

FROM STRATEGIC PATIENCE TO STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY

Trump, North Korea, and South Korea's New President

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The Trump administration declared the Obama-era “strategic patience” toward North Korea a failure. As President Trump extols unpredictability as a virtue, the new U.S. policy of “maximum pressure and engagement” has become a factor of strategic uncertainty in Northeast Asia. However, the instrumental use of uncertainty has a narrow window of opportunity for frustrating North Korea’s nuclear missile development and raising international expectations for China holding Pyongyang accountable. This article considers the prospects of the United States in leveraging “all options on the table” while recognizing the contradictions in China’s role and in South Korea’s domestic politics.

Keywords: defense policy, diplomatic strategy, Asia, North Korean Nuclear Weapons, DPRK, Republic of Korea, ROK, South Korean Election, United States Alliances, missile defense, China, Japan, economic sanctions, engagement policy, denuclearization, missile tests, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, THAAD, Pyongyang, Seoul, Moon Jae-in, Kim Jong-un, President Trump.

La administración de Trump declaró que la era de “paciencia estratégica” hacia Corea del Norte bajo la presidencia de Obama fue un fracaso. Mientras el Presidente Trump exalta la virtud de ser poco predecible, la nueva política estadounidense de “máxima presión y encaramiento” se ha convertido en un factor de incertidumbre estratégica en el noreste de Asia. Sin

embargo, el uso de la incertidumbre tiene una pequeña ventana de oportunidad para frustrar el desarrollo de los misiles nucleares de Corea del Norte y elevar las expectativas internacionales contra China para mantener a Pyongyang responsable. Este artículo considera las perspectivas de los EE.UU. para aprovechar “todas opciones posibles,” reconociendo al mismo tiempo las contradicciones en las acciones de China y la política interna de Corea del Sur.

Palabras clave: Política de Defensa, Armas Nucleares en Corea del Norte, Elecciones en Corea del Sur, Alianzas de los Estados Unidos, Defensa contra Misiles, China, Japón, Estrategia Diplomática, Sanciones Económicas, Política de Encaramiento.

特朗普政府宣布‘奥巴马时代对北韩的’战略耐心’已经失败。由于特朗普总统高度赞扬‘不可测性 (unpredictability), 美国对北韩采取的“极度限施压并接触” (maximum pressure and engagement) 新政策已成为东北亚战略不确定性 (strategic uncertainty) 的某个因素。然而, 不确定性的工具性应用 (instrumental use) 有些许机会阻碍北韩发展核导弹, 并提高国际社会对中国掣肘平壤的期望。本文 考虑到美国“保留一切选项”的前景, 也承认中国的角色矛盾和南韩国内政治矛盾有其影响。

关键词: 国防政策, 北朝鲜核武器, 韩国选举, 美国联盟, 导弹防御, 中国, 日本, 外交策略, 经济制裁, 接触政策

The Trump administration has said that the era of strategic patience with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is over (White House 2017). Criticizing “strategic patience” makes a straw man of the previous administration because there was more to the Obama approach than simply waiting for Pyongyang to return to denuclearization talks (Sanger and Broad 2017). Nonetheless, with North Korea sprinting toward a long-range nuclear missile capability and planning further nuclear and missile tests, existing policies have been shown to be insufficient (Tobey 2017). The new U.S. administration is pursuing denuclearization by “maximum pressure and engagement” (U.S. Department of State 2017a), but without a fully staffed government reading from a single sheet of music, rampant speculation in the media adds to already heightened tensions in Northeast Asia.

President Trump extols unpredictability as a virtue and refuses to telegraph U.S. military actions. He displays willingness to ratchet up pressure, but also sudden flexibility to strike a deal, on occasion

discussing the possibility of meeting with Kim Jong-un (Talev and Jacobs 2017). The instrumental use of uncertainty is not without its risks, however, as miscalculation could produce unintended escalation and even a regional conflagration with North Korea (Fifield 2017c). Furthermore, it is difficult to game other countries that maintain time-tested strategies. Beijing tends to take minimal action against North Korea given its priority for maintaining strategic stability to facilitate China's continued rise (Nanto and Manyin 2010; Scobell and Cozad 2014). Pyongyang uses external threats to domestically justify its regime while pursuing strategic exploitation of its neighbors (Kihl and Kim 2005). China and North Korea both seek advantage from the newly elected government in the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) as Moon Jae-in, the victor of the May 9, 2017, presidential election, is predisposed toward engagement and restarting denuclearization talks.

Strategic uncertainty—including that emanating from South Korea's recent political instability—is not a welcome alternative to strategic patience (Snyder 2017). However, the *instrumental use of uncertainty*, if properly calibrated, can establish an improved status quo. According to a high-ranking North Korean defector, the reasons the Kim regime rejects denuclearization are that it believes the United States will not attack a country with nuclear weapons (Holt and Smith 2017), and China will not cut off trade and assistance to its neighbor (Choe 2016). The Trump administration is working to bring those assumptions into question. Before the South Korean election, U.S. policy aimed to tighten constraints on North Korea's nuclear missile development and raise international expectations for Chinese cooperation to hold Pyongyang accountable. With a new pro-engagement government in Seoul, the Trump administration's challenge will be maintaining coordination with allies while keeping both Beijing and Pyongyang concerned about the costs of North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile tests.

Military and Nonmilitary Options on the Table

The Trump administration has pursued a range of measures to pressure Pyongyang and prod Beijing. The United States has strengthened deterrence by conducting military exercises with South Korea and Japan and brandishing strategic assets in ways visible to Pyongyang. In April 2017, the United States conducted an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test in the Pacific. The *USS Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier was sent to the region to perform exercises off the Korean Peninsula, in

addition to the *USS Ronald Reagan* that is stationed in Yokosuka, Japan. The United States also sent a nuclear-powered submarine for a port call at Busan, and flew two B-1B bombers over the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, the Trump administration took military action against deviant actors elsewhere in the world. In early April 2017, the United States sent 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles to strike a Syrian air base in response to the Assad regime's disregard of international conventions against the use of chemical weapons. A week later, the United States dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb against the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan in a rare use of one of the world's largest conventional weapons. These shows of force were made as the Trump administration was issuing stern warnings for North Korea; the Syria strike occurred as Trump was meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago. Then, in May 2017, the United States conducted a successful test of its ground-based interceptor missile defense system—against a simulated ICBM along the lines of what North Korea might deploy.

In terms of diplomatic efforts, Trump met with the ambassadors of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to persuade member states to fully enforce existing sanctions against North Korea (Lynch and De Luce 2017). He also invited the entire Senate for a briefing on North Korea at the Executive Office Building of the White House, while publicly stressing that a “major, major conflict with North Korea” is possible in case diplomatic measures fail (Mullany 2017). The Trump administration then sent Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Mike Pompeo to Seoul for discussions with U.S. officials and the South Korean National Intelligence Service. The CIA established a Korea mission center, the first such office to focus on a single country. Meanwhile, at the first ministerial-level UNSC meeting on North Korean nuclear proliferation, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasized the necessity of rigorously limiting diplomatic and economic relations with Pyongyang because “failing to act now on the most pressing security issue in the world may bring catastrophic consequences” (UNSC 2017b). Trump also placed phone calls to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders, and Tillerson hosted a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers, encouraging them to strengthen sanctions against North Korea. Speaking in Singapore, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said that “the United States regards the threat from North Korea as a clear and present danger” (Mattis 2017).

Responding to rising tensions, the Japanese government mentioned the need to plan for Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) from South Korea. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force vessels sailed

with the USS Carl Vinson carrier battle group and joined combined drills near the Korean Peninsula (Reuters 2017). Japan's largest naval vessel also escorted an American supply ship toward Korea for the first time under a new interpretation of the Japanese pacifist constitution that allows for expanded international security contributions (Easley 2017a). Some Japanese policy makers are even debating the possibility of acquiring offensive strike capability against North Korean missiles (Miller 2017). Tokyo is also looking to enhance its missile defenses with the AEGIS Ashore system, in addition to upgrading existing Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) and Patriot-Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) interceptors. Moreover, the Japanese government has shown willingness to help other countries close sanctions loopholes.

In the context of these pressure measures, Pyongyang abstained from the nuclear and long-range missile tests that many analysts anticipated around North Korea's political anniversaries in April 2017. These non-events are temporary wins worth noting (Everard 2017), but Pyongyang is almost certain to test again. While the United States and its allies have capabilities to deter missile attack or invasion, using pressure to prevent North Korean nuclear and long-range missile tests is more like compellence, which is much harder to maintain than deterrence. Some former Obama administration officials argue that the next North Korean tests in defiance of Trump's policies will produce a paper-tiger problem for U.S. credibility (see Fuchs 2017; Gordon 2017). The Trump administration appears intent on not drawing "red lines" and, instead, stoking uncertainty about which lines adversaries can test and which would be dangerous to cross. However, Democratic Party members of Congress worry that the Trump administration's pressure tactics increase the possibility of conflict and danger to U.S. citizens (see Gladstone 2017).

Related to such concerns, North Korea returned to its "detention diplomacy," taking two Korean-American instructors at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology into custody for "hostile acts" against the state (Meyers 2017). This brought the number of Americans being held in North Korea to four in May 2017. Pyongyang has used U.S. citizens as hostages before, to set up visits by high-profile Americans including former president Bill Clinton in 2009, former president Jimmy Carter in 2010, and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in 2014. In June 2017, the U.S. Special Representative for North Korean policy, Ambassador Joseph Yun, traveled to Pyongyang to secure the release of University of Virginia student Otto Warmbier. The process involved U.S. contact with DPRK officials in Norway and New York, but far from resulting in a positive reopening of diplomatic channels, the

case increased tensions further because the 22-year-old was inexplicably returned in a coma and died several days later. Warmbier suffered severe brain damage some time after a show-trial in North Korea sentenced him to 15 years of hard labor, supposedly for stealing a propaganda poster (Hiatt 2017).

Pyongyang has other ways of appearing belligerent short of hostage-taking or long-range missile and nuclear tests. North Korean media accused the United States and South Korea of attempting to assassinate Kim Jong-un, reflecting a siege mentality against external threats that aims to bolster regime legitimacy and justify domestic political crackdowns (Easley 2017b). The DPRK marked its eternal leader Kim Il-sung's birthday and its military foundation day with an intermediate-range ballistic missile test and large-scale artillery drill. A massive military parade included mock-ups of long-range missiles, and a musical performance included a video simulation delivering a nuclear missile to an American city (Smith 2017).

Despite North Korea's nuclear bluster, it must be stressed that the United States is not looking to start a preventive war. Such a military option is not attractive because of the vulnerability of South Korea to North Korean retaliation via artillery, missile, and terrorist attack. Moreover, while the Trump administration has suggested it will not recognize North Korea as a nuclear state and considers a testing freeze inadequate, it has also stated that the U.S. goal is denuclearization, not regime change (U.S. Department of State 2017b). The head of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, explained that American policy aims to bring Kim Jong-un "to his senses, not to his knees" (Harris 2017). A preemptive strike (more targeted and limited than a preventive war) would only be considered if a North Korean attack is believed to be imminent. South Korea and the United States are more likely to take military action in self-defense as part of a counter-provocation strategy, punishing North Korean aggression while controlling escalation.

There are many steps, short of kinetic action, available for pressuring North Korea. The United States can increase "left of launch" efforts at cyber and component sabotage of North Korean missile systems (Schilling 2017). The United States and its allies can broaden cybersecurity cooperation against North Korea's hacking of banks and businesses. State-backed North Korean hackers who attacked Sony Pictures in December 2014 have been linked to cyberattacks against banks in Poland, Vietnam, and the Philippines, and to the theft of \$81 million from the Central Bank of Bangladesh in May 2016. North Korean hackers are also suspected of being behind the "WannaCry" ransomware that

disabled hundreds of thousands of computers around the world in May 2017 (Choe *et al.* 2017). Capacity building for sanctions implementation would be particularly useful in helping states comply with UNSC resolutions (Stanton *et al.* 2017). Increasing surveillance of North Korean trade, strengthening export controls on sensitive technologies and materials, and expanding interdiction networks would frustrate North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as well as its illegal trade in weapons. Countries maintaining relations with North Korea could decrease sources of hard currency for Pyongyang (Allen *et al.* 2017) and limit North Korea's slave labor exports by further restricting visa policies and monitoring North Korean bank accounts (Mendelson 2015). Greater scrutiny of human rights and stepping up targeted humanitarian assistance (including for escapees) could increase pressure while helping sanctions place more stress on the regime than on the North Korean people (Cha and Gallucci 2016). Efforts at information penetration into the DPRK could also be expanded.

A United Nations (UN) panel of experts has exposed numerous sanctions loopholes in Malaysia and elsewhere (UNSC 2017a), which may start to close after the blatant assassination of Kim Jong-un's half brother, Kim Jong-nam, in the Kuala Lumpur airport with the VX nerve agent, an internationally banned chemical weapon. The United States also has the options of relisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terror and banning American tourists from the country. As Pyongyang remains highly dependent on Beijing, long-debated secondary sanctions could be imposed on entities in China that do business with North Korea (Cohen 2017). The U.S. Congress is considering action toward this end that would expand upon existing sanctions on Pyongyang (see Rennack 2016). In May 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 1644, the Korean Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions Act (Foreign Affairs Committee 2017). Based on existing executive orders, the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced additions in June 2017 to a blacklist of firms and individuals believed to be supporting North Korea's weapons programs (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2017). Those additions included Russian entities, but analysts deem increasing China's economic stake in North Korea's denuclearization process as more important for prosecuting shell companies that support Pyongyang (Cha 2017b). Military tensions with North Korea usually abate after spring and summer annual military exercises, but the spike in pressure would not have been in vain if Chinese implementation of sanctions improves.

Raising Expectations while Remaining Realistic about China's Role

In an effort to persuade Beijing to exercise its leverage over Pyongyang, President Trump prioritized North Korea as the first major test for U.S.–China relations over other bilateral concerns involving trade, cybersecurity, the South China Sea, Taiwan, and human rights. His administration has used high-level diplomacy to engage Beijing on North Korean policy. Given that China may be responsible for 85 percent of North Korea's external trade (Cha 2017b) and has traditionally propped up or shielded the Kim regime, it is reasonable to seek Beijing's more active involvement in pressuring North Korea. For example, the United States warned China that North Korea's attendance at the Belt and Road investment cooperation summit might interfere with international efforts to isolate Pyongyang (Blanchard and Ruwitch 2017).

Following the April 2017 Trump–Xi summit, there was an apparent reduction in flights between China and North Korea, and Beijing is said to be considering further restrictions on oil exports to, and coal imports from, North Korea (Ahn 2017a). Chinese authorities tightened inspections at the Yalu River Bridge, a main artery for bilateral trade, linking Dandong in the Chinese province of Liaoning and Sinuiju in the North Korean province of North Pyongan. In addition, Chinese troop levels near the border with North Korea were rumored to be placed on alert and increased in number, while neighboring provinces planned environmental responses to nuclear fallout. The state-sponsored *Global Times* newspaper suggested China may not defend its estranged ally, arguing that a hypothetical U.S. surgical strike on North Korea would not prompt a Chinese military intervention (Leng *et al.* 2017). These were likely signals to pressure North Korea, even as Beijing continues to support peaceful negotiations rather than military action (Fu 2017). In response, North Korean state media took the unusual step of directly criticizing Beijing for its “big-power chauvinism” and “reckless act” of damaging DPRK–China relations (Brunnstrom 2017).

Trump has publicly said that the United States would “solve” the North Korean problem with or without China's help, implying that Beijing had better take actions in its interests before having to deal with contingencies that are not (Barber *et al.* 2017). Trump's approach appears to combine personal praise and high expectations for President Xi, with promises not to do something (label China a currency manipulator, impose tariffs, adjust the One-China policy regarding Taiwan) in exchange for cooperation on North Korea. It is unclear whether

this approach will elicit meaningful cooperation or if Xi will simply play along as it suits him. Meanwhile, the appearance of a transactional foreign policy can involve unfavorable issue linkage. U.S.–China terms of trade and currency exchange rates are better left to a separate track from nonproliferation, and talk of trading Taiwan for North Korea is ill advised. Labeling North Korea a “core concern of the United States, just as Taiwan is to China” (Blinken 2017) does not make sense; North Korean denuclearization is a widely shared international interest while unification with Taiwan under threat of force is a parochial Chinese one.

A “pressure China to pressure North Korea” strategy faces limitations because outsourcing the North Korean problem is not an option in light of Beijing’s different interests (Easley and Park 2016). Chinese actors appear to play both sides of the issue; for example, an examination of North Korean missile fragments revealed parts imported from China (Warrick 2017). Not only is China’s implementation of sanctions falling short of its commitments, Beijing’s veto-wielding representative on the UNSC routinely delays and obstructs efforts by the United States and its allies to pass resolutions increasing sanctions on North Korea. In June 2017, China opposed adding new sanctions against Pyongyang, but allowed UNSC Resolution 2356 to pass unanimously, expanding the number of individuals and entities subject to existing Resolution 1718. That 2006 resolution applied asset freezes and travel bans for involvement with the DPRK nuclear weapons program. Despite some cooperation at the UN, Chinese leaders routinely attempt to portray North Korean nuclear weapons as America’s problem (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China 2017b) and express a false moral equivalency between North Korean nuclear missile development and defensive exercises by the United States and South Korea.

Beijing has been particularly strident in criticizing the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea (Easley 2016), subjecting Seoul to diplomatic pressure and economic retaliation that violate international norms. If Chinese leaders object to decisions that sovereign countries make to defend themselves from North Korea, they could do more to address the North Korean threat. The Kim regime’s offensive missiles are an actual threat to peace in Asia, whereas THAAD (with its interceptors lacking warheads and radar configured for defensive tracking, not espionage) is less of a regional problem than environmental challenges such as yellow dust and carcinogenic air pollution (Shapiro 2016). The caretaker government in Seoul rushed THAAD deployment before the May 9, 2017,

election as a favor to the next administration. That way, the new South Korean government could restart relations with China by labeling the deployment a previous administration's decision and not subject to reversal. In the early weeks of the Moon administration, there were signs that China was loosening restrictions on South Korean popular culture, lifestyle products, and tourism packages, and reducing regulatory and online harassment of Korean business interests in China. However, it is yet unclear whether Beijing is prepared to end its attempted coercion of South Korea, and whether the Moon administration will manage to turn the page or pursue a parliamentary inspection that could question THAAD deployment and further politicize South Korea's national defense and alliance with the United States.

South Korean Domestic Politics as a Variable

South Korea's National Assembly impeached President Park Geun-hye on December 9, 2016, and she was ultimately removed from office by the Constitutional Court on March 10, 2017, over a corruption scandal that destabilized South Korean domestic politics for half a year. Moon Jae-in convincingly won a snap election on May 9, 2017, and took office the next day with no transition period. New leaderships tend to differentiate themselves from their predecessors. This is particularly likely in the present case, given that Park's approval rate plummeted to a record low of 4 percent (Gallup Korea 2016), and many of her policies appear tainted in the public eye. However, a radical policy shift by South Korea's new government, or rushed efforts at a breakthrough with Pyongyang, could detract from international cooperation on North Korea.

Some degree of policy continuity is prudent not only for Seoul's security interests, but also for rebuilding public trust in governance. If the new president pursues a massive "housecleaning" of the bureaucracy, military leadership, and intelligence agencies, or introduces new policies without adequate preparation, he may face "deep state" challenges domestically (Fisher 2017) and "early tests" in foreign policy (Cha 2017a). The presidential campaign revealed deep divisions on North Korea policy, ranging from expecting the Kim regime to collapse, to expressing confidence in sanctions, to placing greater faith in engagement. Conservatives tended to conclude that regime change and even unification are necessary to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula (Terry 2014). As that cannot be achieved immediately, conservative presidential candidate Hong Joon-pyo called for the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. Moderates such

as Ahn Cheol-soo were less hawkish but supported missile defense and suggested that a meaningful return to denuclearization talks will require tougher sanctions implementation, especially by China. Progressives who supported Moon Jae-in tended to recommend negotiating a freeze on North Korea's nuclear and missile tests (Ahn 2017b) and resuming economic and social engagement (Delury 2017).

Since the period when Moon Jae-in served as chief of staff and in other senior positions during the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-2008), North Korea has conducted numerous nuclear and missile tests, flagrantly attacked South Korea in the Cheonan-ham sinking and Yeonpyeong-do shelling (Beck 2011), and broken various international and inter-Korean agreements (Hayes and Cavazos 2016). The window for "Sunshine 3.0" is, thus, substantially narrower than for previous iterations of the engagement policy. The Moon government will find that dealing with Pyongyang is frustrating and painstaking; there is no silver bullet for eliciting cooperation or compliance from North Korea. However, it would be inaccurate to say that sanctions are not working; sanctions have not achieved denuclearization, but have created a less favorable environment for North Korea's nuclear program (Haggard and Noland 2017). South Korea's international partners, thus, expect the new government to uphold UNSC resolutions, and existing agreements such as the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the six-party denuclearization talks, rather than loosen sanctions on North Korea in exchange for promises of a diplomatic breakthrough.

During the election campaign, Moon said that Seoul should "take the lead on matters in the Korean Peninsula as the country directly involved" (Fifield 2017a). Moon's camp raised numerous possible changes in North Korea policy, including pursuing peace talks with Pyongyang before denuclearization, reducing and delaying U.S.-ROK military exercises during inter-Korean talks, and restarting the Mt. Kumgang tour project and reopening and even expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Likely in an effort to anticipate the next administration's policy direction, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport solicited bids for North Korean mineral projects to "establish power generation facilities and transportation infrastructure around mines," with "profitability secured by owning the development rights of resources or exploiting mineral resources" (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport of the Republic of Korea 2017). Seoul can amend its own laws, regulations, and sanctions policies (such as the May 24, 2010, measures) to engage North Korea, and the ROK constitution technically claims the

entire Korean Peninsula. However, treating inter-Korean trade as a form of domestic exchange would not be persuasive justification for relaxed enforcement of UNSC resolutions. Moreover, if Seoul increased aid and investment to the North, the Moon and Trump administrations would have difficulty calling for Beijing's enforcement of UN sanctions.

In his inaugural address, Moon expressed a willingness to visit Pyongyang under "appropriate circumstances" (Cheong Wa Dae 2017b). One of the lessons of the Roh government was that the 2007 inter-Korean summit was held too late in the administration's term for agreements to be implemented. Therefore, Moon is likely to seek an earlier summit. It is also likely that his administration will revisit the inter-Korean agreements from the Roh era, stressing incentives for North Korean cooperation and offering new ones (Moon 2012). Moon may look to increase North Korean humanitarian aid, promote cultural and sports exchanges, and arrange separated family reunions. Under the new government, the Ministry of Unification has promised to flexibly review inter-Korean civilian exchanges, approving proposals that do not violate existing sanctions (Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea 2017). The Park administration had not approved any civilian contacts since Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test in January 2016 (which was followed by a fifth test in September 2016). Within its first months in office, the Moon administration approved the requests of dozens of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to contact the North, including the Korean Sharing Movement that seeks to provide antimalaria assistance to North Korea, and a civil committee that organizes commemorations of the June 15, 2000, inter-Korean declaration. Thus far, Pyongyang has not responded favorably regarding people-to-people contacts, opting instead to demand an end to economic sanctions and the return of North Korean defectors in South Korea.

On June 15, 2017, Moon became the first sitting president in twelve years to address a ceremony marking the anniversary of the 2000 North-South Joint Declaration. He suggested that the National Assembly should have adopted all four inter-Korean agreements (1972, 1991, 2000, and 2007) into law, so that the understandings on economic cooperation, confidence building, and eventual unification without third-party interference would be upheld regardless of changes in government. Yet Moon also stressed the importance of denuclearization, normalization of U.S.–DPRK relations, and the establishment of a "peace regime" on the Korean Peninsula. He clearly expressed his willingness to engage Pyongyang in talks, but said that North Korea should refrain from nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

Perhaps most tellingly, Moon's personnel appointments telegraph a very different North Korea policy than the previous administration. Moon has appointed pro-engagement individuals to senior positions, many with experience working directly with North Korea. To head the National Intelligence Service, Moon named Suh Hoon, who had been on the ground in North Korea for two years with the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and who also helped to arrange the two inter-Korean summits. Moon's new chief of staff, Im Jong-seok, is a politician and former student activist who spent three-and-a-half years in jail in South Korea after being convicted of organizing an unauthorized student visit to Pyongyang in 1989. The new Minister of Unification, Cho Myoung-gyon, spent his career in the ministry that he now leads. In the 1990s, he was a policy coordinator for the attempted provision of light water nuclear reactors to North Korea under the Agreed Framework. In the 2000s, he negotiated with Pyongyang regarding Kaesong and coordinated South Korean businesses involved in the inter-Korean industrial park. Cho was instrumental in the 2007 inter-Korean summit and October 4 joint declaration, but was later caught up in a national controversy when South Korean conservatives alleged that President Roh appeased Kim Jong-il regarding the inter-Korean maritime border known as the Northern Limit Line (NLL).

Moon's pick for executive secretary of the National Security Council and chief of the National Security Office is Lee Sang-chul, a former brigadier general who participated in the six-party denuclearization talks as South Korea's military delegate and in inter-Korean military talks in 2007 as the lead ROK representative. Moon Chung-in, a professor at Yonsei University, was named special advisor for unification, foreign affairs, and national security. He accompanied Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun in the past inter-Korean summits and advocates "pre-emptive talks" with North Korea, without preconditions, and for which "Washington's approval is unnecessary" (Moon 2017). Professor Moon is a source of transparency regarding the new administration's thinking about lowering tensions on the Korean Peninsula, but his public comments about Seoul possibly downsizing U.S.-ROK military exercises (reducing involvement of U.S. aircraft carriers, bombers, and submarines) were the subject of media controversy.

Song Young-moo, tapped as defense minister, was a security policy adviser to both the 2012 and 2017 Moon presidential campaigns. His decades-long career in the military included a South Korean victory over North Korean forces in a naval skirmish near Yeonpyeong-do in

1999. While serving as the top naval officer under President Roh Moo-hyun, he was involved in plans to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces from the United States to the ROK. He is likely to pursue command structure reform and OPCON transfer during the Moon administration, and to champion South Korea's indigenous missile defense program. Seo Joo-seok, appointed first vice minister of defense, was a student protester in the 1980s and comes from a policy planning background, including with the Ministry of Unification, rather than a military career. He is likely to be tasked with reform efforts to increase civilian control of the ROK military. Seo is also associated with recommendations to increase South Korean military autonomy from the United States and to work more closely with China on North Korea.

President Moon appointed Kang Kyung-hwa as foreign minister, despite fierce resistance from the political opposition in the National Assembly. She is the first woman named to the post and was a high-ranking UN official rather than a career Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomat. Her previous experiences include serving as an interpreter for President Kim Dae-jung, helping to explain the "Sunshine Policy" to other heads of state. Chung Eui-yong, who was appointed national security advisor, is a former diplomat and ambassador to the UN in Geneva rather than a defense expert. Moon's appointments, thus, suggest strong preferences for engagement over sanctions, diplomacy over military solutions, and working with the UN.

However, President Moon cannot afford to spend all his political capital dealing with North Korea. Various domestic issues may demand precedence. Throughout his campaign, Moon prioritized the economy and social welfare by promising to reform the *chaebol* corporate conglomerates, combat corruption, and reduce youth unemployment. Although the stock market rose after the election and export data have shown signs of improvement, the Moon government will be challenged to identify new sources of growth to stabilize the South Korean economy. The administration will also need to address constitutional reform, devolution of presidential powers, and government reorganization, including of the prosecutor's office, even as the legal controversies involving former president Park Geun-hye continue and Moon's party lacks a majority in the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, North Korea has reminded the new government in Seoul that Pyongyang gets a vote on inter-Korean relations. Throughout the election campaign, the Kim regime outwardly expressed a preference

for Moon and called for reduced inter-Korean tensions. However, within Moon's first weeks in office, North Korea provocatively tested two intermediate-range ballistic missiles. In the weeks that followed, North Korea was caught sending a surveillance drone into South Korea to take pictures of THAAD, tested a new anti-ship cruise missile, and brought the number of missiles it fired in the first half of 2017 to more than a dozen. Kim Jong-un emphasized that North Korea is achieving "diversification and advancement" of its nuclear forces (Ji 2017), meaning miniaturized warheads, multiple delivery systems including road mobile and submarine based, and a lineup of missile types with various ranges and payloads, solid or liquid propellant, and improved reentry and guidance capabilities. North Korean media boast about the technical successes of the country's many tests and play up the new capabilities as ready for mass production, deployment, and use in conflict.

While North Korea has not abstained from provocative tests since Moon's inauguration, it is not clear if Pyongyang is practicing restraint by delaying more provocative nuclear and ICBM tests. One explanation for why North Korea has recently sent its missile tests on higher angle "lofted" trajectories is to avoid sending projectiles longer distances by, for example, overflying Japan. Of course, another explanation is that lofted trajectory tests are practice for defeating missile defenses and developing reentry capabilities. Moreover, it may be wishful thinking to expect Pyongyang to significantly adjust its military development schedule to welcome a new president. North Korea previously rejected Park Geun-hye's "*trustpolitik*" and Obama's "outstretched hand" and "Leap Day Agreement" (Merrill 2016). Many analysts attached better odds to Pyongyang accepting renewed South Korean engagement from a progressive Moon administration, if for no other reason than to exploit it. However, the speed and urgency of Kim Jong-un's testing schedule suggest that the North Korean regime actually wants to demonstrate a nuclear ICBM capability before engaging in meaningful talks.

Moon offered a firm response to early provocations, declaring North Korea's May 14 ballistic missile test "a clear violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions" (Cheong Wa Dae 2017a). He said he remains committed to dialogue and peace on the Korean Peninsula, but felt "deep regret over this reckless provocation" and "firmly condemns the [missile test] carried out just a few days after the new government was sworn in" (Cheong Wa Dae 2017a). Moon said that the North Korean missile test represents a "grave threat, not only to the Korean Peninsula but also to international security." He ordered the government and

military to “maintain a firm readiness posture to respond to Pyongyang’s further military provocations, based on the steadfast Korea-U.S. alliance” while calling for accelerated development of the indigenously produced Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system. Moon went on to apply some of his own rhetorical pressure on Pyongyang, mentioning publicly that “there is a high possibility of a military conflict” at sea near the NLL, and on land within the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas (Kim 2017).

One could posit that Pyongyang’s provocations are pushing Moon toward policy continuity and away from his desired engagement of North Korea. His new administration has already gone out of its way to emphasize the importance of the security alliance with the United States. Moon’s first phone call with a foreign leader was with Trump, during which the two leaders stressed the importance of alliance coordination on North Korea. Hong Seok-hyun, Moon’s special envoy to the United States, visited the White House on May 17, 2017, when Trump apparently agreed to engage North Korea “under the right conditions” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2017). During his trip, Hong also sought assurances regarding unexpected remarks by the U.S. president. In April, Trump had commented that the Korea–U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) may need to be scrapped (Adler *et al.* 2017). Hong apparently received assurances that those comments do not fully represent U.S. policy. In addition, U.S. National Security Council Director for Asia Matt Pottinger met with Moon in Seoul to announce that the new South Korean president’s first summit would be with Trump in late June. Nonetheless, serious issues remain for policy coordination.

In his tough comments on North Korea, Moon avoided mentioning the need or utility of THAAD, suggesting that his new government is not entirely behind the deployment. Two THAAD launchers were rushed into operation before South Korea’s election, but the full deployment agreed to and coordinated by U.S. and ROK officials was to include six launchers. In May 2017, the Moon administration publicly claimed to be shocked that the Defense Ministry allegedly did not inform or consult with the presidential office about the arrival of the remaining launchers in South Korea (Choe 2017). The Moon administration ordered an internal investigation, leading to media speculation about the new government’s plans to clean house at the Defense Ministry and to appease Beijing on the THAAD issue. While not objecting to the two launchers already deployed in South Korea, the administration suspended deployment of the additional four, pending an environmental

assessment, which it said had not been properly completed by the previous government.

The financial terms of THAAD deployment are also controversial, especially as President Trump publicly suggested that the ROK should pay a billion dollars for the missile defense assets the United States had previously agreed to deploy (Adler *et al.* 2017). Many South Koreans feel their country has already paid for the missile defense system by covering the cost of the land and logistical support, to say nothing of the billions of dollars that Korean companies have lost weathering Chinese economic coercion against THAAD. Talks between the Trump and Moon administrations are likely to be heated on defense burden-sharing as the alliance's Special Measures Agreement is due to be renegotiated. Moon may raise the possibility of speeding up the transfer of wartime OPCON to symbolically increase South Korean autonomy from the United States. Meanwhile, the Trump administration may exert pressure on Seoul concerning the bilateral trade deficit.

Another source of uncertainty is the new South Korean government's relations with China. Moon's second international call was with President Xi, when the two leaders agreed that tensions with North Korea should be reduced. Despite the row over THAAD, China invited the ROK to send a representative to its headline Belt and Road investment forum, and law maker Park Byeong-seok attended the meeting in Beijing. Moon also designated Lee Hae-chan, former prime minister in the Roh Moo-hyun government and a key adviser to the Moon campaign, as a special envoy to China. Xi reportedly told Lee in Beijing that bilateral relations should return to a "normal track" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China 2017a). In another sign of a thaw, the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) held its second annual meeting on South Korea's Jeju Island in June 2017. Speaking at the AIIB meeting, Moon endorsed upgrading infrastructure for Asian regional integration, and called for inter-Korean rail links to connect the Korean Peninsula with Eurasia. These diplomatic developments illustrate the significant and expanding international implications of South Korea's domestic politics.

Putting Pyongyang on the Back Foot; Staying in Step with Allies

Despite political changes in relevant countries, the national interests of the United States, ROK, and Japan overlap almost completely in regard to North Korea (Easley 2014). It is important to prevent policies from being captured by partisan politics. The South Korean and

Japanese governments would do well to build upon their December 2015 agreement with efforts to involve their civil societies in historical reconciliation, building public support for security cooperation. South Korea has much economically that North Korea wants. In return for trade and assistance, Pyongyang should engage in threat reduction and allow greater international access (Eberstadt 2017). The discussions in Seoul about possibly restarting the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang Resort will have to account for concerns that those inter-Korean projects helped fund the nuclear threat while being walled off from the North Korean economy and society (Easley 2016). The ROK unilaterally lifting restrictions on trade with the DPRK would likely result in exploitation by Pyongyang and loss of hard-earned international support for Seoul's interests.

South Korean humanitarian aid to North Korea may fit within a coordinated U.S.–ROK negotiation strategy, but any other economic benefits would likely need to be conditioned on improvements in Pyongyang's security policies (Wolfsthal and Denmark 2017). Trump and Moon may agree on a “pressure now, engage later” approach, but the timing, conditions, and content of engagement are not yet coordinated. The two leaders are scheduled to meet in Washington, D.C., on June 29–30, 2017. For a successful first summit, Trump and Moon will need to do more than get to know each other; they will need to dispel doubts about the completion of THAAD deployment and provide a green light to working-level officials to strengthen the U.S.–ROK alliance, particularly in planning responses to future North Korean provocations.

The Kim regime may be accustomed to benefiting from a “madman image” (Lind 2012), but is now on the receiving end of increasing uncertainty aimed at disrupting the *byungjin* policy of simultaneous economic and nuclear development (Institute for Far Eastern Studies 2016). The United States and its allies have so far rejected engaging in talks for talks' sake (Rogin 2017) to disallow Pyongyang buying time and to avoid legitimizing a nuclear threatening and human rights abusing regime. And yet it is preferable to see the North Korean government boast about a street lined with new high-rise buildings rather than about nuclear missiles (Macdonald and Hotham 2017). Market reform and opening offer potential for transforming the current stalemate (Kang 2017). It is prudent to interrogate Pyongyang's calculations rather than explain away North Korean bad behavior as “irrational” (Fifield 2017b). Countries should not submit to North Korean blackmail, but should consider talks as a means to be tested and pursued, not a reward to be

withheld. Pyongyang will try to wait out “maximum pressure” and then exploit divisions within South Korea and among its partners. To avoid this, North Korea should be engaged and required to take concrete steps recommitting to denuclearization for pressure to be reduced.

Strategic uncertainty is not just a problem of risking unintended conflict with North Korea. President Trump’s unpredictability, if it is an asset against U.S. rivals, may not remain so if the administration is seen to be caught up in domestic political controversies. Loss of credibility or distracted leadership would be liabilities for pressuring China and North Korea. Uncertainty can also damage U.S. alliances. The Trump administration’s prioritization of burden-sharing (e.g., remarks on the ROK paying for THAAD) and trade deficit reduction (e.g., remarks on renegotiating the KORUS FTA) can negatively affect internal confidence and the external credibility of alliances. The United States can make clear it is not “Korea passing” (Economist 2017) in diplomacy with China or in its military posture toward Pyongyang. Indeed, American officials have met early and often with South Korean and Japanese counterparts. Washington–Seoul–Tokyo coordination can be expanded in intelligence sharing, missile defense and antisubmarine exercises, and diplomatic pressure for sanctions implementation. Meanwhile, President Moon’s version of Sunshine toward North Korea needs to not open up too much daylight between South Korea and the United States. This will require strategic clarity between Washington and Seoul, and policy adjustments depending on the level of cooperation forthcoming from Beijing, and level of provocation committed by Pyongyang. For the United States and its allies, uncertainty is not a strategy nor a desirable endpoint, but can be used instrumentally within a window of time to build pressure against North Korea’s norm-violating behavior and ultimately to avoid conflict.❷

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