

US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Extended Deterrence Dialogue
August 29-30, 2016, Maui
Key Findings Final

The Pacific Forum CSIS, with the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and with support from the Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (PASCC/DTRA), held a US-ROK-Japan Extended Deterrence Trilateral Dialogue on Aug. 29-30, 2016. Forty-one US, ROK, and Japanese experts, officials, military officers, and observers, along with 15 Pacific Forum Young Leaders, attended in their private capacity. The atmosphere was positive and cooperative. Concerns expressed in previous meetings – Japanese worries about a Korean “tilt” toward China and Korean worries about Japanese collective self-defense (CSD) legislation opening the door to Japanese militarism – were muted if expressed at all. Key findings include:

The US, South Korea, and Japan agree on the nature and depth of the North Korean threat. All agreed North Korea is increasingly able and ready to threaten them, the trajectory of its military development is accelerating (despite sanctions), and it is determined to modernize its nuclear arsenal. All concur that North Korea will attempt to leverage its nuclear weapons in negotiations on other issues.

The three sides agree China plays a central role in dealing with North Korea, but they also believe that Beijing’s desired end-state for the Korean Peninsula differs from theirs. While all four seek a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, there is no faith that China will pressure Pyongyang to behave or give up its nuclear weapons. China’s hostile reaction to the deployment of THAAD suggests that Beijing is even less likely to pressure North Korea in the future.

There is consensus on the need to pressure China to align its policy more closely with those of the US and its allies. South Koreans, however, are more circumspect than Japanese and Americans and argued that geopolitical realities dictate that they must be prepared to work with China, as much as the ROK works with Japan. China’s position will only change if Beijing concludes that Pyongyang is more of a liability than a strategic asset; some experts doubted that the US will take actions that would convince China of the need to change its thinking given the larger risks to the overall US-China relationship.

While all three countries seek dialogue with Pyongyang to achieve a peaceful resolution to the North Korean problem, they believe North Korea will never give up nuclear weapons. Even the sanctions regime is unlikely to alter the North’s strategic calculus, which will continue to favor nuclear and military development over anything else.

There is little evidence that North Korea has a sophisticated understanding of deterrence theory. Worryingly, there appears to be increasing confidence in Pyongyang about its ability to use these weapons, in particular to manage escalation. The North’s military progress may also make it more likely to engage in destabilizing provocations at the conventional level.

A central focus of Pyongyang’s policy and nuclear doctrine is to drive wedges between and within the US and its allies, in particular to dissuade Japan from entering a conflict on the side of the US and the ROK and to exploit political divisions in the ROK to its advantage.

Japanese worry that North Korea will be more assertive in the months following the US and South Korean presidential elections as it attempts to “test” the new administrations, regardless of who wins.

There was considerable anxiety regarding the US presidential election outcome; regardless of who wins, the apparent trend toward isolationism and against free trade is worrisome to both US allies.

The central problem in Northeast Asia today is deterrence, not assurance. US allies seek indigenous means of imposing costs on North Korea. This is driven by fears that deterrence may fail, not by doubts about US commitment. One participant stressed that “pre-emptive options are necessary for deterrence purposes.”

Dealing with North Korea requires convincing Pyongyang that its threshold for pain is lower than that of the US and its allies and that the consequences of bad behavior are real and outweigh any potential benefits.

All agreed that the ROK-Japan Comfort Women Agreement, while fragile, was working and has improved the atmosphere between the two sides. All also agreed on the need for GSOMIA and a bilateral ACSA but few thought either was possible in the near term (i.e., during President Park’s remaining two years). Most believed that in the event of conflict on the Peninsula, Korea and Japan would work things out (with Washington serving as facilitator).

While the subject was not on the agenda, Japanese and Korean participants, at the meeting and privately, strongly objected to the US adopting a No First Use policy, arguing that such a declaration would have a negative impact on extended deterrence.

TTX Conclusions

Move 1 posited the seizure of Daechong Island by North Korea, along with several hundred hostages, followed by an unattributed underwater nuclear blast off the coast of Niigata, which killed 1,000 people. In Move 2, Pyongyang claimed responsibility for the nuclear blast and 50,000 Chinese military forces mobilized on the North Korean border. Meanwhile, there were rumors of a coup in North Korea and reports of limited PLA activity within North Korea at military facilities.

All agreed from the onset that North Korea was the aggressor and was to blame for the nuclear explosion off Niigata and acted accordingly. All agreed that regime removal was required. Koreans saw this as an opportunity to push for reunification. Americans and Japanese were more cautious but stood behind the ROK.

The Japanese considered the Niigata explosion an act of war and authorized JSDF to respond militarily against North Korean ships/aircraft. Japanese indicated that they were prepared to fully use authorities granted in new security legislation, invoke CSD and provide support to the ROK and US (ASW, minesweeping, etc.) if asked. Significantly, Japanese demonstrated – as in past meetings – understanding of and sensitivity to Korean concerns.

Japanese insisted that any settlement of a conflict that did not include complete disarmament of North Korea, including WMD removal, would not be politically viable. Though their bottom line was that North Korea must not be allowed to launch a second attack against them and should be “severely punished,” they would rely on the US to identify an appropriate response.

South Koreans responded by mobilizing for war and reunification, expecting full US backing. South Korean commitment to reunification was near-total: the removal of the Kim regime, and the elimination

of its WMD stockpiles, would not suffice. Americans, for their part, regarded anything short of regime removal as impractical. Japanese were more inclined to be satisfied with regime removal (and denuclearization), vice the elimination of the North Korean state.

There was a divergence between the US and ROK on messaging to China, although there was a common goal: to keep China out of the conflict. South Koreans preferred full transparency and clarity as they worried about working with Beijing after the crisis. The US was more inclined to be opaque so as to not give China reasons to block the realization of its war aims. Still, the US was ready to work with China to secure WMD, while South Koreans worried that any Chinese involvement might undercut unification efforts. All assessed that alleged Chinese military activity in Pyongyang was more likely aimed at supporting a pro-China successor regime than at perpetuating Kim Jung-Un's rule.

While the Chinese mobilization made some Americans reconsider the extent of military action against the North, it had the opposite effect on South Koreans. The possible presence of PLA troops in North Korea prompted them to speed up plans to unify the two Koreas and prevent China from changing facts on the ground. While 50,000 PLA troops along the border were seen as aimed at security not intervention, Americans and Koreans worried about Chinese military intervention to preserve a North Korean buffer if the allies marched on Pyongyang (even though China experts argued that Beijing would be more concerned with entering into a conflict with the US/ROK than preserving a North Korean state that had initiated the conflict).

Both South Koreans and Japanese strongly supported taking the issue to the United Nations to secure international legitimacy, but they did not expect the UN to act in ways that would bring the crisis to a satisfactory conclusion, primarily as a result of Chinese and Russian objections. Diplomacy was supported while militaries created facts on the ground.

Japanese expected China to make moves elsewhere during a crisis, such as in the South or East China Sea and began taking steps to defend the Senkakus against Chinese adventurism, thus diverting resources and creating an expectations gap. Japanese also worried about not having insight into post-conflict plans for the Korean Peninsula and stressed the need for close consultation and coordination.

South Koreans complained that Japanese team was "obsessed" with noncombatant evacuations (NEO), though Americans countered that this issue is likely to concern all governments. The primary ROK concern was the possible use of JASDF aircraft. One bright spot was the possible use of Japanese ferries and maritime assets to help conduct NEO for all third-party nationals; this is an area of potential cooperation that should be explored.

Non-US participants evinced a belief that deterrence is binary; either it works or it fails. Americans explained that even after an attack, deterrence is still vital. A key US goal was reestablishing or reinforcing deterrence; other participants did not seem to prioritize that objective during the crisis. Japanese participants stressed that deterrence was not just about North Korea, but also about China, and that the reaction to the North Korean attack would affect that deterrence relationship.

There was endorsement of increased missile defense (MD) cooperation among three allies—such as upgrading the *Pacific Dragon* exercises—but participants cautioned that there needs to be a better understanding of the limits of MD systems, how they can be integrated, and the benefits that would be produced. There is an important difference between sensor and interceptor integration, for instance.

Both South Koreans and Japanese stated that the US response—to flow forces into the region, take the lead in military operations, and support reunification — had met their expectations. US participants expressed surprise that South Korea’s push for reunification was seemingly not affected by an assessment of the damage that would befall their country as a result of North Korean attacks.

For more information, please contact Ralph A. Cossa (ralph@pacforum.org) at the Pacific Forum CSIS. These are preliminary findings aimed at providing a general summary of the discussion. They are the result of research supported by the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (PASCC). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of NPS or imply endorsement of the US government. A more detailed summary of the dialogue will soon be available upon request from the Pacific Forum CSIS.