



Unlocking Cooperation: A Path to Regional Stability in Asia

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Executive Summary

Amid the current rapidly changing global geopolitical environment, Northeast Asia has been relatively stable. Underlying tensions remain; however, new questions have arisen as regional conflicts spill over and affect Asian interests. Peace on the Korean Peninsula remains fragile, and as North Korea deepens military cooperation with Russia, it has raised alarm across the region. U.S.–China confrontation has continued to force difficult choices on regional players, and U.S. allies in the region are debating the credibility of U.S. security commitments under President Trump. Regional actors are reassessing security policies and alliance dynamics in response to shifting threats and the erosion of traditional diplomatic frameworks.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy’s Forum on Asia Pacific Security recently convened experts from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the U.S. against this complex geopolitical backdrop for a closed-door trilateral (U.S., Japan, ROK) and four-party Track II conference. In keeping with our focus on conflict prevention, discussions focused on fostering regional security cooperation and negotiations to defuse tensions and build confidence among regional players. Despite substantial challenges to regional stability and cooperation, participants recognized the need for their respective governments to build on existing momentum and institutional architecture.

Takeaways and Recommendations:

- Russia – DPRK:
 - The strategic partnership between North Korea and Russia has created a major obstacle to renewed diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.
 - Resumption of dialogue with the DPRK is unlikely until a peace settlement is reached over the Russia-Ukraine war. A sufficient

¹ This report reflects the notes and observations of the authors alone and is not a consensus document.

cessation of hostility between these warring states would create room to focus attention on issues on the Korean Peninsula.

- Although Russia may not require arms support from the DPRK after the Ukraine conflict ends, the strategic partnership will remain intact.

- Regional Security Order:

- The regional security order as we know it is undergoing drastic changes that must be proactively addressed.
 - Geopolitical rivalry and increasing limitations on cooperation within existing mechanisms, rising skepticism, and exclusive groupings have reduced the prospects for an inclusive regional security architecture and increased the risk of military conflict.
 - Both allies and adversaries are having trouble interpreting signals from Washington, elevating the risk of misperception and conflict.
 - Regional discussions on nuclear deterrents are evolving and need to be taken seriously. In addition, the diffusion of new weapons and tactics poses ever more complex threats.
 - Traditional regional security forums have been undermined by geopolitical competition and are likely to further recede in the Trump administration. Communication channels should be maintained or increased, even if at a low level or through Track II, as a means of mitigating misperceptions.

- Taiwan:

- U.S. mixed messaging on issues connected to Taiwan and Cross-Strait relations is unhelpful to regional players and alarming to Beijing.
- “Strategic ambiguity” has preserved the cross-Strait status quo, but must be consistent in its articulation and intent, which should be to act as a deterrent to changes in the status quo by either side of the Strait.
- Allies seek consistency in U.S. policy articulation and consultation regarding any changes. Although the Trump administration has stated that there have been no changes in its Taiwan policy, actions it has taken have contradicted this statement.
- Allied statements, especially from Japan and South Korea, will be crucial in stabilizing the messaging to China in a scenario where U.S. leadership is volatile.

- U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral:

- Participants unanimously acknowledged the need for a robust U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation system. Such a system is strategic and should be insulated from bilateral irritants that will inevitably crop up.

- Japan and South Korea must step up in times of U.S. instability and retrenchment and provide more regional leadership.
- Beijing will continue to perceive the trilateral mechanism as an effort to contain China. Trilateral parties should counter this by including China in some regional security efforts.

Risks and Openings for Engaging Pyongyang in a New Era

Despite the collapse of the 2019 Hanoi Summit, meeting participants agreed that President Trump will likely seek out a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un before the end of his presidency to revive his legacy of personal diplomacy and portray himself as uniquely capable of brokering deals. By casting Hanoi not as a failure but as “unfinished business,” Trump could position a new round of U.S.-DPRK talks as a second chance to achieve a deal on his terms. While Trump’s unconventional and often unpredictable foreign policy approach unsettles allies and partners, several counterparts from China, Japan, and South Korea recognized the potential for an opening on North Korea in his willingness to break with diplomatic norms, provided it is approached with seriousness and that allies are consulted and brought into the process. To enhance prospects that Trump would consult regional partners, participants recommended that their governments urge Washington to pursue an interim agreement on threat reduction that might be of interest to the DPRK and could build a basis for further discussions.

Participants from all sides agreed that many of the longstanding policy assumptions about North Korea are now obsolete. Pyongyang is now a de facto nuclear state, has overcome crushing sanctions and even its self-imposed cutoff from the outside world during COVID, and the Kim regime has endured through setbacks and emerged resilient. Moreover, participants lamented that the DPRK’s deepening strategic partnership with Russia poses a significant challenge to stability in Northeast Asia and beyond. North Korean arms shipments and confirmed deployment of troops to support Russia’s war in Ukraine and reciprocal transfers of oil, military technology, and financial aid blatantly undermine the international sanctions regime and erode U.S. leverage in negotiations over Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Pyongyang is unlikely to engage seriously while the fighting in Ukraine is still active, and Russia is providing it considerable diplomatic and material support.

All four sides acknowledged the reality that the denuclearization goal is no longer a viable precondition for reengagement with North Korea, even if it remains a long-term objective. From one Chinese participant’s perspective, Beijing views North Korea’s nuclear posture as rooted in a fundamental lack of trust in U.S. intentions and an absence of credible security guarantees that should be addressed through bilateral dialogue. Several U.S. participants contended that when discussing the broader nonproliferation architecture,

the focus on North Korea should transition from concerns about the consolidation of the DPRK's nuclear program to concerns about threat reduction.

Several participants also underscored the need for strategic cooperation between the ROK and Japan on North Korea, calling for increased levels of trust between the two states as a building block to a reinforced alliance system. Concerns arose over the election of Lee Jae Myung impeding progress in the ROK-Japan relationship; however, the new Korean President had pledged to warm ties between the two historically contentious states.² Given these shifting dynamics, there is a growing consensus that the interim goal of negotiations must move beyond the long-standing focus on denuclearization toward a more realistic and urgent objective of threat reduction. Participants expressed concerns, however, that Trump and his appointees would not consult allies, do not have sufficient command of the details that would be needed in negotiations, and exaggerate the U.S.'s existing leverage.

Beyond Bloc Politics and Toward Cooperative Security

The evolving security architecture in the region is increasingly defined by strategic realignments, competing threat perceptions, and diverging national interests. Despite its frustrations with the deepening Russia-DPRK relationship, China remains open to constructive engagement, including with Russia and other European actors, to address the North Korea challenge. During the dialogue, Chinese participants cautioned against framing the region through damaging "blocification" and adversarial "axis" narratives, which risk deepening mistrust. At the same time, another Chinese participant voiced the widespread unease in China that multilateral mechanisms such as AUKUS and the U.S.-led trilateral cooperation frameworks are seen as anti-China containment efforts. Beijing claims that these structures are destabilizing, escalatory, and pushing China into closer strategic coordination with Russia and North Korea. A third Chinese participant stressed that the Putin-Xi chemistry is exaggerated and does not reflect a natural affinity, highlighting that China's relationship with Russia is not aimed at any third party but rather reflects mutual strategic necessity due to broader isolation and pressure.

To build trust and lay the groundwork for increased strategic engagement, one Chinese participant suggested focusing on pursuing cooperation on traditional and non-contentious issues like maritime security, climate change, and pandemic response. The creation of multilateral platforms and informal, specialized working groups can help address clearly defined transnational challenges. Additionally, participants on all sides welcomed the regularization of people-to-people exchanges, four-party academic and policy dialogues, with more frequent consultations and the re-opening of official lines of

² The election of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung occurred after the conclusion of this conference.

communication. Proactive crisis simulation and planning exercises, paired with working groups, will also serve as positive steps toward fostering mutual confidence and practical collaboration, another Chinese participant added. Participants acknowledged that these efforts would be difficult to bring to fruition in the current environment, but also that without official communication links, the prospects of a crisis are increasing.

While traditional deterrence has effectively prevented large-scale conflict in the Taiwan Strait, it has failed to constrain China's gray zone tactics around Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands. Japanese and Korean participants alike called for more nuance in the U.S. approaches to deterrence as perceived inconsistencies in U.S. security commitments under Trump may embolden China or lead to unintended escalation. Trump's initial indifference to Taiwan's defense, followed by a reversal under pressure, created highly unstable, confusing, and escalatory dynamics from allied perspectives. One Japanese participant emphasized the use of the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral framework as a means of signaling and to reduce inconsistent messaging across administrations, a proposal welcomed by American and Korean participants. American experts supported U.S. efforts to bolster Taiwan's civil defense efforts, including strengthening cyber resilience, infrastructure, and civic preparedness, but emphasized that a clear and consistent deterrence framework should remain the top priority for the U.S. administration.

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