



ESTABLISHING TRIANGULAR TALKS AMONG
WASHINGTON, BEIJING, AND SEOUL

INTRODUCTION

Of five alternative approaches to addressing the North Korean threat to stability in East Asia and beyond, this section is concerned with the possibility of just one—a diplomatic approach via **Three-Way Talks** among China, South Korea, and the United States. We single out this approach as the golden mean for reconciling the conflicting interests among the parties best positioned to reshape the calculus of Pyongyang. It represents the path to compromise. Among the alternatives, there is the Chinese appeal for a dual-track approach through **Six-Party Talks**, aimed at a peace treaty on terms attractive to North Korea and greatly transformative to the security architecture in Northeast Asia. This could hardly be called a compromise, since Seoul and Washington regard this as a win for Pyongyang and evidence that Beijing actually has been siding with Pyongyang. Another alternative is **Strategic Patience**, which is a misnomer for the policy of the Obama administration, but, in any case, refers mainly to reliance on increased deterrence as pressure is ratcheted up. In fact, Obama was seeking a pathway to three-way talks, giving China time to shift in that direction bolstered by new sanctions, while in 2016 also moving closer to a fourth approach: **Unilateral Sanctions** targeted at the Chinese firms assisting North Korea. A fifth option is **Alliance Triangularity** to force change in Pyongyang.

The four chapters in this section ask whether Three-Way Talks are feasible and conclude that the prospects look dim. Wang Dong provides no hint that China would endorse them in search of a compromise appealing to South Korea and the United States, as he presses for revival of the Six-Party Talks in pursuit of a new regional security architecture damaging to the U.S. alliances. Kim Heung-Kyu is the most optimistic on the chances for Three-Way talks, but—in line with thinking that may be shared with progressive voices who could lead a new presidential administration in Seoul—he is idealistic about Xi Jinping having tilted to South Korea and not being obsessed by a zero-sum outlook on Sino-U.S. security relations. Given the Trump administration’s thinking, as best one can determine at this early stage, as well as Wang’s assessment of Xi’s thinking, the Korean progressive position will not be well received. With little chance of Strategic Patience succeeding, the two alternatives, as outlined by Joel Wuthnow, are Unilateral Sanctions, and, if they fail—as he says is likely—military pressure with the possibility of preemption to force Pyongyang to change course. It is clear that China will be dissatisfied with unilateral sanctions and even angrier by military pressure through Alliance Triangularity. Mark Tokola explores how the U.S. shift to more hardline measures is likely to influence U.S.-ROK relations during 2017.

The promise of Three-Way Talks seemed greatest after China agreed to UN Security Council resolution 2270 in March 2017 and before Trump was elected and Park’s impeachment raised the chances of a progressive successor as president. Failure by China to enforce 2270 as many had expected, the arrival of Trump prepared to risk relations with China even more than Hillary Clinton was likely to do, and the election of a progressive in Seoul make a meeting of the minds highly doubtful. A groundswell of hope appeared to be arising in Seoul in 2016 as China gave its support to 2270 that—given North Korea’s active push to test nuclear weapons and missiles in order to gain a capability to strike the United States, Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing—at last Beijing would be ready to sit down as a threesome and work toward a pathway to combine sticks and carrots in changing the behavior of Pyongyang. By early summer the reality that China was barely enforcing the new sanctions cast doubt on this. Then, China’s vituperative response to the U.S.-ROK decision to deploy THAAD made

three-way talks even more unlikely. Donald Trump's election further set back the chances of coordination in dealing with North Korea. Yet, with North Korea reminding all three countries of its capacity to drive events and a progressive president in Seoul, calls for Sino-ROK-U.S. talks are sure to be renewed. The following chapters assess the reasoning behind how the three are approaching them and whether there is any basis for optimism at this time regarding such talks.

These papers point to conflicting expectations for what is required for triangular talks to take place. Some in Korea are optimistic that a shift in ROK policy to strongly back such diplomacy and the record of Xi Jinping in 2013-15 leaning to Seoul rather than to Pyongyang bodes well for the talks. They imply that THAAD can be set aside or, at least, postponed, winning Beijing's confidence, and that Washington may again recognize that diplomacy might work while acknowledging that preemption is a bad idea. If the Park administration was reluctant to press for this route, a progressive regime would be poised to make it the highest priority. This thinking in Seoul is the reason why observers should take seriously calls for the pursuit of triangular talks.

The Chinese attitude toward Sino-ROK-U.S. talks gives one reason to doubt the logic of the South Korean advocates. If the THAAD decision were the only barrier to these talks, then why did China show no interest prior to the July 2016 announcement? If Xi Jinping was leaning to Seoul, then why was China's reasoning about the peninsula critical of how South Korea was proceeding when "trustpolitik" was the policy? By looking closely at what Chinese are seeking from any resolution of the North Korean situation, we cast doubt on whether South Korean aspirations are based on realism.

U.S. attitudes toward triangular talks are skeptical, as seen in assessments of both the bilateral Sino-U.S. relationship and the alliance ties between Washington and Seoul in a triangular context. There is scant hope that following the lead of Seoul in new talks will alter Beijing's calculus. Moreover, there is little trust in progressives to pursue such talks without idealism. Given the recent feedback from China on how it might approach talks, there is no sentiment in Washington to pursue this route.

The following chapters cover four perspectives on triangular talks over North Korea. By juxtaposing their arguments, we can draw an overall picture on the prospects for such talks. Despite the hopes visible on the Korean side, the views expressed from the Chinese and U.S. sides suggest that triangular talks would break down over: the Chinese demand that they require South Korea to downgrade its alliance with the United States, upgrade security ties with China, and follow China's lead in giving the North much of what it wants as reassurance; the South Korean inability to reconcile its desire for U.S. alliance support in the face of the North Korean threat and its hope for Chinese cooperation to reduce that threat; and the U.S. refusal to grant China a dominant role on the peninsula and to trust a ROK progressive security agenda.

WANG DONG AND SUN BINGYAN, “A VIEW ON CHINA ON TRIANGULAR RELATIONS”

China is unprepared to take the Three-Way Talks route, Wang and Sun explain. A major factor is the sense that imbalances complicate this triangle. Chinese are concerned by South Korea’s alignment and how it would affect the course of the discussions. Also, they seek a wide-ranging agenda of more appeal to the DPRK and in keeping with the national interests of the parties involved. A balanced strategic environment on the Korean Peninsula figures into calculations for what talks may be expected to seek, if doubts could be overcome about their efficacy and promise.

Wang and Sun describe the problem as the absence of strategic triangularity. By this is meant the U.S.-ROK alliance is regarded as contrary to China’s interests, and Seoul would need to strengthen security ties with China and take its interests more into account for equilibrium to be reached. This is zero-sum reasoning, prioritizing the Sino-U.S. balance of power in East Asia over the North Korean nuclear issue. The authors warn that the U.S.-South Korea military alliance can only grow closer as North Korea advances its nuclear technologies; South Korea will then be susceptible to greater pressure from the United States when making security-related decisions, as evidenced by its 2016 decision in favor of the deployment of THAAD.

What is depicted is a vicious circle: China refuses to pressure North Korea heavily in order to keep the regime afloat and to use it to pressure South Korea; North Korea takes advantage of the situation to apply more pressure on the United States as well as South Korea; the United States sees a growing threat and pressures South Korea to strengthen the alliance and missile defense; China views South Korean actions as hostile and pressures it to desist. China, thus, uses the growing dependence of South Korea on trade with China—it is now China’s second biggest partner ahead of Japan and only behind the United States—to pressure it to transform its foreign policy.

Why does China seek an equilateral strategic triangle? First, it justifies North Korea seeking advanced nuclear strike technologies and nuclear power, since Pyongyang’s aim is to ensure national safety. Second, it accuses the United States and South Korea of taking military actions that are unnecessary and unreasonable in pursuit of “absolute safety,” as in the decision to deploy THAAD. Third, it repeats with scant evidence and no willingness to discuss the matter with U.S. security experts, that the deployment of THAAD is a severe threat to China’s security, destroying the security balance in the region. Fourth, it charges that accusations against China for inaction in the face of North Korea’s rising nuclear threat are ungrounded. Fifth, it has shifted from emphasizing shared interests against a common threat to a zero-sum approach of clashing interests with North Korea not posing the major threat to regional peace and stability. Sixth, it argues South Korea must downgrade its alliance as the focus of security and give greater weight to political and security relations with China if it seeks to reduce the security dilemma in the region. This argument takes Sino-U.S. relations as a given, shifting the blame to Seoul for moves in 2016 damaging to regional stability, which must be corrected. Implicit is the notion that the prior Xi-Park “honeymoon” should have been recognized in Seoul as a sign of strategic realignment, which has now been reversed. Whatever South Koreans may have thought about the relationship, it was interpreted in China in ways that raised expectations for Chinese leverage. While Park was calling for

reunification under Seoul as a bonanza, her message was seen in China as reunification led by Beijing and even appealing to Pyongyang. Seoul misinterpreted China's reasoning.

Wang and Sun assert that the existence of the U.S.-South Korea alliance hampers the establishment of political and security trust between China and South Korea. South Korean policies towards North Korea and China are influenced by U.S. political preferences. He argues that, following the U.S. lead, Seoul is not acting in accord with its own national interests and that U.S. pressure on Seoul is at fault for damaging Sino-ROK relations. Yet, those relations have a strong foundation and are resilient. Thus, they can be revitalized without great effort. U.S.-ROK joint military exercises also damage Sino-ROK relations. This is a call for security dialogue excluding the United States. It also carries the warning that China is prepared to use various means to change South Korean thinking. Seoul must agree to shift toward talks with Pyongyang under conditions the latter approves and avoid the prospect of violence.

Behind this Chinese argument is the view that not only economic complementarity, but also cultural affinity binds China and South Korea. Seoul must recognize this tie, presumably at the expense of siding with the United States on matters of values.

Rather than be focused on defense against North Korea, THAAD is aimed at pressing China to back down in its handling of North Korea, but, instead of prompting China to address the North Korean nuclear issue, the deployment of THAAD has amplified the voices of China's hardliners to support North Korea. It signifies an awkward miscalculation by the United States, says Wang and Sun. Yet, Wang and Sun fail to note how Sino-U.S. relations are deteriorating and how critical THAAD is for U.S. policy toward North Korea. They also underestimate the cost to South Korea of the breakdown in the alliance that would accompany the zero-sum choice, which China is offering. It is not a call for Three-Party Talks on North Korea, but for Six-Party Talks on regional security—where China, Russia, and North Korea can together air broad grievances.

KIM HEUNG-KYU, "A VIEW FROM SOUTH KOREA ON SINO-ROK RELATIONS"

Looking back to Xi Jinping's policy toward North Korea since he became China's leader and at his willingness to draw closer to South Korea, Kim Heung-kyu is optimistic that China will be amenable to Three-Party Talks if Seoul avoids taking sides. Seeking to maintain a close U.S. alliance while cooperating strategically with China and having a unified position with both on North Korea, Seoul is increasingly being pushed to take sides in the ongoing competition, he asserts. Yet, he sees hope for greater cooperation on North Korea if the United States and South Korea can find a way to embrace China's newly formed interests as a rising great power. Kim sees Xi as downgrading ties to normal, state-to-state relations with North Korea—leading to deadlocked relations—which provides a window of opportunity for South Korea to draw closer to China. He concedes that China's response to the January 2016 North Korean nuclear test and then the decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea brought tremendous tension to the region. Bilateral relations between South Korea and China have plunged to their worst level since normalization. Yet, he appears hopeful that this downturn can be reversed.

In looking back, Kim disagrees that prior to 2013 China's position on North Korea had softened or had moved away from Deng's call for keeping a low profile. Some argue that China's policy toward the peninsula had changed in 2009 and that 2010 responses were in keeping with a more assertive approach to foreign policy, but he disagrees. In his chronology, the "rising great power school" became the mainstream in China's Korea policy in the context of a grand design to realize the "China Dream" by 2049. As the "developing country school" was being eclipsed on many fronts, North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013 brought change. Despite resistance from the "traditional geopolitical school," which still favors North Korea, Xi launched his new policy. China changed the order of the three principles for Korea from emphasis on stability and peace to denuclearization, "stability," and resolution through peaceful means, he concludes. Yet, many argue that denuclearization only briefly, if at all, appeared to take priority over what Chinese call "stability." Kim's positive review of China's policy evolution is not consistent with what many observers see, especially regarding Xi's hardline thinking.

Kim describes China's bottom line in ways that can be promising for talks: preventing the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime, not allowing the THAAD system on Korean soil, resolving the nuclear issue through talks and compromise, securing China's security interests, sticking to the principle of denuclearization, and preventing U.S.-ROK military encroachment into North Korea. Stressing a priority of "no collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime," Kim explains China's request for exemptions on items related to people's livelihood in resolution 2270. Others, however, consider "no collapse" as misleading, since China is seeking much more in the end game over Korea, as Wang and Sun explain.

Kim splits Chinese experts into six policy orientations on North Korea, but others see, of late, uniformity imposed, as this is a core interest. During Xi's era, supporters of limited and strict sanctions have dramatically increased, becoming a majority, Kim argues, even noting supporters of abandoning North Korea. While for a time diverse views were aired, many find this a misreading of Chinese thinking, as if some academics who spoke out briefly reflect the policy line that is required in 2017.

So far, China has agreed with the United States that the North Korean nuclear issue should be an area of cooperation between the United States and China—instead of competition and rivalry—in the midst of strategic rivalry and in spite of tension in the South China Sea, asserts Kim, adding that this can be a good example of the new major power relationship between the United States and China. This raises hope for Seoul that is unjustified, others would argue. Kim says that China takes the possibility of North Korean instability more seriously and wants to prepare for it in advance, even with the South Koreans, to the point, it would eventually be positive about holding a trilateral dialogue with the United States and South Korea at the Track 1.5 level—a civilian-led dialogue on the surface. Yet, reading Wang and Sun, there is little basis for such optimism.

The Chinese are concerned that Pyongyang's increased belligerence is bringing Seoul and Tokyo closer together while providing strong justifications for Washington to rebalance to Asia, Kim adds, implying that this makes China ready to compromise.

The United States and South Korea could then assure China that they would not work against China's interests in future arrangements for the Korean Peninsula, which would encourage China to undertake a fundamental review of its current North Korea policy, leading to a shift

in China's Korea policy. Others, however, see blocking reunification as the prime way China defines its core interests, aiming for hegemony on the peninsula.

Even after the election of Moon Jae-in, a breakthrough to end the chill in South Korea-China relations over THAAD is nowhere in sight, Kim acknowledges. If China engages in more aggressive economic retaliation, or even militarily, against the South for its final decision to deploy THAAD, public opinion in South Korea will rapidly lean towards emphasizing the ROK-U.S. alliance. This may result in the establishment of an ROK-U.S.-Japan alliance in the region and participation of the ROK in the U.S.-led missile defense system. Beijing runs the risk of deep frustration over the failure of her neighborhood diplomacy and relationship with the South. Thus, Kim expects that Beijing will opt for compromise in Three-Way Talks.

Given the severity of the North Korean threat, the U.S.-ROK alliance should remain the pillar of South Korea's security policy, Kim says, but he also calls for avoiding any confrontation with China, on which South Korea's economic survival depends. Seoul has no choice but to pursue a complex policy of maintaining good relations with both, Kim concludes, but only rosy expectations allow him to identify Xi as a pragmatist who needs stability in the region for managing domestic headaches and to argue that Beijing does not want the THAAD issue to make strained relations with Seoul persist.

Kim concludes that Seoul and Washington need to assure China that the future status of the Korean Peninsula, particularly the alliance arrangement on the peninsula, would not hurt Chinese interests in the region. Otherwise, traditionalists may gain a larger voice in Chinese policy circles, resulting in opposition to active participation in North Korea's denuclearization and Korean unification in favor of South Korea. Under Xi, there is greater potential for the United States, China, and South Korea to cooperate on North Korea, he adds. Yet, he underestimates what China considers to be its interests, the voice of those he calls traditionalists, and the opposition to unification under South Korea. He calls for South Korea intensifying diplomacy with China and reaching a consensus on stability and the end state on the peninsula, while compromising on the THAAD issue.

JOEL WUTHNOW, "A VIEW FROM THE UNITED STATES ON SINO-U.S. RELATIONS"

Candidate Trump said that China has "absolute control" over North Korea and promised to do whatever it takes to convince Beijing to use that leverage; however, he now must navigate the reality of China's extreme hesitance to exert pressure on North Korea, says Joel Wuthnow. Diplomacy goes through Beijing, but so too does pressure, as the Obama administration decided when it relied heavily on China in responding to North Korea's nuclear tests in January and September 2016. Yet, military force goes through Seoul and Tokyo, and that is, increasingly, the default option after repeated failures in winning the support of China to persuade or pressure North Korea.

Despite repeated U.S. attempts to rely more on China to address the North Korea problem, the outcome has usually been disappointing. U.S. concerns have grown about China's willingness to negotiate and enforce effective sanctions and about continuing Sino-DPRK economic and diplomatic ties. It has become clear that China tends to only temporarily reduce its economic and diplomatic contacts with North Korea following provocative actions, usually resuming

them after a short period. It has only weakly implemented UN sanctions, obeying the “letter but not the spirit” of resolutions, including reluctance to use UN authorities to inspect DPRK flagged ships and continued imports of commodities generating revenue for Pyongyang. Provision of dual use technology by Chinese firms has been another concern, as has been China’s tendency to bargain for weaker sanctions in the first place.

Wuthnow lists reasons why Beijing sees “stability” maintenance as its key interest: avoiding a deluge of refugees into its Northeast, which already faces a precarious economic situation; preserving a useful strategic buffer between China, U.S., and ROK forces; and avoiding the possibility of an inadvertent or even intentional nuclear detonation, the fallout of which could reach Chinese territory. Some argue that under the guise of preserving “stability,” China also values North Korea as a force for change, undercutting the U.S. alliance system—a position confirmed in the Wang and Sun chapter.

Disagreements between the three countries on how to handle North Korea have militated against closer coordination, such as through a trilateral summit. China has been wary about pressuring North Korea. The United States and the ROK, in addition to supporting an increase in sanctions, have strengthened their alliance to defend against North Korean threats in a way that has repeatedly frustrated Chinese officials, argues Wuthnow, noting deployments of advanced U.S. military capabilities in the ROK, provision of offensive U.S. weapons to Seoul, overflights of South Korea by U.S. nuclear-capable bombers, and regular U.S.-ROK exercises that are targeted at the DPRK, but which Chinese commentary portrays as destabilizing.

Those in Washington as well as Seoul who have hope that Beijing would agree to Three-Way Talks, leading to a common approach to Pyongyang, discuss plans to reassure it on U.S. bases above the 38th parallel and the disposition of U.S. forces and respect for China’s economic stakes in the North after unification, but Wuthnow has little optimism that China’s real concerns would be assuaged. No matter what U.S. officials have said since 2003 about not seeking regime change in such talks, Chinese stubbornly repeat the old saw that this is the U.S. goal, making talks inconceivable.

Wuthnow concludes that China’s priority is not nonproliferation, and while Trump may attempt to persuade it to join in Three-Way Talks and to accept U.S. intentions, the likelihood is that he will fail—China will avoid imposing stronger costs on North Korea, such as cutting off food and fuel aid. This is consistent with the Wang and Sun analysis. Yet, Wuthnow is more forthright in asserting that, in this case, secondary sanctions could be imposed on Chinese companies, banks, and state-owned enterprises that deal with North Korea, while some travel or tourism companies should be shuttered entirely. Moreover, as damaging as that would be for Sino-U.S. relations, the likelihood that this approach would not succeed would make a third option—most detrimental to these ties—more conceivable. Despite difficulties in ensuring complete destruction of North Korean nuclear material and concerns about retaliation against Seoul, the U.S. military might prepare for a preemptive strike.

MARK TOKOLA, “A VIEW FROM THE UNITED STATES ON ROK-U.S. RELATIONS”

Comparing China’s goals in its relationship with North Korea with those shared by the United States and South Korea, Tokola argues that sharp divergence, stemming from the broader context of great power rivalry, is hindering policy coordination, and, thus, obstructing resolution of the North Korean issue. First, he looks for other examples of smaller states posing a threat to regional security, and if they lack great power patrons to protect them, forcefully imposed change can happen, usually but not always resulting in regime change. In cases in which military intervention is unworkable or undesirable, the most frequent alternative is economic sanctions, he notes, but adds that what makes the North special is China’s protection. While it appears to assume that possessing WMD will protect it from possible intervention; this may have the opposite effect of making it seem more necessary to threatened states that they take swift, decisive action to forestall their use. He gauges that China’s continuing intent is for economic sanctions to indicate displeasure with the North’s behavior rather than to apply strong pressure on the regime.

Of at least formal significance, the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty of 1961 continues in force, the Chinese military, reportedly, continues to take the mutual defense alliance seriously, more than do other elements of the Chinese establishment. In all discussions of how to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula, China resorts to the argument that North Korea feels threatened by the United States and South Korea, and progress will only be made when the United States and South Korea recognize North Korea’s legitimate security concerns, end North Korea’s international isolation through easing sanctions, and engage North Korea in negotiations, particularly for a peace treaty to replace the armistice, and finally bring the Korean War to a close.

THAAD deployment is a sign of South Korea’s unwillingness to engage North Korea in diplomatic talks to ease tension on the peninsula, concludes Tokola, adding that China remains less concerned about a nuclear-armed North Korea than a collapsed North Korea.

Whereas North Korea has persistently tried to negotiate directly with Washington, the United States has been consistent in its policy that the proper channel for diplomacy was directly to engage South Korea. Washington has given South Korea the lead in policy towards North Korea, first joining in providing humanitarian assistance during the years of South Korea’s “Sunshine Policy” of positive engagement with North Korea from 1998 to 2008, and then coordinating tough economic sanctions. Tokola adds, the US-ROK alliance is based on a strong foundation of security cooperation, economic relations, and people-to-people ties, but it is not invulnerable to shocks, some of which might take the form of: a revival of mistrust if each side thought the other might be engaged in secret diplomacy with North Korea or China; an acrimonious fight over cost sharing, trade policy, or a split on policy towards North Korea; a dispute following a serious safety or health incident involving US government or corporate facilities in South Korea. Any of the above could reawaken anti-American sentiment, Tokola warns, looking ahead.

A plausible explanation for China's aversion to applying sufficient pressure on North Korea to change its dangerous behavior might be China's concern that a collapsed North Korea would lead to a chaotic situation, with refugees heading for the Chinese border, an urgent need to secure North Korean nuclear and chemical weapons sites, and, perhaps, civil strife breaking out among competing factions within North Korea. Calculations may be that the Kim Jong-un regime is so brittle, that any pressure on it might shatter it, leading to unpredictable consequences. If the sole reason for China's support for North Korea were fear of the consequences of regime failure, that concern could be addressed by quiet, coordinated planning among the ROK, United States, China, Japan, and Russia, on how to deal with such an eventuality. The United States and South Korea have made clear that their objective is a change in North Korean behavior, not the fall of Kim Jong-un. Their 2009 Joint Vision statement calls for peaceful reunification, not for overthrow of the North Korean government. Why then is China singularly allowing North Korea to pursue its destructive course rather than leading, participating in, or at least discussing a plan to deal seriously with the threat posed by North Korea? China perceives Korea as an element in its great power rivalry with the United States, making a joint US-China-ROK approach to dealing with North Korea unacceptable in almost any form. China's attitude towards Korea may go beyond considering it a bordering country fitting within a natural Chinese sphere of influence along its periphery, There is a pattern of China appropriating Korea as part and parcel of Chinese history. Its conception of a "common security circle," and a "community of common destiny" reaches as far as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and the Central Asian States. It certainly includes the Korean Peninsula. It would view with suspicion even a non-aligned Korea which did not conform to Chinese national interests and whose decisions it could not veto. One could even conclude that the United States and South Korea have more faith in the ability of North Korea to reform than does China.

If China requires a compliant Korean Peninsula within its sphere of influence, the United States would oppose any outcome on the peninsula that did not allow a democratic Korean state, or states, to participate in security agreements with the United States, if that was their policy choice. In dealing with North Korea today, this is the root of tension and the obstacle to cooperation. With the stakes so high, the best course may be for the United States, China, and the ROK to acknowledge their incompatible desires for the peninsula, and to agree that an eventual resolution will have to be postponed in the interest of avoiding imminent catastrophe. A protracted future negotiation involving concessions and gradualism is an unattractive prospect for any of the parties, but better than the cataclysmic alternative, concludes Tokola.