

The United States-South Korea-North Korea Strategic Triangle in the Indo-Pacific

By Scott Snyder

The development of the concept of the Indo-Pacific strategy, since its adoption by the United States in 2017, has primarily been driven by the emergence of China as an object of strategic concern and a perceived threat in the United States and South Korea. The main impacts of a rising Chinese threat are potentially to overshadow and distract from—but not abandon—the U.S.-South Korea alliance prioritization of North Korea as the primary focus and main object it has defended against. A potential secondary impact may be to heighten the inclination on the part of U.S. and South Korean policymakers to subordinate policy toward North Korea to policy toward China as an instrument designed to force China to take responsibility for managing the North Korean threat.

The rise of China as a perceived threat and its impact on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea strategic triangle can be analyzed by considering changes over three periods of time. First, there is the baseline mode of interaction among the United States, South Korea, and North Korea during the 1990s, before China made itself felt as an influence on the Korean Peninsula. At that time, the U.S.-South Korea alliance interacted with North Korea largely independent of Chinese influence, and China had a minor impact on Korean Peninsula affairs. For instance, during the Geneva Agreed Framework and the formation of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) at the time of the first North Korean nuclear crisis, China played a marginal role and had little influence on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea dynamic.

Rather, the United States-South Korea-North Korea triangle during this time was primarily influenced by the nature and fluctuation of political leadership in South Korea between progressive and conservative administrations. These leadership configurations influenced North Korean tactical efforts to drive a wedge in U.S.-South Korea policy coordination by engaging with the United States and marginalizing South Korea (*tongmi bongnam*) during South Korean conservative administrations and seeking closer cooperation with South Korea (*uri minjok kkiri*) at the expense of the United States under South Korean progressive administrations. While China played a marginal role in inter-Korean

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relations, the primary concern animating China's policies toward the Korean Peninsula during this time emanated from a desire to manage the level of tension between the United States and North Korea rather than the pursuit of a peninsular strategy itself.

In the second phase during the 2000s and 2010s, China's role evolved from being a marginal actor to becoming an active, yet still somewhat distant, influence on peninsular affairs. For instance, China participated in the Four-Party Talks in the late 1990s and led the Six-Party Talks on North Korean denuclearization in the 2000s. During this phase, China was a primary actor and influence on the U.S.-South Korea dynamic with North Korea, but rising Chinese influence had the mixed effect of allowing China to be perceived as both a potential partner in constraining North Korea and a shield that protected North Korea from the impact of alliance policies designed to enhance pressure on the North. China's primary policy objectives toward North Korea were to maintain internal stability and enhance bilateral communications, but Beijing struggled to find economic, political, and cultural exchange instruments suitable to achieve its goals.

During this period, China expected that growing tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance under the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations would weaken the U.S.-South Korea alliance and strengthen China-South Korea relations. However, China failed to take into account Korean national sensitivities over the historical significance of the Goguryeo dynasty (37 BC to 668 AD) during the pursuit of its Northeast Project in the early 2000s to enhance the historical narrative of majority Han Chinese at the expense of ethnic minorities within China. As a result, China appeared surprised and dismayed by the subsequent Lee Myung-bak administration's efforts to restore the U.S.-South Korea alliance from 2008 onwards.

In the early 2010s, the initial stage of U.S.-China rivalry began to make itself felt alongside shifting political administrations in South Korea, characterized by efforts to facilitate progress in multilateral or parallel bilateral talks under progressive administrations and an emphasis on deterrence against North Korea under conservative administrations. North Korea responded by reluctantly participating in diplomacy under progressive South Korean administrations, while diplomatic talks involving North Korea broke down during South Korean conservative administrations.

During this period, the United States pursued a rebalancing strategy that drew attention to aspects of the U.S.-China strategic competition, generating Chinese concern regarding rising inter-Korean tensions and skepticism toward

the United States. In response to rising Chinese distrust of the United States and the emergence of a narrative among Chinese strategists that the U.S. global role following the Great Recession had entered into terminal decline while China was emerging as a prominent player in a multipolar global order, the prospects for U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea-related issues gradually eroded, despite pledges made by presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping at the 2013 Sunnylands summit to coordinate efforts to manage North Korea's nuclear pursuits.¹ A further barrier to South Korean efforts to secure Chinese cooperation on North Korea emerged in 2017 as a result of China's economic retaliation against South Korea for allowing the United States to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea in response to North Korea's steady development of short-range missiles capable of reaching the entire peninsula.

The emergence of the U.S. Indo-Pacific policy under the Donald Trump and particularly the Joe Biden administrations marks the third phase of development in the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship. In this phase, the primary influence of rising geostrategic rivalry on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle has been the reinforcing of the U.S.-South Korea alliance while China countered by reviving strategic ties with North Korea. To a certain extent, the reemergence of U.S.-China strategic rivalry brought the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle full circle to the Cold War days of superpower confrontation.

The initial impetus for the revival of China-North Korea ties came about ironically as a result of Trump-Kim summitry, which sparked Chinese anxieties that North Korea might move in the direction of the United States. But the deepening of the U.S.-China rivalry and the failure of U.S.-North Korean summitry provided North Korea with incentives to maximize its room for strategic maneuver as China has directly opposed U.S. policies on sanctions implementation through the UN Security Council since 2020.

Perhaps more importantly, converging shared perceptions between the United States and South Korea of China as a threat have enabled both countries to align their respective policies as well as to spend more time and attention focusing on China as the most serious long-term regional security threat. The scope of U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination has broadened and deepened to encompass China-related issues seemingly at the expense of attention to North Korea. In some quarters, especially in the United States, it appears that China has eclipsed North Korea as the focal point of coordination within the U.S.-South Korea alliance, meaning that there is less bandwidth in both governments to deal with the seemingly intractable and growing threat posed

by North Korea's nuclear and missile development. The broadened scope of U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination and the focus on China as the main strategic priority for both governments in combination with North Korea's continued unresponsiveness to U.S.-South Korea diplomatic efforts raise the temptation for policymakers to subsume policy toward North Korea as a subcomponent of policy toward China by trying to hold China responsible as an enabler of North Korean provocations.

This article outlines the evolution in perceptions of each of the three main actors in the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship, both with reference to their perceptions and approaches to each other and to the evolution and implications of their respective interactions with China. In addition, the chapter analyzes the main features and impacts of the emergence of U.S.-China rivalry on the postures and priorities of the United States, South Korea, and North Korea. Finally, I draw conclusions regarding the future of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship against the backdrop of China's rising power and U.S.-China rivalry as well as the strengthening prominence of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea and China-North Korea-Russia triangles. The U.S.-China rivalry has impinged on the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship by energizing competing strategic configurations between China, North Korea, and Russia on the one hand and the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the other.

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Relationship Following the End of the Cold War

During the Cold War, there was no active triangular relationship between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea due to the absence of diplomatic interaction between the United States and North Korea and the intermittent nature of inter-Korean relations primarily characterized by mutual confrontation. The end of the Cold War-style geopolitical confrontation and emergence of nuclear nonproliferation as the top U.S. policy concern following the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the way for the initial enablement of a triangular U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship. The U.S. policy emphasis on exclusive support for South Korea and rejection of bilateral dialogue with North Korea softened at the end of the Cold War as U.S. concern over nuclear proliferation spiked following the Persian Gulf War during the early 1990s.²

An initial high-level dialogue between the United States and North Korea occurred in 1992 following the U.S. withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula and North Korean pledges to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections of its nuclear facilities. But evidence of

unreported North Korean reprocessing activities collected during IAEA inspections of the North's 5-megawatt reactor led to North Korea's announcement of its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993. To resolve the standoff, the United Nations called for the United States and North Korea to engage in dialogue to avert a crisis the following May.³

Eighteen months of on-again, off-again U.S.-North Korean bilateral diplomacy between June 1993 and October 1994 resulted in the Geneva Agreed Framework, consisting of North Korean pledges to denuclearize in return for the provision of South Korean model proliferation-resistant light water reactors through the establishment of KEDO, an international consortium including the United States, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea.⁴ The agreement and its implementation generated constant tension between the United States and South Korea, which resented being cut out of talks on matters essential to its security, and North Korea, which resented South Korea's central role in constructing the reactors. Thus, the emergence of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle following the end of the Cold War was initially characterized by North Korean efforts to marginalize South Korea and exploit U.S.-South Korea alliance tensions. Throughout this period, China played a marginal role in diplomacy with North Korea and had no role in the establishment or implementation of KEDO.

Multilateral Diplomacy and Emergence of Chinese Influence

China's emerging influence on the Korean Peninsula was initially fueled by the establishment of a new triangular relationship among China, North Korea, and South Korea, which resulted from the normalization of China-South Korea relations in the early 1990s. China attempted to maintain its political influence with North Korea by implementing a framework that emphasized strict limits and priority on maintaining China-North Korea political relations while benefiting from enormous economic growth in the China-South Korea relationship. The triangular relationship also reflected South Korea's desire to gain strategic support or at least acquiescence from China in support of an improving inter-Korean relationship.⁵

The Four-Party Talks held in 1998 marked China's first involvement in multilateral negotiations concerning the Korean Peninsula since the armistice settlement was signed in 1953. The purpose of the talks, established in the mid-1990s as part of diplomatic efforts to promote diplomatic engagement with North Korea and provide humanitarian relief to the country in the midst of a severe famine, was to discuss measures to build confidence and bring about an end to the

Korean War. The talks made little if any progress, but they did open channels for communication between the United States and China and between China and South Korea on North Korea-related issues.⁶

China's clear motivations for engaging in talks were to manage the risks of U.S.-North Korea crisis escalation by supporting diplomacy and to prevent possible peninsular outcomes adverse to Chinese interests, including the possibilities of peninsular destabilization through military conflict or internal North Korean destabilization resulting from either the regime's collapse or its further nuclearization. At the same time, China's default position remained that the main problems rested with mistrust between the United States and North Korea and that China had little influence or ability to influence either the United States or North Korea.

Six-Party Talks: China-led Multilateral Diplomacy and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Relations

As a result of growing Chinese concerns that U.S.-North Korea confrontation might occur under the George W. Bush administration in the wake of the war in Iraq, China cautiously took up an active convening role in North Korea-focused diplomacy at the encouragement of the Bush administration through the establishment of the Six-Party Talks, which occurred between 2003 and 2008. Held in Beijing from 2003, a primary purpose of the Six-Party Talks was to bring the United States and North Korea together for bilateral dialogue with diplomatic support from China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.⁷ All parties had an interest in promoting peaceful denuclearization and building a diplomatic process through which to manage confrontation with North Korea, especially following that country's announcement of its NPT withdrawal and decision to restart its nuclear development.⁸ But those common objectives were subordinated to conflicting strategic interests that stymied denuclearization diplomacy.

China shepherded the establishment of a statement of principles regarding North Korea's denuclearization in which the parties agreed to a broad roadmap of actions intended to exchange concrete North Korean steps toward denuclearization for pledges to support North Korea's economic integration with the regional economy and to achieve normalization of relations with the United States and Japan.⁹ But the implementation process faced setbacks resulting from U.S. financial measures that targeted North Korean access to international banks, North Korea's decision to hold its first nuclear test, and disagreements over how to structure a declaration and verification process for the shutdown of North Korea's nuclear program.¹⁰

With the Six-Party Talks as an umbrella that facilitated multilateral diplomacy, various triangular interactions coexisted and interacted with each other. But the Six-Party Talks primarily served as a framework designed to facilitate bilateral U.S.-North Korean negotiations that remained at the heart of the process. For instance, China hosted a Six-Party dialogue in December 2006 following North Korea's first nuclear test that ended in a stalemate that was only broken following U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks in Berlin the following January.¹¹ A U.S.-North Korea bilateral agreement in Berlin paved the way for a return to Beijing and the announcement of tangible steps by North Korea toward denuclearization in exchange for the return of North Korean funds that had been frozen by a U.S. advisory at the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia.¹²

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle was active as part of Beijing-led multilateral diplomacy, but it proceeded alongside other triangular diplomatic configurations, including the U.S.-China-South Korea and U.S.-China-North Korea triangular interactions. Under the Bush and Roh administrations, lead negotiator Chris Hill closely consulted with South Korean representatives who supported the development of a U.S. diplomatic strategy and contributed vital suggestions for North Korea's denuclearization process as part of the Six-Party Talks.¹³ However, the Roh administration consulted closely with the United States and also sought to maximize its agency and flexibility through close consultations with Chinese counterparts. In addition, U.S.-Japan-South Korea and China-North Korea-Russia triangular diplomacy was present but did not contribute significantly to multilateral diplomacy under the Six-Party Talks.

Beijing's role as convener of the Six-Party Talks provided China with a foothold to assert diplomatic influence on the Korean Peninsula. As host of the talks, Beijing had a role to play as a potential channel between Seoul and Pyongyang, and also could take advantage of the Roh administration's desire for a more "independent" diplomatic role vis-à-vis the United States to promote stronger relations with South Korea.¹⁴ During the Roh administration, China's favorability in South Korea was quite high because of a rapidly expanding bilateral trade relationship, and South Korean investments in China designed to incorporate China's low wages and production costs as part of a South Korean supply chain to the United States and other industrialized countries. Moreover, many South Koreans anticipated at the time that China would replace the United States as the strongest power in Asia, making the idea of maintaining close relations with Beijing more attractive. In addition, the progressive Roh administration highly valued China's potential support for inter-Korean reconciliation.¹⁵

In fact, the Roh administration's objectives and preferred approach to North Korea at times seemed to align more closely with China's objectives than with those of the Bush administration. The Roh administration was skeptical regarding the efficacy of sanctions and actively sought to expand inter-Korean economic relations, through both the Mount Kumgang project and the expansion of the Kaesong economic zone. The Roh and Bush administrations maintained regular consultations on North Korea, but the relationship appeared to be hobbled by divergent preferences over sanctions versus economic engagement with the North. The combination of alliance management tensions between the two administrations and the rapid growth of China-South Korea bilateral ties generated an environment in which the China-North Korea-South Korea triangle appeared poised to supersede the relevance of U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relations.¹⁶

At the same time, China's economic interests in North Korea also clashed with the Roh administration's focus on inter-Korean economic integration, causing some anxiety among South Korean progressives that China's economic involvement with North Korea's mining sector might disadvantage South Korean influence in the North. Nonetheless, the end of the Six-Party Talks, South Korea's political transition from Roh Moo-hyun to Lee Myung-bak, renewed inter-Korean tensions, and Lee's restoration of prioritizing U.S.-South Korea alliance ties with the Obama administration led to a cooling of both China-North Korea-South Korea and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral interactions. At that time, China's spokesperson expressed disappointment in South Korea's focus on the United States by referring to the alliance as a "relic" of the Cold War.¹⁷

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangle Under Conservative South Korean Leadership

Under the conservative leaderships of the Lee and Park Geun-hye administrations, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle was defined by U.S.-South Korea coordination on responses to North Korean nuclear tests and management of crises in response to North Korean provocations, punctuated by sporadic and short-lived U.S.-North Korean and inter-Korean diplomacy. North Korean missile and nuclear tests challenged the Obama administration in its initial phase, causing a delay in the resumption of U.S.-North Korean dialogue. The murder of a South Korean tourist at Mount Gunggang similarly short-circuited the Lee administration's offers of diplomacy with North Korea.

The subsequent sinking of the Korean naval ship Cheonan and North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 generated crisis management challenges for the United States and South Korea over how vigorously to respond to North Korean provocations and reduced prospects for a return to diplomacy.¹⁸

The Obama administration reopened a dialogue in the summer of 2011 that was stalled by Kim Jong-il's death and Kim Jong-un's transition to power in December 2011. The ill-fated U.S. and North Korean announcement of parallel denuclearization pledges on February 29, 2012, what came to be known as the Leap Day Deal, fell apart within weeks as North Korea announced the resumption of missile testing.¹⁹

Inter-Korean efforts to resume dialogue only became possible under the Park administration in the summer of 2015 as a vehicle for managing the escalation of casualties and spiraling tensions at the DMZ resulting from North Korean landmines placed at a South Korean guard post.²⁰ The talks succeeded in calming the immediate crisis, but North Korea's January 2016 nuclear test led the Park administration to order the withdrawal of personnel from the Kaesong Industrial Zone, closing the last remaining venue for ongoing inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. The test also provided a rude awakening for Park, who was disappointed that Xi failed to reach out to South Korea following North Korea's nuclear test despite the extensive personal investment she had made in improving relations with Xi Jinping.²¹

Trump-Kim Summitry, South Korea's Role, and Prospects for a U.S.-China-North Korea Triangle

The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship reemerged as an important node of trilateral interactions under the Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in administrations, with the Moon administration playing the role of intermediary in an effort to bound the escalation of U.S.-North Korean tensions and reopen a pathway that ideally would lead to peaceful denuclearization in 2017. Initial prospects for the development of a triangular relationship between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea looked bleak against the backdrop of a steady drumbeat of North Korean nuclear and missile tests and the rising decibel level of Trump's threats regarding whose nuclear button was bigger, his threat to rain down "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on North Korea, and apocalyptic denigration of Kim Jong-un as "Rocketman" and threats to annihilate North Korea in his September 2017 speech at the UN General Assembly.²²

In the face of this escalation, the Moon administration actively pursued efforts to restore diplomatic communication between the United States and North Korea. Following Kim Jong-un's announcement of a pause in North Korean

testing in November 2017 and his subsequent expression of interest in joining the Pyeongchang Olympic Games, the Moon administration jumped at the opportunity to include North Korea and to use Olympics diplomacy to establish direct channels of communication between the United States and North Korea. Moon tried to engineer diplomatic encounters between high-level Trump administration officials and North Korean delegations at the opening and closing ceremonies, but failed on both occasions. Following the conclusion of the Olympic Games, Moon sent two special envoys to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong-un. Moon then sent both envoys to the White House with an invitation from Kim to Trump to hold a historic bilateral summit. Following a successful inter-Korean summit at Panmunjom, Moon again intervened to hold a secret meeting with Kim in May in an effort to put the U.S.-North Korea summit back on track after Trump announced that he would not go to Singapore. Throughout the spring of 2018, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral relationship showed unprecedented vitality in an effort to realize the Singapore summit between Trump and Kim.²³

But once the U.S.-North Korea bilateral relationship was established, South Korea went from intermediary to marginal actor. South Korean efforts to pursue an end-of-war declaration, beyond brief mention of the goal in the Singapore Declaration, did not generate follow-up due to apparent disinterest from the United States and North Korea. North Korean efforts to persuade South Korea to turn on the spigot of economic assistance to North Korea that had existed during the Roh administration were blocked by UN sanctions, and the Moon administration had neither the leverage to reverse sanctions nor the ability to circumvent them without U.S. cooperation.²⁴

The reopening of inter-Korean economic cooperation that Kim had envisioned following the September 2018 Pyongyang Summit did not materialize, leading Kim to abandon his commitment to “complete denuclearization” made in Singapore and instead requesting partial sanctions relief in return for partial denuclearization when he met Trump for the second U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019. But Trump rejected the proposal and the summit failed despite South Korea’s likely assurances behind the scenes to North Korea that the United States would take the “small deal.” The drama of the reversal in fortunes for inter-Korean relations was nowhere more apparent than in Trump’s third meeting with Kim at the DMZ in June 2019, with Moon standing as an awkward third wheel who was excluded from the meeting. Behind the scenes, the revival of Xi-Kim summitry during 2018-2019 supported and may have shaped the limits of Kim’s appetite for concessions to the United States.²⁵

Rather than exploiting the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea trilateral relationship to achieve its objectives, it became apparent that North Korea's objective was the establishment of a very different strategic triangle between the United States, China, and North Korea. This triangle was one in which a nuclear North Korea would finally be able to occupy the pivot position as a beneficiary of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China. Rather than following the Moon administration's hopes for an alignment in which North Korea might leave China's sphere of influence to join the United States and South Korea, North Korea envisioned itself at the center of a strategic rivalry between the United States and China in which North Korea would be the main beneficiary. But the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry inevitably resulted in China asserting its own strategic interest of using North Korea as a buffer, thereby increasing North Korea's dependency on China rather than enabling Kim Jong-un's dream of strategic autonomy and leverage vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing.

The Emergence of the U.S.-China Rivalry and U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangular Relations

Arguably, the high point of U.S.-China coordination to pressure North Korea in the direction of denuclearization came in 2017 with the UN Security Council's passage of an increasingly stringent series of resolutions that capped North Korean exports of critical materials and curbed North Korean export of labor as a means of capturing valuable foreign exchange that primarily went to state coffers. Alongside its backing for an increasingly stringent series of resolutions in response to North Korea's September 2017 nuclear test and a series of North Korean IRBM and ICBM tests, China imposed its own sanctions on bilateral trade with North Korea as an expression of displeasure with North Korea's expanding nuclear capabilities.²⁶

But Trump's announcement of a sudden shift from sanctions to summitry with Kim in March 2018 caused a sudden about-face in Chinese policy toward North Korea as Xi held a series of summits with Kim prior to and after the Trump-Kim summit meetings in Singapore and Hanoi.²⁷ China's reversal of its approach to North Korea coincided with the deterioration of U.S.-China relations under Trump and revealed China's distrust of U.S. strategic motives for pursuing direct summit diplomacy with North Korea.

The emergence of U.S.-China rivalry during the Trump administration has had the effect of removing the U.S.-China-North Korea triangle as a salient influence on U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular interactions, but in a form that

provides North Korea with greater latitude and freedom of action to the extent that it can exploit China's magnified regional influence in combination with the U.S.-China competition. To the extent that U.S.-China rivalry has had the indirect effect of lessening the likelihood of North Korean diplomatic activity with either the United States or South Korea, it has also reduced the salience of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship, bringing things full circle to a situation that carries the same restraints on diplomatic interaction that characterized most of the Cold War period, during which the diplomatic chasm between the United States and South Korea on the one hand and North Korea on the other hand appeared to be unbridgeable.

In the context of U.S.-China rivalry, North Korea has been able to gain greater freedom to maneuver vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea by using China as a shield against sanctions implementation and as a source of support that immunizes North Korea from U.S.-South Korean efforts, although ostensibly at some cost to North Korean autonomy because of Pyongyang's greater dependency on Beijing.

U.S.-South Korean Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Implications for the U.S.-South Korea-North Korean Triangular Relations

The Biden administration has successfully encouraged the adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategic framework as the primary point of departure for like-minded countries to announce their respective strategies toward China, deepening the impact of U.S.-China rivalry on the Korean Peninsula.²⁸ Regardless of whether China is named as the object of these strategies, it is clear that the framework is designed to strengthen coordination among like-minded countries and generate pushback against Chinese efforts to reframe regional relations in exclusively Sino-centric terms. South Korea's adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy also carries another connotation: the relative priority of U.S.-South Korea policy coordination; going forward may shift from an exclusive focus on deterrence against North Korea to one in which China becomes the main focal point for strategic coordination between the United States and South Korea.²⁹

Given decades of almost exclusive focus within the U.S.-South Korea alliance on deterring North Korea, a reframing of the Indo-Pacific as the main framework for U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination holds significant implications for the way in which the two countries work together to achieve alliance objectives. The first implication is that China may supersede North Korea as the main priority for alliance coordination or that the two allies may have differences in relative

priority as they manage the task of simultaneously pursuing defense and deterrence objectives against China and North Korea. To the extent that China supersedes North Korea as the preeminent “pacing challenge” for the alliance, the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea relationship will be pushed aside in favor of a focus on the U.S.-China-South Korea triangle.³⁰

Another more likely implication is that the United States and South Korea must manage potential prioritization differences that may arise as the United States focuses on China as the preeminent challenge while failing to give sufficient priority to managing North Korea, and South Korea remains fixed on the imminent dangers from North Korea’s expanded arsenal at the same time that it acknowledges a more distant and potentially consequential threat from China. The management of different priorities within the alliance is hardly new, but it is a challenge that will require time, effort, and possibly the adoption of new organizational structures to manage effectively.

A third implication of the adoption of parallel Indo-Pacific frameworks is that both allies must develop new coordination mechanisms designed to ensure that respective China policies are aligned while maintaining close policy coordination in response to North Korea. For instance, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command is the military institution that has the lead responsibility for coordinating potential military responses to China-related contingencies, but South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense has much more frequent contact with U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) on North Korea. As a practical matter, finding the right nodes of interaction between counterparts that have assumed shared responsibilities will be essential to enhancing inter-governmental coordination on the Indo-Pacific.

The Future of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea Triangular Relationship in the Context of U.S.-China Rivalry

The deepening U.S.-China rivalry has been accompanied by the rise in salience of competitive triangular relations between the U.S.-Japan-South Korea triangle on the one hand and the China-North Korea-Russia triangle on the other, overshadowing and decreasing the likely salience of the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle. As was the case during the Cold War, an overarching framework of bipolar strategic competition around the peninsula is likely to have the effect of cutting off avenues of communication across lines of rivalry, isolating and containing the prospect of meaningful interactions between the two Koreas or between the United States and North Korea. In this respect, the rise of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and accompanying deepening of U.S.-China rivalry returns the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangle to square one as an inactive triad constrained by a hostile geopolitical context.

As suggested earlier, the rise of U.S.-China rivalry offers benefits to North Korea to the extent that it is able to take advantage of the space opened up by growing U.S.-China distrust, but it also carries with it some constraints to the extent that North Korea's dependency on China as a primary patron has deepened. This circumstance explains in part the active North Korean diplomatic outreach to Russia, as part of its familiar Cold War strategy of playing off differences between Beijing and Moscow as a primary instrument by which to assert its independence.³¹ At the same time, the risk remains that North Korea, as a low priority actor in the context of deepening global strategic competition, may pursue opportunistic strategies to advance its aims despite the constraints imposed by its economic dependency on China.

There is also a risk that North Korea might view the shift in alliance focus and priorities in the direction of China as signifying that North Korea is getting less attention within the alliance. Such a perception might catalyze North Korea to probe for weaknesses that result from the shifting of attention toward China and away from North Korea as part of a risk-acceptant strategy of opportunism that takes advantage of the strategic distraction of major powers consumed with competing geopolitical priorities.

Finally, there is the risk that the prioritization of China as the main challenge facing the alliance will bring with it temptations to subordinate the North Korea issue to the China issue or to think of North Korea as a subcomponent of the China challenge. Already, frustration with North Korea's non-response and lack of accountability has generated recommendations that the United States and South Korea should hold China responsible for continuing to enable North Korea as a threat to the U.S.-South Korea alliance.³²

The respective Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and South Korea certainly provide a blueprint for understanding the extent of U.S.-South Korean coordination necessary to achieve new policy goals in response to a rising China. The introduction of such a strategy broadens and deepens the focus of the alliance and opens a wide array of expanded opportunities to build close coordination between governments in new areas. But it will be important for such coordination efforts to build on rather than displace the foundation provided by decades of close coordination on policy toward North Korea. The U.S.-South Korea-North Korea triangular relationship that has been central to understanding the peninsular security dynamic for so long is now being supplemented, not yet supplanted, by an equally grave and essential focus on managing the China threat.

Endnotes

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