

North Korea Policies of Neighboring Countries: Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Abe Shinzo and the Korean Government



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— **Alan ROMBERG** President Trump made a good effort to forge an agreement with China to resolve the North Korean issue, but he seems to be more intent on applying pressure on China than on securing common ground for the U.S. and China. In the early days of his presidency, Trump upheld the one China policy, but after his phone conversations with the Taiwanese president in December, 2016 and Xi Jinping in February, 2017, he came to realize that his implied threat to abandon “one China” precluded Chinese cooperation on any key items. Ahead of the U.S.-China summit in April, an economic issue emerged as a major agenda when Trump threatened to designate China as a currency manipulator. In the meeting, however, Trump asserted that if China was determined to resolve the North Korean nuclear weapons program, it could, adding that it just needed the right incentives to take the necessary measures to make that happen. Xi Jinping convinced Trump that resolving the North Korean nuclear issue is a very complicated problem, therefore it requires a complicated solution. The summit ended with a “real commitment” by both leaders to work together for

a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue. Hence, as opposed to the accusatory tone and talk of penalties if China did not cooperate, the theme was now common efforts to deal with a shared problem. Though China is already putting pressure on North Korea, it is not certain whether the pressure would be enough to bring about a serious difference in the course of the North. The U.S. hinted at military action, saying that strategic patience is over. While the U.S. allies see this as a justifiable and even necessary reaction to the North’s advancing program, the possibility of actual use of force at some point has generated widespread unease.

The North Korean development of a nuclear attack capability against the U.S. is seen as not a matter of “if” but a matter of “when.” Therefore, if Pyongyang continues to refuse to reaffirm even an “in principle” commitment to eventual denuclearization, much less take steps to verifiably freeze the program now, this raises a real prospect that the American president may eventually face a decision whether to take out certain DPRK capabilities through the use of force. The administration still believes that a peaceful res-

olution is possible “largely owing,” as Vice President Pence put it, to the new engagement of China. The White House insists that if China cannot or will not contribute meaningfully to a resolution of the North Korean issue, the U.S. will act with its allies and others to do whatever is necessary to resolve it.

However, it is recognition of the enormous barriers to a preemptive use of force and of the enormous obstacles to success through sanctions, alone. The administration seems increasingly aware that any action needs to take account not only of the possibly far-reaching effects on Sino-U.S. relations, but also of the impact on relations with others, especially U.S. allies South Korea and Japan. While the U.S. administration seeks to raise pressure on both Pyongyang and Beijing to help get Pyongyang to do the right thing, it seeks to avoid sending the wrong signals either rhetorically or through accelerated deployments to the peninsula that it is on a rapid or inevitable path to war. One of the delicate issues, of course, is how to apply pressure on North Korea and China while at the same time convincing South Korea, Japan and others that the U.S. will not jeopardize their safety. The self-labeled master of the art of the deal might well be open to at least exploratory talks with the North and perhaps a return to some form of formal negotiations if Pyongyang is willing to adopt credible policies backed up by meaningful actions to “prove” it is willing to step back from the nuclear brink. But there should be no illusions that if there is no such change of policy by Pyongyang, and if it remains on its current course, the American president, whether Mr. Trump or his successor, will likely face the kind of decision with the war-and-peace implications raised here.

— **WANG Fan** There are differences among experts on Chinese policy toward North Korea, but the policy took admittedly clearer shape under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. China is closer to the North, ideologically and geographically. Therefore, China has extended energy resources and economic support to North Korea. However, Chinese policy has changed after the development of nuclear weap-

ons by North Korea. China has strongly asked the North to make good on its promise of denuclearization and to refrain from behavior that destabilizes regional security.

I believe it is because of the U.S. threat that North Korea refuses to give up its nuclear arms. The presence of U.S. troops in South Korea as well as the joint ROK-U.S. military drills and deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) also poses threats to the North. Many countries are pinning hopes on the role of China over the nuclear issue, but it is difficult for China alone to reduce the nuclear threat as long as the most fundamental cause of the issue remains unexplored. The greatest obstacle to denuclearization of the North, I think, is the lack of mutual trust between the U.S. and North Korea. China wishes the U.S. would further strengthen strategic cooperation with it over the North Korean nuclear issue. China maintains the position that the North should freeze and abolish its nuclear program. China will keep putting pressure on the North to that end. In this respect, U.S.-North Korea talks might be a new beginning for China-U.S. relations. Lastly, I think it is crucial that the U.S. should hold enough discussions with China before it starts any military action against North Korea.

— **Junya NISHINO** The North Korea policies of the Abe government are divided into two kinds: pressure on the North and Japan’s defense capacity-building for ensuring security through self-defense. As a neighboring country, Japan cannot tolerate the escalation of the nuclear threat by the North. Japan believes that the North will not abandon its nuclear arms. Japan cannot accept North Korea’s nuclear status. The Japanese government agreed with President Trump on sanctions on North Korea at a G-7 meeting and on Chinese pressure on the North. Due to its significant influence on the North the Abe government believes that it is necessary to keep up the pressure. As there is no trade between Japan and North Korea, Japan cannot resort to unitary sanction against the North. To curb the nuclear capability of North Korea, Japan may consider

strategies to strengthen Japan-U.S. cooperation, its defense capability, the ROK-Japan-U.S. cooperative ties and bilateral cooperation between Japan and South Korea. There are views that Japan could have greater influence on Trump over his North Korea policy after the Japan-U.S. summit in February. Japan is enhancing its defense capacity against North Korean missile attacks and is set to conduct as many military drills as possible, as long as South Korea permits it. Whether Japan, the U.S. and South Korea can further strengthen their cooperation is uncertain because cooperation between Japan and Korea remains inactive amid the controversial history issue involving the comfort women.

There are varied opinions about the Japanese capability for a preemptive attack, but Japanese people want the government to be equipped with a reliable defense capability. I believe President Trump too wants a more active role for Japan. I expect that new South Korean President Moon Jae-in will start talks with North Korea, but hope he takes a more cautious approach toward the talks. I hope that he will pursue inter-Korean talks in cooperation with international society, including the U.S. and Japan, in particular.

— **MIN Jeong-hun** When new presidents took office in Korea and the U.S., many expected a change in Korea-U.S. relations. The “America first” policy made many uneasy, but President Trump assured in his phone talks with President Park Geun-hye that the ROK-U.S. alliance would remain firm, as well as emphasizing the importance of the alliance by dispatching Defense Minister James Mattis and Vice President Mike Pence to Korea. Two months later, President Trump intensified pressure on North Korea, calling for greater pressure on and greater engagement with the North. At the same time, he asked China and Japan for cooperation on the North Korean issue. In the meantime, South Korea was momentarily pushed to the sidelines due to the impeachment of President Park; but President Trump started to emphasize the ROK-U.S. alliance again when Moon Jae-in was elected president on May 10 and said in his meeting with the special presiden-

tial envoy, Hong Seok-hyun, that America’s commitment to stand by the ROK against all external threats was unwavering. President Moon Jae-in is scheduled to visit the U.S. next month for a summit meeting with President Trump, and the North Korean issue is to top the agenda. The North Korea policy of President Moon is expected to focus on “pressure plus dialogue” to end denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to establish a peace regime, based on the ROK-U.S. alliance. Moon is expected to take a gradual approach to the denuclearization. If the North agrees to freeze its nuclear program, the South would scale down its joint military exercises with the U.S., and if the North continues the freeze, the South is expected to open economic exchanges with the North. President Moon believes that the South should continue talks on the human rights issue in North Korea, separately from diplomatic and security affairs. If the North continues missile tests, however, Moon could hardly pursue this engagement policy. Therefore, I believe, the summit between the South Korean and U.S. presidents should be the foundation for a solution to the nuclear issue and an occasion for the two leaders to build personal ties. The discussion on the nuclear issue should start with this relationship, and it will take time to see how issues involving South Korea’s share of the cost for the upkeep of U.S. forces in Korea, the deployment of THAAD and a renegotiation of the Free Trade Agreement(FTA) will be settled, and how those issues would affect the ROK-U.S. ties.

— **Alan ROMBERG** What does North Korea want? In retrospect, there have been a lot of discussions on security measures to be provided by the U.S. and international society against nuclear and conventional attacks by North Korea. However, the North brushed aside such discussions as pointless. Many people now say that the North will not give up its nuclear weapons, and I agree with it. I think it cannot but be difficult to come up with a solution to the nuclear issue, as all the parties, including the U.S., have sought a breakthrough without a policy to change the North Korean regime. If the demands of North Korea for

the abolition of the ROK-U.S. alliance and withdrawal of U.S. troop are accepted, except for the acknowledgment of North Korea’s nuclear status, would the North be content with it? I doubt if the North would agree to the denuclearization, nominally at least.

— **WANG Fan** President Trump calls for greater pressure and greater engagement with North Korea, but I wonder how pressure can be compatible with engagement with the North. I cannot understand the logic of Trump, because the intensified pressure precludes engagement. I think that sanctions might be an alternative, but it cannot be an ultimate solution to the nuclear issue. New Chinese sanctions against the North would be ineffective, if other countries engage with the North even if China implements sanctions against the North. I believe that the deployment of THAAD would provoke the North. China might find more difficulties in engaging the North for this reason.

— **MIN Jeong-hun** The North might want the status of a state with nuclear weapons, or a guarantee for its regime, or a peace treaty with the U.S. What South Korea wants is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. I think that there should be a readjustment of the different objectives of the countries involved in the issue.

— **Junya NISHINO** Most of the international issues in East Asia originate from the division of Korea, I think. The survival of the Kim Jong-Un regime is the ultimate goal of North Korea, and I believe, its nuclear weapons serve as leverage for negotiations with the U.S. The North thinks that its nuclear weapons are a prerequisite for negotiations with the U.S. and will only come to the negotiation table when it acquires a nuclear capability powerful enough to confront the U.S.

Keywords

North Korea policies, Trump administration, Denuclearization of North Korea, U.S.-China relations, and North Korean nuclear issue