



## [After Trump Series 2] Prospects for U.S.–South Korea Cooperation in an Era of U.S.–China Strategic Competition

### China's Gambit on the Korean Peninsula

Jung H. Pak

SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies  
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

China is seeking to weave engagement with North and South Korea to try to increase its influence over the Korean Peninsula, including on the North Korean nuclear issue, and weaken the perception of Washington's relevance in the region as it seeks to establish its regional dominance. Chinese president Xi Jinping almost certainly sees opportunities to make progress on those goals, given the stalemate in U.S.-North Korea nuclear talks and the significant fissures that have opened in U.S.-South Korea ties under the Trump and Moon administrations.

As U.S.-China relations continue to worsen, dampening Beijing's appetite for cooperation on key security issues like North Korean denuclearization, Xi's assertiveness in pursuing China's priorities on the Korean Peninsula has the potential to embolden, not rein in, Kim Jong Un, reduce Washington's role and influence in Northeast Asia, and coerce Seoul to accommodate Beijing's policy goals or risk punishment. Moreover, China's heft in influencing the security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula has grown, as a result of its rapprochement with North Korea since 2018, a convergence of interests among Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul, the necessity of its compliance in making sanctions work, and the Trump administration's haphazard approach that has weakened alliances and eroded U.S. credibility in the region.

#### Warming ties to Pyongyang, after a rough start

After seven years of icy ties during which high-level exchanges came to a near standstill, Beijing and Pyongyang have jumpstarted robust diplomacy, trading high-level party and military delegations and encouraging the growth of economic cooperation. From 2018-2019, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un met

five times, including Xi's visit to Pyongyang in June 2019, the first time a Chinese head of state visited North Korea since 2005.

According to Chinese state media, Xi pledged unwavering friendship, [vowed](#) to “keep close exchanges with Chairman Kim, in order to consolidate political mutual trust,” and offered “assistance that can guarantee DPRK's appropriate international security.” As Xi [stressed](#) the importance of maintain peace on the Peninsula, Kim, in turn, appropriately flattered his guest, stating, “My country hopes to learn from China's experience in developing the economy and bettering people's lives,” reviving the as yet unrequited Chinese desire for Kim to adopt economic reform.

Pageantry and smooth diplomatic talk aside, bilateral relations had been tense in the years prior, as Kim Jong Un—who came to power in December 2011 upon the death of his father Kim Jong Il—placed a higher priority on accelerating the North's nuclear weapons program and consolidating power, than on building ties to Beijing. Seeking to show toughness to internal and external audiences, Kim ratcheted up tension with Seoul, [threatening](#) to attack the South Korean presidential Blue House, [firing](#) artillery around islands in the disputed maritime border area and conducting numerous ballistic missiles [tests](#), earning international condemnation and United Nations sanctions.

Kim tested China's tolerance for his aggressiveness, as his actions invited stronger U.S.-South Korea ties and coordination, including military shows of force, contrary to Beijing's desire for stability and a weakening of the U.S. presence in East Asia. To add insult to injury and to punish Beijing for its support of U.N. sanctions, Kim conducted ballistic missile tests before Xi's convening of priority Chinese events such as Xi's first [summit](#) with Trump and the [Belt and Road Forum](#) in May 2017, and detonated a nuclear device during the Chinese leader's hosting of the annual summit of the BRICs countries in September 2017. After the September nuclear test, one prominent Chinese academic [said](#) that it was “a slap in the face for China.”

## Beijing's motivations

Yet Xi's efforts to grow closer to Kim, despite the latter's highly provocative actions in late 2017 and disregard for China's preferences, reveal Beijing's longstanding preferred approach for dealing with North Korea, one that places a premium on stability, puts off denuclearization to a distant future—or perhaps even accommodate North Korea's nuclear weapons status, as former U.S. diplomat Evans Revere has [suggested](#)—and stresses economic inducements rather than pressure. Using the momentum of summitry that was unleashed by the unprecedented meetings between President Trump and Kim Jong Un, and the latter's unilateral moratorium on nuclear and long-range ballistic missile testing, Beijing has sought to amplify its call for reduction of sanctions pressure on Pyongyang, putting it at

odds with U.S. policy.

Since the summits began in 2018, Beijing has teamed up with Moscow at the United Nations Security Council to [stymie](#) U.S. attempts to implement sanctions measures and pushed repeatedly for easing sanctions against North Korea “given the positive developments,” even amid vigorous U.S. calls for Beijing to abide by its obligations and crack down on North Korean [efforts](#) to circumvent sanctions, including through ship-to-ship transfers of oil at sea.

Beijing’s near-term motivation was driven by its desire to avoid being marginalized in any U.S.-North Korea talks and distrust of President Trump’s “fire and fury” approach in 2017 that sparked fears in China about North Korean instability and possible military conflict, reinforcing Chinese scholar Zhao Tong’s [assessment](#) that, “For China, the U.S. is always the top geostrategic concern, the top threat.” Xi also probably sought to remind Kim of his dependence on China and try to rein in the young leader’s aggressive proclivities by encouraging a focus on economic development.

As the initial euphoria at the prospect of rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang has devolved into a frustrating, all-too-familiar stalemate, Xi has also grabbed the opportunity to project China’s regional leadership, and more specifically, its centrality in managing the Korean Peninsula. The downward trajectory of U.S.-China relations, a deadlock in U.S.-North Korea nuclear negotiations, and Washington’s struggle to contain the coronavirus pandemic has probably fueled Xi’s confidence in his ability to widen perceived gaps in the U.S.-South Korea alliance. In trying to draw Kim closer, Xi is seeking to increase his influence not just in Pyongyang, but also in Seoul.

## Beijing’s view of Seoul

While Xi has visited Pyongyang in 2019, he has yet to go to Seoul (as of November 2020), suggesting that Beijing is placing a higher priority on building ties to Pyongyang and that tension remains after South Korea agreed in 2016 to deploy THAAD, the U.S. missile defense system, in response to North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Beijing opposed the THAAD deployment as a threat to China’s security, and in retaliation, implemented an unofficial economic [boycott](#) against South Korea, which cost the smaller country \$7.5 billion in losses in 2017 alone, compared to China’s self-inflicted losses of \$880 million.

Beijing has long seen the U.S.-South Korea alliance as a destabilizing factor in the region, a relic of the Cold War, and a threat to China’s interests and security. That perspective has driven China’s reluctance to apply too much pressure on North Korea, for fear of inducing Pyongyang to lash out, thereby inviting closer U.S.-South Korean ties or triggering a North Korean collapse, and prompting South Korea and Japan to bolster their military capabilities.

Thus, despite various South Korean attempts to strengthen strategic cooperation with China over the past two decades, motivated by what Korea expert Scott Snyder has [called](#) “the holy grail of Korean unification that Seoul has sought for over two decades” and the critical role that China plays in that process, Chinese leaders have repeatedly disappointed South Korea, proving itself an unreliable strategic partner. Beijing blamed Seoul’s hardline policies for the 2010 North Korean attacks that killed dozens of South Korean sailors, deflected blame away from Kim Jong Un after nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and sought to water down international punishment for the regime’s provocative actions. As Chinese scholar Wang Junsheng [explained](#), “China defines its role and responsibility as alleviating North Korea’s vulnerability and insecurity through a stable relationship with Pyongyang, in light of the imbalanced geopolitical structure.”

### Trying to drive a wedge in the U.S.–South Korea alliance

Even as Beijing sought to punish Seoul for its alliance with Washington, Chinese leaders saw mounting signs of deepening U.S.-South Korea cleavages. President Trump has repeatedly [criticized](#) the alliance, threatened to end the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, [blustered](#) about military action against North Korea, without regard to the potentially devastating impact on South Korea, demanded an exorbitant 400% increase in host nation support for U.S. troops stationed on the Peninsula, and [hinted](#) at a desire to withdraw U.S. troops.

Although the Moon administration generally has tried to smooth over disagreements with Washington—for example, renegotiating the free trade agreement and downplaying the stalemate in host nation support discussions and generally recalibrating policies to match President Trump’s preferences—Seoul has been willing to risk Washington’s ire to advance inter-Korean progress. Moon entered the presidency in 2017 vowing to engage with North Korea, arguing that pressure and sanctions have not worked, and that [South Korea should](#) “embrace the North Korean people to achieve peaceful reunification one day.”

The progressive Moon has [stressed](#) the importance of Seoul as the “protagonists” in Korean Peninsula-related issues, and the importance of a declaration to end the Korean War—which ended in a military armistice agreement—to advance denuclearization. President Moon’s eagerness and unwavering push for inter-Korean economic projects has generated concern among Trump administration officials who have stressed the importance of maintaining sanctions pressure on Kim to begin negotiations.

As cracks are widening in U.S. and South Korea’s views about how to deal with North Korea,

Beijing's approach and Seoul's interest in improving inter-Korean ties have converged. In the aftermath of the THAAD dispute, Xi Jinping and Moon Jae-in met five times, most recently in [December 2019](#) in Beijing, reflecting the latter's desire to stabilize the relationship, seeing Xi's support for his more concessionary approach to Pyongyang as vital to making progress with Pyongyang during his single five-year term in office. When Chinese FM Wang Yi visited Seoul that month for the first time in four years, Moon asked for "continuous support from the Chinese government until the new era of a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula opens." Wang [said](#) China would continue to play a "constructive role" to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue.

Xi Jinping probably sees promising space to strengthen calls for scaling back or canceling U.S.-South Korea military exercises and hamper missile defense cooperation to maintain the (illusion of) peace, given Kim Jong Un's willingness to improve ties to Beijing and Kim's relative restraint and Moon's support for relaxing sanction and ongoing push for a peace declaration, as well as the Trump administration's downplaying of North Korea's weapons development and short-range ballistic missile testing.

China's leaders also probably perceive the Moon administration's moderate tone and responses, despite the Kim regime's insults—the blowing up of the North-South liaison office and the gruesome [murder](#) of a South Korean official in the disputed maritime border area—as an opportunity to drive a wedge between the U.S. and South Korea. As China expert Bo Zhiyue [noted](#), "A more peaceful Korean peninsula would significantly undermine the justification for the U.S. military presence."

### **A wary North and South Korea likely to limit Beijing's influence**

As of late 2020, China's ties to both Koreas are stable, though tensions exist under the surface. While there appears to be a troubling convergence of interests between Beijing, Pyongyang, and Seoul, mutual suspicion and fundamental differences in national priorities will limit China's ability to press Pyongyang and Seoul to yield to its preferences.

For Kim Jong Un, his primary goal vis-à-vis China is to maintain independence of action. Towards this end, he probably will continue to advance and test his nuclear weapons program, use the perception of his improved relationship with Xi to amplify his message that he will not denuclearize without "security guarantees" from the United States, and impede coordination on sanctions implementation. Kim probably recognizes that his ability to disrupt regional peace and stability—through threats and weapons development—and alternating provocation and diplomacy with Washington afford him leverage over his Chinese counterpart.

For now, Kim Jong Un is cozying up to both Xi Jinping and tending to his relationship with President Trump. On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War in October, Kim paid his respects at the North's cemetery for Chinese soldiers who died during the conflict and [visited](#) the gravesite of Mao Anying, Mao Zedong's eldest son. In June, an article in one of North Korea's state-run newspapers [defended](#) Beijing's crackdowns in Hong Kong and Taiwan against U.S. criticism, and in May, Kim [congratulated](#) Xi for his "success" in controlling the coronavirus pandemic and wished his counterpart "good health."

Regarding the United States, North Korean media in early October reported that Kim [wished](#) President Trump and the First Lady a speedy recovery when the two were diagnosed with COVID-19. Later that month, in a speech at the massive military parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of Korean Workers' Party, Kim [reiterated](#) his commitment to his nuclear weapons program but refrained from making critical remarks about the U.S., suggesting that he is seeking to keep his options open. The Moon administration is similarly trying to balance its relationships with China and the United States, satisfying neither in the process. But wooing Beijing's cooperation has been growing in importance for Seoul, as inter-Korean interactions had come to a halt in late 2018 and U.S.-North Korean talks shut down after the February 2019 Hanoi summit, with a short, but unsuccessful U.S.-North Korea working-level [meeting](#) in October 2019. In a dramatic show of its frustration with Seoul, the Kim regime in June 2020 [destroyed](#) the joint liaison office that had been a shiny symbol of a new era of inter-Korean cooperation.

Yet while Moon's high priority on inter-Korean progress will continue to [drive](#) Seoul's relationship with Beijing, he almost certainly recognizes the necessity of maintaining the alliance with the United States. China's long history of shielding North Korea, its unofficial boycott over THAAD, and Beijing's increasing willingness to use coercion to test the limits of the U.S.-South Korea alliance amid its own deteriorating relations with Washington probably factor into Moon's assessments about the limits of partnering with China.

The Moon administration's suspicions are reflected in public opinion polls, which show the low esteem South Koreans have for their much larger neighbor. According to a recent [Pew Research Center poll](#), an overwhelming majority of South Koreans interviewed in 2020 viewed Xi with deep suspicion: 83% said they have no confidence in him to do the right thing regarding world affairs. The [Chicago Council on Global Affairs polling](#) from 2019 indicated that about 14% of South Koreans perceived China as a reliable future partner, compared to 33% in 2016 before the THAAD episode. Finally, a survey of over 2000 South Koreans conducted in late 2019 by the [Carnegie](#) Endowment for

International Peace found that only 26.9% believed that China would be a good partner in reunification, although 61% said China should have a role in advancing reunification, indicating the uneasy existence of mistrust and dependence in the relationship.

## Implications for the U.S.–South Korea alliance

In the near to medium term, Beijing is likely to seek to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, even if it means putting off the issue of North Korea’s denuclearization to the distant future. To do so, Chinese leaders probably will emphasize the need for “security guarantees,” relaxation of sanctions implementation, and discourage U.S. or South Korean actions—such as military drills or criticism of the North’s human rights violations—that have the potential to trigger North Korean ire, but which also threaten China’s interests. Moreover, to mollify Kim Jong Un, China since late 2018 has been [easing](#) trade restrictions, to the [frustration](#) of U.S. and the United Nations officials who have been trying to keep sanctions pressure on North Korea.

Meanwhile, Chinese leaders probably will aim to channel South Korea’s desire for inter-Korean progress and the Moon administration’s desire to seek China’s support for its pro-engagement strategy toward advancing China’s own objective of reducing U.S. credibility and military presence on the Korean Peninsula. Judging from Xi and Kim’s [positive comments](#) about the shared history between China and North Korea on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China’s participation in the Korean War to help Kim Il Sung repel the U.S. “imperialist invaders,” Beijing might be looking to use the perception of strong ties to Kim Jong Un to build its credibility as Seoul’s only interlocutor with Pyongyang.

Moreover, as the U.S. continues to struggle with mounting coronavirus infections, China and South Korea have been [opening up](#) business travel between their countries to reinvigorate their economies and Xi continues to dangle the prospect of a visit to Seoul this year. Indeed, it would be in Seoul’s interest to stabilize and rebuild ties to Beijing, given the [Lowy Institute’s assessment](#) that “China’s fast economic rebound from COVID-19 will widen the power differentials between itself and the rest of the region.”

The sharpening of U.S.-China tension might make it more attractive for China’s leaders to start thinking about the potential geopolitical value of North Korea to support China’s regional ambitions, in part because Kim Jong Un’s tactical moves keep the U.S. and South Korea playing defense. And given the U.S. ongoing struggles to rein in the coronavirus and the attendant deterioration of the economy, as well as the bruising presidential election season, China’s leaders might be anticipating that North Korea will not be on the top of Washington’s agenda in the coming year, possibly fueling their belief that they can keep chipping away at U.S. credibility on Korea issues. As China expert

Alice Ekman [observed](#), China's "weight" on Korea issues is significant given its alliance relationship with Pyongyang and the necessity of China's cooperation on sanctions implementation. China's heft has only grown as its relations with North Korea relations grow stronger and South Korea continues to push for a peace regime and pursues a balancing approach with the United States.

But Beijing undoubtedly recognizes that the success of its posture toward Pyongyang—and Seoul's support for it—is dependent on the absence of strategic provocations from the Kim regime. Ironically, Kim Jong Un, having validated that Beijing will not abandon North Korea despite its three ICBM tests and massive nuclear test in 2017, and perceiving a lack of international and regional unity on applying pressure on his regime, might be more emboldened to return to risky, aggressive actions, including attacks against South Korea. He might further calculate that he can then play off the U.S. against China through an abrupt about-face to a charm offensive to defuse tension and mitigate punishment for his actions.

A by-product of such a scenario is the marginalization of South Korea, which remains reliant on the U.S. and China to advocate for its interests. The tension between the South Korean progressive government's support for engagement and its alliance with the United States could grow starker, and further undermine a unified, coordinated effort on North Korean denuclearization. It would also provide a bigger space for Kim to make further advancements in his nuclear weapons program, evade sanctions, and engage in proliferation activities. Meanwhile, China might hamper inter-Korean rapprochement given its fears about a reunified Korea that is aligned with the U.S., a possibility that should give Seoul serious pause about how far it can go in trusting Beijing to broker peace on the Peninsula.

But it is premature to conclude that Beijing's noncooperation on sanctions and North Korean denuclearization is a foregone conclusion. Chinese leaders are almost certainly aware of the volatility of the North Korean nuclear situation and their limited ability to control Kim's actions. Thus, Beijing calibrates aid and pressure on Pyongyang to keep it afloat while trying to discourage aggressive, destabilizing behavior.

In order to align the strategic interest of Beijing and Seoul in a unified regional and global effort on North Korean denuclearization, Washington should pursue a multilateral approach, rather than the unilateralism that has marked the Trump administration and achieved little more than hollow summits, while alienating key players in the region.

To that end, Washington should consider initiating and regularizing a trilateral dialogue with Beijing and Seoul designed to emphasize common interests, acknowledge differences, and limit Pyongyang's ability to drive wedges among the capitals.

First, the trilateral group should affirm the goal of denuclearizing North Korea and the critical need for robust sanctions implementation to prevent proliferation activities and to ensure that Kim Jong Un is not funneling more resources into his nuclear weapons program.

Second, the parties should develop a roadmap for negotiations that outlines not just the sticks, but also the carrots that would be provided to North Korea if it takes steps toward verifiable denuclearization. Such consultations might help allay China's fears about the destabilizing impact of pressure measures and encourage Beijing to use insights from this mechanism to message Pyongyang, while providing some reasonable assurances to North Korea on the sustainability of these commitments. Related to the above, the U.S., China, and South Korea should study how economic engagement and partnerships, within the strictures of the sanctions regime, might be used to elevate people-to-people ties, increase information flow into the North, alleviate humanitarian concerns, and help to integrate North Korea into the regional economy.

Finally, a commitment to inter-Korean progress should be baked into the trilateral discussions to demonstrate to Pyongyang the importance of reducing military tensions with Seoul, rather than ignoring and sidelining South Korea.

■ **Jung H. Pak** is a senior fellow and the SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies at Brookings Institution's Center for East Asia Policy Studies. She received her doctorate from Columbia University in U.S. history. Her research interests include the national security challenges facing the United States and East Asia, including North Korea's weapons of mass destruction capabilities, the regime's domestic and foreign policy calculus, internal stability, and inter-Korean ties. She is also focused on developing interdisciplinary forums to bolster regional dialogue on counterterrorism, nonproliferation, cybersecurity, and climate change. Her recent publications include *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator*.

■ Typeset by: Juwon Seo, Research Associate

Inquiries: 02-2277-1683 (ext. 206) [jwseo@eai.or.kr](mailto:jwseo@eai.or.kr)

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The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoup 04548, South Korea  
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684  
Email [eai@eai.or.kr](mailto:eai@eai.or.kr) Website [www.eai.or.kr](http://www.eai.or.kr)