

U.S.-ROK Strategic Communication:

Track II Dialogue on the U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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On August 5-6, 2021, the George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) hosted a virtual Track II Dialogue on “U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry and the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” co-chaired by Yonho Kim, Associate Director of GWIKS, and Heung-kyu Kim, Director of the U.S.-China Policy Institute (UCPI) of Ajou University in South Korea, for a project sponsored by the Korea Foundation with leading experts from the United States and the Republic of Korea participating.

Since the previous roundtable discussion on April 6, a number of developments have taken place. The U.S. has held bilateral summit meetings with its two key Asian allies, first Japan in mid-April and then South Korea in mid-May, reaffirming its commitments to its allies as well as strengthening ties with both on a variety of issues, including security, pandemic response, and climate change. Additionally, the recent East Asia trip of Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and finally China last minute, allowed for the U.S. to hold meetings with its allies and partners as well as to hold a second meeting with Chinese counterparts. This second virtual meeting between experts provided a forum for the various experts to exchange views on issues related to the U.S.-China strategic rivalry and U.S.-ROK alliance, building upon points made during the previous roundtable and narrowing the discussion to more specific areas. Based on these discussions, the project will publish a policy recommendation report for the policy leaders in Washington and Seoul in early 2022.

Executive Summary

The discussion, building off of the previous meeting in April, showed that while there was broad consensus on the challenges and threats posed by both China and North Korea, and the necessity of a strong U.S.-ROK Alliance amidst the changing geopolitical landscape, there were differing views when exploring the particulars of issues such as security policy on the Korean peninsula and the wider region and what position South Korea should take in the U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry.

While there was broad agreement on key issues as in the April discussion, the American panelists differed on the specifics of such topics like the security policy in the Indo-Pacific, whether the deployment of land-based missiles in allied countries and even tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula are suitable policies. Additionally, the shifting focus away from the Korean

peninsula to the Taiwan strait as the central area of tension in the evolving U.S.-China strategic rivalry was greatly discussed, particularly by the American experts.

The South Korean participants generally had questions regarding the particulars of U.S. security policy toward the Korean peninsula and East Asia. However, compared to the previous meeting, the South Korean side displayed more optimism regarding the U.S.-ROK Alliance and cooperation, not only in defense but in pandemic response, climate change and energy. But some Korean participants expressed concern regarding these future variables and the contrast of China's growing economic and military clout with relative U.S. stagnation. Particularly, some on the Korean side showed unease at the prospect of the U.S. leaving conventional defense to Seoul alone as other areas such as Taiwan take precedence. They also discussed the potentialities of the future as the Moon administration nears its end in addition to the upcoming U.S. political elections and the potential foreign policy changes it could initiate.

On facing the challenges and threats posed by North Korea, there was much debate and difference in opinion on the collective responses to both North Korean survival strategies and the bold peace offensives Pyongyang may pursue in achieving its aims. While both American and Korean sides agreed that appropriate measures with North Korea — such as dialogue, engagement and sanctions relief for good behavior and sanctions for unacceptable behavior differences — are crucial, differences emerged between and among both sides regarding the looming presence of China on issues related to the Korean peninsula. With the China variable in play, American and South Korean participants disagreed on what position Seoul should adopt, with a voice on the American arguing that Seoul's strategic ambiguity will result in Korea becoming a geopolitical arena or even a battlefield. Some on the Korean side cited Korea's long relationship with China as evidence that that Korea has the historical knowhow to deal with Chinese influence as in the past.

Overall, despite some disagreement on security policy in regard to China and the Korean peninsula, there was a positive outlook on the U.S.-ROK alliance, which has evolved from a North Korea-focused Cold War security alliance to a modern comprehensive partnership cooperating in the fields of climate change, energy, public health, and technology and other wider regional issues. These areas are forming the key pillars of a forward-looking U.S.-ROK bilateral relationship.

Identifying Principles and Priorities for Coping with the Intensifying U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry

A Korean Perspective

A South Korean speaker gave opening remarks on the current status of U.S.-China relations and factors that will likely influence the strategic rivalry. The expert stated that recent developments such as the U.S.-China Alaska Meeting and Wendy Sherman's July visit to China have not warmed relations. The mismanagement of relations could quickly tilt toward the miscalculation and even armed conflict. The Korean expert highlighted issues such as Washington and Beijing's differing views on the international order. First, according to the expert, the U.S. regards the world order as bipolar, while China views it as tripolar, composed of the U.S., China and the EU. China has paid more attention to diplomacy with European countries, and European countries increasingly focus on expanding their diplomatic and security autonomy amidst the U.S.-China strategic competition.

Second, the expert cited U.S. domestic politics as a critical variable in U.S. foreign policy. The upcoming midterm congressional election in 2022, and the presidential election in 2024, potentially favoring the GOP, could cause U.S. foreign policy to become more insular. A poor mix of policy elements, a mishandling of U.S.-China relations and chaotic domestic politics could lead to a hastened U.S. decline, rapidly ceding the Asia-Pacific to Chinese hegemony. Effective U.S. leadership in the region hinges on strong relations with two key U.S. allies, South Korea and Japan. Given their roles as balancers, China would invest more diplomatically and economically in them to draw future cooperation from both. For example, if China hosts an inter-Korean meeting before the February 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, the U.S. may be compelled to take the role and the interests of South Korea more seriously. A better understanding of how countries view their role in the region and their relationship with China is vital. South Korea's vivid democracy, economic prosperity and strong military capabilities have made it both a buffer zone and a threat to China, the participant argued. Additionally, greater mutual trust and understanding is required between the U.S. and South Korea for their ever-expanding cooperation.

An American Perspective

An American expert argued that the context of the U.S.-China relationship is still relatively fluid. The panelist believed that Beijing is at odds with the Biden administration's frame of a confrontational, competitive, and cooperative relationship. In response to the Korean panelist's view of an emergent tripolar order, the American expert found it hard to see Europe as an independent pole and stated that tensions between Europe and China are growing.

The American speaker laid out key principles and priorities for South Korea in coping with the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. First, define and prioritize vital interests and be willing to take some risk to defend them. Countries should signal a willingness to incur costs to protect their interests. According to the expert, South Korea has three key interests: (1) maintaining the alliance with the United States, (2) preserving friendly, or at least non-adversarial relations with China, and (3) strengthening the rules-based international order to be favorable to South Korean interests.

Second, South Korea should clearly and consistently convey these vital interests to both the U.S. and China. This would involve Seoul telling Beijing that its alliance with Washington is essential for its security and informing Washington the necessity for Seoul to have a constructive and stable relationship with Beijing. So, where vital interests are not at stake, compromise should be prioritized, with one example being the wording of the joint statement to mention Taiwan during the May U.S.-ROK summit.

Third, middle powers have the most to lose if the international order becomes more power-based, and the erosion of the rules-based order will largely favor China, enabling it to apply coercion more effectively and to reshape the region in its favor. So, countries like South Korea should be working to bind the major powers to the rules, both China and the U.S.

Fourth, widen networks of strategic partnerships beyond a focus on the U.S. and China to cooperate with other countries, even create ad hoc coalitions and forums to respond collectively to challenges. On final point of economic resilience, the expert argued that it is crucial to avoid dependence on any one country, reducing one's vulnerability to economic coercion. Diversifying trade flows, broadening one's energy mix, and preventing foreign interference in domestic politics is crucial for all countries.

Discussion and Reactions

One Korean panelist pointed out that Seoul has already attempted all of these recommended measures and asked the American speaker for their assessment on Seoul's policy approach toward Washington and Beijing. The American panelist admitted that the South Korean policies have thus far not borne fruit. The expert pointed out that the German side does not fully share the U.S. assessment or approach to China. However, they clearly articulate where they agree and disagree, and there is substantial alignment on human rights, Xinjiang and forced labor, as well as on supply chains, the panelist noted. The German side disagrees with some of the U.S. messaging on China. Germany is extremely interested in cooperating with China where interests align, and the U.S. also ultimately feels that cooperation on mutual interests is essential for national security. The expert also asserted that South Korea has not defended its interests in the same way that both Germany and the EU as a whole have. Particularly, there is a view in the U.S. that South Korea is actively attempting to not offend China. Both an American and a Korean panelist raised eyebrows at the comments of the previous American speaker, with the American expert stating they are not convinced that South Korea can emulate the German approach, and the Korean expert stated that the U.S.-ROK relationship is far warmer than the U.S.-German relationship.

Another American expert also questioned whether Seoul's two vital interests are at all compatible with each other. Since Seoul already more or less embraces the points outlined, the panelist argued, we should examine the nature of the U.S.-China rivalry now to determine whether those vital interests are mutually exclusive. Another Korean participant agreed that while states should risk incurring a cost to defend their national interests, at times this may be too burdensome. Since many issues are of a zero-sum nature in the U.S.-China strategic competition, there would be more room for South Korea to maneuver in a more positive-sum environment. One American expert argued that despite the zero-sum nature of the strategic competition, the economic relations between the U.S. and China are incredibly interdependent, and Korea is also a key player. The expert pointed that those developments, such as decentralization, increasing technological innovation, global wealth and democracy around the globe, are empowering individuals, even in North Korea, but especially in China.

The domestic political environments of South Korea and the United States also stood in contrast. In response to an American counterpart's question regarding the discussion in Seoul on contingency planning or the durability of assurances around the alliance with the U.S., the Korean panelist responded that politicians in South Korea are not interested in foreign policy and security issues at this moment and there is almost no discussion of U.S. foreign policy nor U.S. domestic politics. In U.S. domestic politics, on the other hand, an American expert stated that Republicans will move toward a more hardline approach to China, focused more on either a balance of power or an ideology-based approach. And Democrats will emphasize a more rules-based international order and soft power approach. There will be a strong push on burden sharing from Republicans. And despite the Trump administration's criticisms, South Korea is better on burden sharing than most U.S. allies, the panelist mused.

A couple on the American side agreed that they did not view Europe as an independent pole. One participant believed that China may see more opportunity in picking apart a weak confederation that is in relative economic decline. And unlike countries neighboring China, European states both feel the threat far less acutely and are economically needy, with anemic growth rates over the last 15 years. Given this, the participant observed, Europe will be a key area for competition. Another American panelist pointed out that despite the recent return of European navies to the Pacific, European nations lack the capacity and the unity to weigh in decisively. But this development is a

sea change in European attitudes on their connection to the security environment in the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. Pacific Deterrence Initiative and Managing U.S.-Korea and Korea-China Relations

A Korean Perspective

A Korean expert stated that recent Chinese military buildup is shifting the regional balance of power in an unfavorable way to South Korea. The Chinese A2AD capability poses a greater threat to U.S. forces in the region. In response, the U.S. has formulated the Archipelagic Defense strategy, with the most important means for enabling this strategy being the land-based missile. To tip the balance, the U.S. plan is to combine its assets with those from Australia, Japan and South Korea. And there are many scenarios regarding the regional deployment of U.S. military assets, including deploying smaller PrSM missiles in Japan and South Korea. In the Korean context, the PrSM missiles may replace USFK's ATACMS missile and could change the calculus in the Yellow Sea, posing a large threat to nearby Chinese military assets. Another possibility is the deployment of the Strategic Long-Range Cannon, with a 1,000-mile range, to Southwestern part of South Korea.

Additionally, the Korean panelist stated that South Korea is encouraged to participate in multinational military exercises, such as Talisman Sabre in Australia and Pacific Vanguard exercises in the Indo-Pacific region. There is a concern that U.S. foreign policy is too ideologically driven and anti-China. The Pacific Deterrence Initiative should be both more strategically sustainable for the U.S. and more palatable for the national interests of U.S. allies.

An American Perspective

An American expert stated that there has been insufficient focus, effort and outlays on sustaining and modernizing the U.S. and allied forward conventional defense against China in the Western Pacific. But the core concern is, the expert stated, the rapidly growing Chinese military threat against Taiwan. In the event the U.S. fails to react quickly, China could achieve its goals through fait accompli and then operate from a strong defensive position where the U.S. will not be able to eject Chinese forces. In this situation, Japan and South Korea will be bottled up and put under great pressure.

South Korea, the expert continued, is up for question as a basing location, partly because it is so vulnerable to Chinese attack. Shorter range systems might make sense, and U.S. defense planning is moving in this direction. The U.S. army, according to the expert, has been discussing a scenario in open hearings where a second front in Korea may emerge as part of a wider conflict with China.

Many in the U.S. national security establishment believe there is a serious risk of conflict with China over Taiwan this decade, the American expert warned. As various defense bills and budgets go through, Congress is probably more for investments in forward posture. The panelist believed that Japan would be a natural place to consider changes to U.S. deployment in the near term. For South Korea, the major issue will be that the U.S. cannot maintain a large number of forces on the Korean peninsula focused only on North Korea. The best outcome, the expert claimed, would be

for U.S. forces on the peninsula to become more suited either for the direct defense of South Korea against China, or for contributing to regional contingencies. This will become the increasing focus of U.S.-ROK defense discussions this decade. And this model would be similar with the U.S. policy toward NATO. The longer the delay in addressing it, the expert asserted, the more hesitancy on the part of allies to contribute and the more difficult it will be later on.

Discussion and Reactions

The topics of regional security and U.S.-ROK-China trilateral relations stirred much debate among the panelists. One American and one Korean participant questioned the willingness of U.S. allies to host land-based missiles. One Korean expert commented that, while the U.S. still maintains global military superiority, Chinese forces can be concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region. The expert added that China will utilize the North Korean card where possible and respond accordingly to inter-Korean cooperation. All future South Korean administrations will have to deal with Chinese diplomatic and economic pressure. Another Korean panelist believed that, if conservatives win the Korean presidency next year, they may invite U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to Korea.

In response, an American speaker stated that tactical nuclear weapons are not the solution of the problem with China. The notion that the American people will support a large-scale nuclear first use to defend their allies in the Western Pacific, the expert contended, is not realistic. The idea that the U.S. will launch a large-scale nuclear attack as a response to a Chinese conventional invasion, excluding a large-scale conflict, is not realistic, either. Thus, the Chinese are pursuing conventional dominance in the theater. And while they are building up their nuclear forces, they understand that the Soviet error was overemphasizing nuclear weapons and therefore, are building a nuclear force designed to deter U.S. first use.

While tactical nuclear weapons are adequate in the Korean case, these can be delivered from other locations, the American expert asserted. The North Korean nuclear missile program is reaching a point where it can saturate U.S. missile defenses. If Americans are at risk from a North Korean nuclear attack, the U.S. will be less willing to actively defend South Korea, the expert warned. Tactical weapons on the peninsula would be a stopgap at best as regional nuclear weapons programs become a key issue, and the U.S. position will have to continually evolve.

A Korean expert raised the question of the possibility of the U.S. dispatching troops or deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Taiwan, stating that it is an interesting scenario from the Korean perspective as the U.S. seems to shift more focus from the Korean peninsula to the Taiwan Strait.

An American speaker responded to the question, citing the three red lines that the Chinese have publicly emphasized: (1) Taiwanese independence; (2) U.S. forces on the island; and (3) Taiwan possessing nuclear weapons. A Taiwanese nuclear program would clearly undermine Taiwanese security, the expert continued, as the Chinese would almost certainly preemptively act to neutralize it. Ultimately, Taipei would have to rely on the implicit protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

The American speaker further stressed that this reflects a prioritization of China over North Korea, and that Taiwan is simply China's first target. It is creating a power projection military and building aircraft carriers, a space architecture, and nuclear attack submarines. These capabilities targeting Taiwan could also be used against South Korea. According to the speaker, the key planning construct in the Pentagon is to ensure the U.S. "wins the big war first," which in this context means China. Over time, more energy and resources will be directed towards China.

An American expert argued that the U.S. will be developing its undersea capabilities and that the U.S. is unlikely to deploy missiles everywhere. And if Japan deploys missiles, the participant believed, it will be their own conventional missiles. The same panelist agreed with an American colleague on China's three red lines on Taiwan but added that a key variable is what Taiwan does. The panelist even argued that a crisis is not imminent on Taiwan and that not only capability but also intent is the crucial factor for Korea to consider in dealing with China.

Revitalizing the Alliance in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era and Unconventional Security Cooperation

A Korean Perspective

A Korean expert outlined points for the prospect of U.S.-ROK technology cooperation. First, one key component is Korean firms' investment in the semiconductor and battery manufacturing sectors in the U.S. Such investment would complement U.S. manufacturing capabilities and stabilize the U.S. supply chain, giving Korean firms opportunities for growth and innovation. As recent decision-making by South Korean firms has been largely driven by the logic of the alliance rather than market forces, the speaker stated, the operation of advanced semiconductor and battery manufacturing facilities in the U.S. would require at least two more years of preparations. And if technological cooperation between South Korea and the U.S. is to develop into a solid foundation for the alliance, it would require long term support from the U.S. government.

Second, reorganization of global supply chains will likely lead to a dual structure where U.S.-China decoupling would take place in some limited high-tech areas, while highly interdependent supply chains across the two countries would remain in other areas. While export controls and investment restrictions against China related to critical technology should continue, these should not limit cooperation in essential areas.

An American Perspective

An American expert agreed that a symbolically significant development was reflected in the summit, created by the Moon administration's need to secure vaccines and the U.S. response to that specific political need. More important was the effort to frame a longer-term basis for cooperation by combining U.S. technology and South Korean manufacturing capability to forge a global vaccine partnership. And this was an attempt to draw South Korean cooperation on issues that the U.S. had emphasized in the context of the QUAD. Ultimately, the U.S. was asking South Korea to join the QUAD without actual membership. The Biden administration seems to see South Korea as still malleable and is working on framing South Korean choices.

The supply chain resiliency issue is critical, the panelist stated, because it challenges South Korea's view on its position vis-à-vis the U.S. and China, as it signals that the U.S. desires to engage with South Korea on economic issues in ways that realign its security and economic priorities. The American expert complimented the Biden administration for drawing in the private sector on supply chain resiliency issues, as it hedges the government with regard to having practical reasons for reinforcing the alliance.

A Korean Perspective

A Korean panelist expressed optimism about U.S.-ROK energy and climate cooperation as there emerges an incidental but ideal partnership between the two. Both pursue carbon neutrality by 2050 and have reached a trading balance of oil and LNG. The U.S. became a net natural gas exporter in 2018, and a net oil exporter in 2020. Thus, the U.S. needs countries to export these surpluses to, a fact South Korea understands well. Seoul has few incentives to join an East Asian version of Nord Stream. Rather, by importing oil and natural gas from the U.S., it can diversify its energy supply chains and reduce energy dependency. For North Korea, such a hub would allow it to collect gas transit fees and become a natural gas corridor. The panelist stressed that, without denuclearization, neither South Korea nor the U.S. would permit North Korea to benefit from Russian gas transit through its territory. Finally, the speaker noted that a Green New Deal can change or disrupt the dynamics of energy security in East Asia, as Korea would have to reduce LNG imports to become a net zero emitter by 2050.

Discussion and Reactions

On the issue of climate, energy and pandemic cooperation, there was broad agreement by both the American and Korean sides.

On the Korean side, one expert stressed that economic cooperation between the U.S. and South Korea will be critical in the U.S.-China strategic competition, with cooperation in the energy sector becoming the most important area in U.S.-ROK relations. Another Korean panelist emphasized that South Korea is diversifying its energy supply chain from the Middle East to its key ally, the U.S. No Korean administration can change that trend. Another Korean expert was skeptical of the contradictory policies from the South Korean government. While Seoul declared that it would phase out nuclear energy over a 60-year period, it has moved to export nuclear power plants abroad, increase domestic coal plants and import more LNG, both of which are not carbon free. In the Korean case, one uncertainty is that government policy is not completely decided, including how to manage and expend nuclear fuel. One Korean expert stated that there is still a lot of space for cooperation behind-the-scenes of the U.S.-China competition. And the U.S. should implement very precise regulations against China in order to target specific technology, including semiconductors, to avoid affecting other non-sensitive areas.

On the American side, a panelist observed that there's been a dramatic shift in terms of the destination for South Korean investment, from China in the mid-2000s to the U.S. over the course of the last few years. Another American expert posed a question regarding whether South Korea is concerned about the instability of a vacillating U.S. energy policy. The same expert brought up a topic that had flown under the radar—the development of small nuclear power units. With these small generators, the panelist stated, nuclear power comes now in custom units and that South Korea would be an ideal place to construct them.

Regarding vaccine cooperation, one American panelist stated that it still appears aspirational at this point. With the bottleneck of production in India, there is an opportunity for South Korea to cooperate with the U.S. in production of public goods such as the vaccine and in area of public health for the region. Another American expert predicted that there will be a vaccine oversupply in six months and advised not to pay too much attention to the supply chain because usually prices work themselves out.

Collective Responses to North Korea's Survival Strategies

A Korean Perspective

An expert from South Korea addressed the topic of the collective response to North Korea's survival strategies by first defining what survival means to North Korea. For North Korea, survival can be the maintenance of the 'Great Leader' system, or it can be the continuation of state socialism. North Korea has traditionally asserted that South Korea and the U.S. have threatened its system security, and therefore, it must develop nuclear weapons in response.

North Korea has called for the abolition of U.S.-ROK joint exercises, the withdrawal of the U.S. security commitment to South Korea, and the conclusion of the U.S.-North Korea peace treaty as a "system security" guarantee. North Korea's main goal will be to gain an advantage in inter-Korean relations by obtaining nuclear capabilities, securing its influence that cannot be ignored by the U.S. and China, ultimately ensuring that the state ruled by the 'Great Leader' will become a dominant regional power.

While maintaining sanctions, the expert asserted, the U.S. and South Korea should always be open to dialogue with North Korea. If necessary, measures to allow North Korea to save face, such as easing some sanctions, could also be considered. More important than maintaining sanctions is the ability of South Korea and the U.S. to respond to North Korean nuclear threats. However, the U.S. has remained passive in specifying the pledged "extended deterrence" measures for South Korea. In addition, the promotion of values, such as democracy and human rights, should also be emphasized in order to stimulate changes in the North.

An American Perspective

An American panelist, referring to Pyongyang's strategy as a "poison pill strategy," argued that North Korea's survival as an independent state, not necessarily the survival of its unique socialist system or the Kim Dynasty, can be approached as different questions. While Pyongyang has attempted to maintain all three systems, the participant noted, the separation of the three is significant.

The expert outlined several questions on the nature of North Korea. First, do North Korea's rulers believe North Korea can coexist with South Korea and survive independently, or do they think this is a zero-sum rivalry between two states that claim the same territory and the same people? Can an inefficient and impoverished socialist economy withstand domestic pressures to reform before it collapses? Probably not, the expert argued. In fact, North Korea is undergoing rapid changes, creating political pressures for the system and the state. How North Koreans answer these questions is crucial. The panelist made a clear distinction between regime and state survival, arguing that North Korea uses its nuclear weapons as a poison pill, effectively isolating its society and protecting the regime from the outside world. This strategy, while perhaps protecting the regime, is destroying the system. Capitalism now seems to be winning out, the expert emphasized.

The panelist laid out several measures in response to North Korea's survival strategy. The first is to compel North Korea to shift its survival strategy from regime to state survival, meaning political and market reforms and property rights that resuscitate investment in the economy. On the U.S. and South Korea side, that means a willingness to engage their markets, invest in their exports,

recognize their sovereign status, and bring them into the WTO and higher ILO global frameworks that promote decentralized economics. The Second aim is to raise the cost of nuclear development for the Kim regime, lessen their benefits by preparing for preemptive move against them. The expert recommended replacing U.S. ground troops with hypersonic missiles, suspending joint exercises and maintaining sanctions. Sanctions should be used to reward good behavior and penalize any violations. Third, communicate to North Korea that the U.S. has no inherent issues with a reformed North Korea strong enough to protect itself without external ambitions, similar to Vietnam. And finally, bring the North and South together by officially recognizing their separate states, clear boundaries and huge systemic differences. This process would be akin to the one that brought France and Germany together, mutually beneficial with the creation of a small trade pact, an elimination of tariffs, a free trade agreement, labor and capital mobility, a monetary and economic union, and possibly followed by political union.

Discussion and Reactions

A lengthy discussion on the nature and role of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the utility of U.S. forces in South Korea followed, with a heated debate centered on the focus of the U.S.-ROK alliance, whether it was explicitly North Korea or also included China in its purpose.

On the Korean side, there was some agreement that the problem is the mission and role of the U.S.-ROK alliance. A Korean expert recommended that the U.S. and South Korea recalculate their threat perception as well as the common mission and the goals of the alliance. Another Korean participant argued that if the focus of the U.S.-ROK alliance shifted from North Korea to both the general defense of the Korean peninsula and the stability of the wider region, North Korean fears may be assuaged although it may draw the ire of Beijing. One Korean expert highlighted the divide in South Korea over the alliance, stating that while many think that the U.S.-ROK alliance should focus on North Korea, others believe that the expansion of the alliance is in both countries' interests. And one Korean panelist added that the U.S.-ROK alliance is not solely focused on North Korea anymore as evidenced by the joint statement from the latest U.S.-ROK summit in May 2021. The joint statement addressed issues including technological cooperation, tackling regional challenges and even mentioned the Taiwan strait issue. The alliance, the panelist noted, is becoming more future-oriented and more comprehensive.

Regarding China, a Korean expert stated that South Korea fears that any U.S.-ROK cooperation against China would far exceed the benefits of the alliance if South Korea were forced to take a side, citing the THAAD case where South Korea suffered without any meaningful assistance from the U.S. Another Korean panelist argued that South Korea's existence itself is a threat to China and that Koreans know from historic precedent the looming danger China poses.

On the American side, a panelist addressed a Korean expert's concern regarding the U.S. alliance commitment, arguing for the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces, not the termination of the alliance nor the protection of South Korea. The American participant criticized the concentration of U.S. forces in the Pyeongtaek military base, within range of North Korea's Nodong nuclear missile. The expert stressed the need to revamp the entire strategy, based on the fact that North Korea does have nuclear weapons, and that the only real way to deal with a nuclear weapon is to preemptively neutralize it. Moreover, the expert believed that North Korea would be fearful of a U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea as U.S. forces are in effect hostages to their nuclear weapons. The American speaker also stressed that the alliance with South Korea is solely for defense against North Korea. It is crucial to avoid threatening China with the U.S. presence in South Korea, the

expert underlined. Another American expert rejected the contention that the alliance with South Korea is just about North Korea. It is incorrect historically and currently, the expert claimed, and the Biden administration has also made that clear in the “two plus two” meetings with Seoul. The reality is an alliance purely focused on North Korea is not in the U.S. interest to sustain.

A previous American speaker posed the question of whether South Koreans do generally feel a military threat from China. In response, the Korean panelist affirmed the general perception among Koreans of military threat from China and cited the 1953 ROK-U.S. Security Treaty. The treaty states that the alliance should tackle the threat coming from the Pacific region. So, abiding by the Treaty, the alliance should address any kind of threat in the region.

One American panelist took a more nuanced assessment of the alliance, arguing that while from its inception the U.S.-ROK alliance was focused on more than the Korean peninsula, it is also incorrect to consider a direct threat from China to have been at the core of the U.S.-ROK alliance since its inception. China had been a combatant in the Korean war and was considered part of the threat against which the alliance was designed to defend. But all through the 1980s when the U.S. was selling arms to China, the U.S.-ROK alliance did not seem to be oriented against a Chinese threat that was not perceived to exist at the time. It is a living, breathing document, the expert stressed, and it has changed and is likely to change again in the future. However, the panelist rejected the notion that China has been an immutable target of the alliance.

One American participant reacted by arguing that while it is correct that the alliance is not anti-China explicitly, the simple fact is South Korea will be vulnerable to a potential Chinese attack. The reality for the U.S. is, the expert asserted, that Washington will have to reevaluate everything, including its alliances. The panelist underscored two main reasons for the alliance. First, South Korea is a very strong economy, an essential partner for the U.S, in the region. And second, the alliance is critical for the defense of Japan, a critical state in Asia due to its size and geographic position. The problem is that if South Korea attempts to remain impartial, the Korean peninsula will become an arena in the strategic rivalry as the U.S. and China cannot allow such indifference. And one mistake of the Biden administration is masking the severity of this choice. If South Korea desires to ultimately remain neutral, the expert warned, the U.S. will feel betrayed at a moment of maximum danger.

In responding to another American participant’s question of how the costs of alliance dissolution are distributed between the U.S. and South Korea, one American panelist stated that both sides would suffer greatly from a dissolution of the alliance. If Korea shifted away from the U.S., it would essentially be at China’s mercy. Discussions of the Korea strategic issue often focus solely on the peninsula, the expert noted, but given that the strategic situation is characterized by overwhelming challenge from China, this needs to be reevaluated.

The debate shifted to a focus on the internal developments in North Korea and the intentions of the regime in relation to its survival strategies. A broad theme introduced by an American expert was the disaggregation of the North Korean regime, the socialist economic system and the nation. Additionally, the panelist’s concept of the “poison pill strategy” generated much discussion, particularly from some on the Korean side.

A panelist from the Korean side expressed agreement with the concept of Pyongyang’s “poison pill strategy.” In the long term, nuclear weapons may do more harm than good, with the expert stating that the North Korean regime understands well that nuclear weapons may be politically poisonous but addictive. And they may believe they can manage a level of poison just enough to survive. For example, Pyongyang will use it to influence internal politics, and to create a crisis

situation for foreign powers. And regarding the shift of focus from regime or system survival to state survival, the panelist noted that since Kim Jong Un seems to place importance to the regime, system and state in this order, it will prove difficult to induce a reprioritization. And one Korean participant questioned if Kim Jong Un and the elite want to maintain the Great Leader system and if peaceful coexistence between North and South Korea is possible.

Another Korean panelist took the opposite view and argued that there is too much focus on China as the source of the problem. Historically, Koreans possess a certain knowledge of how to deal with Chinese influence, different from the Americans and quite different from the Japanese. The panelist stressed a democratized and prosperous South Korea does not lend itself in furthering China's growing influence over the region.

On the American side, an expert stated that North Korea is changing under the duress of sanctions and various pressure. While the regime and country are not collapsing, their socialist system is undergoing a transformation. They are using money in transactions, where not long ago they used rations. The outside world is in a good position to take advantage of North Korea's current vulnerability. Pyongyang needs to be induced into thinking more about national survival, regime or system survival. Targeted sanctions, the expert asserted, would reward the private sector and punish the regime, which is an "engage the market, not the state" approach. The panelist emphasized the role of intelligence but expressed disappointment in U.S. intelligence on North Korea, in part because it doesn't distinguish the state activities from market activity. Inducing North Korea toward using more money by strengthening their monetary system, the participant stated, would in turn strengthen their decentralized market economy.

One American panelist stressed that there is little risk that either Korea will ever ignore the potential threat to their sovereignty posed by China. The question is whether they will be able to muster international support for their sovereignty, either individually, or as a union, or as a unified state. Additionally, the expert added, the future of the Korean Peninsula is about the future "border" of the Chinese sphere of influence.

The Possibility of North Korea's Bold Peace Offensive: Risks and Responses

An American Perspective

An American expert introduced the new topic, stating that while the Trump administration came close to "catastrophic success" during the 2019 Hanoi Summit, the idea that Pyongyang would advance a bold peace initiative that would work against Washington's and Seoul's interests and deceive them into a false peace is a more remote concern today. North Korea understands the substantial difference between the current and previous U.S. administration.

The Biden administration, the speaker claimed, is pursuing a "Goldilocks solution," not a hardline fire and fury approach, nor an outright readoption of the passive strategic patience approach. The entire approach essentially works in contradiction to any sort of bold initiative by the North, either in the form of a dramatic peace offering, or in the form of dramatic courses or provocative steps. The Biden administration is focused on managing the North Korea problem rather than solving it, the panelist claimed. But the downside of this approach is a gradualism that cedes the initiative to

Pyongyang, and one thing the former administration injected into the North Korea issue was creativity, the expert stated. In sum, the likelihood of a bold peace offering from the North is low. But were it to happen, the expert believed, it would likely fall on deaf ears in Washington since it would be unbelievable that such an offer would yield tangible results. One concern is that the North will continue efforts to drive wedges between Seoul and Washington by dangling various peace initiatives that may seem appealing to Seoul, but unenticing to Washington.

A Korean Perspective

A Korean panelist gave a different take on the issue, stating that North Korea recently took a bold peace offensive already by reopening the inter-Korean communication channel. While the reestablishment of this channel must be welcomed as a green light for improvement in inter-Korean relations and the possibility of an inter-Korean virtual summit, the expert stated, it may be too early to say that North Korea has agreed to fundamentally improve inter-Korean relations. North Korea just restored the communications line it unilaterally blocked. This is not a new development or concession. Kim Yo-jong, after reopening the communication channel, openly demanded that South Korea and U.S. stop the joint military drills. Even if South Korea and the U.S. postpone or reduce the joint drills again, it is unlikely that it will lead to progress in the denuclearization dialogue, or improvement in inter-Korean relations. In a sense, the speaker noted, North Korea is already successfully driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

Discussion and Reactions

One Korean expert argued that Pyongyang would attempt a tailored peace offensive primarily for the purpose of boosting the North Korean economy. Although Kim Jong Un views self-reliant economic development as ideal, he also understands that this is impossible. And while North Korea may likely move to reopen the border with China in this situation, it may also seek to reengage with South Korea or the U.S. to avoid overdependency on China. Given this, it is likely that North Korea will make a peace offering after the U.S.-ROK military exercises, the expert predicted, potentially resuming dialogue with Seoul to pursue this end. Kim may even agree to hold a summit with President Moon before his term ends, with the target event potentially being the Beijing Winter Olympic games. However, if a conservative government comes to power in Seoul, the expert highlighted, South Korea will likely shift toward closer cooperation with the U.S. in pressuring North Korea to abide by the economic sanctions, which would likely provoke hostility from Pyongyang. In light of this situation, it is unsurprising that Pyongyang prefers a favorable government in Seoul for the next five years.

Another Korean participant highlighted that, due to both the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021 and the Winter Olympic Games in 2022, both this year and the next hold great significance for China. Thus, it is highly likely that China will attempt to minimize North Korean provocations and facilitate inter-Korean talks during the Olympics Games. This would provide a momentous opportunity for Moon Jae-in and Xi Jinping to invite Kim Jong Un to the Games for a potential summit meeting. Then the question becomes, the panelist mused, whether the U.S. would participate in such a multilateral summit if invited by China.

One Korean panelist asserted that preparations must be made for a long-term confrontation with North Korea on the nuclear issue. Additionally, the panelist emphasized that it is crucial to strategize how to reach out to the North Korean people. An excessive focus on denuclearization is

eclipsing long-term strategies and approaches on other key issues that both the U.S. and ROK can pursue, the participant argued.

On reengagement with North Korea, Another Korean expert warned that, while improvement of both U.S.-DPRK and inter-Korean relations through greater dialogue, economic cooperation, and inducements of reform is always a welcome development, signaling to Pyongyang that its tactics in driving a wedge between Seoul and Washington yield any efficacy must be avoided.

An expert from the American side voiced agreement that North Korea is testing what they can get out of the South, rather than signaling a bold shift in their position vis-à-vis negotiations with the U.S. North Korea is very mindful of the U.S. and ROK political cycles, the expert stressed, and are cautious as a result. And while COVID and prospects of famine do put great stress on North Korea, their track record when faced with such pressures is not to make big concessions. There is a reluctance to accept the kind of penetration, confirmation and verification measures necessary for a large-scale vaccine operation in the country. If Pyongyang finds itself under famine and other economic stresses toward the end of this year, it may carry out provocations to gain concessions. Additionally, the participant stated that the next “bold initiative” might be resumption of trade with China.

An American expert believed that the U.S. is unlikely to join a China-DPRK-ROK trilateral summit. And the reason is simply that the Biden administration believes that meetings should be catalytic events that lead to significant progress. And there is no expectation that such a trilateral meeting would yield significant progress on denuclearization. The speaker agreed that North Korea may see value in attempting a tailored peace offensive, perhaps in the context of the Beijing Winter Olympics. If relations were not strained, the U.S. would likely accept a Chinese offer to play host to multilateral meeting. The Biden administration seems to be in risk management mode, playing a defensive game right now on the Korean peninsula. On the domestic front, the expert stressed that there is a real political risk at home for any Biden peace gesture toward the North, especially one without results. And while the Biden administration will not discourage such efforts, it also seems that they will not directly participate in them.

The previous American speaker responded to the question, stating only Moon Jae-In is in a position to kickstart dialogue. The problem is that past efforts have produced less than satisfactory results as he cannot guarantee meaningful progress on the issues of great interest to the U.S. One reason for this impasse is that the U.S. continues to narrowly define the objective as denuclearization. As long as the narrow focus on denuclearization remains the only benchmark by which the U.S. can justify engaging the North, the expert noted, progress will remain elusive.

One American expert asserted that one major problem regarding the impasse with North Korea is the lack of solid intelligence from the intelligence community on internal developments in North Korea. Regarding denuclearization, the expert stated, the question should be what it would take for Pyongyang to trade the weapons off. Ultimately, the expert believed, the academics and researchers need to intensify the analysis of developments inside the North Korean regime and look for opportunities to change it.

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