Overview: Purpose, Scope, and Assumptions

This paper takes a fresh look at the current alignment of major power stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula, with a particular focus on US, ROK, and Japanese core interests and priorities. This paper grows out of the findings of a March 2017 Mansfield Foundation study group (LINK) which found significant overlap among major power interests on the Peninsula and a June 2018 policy retreat to draft a rough roadmap (LINK) for next steps to promote peace and denuclearization on the Peninsula. All key stakeholders seek to end the Korean War, denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and establish durable peace there, as well as promote economic growth, both on the Peninsula and in the region. But this rough alignment on broad objectives masks significant points of divergence, not only on how nations define and prioritize the common goals, but also in their assessment of the most effective tools to make progress.

No over-the-horizon radar can resolve all of the variables that will affect long-term issues such as the best formula for unification of the two Koreas, the endurance of the U.S. alliances with ROK and Japan, the resilience of extended deterrence, or the likelihood the U.S. will withdraw its military forces from the peninsula in the wake of a successful peace and denuclearization process. Instead, I have organized my analysis around a few key short and medium-term questions:

1) How does the *framing* of the DPRK challenge influence our thinking?
2) What are the *core objectives* for each power and their *maneuvering room*?
3) Can the stakeholders find enough common ground to shore up the skeletal framing of the [Singapore Declaration](https://www.mansfieldfoundation.org/policy-research/papers/2018-06-structure-for-peace-and-denuclearization-on-the-korean-peninsula) and build the foundation for lasting peace and security mechanism for the Peninsula?

My analysis incorporates five common sense assumptions:

1) Unity of vision and coherent action by the “five” powers of the “Six Party Talks” will make the progress *more* likely, while misalignment on priorities, tactics, and end goals will *hinder* it.
2) None of the core stakeholders on the Peninsula is willing to accept North Korea de jure as a nuclear weapons state, having tolerated living with a nuclear-armed DPRK for the past 13 years.

3) It appears inconceivable that the DPRK will abandon its nuclear weapons unilaterally (particularly in the near-term), without the hard work of diplomats.

4) A careful study by Sigfried Hecker determined that even an expedited denuclearization effort would likely require 5-10 years to accomplish. (LINK) Lifting any sanction would require concerted action by many parties, including the UN Security Council, the U.S. Congress, the ROK National Assembly, and the Japanese Diet.

5) Although the United States, ROK, and Japan have often been out of sync with respect to their appetite for diplomacy with the DPRK, all remain willing to pursue diplomatic engagement with Kim Jong-un with a sense of urgency given respective political time-lines. Unfortunately, the priority attached to DPRK engagement has dropped precipitously in the United States with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uncertainties: A global pandemic and other exogenous factors

Although the ROK has been effective in containing the spread of COVID-19, we don’t know how bad the situation is in the DPRK; however, it seems inconceivable that the North has escaped the virus. Ultimately, the virus and the global response to it could actually catalyze the Korean Peninsula peace process. But for now, the pandemic is making it harder, at least in Washington, to obtain high level attention to the persistent challenge posed by DPRK’s nuclear weapons program. Even prior to the pandemic, the leaders of the United States, ROK, China, Japan, Russia, and the DPRK all had many tasks on their “to do” lists, which often intrude on diplomatic efforts and cause leaders to miss opportunities. The race riots currently sweeping across the United States have dramatically shrunk President Trump’s maneuvering room and undermined his political strength, making any bold steps on North Korea policy extremely unlikely.

Question One: “Don’t Think of an Elephant”

As George Lakeoff famously observed, the framing of an issue – to include the words and metaphors used to describe it – can affect whether political leaders can marshal support for a particular policy initiative. The divided Korean Peninsula lends itself easily to Cold War, zero-sum metaphors: A game of chicken – with the US, ROK, and Japan steering an 18-wheeler hurtling down a Texas highway toward an on-coming Chinese-made Volkswagen

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1 Linguist and philosopher George Lakoff explored how metaphors and linguistic construction can affect outcomes in political debate in his brilliant manuscript, Don’t Think of an Elephant
Passat sedan carrying China, Russia, and the DPRK. Regardless of how confident both drivers may feel about themselves, there will be no winners if the two trucks collide.

Cold War “us-them” thinking is becoming more popular in both Washington and Beijing. Some U.S. experts go so far as to assert that the United States should reject any approach that fails to deprive China of a sphere of influence in Northeast Asia. (link to CNAS paper). The rationale behind echoes rhetoric found in core Trump Administration policy documents, including the National Security Strategy, dividing the world between the forces of repression and the forces of freedom and openness led by the United States, its treaty allies, and those states qualifying for membership in the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” The geometry of this applied to the Korean Peninsula is three versus three.

This framing is antiquated, misleading, and ultimately self-defeating. The United States, ROK, China, Japan, and Russia are actually surprisingly well aligned when it comes to the nuclear issue – especially their unified opposition to any North Korean nuclear tests. Although their motives may differ, all hope the DPRK will bring itself into closer alignment with broadly respected international norms of behavior. In sum, they are looking in the same general direction, but since the Six Party Talks came to naught, they are traveling in separate vehicles, following different roadmaps. The lack of coordination among the five has proved to be inefficient, if not counterproductive, maximizing the chance that one or more parties will take a wrong turn, get lost, or break down and get left behind.

To make progress on the Korean Peninsula, multilateral cooperation is not optional. Although the geometry for multilateral negotiations is more complex than for bilateral talks, a multilateral framework for dialogue does not necessarily mean multilateral negotiations, per se. From its inception, the Six Party Talks served more as a platform for an ever-changing constellation of two and three-party talks than as a true six-sided game of diplomacy. In the face of the DPRK’s stance, only closely coordinated actions by the other five have a chance to succeed. Tight cooperation is particularly important among the three allies (United States, ROK, and Japan) and between the United States and China.

**Question Two: Assessing Convergence and Divergence of Interests**

Of course cooperation assumes alignment on core objectives. The good news is that the United States, ROK, and Japan are sufficiently aligned on the broad goal of denuclearization for the allies to make progress toward a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. Moreover, even China and Russia seek denuclearization. In fact, none of the key stakeholders, apart from the DPRK, will be satisfied by a long-term outcome that sees North Korea emerge as a de jure nuclear weapons state on the Korean Peninsula.
The more troubling news, however, is that significant gaps exist with respect to how to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The United States and Japan are more inclined to impose new sanctions and less willing to lift existing sanctions on the DPRK than are ROK, China, and Russia, especially when it comes to DPRK missile tests. Japan has consistently objected strenuously to any DPRK missile launches and favored the imposition of new sanctions in response to these violations of UN Security Council Resolutions. Washington has generally aligned itself with Japan on the issue, although President Trump has differentiated between short range and long range missile tests, describing the former as permitted under the understanding he reached with KJU in Singapore. By contrast, the ROK, China, and Russia all seem to have concluded that UN sanctions have outlived their usefulness. China and Russia have even floated a proposal to relax sanctions as an incentive to induce cooperation from the DPRK.

It should come as no surprise that the DPRK is badly out of alignment with the U.S. with respect to its emphasis on the peace and normalization components of the Singapore Declaration. Pyongyang demands that the United States relax sanctions and remove other measures the DPRK considers as “hostile policy.” Washington has no intention of doing so. This misalignment helps explain the DPRK’s sluggish response to offers of engagement by the United States and ROK for talks, and its development of military programs.

Finally, great misalignments can be found when exploring the “human dimension” to the challenges. The five parties differ markedly in their willingness to invest time and resources to address humanitarian issues (e.g. food security and public health), to promote reunion visits for divided families, or to stand up for the human rights of North Koreans, including those working abroad.

**Question Three: How Much Maneuvering Room?**

Each of the key stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula operates within certain boundaries – set both by economic and military resources and political strength.

**DPRK: Weak, Yet Flexible**

Paradoxically, the weakest of the parties in terms of resources – the DPRK – probably enjoys the greatest overall maneuvering room, and has a leader who can act swiftly to change the trajectory of his nation. No other leader enjoys the ability to turn on a dime that Kim Jong-un enjoys. He controls all the levers of power in the DPRK, including the Korean Workers Power and the Korean People’s Army. He doesn’t have to contend with opposition political parties, requires no Senate approval for a peace treaty, and does not need to worry that his domestic media outlets will criticize him for cutting a “bad deal” with President Trump. In fact, Kim Jong-un knows that US Presidents facing re-election – especially if the race looks close or uphill – may be more pliant than those just starting their terms.
USA: Massive Resources, Limited Bandwidth

The United States enjoys massive asymmetric advantages over the DPRK in every resource area, except one – political maneuvering room. Having already declared success in his effort to denuclearize the DPRK, and having touted his special friendship with Kim Jong-un, President Trump has been reluctant to characterize the current stalemate in talks as anything other than a minor setback. President Trump in late March even wrote a letter to KJU underscoring his continued support for the peace process and offering assistance to the DPRK in light of the COVID epidemic. But in a frustrating turn of events for special envoy Steve Biegun, Pyongyang has shown no willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations in the absence of a specific and bold proposal by the United States. No new working level talks have been scheduled since the nuclear talks in Stockholm last October that the DPRK abruptly ended.

Politically, President Trump is engaged in a desperate re-election struggle. His approval ratings hovering in the low 40s, and the double threat of a recession brought on by COVID-19 and race riots fueled by long-standing criminal justice inequities argue against taking any risky moves in the realm of foreign policy. And President Trump has repeatedly downplayed the likelihood of making rapid progress with the DPRK. Nonetheless, President Trump is not an ordinary leader and these are not ordinary times. While COVID-19, a recession, and civil unrest will certainly command most of the administration’s attention, President Trump could still seek opportunity abroad to burnish his reelection prospects. An “October Surprise” remains possible, but it would be a risky move.

ROK: Keep Hope Alive

President Moon Jae-in finds himself far down the path of engagement with DPRK, hoping others will join him. No leader in the region has invested more political capital in the endeavor. Despite some with the DPRK, the reality is that the ROK acting alone cannot convince the DPRK to denuclearize, nor can he ignore the fact that there is not much appetite in Washington to support further inter-Korean rapprochement. A US-DPRK deal remains imperative if the DPRK is ever to take the dramatic steps necessary to eliminate its nuclear weapons program, and there is simply no evidence that such a deal is in the offing. President Moon has gone about as far as he can in improving inter-Korean relations without overstepping the limits imposed by the UN Security Council. President Moon can seek US support for limited steps on humanitarian issues permitted under the comprehensive sanctions regime – indeed, he has done so – but he cannot fundamentally alter the international posture on sanctions absent concrete steps by the DPRK toward compliance with UN Security Council Resolutions. At the other end of the spectrum, President Moon cannot significantly harden his position toward the North without alienating his progressive base, nor can he afford serious friction with Washington over his approach to the North.

China: Xi’s flexibility with a balanced approach
President Xi Jinping has moved decisively over the past seven years to consolidate his hold over the Communist Party of China. With power unrivaled since the era of Mao following his reappointment in March 2018, President Xi enjoys broad latitude over all foreign and domestic policies of the PRC.

Despite the worsening of China-US relations and Beijing’s heavy-handed approach towards the U.S.-ROK decision to deploy THAAD, President Xi has steadily enhanced China’s influence over events on the Korean Peninsula over the past two years. He has met four times with Kim Jong-Un, and has sustained, and arguably increased, China’s economic leverage over the DPRK. He has walked a careful line on UN sanctions, allegedly allowing some leakage along the border and at sea, but making a show of returning many guest workers and cracking down on the trade in sanctioned dual-use and military goods. After a brief period of distancing itself from the DPRK, President Xi seems to have accepted the fact that China must, as Bill Perry counsels, deal with North Korea as it is, and not as they might wish it to be.

Having consolidated power at home and perceiving US leadership to be in decline, President Xi has moved to fill the vacuum, authoring proposals for limited UN sanctions relief designed to coax the DPRK into fresh steps on peace and denuclearization. He has tried to shore up relations with President Trump by signing a phase one trade agreement, and to restore more normal relations with Japan. Relations with ROK began to recover with the Xi-Moon meeting in December, 2019, and the two leaders exchanged messages of solidarity with respect to COVID-19 in late February. In sum, Xi Jinping seems poised to resume a leadership role on the peninsula not seen since the PRC last hosted the Six Party Talks more than a decade ago.

Russia: Spoiler Alert

As Artyom Lukin wrote at the end of last year, “Russia’s policy toward North Korea has followed the pattern well-established since the early 2000s: maintaining friendly ties with Pyongyang, while closely coordinating with China and generally following Beijing’s lead on Korean peninsula issues. The Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang trio has clearly emerged, with China as its core, and it has effectively negated Washington’s maximum pressure campaign on the North.”

Russia has finally begun to raise its own profile. For years, President Putin’s modus operandi has been generally to support non-proliferation and peace initiatives on the Korean following China’s lead, even while occasionally looking for areas where he can disrupt U.S. initiatives or play the spoiler. Moscow has become a surprising de facto interlocutor between Washington and Pyongyang, while maintaining close coordination with Beijing. To the

2 https://www.38north.org/2019/12/alukin122319/
disbelief of many, given the overall sour state of U.S.-Russia relations, Washington and Moscow maintain regular, quiet diplomatic dialogue about the Korean Peninsula.

Russia’s interest in peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula is linked to its aspirations to develop and bring the vast oil, gas, and other natural resources of the Russian Far East to the marketplace of Northeast Asia. Russia has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in infrastructure projects designed to position Moscow to profit from progress toward peace and stability in the region.

Russia, like China, believes that the only pathway towards a denuclearized and truly peaceful Korean Peninsula lies through a comprehensive deal between Washington and Pyongyang. From Moscow’s vantage point, the DPRK will not give up its nuclear ambitions in the absence of a major course adjustment by Washington, normalizing bilateral relations and offering serious economic incentives and security guarantees.

**Question Three: How to Harmonize Approaches**

**Recommendation One: Seize the Day**

Assumed to be a *de facto* nuclear weapons state, DPRK will stubbornly resist efforts to convince it to abandon its nuclear arsenal. If the international community, led by the United States, does not put a truly bold piecemeal proposal on the table soon, the prospect of a non-nuclear DPRK may become moot. Over the next few months, there still exists a tiny window of opportunity for the United States and the ROK to put a floor under the denuclearization and peace processes and make a return to “fire and fury” high tension environment less likely in 2021 - Regardless of whether Trump wins reelection or Biden prevails, the DPRK seems likely to continue developing its nuclear “deterrent,” absent new U.S. initiatives.

**Recommendation Two: Avoid Cold War Thinking**

Assuming it can summon the energy to revitalize DPRK diplomacy, Washington’s next step should be to change its framing of the dynamic at play on the peninsula; a joint road trip for all six parties rather than a game of chicken between two Cold War superpower adversaries and their respective allies. The United States will not tolerate being relegated to a subordinate position with the US-DPRK security dynamic at the core of the denuclearization issue. Just as the United States and China cannot bring peace and denuclearization to the peninsula absent buy-in from ROK and DPRK, North and South Korea cannot solve the security dimension of the problem without concurrence by the United States, and ultimately China.

Having said that, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un must set the pace and tone for the peace process, while the United States ensures its interests (and those of its Japanese ally) are also taken into account throughout the journey. Xi
Jinping should play a supporting role; reassuring the DPRK about its security and financial resources that could help to transform the DPRK if a peace deal can be reached. Although Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin have not earned major roles, it would be a grave mistake to exclude the two from the process. Any peace process must allow for a differentiation in roles that was a part of the Six Party talks.

As a practical matter, moving away from the Cold War framing requires a significant change in the tone of U.S.-China relations. This will be extremely difficult to accomplish under President Trump, especially given Secretary of State Pompeo’s new framing of U.S.-China relations in Cold War terms. Tensions are high, with each blaming the other for COVID-19. Public sentiment in both countries is deteriorating amidst trade tensions, tariffs, human rights concerns, suppression of democracy advocates in Hong Kong, closing of consulates, etc. The White House needs to restore central control over China policy and prioritize cooperation over competition, at least for the duration of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation Three: Initiate Five Party Consultations

The United States, ROK, Japan, China, and Russia should launch a five party consultation mechanism with a view toward harmonizing their respective approaches and better aligning their short and long term objectives on the Peninsula. One of the first outputs of this new consultation mechanism should be a joint statement of all the parties affirming the Singapore Declaration and pledging to work together with the DPRK to implement it. Each nation should also reaffirm and pledge to uphold the past bilateral commitments they have made; e.g. the September 2006 Six Party Joint Statement (LINK), the April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration (LINK), and the September 2018 Pyongyang Declaration. (LINK) Regardless of the outcome of elections in the United States and South Korea, the new administrations should reaffirm the commitments of their predecessors and consider them binding.

Recommendation Four: Make Common Effort on the “Human Dimension”

All three elements of the human dimension; humanitarian issues (including food aid and public health assistance to the DPRK), human rights concerns, and Japanese abductees, require attention. All should be delinked, as much as possible, from the political and security challenges on the peninsula. The sole objective of any humanitarian engagement with DPRK should be to help those in need.

As a first step, the five parties should narrow their difference on humanitarian assistance. Specifically, Washington should consult with Seoul and Beijing on ways to significantly intensify its support for foreign aid programs, leveraging that move to extract greater Chinese adherence to global norms on the treatment of DPRK refugees/guest workers in China. The second step should be for the international community to support, in earnest, inter-Korean engagement, including family reunifications and regular cross-border communication and people-to-people exchanges. To date, only the ROK has devoted much toward addressing these issues, even though thousands of
ethnic Koreans in China, the United States, Japan, and Russia have relatives in the DPRK with whom they have lost contact.

With respect to the abduction of Japanese citizens by the DPRK, the United States, ROK, China, and Russia should support DPRK-Japan dialogue with a view to satisfying Japanese concerns regarding the abduction issue. In order to convince Pyongyang to resume cooperation with Tokyo and to facilitate progress, Japan should set the bar at securing full cooperation from Pyongyang, a necessary first step toward eventually arriving at a full accounting. In this regard, Tokyo could usefully draw on lessons learned by the United States from its process of normalization with Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War: Emphasize cooperation and transparency, and then provide such assistance to Vietnam as was required to facilitate joint recovery/investigation operations.

Finally, when it comes to the DPRK’s human rights issues, the focus should be on multilateral initiatives securing DPRK cooperation with UN mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review. The DPRK invariably views unilateral criticism by Washington as a manifestation of the United States’ “hostile policy” toward North Korea. To signal its enduring commitment, Washington should appoint and confirm a full-time Ambassador for Human Rights in the DPRK to coordinate policies among the other four key stakeholders, as authorized under the North Korean Human Rights Act.

**Recommendation Five: Differentiate COVID-19 Aid from Sanctions**

As the Trump Administration quickly realized, managed shrewdly, the COVID-19 pandemic health crisis could serve as a chance to close the existing gap between the United States’ strict approach to sanctions enforcement and the more lax posture adopted by China. The five parties should mount a unified humanitarian response to COVID-19, utilizing existing NGOs with field operations inside the DPRK and international organizations such as the WHO. UN sanctions were never meant to impede humanitarian aid deliveries, and yet critical health supplies sit in warehouses in China and elsewhere, awaiting approval for delivery, while aid workers find it nearly impossible to administer aid due to the new maze of regulations in DPRK. The international community should streamline the rules restricting aid flows even while it tightens enforcement of sanctions to impede the North’s nuclear weapons program. By providing more support for public health and nutrition aid to the DPRK, the United States will bring itself into closer alignment with South Korea and will finally do something meaningful in terms of building trust with North Korea.

The international response to COVID-19 provides an opportunity to close ranks and articulate a “shared vision” for the future of a peaceful and denuclearized Korean Peninsula. States emphasizing strict sanctions enforcement need to make allowances for NGOs to provide aid (provided sufficient monitoring/transparency can be assured), while those more focused on people-to-people engagement need to shore up enforcement actions designed to prevent the DPRK from acquiring resources required to sustain its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.
Recommendation Six: Reaching for an Interim Security Deal

There are many sensible studies on what an interim/phase one security deal might look like (See Brookings study here), and many obstacles as well. The first is the absence of an agreed definition on the end goals – the United States and DPRK do not share a common vision for what a “denuclearized” Korean Peninsula looks like. It’s hard to start a journey when one is uncertain of the destination. The second obstacle is the lack of cohesion among the five powers on the parallel processes of peace and denuclearization. This obstacle can be partially addressed by implementing the preceding recommendations for collective action by the five key stakeholders on the human dimensions of the problem. The final obstacle is frankly in the realm of the unknown – will the DPRK ever take “yes” for an answer? In other words: Are there any conditions under which the DPRK would trade the security it derives from possessing nuclear weapons for external security guarantees, enhanced by normalized relations with the US and ROK and the economic benefits that would flow from normalization? The answer to this question can be found only after there is a comprehensive proposal on the table for North Korea to consider. It would certainly help if such a proposal was put more clearly to the DPRK by those concerned speaking with one voice.