

Can China, the United States, Japan, and South Korea Agree on Policy toward North Korea?

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President Trump's continuing willingness to meet with Kim Jong-un reflects both a major shift in U.S. policy and the importance of China's constructive influence. Beijing has pushed Washington for years to open a bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang.

Previous U.S. administrations spurned or deflected China's advice. The closest Washington came to adopting that course was as a participant in the Six-Party Talks that Beijing hosted and chaired beginning in 2003. There were reports of informal bilateral discussions on the sidelines, but the Bush and Obama administrations steadfastly refused to hold formal two-party negotiations with the North Korean government. The Six-Party Talks gradually became moribund, since the United States was the only country that could grant most of the meaningful benefits Pyongyang sought, especially a complete lifting of economic sanctions and Washington's formal diplomatic recognition of the DPRK.

The prevailing U.S. attitude was that the onset of bilateral negotiations would be a prestigious diplomatic coup for Pyongyang – especially if the United States agreed to a summit meeting. U.S. officials were firm that Washington would not participate in bilateral talks — much less a summit — unless Pyongyang first made major moves toward shuttering and gradually eliminating its nuclear program.

China continued making efforts to facilitate a breakthrough on bilateral talks. With the election of President Moon Jae-in, the Republic of Korea (ROK) pursued a similar strategy as part of its own conciliatory policy toward Pyongyang. Under President Donald Trump, however, the United States adopted an alarmingly confrontational approach. Washington lobbied for harsher economic sanctions against the DPRK and prodded its allies (and China) to tighten enforcement efforts. The United States deployed more air and naval forces to Northeast Asia, and Trump's own rhetoric turned nasty, punctuated by his scornful public reference to Kim as “Little Rocket Man” in November 2017.

Tensions on the Peninsula had reached their worst level in decades. Japan and the ROK officially supported their American ally, but only Japan seemed truly on board with Washington's hardline approach. Then, in early 2018, Trump changed course dramatically. For the first time, not only did the United States agree to bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang, but Trump did so at the

highest level, holding a summit meeting with Kim in Singapore in June 2018. Both China and South Korea expressed strong approval of that course change. Japan's reaction, while supportive, was noticeably more subdued. As the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi approached in February, 2019, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government exhibited distinct signs of uneasiness that it was being bypassed and that Japan's security interests might be sacrificed.

When U.S.-North Korean tensions rebounded modestly following the collapse of the Hanoi summit, both Moon and Chinese President Xi Jinping labored to salvage the embryonic dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Xi took the highly significant step to visit Pyongyang and hold a face-to-face meeting with Kim. It was the first trip by a Chinese president to North Korea in more than 14 years. Much of the substance of their talk has not been made public, but it seemed more than a coincidence that just days later President Trump made his supposedly spontaneous comment that, during his forthcoming summit trip to the ROK, he might be willing to meet Kim at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to say hello and shake hands. That move, of course, set the stage for the celebrated "photo-op" summit at the DMZ and Trump's symbolically important 20-step stroll into North Korea.

Whether the process of bilateral conciliation continues as Seoul and Beijing favor remains uncertain. Not only has Prime Minister Abe been noticeably subdued about the warm personal relationship between Kim and Trump, he notices the U.S. president's criticism of the venerable U.S.-Japan alliance. Although Trump offered reassurances about the defense commitment, Japan's security establishment appears less than thrilled about Washington's budding rapprochement with Pyongyang. The ROK's rapprochement with North Korea also is generating friction between Seoul and Tokyo. Recently, Abe implied that Moon's government was not diligently enforcing sanctions against Pyongyang, an allegation that the ROK heatedly denied.

Japanese officials, along with hawks in the United States, seem especially disturbed about press reports that the Trump administration might now accept merely a freeze of the DPRK's nuclear program rather than continuing the traditional U.S. demand that North Korea accept a "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" end to its nuclear efforts. It is just one aspect of Trump's North Korea policy that has deeply divided the American political and foreign policy communities. Some of the president's more outspoken critics object to him even meeting with Kim, contending that such a prestigious encounter "gives legitimacy" to North Korea's brutal, repressive regime. Others insist that while meeting with Kim might be acceptable, Trump should have demanded that Pyongyang take tangible steps toward complete denuclearization before agreeing to future sessions. Even some administration officials, most notably National Security Adviser John Bolton, appear to hold similar views.

Therefore, the U.S. rapprochement with the DPRK is quite fragile, as is the parallel effort on the part of President Moon. China consistently has been supportive of the U.S. and South Korean initiatives to improve relations with Pyongyang. But Japan's position is more ambivalent, and hawks (along with opportunistic, partisan opponents of President Trump) in the United States seem eager to derail the process. And ultimately it is not certain if Trump himself is sufficiently committed to detente with North Korea to persist in overcoming the numerous obstacles. The opportunity exists to transform the security environment on the Korean Peninsula to the benefit of people throughout East Asia, and it would be a tragedy for all concerned if the budding rapprochement fails.

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