

**THE CHINA-RUSSIA-NORTH KOREA  
TRIANGLE AFTER KIM JONG-UN'S  
TURN TO DIPLOMACY**

## Introduction

The triangle of Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang has great significance for the geopolitics of not only Northeast Asia, but the globe. It played a critical role in the 1950 launching of the Korean War, when the Cold War took shape. It became the subject of much speculation in the 2000s, when the Six-Party Talks offered hope that the post-Cold War framework could become one of trust based on shared interests in peace and stability and joint prosperity focused on Northeast Asia. Today, it is again worthy of close attention, as diplomacy has intensified in an atmosphere of increasing polarization. Various alternatives for the future of this triangle have recently been suggested.

The options offered for the emerging China-Russia-North Korea triangle include the following. One, a North Korean defection centered on a deal with the United States and an understanding with South Korea allowing for gradual inter-Korean integration with economics in the forefront. Two, a Chinese sphere of influence, which Russia is too weak to resist and North Korea prefers to the danger of regime change through Korean integration and U.S. demands for openness and human rights. Three, a balanced triangular alliance, where North Korea resumes playing off its allies in Beijing and Moscow without having to take the side of either, but this time without a serious split between the two great powers. Four, maximum autonomy of Pyongyang carving space among the five states most concerned with its destiny, leaving this triangle with no more significance than the triangle with the U.S. and South Korea. Fast-moving, diplomatic developments in 2018-2019 provide some evidence for assessing these alternative outcomes.

The five chapters in Part I give us differing perspectives on what is transpiring within the triangular configuration. Each sets forth some of the details for how Sino-North Korean and Russian-North Korean relations have been changing. All interpret the state of Sino-Russian ties at the end of the 2010s. They differ on the angle they take on the Sino-Russian-North Korean triangle. One reflects on Japan's thinking. One draws South Korea heavily into the analysis. A few stress the Sino-Russian nexus. The fifth chapter offers details about energy issues. Together, they explore a process of transformation still at an early stage after sanctions were pressed through 2017 and as diplomacy was reaching its full fruition in 2018 with uncertainty building through early 2019.

Authors have been asked to consider where this triangle is heading, looking back on recent diplomacy and keeping in mind the strategic thinking of the various states. Their arguments were tentatively prepared prior to the Hanoi summit of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un on February 27-28 and finalized in the aftermath of that meeting as developments kept unfolding. This is a fast-changing situation; authors can only capture what has transpired in the recent turn to diplomacy and offer a snapshot of where things were with informed commentary on where they may now be heading. At the end of April, chapters were last updated to cover the Putin-Kim summit in Vladivostok.

Drawing on the first three chapters, the following questions are addressed: 1) Why have Sino-Russian relations strengthened and how strong is this relationship? 2) What is North Korea's role in that? 3) How much overlap is there between the policy priorities of the two in dealing with the North? 4) What challenges do the two have in coordination? 5)

What is the impact of the U.S.? and 6) To what extent are triangular ties with Pyongyang being institutionalized? The final two chapters are covered in more traditional fashion, summarizing and interpreting their main points.

Robert Sutter, “Sino-Russian Relations,  
South Korea, and North Korea”

Stephen Blank, “The North Korean Factor  
in the Sino-Russian Alliance”

Brian G. Carlson, “Sino-Russian Relations  
and Security Ties to North Korea”

### **Why have Sino-Russian relations strengthened and how strong is this relationship?**

Blank describes Sino-Russian relations as an alliance, predicts the return of bipolarity that characterized the Cold War in Northeast Asia, albeit in altered and looser form, and foresees a recurrence of the dynamics whereby North Korea facilitated the Soviet-Chinese alliance during the Korean War. Russia’s Vostok-2018 exercise that also involved Chinese forces originally reflected apprehension about a U.S. strike on North Korea that could oblige them to respond, and the overall schedule of Sino-Russian military exercises of 2017-2018 was probably conceived of and implemented to thwart a U.S.-led invasion of North Korea, Blank argues. The earlier Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) installations generated a Chinese trade and economic war against South Korea and also enhanced Sino-Russian military coordination. These are all evidence of how the security situation in Northeast Asia is becoming polarized with Korea in the forefront.

Washington would benefit from viewing Korean issues primarily as regional security questions. Russia and China do so, notes Blank. For both, it is essential to be recognized as major if not dominant actors on the Korean Peninsula. If their ability to influence developments on their immediate periphery is diminished, then their ability to play a global great power role will also be reduced. Russian analyses follow China in blaming Washington for North Korea’s continuing nuclearization due to U.S. threats against it. Russia and China argue, to Pyongyang’s delight, that Washington must initiate concessions, e.g. formally ending the Korean War, reducing sanctions, giving security guarantees, and ceasing its threats while deferring denuclearization. Overlapping thinking in Moscow and Beijing on Korea, thus should serve as a wake-up call in other countries.

The chapters list many factors drawing Moscow and Beijing close, although Carlson finds that one factor that has held them back from establishing a formal political-military alliance is the unwillingness of both countries to be dragged into the other’s regional conflicts. Yet, Korea is viewed as a shared regional interest, even if Moscow accepts that Beijing’s interests prevail. In historical memory, national identity, and geopolitical interests, it boosts their common cause.

### **What is North Korea's role in improving Sino-Russian relations?**

Sutter considers how the Sino-Russian relationship reacted to the major changes on the Korean Peninsula brought on by the string of remarkable developments there since 2017. He lists those developments as: the Trump administration's pressure against North Korean nuclear weapons development in 2017; the North's abrupt shift away from confrontation and toward negotiations with the U.S. and South Korea in early 2018; the subsequent dramatic shift toward top-level U.S.-North Korea negotiations to ease tensions and improve relations seen in Trump's meetings with Kim Jong-un in June 2018 and February 2019; and active, related North Korean summitry with South Korea and China. He finds that China and Russia in ties with both Koreas worked together to offset U.S. pressures and undermine U.S. influence, with Russia, putting aside concerns, repeatedly siding with China in playing second fiddle to it on matters there. China, for its part, seemed comfortable with close cooperative relations with Russia in dealing with Korean matters.

The dispositions of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations, Sutter says. The momentum is based on: 1) common objectives and values; 2) perceived Russian and Chinese vulnerabilities in the face of U.S. and Western pressures; and 3) perceived opportunities for the two powers to expand their influence at the expense of U.S. and allied powers seen in decline. Russia and China work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in world politics, economy, and security. The dramatic rise in tensions on the Korean Peninsula followed by the equally dramatic U.S.-North Korean summitry provided repeated opportunities for Beijing and Moscow to work together in support of their interests and at odds with U.S. ones.

Blank offers five reasons why North Korea has brought China and Russia closer together, despite three reasons for why this should not be occurring. The facilitating factors are: 1) historical great power identity; 2) denial of a U.S. identity victory seen as a "color revolution"; 3) a geopolitical test reshaping the Northeast Asian region in opposition to the U.S. presence and U.S. alliances; 4) each government's view that North Korea can become a strong ally under the right conditions; and 5) positive assumptions in each about economic integration with North Korea if it resolves the nuclear crisis in the right manner, albeit conflicting in some details. The factors that complicate a sustained alliance are: 1) the traditional North Korean tactics to play China off against Russia; 2) Russian concern about China's dominance leaving Russia with little economic benefit or prospects for multipolarity in Northeast Asia; and 3) Chinese insistence on unilaterally subordinating North Korea to its policies with scant regard for Russia's role. All these factors have appeared intermittently, but in 2018-2019 we see more clearly how they combine to boost Russian-Chinese alliance ties, and the prospects of a three-way alliance, concludes Blank.

During the period leading up to the turn toward diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula that began in 2018, China and Russia achieved close cooperation in addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis. This cooperation was one of the most striking examples of the increasingly close relationship that the two have forged in recent years amid a downturn in both countries' relations with the U.S., argues Carlson. All three chapters trace how coordination regarding North Korea's relationship with the U.S. has deepened between Moscow and Beijing, leading to qualified support for tougher UN Security Council sanctions in 2017 and softer attitudes for relaxing those sanctions in the 2018 diplomacy.

## **How much overlap is there between the policy priorities of the two in dealing with the North?**

The policy priorities of China and Russia on the Korean Peninsula overlap significantly, all the chapters argue. Apart from Taiwan, there is no more important area along Beijing's periphery—the longstanding focus of its foreign and security policy—than the Korean Peninsula. What happens in Korea impacts directly China's longstanding efforts to offset the threat posed by the large American security presence along China's all-important maritime frontier. Serious disruption in Korea would have a large impact on the adjoining Chinese provinces that are critically important in Beijing's economic development. It would cast a pall over Chinese broader plans for economic development. A bottom line among Chinese interests in Korea is preserving stability. Optimally, Beijing seeks to sustain and develop the independent North Korean state through economic reforms and international outreach that would preserve the advantages China sees in division of the peninsula rather than risking the negative consequences that regime change could involve, explains Sutter. Russia is seen as having no less compelling geostrategic, economic, and national identity reasons for sustaining the North Korean regime.

In the face of U.S.-backed pressure on North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program and related ballistic missile development, China tends to focus on ways to preserve stability that work against such disruptive interventions and advance Chinese advantages in relations with North Korea. In this process, Beijing at various times has seen South Korea more willing than the U.S. to support more positive engagement with North Korea. It has sought to work more closely with Seoul in those instances, often in ways that divide Seoul from Washington. The significance of the common ground seemed diluted by the backwash of the acute dispute between the two countries over the deployment in 2017 of the U.S. THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea and China's unofficial, very damaging economic sanctions against South Korean businesses. In late 2017, Beijing and Seoul negotiated at least a pause in their dispute. For Russia, dividing Seoul from Washington and stopping THAAD also were strategic goals.

China and Russia welcome the current process but recognize the difficulty of achieving a diplomatic resolution of the crisis. As this process unfolds, China and Russia are likely to continue their close coordination, with China taking the lead and Russia largely playing a supportive role. The similarity of Chinese and Russian views on international issues, especially their shared opposition to a U.S.-dominated international system and to claims of the universal applicability of liberal values, suggests that their close partnership is likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Similarity in the two countries' perceptions of their security interests on the peninsula indicates that their close cooperation on this issue is likely to persist. Yet, authors note that if reunification eventually becomes a serious possibility, Russia's eagerness to increase its regional influence through joint economic projects with the peninsula could create tension with China, which would be concerned about the impact of such developments on its own relative power in the region. Such an outcome remains a distant prospect, however, Sutter explains. As explained by Christoffersen in the summary below, the struggle over Chinese bilateralism and multilateralism has started.

Moscow scrupulously avoids steps that would potentially upset its leading strategic partner and is unlikely to take substantial initiatives on the peninsula that run against the basic interests of China. It is well aware that Korea is vital for China's security, recognizing that

Beijing's stakes in the peninsula are significantly higher. Yet, Russia sustains ambitions to play a leading role in the North Korean nuclear crisis as part of its overall effort to enhance its profile in East Asia. At the end of April 2019 Putin hosted Kim Jong-un, raising Putin's profile in the diplomacy over the Korean Peninsula, while giving Kim a chance to showcase other options after the Hanoi failure.

### **How much overlap is there between the risks of diplomacy to China and Russia?**

The surprising thaw leading to the June 2018 U.S.-North Korea summit seemed to put at risk Chinese interests and influence. A possible U.S.-North Korean reconciliation could marginalize China. Chinese leaders are aware that North Korean officials have repeatedly demonstrated antagonism to China when they have interacted privately with American officials. North Korea has a long history of maneuvering among larger powers. Reconciliation could result in much stronger North Korean independence backed by the U.S., which could seriously complicate China's ambitions in Northeast Asia. Such calculations seemed behind Xi's abrupt shift away from his wariness toward Kim Jong-un. China eased implementation of sanctions in exchange for less confrontational North Korean behavior, although it generally adhered to the strict terms of the UN Security Council sanctions. Yet, Beijing provided leverage and backing as Kim Jong-un dealt with Trump. Xi held four summits in China with Kim in a single year.

Putin has tailored his approach to the region in ways that enhance Russia's alignment and avoid serious friction with China. The result over the past two years has seen collaborative Russian-Chinese efforts pursuing interests at odds with the United States. Russia's relations with North Korea in recent years have continued to improve, even when China's relations with Pyongyang declined. North Korea's support for Russia in the UN after the invasion of Crimea led to a reassessment of its value as a partner. As China in 2017 used economic leverage against North Korea, Russia avoided such pressure, smuggled oil to North Korea, and improved its political relations with Kim's regime. Yet, Kim's visit to Vladivostok saw no notable easing of sanctions. South Korea was the only U.S. ally which did not impose sanctions on Russia in 2014. Moon Jae-in's visit to Moscow and summit with Putin in June 2018 appeared friendlier than Moon's visit with Xi in Beijing six months earlier. After Moon took office in May 2017, Russia sought to capitalize on his interest. Sino-Russian coordination has been incomplete, but it is growing.

### **What is the impact of the U.S.?**

Both China and Russia view the issues of the Korean Peninsula through the prism of global security and their competition with the U.S. They seek to reduce the U.S. security presence in Northeast Asia, and they accuse the U.S. of using North Korea's nuclear weapons program and provocative behavior as a pretext for strengthening this presence. They are particularly concerned about U.S. deployment of THAAD in South Korea. Opposition to THAAD represented the continuation of sustained efforts by China and Russia to resist the expansion of U.S. missile defense dating back to the 1990s. As the North Korean nuclear crisis intensified in 2016 and especially in 2017, China and Russia closely coordinated their responses to events. They expressed a shared position clearly in a July 4, 2017 joint declaration. As much as North Korea's nuclear weapons and belligerent behavior may

irritate them, their goal of limiting the U.S. military presence in the region overrides these concerns. Unless the U.S. agrees to limit its regional military presence, China and Russia will continue to support the regime and attempt to ensure its survival.

Chinese leaders have become increasingly irritated with North Korea's behavior in recent years and increasingly supportive of international sanctions against the regime. China recognizes that North Korea's nuclear weapons program serves as the only reliable deterrent against a potential U.S. attack on the regime in Pyongyang. It thereby serves China's interests by ensuring the continued survival of North Korea as a buffer state for China. North Korea's provocations create demands on U.S. military resources and attention, potentially reducing pressure on China. Chinese leaders also recognize that progress in the construction of North Korean nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles has the potential to weaken U.S. alliances in Asia. These programs could increasingly call into question the willingness of U.S. citizens to put their own cities at risk on behalf of their Asian allies' security. Along with Russia, China has sought to ensure that a reduction of the U.S. security footprint in Northeast Asia accompanies steps toward denuclearization by North Korea. China supports the goal of denuclearization only if it occurs in a way that preserves its perceived security interests. Despite its official opposition to North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, Russia professes understanding for the motives behind it and assigns a significant amount of blame for the crisis to the U.S.

China and Russia took a "good cop/bad cop" approach. China, which was experiencing a relatively warm period in relations with the U.S. following Xi Jinping's meeting with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, in March 2017, was willing to support slightly tougher sanctions than it had previously. Russia was more reluctant, viewing sanctions as an ineffective means to induce changes in North Korean behavior, but it ultimately agreed to follow China's lead. China and Russia nevertheless succeeded in weakening U.S. sanctions proposals. Most notably, they rejected the U.S. proposal for a total crude oil embargo. The turn toward diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula during 2018 changed some of China's calculations. As the crisis intensified during 2017, China sought to use its influence over North Korea as leverage in relations with the United States. China hoped that its willingness to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on North Korea would help to achieve more favorable U.S. policies regarding such issues as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and trade. Now, with the turn toward diplomacy, China had to be alert to the possibility that North Korea would return to its time-worn tactic of playing on divisions for great-power rivalry.

Above all, China and Russia were determined to limit and ultimately reduce the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia, including the deployment of missile defense systems. The security interests of China and Russia on the peninsula are not identical, especially regarding the long-term prospects for reunification, but their interests are likely to remain largely aligned for the foreseeable future, asserts Carlson. China and Russia welcomed the turn toward diplomacy that began in 2018, which essentially followed their preferred course of a moratorium on North Korean nuclear and missile tests and a corresponding pause in the conduct of U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises. Yet, the two countries remained skeptical about the prospects. China is widely expected to intervene in any war on the Korean Peninsula, as it did in 1950. China's paramount goal, however, is to

dramatically reduce and ultimately eliminate the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia, as in the wider Asia-Pacific region, allowing China to establish itself as the dominant regional power. China supports the eventual reunification of the peninsula, but only as a country that is, at minimum, neutral. With no prospect of such an outcome currently in sight, China is likely to persist in its belief that the status quo is preferable to any unification process for the foreseeable future. Russia has many of the same caveats, but it has a stronger interest than China in reunification or at least a much closer relationship between the two Koreas. Unification or integration would allow Russia to pursue economic projects that could stimulate the development of the Russian Far East, expand Russia's influence on the peninsula, and enhance Russia's profile in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, for the foreseeable future, Russia and China are focused on addressing the immediate crisis, in which their interests are largely aligned.

Beijing's persuasion, not U.S. concerns, reportedly drove Russia in December 2017 to agree to tough sanctions. In their joint statement in July 2017, Putin and Xi said that tensions on the Korean Peninsula should not be used as a pretext for expanded U.S. military capabilities and opposed THAAD as detrimental to their own security interests and ineffective in achieving denuclearization or peace and stability in Northeast Asia. This paved the way for Russia agreeing with China on sanctions. Their unified position on the crisis combined previous Chinese proposals of a "double freeze" (the halt of nuclear and missile programs by the North in exchange for suspension of massive U.S.-ROK military drills) and "parallel advancement" (simultaneous talks on denuclearization and the creation of peace mechanisms on the peninsula) with a Russian-proposed stage-by-stage Korean settlement plan. It was the first time that China and Russia so clearly articulated their common position with respect to the North, Sutter explains, adding that they explicitly link the resolution of the North Korea problem to America's willingness to make major strategic concessions in Northeast Asia.

While China exercised severe economic pressure on North Korea through substantial diminution of its trade with the country in 2017-2018, the advent of talks with the U.S. has led to new optimism. China is now apparently urging North Korea to join its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), arguing it would prosper by doing so. This move would reduce its economic exposure to a politically dangerous situation, yet would also subordinate North Korea's economy to China. Yet, North Korea has never fully trusted either Beijing or Moscow and fears either abandonment or efforts to suppress its independence. One reason for building nuclear weapons is the desire to achieve independence from both those powers and force them to offer resources to sustain it. Pyongyang still will not undertake the kinds of reforms launched by Vietnam or China, presumably due to fears of their political consequences.

The U.S. presence would dramatically reduce Russia's projected main instrument for gaining leverage over either or both Korean states, i.e. the generation-long proposal for a Trans-Siberian and then Trans-Korean Railway (TSR-TKR). Likewise, if the U.S. can steer the negotiations with North Korea, this would likely mean preserving a sizable U.S. military presence in both South Korea and Japan that both Beijing and Moscow see as directed against them. Lastly, to the degree that Washington can successfully steer the negotiations, that outcome would greatly enhance its standing across Asia at China's expense. The earlier THAAD installations generated a Chinese trade and economic war against South Korea and enhanced Sino-Russian military coordination. If we reckon with all of the economic, military-

strategic, and ideological-political interests, we easily see that both Moscow and Beijing have compelling and, more crucially, comingled ideological-political-strategic-economic interests in common against the U.S., concludes Blank. Accordingly, they cannot easily permit North Korea to act independently in ways that sideline them even if they both need and desire a détente in Northeast Asia that minimizes the risks of a war in Korea. These interests correlate with their expectations regarding North Korea's role in their regional economic designs, as in Russian obsession with proposed infrastructure projects.

### **To what extent are triangular ties with Pyongyang being institutionalized?**

The combination of the Xi Jinping-Kim Jong-un rapprochement with the already cordial Russia-North Korea relations led to tentative institutionalization of a Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang bloc. In October 2018, Russia, China, and North Korea, represented by deputy foreign ministers, held in Moscow their first official trilateral meeting and called for the easing of the UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea to reward Pyongyang for its efforts at denuclearization. This is a consequence of the fact that the pattern of security ties between Russia and North Korea bears many similarities to those of the China-North Korea relationship. Russia views North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches as potentially destabilizing for regional security. It considers North Korea's nuclear weapons program and provocative behavior to be a pretext for U.S. regional military buildups that are at least partly directed at the containment of Russia as well as China. Like China, Russia wants to maintain North Korea as a buffer state. In their view, the U.S. should first ease sanctions as a reward for North Korea's willingness to enter negotiations, then engage in a step-by-step process in which the two sides trade reciprocal concessions. The three chapters suggest the potential for institutionalized trilateral security coordination, but they leave unclear North Korea's interest and the timing that could lead to this outcome in light of ongoing U.S. diplomacy or China's reluctance to incite a break with the U.S.

## James D.J. Brown, "Japan's Strategy to Keep the North Koreans and Chinese Down, the Americans in, and the Russians Neutral"

North Korea, China, and Russia each present Japan with specific security concerns, explains Brown, adding that Japan also faces the added worry that these three countries will increasingly coordinate their activities within the region. Even if they do not actually forge a strategic triangle, there remains the threat that they could join together on certain issues, forming a "loose coalition" to counter the interests of Japan and its U.S. ally. This is related to the fact that while there may be some common ground regarding the ultimate goal of denuclearization, Beijing and Moscow are diametrically opposed to Tokyo's position when it comes to the question of how to achieve this. The Japanese government has maintained a hard-line position, even though Abe Shinzo has conceded that he too would be willing to meet Kim, conditional on that contributing to the resolution of the abductions issue.

Tokyo is worried that Beijing and Moscow are increasingly making common cause with Pyongyang, argues Brown. This impression was strengthened in October 2018, when the deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and North Korea met in Moscow. Furthermore, there have been allegations that China and Russia are becoming increasingly lax in enforcing

existing international sanctions. Two factors make the situation especially troublesome: the poisonous state of relations between Japan and South Korea, and Trump's leadership, not intervening to smooth out tensions between U.S. allies, but contributing to Japan's sense of regional insecurity. This is a consequence of Trump's "America First" foreign policy and the transactional approach that he takes to alliances. Thus, Japan's security situation is alarming. The country faces not only the individual security challenges posed by North Korea, China, and Russia, but also the danger of increased cooperation between these three nuclear-armed neighbors. What is more, at just the time when Tokyo needs reliable partners, it finds itself dealing with a South Korean government that it considers chronically untrustworthy and a U.S. administration that often seems less like a loyal friend and more like an increasingly expensive supplier of commercial security services.

Japan's current strategy can be characterized as aiming to keep the North Koreans and Chinese down, the Americans in, and the Russians neutral, concludes Brown. Despite feelers toward Kim Jong-un for a summit and a supposedly breakthrough summit between Abe and Xi Jinping, no fundamental change has taken place in Japan's policy. The Japanese leadership remains just as wary of both Pyongyang and Beijing as previously, and the guiding principle of Japan's strategy remains to contain North Korea and China. Rather than indicating a true reorientation of strategy, Japan's seemingly changed approach has been driven by the need to respond to alterations in U.S. policy towards North Korea and by the priority of avoiding a crisis in relations with China.

The Japanese leadership was shocked by Trump's announcement in March 2018 that he intended to meet Kim Jong-un. This was made even more unpalatable by the knowledge that the change in U.S. policy had been brought about through the work of the Moon administration, in which Japanese trust has never been high. From the very start then, the Abe administration has regarded the talks with North Korea as a mistake, believing that a summit with the U.S. president should only have been granted after Pyongyang offered something more concrete than a vague commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Yet, the Abe administration felt that it had no choice but to alter the presentation of its North Korea policy to limit the appearance of differences with Washington. This is the real reason why Abe also announced his willingness, in principle, to meet Kim Jong-un. Abe has consistently emphasized the abductions issue as the most important problem in relations with North Korea. This means that Abe would find it hard politically to engage with Pyongyang unless real progress were made on the abductions issue.

Japan's real policy is therefore not to provide genuine support for the diplomatic process with North Korea but rather to encourage the U.S. to maintain as much pressure as possible. Additionally, Japan is focused on the goal of minimizing the perceived risks of the U.S.-North Korea talks. Above all, Japan is worried about the prospects of Trump cutting a deal with Kim Jong-un that would address the issue of North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) but would not tackle the threat of short- and medium-range missiles that can reach Japan.

If the Korean War is declared to have officially concluded, Trump may be inclined to begin implementing his longstanding goal of withdrawing or reducing the U.S. military presence in South Korea. Japanese strategists see such a step as not only benefiting North Korea,

but also potentially causing South Korea to reorient itself towards China. Japan's isolation in Northeast Asia would then be complete. After all, while the atmosphere in relations between Tokyo and Beijing has undergone a welcome improvement, Japan continues to regard China as a chronic security threat, exceeding even the acute danger posed by North Korea. Efforts are concentrated on challenging China's expanding activities in the East China Sea, especially around the Senkaku Islands, as well as in the South China Sea. Yet, while Tokyo may be united with Washington in the overall aim of countering China's geopolitical ambitions, it has a very different approach to achieving this. The U.S. has taken an increasingly confrontational stance. Japan's strategy is to quietly work toward containing the effects of China's rise, yet to simultaneously keep bilateral relations on an even keel and avoid dangerous squalls while emphasizing the goal of mutually beneficial co-existence. Japan has nothing to gain from recurring crises, and Abe has been seeking to take the heat out of the relationship to return ties to their status before the collision of September 2010. The improvement appears to have been driven by the Chinese side, argues Brown.

The Abe administration is pursuing what might be described as a preventative anti-abandonment strategy to demonstrate that Japan is a valuable ally and not a free rider, thereby ensuring that Washington does not even begin to question its security commitment, and to keep strong personal rapport with Trump. This is something that Japanese leaders seek to do with all U.S. counterparts. The task has, however, become especially important with Trump due to his isolationist instincts and highly personalized approach to foreign policy. This accounts for Abe nominating Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his diplomatic engagement with North Korea, albeit at the request of the U.S. government. This revelation was embarrassing for the Japanese leader, not least because it is well known that Abe is not an enthusiastic advocate of diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang. The Japanese government's official assessments also state that the threat from North Korea remained undiminished after the summit in Singapore. Moreover, there has been no apparent progress towards resolving the abductions issue. Yet, Abe evidently calculated that humbling himself before Trump was a price worth paying if it contributes to retaining the U.S. presence in the region, Brown concludes.

As for Russia, Japan's primary concern is not that its forces will pose a direct military threat, as was the case during the Cold War, although, in fiscal 2017, 390 scrambles of Japanese planes were to intercept Russian aircraft, second only to the 500 scrambles provoked by Chinese planes. Compared with the threats posed by China and North Korea, Russia is considered a very distant third. Instead, the main worry is that Russia's support will embolden North Korea and China. The close relationship between China and Russia is already a source of strength for Beijing. The strategic nightmare for Japan is that this trend could lead to Russia abandoning its position of neutrality on the issues of the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea and move to explicitly support Beijing's position. Japan's Russia policy has been shaped by the goal of neutralizing the danger of Beijing and Moscow forging a united front against Japan. This, along with Abe's desire to resolve the countries' territorial dispute, accounts for his wooing of Putin. If the talks on a peace treaty ever reach fruition, there is also the possibility that the sides would include a clause that would commit them not to take part in hostile military activities against each other. While easing Japanese concerns about Russia contributing to hostile actions by China, this clause could appeal to Moscow, guaranteeing that the U.S.-Japan alliance would not be directed against it.

Kim Jong-un's turn to diplomacy in 2018 has done nothing to ease Japan's long-term security concerns, nor has Beijing's simultaneous adoption of a softer stance towards Tokyo. Japanese strategists remain deeply concerned about the threats posed by North Korea and China, as well as by the danger that Russia could increasingly make common cause with them. Added to this, the Abe government questions whether the Moon administration really is a security partner and fears the withdrawal of the U.S. commitment to the region, leaving a perilous situation of attempting to keep the North Koreans and Chinese down, the Americans in, and the Russians neutral. The urgent concern is North Korea; the Japanese leadership is hopeful that the current diplomatic efforts will fail, overlooking the risk that such a failure will return the region to the brink of a conflict from which Japan can hardly expect to escape unscathed, argues Brown. He adds that the Abe administration may find it increasingly difficult to continue its courtship of Putin's Russia. Domestically, there is growing criticism of Abe's failure to achieve real progress on resolving the territorial dispute. Meanwhile, while Trump himself is unlikely to criticize Abe for being too close to Putin, others in the U.S. security establishment may ask why their main ally in Asia continues to ardently pursue cooperation with the U.S. strategic competitor. Added to this, the Japanese leadership may have overestimated the extent to which Moscow shares its concerns about China since there is currently no evidence of any success altering Russia's China policy.

## Gaye Christoffersen, "Chinese, Russian, Japanese, and Korean Strategies for Northeast Asian Cross-Border Energy Connectivity"

Christoffersen reviews research in Northeast Asia on trilateral and multilateral initiatives for cross-border infrastructure connectivity involving China, Russia, both Koreas, and Japan. Infrastructure includes railway lines, cross-border oil and gas pipelines, and power grids. She compares the strategies of the five parties, recognizing that Northeast Asian institutionalization is understood to require a concrete functional area, which appears to be energy. However, there has long been a failure to form a regional political consensus on an energy regime; a core question unanswered is whether such a framework will be China-centered and largely bilateral in nature or truly multilateral, perhaps at South Korea's initiative.

Beijing has promoted a BRI that contains six energy channels, all of which are bilateral for importing oil, natural gas, and other raw materials into China. It is a network of energy infrastructure centered on China, using the BRI to create bilateral asymmetric dependencies.

South Korea's New Northern Policy (NNP) and the Asian Super Grid, involving Japan, Russia, Mongolia, South Korea, and China, have in common the fact that they do not conform to the BRI's strategy of bilateral energy channels and are not centered on China. These initiatives promote energy infrastructure connectivity that could form the core of a multilateral energy regime, the super grid on a commercial basis, and the NNP through a political consensus.

In 2018 Beijing changed its policies and studied incorporating Northeast Asia into BRI, primarily South Korea's NNP, which partners with Russia, but also the Asian Super Grid, a project centered on Mongolia and initiated by Japanese and South Koreans with Russia as a partner. Both of these projects interrupt the BRI's bilateral energy channels and undermine

older Chinese regional projects. Chinese analysts have suggested that Sino-Russian pipelines could form the core of a Northeast Asian energy regime, but there is no regional response to these suggestions.

Christoffersen recalls Park Geun-hye's Eurasia Initiative, which included development of international energy networks and was primarily focused on the Russian Far East and Central Asia. China was included in the concept of Eurasia, but it was not at the center. The Eurasian Initiative proposed trilateral cooperation among North Korea, South Korea, and Russia, as well as trilateral cooperation among North Korea, South Korea, and China, placing Seoul at the center. Christoffersen points to Russia's interest from 2016 in what it called the Russia-Japan energy bridge, meaning the Asia Super Grid. The Russian expectation was to make Siberia and the Russian Far East the hub of a regional energy network. Moon proposed the NNP at the third Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok. It included the economic and energy integration of the Russian Far East, North Korea, and South Korea. Moon's "nine bridges" of the NNP included a natural gas pipeline.

There are many known impediments: international sanctions on Russia and North Korea would block financial assistance from international organizations and companies; Russia and South Korea have different goals in trilateral cooperation; Russian companies want access to the South Korean market; and South Korea's goal is economic integration with North Korea. Some warn that Russia and the Koreans would have to coordinate their actions with China, in effect giving China veto power over Russian-Korean trilateral projects. With regard to the Asian Super Grid, Chinese researchers have argued that energy channels and infrastructure proposed by the BRI can resolve the problem of regional energy cooperation. Northeast Asian countries need oil and gas pipeline networks and power grids. BRI could supply investment through the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. BRI can be implemented bilaterally and does not initially require a multilateral framework, but rather could evolve into one as Japan and South Korea join the Sino-Russian economic corridor of oil and gas pipelines and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor. BRI promises political trust and an organizational answer.

Some analysts have argued that currently there is greater political will and vision that will enable a Northeast Asian energy regime, making it possible to combine China's BRI, Mongolia's Gobitec Project, South Korea's NNP, and Russia's New Eastern Policy. Yet, Christoffersen adds, they recognize that there is still an organizational deficit. The Chinese approach contrasts with the Japanese and South Korean ones; Chinese perceive regional infrastructure projects as a means to avoid market competition, and there is less emphasis on commercial viability. There is no evidence of Chinese economic feasibility studies prior to project implementation. Beijing has promoted coopting other regional projects, placing them under BRI to acquire political control.

The possibility of incorporating South Korean initiatives into the BRI began in 2016 with Chinese discussion of docking the Eurasia Initiative and the BRI using the China-Korea FTA as the framework. When Seoul shifted to the NNP, Chinese discussed docking BRI with it. In the Chinese understanding of docking, it is the means by which the NNP could be incorporated into the BRI. Chinese analysts considered BRI a larger, stronger, more enduring initiative with a greater capacity for implementation than NNP, but South Korean analysts question the benefits of BRI and critique its compatibility with Seoul's strategies. Moon expected BRI

would lessen Korean dependence on China, but critics thought dependency would increase because Beijing would use South Korea to develop China's Northeast provinces as a hub. By November 2018, Beijing was ready for BRI docking with NNP. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Xi proposed to Moon that South Korea participate in BRI, intending to incorporate the NNP into it. At that time Moon had not decided whether to join. Some Koreans suspected Xi's proposal was meant to force South Korea to choose between China and the U.S. during their trade war, Christoffersen added.

The puzzle of Northeast Asian energy infrastructure is how to link the three regional energy projects—BRI, Asian Super Grid, and the NNP—without BRI coopting and absorbing the other two projects. BRI's proposed infrastructure projects promise infrastructure connectivity in Northeast Asia. The other infrastructure initiatives are more multilateral, not exporting energy only to China. Beijing's response to these multilateral initiatives has been to try to run all multilaterals through China to keep China at the center. Given the fact that since the end of the Cold War, Northeast Asian regional energy cooperation has been seen as a basis for building a larger regional mechanism and a peace regime on the peninsula, the outcome will be important.

