

Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces of North Korean Threat on the U.S.-Japan-ROK Cooperation

Issue 2018/03 • March 2018

by Dr Tongfi Kim
tongfi.kim@vub.be

Tensions over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs remain high although diplomacy has taken a prominent role in recent weeks. With summit meetings scheduled between South and North Korea and between the United States and North Korea in the coming months, cooperation between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) is more important than ever.

The leaders of three security partners have emphasized their unity, but their cooperation faces challenges both despite and because of the significance of the North Korean threat. On the one hand, the shared threat emanating from Pyongyang creates a centripetal force that binds Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul because the three partners need mutual assistance. On the other hand, however, the high stakes involved in the North Korea policy of these states also intensify discord over the means to address the threat, thereby producing a centrifugal force.

The three partners must not lose sight of their common interest in countering the North Korean threat, but it is also important to understand each other's bottom line. Precisely because they have so much common interest, it is tempting to see divergent policies of each other as emotional, misguided or irresponsible without genuinely appreciating the others' gravest concerns. Granted, in addition to preferences for different strategies, there are many other important factors that affect their North Korea policy – ranging from personal differences among leaders to domestic political necessity to historical discord between Japan and South Korea. It is imperative, however, for security partners to understand reasonable differences in

The shared threat emanating from Pyongyang creates a centripetal force that binds Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul because the three partners need mutual assistance. On the other hand, however, the high stakes involved in the North Korea policy of these states also intensify discord over the means to address the threat, thereby producing a centrifugal force. Policies that hurt each other's fundamental security interests have to be pursued only with careful consultation with the partners, for both the policies' effectiveness and for the maintenance of the partnerships. For effective cooperation, the U.S., Japanese, and ROK governments must all embrace the centripetal force of the North Korean threat while being mindful of the centrifugal force.

each other's strategic priorities even with respect to the shared adversary.

Preventing a devastating war on the Korean Peninsula has priority over almost any other conceivable foreign policy task for Seoul. Land contiguity and proximity of the Seoul metropolitan area, which houses about half of the country's population, to the northern border make the country far more vulnerable to North Korean attacks than the United States or Japan. This vulnerability explains why South Korean President Moon Jae-in

pledged that his government “will block war by all means.” North Korea’s nuclear weapons increase the potential destructiveness of its attack on the South, and Pyongyang’s long-range missiles can also damage the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, but it is too risky for Seoul to start a war to prevent their development.

Japan’s security interest is best served by eliminating North Korea’s nuclear program. Having faced North Korea’s hostile attitude for decades, Japan has good reasons to fear North Korea’s nuclear threats – not least because Japan hosts U.S. military bases with important roles in contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. The ocean surrounding the island country offers natural barriers against North Korea’s military force, but North Korean nuclear weapons can inflict massive damage on Japan. Nuclear disarmament of North Korea, therefore, is a top priority for Japan’s national security. Japan has been within the range of North Korean missiles for years and North Korea does not need long-range missiles to hit Japan, but Tokyo still has concerns about North Korea’s long-range missiles diminishing the U.S. extended deterrence for Japan.

Among the three partners, the United States is arguably the least vulnerable to North Korean attacks, but Washington still seeks to minimize North Korean threats to the U.S. territory. From the U.S. perspective, the recent progress in North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs has transformed the problem from management of East Asian security and nuclear non-proliferation to a direct threat to its own security. A large number of U.S. soldiers and their families in South Korea have been exposed to North Korean military threat for a long time, but the U.S. threat perception is higher now that American cities can be devastated by North Korean nuclear missiles. For those who believe that Pyongyang has not yet acquired the capabilities to strike the mainland United States with nuclear warheads, the urgency of stopping North Korea is particularly strong. A preventive war is risky, but if one thinks war is likely, it might appear to be better to fight now than later so that the damage of the war is limited to “over there.”

Considering their respective bottom lines, what should the three security partners do? Given Seoul’s strong reluctance, it is problematic to publicly threaten Pyongyang with a preventive war. Although such a threat can have its advantages in bargaining, it will destabilize U.S. relations not only with North Korea but also with South Korea. Seoul in turn needs to respect the U.S. and Japanese efforts at sanctions to curtail North Korean nuclear and missile programs even if these sanctions are in the way of inter-Korean reconciliation. Policies that hurt each other’s fundamental security interests have to be pursued only with careful consultation with the partners, for both the policies’ effectiveness and for the maintenance of the partnerships. The Moon government’s diplomatic initiatives so far have been impressive, but South Korean leaders should also be careful not to make Washington and Tokyo uncomfortable and alienated from the peace diplomacy.

In reality, the leaders of the United States, Japan, and South Korea also face pressure from domestic politics and other foreign policy issues. For instance, domestic political incentives to appear tough against the evil regime in Pyongyang or fresh and different from previous administrations can complicate diplomacy. The leaders need to minimize the negative consequences of such domestic political theater. Trilateral cooperation against North Korean threats – for example, in missile defense – affects other actors such as China. The United States and Japan should recognize South Korea’s need to not antagonize the giant neighbor, if only because Beijing’s cooperation is crucial in dealing with Pyongyang. South Korea, in turn, needs to remember the importance of the trilateral cooperation for its most important policy goal.

Overall, the clear and present danger of North Korean military threats should make the U.S.-Japan-ROK collaboration easier even with their different priorities. For effective cooperation, the U.S., Japanese, and ROK governments must all embrace the centripetal force of the North Korean threat while being mindful of the centrifugal force.

About the author



Dr Tongfi Kim is KF-VUB Korea Chair Senior Researcher at the Institute for European Studies and Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Vesalius College in Brussels, Belgium.

tongfi.kim@vub.be

This Policy Brief as well as all other KF-Korea Chair publications can be found on www.korea-chair.eu.

The KF-VUB Korea Chair (www.korea-chair.eu) at the Institute for European Studies (www.ies.be) is the primary contact point in Europe on policy issues related to Korea and the Korean Peninsula.

A joint initiative between the Korea Foundation and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), the Chair plays a strategic role in furthering Europe-Korea relations. It builds links between Europe and Korea through a number of activities and partnerships, and contributes actively to increasing the possibilities for their future cooperation on bilateral, regional and global levels.

The KF-VUB Korea Chair was launched in October 2017 and acts as an independent platform in Brussels and across Europe to advance academically rigorous and informed discussions on policy questions that are of relevance to the Republic of Korea and Europe. It conducts policy research and discussions on a wide range of areas including nuclear weapons and WMD, trade, finance, cyber security, counter-terrorism, climate change and science and technology, among others.

The Chair holder is Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, who is also a Senior Lecturer at King's College London.

The KF-VUB Chair
at the Institute for European Studies
is a joint initiative between the
Korea Foundation (KF) and
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
www.korea-chair.eu

Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussels
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: info@ies.be
www.ies.be



INSTITUTE FOR
EUROPEAN
STUDIES



KOREA CHAIR