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WEBINAR

NORTH KOREA DIPLOMACY IN A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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YEO: Good morning from Washington, D.C., and good afternoon, evening for those tuning in from Europe and Asia. I'm Andrew Yeo, senior fellow and the SK Korea Foundation chair at the Center for Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. Although much of the world is still taking stock of the Trump-Xi summit that took place in Beijing, we're turning our attention to North Korea.

Our discussion today draws from our Brookings project on the new geopolitics of Asia and the prospects of North Korean diplomacy, and also a set of papers we recently published available for free on our webpage. I'm joined by three of our project contributors, or at the moment two. One of our speakers are having technical difficulties. But hopefully, we'll be joined by three, all three contributors, to examine the path forward for diplomacy with Pyongyang and implications for the region and the Korean Peninsula.

So, I'll introduce our panelists now. First, we have Professor Jihwan Hwang. He's a professor of international relations at the University of Seoul in South Korea. We also have Dr. Kyung-joo Jeon. She's the chief of the Korean Peninsula Security Division and a research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis. And lastly, we have coming in, And again, we have some technical difficulties, so he may not be on screen, but we have Alexandre Mansourov. He's an adjunct lecturer and faculty co-lead in the Asia focus area at the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University. So, I'm delighted to have all three of these guests here with us this morning. So let me just jump right in because, of course, what's in the news cycle right now is the just recently concluded Trump-Xi summit. For those seeking resumed US-North Korea dialogue, and this is certainly the Lee Jae-myung government in South Korea, they were hoping to see some kind of diplomatic maybe connection with US-North Korea.

There was some hope that Xi and Trump would put North Korea on the agenda. And even several months ago, some experts even speculated myself included, that Trump might meet Kim while in Asia. So, I wanna throw this out to our speakers in just, in a quick lightning round in a minute or two. Are you surprised that North Korea didn't figure prominently in this recent US-China high-level discussions? Or why do you think that North Korea just wasn't at all on the table? So let me begin with you let me begin with you, Jihwan. Or actually, let me begin with you, Kyung-joo.

JEON: Thank you for having me and I'd say no I didn't believe we were surprised because especially given the summit was delayed due to the war in Iran and the world was just focusing on the Iranian issues rather than North Korea. But, however, I believe that the ROK government still hope this summit can be a steppingstone for a future US-DPRK summit by making the US-China discussion more active that would make North Korea as an agenda for their future discussion.

YEO: Thanks, Kyung-joo. Alexandre, welcome. I'm glad you could join us. I'll wait for you to unmute, but the question that we've been posing was about the Trump-Xi summit and if, if it was, if it's surprising at all to you that North Korea didn't come up on the agenda I think Alexandre is still having a little bit of technical difficulty. So let me jump over to you, Jihwan, and then maybe if Alexandre resolves his issue, we can come back to him. So, Jihwan so any thoughts for you about this Trump-Xi summit and the absence of North Korea?

HWANG: Okay. First of all, thanks a lot for inviting me here to the wonderful the platform. And then I wouldn't say it's particularly, surprising that North Korea did not figure prominently in recent US-China the high level, discussions. In fact, I think this is quite consistent with the broader, strategic shift we were seeing for the last decades. First I think from the Washington perspective the North Korea is no longer at the top of the priority list. So United States appears increasingly focused on the managing, the great power the competition, especially with China through a framework of, the decent peace, so in that context, I think North Korea becomes a secondary or derivative, issue, often subsumed under broader US-China strategic stability, rather than treated as a standalone, diplomatic priority. From the Beijing's side there is limited incentive to elevate North Korea in bilateral talks unless it serves a clear strategic, purpose.

China values stability on the Korean Peninsula, but it is also cautious, very cautious about allowing the North Korean issue to become a bargaining chip in dealing with the United States that could constrain its broader, competition with the United States. So, in a sense that Beijing prefers to keep North Korea as a managed, a variable rather than a central the agenda the item, so okay. Andrew?

YEO: Oh, yes. Thank you. Now it's my turn to be... Alexandre, so I was gonna turn the floor back over to you and see if we can get any comments from you about the Trump-Xi summit and the absence of North Korea here.

MANSOUROV: Okay. Thank you, Andrew, and hello everyone. Can you hear me?

YEO: Yes, we can hear you.

MANSOUROV: Yes. Great. Okay. Excellent. Fantastic. So, the question was whether I'm surprised that North Korea was not featured prominently in the Korean Peninsula during the Trump-Xi discussion, if I got it right. And my answer is no, I was not surprised. Although the two leaders touched briefly on the Korean Peninsula matters, but again, they didn't go into detail, and I think for three reasons. First in my opinion, North Korea and the Korean Peninsula honestly as a whole was not as important as other bilateral issues which face the two leaders or global issues. The two leaders of the- they set the new vision, if you wish, of developing this relationship of strategic stability.

And clearly the Korean Peninsula does not occupy the dominant space there. Number one. Number two I believe both President Trump and Chinese leader prefer to deal with the North Korean issue in a bilateral manner rather than in any multi-lateral forum. And finally, the third reason I think was that there was no crisis on the peninsula which could overshadow everything else and drew, and draw the attention of the United States and China. And by the way this time around, Kim Jong Un does- did not seek the attention of either superpower. Finally, as far as the Russian-North Korean cooperation for both Beijing and Washington, this is, in my opinion, the old news, so to speak which was not worthy of extensive discussion at the summit. So no, I wasn't surprised to see no in-depth discussion of the Korean issue at the summit.

YEO: Yes. And, Thank you, there was even some speculation when foreign, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited when he visited Pyongyang, that he was there in some ways to tell the North Koreans, one, is not to conduct any kind of provocation that would take away from the Trump-Xi summit, not to do anything that would distract from the Trump-Xi summit 'cause it was important. So, I think it's fairly uniform that most were unsurprised about North Korea not making it to the agenda. But I wanted to dig a little bit deeper into the research that we did. And as I mentioned to our audience, there's a fabulous set of six papers on Brookings webpage looking at the prospects of North Korea diplomacy from different- different regional angles.

But Jihwan, in your paper you argued that rather than aligning exclusively with any single power, Pyongyang is leveraging competition among the United States, China, and Russia to expand its

strategic space. And if that's the case, should we expect North Korea to eventually reengage diplomatically with the United States? Because I think in your paper you even mentioned the Russia-North Korea cooperation is, it's really not that deep and they're willing to play off Russia and China. So, if that's the case, then are, do you expect some sort of engagement diplomatically with the US as well?

HWANG: I should say yes, but with important, qualifications. So, we should expect the possibility of renewed, US-North Korea engagement this time again Trump-Kim the summit meeting maybe, but not a return to the sustained or the negotiation, focused diplomacy in the near future. Pyongyang's strategy today is not about choosing sides among China, Russia, and the United States, but about maximizing strategic space within an unstable, emerging, multipolar order.

In that context engagement with the United States is just one tool among many tools, not the central pillar of its foreign policy. So North Korea is currently benefiting from diversified, the partnerships particularly its, deepening ties with Russia and its, the newly stabilized, relationship with China which reduced the urgency of Pyongyang's reaching out to Washington. That said Pyongyang has not closed the door on diplomacy, I think. Instead, it has redefined the terms. I think it is signaling that any future dialogue with the United States must begin with the US co- recognition, acceptance of what it calls the changed reality. North Korea's status as a nuclear weapon state.

So, since that remains unacceptable to Washington and Trump, the gap between the two sides is very structural at, and not just, tactical. So, in short, the re-engagement is possible, even likely at some point, I believe, but it will be highly conditional strategically calculated and limited, I think, in scope. So, from Pyongyang's perspective, diplomacy is no longer about resolving the nuclear issue but it's about managing external pressures while I think the preserving the regime security and strategic autonomy and the

YEO: Yes, I agree with you there, Jihwan. I was saying that I also anticipate some kind of meeting between Trump and Kim in his remaining two-and-a-half years, but it will be very conditional. It's not guaranteed but I think there are a lot of conditions behind that. But Alexandre, I wanted to turn to you because I know that you've been following Russia-North Korea, North Korea-Russia relations quite closely.

Currently North Korea is the most important diplomatic partner, or at least Russia is the most important diplomatic partner for North Korea. How should we understand this current relationship, and is it, do you see it also as primarily a wartime transactional partnership as Jihwan had outlined, or do you see it as more durable? I know in your paper you talked about this Eurasian alignment against the West. Would North Korea fit in that alignment as well too?

MANSOUROV: Hey, Andrew, thank you very much. This is an excellent question. Of course, the sight of North Korean soldiers marching in formation on the May Day parade on the Red Square in Moscow was stunning. It was something unprecedented, never happened before, raised a lot of eyebrows. So how should we understand that ongoing rapprochement between these two countries? In Russia, there are a couple of schools at least. One, I would call them the optimists who say that Russia and North Korea, they share not only the threat perceptions today, the United States, of course, being the main enemy of both spoken and unspoken, but they share some national interest, military, economic et cetera, values.

People even talk about shared values, let alone common history. Let me remind you that Kim Il-sung actually was fighting in the Soviet Army back in the Great Patriotic War in the '40s. That's where Kim Jong Il was born in 1942 in Vyatskoye village not far away from Khabarovsk when his father was stationed. Plus, of course, the leadership affinities they highlight the relationship between President Putin and dear leader Kim Jong Un. So, they say that this gravitation towards closer and acting together in harmony is inevitable. Now, there are skeptics in Russia as well, or even pessimists who say, who basic-basically question whether this new relationship or renewed relationship will survive the end of the Russian-Ukraine war let alone the end of President Putin's tenure.

Nobody lives forever. Given the past record of betrayal in the early '90s, Russian betrayal caused a lot of mistrust. Remember, Russia was part of the united front which sanctioned North Korean and forced sanctions against North Korea, plus some policy differences which existed for a long time. Now, what's my opinion? Where do I stand on this? I believe it's a military alliance at present, both legally they signed an essentially mutual defense treaty. Article three commits them to consultations in case of crisis in event of crisis. Article four commits both sides to mutual defense. And Article 17 commits them basically to dismantle jointly the international sanctions regime imposed both against North Korea and Russia.

Very important legal commitments. And in practice, we see North Korean troops assisting Russian combat operations in Ukraine, and in return, Russia supplying North Korea not only fuel, food, but also key technologies weapons technologies. Now, is it a durable military alliance? In my opinion, only time will tell. Is it credible? Now, North Korean security commitment to Russia is proven. We see North Koreans having shed blood in Ukraine. A couple of thousand North Korean soldiers were killed in that war. Now, Russia, as far as Russia's security commitment to North Korea, this is something which I would say the proof is still in the pudding.

And only Russian reactions to future contingency on the peninsula, future military crisis in Korea, if you wish, may tell. We know in the past the Russians did support North Korean operations against the South during the Korean War. Again, now they say, at least they say, if you look at the rhetoric that they owe a moral debt of gratitude to North Korea, and they're bound by that moral obligation to fight to defend North Korea. But again, the proof was in the pudding. My opinion, until proven otherwise, we should take this relationship very seriously and plan accordingly. In the near future, it's likely to broaden and deepen, and I would expect the unexpected, to be honest. So, I wouldn't rest on laurels and discount it as a pure transactional relationship. Thank you.

YEO: It sounds like you're saying we should be watching this vigilantly, this Russia-North Korea relationship. And I also liked how you mentioned the differences between the two sides and the way North Korea views its relation with Russia. As you mentioned, they're clearly committed. They sent troops there. But I also think within the narrative of North Korea, the fact that they're building memorials and monuments for fallen North Korean soldiers means that this rhetoric about the Russia-North Korea relationship is meant to last. It's for the people. And then I think last month there was a five-year, some kind of military agreement.

And so, they're, it looks like they're trying to institutionalize the relationship. Russia is reciprocating, but we don't know how deep the North, how deep North Koreans runs within the mindset of Russians. But that was really insightful, Alexandre. I wanted to just follow up with I wanna actually turn to Kyung-joo, because in your paper you argue that North Korea's northern turn and this shift to two hostile states, so North Korea no longer wants unification with South Korea, and this two hostile states is a doc- a doctrine that signals a break from inter-Korea reconciliation and unification. If North Korea increasingly sees its future tied to Moscow and Beijing rather than inter-Korean engagement, does

that mean South Korea's North Korea policy must become less about reconciliation and more about long-term management of a permanently divided peninsula?

MANSOUROV: Yes I--

JEON: Yeah.

YEO: Oh,

MANSOUROV: Sorry.

YEO: Okay so if I, I'll get to Kyung-joo first, and then we can see if there are any other follow-up responses.

JEON: That's really an excellent question, but really difficult to answer. I would say yes, because North Korea does not want to sit down and talk to South Korea at all up to date, even though we want to seek for reconciliation. So, it just does not work. The fact that North Korea is expanding its diplomacy toward Russia, China, Belarus, and even some countries grouped as South, Global South that means that North Korea has lesser room for its diplomacy with Nor- with South Korea, and other partners are providing what North Korea needs.

So North Korea is not really bothered by its break from South Korea, unless South Korea really threatens North Korea, but that's not gonna happen at all. So therefore, regardless-regardless our regardless of our preference or expectation, I think we should keep prepared to take a long-term approach to managing a divided peninsula. Actually, that is not so different from what we have done so far, but we had some crisis management channels before. Now we don't have that. We-- The absence of a hotline has raised some concern given a very unstable environment on the peninsula. Due to that reason, our government has offered some military talks since last year, but North Korea did not really answer.

And let me add one comment regarding reconciliation. Regarding reconciliation, we still see a prospect for a US-DPRK summit. I think the very final goal for North Korea is not to be respected by China or Russia, but by the United States. My view might be somewhat different from Ji Wan or

Alexandru, but I believe that North Korea's end goal is not China or Russia, but the United States. They want respect from the United States. So North Korea is trying to increase its bargaining power by leveraging its relation with China and Russia against United States. So, I believe North Korea does not... does want to resume its talk with the US and get some biggest superpowers endorsement that North Korea is a de facto nuclear power and get some sanctions relief.

If that ever happens that would be really bad news for us, and we don't believe President Trump will make such a deal. We just want from the summit a breakthrough that allows us at least a very small opportunity to reach out to North Korea. And South Korea does not expect immediate denuclearization. Instead, the thinking is much more gradual. First and then eventually dismantlement over time. And now we see that even preventing escalation and maintaining stability would already be considered meaningful progress. So, the Lee Jae-myung administration is focusing on creating regional condition that could eventually make it, its engagement with North Korea possible again, mainly through the US-China summit.

And if it does not work, maybe a detoured way support by, supported by the China DPRK summit or DPRK-Russia summit. The ROK government believes the US and these regional powers can create conditions for a resumption of a talk between South Korea and North Korea. That said, even though we can make a breakthrough eventually and sit down with North Korea we do not have confidence that we can make a major step forward towards denuclearization or unification, because North Korea is even less interested in those goals than before. We are speaking about peaceful coexistence, but not so sure whether we could ever peacefully coexist with North Korea which is an authoritarian regime with nuclear weapons

YEO: Yeah, thanks, Kyung-joo. So, it seems like in your response, it's not really an either/or question about reconciliation versus long-term management of a divi- divided peninsula, that actually it sounds like the Lee government aspires to do both, but maybe in terms of priorities it has to manage those divisions as well. Of course, they're not mutually exclusive either. Sometimes taking steps to manage conflict, reduce risk can also be a step towards reconciliation. But Alexandre, I know that maybe you had wanted to jump in first as well. Did you wanna add anything about-

JEON: Oh.

YEO: We- we'll get back to you then if you didn't wanna add anything right now. But I did have, Kyung-joo, you had already mentioned a little bit about this idea of peaceful coexistence and, I was in Seoul in March because there was a conference talking about peaceful coexistence. This seems to be a buzzword, I think, with the Lee government. But are there any tensions or trade-offs that are created when you talk about peaceful coexistence, but with a nuclear-armed North Korea?

JEON: Actually, the Lee government's emphasis on peaceful coexistence tends to align with recent polls that show many South Koreans increasingly see North Korea as a separate state rather than part of one Korean nation. And a large majority now prioritize peaceful coexistence over reunification. But I think there is a major challenge. If Seoul wants Pyongyang to accept peaceful coexistence, South Korea may eventually need to adopt a more moderate position towards North Korea's nuclear weapons and military threats. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example they have m-much more emphasis on denuclearization and international non-proliferation norms.

So, there is concern if South Korea weakens its own commitment to denuclearization, it could undermine broader international pressure on North Korea and potentially encourage regional arms competition. In the meanwhile, the defense ministry that is increasingly alarmed by North Korea's rapidly advancing military capabilities. With sanctions enforcement weakening because of China and Russia, North Korea is advancing its military modernization very fast. So, cooperation with Russia has helped North Korea improve areas like drones, doctrine, and modern warfare capabilities. At the same time, Pyongyang is now placing new emphasis on conventional military modernization.

And these conventional capabilities really matter because they increasingly support and integrate with North Korea's nuclear forces. And also, the defense ministry's current top priority is the OPCON transition, and one of the three conditions for the transition is the military buildup in response to North Korea's nuclear threats. So, this agenda is at odds with peaceful coexistence

YEO: Just wanted to interject here, but h- here in DC, we also notice that the Uni- Ministry of Unification I- is much more forward-leading in using the phrase peaceful coexistence. And I do get the sense that MOFA, though, wants to remind the international community that denuclearization is still important.

In Washington, in some ways, it's like receiving mixed signals, so we're not really sure what direction South Korea is taking. But I almost wonder if it's a strategy in some ways where maybe MOFA is exactly trying to send that signal that we still care about denuclearization. But the Ministry of Unification may have a different goal or a, or an agenda, I think, to also emphasize this idea of peaceful coexistence and its, or engagement with North Korea. And it's much easier for the Unification Ministry to do that than Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, one could see it as conflicting message and conflict between two different bureaucracies, but others might actually see it as, a strategy to kinda emphasize both goals and but use different actors to do it.

So, I don't know which is which, but I just thought I would throw that out there. Jihwan, I wanted to turn the floor over to, back to you. I don't know if you have any comments on this idea of peaceful coexistence. But we are hearing increasing references to, peaceful or I was part of this group with the Asia Pacific Leadership Network where there was a joint statement to ref- you know, to talk about stable coexistence. I think part of it was peaceful coexistence is vocabulary that China uses, and so we didn't want to use that. The term stable coexistence has come up from policymakers and analysts. Is there a new consensus, do you think, emerging around the idea of coexistence, and does that imply that we're moving away from denuclearization as a realistic goal?

HWANG: I think that's, that is a very interesting situation. I think there is a certainly a growing, discussion in and out of the Korean Peninsula around peaceful or the stable coexistence. But I would be somewhat cautious about calling it a full consensus especially in South Korea, or interpreting it as a clean shift away from the denuclearization. What we are really seeing here is that North Korea has already moved, quite far in normalizing it- its status as a, a de facto nuclear weapon state, and the prospect for the near-term denuclearization are extremely low. So, in that context, the policymakers are in the South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere in the world are increasingly thinking in terms of risk management preventing escalation, maintaining the communication channels and stabilizing the deterrence rather than the expecting rapid the nuclear rollback.

I think that reflect the reality right now. So that's where the language of the coexistence comes in. So, it reflect a recognition that the immediate priority may be managing a long-term standoff rather than resolving it. Importantly, though this does not necessarily mean that the formal acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. Rather I think it suggests that a shift toward the interim, goals, arms

control, threat reduction, or crisis stability, while keeping denuclearization as a long-term, final, perhaps the final, objective. So, at the same time there are real, limits to how far this approach peaceful coexistence approach can, go because, North Korea's own framing of inter-Korean relations as two hostile state- states, along with its insistence on nuclear recognition that makes even stable coexistence difficult to operationalize.

North Korea has always, argued that the United States has a the hostile, the policy toward the North Korea. North Korea now has saying the hostile state relationship toward South Korea. So, coexistence requires some minimal level of mutual restraint and shared, the expectations which are still quite fragile, I think. So, in short, we are not seeing a s- settled consensus but rather on the emerging policy com- conversation shaped by constrained options. So, coexistence is gaining traction. It may reflect the reality now as a practical framework. But I think it exists in tension with the enduring in if increasingly distant goal of denuclearization and also the long-term, plan of the Korean peninsula.

YEO: Yeah. And I was gonna say, even with peaceful coexistence, if in the context of North and South Korea, what if South Korea decides to go nuclear as well too? Then you can have deterrence, and then could you have... the irony is that you could and you could open a can of worms in terms of proliferation. And so could you really say it's peaceful coexistence because South Korea might feel more secure with its own nuclear weapons with North Korea. And it's an interesting tension or a paradox that I think we have to think about further. But I wanted to bring Alexandre into the conversation because actually in your paper you said, you, you sounded skeptical right off the bat.

You said you've argued that peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula may be a mirage. So, I wanted you to unpack that for us a little bit, and what makes you skeptical of that framework. And then I wanted to throw out another question for you and just take advantage of your Russia expertise. Have you ever seen the phrase peaceful coexistence from on the Russia side? For Russia, it wouldn't seem to be a problem to have, for North Korea to have nuclear weapons and to coexist with its neighbors, because it now essentially accepts North Korea's nuclear program. So, if you could shed some light for us both on, p- what you think, what makes you skeptical about this phrase peaceful coexistence, and then how the Russians look at look at that term and look at North Korea's nuclear program.

MANSOUROV: Okay, Andrew, thank you very much for your important question. Obviously this expression peaceful coexistence is in the vogue now. It's being pushed by the Lee administration out of Seoul. I would say welcome to the party. Joining come lately. As I'm a contrarian. I've been talking a lot about this concept for many years but in the past, no more. Today, as you correctly pointed out, I believe it's a mirage. It's a mirage for five reasons, and I'll start with soft ones and then end with very hard reasons why it's unlikely and hardly possible.

The first one is it's a policy declaration made by one side as and it's not shared. It's not shared by the other side. The North Koreans designated South Korea prominently publicly as a hostile, the most hostile power. There is a huge policy gap here. Arguably it can be overcome in the course of negotiations, but so far the track record suggests we need to be skeptical. Number two, legally, North Korea and South Korea, they're still at the state of war. There is no peace treaty, no peace regime. Obviously, the armistice regime has been suspended, as at least by the one side, by North Koreans. And speaking about one military agreement which existed between the two countries, the comprehensive military agreement, it was abrogated by another party by South Korea unilaterally as so no legal legally binding commitments here. Now, let's get to more difficult reasons more difficult to eradicate. Politically, as every time there is a change of government in Seoul from liberals to conservatives and back, obviously you know that there's a dramatic alteration in policy.

These shifts from hard line to soft line and back. And given what's happening in South Korea today, who is to say that should conservatives come back to power, again big if that there will be no dramatic change again and nobody will talk about peaceful coexistence at all? Again, I would not bet my bank account on anything in this regard. And even more difficult reasons just two of them left.

Constitutionally Let's not forget that whereas North Korea changed its constitution, basically limited its territorial ambitions to only to the northern half of the peninsula. South Korea, according to its constitution, Article 4, I believe, still regards the entire Korean Peninsula as its territory.

It's still seeking unification, and it's beyond constitution. It still maintains operational plans designed basically to eliminate North Korea as a state in the event of contingency, a number of contingencies. So, without the constitutional revision in the South, I would argue peaceful coexistence is the peaceful part. The peaceful part is going to be unlikely. Remember, look at Israel and Palestine, the PLO, how Israel demanded the revision of PLO charter just to get rid of all that language which indicated hostile

intentions. North Koreans did their part. South Koreans, they still have a lot of work to do in the constitutional revision sense.

And finally, the final reason, very hard reason to overcome the premise of peaceful coexistence assumes The acceptance of North Korea as it is with nuclear weapons, with, a questionable human rights state, if you wish, with its political system. It basically assumes that the South is not going to meddle into North Korean domestic affairs. Which means abandoning the denuclearization goal, abandoning the pursuit of better human rights to some extent, et cetera, et cetera. And so just Keon Joo said, this is not something the South Korean public society, the government are likely to do. So, in that sense, peaceful coexistence today, in my opinion, is wishful thinking.

In Russia there are some analysts who use the term. Again, Russia is a free society, open society. There are lots of opinions from different directions. So, you can find references to peaceful coexistence, no question about it. But the official line is now to basically back the North Korean stance on its policy vis-à-vis the South. And so officially they don't use that language because it's not the language which the North Korean government is using today. Thank you.

YEO: A couple of quick follow-ups. I did wanna mention that as we're approaching towards the end of the webinar, that if you have any questions, you can send them, you can email them in. There is a in the RSVP, I think there was a place where you could send any questions and we'll get to those towards the end. I wanted to throw out two questions that were unplanned. One is about this idea of South Korea's constitution where it talks about there really only being one Korea.

And Alexandre, those were five excellent points. I hope that the South Korean government and the Ministry of Unification was taking note because I think it's important to look at some of the critiques about this concept and think through them. So those were excellent. But Ji-Hyeok, just very quickly Minister Chung Dong-young at one point had said k- in a very brief way that, we could, he talked about constitutional revision, but then he walked that back. He walked that back saying that it would be too hard to do politically. He thought that there would be a lot of political opposition to it, so it's not something that they would aim for. But could you foresee some point where maybe South Koreans do consider revising their constitution as a signal to show that they have no hostile intent to the North Koreans?

And would it be more likely under a political or a politically I- aggressive leaning government or a politically conservative government? I think it's the former, but I don't know if you have any thoughts there. And then the second is for Alexandre, is just with Russia, if let's say that you get to a place where there is some stability, but then the South Koreans believe that they want to move in a nuclear direction, would the Russians have, would they be adamantly opposed to South Koreans then getting nuclear weapons ostensibly to deter North Korea? Would that be a big problem? And if it is how do you square that with, Russia's current acceptance of North Korea's nuclear program? So, Jihwan? Yeah. Kyung-joo, yes.

JEON: May I have a question for Alexandre before he answers? Yes. I'd like to ask you do you think our constitution sounds very aggressive even though we do not make any aggressive actions against North Korea?

MANSOUROV: That's an excellent question. Let me think aloud. If Canada or Mexico in their constitution would say that their territory should cover the entire United States do you think the United States would think it's not aggressive to have a neighbor whose constitution would stipulate that the American territory should cover-- should be part of Canada or should be part of Mexico? So, in that sense it is aggressive. When North Korea... And I remember, the time when we would say to the North Koreans "Your constitution still says that the entire South Korea is part of your territory." And that's clear expression of hostile intent, aggressive intent.

You want to conquer us because you want the entire South Korea to be part of North Korea. So, we told the North Koreans this was aggressive. Change your constitution to show that you have benign intentions, no aggressive intentions. Now they did just that. They said, "No more. 38th parallel, that's it." That, whether policy-wise they intend to move south or north and under what conditions, we don't know. But at least constitutionally, they said, "This is it. This is the line which we're not going to cross." For South Koreans, I would say now it's your turn, to think hard about your national identity if you...

And I know it's very uncomfortable question. As soon as North Korea said, "We are North Koreans. We are not Pan-Koreans," "Our national identity does not extend beyond 38th parallel," immediately it puts into question South Korean, not just national ambitions, but national identity. Where-- And by remaking the North Koreans their own identity, they force you to rethink your own national identity,

and that's very uncomfortable task. Russians, Ukrainians, they're fighting exactly about that. If Russia today were to say in its constitution that Ukraine should be part of Russia- Just because 30 years ago it was because we're all Russians, the whole world would say how aggressively it is. So now it's time for South Koreans to really think hard about not just their constitution, but their national identity and their national ambitions.

YEO: Yeah, in the Constitution--

MANSOUROV: Because at this point it say sound just a land grab if you want to unify.

YEO: Do they mention that being a democratic Korea? Is that what in the Constitution? I know that Yoon Suk Yeol was talking about a free and unified democratic Korea, but the Constitution itself, I can't remember. Does it say a democratic Korea? I guess we can check with Ji- Jihwan about the constitutional revision.

HWANG: Yeah, it says the democratic. And then returning to the Andrew's, question about the unification and the peace and the Constitution it's because the Korean Constitution include the unification and then it's really difficult to revise the Constitution. And then so there has been a very serious de- debate about the relationship between the unification and peace from mostly from the conservative the point of view. They argued that the unification is more important than peace. But the, from the progressive point of view the, although the unification is very important they say that the peace is peace on the Korean Peninsula is right now the more important goal than the unification, because unification is the longer-term goal.

That kind of, debate is still going on. And I believe that both unification and peace are very important in the short term. Peace on the Korean Peninsula is important, but in the long term the unification eventually will they bring the peace back to the Korean Peninsula. So that's why I believe that both unification and peace are really important and that we should keep it keep them also on our, the Constitution too

YEO: Great. Terrific for that answer. I wanted to now turn to audience questions, but before I do, I'm gonna throw out what was my final question, but you're not allowed to elaborate. You can only s- answer with a yes or no. Do you think Trump and Kim are going to meet before 2028? So yes or no.

And then the follow-up question from one of our listeners, Sharon Yu, asks, "Given the volatility and unpredictability of the current US administration, what do you think the projected outcome will be for North Korea diplomacy and Northeast Asian security?"

Do you expect this volatility to open space for diplomacy or further destabilize the region? Why?"

Maybe we can go in reverse over to how we started. Again, so yes or no, is Trump or Kim going to meet? But then given the volatility of the current US administration, what do you think the outcome will be for North Korea diplomacy and Northeast Asia security? So, let's start with Alexandre.

MANSOUROV: First, there is little, in my opinion, little to no chance at all that President Trump will meet Kim Jong Un before the end of his term. Trump is in the driver's seat. He has no... He has a lot of issues on his plate, on his agenda where he can succeed. In North Korea, I don't think he will succeed. Kim Jong Un has very little to offer any gifts to Trump. So, it would be a high-risk, low-reward gamble for both of them to meet, and I don't think it's likely to happen. Finally, South Korea, in my opinion, has very little leverage over President Trump. That's my personal assessment. And so, they're not likely to convince him to meet with Kim and to do their bidding unlike the Israelis, for example. So, no I don't see much prospect of a little even prospect of Kim-Trump meeting in the years to come. Thank you. Jihwan?

HWANG: I would say 60% yes, 40% no, because I think it is depends on the future of the Ukraine war and the US-Russia relations after that, and also the China-North Korea relations. That we remember that Xi Jinping has not met Kim Jong Un since he took power in early 2010. So that kinds of relations comes back, and then the China-North Korea relation could be troubled again, and then that really the give the Kim Jong Un a, a new incentive to the talk with the US President Trump. So, I wouldn't say that window has closed has not closed yet.

YEO: Kyung-joo.

JEON: Maybe I would say the window is closing. I... Still, I think there is a possibility that US North Korea summit could happen because those both leaders really enjoys the symbolic moment, optics rather than substance. So even though they don't have any substance to discuss, they might enjoy the possibility to have some spotlight from the world, and to just meet and say hello, and to agree on

the Korean Peninsula stability and so on. So, I know that the possibility is getting diminished as the Trump administration has only two or two- more than two years.

YEO: Yeah.

JEON: So North Korea will not be interested in discussing any serious issues with Trump. But I said, as I said earlier, they want some politically symbolic moment that can give a great message to North Korean people and to, to others in the US as well for Trump.

YEO: Okay, great. I'm gonna try to combine two questions here. So, one is from Michael Ralston. He asked, "Is North Korea playing China and Russia off each other? Does the... Do they really trust either Russia or China?" And then a somewhat related question from Diana Hala asks, "The existent coalition between China, Russia, North Korea exemplify rising anti-US sentiment. Do you believe it is in North Korea's security interest to continue the expansion of said coalition to both gain expansive influence and act as a threat to US power in terms of bipolarity that exists? If it's a direct threat to US interests, how do you propose effective diploma should be pursued if North Korea's end goal is the mitigation of US power?"

So, one of them is whether North Korea r- is playing off China and Russia. I know, Jihwan, you already answered that. The answer is yes. So maybe, Alexandre, you could also weigh in. Do you think North Korea is playing off Russia and China? And then if anyone wants to answer the question about the coalition between China and Russia and North Korea is it in North Korea's interest to continue the expansion of that coalition? And if it's a direct threat to US interests, which it is, what might we do about that?

MANSOUROV: These are good questions, Andrew. And very yeah, very briefly, I believe North Korea is not playing off Russia against China. They're basically trying to expand the relationships both with Russia and China. Broaden, deepen the more the better diversifying I would say traditionally. I, I don't see the contentious part, which existed, let's say, during the Cultural Revolution or the Cold War when China switched sides and the North Koreans, they were torn between the two a- allies.

I don't see it today. I believe again, Kim wants a broader, deeper relationship with both China and Russia. And not only because he's hedging but because genuinely I, I think he believes his interests

are aligned with both the interests of Russia and China. And it's, it's not good news for the United States, obviously, because the, that growing threat perception of the United States, this anti-American sentiment is part of that renewed trilateral alignment which again, I, again I don't see them as playing off. They're playing off China against the United States, that's for sure, or Russia against the United States, that's for sure. But Kim wants more broader deeper embedded relationship with both Beijing and Moscow.

YEO: Okay. And let me get, so there's still that question on the table of if there's anything we can be done diplo- diplomatically to address the North Korea-China-Russia angle. But I wanted to end with this final question as well from Dinshan Mistry, maybe for either Kyung-joo or Jihwan, because I know both of you work on nuclear issues. But the question is, to what extent do conventional force sizes, doctrines, exercise, and postures affect nuclear risk reduction? How can risk reduction measures be verified, if at all, in the context of North Korea?

HWANG: I think that question is a very professional or very difficult one. And then North Korea is also, it seems to me that North Korea is also, trying to combine the conventional tactics and also nuclear tactics. So, it also, included that the nuclear, posture and the tactics in the, in newly revised constitution. So, I think that the Pyongyang will keep, going in that direction and try to develop the as much capability as possible, the nuclear capability. And also now also, focusing again on their the conventional, weapons and posture too.

YEO: Kyung-joo, the final... We start with you, we end with you. So, the final word. Can we- Can risk reduction measures be verified at all in the context of North Korea?

JEON: No. Very negative, I think. Regarding nuclear element, it would be really difficult to verify. And for conventional capabilities, that's just an area that would be much more hard for verification. So, I'd say I'm very negative about it. And actually, I would like to mention more about China-Russia-DPRK coalition. I don't believe there is a very significant or empirical evidence that there is a real coalition between these three actors. Those relations remain mainly bilateral, and they did not have any trilateral meetings or summit. So, I think the fear of this coalition might be somewhat exaggerate up to date. And actually, that, that is enough very... That is dangerous enough to South Korean government and also the US, but we should try not to really exaggerate that coalition as that is already existent.

Rather, we should try to decouple those actors inducing Russia China decoupling from North Korea.

So, I think our effort should be on that direction.

YEO: So, it seems like we return back to diplomacy then to try to decouple the links between North Korea, China and Russia. Jihwan, Alexandre, Kyung-joo, thank you so much for joining us. I do see the hand raised. Thank you. We're gonna have to take it offline because I do want to respect both people's times. But thank you so much again for joining us this morning or evening in Seoul, and thank you all again. And this will be also online if you want to re-watch it. And please do check out the policy papers that are posted on our webpage. Thank you all.

JEON: Thank you. Thanks a lot.

MANSOUROV: Thank you. Thank you.