



Far, Far More Than Meets the Eye: Extended Deterrence in Complex Crises in Northeast Asia

A Conference Report of the
US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue

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Pacific Forum

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KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

US-ROK-JAPAN TRILATERAL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, MAUI

The Pacific Forum, with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), brought 41 officials and experts from the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK), along with eight Pacific Forum Young Leaders, all attending in their private capacity, to Maui, Hawaii, Sept. 5-6, 2019 to explore the three countries' thinking about extended deterrence and prospects for and obstacles to strengthened trilateral security cooperation. A two-move tabletop exercise (TTX) was focused on concerted and coordinated efforts by China and North Korea to revise the status quo in Northeast Asia. Key findings include:

Despite political difficulties, there was little difference among participants regarding assessments of the situation and dynamics in Northeast Asia. They were generally aligned and this was evident in responses to the TTX: they sought to prevent opportunism, provide off-ramps for adversaries, and didn't rush to connect the incidents.

Official statements notwithstanding, there is rising anxiety in Seoul and Tokyo for a variety of reasons. In the ROK, some concerns focus on the role of nuclear solutions to national security problems. In Japan, the issue is often the US-China balance of power. Tokyo and Seoul remain committed to their alliances with the US, however.

Participants acknowledged that conventional strength among allies and the ability to coordinate more seamlessly strengthened extended deterrence.

There were various views of political decoupling and its impact on strategic

decoupling. Despite differences, there was general agreement that political decoupling and poor Japan-ROK relations erode strategic alignment; prevent the three countries from improving deterrence; and provide China and North Korea with a wedge to employ against both alliances.

There continue to be misunderstandings among Asian allies about US relations with NATO and nuclear coordination. Many experts in Japan and ROK believe that they have neither the priority in US eyes nor the best possible nuclear umbrella, and desire a more "NATO-like" nuclear arrangement without full understanding of what that actually entails.

The US should encourage greater allied participation in nuclear policy discussions. Those allies must understand that increased input into discussions means that they will share responsibility for subsequent decisions.

Improving Chinese conventional capabilities demand that US-ally deterrence dialogues spend more time on conventional issues. There was a growing appreciation that the full continuum of military capability from conventional to nuclear, to include allied interoperability, helps under-write extended deterrence. Future developments and cross-domain capabilities will add to this.

There was concern about the impact of new technologies on the warfighting environment in Northeast Asia. While deployments of those technologies are still years to come, security planners must accelerate efforts to anticipate—and counter—those effects. These efforts will be complicated by the increasingly strained fiscal situation in each country.

There was considerable debate about the future and importance of GSOMIA. ROK participants insisted that information sharing would continue even if GSOMIA lapsed, and

there was time to save GSOMIA since it didn't expire until November. US participants argued that TISA is a poor substitute.

The difference in views between Japan and the ROK over GSOMIA was evident at other times in the discussion. There were troubling assertions of national pride, such as insisting on who had to initiate contact for the exchange of information.

As in previous meetings, ROK participants emphasized that they increasingly see China as a potential adversary. They argued that their military planning is not purely focused on the Korean Peninsula and that actions taken to improve ROK defense address regional stability and security, great power competition, and countering incremental revisionism. They are concerned about continued or intensified Chinese economic pressure as they enhance or strengthen the alliance.

There is concern in Seoul about alliance management with the US and the appropriate balance of defense and diplomacy. South Korean participants argue that adjustments in ROK defense policy do not constitute a radical shift in direction or policy.

Japanese security planners no longer assume that they have superiority in the air and maritime domains but focus on maintaining overall superiority via cross-domain operations. Japanese are very concerned about North Korean short- and medium-range missiles.

For deterrence to be credible, adversaries must believe that their threats of escalation are less credible than US threats of escalation. This basic fact assumes growing significance when there is a growing perception that US commitment to the region and allies, more generally, is weakening.

There is widespread agreement that the US should deploy new missiles in Asia to redress a balance of power that is shifting against it. Few seemed eager to have them in their own country, however.

While public opinion opposes new weapon deployments, the US and its partners must stress that new weapons are conventional, not nuclear.

In any regional crisis, the US and allies both in and beyond the region must be alert to opportunistic exploitation by other adversaries.

TTX Move 1

A Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force warship monitoring a suspected DPRK illicit ship to ship transfer of goods near Chinese waters is attacked and it attacks an underwater contact in response. An ROK surveillance aircraft monitoring the situation while in the KADIZ collides with a PLA fighter and is lost. North Korea begins preparing for a nuclear weapon test. Chinese saber-rattling intensifies as Beijing-Pyongyang relations markedly improve.

The primary question for any Chinese act considered to be a provocation is whether it is an isolated incident or part of a broader attempt to rewrite the regional status quo. If the latter—or if any country is determined to do so—the general view was that the US and its allies should “escalate to de-escalate”: take decisive measures to convince the adversary that those governments will not tolerate such actions.

Participants paid little attention to North Korean nuclear test preparations; apparently, such tests have been normalized.

While all participants believe that a case must be made to the United Nations Security Council and that it is vital to win over international public opinion, there is little hope that the UNSC will censure provocative behavior by China or North Korea.

While participants were concerned that excessive reaction to a provocation might escalate a crisis, there was also fear that publics would demand more substantial responses.

TTX Move 2

China tries to exclude all countries from waters near Shanghai as it searches for a lost submarine. It mobilizes nuclear forces and denounces the US and its alliances. North Korea seizes Yongpyeong Island and launches a missile that flies over Japan and detonates a nuclear explosion in the Pacific Ocean.

Participants concluded that these events belied a coordinated effort by China and North Korea to break the US alliance system and impose a Sino-centric security order. If that interpretation is correct, then the US and its allies must be prepared to risk escalation to convince those adversaries of US and allied resolve.

Allies warned that they were studying closely the US response to the nuclear detonation and would base their policies on the nature of that response.

ROK participants warned that a possible US nuclear response risked contaminating the peninsula, rendering it uninhabitable—especially if North Korea responded in kind. US participants responded that restraint would impose significant costs on allies—conflict termination would take much longer.

Cascading and/or connected incidents create powerful demands on limited resources.

In a complex crisis, little attention was paid to how signals sent to one adversary might be (mis) interpreted by another adversary. Posturing forces to prepare to fight vs initial signaling can be entirely different—in terms of what, how much and where those forces are sent. The same postured forces provide

messages in multiple directions and for different purposes.

There was general agreement that participants did not pay sufficient attention to nonmilitary means of compelling adversaries or changing their decision-making calculus. This underscored the need for true “whole of nation” efforts.

Strategic and operational level planning considerations:

- Alliance coordination is especially difficult when each ally is dealing with a separate contingency at the same time. The impact of such coordination is not even given the existing regional force posture and roles and missions assigned. Japan is more critical to US-ROK alliance operations than South Korea is to US-Japan alliance operations.
- Improved operational concepts—*ways*—will complement improvements in capability and capacity—*means*. The diminished visibility of conceptual *ways* may not contribute to deterrence as compellingly as more visible capability and capacity improvements, however.
- US military strategy—shifting from multiple MCO-constructs to a more limited, and sequential, approach—may encourage adventurism by third parties in a crisis, or contribute to miscalculation by aggressors perceiving advantage and opportunity (whether real or imagined).
- Allies noted that Russia is playing an increasingly visible role in Northeast Asia, acknowledging that it would likely be a factor in any regional crisis. Even if not directly involved in that contingency, there is concern that Moscow may exploit a crisis by acting opportunistically in another theater, most likely Europe.

- There is growing allied concern regarding the appearance of increasing alignment of China and Russia in foreign policy and strategic interests. Unlike previous years, there was more emphasis on coordination and cooperation between Beijing and Moscow than on potential conflicts between them. Allies have noted the continued and growing sophistication of Chinese and Russian coordinated operations since 2016.
- Expand trilateral exchanges and exercises (from command post-level to field-level) focusing on the coordination required to successfully address single and multiple regional crisis situations.

Recommended actions:

- Within each alliance, establish a Nuclear Policy Group, a bilateral defense ministerial-level mechanism (akin to the NATO NPG), that would provide guidance on nuclear policy and review plans, exercises, and national developments for that alliance.
- Widen agenda in Northeast Asia deterrence dialogues to factor conventional forces.

FAR, FAR MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN COMPLEX CRISES IN NORTHEAST ASIA

CONFERENCE REPORT

A troubling convergence of trends and trajectories threatens political and military stability in Northeast Asia.¹ North Korea's military modernization efforts—its nuclear and missile programs in particular—along with China's spreading influence, rising apprehension about the US defense commitment to its regional allies, and tensions between Japan and South Korea pose foundational questions about the viability of US extended deterrence in this vital sub region. To better understand the significance of those trends and their impact on extended deterrence, Pacific Forum, with support from the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) held the sixth US-Japan-South Korea Strategic Dialogue. Forty-one senior experts and officials from the US, Japan, and South Korea (all joining in their private capacities) were joined by eight next-generation Young Leaders for two days of robust and probing discussions of policies, politics, and perspectives, which included a two-move scenario exercise that examined responses to a complex nuclear crisis in Northeast Asia. As always, the report that follows represents the authors' assessment of the conversations and does not necessarily represent the views of participants or their resident institutions; this is not a consensus document.

¹ This report was written before the Covid-19 outbreak of 2020.

² A "blue theory of victory" is a set of hypotheses about how the US can manage escalation and de-

Northeast Asia Extended Deterrence

Our dialogue began with a former US defense official's assessment of extended deterrence (ED) in Northeast Asia. While conceding that nations were challenging US national interests and those of its regional allies—North Korea continued its provocations and China was probing alliance red lines with "gray zone" activities—he concluded that ED was working. He was similarly confident that the US had the means and the will to defend its allies' interests, although he observed that both Seoul and Tokyo were increasingly anxious over mixed signals from Washington about its response to perceived challenges. His optimism was buoyed by the observation that governments in both capitals had made the strategic choice to cooperate with the US rather than strike out on their own.

Confidence in the US reflects its ability to deploy a nuclear weapon anywhere in the world within 30 minutes and the modernization of capabilities to give military planners an array of options decreasing their reliance on nuclear weapons to address threats. At the same time, however, force modernization has proceeded more slowly than anticipated and there remains no convincing "blue theory of victory."²

Our speaker identified two sets of problems: political and military. The first includes the readiness of President Donald Trump to challenge the long standing logic of US defense and foreign policy, which reinforces anxiety about his actions in a crisis. The downward spiral in relations between Japan and South Korea is also a factor, as it erodes the trilateral cooperation that is a vital component of successful extended

escalation in a confrontation with a nuclear-armed state in a way that safeguards its national interests.

deterrence. So, too, are rising levels of partisanship in each country, which taints even deterrence policy (which our speaker argued had hitherto been bipartisan). China-Russia strategic cooperation is another political consideration complicating cooperation, as are the cascading consequences of Moscow's decision to abandon virtually all (14 of 15) arms control agreements. Russia figured more prominently in discussions this year than ever before.

Militarily, the most alarming development is the threat of “strategic insolvency,” or the prospect that the US will not prevail in a military confrontation. Authoritative assessments, including the National Defense Strategy Commission, warn that “US military superiority is no longer assured,” and it “might struggle to win, or perhaps even lose, a war against China or Russia.”³ An analysis by the US Studies Center at Sydney University is even more scathing, concluding that “America no longer enjoys military primacy in the Indo-Pacific and its capacity to uphold a favorable balance of power is increasingly uncertain.”⁴ The degradation of US military capabilities assumes ominous proportions in light of political cooperation between China and Russia.

For some time, some allies have asserted that an “answer” to the problems of extended deterrence in Northeast Asia is a more “NATO-like” structure. There is a belief among Asian allies that extended deterrence works better in NATO and that Europe is a higher priority in the US alliance structure. That latter assertion is not true: The Department of Defense's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report begins with the secretary of

³ United States Institute of Peace, *Providing for the Common Defense: Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, 2018, p. vi.

⁴ Ashley Townsend et al, “Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and

Militarily, the most alarming development is the threat of “strategic insolvency,” or the prospect that the US will not prevail in a military confrontation

defense's declaration that “the Indo-Pacific is the Department of Defense's priority theater.”⁵ NATO has a longer history of discussion of and debate over extended deterrence, but our speaker, who has participated in many such meetings, is not convinced the European answer is better. He acknowledged the assurance benefits but he noted unanticipated problems too: more public discussion of nuclear deterrence, with all the associated difficulties of such a debate, including opportunities for adversaries to “meddle” and attempt to influence that discussion.

Rather than copying the NATO model, our speaker endorsed a new defense ministerial-level mechanism to sustain nuclear focus. He suggested that it focus on the broader top-level guidance and review of plans, exercises, national developments, and nuclear policy—but not actual nuclear planning. This would, he argued, heighten readiness to implement existing policy and help come to terms with the “strategic insolvency” problem.

As in previous years, discussion explored the NATO comparison but the conversation was

Collective Defense in the Indo-Pacific,” *The United States Studies Center*, Aug. 19, 2019, p. 2.

⁵ “Message from the Secretary of Defense,” *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, US Department of Defense, June 1, 2019.

more skeptical this time than in the past. As always, US participants urged interlocutors to be precise about the parts of the European model they sought to emulate. In some cases, US-NATO nuclear relations are misunderstood: the name is a misnomer—the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) doesn't actually plan. Some European governments now consider Asia's extended deterrence a model for them (wanting the US guarantees without the physical presence of nuclear weapons). In addition, there is a recognition that bilateral consultations—as in Northeast Asia—can be deeper and easier than those with a large group of allies. Some Northeast Asian participants acknowledged that their arrangements may be superior but concerns persist over how to ensure US commitment and sufficient consideration of allies' equities in crises.

Allies' questions are mounting as adversaries acquire new capabilities—participants specifically identified North Korea's maneuverable warheads that can penetrate first-generation missile defense systems and China's nuclear warfighting assets—that alter regional strategic calculations. As one Japanese bluntly stated, “the nuclear situation in the environment surrounding Japan has deteriorated.” This could help the alliance if, as an American asserted, public receptivity to nuclear deterrence is a function of threat perceptions. But, as always, effective extended deterrence is far more than just nuclear deterrence, which means that ED dialogues need to address a broader agenda—a Japanese participant flagged China's improving conventional capabilities as a specific future agenda item; a Korean argued that nonmilitary responses need to be considered—to better align threat perceptions and agree on ways to meet and reduce those challenges. South Korea

participants questioned whether existing ED consultative mechanisms are the best venues to compare threat perceptions and exchange information.

Critically, however, if allies want more input into deterrence decisions, then they must be ready to share responsibility for those decisions. This has important implications. First, allies will have a greater risk of entrapment in conflicts. Second, they will have to do more to sell decisions to their publics even with that entrapment risk. Third, on the other end of the spectrum, allied governments will have to do more to make alternative options—the “second track” that can be used to avert adversaries' deployments of weapons systems—more attractive. That will be easier for some allied governments than others.

A foundational assumption of this dialogue is that trilateral cooperation is key to effective extended deterrence. That cooperation has been imperiled as relations between Seoul and Tokyo have deteriorated. Our dialogue occurred after South Korea threatened to let lapse the General Sharing of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) it has with Japan—the result of a cascading fight over historical issues that spilled over into economic relations between the two countries.⁶ Views of the impact of these tensions were mixed—the majority view was that political tensions had damaging strategic effects—and this discussion ranged well beyond the issues that have roiled that bilateral relationship. Japanese (and some Americans) worry that the ROK government is less committed to North Korea's denuclearization and less willing to challenge China on key issues. The charitable form of this argument is that the ROK government is making tactical adjustments to engage

⁶ At the 11th hour, the Seoul government did not let GSOMIA lapse but stressed that the stay was temporary and conditioned upon improvement in

ROK-Japan relations—or more precisely, Japanese efforts to fix them.

Pyongyang and is unwilling to take steps that could endanger inter-Korean rapprochement or the peace process. A more extreme argument—not made in our meeting but which is sometimes heard in Washington and Tokyo—is that Seoul is loosening ties to the US and is moving closer to China on a range of issues. ROK participants pushed back hard against this charge and countered that South Korean views of China are hardening and there is growing readiness in the ROK strategic community to see China as a threat and plan accordingly.

A final thread (addressed in more detail below) examined the impact of the US withdrawal from the INF treaty. US participants underscored that their government’s decision was based on Russian behavior, although the growth of the Chinese missile arsenal was disturbing. They confirmed that the US may to deploy new missiles in the region but emphasized that they would be conventional, not nuclear, capable. ROK participants reinforced the logic of that choice, noting that reintroduction of US nuclear missiles would undercut criticism of North Korea’s nuclear program.

National Defense Strategies

Having established a framework for thinking about extended deterrence, we turned to assessments of each country’s defense strategy with a five-year horizon. Our US presenter began by noting that budgets would remain flat at around \$770 billion to \$790 billion per year, even though the sequester had ended. A significant chunk of that money, some \$500 billion in total, has been devoted to research and development since 2015, with each of the services placing bets across various domains. Nevertheless, he warned that rising personnel costs would continue to crowd out modernization.

Our speaker anticipates defense program priorities to include maintenance and

modernization of the triad, even as SSBNs are reduced and ICBMs replaced. Given a focus on ensuring the survival of strike platforms, he expects the navy to embrace unmanned systems and expansion of conventional ground-based strike capabilities, along with amphibious forces and a commitment to the procurement of high-end munitions.

The National Defense Strategy’s “one war construct” will shape investment, and while he anticipated flexibility in setting priorities our speaker was concerned about the tension between capability and capacity. He noted that the many dimensions of the China threat are driving the US on multiple fronts. He echoed the US Study Center’s conclusion that US conventional capacity had atrophied, while adding that China’s global power projection capabilities would complicate planning for other regional commands, not just Indo-Pacom. He highlighted the new focus the US has put on technology development and transfer, noting reform of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), which he sees as part of a larger project to digitally decouple the two economies; allies will be pushed to follow the US lead.

He was optimistic about the Korean Peninsula, noting that the US had numerous options. He cautioned that efforts were underway to restore the broader regional conventional military balance that were not clearly visible, such as the development of new operational concepts—he highlighted a new urgency in Air Force efforts—as well as disbursed power projection and joint strike programs. He applauded work to develop infrastructure throughout the theater.

The alliance with Japan will remain central to US strategy, which will center on China. Joint planning on scenarios will be completed, the allies are developing new command and control architectures, and new allied frameworks will emerge. He expects Japan to

share access to its bases and the two militaries will pursue joint ground-based strike training and the US will deploy missile defense assets on southern Japanese islands.

He expects stability to return to the US-ROK alliance after host nation support negotiations are concluded. The alliance will remain more narrowly focused on the Korean Peninsula and troop cuts will occur but US personnel will not drop below 20,000. Wartime OpCon transfer will be concluded in 2023, the US will deploy boost-phase missile defense to the peninsula to counter North Korean threats, and it will be complemented by the expenditure of considerable resources on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

Any analysis of Japanese defense planning must begin, as our Japanese speaker did, with the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) ⁷ which, among its important features, calls for a multi-domain joint force that includes all domains, while highlighting cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. Significantly, (and worrying given conclusions about US capabilities), the NDPG no longer assumes that Japan can maintain uncontested superiority in both the air and maritime domains in a conflict. It does call for overall superiority via cross-domain operations, though. This is to be facilitated by enhanced jointness and the creation of a joint operation commander. Japan will focus on the first and second island chain, developing its antiship and ISR capabilities. He warned, however, that the government is investing in platforms that are becoming obsolete, such as fixed ground-based platforms—he pointed to Aegis Ashore purchases—and the development of a “quasi-aircraft carrier.” These decisions, he said, were led by politics and risked potential negative consequences. ⁸

⁷ Ministry of Defense, National Defense Program Guidelines, Dec. 18, 2018.

His list of threats mirrored those of other speakers. North Korea continues to be the primary threat. While the development of that country’s missile capability is troubling, it should not lead to the conclusion that extended deterrence is failing. For him, the issue is political will and he too noted “growing anxiety” about the US president’s thinking about alliances.

China’s growing arsenal is enhancing its anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities and he highlighted concerns about coordination between China’s coast guard and the PLA, and the potential for more “gray zone” and hybrid challenges. He too warned of growing operational coordination between China and Russia and expects it to expand. At the same time, there is no mistaking the efforts by both Tokyo and Beijing to stabilize their relationship, but he was skeptical that China will maintain that interest over the next five years.

The Japan-US alliance is solid but our speaker worried about the future. While he, like most Japanese, acknowledged a need for more extensive alliance cooperation and burden sharing, he warned that bitter negotiations over host nation support, scheduled to conclude in 2021, will shape perceptions and alliance management. He anticipated a positive response from Japan to US entreaties to host or deploy missiles on remote islands in the southwest. Our meeting occurred as Japan was contemplating the dispatch of Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) assets to the Persian Gulf to help protect traffic in that vital waterway, and our speaker worried that resource constraints could force a tradeoff and deployments that far from Japan could undercut homeland defense efforts. He was somewhat optimistic about trilateral cooperation, noting reports that the ROK would not abandon GSOMIA, rumors that

⁸ His critical assessment of these purchases was not shared by all Japanese participants.

proved true; while GSOMIA may have limited impact on information sharing, he underscored its value as a symbol of cooperation between the two countries. He also noted a growing concern among Japanese experts about the future of OpCon and the US force presence in Korea. He also sees the ROK effort to develop its own multi-domain warfighting concept as another opportunity to enhance trilateral cooperation, and he noted the potential convergence of Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision with Korean President Moon Jae-in's Southern Policy.

Our South Korean speaker began by noting the extensive ROK efforts to reform and modernize its military, pointing to the Moon government's Defense White Paper, the earlier Defense Reform 2.0, and various defense plans. For all the change, he highlighted the continuity in ROK policy. Priorities remained protection from external attack, support for reunification, and support for regional peace and stability. He challenged the claim that the ROK is merely focused on North Korea, arguing instead that the country is actively contributing to efforts by the United States and other like-minded countries to counter revisionism in this era of great power competition. In fact, he claims that the ROK is ahead of other countries in addressing critical issues, including countering incremental challenges to the strategic status quo. Seoul is developing indigenous multiuse platforms and pressing for greater integration of civil-military relations. These changes are aimed at strengthening the ROK's ability to counter North Korea and China's asymmetric and A2AD capabilities. Nevertheless, prioritizing a more diplomatic approach to these two countries, the ROK avoids highlighting this.

Hanging over this conversation were doubts about the current US administration's commitment to the US-ROK alliance

He noted significant increases in the defense budget for ISR, nonlethal weapons, and missile defense. Girding these changes is a desire by the ROK military to take greater responsibility for national defense, to increase resilience, and contribute more to shared alliance missions. Our speaker does not anticipate that future administrations will alter that trajectory. He does, however, see signs that a subsequent administration, be it progressive or conservative, will adjust policies to reflect a realization that the Moon administration oversold the advantages and impact of technology development and focused too much on redistributing influence among the services rather than prioritizing jointness.

Like his Japanese counterpart, he voiced growing concern about alliance management, and worried whether the Moon administration had struck the right balance between defense and diplomacy; he expected adjustments but not major change. As in Japan, alliance management will become more difficult, even though ROK reforms align well with what the US desires. The benefits of that convergence are being squandered by poor strategic communications and working-level operations, however. These difficulties are especially important in the context of transitioning wartime OpCon, but they can be overcome, he insisted, if the alliance is able to strengthen communication and cooperation between ROK military leaders

and off-peninsula US combatant commanders.

In this context, the US-ROK alliance must change. He called for the US to adopt a new outlook—one based on partnership—and a new style, based not on control but on soft power and influence. He warned that China is and will be increasingly threatened by the changes underway in the ROK and urged the US to do more to support its ally in the face of PRC threats and actions. Cooperation, both bilateral and trilateral, will be politicized. While deterrence will continue to be a pillar of ROK and US-ROK strategy, it must fit more neatly in the daily work of defense and diplomacy.

Discussion focused on practical concerns. Japanese worried about the impact of scaled-back US-ROK exercises (an outcome of the Trump-Kim Singapore summit) on alliance readiness and the prospect of a reduced US presence on the peninsula; one Japanese participant warned of the creation of a new “Acheson line.” Korean participants acknowledged that US troop cuts could be a big deal but added that much depended on how they were done. Americans noted that the US presence was to deter and defend against North Korean aggression, not that of China, and thus might have a more limited effect.

Hanging over this conversation were doubts about the current US administration’s commitment to the US-ROK alliance. Concerns reflected the president’s longstanding skepticism about the value of alliances, his belief that allies use those relationships to exploit the US in trade agreements, and contentious host nation support talks. All sides agree that changes are coming and more burden sharing is required. There is no consensus, however, on what an equitable division of costs looks like; of particular relevance here is the absence of

agreement on the contribution the ROK should make to the cost of strategic assets. One ROK participant noted his government’s decision to spend a billion on a light aircraft carrier, a second billion on another carrier, and another billion on F35Bs. This is, said another ROK participant, proof of the ROK’s commitment to doing more for defense, which is guided by a recognition among all South Korean governments of the centrality of the US-ROK alliance to their nation’s security.

A Japanese participant noted the ROK government’s commitment to growing its defense budget, but pointed out that its defense spending was now 80% of that of Japan. His questions—what is the ROK goal and how much is enough?—betrayed some unease, perhaps understandable given tensions between the two countries. ROK participants reaffirmed their commitment to good relations with Japan and trilateral cooperation. When challenged on the reality of that commitment given Seoul’s apparent readiness to end the military information-sharing agreement, they countered that the Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) would suffice, an argument that was pointedly rejected by US participants.

Discussion also added nuance to Japanese thinking about China. While Japanese participants welcomed a US approach that focuses on heightened competition with China, they also cautioned that the policy creates difficulties for Japan. They are heartened to see the US adopt a more realistic assessment of Chinese power, but the mainland is a geographic fact of life for them: Tokyo cannot turn its back on diplomacy and engagement. Similarly, Japan’s economy is deeply integrated with that of China and US-China tensions have a profound impact on Japan’s economic prospects. In both domains, Washington and Tokyo must coordinate to ensure that they are not hurting

each other or undercutting the other's initiatives.

TTX, Move 1

As in previous years, the meat of this meeting was a two-move tabletop exercise (TTX) that probed how the three countries would respond to a nuclear-related crisis in Northeast Asia. This year's contingency differed from earlier exercises in several ways. In move 1, the crisis was more complex—two adversaries made moves that threatened regional peace and stability—and one of those adversaries was China; previously China was only a peripheral and late-moving actor.

In the scenario, a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) warship monitoring a suspected DPRK illicit ship to ship transfer of goods near Chinese waters is attacked and it attacks an underwater contact in response. An ROK surveillance aircraft monitoring the situation while in the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) collides with a PLA fighter and is lost. North Korea begins preparing for a nuclear weapon test. Chinese saber-rattling intensifies as Beijing-Pyongyang relations markedly improve.⁹ Each team answered the following questions.

1. How would you summarize or describe the scenario?
2. What are the five immediate diplomatic steps you take: who do you reach out to and what do you tell them?
3. What are the five immediate military steps you take?
4. What are the five priority items you want from each ally/partner?
5. What messages do you send to Pyongyang?
6. What messages do you send to China?

The *Japan* team's narrative reduced the events to a series of accidents in a congested area, and their objective was to clarify what transpired while being tough with China and North Korea. To that end, their five immediate diplomatic steps were:

1. appeal to the US and South Korea to confirm their cooperation in this situation using the Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT);
2. appeal to China to act follow international law, in particular not to impede MSDF maneuvers in the wake of the incident;
3. appeal to the DPRK to stop provocations and to abide by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions;
4. take its case to the UNSC because its warship had been attacked;
5. show condolences to the ROK for its loss of life.

The five immediate military steps were:

1. begin ASW actions in the vicinity of the attacked vessel;
2. begin search and rescue operations to assist the ROK;
3. clarify what happened and identify the attacking entity;
4. enhance ISR capabilities;
5. upgrade level of ballistic missile defense readiness.

From the ROK, its priority items were acquiring data on the MSDF attack via GSOMIA and getting information on DPRK activities. From the US, Tokyo sought support as it made those same requests to Seoul. In addition, it would appeal to the US for coordination on search and rescue (S&R) and ISR and ballistic missile defense (BMD), including the dispatch of an Aegis-equipped warship to the Sea of Japan; intelligence

⁹ The complete scenario is in the appendix.

sharing regarding the East China Sea, and Washington's support at the UNSC.

Tokyo would send messages to Pyongyang requesting that it abide by all UNSC resolutions and suspend all challenges to Japanese initiatives to recover bodies and uncover the truth behind the attack on its MSDF vessel. China would also be asked to abide by all pertinent UNSC resolutions, and Beijing would also be told that Tokyo would no longer tolerate illegal behavior by North Korea and that it expected China to put more pressure on Pyongyang to behave. Japan will also tell Beijing that its vessel was not in Chinese territorial waters and that it expected support from China to discover what had happened.

For Japan, the key factor was the attack on their warship, an event that obscured North Korean missile launches that were also occurring. One Japanese team member noted that launches have become somewhat routine—which prompted a US participant to worry that they had been normalized—while an attack on a warship was not. Japanese participants explained that their government would declare a Maritime Safety Operation, a policing operation that exceeds Coast Guard capabilities, adding that since they were not sure who attacked their vessel—although they seem to assume that North Korea was responsible—the official response was measured. To prevent escalation, they would pressure Pyongyang through Beijing. Equally important was showing solidarity with the US and the ROK. Japan's first priority is security of the MSDF warship and its crew, and that attack, not the missile launch, would be the focus of the UNSC discussion.

The main debate among US team members was whether the appropriate response was to show resolve or to manage escalation

The *US* narrative emphasized the seeming collusion between China and North Korea, in which Beijing attempted to rewrite the regional status quo while Pyongyang continued its provocations. In a nod to the peculiarities of the moment, the group said that it would consult with allies before going to the US president with advice, but expected to do the following (in no particular order):

1. work with Japan to ascertain what happened to the submarine and the ROK plane;
2. go to the UNSC to get its support;
3. issue a strong statement to contest China's expanded claims of sovereignty to the area;
4. issue a statement condemning North Korea's resumption of testing;
5. issue with its allies a strong collective security statement;
6. hold leader-to-leader conversations, reassuring allies about commitments and asking them to refrain from unilateral statements and actions.

Its five military steps included:

1. maintaining Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS) status quo;
2. dispatching a fighter joint patrol in the disputed ADIZ and an escort to the JMSDF ship;
3. moving attack subs from Guam and Hawaii and keeping them in the area

- (allied governments would be informed, not publics);
4. considering joint and trilateral exercises including ASW;
 5. surging MD assets;
 6. conducting search and rescue operations;
 7. reaffirming US extended deterrence policy about attacks on allies and repeating that it will not tolerate the use of nuclear weapons.

The US expects its allies to work together, to issue a trilateral joint statement, to hold both virtual and actual meetings, and to hold a joint ASW exercise. Pyongyang would be told to comply with UNSC resolutions and warned that noncompliance risked a return to “fire and fury.” China would be told both publicly and privately that its claims to territory would be contested, that this is not the time for opportunism in other areas, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the South China Sea, and that Washington expected Beijing to use its leverage to keep Pyongyang in line. Moscow would also be warned that opportunistic acts would not be tolerated.

The main debate among US team members was whether the appropriate response was to show resolve or to manage escalation. They opted for the former, convinced that China and North Korea were colluding to change the regional status quo. Americans argued that Beijing and Pyongyang would see anything less than a hard line as an invitation to escalate, as US restraint would provide opportunities to test US and allied resolve. If so, the US team conceded that efforts to engage the UNSC would fail—given China’s veto—but they felt a need to appeal to China’s international responsibilities and honor previous UNSC resolutions and to use the UN to win over world opinion. The US team also put considerable emphasis on the value of a trilateral statement, arguing that it effectively “recoupled” the allies.

The other teams were reassured by the US reaction, with the Japanese noting that both governments seemed to be on the same page. Koreans agreed with the emphasis on trilateral cooperation, noting that the seriousness of the situation demanded taking all necessary steps. There was, however, division among South Koreans about the possible US dispatch of an aircraft carrier: some backed the move to assist search and rescue efforts and to send a strong signal to China, while others saw it as unnecessarily provocative.

The **ROK** team considered this a very serious situation and responded accordingly. Its five immediate diplomatic steps included:

1. sending a strong message China about the incident but not escalating, and calling on Beijing to manage North Korea;
2. talking to Americans to seek close military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and search and rescue operations, as well as a united front in messaging to China and North Korea about the missiles;
3. seeking Japan’s close cooperation and showing a readiness to share intelligence and provide help to the stricken MSDF vessel;
4. warning North Korea against provocations and to honor the spirit of North-South declarations; and
5. while acknowledging the difficulties, go to the UN to condemn China’s behavior.

The five immediate military steps included:

1. search and rescue operations;
2. increasing readiness on the Korean Peninsula (changing WatchCon, not DefCon);
3. increasing readiness of the Yellow Sea fleet;

4. sharing information with the US and Japan; and
5. improving trilateral coordination with Japan and the US.

From the US, the ROK team sought assets for search and rescue; diplomatic support to check China at the UNSC; the prevention of escalation by North Korea; direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang; and the facilitation of trilateral coordination between Japan and ROK. Japan would be asked to align with Seoul in dealing with China; share intelligence regarding China and North Korea; and help in preventing Pyongyang from escalating—which also means avoiding any provocative actions.

ROK team members agreed that the scenario was serious and threatening, but unlike the US and Japanese teams, they did not see the incidents as a deliberate attempt to collaborate to rewrite the regional status quo. (A Japanese added that if events were accidental and not related, then China should intervene to reduce the risk of escalation.)

Here, discussion about information sharing became most heated. When pressed, South Koreans admitted to reluctance to being the party requesting information and activation of GSOMIA. They argued that TISA could be used as effectively, an argument that was rejected by virtually all other participants. A Japanese participant countered that TISA applies only to information exchanges pertaining to nuclear incidents or missile tests, and not for general information such as that about North Korean spy ships. Again, ROK participants insisted that an end to GSOMIA is merely a political statement, not the end of the South Korea-Japan strategic relationship, a claim that Americans vehemently disputed: for them, political decoupling leads to strategic decoupling.

TTX, Move 2

China tries to exclude all countries from waters near Shanghai as it searches for a lost submarine. It mobilizes nuclear forces and denounces the US and its alliances. North Korea seizes Yeonpyeong Island and launches a missile that flies over Japan and detonates a nuclear explosion in the Pacific Ocean. In a change from round 1 and previous meetings, participants were broken into two alliance teams—US-Japan and US-South Korea—and given the following questions:

1. How do you assess Chinese intentions? What are Beijing's priorities and objectives at this point (and rank order them)?
2. How do you assess North Korean intentions? What are Pyongyang's priorities and objectives at this point (and rank order them)?
3. What are your top five priorities at this moment?
4. What are the five immediate requests of the other alliance?
5. What are the three things you do not want it to do?

The *US-ROK* concluded that the events of the scenario were no accident or coincidence and that China had the broad intention to redefine the regional order in a Sinocentric way. It sought to gain exclusive control of region with its A2AD strategy and break the US alliance system. The team believed that China's first priority would be search and rescue operations for its missing submarine, which would also be used to justify its A2AD strategy.

The team concluded that North Korea was being equally ambitious. Pyongyang was trying not to test the US-ROK alliance but to break it. It too sought to rewrite the status quo. While its nuclear missile launch was an attempt to deter US military intervention,

North Korea was fully cognizant of the balance of military power on the Korean Peninsula and therefore did not want to escalate to full-scale war; it would not invade South Korea or attempt to unify the peninsula by force. It did want to expose US extended deterrence guarantees as hollow.

The team's top 5 priorities were: continuing search and rescue operations; issuing a strong message at the UNSC denouncing the attack and seizure of Yongpyeong island; getting the island back without escalating to a full-scale war with North Korea; avoiding a similar conflict with China; and making an overwhelming show of US force with measured execution (which would be led by South Korea with US support). One of the principle means to the realization of these goals is the deployment of a US carrier strike group to the Yellow Sea to show US commitment and impose costs on China.

From the US-Japan alliance, it sought information sharing; mobilization of US Forces Japan (USFJ) under the UN Command (UNC); strong public condemnation of North Korea by the government of Japan; and assistance in getting other UNC countries to align with the alliance in public statements. It warned the other alliance to avoid: direct SDF involvement in military operations on the Korean Peninsula; restrictions on mobilization of the UNC; direct attacks on North Korea nuclear sites with its forces without prior consultation.

Discussion of the US-ROK alliance response focused on two issues. The first was the decision to deploy the carrier strike group to the Yellow Sea. Characterized as part of the "escalate to de-escalate strategy," the decision was also a direct US counter to China's A2AD policy. Its operations facilitated search and rescue operations, signaled US resolve, provided a platform for actions to retake Yeonpyeong island, and constituted rejection

of China's attempt to make new territorial claims. It quickly became clear, however, that those missions could conflict: signaling resolve also provided a target for adversaries ready to escalate. ROK participants noted that they were more focused on the message—a signal of both resolve and a desire to avoid escalation—and in some cases distinguished between strategic and nuclear assets, although that logic was not always clear.

The need to balance those two concerns was also evident in the discussion of the second issue, the response to North Korea's nuclear test. The detonation in international waters triggered a debate over whether it constituted nuclear use or was "just" a test (with some participants noting that a test is a form of use). In the move 1 discussion, it was asserted that nuclear use would provide grounds for regime change in North Korea (an outcome that matched previous years' discussions.) In this move, however, the explosion was characterized as a "form of A2AD" as well as an act of nuclear coercion that demanded a response—but one that did not reach the level of regime change. Americans cautioned that the US response to nuclear use depends on the type of use, and given the intense scrutiny that allied governments will give any US response—a warning reiterated by allied participants—US planners must be extremely sensitive to the cost of restraint on both allies' capabilities and US credibility. The US walks another fine line: ROK participants want the US to use all means to deter attacks against their country, but they also warned that nuclear use on the peninsula could render it uninhabitable—especially if the North responded in kind.

The *US-Japan* team agreed with the US-ROK team's assessment of Chinese intentions: it too saw the events as a deliberate challenge to the US security system in East Asia and believed that Beijing and

Pyongyang were working together toward that goal. Its five top priorities were:

1. preserving trilateral relations as three governments dealt with two simultaneous crises;
2. suppressing North Korean provocations and responding to Chinese challenges;
3. demonstrating the resolve of the three countries against both adversaries;
4. undertaking collective search and rescue operations for the missing crew; and
5. deterring nuclear use.

Its five immediate requests to the other alliance included: information sharing among the three countries; avoidance of independent actions or unilateral behavior; issuance of a trilateral statement against China and North Korea; activation of missile defense systems; and a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO). It urged the other alliance to make no meaningless *escalation* (emphasis from the team), to not deploy dual-capable aircraft (DCA) to South Korea, and to avoid escalation with China.

The US-Japan team emphasized that their main priority was China and its ambition to disrupt the alliance and rewrite the regional status quo. Members underscored the vital importance of sharing MD information. The missile launch was considered an attempt to drive a wedge between the two alliances. There was discussion of the meaning of “meaningless escalation”: team members drew a distinction between necessary albeit dangerous steps and those that were not required and were primarily escalatory. They asserted that the deployment of US nuclear

weapons to the Korean Peninsula fell in the latter category. US participants noted that the group did not endorse a nuclear posture change, nor was there discussion of hitting a North Korean missile site; such a strike was also considered “meaningless escalation.”

TTX wrapup

Assessment of the scenario focused on several questions. The first was how participants evaluated nuclear signaling.¹⁰ The consensus view was that North Korea’s provocations were troubling—no team said it was deterred by its nuclear threats¹¹—but they were distractions from the real problem: China’s seeming preparation for armed hostilities. Some participants voiced concern that asymmetrical interests—Beijing was deemed to have more at stake—would make the US reluctant to escalate as the crisis unfolded. (To ask this another and perhaps more clarifying way, “why do adversaries believe their threats to escalate are more credible than US threats to escalate?”) This prompted several participants to observe that the current US leadership not only added an element of uncertainty to allied calculations but might encourage adversaries—using the same logic as those allies—to miscalculate on the side of adventurism. Fortunately, there was no indication that any of the countries was deterred by Chinese actions. There was, however, an emphasis on a broad-based response to China’s nuclear threat, and the active consideration of all measures from the entire range of DIME—diplomatic, information, military, and economic—options. Nevertheless, US participants reminded the group of the need to focus, eventually and ultimately, on hard military power.

¹⁰ For details of Chinese actions, see the full descriptions of the two moves in the appendix.

¹¹ As in previous years, there was a robust discussion of the significance of a “demonstration

shot.” Americans argue that these are a sign of weakness, and while that is not a consensus view, opposition to that thinking seems to be diminishing.

At this point, China's "no first use" policy comes into play. If those declarations are sincere, then the US and its allies should be confident that they can prevail. The problem, however, is that there is profound skepticism about the validity of that pledge. It is difficult, if not impossible, to believe that the Chinese leadership, having encouraged nationalism, would be able to survive a military defeat and would thus seek to prevail by any possible means.

...Japan must deploy ballistic missiles as a cost imposition strategy, one that will force the PRC to spend money on defense; every RMB spent on defense is an RMB not used on capabilities to threaten Japan

The US had signaling issues of its own. The US must balance competing imperatives: showing resolve while wanting to demonstrate a preference for de-escalation. That calibration is even harder if the adversary doubts US resolve. Since US allies admit that they are incapable of achieving national objectives without US support, Washington's decision making calculus—specifically, how much risk it is willing to accept—is critical. Even more alarming, US action that reassures allies may not be sufficient to deter a revisionist adversary.

For all the questions, most South Korean and Japanese participants were pleased with the two alliances' response. Interpretations of adversary behavior and motivations

converged, and there were no discrepancies in demands made to the other alliance nor clashes in actions taken, sought or from which they were preferred to abstain.

Missiles and Northeast Asia

Our dialogue convened a few weeks after the US decision to withdraw from the US-Russia Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. While the US decision was primarily the result of years of Russian cheating, the steady growth of China's missile arsenal weighed on US thinking. More broadly, however, as our Japanese speaker suggested, the treaty's demise reflected a change in great power relations and the transition to a more competitive world.

Japan will not be passive as this change occurs. The country's strategists worry about regional missile proliferation, and our speaker pointedly included South Korea on the list of nations that he identified as worrying, accusing Seoul of being insufficiently transparent about its intentions. He extolled the advantages of ground-based systems, noting that they are cheaper, have more relaxed size constraints, and a superior ballistic capability (meaning they have higher velocities and are more penetrable). For him, the future of air war is characterized by more accurate missiles, stealth technology, and unmanned systems, and he sees China well down the path to exploit these capabilities. In this world, Japan must deploy ballistic missiles as a cost imposition strategy, one that will force the PRC to spend money on defense; every RMB spent on defense is an RMB not used on capabilities to threaten Japan.

To that end, Japan should have or host on its territory a ballistic or hypersonic missile (which is currently in research and development) and an antiship, long-range cruise missile. He wants weapons that can strike Chinese airstrips and deny the mainland

air superiority. These decisions are in the future, however. For now, Japan maintains a “strategic no decision” policy. That makes sense as the country does not yet have hypersonic technology nor has it had to decide about hosting a US ground-based strike system. When the decision is made, he noted that it will have three audiences: the Japanese public, its US ally, and the adversary. He concluded by noting that Japanese strategists support the US decision to develop new missile capabilities.

Our South Korean presenter was similarly enthused by ballistic missiles, arguing that they are an integral part of the ROK kill chain system and new guidelines extend its missiles’ range. Key decisions will focus on ways the new systems add value and impact deterrence, and those choices will be made through the prism of the alliance. Our speaker dismissed the charge that the alliance is weakening, emphasizing that it will always be in Seoul’s interest to align with Washington. The alliance division of labor needs to be recalibrated, and joint development and exercises that will enhance US and South Korean warfighting capabilities are to be applauded. Here again, however, the worrisome implications of divisive host nation support talks were evident.

The end of the INF treaty creates opportunities for the ROK. A new, more expansive treaty (i.e., one with more signatories) that eliminated or reduced missiles would be welcome, although verification measures would be critical. ROK strategists prefer a region in which the US enjoys military superiority as they believe that reinforces strategic stability and dampens incentives for adversaries to escalate in a crisis. If new systems are to be developed, the preference is for defensive ones, since offensive systems worsen the security dilemma and are considered especially destabilizing.

Our speaker conceded, however, that the post-INF environment can also complicate life for Seoul. If the US should seek to deploy new missiles in the ROK—an option that has not been mooted by Washington, but which the PRC has nevertheless condemned—the value of US bases in South Korea is altered, as they can become both forward deployed platforms and more important targets. The Moon administration would see such deployments as damaging to inter-Korean relations and would discourage Pyongyang from eliminating its own intermediate-range assets. It would also make it much harder for the ROK to implement its hedging strategy, which is contingent on a degree of ambiguity in signaling—even though our speaker argued that hard choices would not be subject to question.

Our US presenter backed the US decision to withdraw from the treaty—Russia had been cheating for years—while taking issue with how it was done, in particular the failure to consult with allies in advance. Echoing the previous speaker, she agreed that the moment was an opportunity for the US and its allies, as they would be able to find a better mix of systems and basing modes to defend against and deter regional adversaries. The secretary of defense declared that he wanted to deploy new missiles in Asia “sooner rather than later,” but the US has gone no farther than articulating that ambition. A new ground-launched cruise missile was tested only days after the US withdrew from the treaty, but there are no plans to deploy it to the region. There is a panoply of systems to be considered—Tomahawks, JASSMs, LRASMs, long-range precision strike systems, hypersonics, and even old equipment like Pershing 2s—each with benefits and costs. Allies should begin to discuss their willingness to accept deployments as Washington will soon be inquiring. That process will be complicated by the public messaging by China and Russia—with many untruths, our speaker

warned—which is designed to influence domestic opinion in allied publics and make them hostile to such deployments.

Our speaker concluded with two points. First, the US is only considering the deployment of conventional missiles in the theater, not nuclear-tipped ones. There is no readiness to change the policy of not forward-deploying nuclear weapons in Asia. Second, the proliferation of missile systems in Asia has made clearer the need for the alliances to have strike capabilities. It is yet unclear whether it is better for those to be indigenously controlled or US forward deployed.

No one dissented from the view that the strategic balance in the region was shifting and the growth of missile capabilities among regional adversaries, coupled with restraints on US and allies' arsenals was one of the main causes. US missiles are old with limited capabilities; forward deployed, they are obvious targets in early assaults. One participant succinctly concluded that the US is outmatched by its adversaries in both quantity and quality. The modernization of Chinese defense capabilities compounds this problem. New US missile deployments are intended to free up existing assets for other missions while forcing adversaries to devote more resources to defense.

In a world of limited resources, ground-based deployments make more sense as they are quicker and cheaper than sea-based assets. But finding territory for deployments will require consultations with allies and Japanese and South Korean participants both conceded that their publics were not ready for such discussions. Japanese participants warned that misinformation about US plans was rife: conversations focused on nuclear capabilities—which are not on the table—which, domestic audiences fear would trigger another arms race. The fact that the US withdrew from the treaty fostered a belief that the US is responsible for its collapse. To

reduce public opposition, it was argued that the US had to embrace a dual-track approach that put equal emphasis on arms control. US participants conceded the logic of that position but cautioned that neither China nor Russia has an interest in arms control. Other participants suggested that Asians and Europeans have a strategic dialogue about missiles, mediated or hosted by Americans.

If publics are reticent, Japanese and South Korean strategists are eager to have that conversation. They are asking hard questions about US intent and are struggling to understand the rationale behind forward deployments: are they for signaling, to impose costs, for operational purposes, or are they bargaining chips? Whose finger should be on the button? Will indigenous capabilities meet US needs? If so, is Washington prepared to co-develop with its Northeast Asian allies?

Allies are studying indigenous missile capabilities. Japan's debate over "strike options," which began in earnest over a decade ago, has intensified in the last few years. One Japanese participant noted that the NDPG called for the acquisition of "stand-off firepower and other requisite capabilities to deal with ships and landing forces attempting to invade Japan." As our South Korea speaker noted, that government has been studying and deploying offensive missile capabilities for some time. Our discussion, however, made clear that ROK strategists are looking at all potential threats: Another Korean participant underscored that the ROK defense white paper noted that any force that threatened the country was seen as an enemy. Yet another South Korean participant went still further and specifically identified China as a threat, capable of provocations, intervening in a Korean Peninsula crisis or even invading. Japanese participants were pleasantly surprised by the Korean admission that China can be a threat, although one Japanese participant was also skeptical that a ROK offensive capability

could do much damage to China—and warned that Seoul needs to take seriously Japanese complaints about a lack of transparency.

Conclusions

As always, the extended deterrence strategic dialogue was candid, probing, and robust, offering participants, many of whom also attend official bilateral deterrence dialogues, an opportunity to move beyond the confines of those discussions. The most important takeaway from this year’s conversation was that a complex crisis in Northeast Asia is increasingly likely and will pose ever more difficult challenges for the US-Japan and the US-ROK alliances. In these situations, the US will balance competing and conflicting priorities, from allies and adversaries.

The balance of power in Northeast Asia is evolving, and this demands new thinking about extended deterrence. More emphasis must be put on conventional strength, which is part of a continuum of military capabilities that ranges from conventional to nuclear means, as well as other domains, and must also include allied interoperability. This interoperability, in itself, is also a deterrence capability to be factored in any adversary calculus, giving deeper meaning and consequence to the value of trilateral cooperation. New technologies are an integral part of this evolution and although deployments of some technologies are years to come, security planners must accelerate efforts to anticipate — and counter — those effects. These efforts will be complicated by the increasingly strained fiscal situation in each country. Given the potential for increased Chinese and Russian strategic cooperation, capacity assumes a heightened dimension given the potential for simultaneous crises both in the Indo-Pacific and globally. This fact directly affects both force posture and force responses in escalating situations.

Hanging over military concerns are political considerations that complicate alliance relations. While the security communities in each country profess commitment to their alliances and trilateral cooperation, there are persistent apprehensions in each capital about the other two partners. There is fear that continued tensions could lead to political decoupling, which would erode strategic alignment.

Postscript

Soon after the sixth extended deterrence dialogue, senior Pacific Forum personnel met with officials and experts from the security communities in Tokyo and Seoul to inform them of the results of the discussion and to obtain an independent assessment of views articulated at the conference. These debriefs have been an integral part of the ED dialogue process and provide an opportunity to cross-check the inputs to and conclusions drawn from the meeting.

Those conversations reaffirmed the most important conclusions in this report. In both countries, interlocutors decried the political issues that inhibit cooperation —bilateral and trilateral—and applauded US efforts to facilitate a conversation between them. Officials and experts in Seoul and Tokyo expressed apprehension about US commitment to the region, anxiety that was magnified by the Trump administration decision, made only days before those debriefs, to withdraw support for Kurdish forces in Syria.

In both capitals, the US was urged to do more to sell the alliance to local communities. While alliance advocates in both governments want US help, at times it sounded as though the primary responsibility for building alliance support in those countries rested on the US rather than the ally. That task is complicated by the current US negotiating style, which makes alliance management look

more transactional; in South Korea at least, host nation support talks have generated anger among officials and the public. In this environment, the prospect of US forward deployments of intermediate-range missiles is limited (if not nonexistent).

Interlocutors in Seoul were pointed in their criticism of Tokyo, and subtly but unmistakably charged the US with favoring Japan over South Korea. Some officials were nevertheless hopeful that information sharing between the two countries could, if political issues are resolved, evolve into a more systematic operating procedure.

Conversations in Seoul confirmed the view articulated at the dialogue—which surprised many Japanese participants and their counterparts in Tokyo—that the ROK is increasingly concerned with off-peninsula threats and China is prominent among them. At the same time, however, South Koreans remain acutely sensitive to the threat of economic retaliation by China for ROK decisions that challenge PRC interests.

Officials and experts in Tokyo also voiced concern about US commitments, but the trigger for them was seeming US indifference to North Korean missile tests. They noted the “missile gap,” adding that the problem was not just intermediate-range missiles but long-range missiles and hypersonics.

Unfortunately, they conceded that local communities are reluctant to accept deployments necessary to remedy some imbalances, and urged the US do more to address those concerns.

Japanese officials continue to study how to strengthen deterrence. They dismissed the idea of a NATO-style NPG as unnecessary, acknowledging the benefits they fully appreciated in their existing bilateral relationship with the US, but they did highlight the issues inherent in deploying “invisible deterrence assets”: they are easier for publics to accept but they are less adequate as a means of signaling to adversaries. And while they were, as noted, pleasantly surprised by the ROK’s seeming readiness to view China as a potential threat, they still worried that US operational capabilities would be inhibited in a regional contingency because of Seoul’s fear of angering China. And, of course, Japanese experts and officials were angered by the decision to let lapse GSOMIA (as well as Seoul’s nurturing of historical grievances that undermine bilateral relations).

Brad Glosserman is deputy director of and visiting professor at the Center for Rule-Making Strategies, Tama University, and senior advisor (nonresident) for Pacific Forum.

APPENDIX A

US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Royal Lahaina Resort, Maui, September 4-6, 2019

AGENDA

Wednesday, September 4, 2019

6:30 PM **Reception and Opening Dinner**

Thursday, September 5, 2019

8:00 AM **Breakfast**

9:00 AM **Introductory Remarks**
Bob Girrier

9:15 AM **Session 1: Northeast Asia Extended Deterrence**
Is extended deterrence having the desired effects on the Northeast Asian security environment? What are its current strengths and weaknesses? Have new challenges emerged (for example, the demise of the INF treaty)? What more should be done to adapt and strengthen the practice of deterrence in the region by the United States, Japan, and South Korea, (whether separately, cooperatively, or collectively)? What steps would be unhelpful at this time?

Speaker: Brad Roberts

10:45 AM **Coffee Break**

11:00 AM **Session 2: National Defense Strategies Five Years Ahead**
A speaker from each country will chart the anticipated evolution of her/his country's national defense strategy for Northeast Asia over the next five years. (Emphasis not on *should be*, but *will be*.) Questions to address include: What are the threats and how are they prioritized? What are defense priorities, and how will they affect deployments and posture? What developments have the most ability to change that answer? What will be the nature of the relationship with the US (or each alliance partner, for the US speaker)? What is the role of cross-alliance relations (or how do the two alliances and allies interact)? What is the defense posture and how does deterrence fit into planning? How does Northeast Asia fit into the Indo-Pacific defense posture?

US speaker: Eric Sayers

Japan speaker: Tetsuo Kotani
ROK speaker: Seukhoon Paul Choi

- 12:30 PM **General Briefing on the TTX**
Brad Glosserman
- 12:45 PM **Session 3: TTX Move 1**
Group breaks out, gets boxed lunch in breakout rooms; each group prepares answers to TTX Round 1 questions.
- 2:45 PM **Session 3A: Plenary – Round 1 Assessment**
Plenary reconvenes to provide answers to questions and how each group reached those conclusions. After each presentation, the group is questioned by others on process and outcome.
- Chair: Brad Glosserman
- 5:00 PM **Session Adjourns**
- 6:30 PM **Dinner**

Friday, September 6, 2019

- 8:00 AM **Breakfast**
- 8:30 AM **Session 4: TTX Move 2**
Group breaks out and prepares answers to TTX Round 2 questions.
- 10:15 AM **Coffee Break**
- 10:30 AM **Session 4A: Plenary – Round 2 Assessment**
Plenary reconvenes to provide answers to questions and how each group reached those conclusions. After each presentation, the group is questioned by others on process and outcome.
- Chair: Brad Glosserman
- 12:30 PM **Lunch**
- 1:15 PM **Session 5: TTX Wrap-up**
- 3:15 PM **Coffee Break**
- 3:30 PM **Session 6: Missiles and Northeast Asia**
A speaker from each country will provide a national perspective on the importance of enhanced strike capability in each country. How does each government assess

the impact of the end the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty? What will be the response of regional governments? What is the impact on the military balance of power? What are the prospects for a future arms control agreement that addresses this class of missiles? How will your government respond? What does it expect from the other two countries?

Japan Speaker: Sugio Takahashi

ROK Speaker: Jina Kim

US Speaker: Elaine Bunn

5:00 PM

Session 7: Wrap-up and next steps

A discussion among the trilateral participants on various conclusions, next steps for trilateral security cooperation, and specific topics to address in our future meetings.

5:30 PM

Meeting Adjourns

APPENDIX B

US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue
Royal Lahaina Resort, Maui,
September 4-6, 2019

PARTICIPANT LIST

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APPENDIX C

US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Royal Lahaina Resort, Maui, September 4-6, 2019

Table Top Exercise, Move 1 Maui, Sept. 5, 2019

Scene Setter

It is Fall 2019. US-DPRK nuclear talks remain stalled. President Donald Trump received another letter, similar to previous ones and which he characterized in similar terms but there have been no working-level meetings between the two governments. Pyongyang has ratcheted up rhetoric demanding an end of war declaration and peace treaty, an end to all US-ROK joint military exercises, and the immediate lifting of all sanctions. It warned that failure to move forward on these items will force it to end its moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests. The DPRK has also said that it will no longer sit idly by if its ships are harassed at sea, and those who infringe on its sovereign rights will be “severely punished.”

While the US has reduced the size and length of its military exercises, it insists that sanctions will not be completely lifted until Pyongyang has eliminated its nuclear assets. The US president continues to raise concerns about the cost of the US military presence in South Korea.

Talks between the two Koreas have made no substantive progress. Pyongyang has pressed Seoul for more economic assistance and investment, and there has been no movement in other areas – no reunions of divided families, no efforts to implement the military agreement reached by the two countries, and no more summits. Pyongyang also demands that Seoul halt participation in sanctions programs, commonly calling them “warfare by other means.”

China’s relations with North Korea are improving, with the two governments announcing regular meetings across a range of issues. Kim Jong-un made a brief visit to Beijing a few weeks ago, during which he met Xi Jinping. Upon his return, North Korean media announced that the “indomitable DPRK-PRC partnership was scaling new heights under the vision of Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un.” Bilateral military cooperation between the two countries has been prominently featured in DPRK news and some Chinese outlets report meetings between military officials from the two countries. Shortly after Kim’s return from China, Pyongyang launched several medium-range missiles, part of a forward-leaning North Korean military posture that features regular missile tests and news reports of “invincible new hyper-modern military capabilities.” Pyongyang has held major military exercises involving offensive amphibious operations as well as mobilization of elements of KPA strategic forces.

Relations between Japan and North Korea remain at an impasse. Tokyo has indicated its readiness for leader-level talks but North Korea has not responded.

Relations between Tokyo and Seoul, now at their lowest level in years, remain unchanged. While no additional measures have been imposed that would impede trade between the two countries – procedures have changed, but no shipments to the ROK have been halted – GSOMIA has not been renewed, and tensions persist in the bilateral relationship. Prime Minister Abe notes ROK President Moon’s call for better relations between the two countries, but insists that while he would like to build a forward-looking relationship with South Korea, it is up to Seoul at this point to demonstrate its sincerity and commitment to that future.

US-China trade talks are also at a standstill. President Trump insists that China is weakened by sanctions and that the US will prevail in a trade war. He said that he is ready to sanction all trade with China. Trump also tweeted that China has decided that he is too tough for them and that Beijing prefers to wait for a new US administration rather than test Trump’s mettle. There are also again allegations that China is trying to illegally influence next year’s elections. The US Navy has maintained its heightened level of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and several vessels transited the Taiwan Strait. Chinese warnings about entering China’s territorial waters have become increasingly shrill and there has been harassment by PLA Navy ships. In one incident, a US Navy ship had to make emergency maneuvers to avoid a collision.

Crisis

In waters east of Shanghai in the Yellow Sea, a Japanese MSDF vessel observed a small vessel laying alongside a North Korea- flagged tanker, where it was suspected of transferring illicit goods. As the MSDF ship observed the activity, Chinese authorities warned that it was in Chinese waters and should leave the area. The Japanese ship replied that it was engaged in routine patrols in international waters and was observing a suspected violation of UN Security Council resolutions. Soon after that transmission, the MSDF vessel was rocked by an explosion; there were reports that the ship’s sonar had detected an underwater vessel and concluded that it had fired a torpedo, the MSDF ship then engaged the underwater contact, resulting in an underwater explosion. The Japanese vessel was damaged, and several crew were injured; no fatalities were reported and the ship was returning, slowly, to its home port.

A ROK surveillance aircraft was on patrol in the KADIZ, monitoring the Japanese vessel and observing the suspected ship-to-ship transfer. It encountered a Chinese fighter aircraft that warned the South Korean plane that it was in China’s ADIZ and ordered it to change course. The ROK aircraft countered that it was in the ROK ADIZ and would not alter its flight path. When the Chinese plane approached and reiterated its warning, it banked sharply, colliding with the ROK plane and sending it into the sea; the ROK plane and crew were lost and presumed dead. The Chinese aircraft returned to a nearby mainland Chinese airbase.

Several hours after the incidents, Chinese patrol aircraft were reported to be patrolling the area where the MSDF had been operating and conducted its engagement. China’s Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning the ROK for violating Chinese air space and said that Seoul’s irresponsible behavior threatened peace in the region. It demanded that Seoul halt all such flights and stop violating Chinese sovereignty, warning that similar acts would require a forceful response.

North Korea has seemingly begun preparation for a weapons test and *KCNA* published a commentary saying that “While North Korea has always preferred diplomacy to resolve its problems, it cannot ignore reality. Some governments are too juvenile and primitive to appreciate Pyongyang’s forbearance and the time for being subtle is over. North Korea must send the world a signal of its resolve, its determination and its capability.” It went on to note that “recent events had made plain that only a strong and resolute defense force and posture will protect the glorious DPRK and any country that thinks it can ignore or push us around will soon learn of the pain and embarrassment that only we can inflict.”

Questions for each team

7. What are the five immediate diplomatic steps you take: who do you reach out to and what do you tell them?
8. What are the five immediate military steps you take?
9. What are the five priority items you want from each ally/partner?
10. What messages do you send to Pyongyang?
11. What messages do you send to China?

Table Top Exercise, Move 2 Maui, Sept. 6, 2019

48 hours after move 1. In response to the attack on its vessel, Japan dispatched other ships and aircraft from Sasebo to help the damaged ship return and provide protection. The ROK has mobilized a search and rescue mission to find the downed aircraft and its crew. The US secretaries of State and Defense have condemned the attacks and “the irresponsible behavior that lead to the loss of life in both incidents.” They called on all sides to be responsible and avoid any steps that could lead to miscalculation or escalation of tensions. The US has offered to assist both governments in whatever way that it can. Both USFK and USFJ are on higher levels of alert and reconnaissance and surveillance activities have been enhanced.

China has acknowledged that one of its submarines is missing and may have sunk in the Yellow Sea. Beijing has provided no public explanation for what has happened, but there is speculation – and the Japanese government believes, but is not certain – that it was sunk by the MSDF vessel the day before.

Beijing has commenced a propaganda campaign. A nationalistic and jingoistic commentary was published in both *The People’s Daily* and *China Daily* extolling the virtues of China’s military, the determination of the PLA to defend the honor and core interests of the state, the readiness of the Chinese public to never be defeated and to ensure that China is never again humiliated by foreign adversaries. A similar unsigned commentary appeared in the *Liberation Army Daily*. Unscheduled TV programming showcased the newest weapons in the PLA arsenal, with special emphasis on nuclear forces. The Foreign Ministry refused to answer questions about the submarine, but it did release a statement that said no one should think that China can be attacked without consequence, the country’s defenses are resolute and cannot be breached, and “those who play with fire will get burned.” It went on to charge that the United States was the chief force responsible for instability in Asia and the world and “the time has come for Washington and its so-called ‘friends’ to recognize that simple fact. The US alliance system has outlived its usefulness and it is time to scrap it in favor of an Asian-oriented security system that better responds to the needs of the region and the times.” The statement concluded by noting that “The Chinese side strongly urges the US and its allies not to misjudge the situation, not to underestimate the determination of the Chinese people, and immediately stop the wrong approach, otherwise all consequences will be borne by the U.S, and those countries.”

China reports that missiles at PLA bases have been mobilized, with DF-21 mobile missiles and launchers deployed and dispersed. The bases are believed to have conventional and nuclear DF-21 brigades. They also report “commensurate” increased readiness activities among the North and East Sea fleet areas, involving ships, submarines, and aircraft as appropriate. Reports indicate that some of those ships are in the area where the ROK plane was lost and impeding search efforts to recover the aircraft and its personnel. The Ministry of Defense has declared that the PLAN will be holding exercises in that area and has issued a Notice to Mariners (NOTAM) advising all other military forces and commercial vessels to leave and remain clear of the area. The announcement also notes that the exercises will include missile launches.

North Korea has mobilized its military, assaulted and seized Yeonpyeong island. A bitter firefight left an unknown number of ROK soldiers killed, wounded or taken hostage. North Korean media announced that the action was “proof that a new North Korea has been born under the guidance of Kim Jong-un. It is righting historical wrongs and correcting injustices committed against our state.” In addition and without warning, North Korea launched a missile that flew over Japan, landed 2000 km from its eastern shore in the Pacific Ocean and exploded a nuclear device. After that launch, Pyongyang released a statement saying that “the glorious motherland under the leadership of Kim Jong-un has again demonstrated its invincibility. Any country that attempts to challenge the DPRK or undo its great victories will feel firsthand our might and power.”

Japan also reports that it believes that China is preparing forces, perhaps just fishing boats, to head to the Senkaku islands, to attempt a landing.

Questions

6. How do you assess Chinese intentions? What are Beijing’s priorities and objectives at this point (and rank order them)?
7. How do you assess North Korean intentions? What are Pyongyang’s priorities and objectives at this point (and rank order them)?
8. What are your top five priorities at this moment?
9. What are the five immediate requests of the other alliance?
10. What are the three things you do not want it to do?