

**SOUTH KOREA'S DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS
UNDER MOON JAE-IN**

Introduction

During his first year as president, Moon Jae-in faced a challenging strategic environment and divergent advice on how to manage it. He could cater to his progressive base and act in accord with his political lineage by renewing the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. Alternatively, he could strive for consensus at home by reconciling the differences with conservatives in foreign policy. In diplomacy with the great powers, he also had important choices to make. He could double down on the U.S. alliance or, going further, he could agree to trilateralism with Japan. Yet, he also could be tempted by the option of balancing dependence on the United States with a closer relationship with China. Impacting all of his choices was the question of how Kim Jong-un would focus in 2018, shifting from provocations aimed at military leverage to diplomacy linked to his outlook on Moon's policies. In the following five chapters authors explore each of these options. This introduction reviews some of their findings and points to linkages among them as part of an overall assessment of how Moon has navigated among the choices he was facing.

The following chapters set forth the options that Moon Jae-in has before him. Chapter 1 by David Straub seeks to grasp the appeal of a renewed Sunshine Policy to Moon, while spelling out the implications of taking that route, warning of a breach in trust with the United States if not a temporary welcome from Donald Trump eager for a Nobel Peace Prize. Leif Eric-Easley's analysis in Chapter 2 assesses the prospects of Moon doubling down on the ROK alliance with the United States and argues that, so far, trust between allies has been sustained, including in 2018 as diplomacy intensified with summitry on the agenda. In Chapter 3 John Delury examines the domestic political environment, pointing to the impact of the Candlelight movement, which offers opportunities for Moon as well as constraints on policies he might adopt. Chung Jae Ho in Chapter 4 explores Sino-ROK relations and the prospects of Moon drawing closer to China with consequences for relations with the United States. A fifth chapter by Sheila Smith focuses on Japan-ROK relations, newly strained by different approaches to diplomacy with Kim Jong-un. Each chapter views Moon's policies and proclivities in the context of the dynamics of bilateral ties, while following closely what has been happening to those ties during the tumultuous course of Moon's first year in office, notably in the first third of 2018 as diplomacy intensified.

David Straub, "Salvaging the Sunshine Policy"

A couple of weeks before his election Moon finally detailed his North Korea policy, announcing that he would "inherit" the Sunshine Policy. This contrasted with both the UN Security Council's focus on sanctions and Donald Trump's forceful rhetoric. Reviewing the Sunshine Policy—its practice was used by previous progressive governments—and the different approach of the succeeding conservative administrations, Straub argues that Moon and many progressives continue to believe in the basic approach, even though North Korea now has a nuclear weapons capability and may soon be able to credibly threaten the United States homeland. He assesses how Moon, as president, has attempted to salvage the policy and how North Korea and other countries have responded, concluding with prospects for Moon's North Korea policy and recommendations.

Kim Dae-jung's policy was based in part on the widespread progressive belief that both South and North Korea had been victims of the great powers, including the United States, and that the North's external security concerns were understandable if excessive. Progressives tended to be more critical of the U.S. role on the peninsula than conservatives. Kim Dae-jung "bribed" the communist leader and strengthened his chances to win the Nobel Prize. Roh Moo-hyun called his approach the "peace and prosperity policy," but it was quite identical to Kim's Sunshine Policy. Kim Jong-il's response to Roh's pursuit of reconciliation with the North was confined largely to cooperating on two hard currency earners for the North—touring the Mount Kumgang area for a fee and expanding the Kaesong industrial park. Kim Jong-il agreed to a visit by Roh to Pyongyang only two months before the presidential election to influence the outcome.

Lee Myung-bak too sought improved relations with Pyongyang, including a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il. He demurred, however, when the North Koreans in 2009 demanded \$10 billion and half a million tons of food for a summit, giving Lee little political space to engage them. They also gave Park Geun-hye little leeway, committing provocations from the beginning of her term. Motivated by frustration that Pyongyang was continuing its nuclear weapons push and feeling that Seoul had to be consistent with the U.S.-led international campaign to press it to participate in good-faith negotiations, Park kept her distance before pushing back in 2016.

Moon Jae-in was not only involved with most of the Roh administration's North Korea policy deliberations and decisions, he identified with Roh personally. His continued support for the Sunshine Policy approach is evident in his personnel selections and when he moved quickly to realize the North's participation in the Olympics in January 2018, taking extraordinary measures. The reaction to Moon's response to the North Koreans included both widespread praise for reducing "tensions" to dismay that he was falling for yet another phony "charm offensive" just as the regime was beginning to feel the bite of increased international sanctions. The main opposition party called the Pyeongchang Games the "Pyongyang Olympics."

Mike Pence's words and actions in connection with the Games dramatically underlined the gap in North Korea policies. Moon seeks a step-by-step, comprehensive approach to progress. The Trump administration, in contrast, believes that the reasons for developing nuclear weapons include using nuclear blackmail to strategically decouple the United States and South Korea, then seeking to use strategic advantage as a nuclear power to reunify the peninsula on its own terms. Some senior U.S. officials believe that Pyongyang, unlike countries such as the Soviet Union and the PRC, might not be deterrable once it has a full-fledged nuclear force. Trump has declared that he will not permit it to develop the capability of attacking the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons and is prepared to use a "military option." In Moon's push to include North Korea in the Olympics and Trump's criticism that it was abusing the Games for propaganda, the gap between the two administrations was extraordinary, argues Straub, and he warns that Moon is trying to revive the Sunshine Policy approach under difficult circumstances. North Korea is much farther along in having a deliverable nuclear weapons capability. The United States and the international community are much less inclined to give it the benefit of the doubt. International sanctions constitute formidable barriers to a negotiated settlement as long as Pyongyang will not give up nuclear weapons. In South Korea too, there is greater skepticism.

Progressives tend to believe that the policy of Kim and Roh would have worked had it not been for obstructionism of the George W. Bush administration and South Korean conservatives. They believe that the “hardline” policies of the Lee and Park administrations were a failure. They saw Trump’s 2017 policy as embodying their worst fears, of another Korean war or, at best, a “new cold war structure” forcing them to choose between the United States and Japan, on the one hand, and the PRC, Russia, and North Korea, on the other. Straub sees Washington and Seoul suffering from a deficit of mutual trust, which encourages Kim Jong-un that he will achieve his goals. It is unlikely that Trump or his successors will accept North Korea, even tacitly, as a legitimate nuclear weapons state and ease sanctions against it. Doing so, including in the form of some nuclear “freeze” on Pyongyang’s part, would contribute to unravelling the U.S. strategic position in East Asia and undermining the global nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Unless North Korea is truly willing to fully denuclearize and to do so expeditiously, any general understanding reached between Trump and Kim at a planned June summit will not be sustained. Trump might then return to his emphasis on a “military option.” It is more likely, however, that the Trump administration will ultimately opt for a policy of enhanced deterrence and containment of North Korea’s nuclear threat, something most experts in Washington seem to support.

Leif-Eric Easley, “Doubling Down on the U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Olympics Diplomacy Did Not Breach Trust, but Trump-Moon Confidence is in Jeopardy”

Easley argues that the alliance is more effective at deterring conflict, reassuring publics, and promoting regional cooperation when trust is high, but that concerns have grown in South Korea and the United States about damaged trust. Trump’s campaign rhetoric questioned the terms and intrinsic value of the alliance; and Moon was the heir to a record of pro-engagement policies toward North Korea. Given the contrast with Trump’s coercive diplomacy, the question surrounding Olympics diplomacy was whether Moon’s pro-engagement policies give space for Pyongyang to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. Yet, Easley finds, Seoul’s efforts have not breached trust in the alliance despite signs of strain amidst the spring 2018 summitry. While changes in national leadership and domestic political preferences brought into question the bilateral trust the alliance needs to deter conflict, reassure publics, and promote regional cooperation, trust between the two governments is allowing them to double down on the alliance, and Moon’s shrewd diplomacy has increased space for South Korea’s middle power role in Asia.

Trump’s campaign rhetoric questioned the terms and value of the alliance to an extent not seen since Carter’s 1976 campaign. Then, Trump’s coercive diplomacy contrasted with Moon’s pro-engagement policies, perhaps allowing space for North Korea to cause a split between Seoul and Washington. Yet, Easley finds that Seoul’s efforts did not undercut ties in the alliance and that the allies are not approaching a rupture despite strain uncertainty, given Moon’s ambitions regarding Korean national identity and Trump’s unconventional alliance management style.

The speed and scale of inter-Korean engagement raised key questions for trust in the U.S.-ROK alliance. Sports and cultural diplomacy helped reopen channels of high-level communication between Pyongyang and Seoul, and restarted working-level cooperation. Also, the Kim regime increased its acceptance of South Korea as a dialogue partner on security. Questions arose over whether the Moon administration is clear-eyed about the brutal nature of Kim's regime; whether Seoul values the strength of the alliance over conflict avoidance; and whether it remains committed to international sanctions demanding North Korea's denuclearization. Yet, Seoul did not soft-pedal implementation of UN sanctions after the Winter Games, nor did it remove its unilateral sanctions known as the "May 24 measures," or rush to restart the shuttered Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism project. Moon gave credit to Trump's pressure campaign for pushing North Korea into talks with the South, and there was strong U.S. support of South Korea's strategy of making the Olympics a success. Coordination was very close on security matters, and the U.S. Treasury Department gave inter-Korean engagement at the Olympics a pass from sanctions enforcement, Easley explains. Moon and his advisers knew that if they drastically improved relations with Kim Jong-un with no progress on denuclearization, trust between Seoul and Washington would be seriously damaged. Hence, they pushed for a spring of high-level shuttle diplomacy to engage North Korea multilaterally, as soon ensued.

The two Koreas established a basis for conflict prevention and confidence building with steps that have significance in North Korean domestic politics, argued Easley. The Kim regime also seemed to temper some of its explicit and expected demands, at least temporarily. U.S.-ROK trust was actually higher than many thought going into and coming out of the Winter Olympics, helping to make the spring of summits possible. The long-term consequences of summit diplomacy are likely to hinge on the maintenance of U.S.-ROK trust through a process of South Korean domestic political and national identity change, and the Trump administration's unconventional approach to security alliance policy. While many in South Korea lack enthusiasm for unification, given identity distance from North Korea and the expected financial costs, most want peace and stability, and were moved by the emotional symbolism of the Olympics and Panmunjom summit. The Moon administration looks to build upon that sentiment by enshrining inter-Korean engagement in domestic law, using taxpayer money to promote inter-Korean exchanges, and expanding municipal involvement in those exchanges after progressive candidates make advances in the summer local elections.

Questions remain about the trajectory of South Korean and U.S. policy going forward. Even if policies do not change much, rhetoric based on emotions and political pandering (rather than on facts and national interests) can degrade perceptions in the other country about its ally and set off a downward spiral of trust. It is fine for Washington and Seoul to productively differentiate roles but staying on the same page is essential so that the efforts by one are not misconstrued as undermining the efforts of the other. Eventually, sanctions relief and economic cooperation can accompany North Korean progress toward denuclearization. Rushed solutions and grand bargains risk unintended consequences. The Moon government recognizes that South Korea has more to lose in terms of trust and cooperation with the United States than it presently has to gain with North Korea. It continues to double down on the alliance. But U.S. policymakers should avoid a situation where South Koreans blame America for a lost opportunity.

John Delury, “The Candlelight Mandate and Moon Jae-in’s Inter-Korean Dilemma”

The Candlelight movement that toppled Park is critical to understanding the Moon government, including its foreign policy, argues John Delury, although the movement had little to do with foreign affairs. The protests relit the spirit of citizenship in South Korea, tapping into widespread revulsion against corrupt practices, vested interests, and social injustice. They represented a broad consensus around the yearning for a fresh start, open and transparent government, and a political and economic reset. Given the participatory nature of South Korean political culture, it would be foolish to adopt an elitist premise that the public factor can be ignored. Moon Jae-in openly affirms the critical importance of democratic legitimacy and public input in all aspects of governance, including foreign policy. Yet Moon faces a dilemma. He entered the Blue House with three foreign policy ropes tied around his neck: the “comfort woman” deal impacting ties with Abe Shinzo, the Kaesong Industrial Complex which closed channels with Kim Jong-un, and the THAAD deployment on the basis of which ties were frayed with Xi Jinping. Park Geun-hye made these decisions abruptly, with little effort to prepare the public, and after her impeachment Moon campaigned against all three. Yet, his electoral victory had little to do with foreign policy, leaving him without a mandate. As he launches his own foreign policy, can he earn a mandate?

Setting Moon’s domestic mandate dilemma in the context of the contradictory foreign policy legacy he inherited, Delury finds that Moon improved ties with Xi Jinping on the basis of the “three noes,” stabilized ties with Abe by upholding the letter of the “comfort women” deal while rejecting the spirit of it and opened a channel with Kim Jong-un through the Olympic détente. Moon’s foreign policy preferences—sustaining a robust alliance with the United States, restoring a close partnership with China, and allowing a working relationship with Japan—are grounded in fairly strong domestic consensus—but in inter-Korean relations Moon faces a fragmented public.

Looking back, Delury asserts, in late 2015–early 2016, Park abruptly reversed course, shifting to a conservative posture in foreign policy. The first reversal came with Japan when a deal was announced that purported to be the “final and irrevocable” resolution of the issue of wartime sexual enslavement. The backlash intensified as the Abe government insisted that Seoul prevent civic groups from putting up remembrance statues of “comfort women.” The second reversal was triggered by North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Frustrated that Xi Jinping was unwilling to help, Park deployed the THAAD missile defense system. A majority of Koreans want a good relationship with China for economic reasons, and the THAAD spat reinforced the sense of economic vulnerability. The third reversal was that Park closed the door to cooperation with Pyongyang after three years of “trust-building.” Kaesong’s closure had a polarizing effect. Progressive advocates of engagement were outraged, but a majority of the public approved. Before they could fully judge the new foreign policy, the Park presidency came crashing down.

In his campaign, Moon strongly rejected Park’s “comfort women” deal, yet he affirmed the importance of an open channel with Tokyo. His campaign criticized the THAAD deployment but stressed the importance of a strong alliance with Washington, along with a close

partnership with Beijing. He was critical of the Kaesong closure, promising to reopen and expand the complex as a “stepping stone of Korean reunification.” Moon affirmed the importance of stopping the North’s nuclear progress through sanctions. He conveyed the image that the Candlelight coalition elected him to project—openness, transparency, justice, and reform. Yet, the coalition did not articulate clear expectations on the central foreign policy questions—how to balance China’s rise and the U.S. alliance, how to lift the burden of the past with Japan, and how to handle North Korea.

In U.S.-North Korean tensions, South Korea was relegated to a bystander. The U.S. debate over the merits of military action devalued the strategic and human significance of South Korea. The spiraling tensions between Trump and Kim created a severe political dilemma. Moon was trapped in the path of dependence created by Park’s triple reversal, and he was hamstrung in interjecting Seoul into a meaningful role in the standoff between the United States and North Korea. Kim Jong-un was not making things easier. When Trump visited Seoul, he inadvertently affirmed Moon’s outreach to Beijing; it had not damaged U.S. ties. Moon achieved his diplomatic goal of holding a constructive summit with Xi, and there was no major backlash against either the “three noes” or the trip. He started 2018 implementing something closer to his own foreign policy after Beijing had appeared to relent to the presence of a THAAD battery. In encouraging Abe to attend the Olympics, Moon made his intention clear to keep a channel open to Tokyo.

The weaker sense of pan-Korean ethnic solidarity and diminished need to rectify division exacerbate Moon’s dilemma in winning youth support for inter-Korean reconciliation. Domestic issues take precedence over inter-Korean relations. Progressives who support dialogue do not want to detract from addressing social injustice. Conservatives who take a hard line do not want to jeopardize economic growth. Almost no one wants to pay for reunification.

Moon’s foreign policy preferences seem to lean toward revived linkages with North Korea, a close partnership with China, a strong alliance with the United States, and neutral ties to Japan. Moon’s preferences on managing ties to the United States, China, and Japan seem to conform to public sentiment. Retaining the THAAD battery while promising “three noes” did not trigger a backlash. Nor did the “uphold the letter, reject the spirit” approach to the “comfort woman” deal. The hard part looks like it will be winning public support for improved inter-Korean relations. Moon needs to rethink the question of reunification as society moves from a pan-ethnic to an ethno-civic concept of national identity, as the political definition of ethnic community narrows among many young South Koreans to no longer include the North.

Although Moon emerged from the success of the Panmunjom summit with sky-high approval ratings, it is worth anticipating the domestic political complexity of a peace and reconciliation approach to inter-Korean relations, if only to mitigate their impact on progress with Pyongyang. Moon’s key foreign policy preferences—sustaining a robust alliance with the United States, restoring a close partnership with China, and allowing a working relationship with Japan—appear to be grounded in fairly strong domestic consensus. The challenging issue is likely to be in the sphere of inter-Korean relations. Here, Moon faces fragmented public sentiment.

Chung Jae Ho, “South Korea’s Strategic Approach to China (or Lack of It)”

The CPC Work Report on October 18, 2017 made three points clear as they related to China’s external strategy: 1) to be highly proactive, 2) to become a modernized great power, and 3) to lay down “Chinese ways” for others to emulate. The U.S. National Security Strategy on December 19th, defined China as America’s rival and recommended that the United States do more to promote American resilience and stand up to “revisionist” Chinese efforts to expand her influence. Chung Jae Ho finds that the “shadow of history” (i.e., lingering memories of Chinese empires) seems bigger as China is poised to be America’s hegemonic competitor. Due to its geographical proximity to and cultural similarities with China, as well as its strategic importance to both the United States and China, South Korea’s tightrope-walking has been tighter than anyone else’s.

Chung offers a brief overview of the complex relationship since diplomatic normalization in 1992, outlines features of over-optimism during the first three years of Park’s tenure, delves into the issue of THAAD and how that shattered the Park-Xi honeymoon in 2016, offers a brief discussion on China’s narrowly-focused sanctions during 2016-17, looks at Moon’s first year, focusing on envoy politics, the “three-noes controversy,” and Moon’s state visit to China, and finally assesses critical factors in shaping Moon’s policy toward China and where the room for mending and improvement lies. He recalls four principal crises: 1) the “garlic battle” of 1999-2001; 2) the Koguryo-centered historiographical controversy of 2004; 3) the rift in 2010, when China one-sidedly defended North Korea, rendering Sino-ROK relations politically frozen for nearly two years; and 4) the worsening relationship since 2016 over the deploying of THAAD. These relations, he adds, have recently entered into a stage where conflict resolution is more difficult due to the third-party involvement as well as to the hard-security nature of the problems.

China’s “import offensive,” which South Korea could not resist over the last three decades has left the South vulnerable. China has become much more important to South Korea while South Korea’s weight has been gradually diluted in the eyes of China. When Park Geun-hye was elected, relations with China had reached their nadir: in the Lee administration revitalizing the Korea-U.S. alliance was the top foreign policy priority; and North Korea’s two provocations in 2010 put relations in a very awkward situation. Yet, what went on in relations during the first three years of the Park administration was an outcome of excessive politicization of foreign affairs management and of exaggeration of the individual leader’s accomplishments, argues Chung. Beijing sought a chance to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington, putting much effort into a charm offensive, as voices grew louder in Seoul, warning Park against moving too fast to consolidate security ties with China amid claims that bilateral relations were never better.

The view that South Korea was increasingly tilting toward China spread. Seoul’s hesitation to join the U.S.-led negotiations for TPP was one indicator; its decision to join the China-initiated AIIB was another, as was Park’s attendance at Beijing’s V-Day commemoration in September 2015. Beginning in early 2016, however, relations took a steep downturn with the irreconcilable disagreement over deploying THAAD. Seoul overestimated the strategic bonds it was cultivating with Beijing in the midst of the excessive politicization

of state visits by Park and Xi and “trust diplomacy.” THAAD was interpreted by China as Washington’s effort to consolidate trilateral defense cooperation. No high-level channels were working effectively between Seoul and Beijing to discuss such an intricate issue, and Seoul’s insistence on the “three-noes” (i.e., no request from the U.S., no consultation with Washington, and no decision whatsoever regarding THAAD) from mid-2014 through early 2016 took away valuable time that could have been utilized for prudent diplomacy. They were an outright lie from China’s viewpoint as Seoul was in fact discussing the issue with Washington while it was also a confidence-discounting measure in the eyes of America. Seoul was not able to hold on to what was within the conventional realm of sovereign decisions—protection of national security. It could not execute a well-thought out plan of “flexible diplomacy” to somehow strike a balance between the ally (Washington) and the strategic cooperative partner (Beijing). Nor was Seoul capable of pressuring provocative Pyongyang by making use of the THAAD deployment. Worse yet, South Korea came to be viewed as a non-transparent opportunist by her ally as well as strategic partner, concludes Chung.

The U.S. and China are in a stage of acute strategic competition in East Asia, asking regional states the same exclusivity question “are you with us or against us?” China was not going to back off due to its preoccupation with “face,” and lives of the American armed forces stationed in Korea were on the line. China’s retaliatory measures were concentrated mainly in the sectors where adverse impact on China would be minimal. Tighter inspection measures for Korea-imported cosmetic products was one example. Virtually no barrier was set up against the sectors—e.g., semi-conductors, displays, and other key intermediate goods—that were crucial to China’s economy. In 2016, South Korea’s total trade surplus with China amounted to \$37.4 billion. The export of semi-conductors accounted for 64.7 percent of that value. Sanctions were applied mainly to the areas where governmental regulations were more convenient to be meted out or withdrawn—e.g. the number of Chinese visitors to South Korea in January 2017 was 563,000 as opposed to 917,000 in July 2016. China’s National Bureau of Tourism on March 2, 2017 instructed travel agencies that all group tours to South Korea be suspended after March 15th and only individual tourists who purchased tickets online would be permitted to go. China’s narrow-scope sanctions were painful from South Korea’s perspective—particularly for those in tourism industries—but they were not as painful as though Seoul had to give in unconditionally.

The Moon administration found itself in a similar situation to Park Geun-hye right after her inauguration, having to rebuild badly damaged relations with Beijing, but it was determined to improve relations even if that meant making considerable concessions. The “October 31 statement” was problematic in many aspects. The titles of the same statement are different, as the Korean one includes the word “improving”—i.e., more wishful thinking—while the Chinese one does not. This is not a trivial factor as high doses of wishful thinking on the part of South Korea were sustained for much of the administration’s first year of dealing with China. A close reading of the statement suggests that the Chinese position on THAAD is very specific and Beijing’s concerns are repeatedly emphasized. In stark contrast, the South Korean position—deployment is both necessary and inevitable to cope with North Korea’s growing and imminent threat—is completely missing. Since the strategic situation is constantly changing (as North Korea’s threat is), South Korea should not have limited or precluded her own options that way.

The Chinese side had a totally different thought: the October 31 statement was just a beginning and the whole problem had to be gradually dealt with until the complete withdrawal of THAAD. *People's Daily* referred to the October 31 statement as “South Korea’s sincere accommodation of China’s demand,” *Global Times* viewed it as a “materialization of optimal results,” a Hong Kong-based paper branded it as “China winning its war against THAAD without firing a shot.”

The Moon administration rushed to implement its grand design of improving relations with China, setting up Moon’s state visit to China before the end of the year, inviting Xi to the Winter Olympic Games, and facilitating summits among world leaders to pave the road to peaceful resolution of the North Korean problem. It was apparently “confident” in talking with two voices regarding the October 31 statement. Toward China, the government branded the October 31 statement as a “position” or “stance” (ipjang), while toward the U.S. Seoul designated it only as an “intention” (euihyang) but not a commitment or agreement. A seven-month journey of the new administration culminated in a state visit to China. Overall assessments, however, make one wonder if a state visit—as opposed to an official or even a working visit—was necessary.

Chung warns that “balanced diplomacy” ended up being mere sutures for damaged relations with the ally or neighbors. Related symptoms were those of “talking too much too fast.” Lacking clearly defined national goals and strategic roadmaps, diplomacy nevertheless had so many slogans such as “Northeast Asian balancer,” “New Asia Diplomacy,” “Trust Diplomacy,” and “Northeast Asian Peace and Security Initiative” which no one really talks about any longer. The Moon administration’s “New Northern and New Southern Diplomacy” may go down that path.

Chung sees an inadequate assessment of the strategic environment: 1) underestimating the level of threat posed by North Korea; 2) overestimating China’s willingness to resolve the North Korean conundrum; and 3) undervaluing the necessity of sustaining the alliance with the U.S. at this critical juncture. Confusing responses to America’s new concept of “Indo-Pacific” well illustrate this. If the Moon government is indeed trying to hedge against the U.S. and China, has it been successful or were diverse messages merely the debris of the lack of experience, coordination, and strategic thinking? This is the concluding concern raised by Chung.

Sheila Smith, “The U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral: Better at Deterrence than Diplomacy?”

Only some weeks into the surprise announcement that Trump will meet with Kim Jong-un and just after Abe’s rushed visit to meet Trump, the diplomatic geometry seems unhinged. It is hard to decipher the contours of what will be negotiations on more than denuclearization. Diplomacy over North Korea could put unprecedented strains on the trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK framework Washington has been striving to establish with its two vital allies in East Asia and on each of the three pairings. This was apparent in the nervousness visible in Japan over Moon Jae-in’s first Winter Olympics contacts with Kim Jong-un’s representatives and then the surprise decision by Trump to hold a summit with Kim. At the Trump-Abe summit differences did not appear to be resolved, as many in Japan lost confidence in the special relationship between Abe and Trump.

Smith points to five challenges for the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relationship. First, the military challenge, as Kim Jong-un has challenged U.S. allies in Asia with his rising military capabilities, and Asia's geopolitics are suggesting a new context, one in which the trilateral relationship among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington may prove inadequate to the task of managing the new dynamics of major power competition. But if conflict emerges, will close ties be sustainable as Pyongyang approaches the ability to effectively target the United States? Will America's allies be confident in the extended deterrent that has long allowed them to avoid the nuclear option themselves? This challenge has become more evident with the 2017 military tensions, and talks in 2018 have raised, especially among Japanese, concern that coordination over it is now harder.

Second, the diplomatic challenge, as the diplomacy required to sustain Northeast Asia's peace is proving difficult for trilateral relations, Smith explains. As prior attempts to negotiate with Pyongyang have demonstrated, the United States, South Korea, and Japan each have different interests at stake. Moreover, the domestic politics of sustaining diplomatic initiatives and offering compromise needed to realize results are not in synch. Tokyo worries about Seoul being too ready for compromise. Seoul worries about Tokyo's "remilitarization," and both in varying degrees worry that Washington might either sacrifice their security interests in an attempt to reach a deal or become too rigid for compromise to emerge. Given the rapid progress in Pyongyang's development of ICBMs capable of reaching cities across the United States, there is concern that Trump will prioritize ending this threat at a price that will not only leave the threats to Japan and South Korea but also call into question U.S. commitment to extended deterrence.

There is far greater concern about China's role in a negotiation, and far less confidence in U.S. leadership of a negotiating process. Moreover, Kim Jong-un seems far more assertive in shaping the context for negotiations. The diplomacy that may be emerging over Kim Jong-un's arsenal will thus need to consider the broader context of Asia's rapidly evolving military balance.

Third, the leadership challenge is mentioned by Smith, observing that all three democracies have changed leaders multiple times in the two decades since Kim Jong-il announced his withdrawal from the NPT. Elections have brought new leaders to the fore, each time prompting a reset in North Korea policy. Even below the level of leaders, sustaining engagement requires keeping all three leaders committed to diplomacy and to a unified strategy for pursuing a common end game. Synchronizing this takes considerable effort—and trust. The lack of a clear U.S. strategy makes formulating a trilateral strategy for talks with Pyongyang nearly impossible. Japanese see their prime minister's relationship with the U.S. president as weakened, and thus their confidence in the alliance somewhat shaken. This challenge has only intensified since the 2017 inaugurations.

The most often cited challenge to effective trilateral policy coordination has been the difficult relationship between Seoul and Tokyo. Troubled recently by war memory politics, Seoul and Tokyo have had difficulty overcoming the raw sentiments that have emerged over South Korea's residual grievances over colonial and wartime behavior by Japanese. North Korea brings both Tokyo and Seoul together in military cooperation, and yet their diplomatic strategies could potentially divide them, warns Smith. South Korean sensitivity to having Japanese military on Korean soil continues to limit the full integration of alliance

planning and exercising. Keeping all three nations aligned as diplomacy takes its course will be difficult, particularly in light of the unpredictability of U.S. policy, which is treated separately as the fifth of the serious challenges.

Fifth on the list is the challenge of American unpredictability under Trump. This has become all the more apparent in Trump's handling of the North Korean issue, agreeing spontaneously to a summit, surprising both Moon, who had passed the idea along to Trump, and Abe, who was totally blindsided by the decision. Later, Trump did not bother to consult Abe, who had met with him recently to ensure coordination would take place, and Moon, who had barely left Trump's oval office, on a hurried decision to cancel the planned June 12th meeting in Singapore with Kim Jong-un. Yet, barely a day later, Trump appeared to have reconsidered, adding another surprise.

The Singapore Statement and Trump's subsequent remarks brought further surprises, not least to Abe. U.S.-Japan relations have been shaken not only by failure to coordinate over North Korea but also by Trump's unilateral moves on trade and on G7 and alliance management. In mid-2018 the state of the alliance has abruptly become uncertain despite Abe's strenuous efforts to solidify it. With diplomacy over North Korea hard to predict and Trump hard to control, the alliance that Abe was so keen on leaving in the best shape ever has entered uncharted waters.