably Donald Trump is the person that Kim regime prefers in the White House. And for Russia, if Biden is elected, we are going to see whether that's a renewal of Obama's approach to North Korea, and the new administration will be skillful in trying to compartmentalize all the various crises and maintain productive cooperation with China and Russia on North Korean issue while competing on many other fronts. And it really depends on which type and shape of competition the future Biden team will see with regard to China. It might be a kind of bolder, more strategic, but less confrontational approach than the recent one we've seen from team Trump. And that also covers Russia, because if there is a serious conversation on not improving, not making another reset with Russia, but putting some guardrails around the nature of competition with Russia, and trying to stabilize the relationship at the point where it is, that might lead to Russia not slipping deeper into China's embrace, and deepening ties with China, but not doing steps that will really irritate Washington along. So we will see a lot of continuity in Russia's approach towards North Korea rather than just 100 percent siding with whatever Beijing suggests both Moscow and Beijing should do.

Haenle. Well, we could go on much longer, and there's a lot to talk about. This has been a fascinating discussion, and I want to thank both of you for sharing your perspectives on these issues. I can tell from the questions, and I apologize for not being able to get to a lot of the questions, but there's a huge amount of interest in this issue, and I suspect that will continue in the future and would like to invite at some point soon Alex Gabuev and Dr. Tong Zhao to come back, and maybe even invite our Carnegie colleague Chung Min Lee from South Korea, to get a South Korean perspective on these issues, and so, hopefully, we can organize something like that over the next few months. But thank you both very much, and everyone watching, I hope you enjoyed the discussion and the opportunity to ask questions. If we did not get to your question, be sure to tune in next time we hold a live episode, which I hope will be shortly. Thank you for tuning in today to the China in the World podcast. Please be sure to check out all of Carnegie's work, certainly the Carnegie-Tsinghua's website, but Carnegie Moscow as well, and have a wonderful day, and stay safe. Thank you very much.