

**“Working at Cross Purposes?
New Challenge to the Alliance in Negotiating with North Korea.”**

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Introduction

Almost exactly one year ago, on January 18, 2018, Donald Trump met with his senior national security advisors to talk about the value of alliances. This was only the latest discussion – or argument – that he had with his team on this subject. This time, Trump asked rhetorically at one point, “What do we get by maintaining a massive military presence on the Korean Peninsula?”

For those of us who value the ROK-U.S. alliance without question, Trump’s query may come as a surprise. Actually, it should not be. Trump’s beliefs on U.S. external policy were formed over thirty years ago, and they were outside the American mainstream. He believed, and apparently still believes, that our closest allies and partners are “cheating” America on trade and free-riding on the U.S. security commitment.

Let me be clear. In my humble opinion, Mr. Trump’s views were wrong when he formulated them and are wrong today. Fortunately, the President’s national security team has understood that alliances and forward deployment have been a critical element U.S. national security strategy since the late 1940s. They have understood that the value of alliances cannot be measured using the sort of simplistic quantitative measures that President Trump uses. What quantitative value, after all, can we place on shared sacrifice? All of this is true of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Unfortunately, Trump has no such understanding. James Mattis resigned and then was fired as Secretary of Defense in part because he and Mr. Trump disagreed so profoundly with him on the centrality of alliances to American security strategy.

Even when allies agree on the identity of the adversary state, as Washington and Seoul have agreed regarding North Korea; and that even when the adversary poses an existential challenge to the target state, building adequate deterrence is hard work. Through the Combined Forces Command, strong public support, and a shared vision by our past political leaders, our alliance has done that hard work. I am inclined to believe that North Korean leaders understand that our combined capabilities are robust, and that our clear and common intention to resist aggression if, God forbid, deterrence fails is highly credible. We should not take for granted the success of our alliance in avoiding a second Korean War.

At the same time, we should not automatically assume that North Korea will forever have evil intentions toward the ROK. *At least hypothetically*, we should remain open to the possibility that leaders in Pyongyang might conclude that Seoul and Washington have won the long, twilight struggle and that they should revise North Korea’s grand strategy and place relations with Seoul and Washington on a new, not-hostile, basis. At times, such a change in policy by Pyongyang

has been hard to imagine but we can't rule it out. (Actually, the possibility that DPRK leaders would change direction in this way has been the premise of efforts like the Six-Party Talks.)

Therefore, our alliance must be prepared to win the peace – if peace is possible – just as it has learned to deter war. If you will, it must be prepared to pivot for peace. It must make that pivot *with skill*, because taking risks for peace can sometimes be more difficult than deterring war. It requires a common view of the adversary's intentions – that is, whether it seriously wants peace or is just engaged in deception. It requires a shared strategy for defining and deploying concessions needed to induce concessions by the other side. The fear of abandonment that infects an alliance designed for defense also plagues an alliance that tries to pivot to peace-making. In the 1970s, the leaders of South Vietnam and Taiwan were profoundly disappointed in how the United States tried to build peace with North Vietnam and China.

To return to my opening point, it is a lot harder for our alliance to pivot to peace when the President of the United States has his own peculiar views of the value of our alliance and how to set the terms for peace. It is even more difficult when political leaders in both Washington and Seoul have similar views about setting the balance point between deterrence and peace, views that are different from those of their national security establishments.

Past Efforts and Today

Of course, this is not the first time that the United States and others have seen merit in testing North Korea's willingness to change its capabilities and intentions in ways that would benefit the ROK, the United States, and the entire Northeast Asian region. There were attempts in the mid-1990s (the Agreed Framework), and the mid-2000s (the Six-Party Talks). In my view, peace on the Peninsula was also the goal of Barack Obama's sanctions-based approach, even though negotiations never occurred. The logic that ran through all these efforts was that Pyongyang would only consider denuclearization if it were convinced that doing it was a necessary condition for achieving economic growth and regime survival, and that talks would only occur when it began making real concessions.

The degree of alignment between Washington and Seoul varied during these attempts. The best period was probably during the time that Obama was the American president and Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye was ROK presidents. Among other things, consultation between the two governments was close and the each president was of one mind with his/her national security establishment. But each of these three efforts ended in failure because, I would argue, North Korea thought that it ultimately could get prosperity without giving up its nuclear weapons and programs.

President Moon has been systematic and dedicated in his effort to create a more peaceful Korean peninsula. His path towards peace has a clear logic: that is, North Korea truly believes that the United States is an existential threat, for which nuclear weapons and ICBMs are the only effective deterrent; and that giving priority to making a formal peace and promoting good inter-Korean relations and economic growth in the North first will together moderate its hostile behavior. Denuclearization (removing Pyongyang's most dangerous capabilities) would be nice to have, but what makes those capabilities dangerous is not their mere existence but Pyongyang's

profound insecurity and the reckless ways it seeks to mitigate insecurity. Making peace now will create the best basis for denuclearization later, but it is important and valuable for its own sake.

Now I don't happen to agree with President Moon Jae-in's logic, just as I disagreed with the logic of Barack Obama and Lee Myung-bak (more on that later). I believe that deferring denuclearization until a later time will definitely ensure that it never happens. But I do give Presidents Moon, Obama, and Lee credit for trying to develop a coherent approach that links means and ends. I can't say the same for President Trump. His approach *seems* to be in the same conceptual ballpark as President Moon, but it is driven by his penchant for improvisation that boosts his ego, not a serious effort to set goals and define a path to reach them.

The Problem of Dysfunctional Policy-Making

President Trump's approach has another serious flaw: the division within the policy making process. In August last year, Daniel Sneider, a scholar at Stanford University, published an illuminating article in *Tokyo Keizai* entitled "Behind the Chaos of Washington's Korea Policy." And "chaos" is a good word. One reason for the chaos is the fundamental split between the President and his national security team over key issues like North Korean intentions, the value of summits, and so on. The national security team is united in its pessimism about where North Korea would like to go. It believes that Trump-Kim summits hurt U.S. interests. Sneider quotes a well-informed former official who told him, "The bureaucracy is unifying to protect the world from Trump. They do not conceal their complete frustration and alarm with Trump."¹ The other reason for the chaos is that Mr. Trump instinctively dislikes and orderly, institutionalized process. For him, creating chaos allows him to dominate the policy process.

My impression is that President Moon's administration is more united behind his policy approach. Now I am sure there are tensions differences among various policy institutions. For example, there has been media reporting of differences within the Moon administration on how much to inform, coordinate, and consult with the Trump administration. But President Moon's policy team supports his basic goals and strategy. Compared to the Trump administration, the Moon administration appears to be a well-oiled machine. This policy unity gives Mr. Moon considerable freedom of policy action to lead the ROK where he wants to take it. He also benefits from North Korea's current restraint on missile and nuclear tests, China's support for Seoul's policy, and the fact that Donald Trump sometimes acts in parallel with President Moon and against his own national security team.

Problems in Alliance Coordination

In his August 2018 article, Dan Sneider reports that members of the Trump national security team have been afraid that Seoul will press ahead with engagement with the North and leave the issue of denuclearization for Washington to handle directly with Pyongyang. To put it differently, because of the differences in approach within the Trump administration and between it and the Moon administration, it has become very difficult for the alliance to operate *as an alliance* to craft a common approach to negotiating with North Korea, with the U.S. national

¹ Daniel Sneider, "Behind the Chaos of Washington's Korea Policy," *Tokyo Keizai*, August 27, 2018 (<https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/234272>).

security team at fundamental at odds with both Trump's own impulses and with President Moon's goals.

As Special Advisor Moon Chung-in told the *Global Times* in December, "The US has asked us to slow down inter-Korea exchange and cooperation by fine-tuning it with US-DPRK relations."² A key issue is sanctions on North Korea. The Moon administration believes that at least gradual lifting of sanctions is a necessary and effective way in inducing cooperation from Pyongyang. The Trump administration (but not necessarily Trump himself) believes that maintenance of sanctions is the best way to induce genuine concessions.

In November, Seoul and Washington created a process mechanism – the U.S.-ROK Working Group – to facilitate this "fine-tuning." The Working Group had its first meeting on November 20th. Having this procedural mechanism may be very useful in aligning the U.S. and ROK positions. Thus, in his *Global Times* interview, Special Advisor Moon said, "Until real progress is made in the direction of denuclearization, we will comply with the UN Security Council sanction resolutions."³

Still, although Moon Chung-in believes there are things that Pyongyang can and should do on denuclearization, he does believe that Washington is taking the wrong approach by insisting that sanctions relief will come after complete denuclearization. He says: "South Korea has been working very hard at mediating between Washington and Pyongyang, but the two parties so far have been too rigid. There should be words for words, commitments for commitments and actions for actions. But *both sides* are lacking actions. It's time for actions."

Some might say that in fact Washington and Seoul are pursuing different goals. It's probably more accurate that both have the same list of objectives but each ranks those goals in different ways. Complicating matters, it is definitely true that President Trump and his advisors are pursuing different, antithetical goals. These differences make it difficult, if not impossible, to craft a common negotiating approach towards Pyongyang, which creates a great advantage for Kim Jong Un, since he can play the two Presidents off against the U.S. national security team.

Moreover, while it is easy to use terms like "denuclearization" and "peace" in a general way, as I have done, these are actually very complicated packages of policy problems. Take "denuclearization" first. Earlier this year, David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, laid out the following key targets of any serious denuclearization effort:

- Plutonium program, including any plutonium and its production, separation, and storage capabilities;
- Uranium enrichment program, including all highly enriched uranium;
- Thermonuclear materials production program;
- Nuclear weapons and associated missile and other delivery systems;
- Nuclear weaponization, including sites to research, develop, manufacture, test, and maintain fission only and fission/thermonuclear nuclear weapons;

² "How to Break Stalemate on Korean Peninsula," *Global Times*, December 20, 2018 (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1132832.shtml#.XBtxH4UU0mw.twitter>).

³ Ibid.

- Nuclear, WMD, and missile proliferation activities; and
- North Korea's illicit nuclear and missile trade and smuggling networks for its own and possibly others' nuclear or missile programs.

Each of these involves a mass of information that we do not yet have. Some of these tasks involve facilities that the United States, the ROK, and others suspect to exist but whose location is mostly unknown.

Assuming that North Korea is willing seriously to undertake denuclearization, Dr. Albright anticipates a three stage process: first, a freeze; second, dismantlement; and third, the DPRK's return to compliance with the NPT. Appropriate verification is required at each stage. Obviously, this is a very complicated agenda that would take a long time to carry out. Dr. Siegfried Hecker estimates fifteen years. We should have no illusions about how demanding a challenge it would be truly to denuclearize North Korea.

A peace accord might not be quite as daunting but it would still require a lot of work. Ms. Duyeon Kim, who is affiliated with the Center for a New American Security in Washington, DC, wrote an excellent analysis of the problems in September.⁴ She highlights the need to distinguish three elements of "peace": a peace accord, a peace treaty, and a peace regime. She also identifies a number of key issues. How do these relate to each other both in terms of substance and sequence? How do they relate, both in sequence and substance to denuclearization? What are the implications of each instrument for key elements of the current war-prevention regime: the armistice, the UN Command, U.S. forces in Korea, and so on? For each instrument, which parties would be signatories (China is the big question mark here)? In a peace treaty, would there be an understanding on conventional arms control (especially North Korea's forward-deployed forces)? Would a peace treaty require both North and South to amend their constitutions, each of which regards the entire Peninsula as its sovereign territory?

In short, there are a lot of complex issues that would have to be addressed for both denuclearization and a peace treaty and peace accord. I have some doubt that Seoul and Washington has done much work to prepare for negotiating on these issues. Even in an environment of general trust, reaching consensus with Pyongyang would be difficult. Quick solutions are unlikely.

A More Basic Problem

In my personal view, this policy complexity reflects a problem that is more fundamental than the mismatch between the Trump and Moon administrations. Simply put, the deal that the ROK, the United States, and others have offered to Pyongyang over the years is objectively a bad deal for North Korea.

In successive negotiations, our side has called on North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and programs in a verifiable way in return for security guarantees and economic benefits. But think about the tradeoff involved here. We have asked North Korea to do give up the capabilities that it

⁴ Duyeon Kim, "What's in a Name? Korean 'Peace' and Breaking the Deadlock," *War on the Rocks*, September 14, 2018 (<https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/whats-in-a-name-korean-peace-and-breaking-the-deadlock/>).

believes are the best assurance of its security, in return for a change in our intentions, a change we would make through security guarantees and an end to sanctions. Yet whereas we have demanded the irreversible end of the North's nuclear *capabilities*, our *intentions* can be easily reversed. At least North Korea would have reason to think so, particularly after the Trump administration reneged on the Iran nuclear deal that involved a similar set of tradeoffs. Even if this asymmetric trade-off with North Korea were executed in a staged way, the chances of one side or both reneging is high. The only reason, I think, that Pyongyang would accept such an asymmetric deal is that is if it truly trusts the United States and the ROK, which it viscerally does not.

So in my very pessimistic view, to have based our policy on the assumption that North Korea would really denuclearize in a serious way, either now or later or much later, was flawed from the outset. For a long time, we have pretended that a mutually acceptable negotiated outcome was possible.

Even if nuclearization is impossible, we must ask what is fundamentally wrong with President Moon's approach, which puts the benefits for North Korea at the beginning instead of later in the process. If by addressing Pyongyang's fears we moderate its behavior, what is wrong with pretending that serious, verifiable denuclearization is possible, even if we know that it is not?

First of all, I don't believe that the South Korean public would be prepared to accept being vulnerable to a permanently nuclear North Korea, once that became obvious. Japan certainly would be unhappy with an outcome that left it to face not one nuclear power (China) but two. Whatever happened in the tragic past, I believe, South Korea should keep in mind Japan's interests now and in the future.

Second, I worry that even in the context of a formal peace, a nuclear North Korea would behave in ways that are fundamentally destabilizing. President Moon's approach might change North Korea's *behavior*, at least for a time, but it would not necessarily change its intentions. Those intentions are still the dissolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance and bringing about unification more on its terms than Seoul's. And why would Pyongyang think that the creation of a formal peace would place achievement of those goals further away?

Finally, there is the real possibility that North Korea would be more reckless once it believes that Seoul has accepted its nuclear weapons arsenal, at least on a de facto basis. It would feel freer to manufacture incident and increase tensions (think back to 2010) in the belief that the U.S. nuclear deterrent is no longer so reliable and the ROK-U.S. alliance is no longer so robust. This dynamic, the "stability-instability paradox," would put the initiative in Kim Jong Un's hands. He would have new ways to pursue North Korea's fundamental and unchanging objectives.

Realistically, North Korea might change its behavior for a while but will give up neither its nuclear capabilities nor its revisionist intentions. A mutually acceptable, negotiated solution is impossible. Consequently, we really face just two options. One is containment and the other is appeasement (the United States has no military option because of the risk it creates for South Korea). Please note that I am not using the word "appeasement" in a derogatory way. Sometimes

appeasement is the only reasonable strategy available to a country facing a strong and reckless adversary. Think of Finland in the Cold War.

I would say that the Trump national security team is already pursuing a kind of containment, while South Korea and Donald Trump are already pursuing a version of appeasement. Each approach has its limitations. Containment will only work if it includes China, but China has moved into the appeasement camp. Appeasement will only work if it induces the adversary to exercise restraint and moderate its intentions on a long-term basis, something I believe North Korea would be unwilling to do.

I hope I am wrong. I actually hope that President Moon is correct in his assumptions, his approach, and expectations. At this point, however, I believe that what drives North Korea is not insecurity but long-term, unsatisfied greed. "Peace" without denuclearization will be anything but peaceful. In the meantime, however, the divisions within the Trump administration and between it and the Moon administration severely handicap us in negotiating with Pyongyang.