

TESTING THE POSSIBILITIES OF RENEWED COOPERATION WITH CHINA ON NORTH KOREA POLICY

JONATHAN D. POLLACK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper assesses North Korea's nuclear and missile development under the Trump Administration; the next administration's priorities in constraining North Korea's strategic goals; and whether renewed cooperation with China can contribute to these efforts.

During his tenure, President Trump hoped that a personal relationship with Kim Jong-un might convince the North Korean leader to pursue different policies toward the United States. Though the administration was able to secure China's support for heightened Security Council sanctions, it largely sought to circumvent existing diplomatic and policy approaches. Trump sought to relegate Beijing to a sideline role on North Korea policy, reflecting the severe deterioration in U.S.-China relations over the past four years.

The Trump Administration's failure to achieve any of its declared denuclearization objectives requires careful reassessment of credible policy goals, the mechanisms needed to advance them, and steps to be avoided. Among U.S. policy priorities, rebuilding coordination with U.S. allies in Seoul and Tokyo is the most important priority. Reestablishing policy channels with China cannot be safely assumed, but this effort also warrants careful exploration.

North Korea's ability to sustain pursuit of a fully operational weapons program is not in the strategic interest of either Washington or Beijing. This makes renewed cooperation on the nuclear issue (or the inability to achieve new understandings) an important test case of whether both sides can overcome the acute policy setbacks of recent years. As long as the bilateral relationship hovers close to an adversarial level, the incentives for leaders in either country to resume cooperation will remain very limited.

Should the U.S. again decide to rebuild institutional mechanisms with China, there are three primary dialogue levels that warrant particular attention: (1) intelligence sharing on North Korea—arguably among the hardest of targets; (2) policy-level coordination drawing on earlier approaches that (at least for a time) generated meaningful results, with a reconfigured six party process offering relevant precedents; and (3) deliberations among military operators, with particular attention to crisis management. Such mechanisms will also improve the possibilities for effective alliance management as the ROK approaches its next presidential election in 2022. None of these exchanges guarantee easy success: fully verifiable constraints on the North's nuclear advances will be a long-term process, ultimately depending on internal transitions in the DPRK that are not discernible at present. But without diligent efforts between the U.S. and China the strategic environment on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia as a whole could become much more severe, to the pronounced detriment of all countries neighboring North Korea.

THE PROBLEM

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapon and ballistic missiles first became a major US policy concern under George H.W. Bush. Its importance has grown immeasurably over the past three decades. All four presidents since Bush 41 have tried to impede North Korea's nuclear weapons program, but none have succeeded. Agreements and understandings with Pyongyang have rarely outlasted each administration. North Korea has repeatedly protected its nuclear and missile assets, opting to run out the clock and await the next president.

This pattern is again evident in late 2020, but (compared to the outset of the Trump Administration) the strategic circumstances are now far more

worrisome. Despite grievous economic problems and the imposition of UN Security Council sanctions, the North has made major breakthroughs in nuclear and missile development and sustained its progress toward a fully operational deterrent. These included the detonation of a thermonuclear weapon and three successful tests of longer-range missiles able to reach American territory.

Though the North has not resumed tests of its most capable systems since late 2017, Pyongyang's commitment to nuclear and missile development is unabated. The appearance at a major military parade in October 2020 of the world's largest, liquid fueled road mobile ICBM and a solid fuel SLBM highlight North Korea's longer-term objectives. It is intent developing operational nuclear capabilities that can threaten all of Northeast Asia as well as the U.S. mainland. These capabilities will directly affect the vital security interests of all neighboring states, including China.

The next administration will face policy choices under strategic circumstances very different from those at the outset of the Trump Administration. Policy cooperation with China must be among the choices the U.S. needs to weigh carefully, based on the future behavior of North Korea and on the directions of U.S.-China relations in the next administration.

THE LEGACY OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

The U.S. policy missteps of the past four years cannot be undone, but they necessitate careful review.

From his initial weeks in office, President Trump was deeply involved with the nuclear issue. When Pyongyang accelerated its testing programs in early 2017, Trump threatened the preemptive use of force; deployed U.S. strategic bombers close to North Korean territory; and repeatedly belittled Kim Jong-un, all with minimal attention to the risks for the ROK and Japan. Kim quickly responded in kind, generating fears of an uncontrollable crisis that for a time threatened to envelop the entire region and the United States.

In March 2018, Trump abruptly shifted course. Without deliberation among his senior advisers, he agreed to meet with Kim Jong-un. The summit

occurred in Singapore three months later. This was the first time a serving U.S. president had met with his North Korean counterpart, though Bill Clinton had contemplated meeting with Kim Jong-il at the end of his second term, only to demur during his final weeks in office.

Trump opted to ignore nearly all established diplomatic and security tools for addressing the nuclear issue. His approach would entail neither carrots nor sticks, and instead he would deal directly and very personally with a young leader seeking affirmation and validation. Trump also recognized that a meeting with Kim would generate a global television audience as well as enhance his domestic political standing. Finally, he believed that a face to face meeting would alter Northeast Asia's political and strategic map, largely dispensing with the complexity, detail, and tedium of protracted negotiations. A personal relationship with Kim would also minimize the need to consult with the states most directly threatened by North Korea.

However, Trump had few discernible "asks" of Kim. He instead offered unilateral concessions about future U.S. military exercises and indicated he would be willing to sign an end of war declaration. A video hinting at U.S. economic assistance resembled little more than a preliminary real estate prospectus. Most important, Trump barely mentioned denuclearization, or even how to define it. In essence, he signaled to Kim that relations with the United States would be largely cost free.

Trump offered the young leader personal validation that neither his grandfather nor his father were able to achieve with a serving U.S. president. At least in appearance, he was offering Kim Jong-un an alternative to near-total dependence on China. Kim very likely saw Trump's disparagement of U.S. military exercises on the peninsula as a signal that the U.S. was willing to reduce or eliminate its security commitments to South Korea and (prospectively) to Japan. He appeared to conclude that Trump had political powers inside the U.S. comparable to his own in the DPRK. Kim saw no need to delegate negotiating authority to any of his subordinates, rendering largely irrelevant any U.S. efforts to advance denuclearization. Kim and other North Korean officials also voiced strong objections to the UNSC sanctions regime, which has since become much leakier.

Trump's policy overreach in Singapore collapsed during his second meeting with Kim, which took place in Hanoi the following February. Kim proposed a trade between the lifting of economic sanctions and a North Korean pledge to shutter its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, which the US deemed ambiguous, unverifiable and therefore unacceptable. This resulted in an abrupt end to the meeting in Hanoi.

Kim viewed his shattered expectations for a major breakthrough with the U.S. as a personal humiliation. Notwithstanding a third meeting between the two leaders at the DMZ four months later, U.S.-North Korea relations have remained frozen ever since. Kim and Trump have regularly exchanged flattering personal letters, but the absence of detailed negotiations remains telling. Nuclear consultations among the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan have continued at a desultory pace. Any discussions between the U.S. and China have dwindled to near zero, reflecting the acute deterioration in Washington-Beijing relations.

By the fall of 2019, Kim Jong-un stated that North Korea was no longer obligated to uphold the missile testing moratorium that it had announced in 2018. Pyongyang undertook several tests of shorter range missiles able to reach regional targets and also tested rocket engines, quite possibly intended for use in the ICBM displayed in the October 2020 military parade. At least as important, it also continued production of fissile material, with annual weapons potential estimated in the upper single digits.

North Korea's policy stance thus remains unchanged: it insists on explicit recognition as the world's ninth nuclear armed state. It is unprepared to negotiate limits on its nuclear weapons potential, let alone forego any of the weapons in its current inventory, variously estimated at between 30 to 60 weapons, though some estimates range as high as 100. Without a comprehensive accounting and verification system, the actual number remains unknown.

Despite Trump's grandiose claim of "solving" the nuclear issue, conditions are more worrying than what he inherited from President Obama. Its missile testing has not exceeded the peak levels of 2016 and 2017, but tests of lesser range systems resumed in 2019 and 2020. More ominously, tests

of its newest systems could loom, possibly coinciding with the onset of a new administration in the U.S. These would directly violate a "red line" implied in Trump's statements, and that China appeared to share. Any resumption of testing and other escalatory actions early in the Biden administration would also represent a clear opportunity to test the possibilities for renewed coordination with Beijing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

Despite the severe deterioration in bilateral relations, nuclear non-proliferation remains a vital issue where American and Chinese interests still largely align. As two of the five declared nuclear weapons states under the Non Proliferation Treaty, neither has an interest in consenting to the emergence of additional nuclear powers. The DPRK's immediate proximity to China gives this issue particular salience for Beijing: any threat of renewed military hostilities on the peninsula would immediately implicate both Washington and Beijing.

However, adversarial relations between the U.S. and China have made cooperation on the Korean nuclear issue much more difficult. This does not reflect Chinese affinity with or endorsement of North Korea's nuclear goals. Despite their interconnected histories, a long common border, and the North's extraordinary economic dependence on China, the Kim dynasty has long sought to avoid subordination to China, and on multiple occasions has openly defied Beijing.

China's damage limiting approach seeks normal relations with both Pyongyang and Seoul, hoping to prevent North Korea from undermining China's core economic and security objectives in Northeast Asia. A fully realized North Korean weapons capability would represent a strategic disaster for Beijing, especially if Japan and the ROK should then explore nuclear programs of their own. Some observers posit that China's longer-term goal is to displace the United States from its predominant security position in Northeast Asia, but North Korea's continued nuclear and missile advances would reinforce the U.S. role, not undermine it.

Other than pro forma exhortations for the US and North Korea to pursue a "dual freeze" proposal (i.e., a halt in US-ROK military exercises in exchange for North Korea deferring further weapons development), China has never put forward larger

ideas of its own. It has also made repeated efforts to coax the North to open its isolated, moribund economy. Despite the improvement in China's relations with North Korea during 2018 and 2019, these do not prefigure resumption of China's commitments under the 1961 treaty. Shared animosities toward the US have drawn China and North Korea together for tactical reasons, but they are not evidence of deeper strategic congruence.

Quite possibly, Trump envisaged his personal relationship with Kim Jong-un as a way to deny China a major role in Korean affairs. However, China's immediate proximity to the peninsula; its economic centrality to both Korean states; and its enduring strategic interests in Northeast Asia are indisputable facts. Rather than marginalizing China, Trump's overtures to Kim Jong-un had the opposite effect, enabling Kim to deal more openly with China without risking his relationship with the United States.

Immediately before the Singapore summit, Kim paid his first ever visit to China, with Kim demonstrating uncharacteristic if symbolic deference to Xi Jinping. This accommodation has continued during four subsequent meetings, including Xi Jinping's state visit to Pyongyang in June 2019. China's loan of a Boeing 747 aircraft for Kim's flight to Singapore reflected North Korea's continued dependence on Beijing. But it also signaled that Xi was prepared to facilitate the summit, provided that it did not undermine Chinese interests.

Beijing undoubtedly prefers the continuation of the North Korean regime, but it reveals little about steps it might undertake to help sustain its neighbor. Large unanswered questions persist in Beijing's North Korea policy, including China's assessment of the system's survivability; whether Beijing believes that the ultimate US policy objective is the end of the regime; the risks of disruptive internal change in the North; and the consequences of peninsular unification for Chinese interests, independent of how unification might occur. The future of the nuclear program hangs over all these questions.

However, China remains very reluctant to disclose how it might respond to a major change in political or military circumstances. In addition there is no mutually acceptable formula among China, the ROK, and the U.S. encouraging Pyongyang to move toward less adversarial relations with all three

states. These issues must be revisited by the next administration, lest a severe peninsular crisis break out, for which no one is prepared.

North Korea's leaders persist in the belief that their system's survival depends on remaining apart from all others. Pyongyang fears that opening doors to the outside world would undermine the Kim dynasty's internal control, and possibly trigger major instability. Pyongyang has announced plans for the 8th National Congress of the Korean Worker's Party in January 2021, where it will reaffirm its pursuit of an autonomous economic strategy. The timing of the meeting with the inauguration of the next US president seems no coincidence.

China (fearing the possible reverberations for its own security) remains unwilling to bring the full weight of its power to bear against its recalcitrant neighbor. It sees this as a risk-limiting strategy. Despite China's growing power and assertiveness elsewhere in Asia, passivity and risk aversion remains its default option with North Korea.

THE ROAD AHEAD

With the election of Joe Biden, a return to a disciplined approach to North Korea seems very likely, with immediate implications for U.S.-China relations. Inhibiting North Korea's unconstrained pursuit of fully realized nuclear and missile capabilities must remain a core concern, including responses to any additional weapons testing. A reaffirmation and rebuilding of the U.S.-ROK alliance, including realistic approaches to operational control and burden sharing, will be essential. A parallel commitment to triangular political and security relations among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan must also be part of this process.

Specific security assurances to China on limiting U.S. forces to a "peninsula only" role will also require careful deliberation. At present, there are no meaningful discussions between the U.S. and China on stability and security in Korea. Beijing repeatedly characterizes the U.S.-South Korea alliance as "a vestige of the Cold War," arguing that its continuation perpetuates peninsular division and precludes a transformation of the regional security order.

Beijing argues that U.S. strategic intent on the peninsula is primarily directed against China rather

than North Korea. In parallel fashion, many U.S. observers contend that China's preeminent policy goal is to weaken and ultimately invalidate the U.S.-ROK alliance, without addressing North Korea's malevolence towards the South and Japan and its possession of nuclear weapons. Some argue that North Korea remains a reserve strategic asset for Beijing, thereby preventing single minded U.S. attention on China.

These arguments fail to consider the implications of a fully realized North Korean nuclear weapons capability for the interests of both the U.S. and China. During his state visit to Pyongyang, Xi Jinping spoke about realization of "permanent peace in the region." But Kim Jong-un continues to insist that the North's "reliable and effective self-defense nuclear deterrence ...[guarantees] the security and future of our state...forever." Even tacit Chinese acquiescence to such a strategic future raises very worrisome concerns, and should be an issue of utmost concern in any renewed deliberations between Washington and Beijing.

The next administration must avoid a repeat of the blunders and mismanagement of North Korea policy over the past four years. Any future US policy should neither be standalone nor improvisational, and a

reaffirmation and strengthening of America's core alliances will be essential. But a parallel approach to China could prove equally crucial. Compared to all other states, Beijing has a greater ability to affect North Korea's future, and it also has at least a partial understanding of Pyongyang's strategies, vulnerabilities, and leadership calculations.

Any renewed approach to China will have to weigh the damage to U.S.-China relations over the past four years. A recommitment to cooperation on the singularly intractable North Korea issue would be an indicator of Beijing's readiness to collaborate on an issue of singular importance to both countries. Contrarily, a distanced or adversarial stance by Beijing should sober the U.S. about future strategic possibilities in Northeast Asia.

The immediate tasks for U.S. policy in Korea are to restore order and predictability in US-ROK relations; to reaffirm U.S. extended deterrence guarantees to South Korea and Japan; and then to assess whether Sino-American understandings about North Korea are realistic or feasible. There will be no easy escape from questions that have burdened Northeast Asia and the United States for decades, and China cannot be excluded from this process.