



EVENT REPORT

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs

NDU Korea Futures 2025 Symposium

June 29, 2020

Executive Summary: On February 6, 2020, National Defense University (NDU) conducted a symposium that brought together government and non-government experts to discuss the future of the Korean Peninsula through 2025. The objective was to explore the implications and consequences of differing Korean futures for the United States and the countries of Northeast Asia, not to predict which outcomes were most likely. The symposium was a follow-up to a previous February 2016 symposium [“North Korea 2025: Alternate Futures and Policy Challenges.”](#)

The initial scenarios explored two branches: (1) would the Korean Peninsula unify or would it remain divided? and (2) would future relations between North Korea and South Korea be peaceful or violent?

Although the initial scenarios offered stark, binary choices, they produced a useful discussion on denuclearization, inter-Korean relations, the national interests of regional countries, and international reactions to a possible dramatic loss of control by the North Korean regime. Experts recognized that the initial binary choices reflected extreme outcomes rather than intermediate possible futures.

For example, unification might be a long, incremental process rather than a single, grand event. Relations between North Korea and South Korea might be cooperative in some areas and adversarial in others. The discussion also explored a future in which unification preceded denuclearization, leaving Korea with inherited North Korean nuclear weapons.

Key Findings:

- There are different understandings of what it would mean to “accept” a nuclear North Korea. Acknowledging that North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and does not plan to give them up—and then adjusting policies and postures accordingly—does not mean recognizing that it has a right to have them in violation of its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments.
- De facto acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea is not mutually exclusive with maintaining denuclearization of North Korea as a long-term, aspirational objective. North Korean official policy has long been that it will denuclearize, when vague future circumstances permit.
- Unification might involve a gradual, evolutionary process, as articulated by South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The process could be similar to the European Union’s “ever closer union.” Denuclearization and unification might proceed along parallel, incremental tracks, with North Korea initially maintaining some nuclear capability.
- If a unified Korea inherited North Korea’s nuclear weapons, it would come under international pressure to abide by NPT obligations, but Korea could bargain to obtain international funding for dismantling the inherited weapons and perhaps security guarantees before final disposition. If a unified Korea maintained possession of a nuclear arsenal, the U.S.-ROK alliance would be badly strained, and possibly broken.

- China is unlikely to seek regime change in North Korea due to Beijing's risk aversion and the difficulty of installing a compliant successor government. However, if a conflict breaks out or the North Korean regime appears to be collapsing, Beijing might intervene militarily to secure WMD and to enhance its ability to shape political outcomes on the peninsula.
- The oft-cited preference for stability over instability on the Korean Peninsula masks important policy questions: stability for whose benefit, and at what cost to longer-term interests? For the North Korean regime, internal stability may depend upon an appropriate degree of tension with the United States and South Korea. A significant decrease in military tensions might spark a new era of great power diplomatic and economic competition for influence on the peninsula, which is of strategic importance for surrounding countries.
- The Korean peninsula is increasingly affected by U.S.-China strategic competition, with Beijing seeking to increase its influence over both Koreas and to undercut the U.S.-ROK alliance. A fundamental question is whether a resolution of the North Korean nuclear impasse or even Korean unification would either help to resolve or simply exacerbate this competition. Washington and Beijing appear to be able to cooperate to some degree to address North Korea's threatening behaviors, but the U.S.-China strategic competition still affects how all the players in the region deal with the security challenges posed by North Korea. In the absence of the common concerns posed by North Korea, would regional security cooperation become even more difficult?
- International stakeholders, faced with significant uncertainties regarding various Korean futures, have differing theories of victory regarding a solution to the "Korea problem." Risk aversion has limited their ability to advance their desired outcomes, and probably

will continue to do so, leading to an end state of second-best solutions for all.

Summary of Discussion:

Denuclearization

Denuclearization of North Korea remains the primary stated objective of the United States, South Korea, and the international community, but progress towards that goal remains elusive. Experts at the "Korea Futures 2025 Symposium" recognized the value of North Korea's current freeze on nuclear testing and ICBM launches, but were skeptical that North Korea would surrender its existing arsenal and abandon its nuclear development program anytime in the near future. At the same time, they saw no reason to "accept" North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

North Korea has reason to believe that its decades-long and hugely expensive nuclear weapons and missile programs have been a success. Sanctions have slowed but not stopped these programs. Development and testing continued in the face of external pressure. Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs have led to summit meetings with the President of the United States and offers of economic engagement and assistance from South Korea. They have increased the Kim regime's domestic prestige and earned it attention as well as opprobrium from major powers. Experts agreed that it would be extremely difficult to persuade or pressure North Korea to surrender its nuclear program at this point.

On the other hand, Kim Jong-un may also be frustrated that, even after the self-proclaimed completion of a nuclear deterrent, he still has yet to bring an end to sanctions or strike a bargain with the United States.

Experts also argued that even if complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization is impossible in the near future, the alternative need not be open acceptance of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Clearly, the United States and other countries are not going to admit North Korea as a

sixth member of the club of nuclear powers. North Korea may aspire to a status similar to that of Israel, which is understood to have nuclear weapons without overt recognition. This outcome is unlikely to be acceptable to the United States, South Korea, China, or Japan; it could put pressure on South Korea, or perhaps even Japan or Taiwan, to also develop nuclear weapons.

An alternative possibility would be the international community grudgingly accepting that North Korea will retain nuclear weapons for an indefinite period, and that slow, gradual progress towards denuclearization is preferable to the alternatives. This would mean approaching denuclearization as a long-term goal in the larger context of changing the security environment in Northeast Asia, which is in fact also North Korea's long-standing stated policy. Pyongyang's official statements on denuclearization are vague, open-ended and conditional, usually couched as "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" but even extending beyond the peninsula to include global denuclearization. Participants envisioned a range of possible international approaches to denuclearizing North Korea that could be gradual, even multi-generational, so long as all sides could point to the stabilizing effect of the denuclearization trend and professed good faith in the ultimate objective.

Unification

Although a distant and perhaps unattainable goal, unification of the Korean Peninsula remains the policy of both North and South Korea – indeed, it is enshrined in both constitutions and both Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un continue to refer to it in their speeches.

In recent years, the focus among experts discussing the prospects for Korean unification has shifted from the potential for sudden absorption to mutual accommodation. Whether North Korea actually maintains the goal of forcible unification despite the regime's rhetoric is debated among American experts. More clear is Moon Jae-in's vision of a gradual melding of North and South Korea through

people-to-people ties, cultural exchange, trade and investment, and government-to-government commissions and projects. The model would be that of European integration, with Korea following the EU's example of incremental movement towards "ever greater union." Meanwhile, support for unification "on terms acceptable to the Republic of Korea" remains U.S. policy.

This evolutionary route to unification may be attractive to North Korea if Pyongyang can control the modalities and pace of inter-Korean engagement, and if it does not have to give up its nuclear arsenal to start the process. It likely would welcome South Korean economic assistance on its terms, particularly towards improving its dilapidated infrastructure. For its part, South Korea may be more willing than previously to overlook North Korea's authoritarian nature and human rights abuses so long as inter-Korean engagement contributes to South Korea's stability and prosperity. Engagement with North Korea could promote South Korea's economic interests by gaining access to North Korean natural resources and inexpensive labor, establishing land links to China and Russia, and perhaps lessening dependence on the United States.

Experts posited a possible future in which both denuclearization and unification proceeded along parallel tracks at an evolutionary pace.

A Nuclear Dowry

Under the gradualist scenario above, it is an open question whether complete denuclearization would proceed or follow unification of the Korean Peninsula. If the latter, South Korea could acquire North Korean nuclear weapons as an inheritance from a collapsed DPRK or a dowry for a unified government. Experts disagreed on the effects this would have on the U.S.-ROK Alliance and on the region.

Some experts expressed their belief that Seoul's acquisition of North Korean nuclear weapons would alter but not break the Alliance. The United States likely would withdraw its forces from the peninsula

and press the unified Korea to abide by its NPT commitments. At the same time, strong economic and historical ties and a continuing mutual interest in balancing against China could keep the fundamental U.S.-ROK relationship intact.

Other experts thought that a unified Korea would have no choice but to denuclearize, first as a matter of international law but also as a *sine qua non* for a continued positive relationship with the United States. If the unified Korea claimed to be a continuation of the South or North Korean states, their existing treaty obligations would continue to apply, including those of the NPT. The NPT is deliberately designed to be difficult to abrogate. North Korea's attempts to withdraw from its NPT commitments have not been accepted by the United Nations Security Council because they have not met the Treaty's onerous withdrawal requirements.

If a unified Korea argued that it was a successor state rather than a continuing state and therefore not bound by the NPT, it would lose its current membership in the WTO and the G20 among other organizations, and would also lose its extensive network of free trade agreements. Having to renegotiate all existing agreements with countries averse to a nuclear Korea would be a daunting diplomatic challenge. It is hard to imagine that Seoul would risk inflicting such grave damage on itself, and being internationally isolated, in exchange for nuclear weapons. Finally, a trade-dependent unified Korea would be far more vulnerable to international sanctions and pressure than the insular North Korea of today. Several experts found it unimaginable that the United States would tolerate a unified Korea with nuclear weapons while it had the means to prevent it. China, Russia, and Japan are also likely to bring their considerable economic and diplomatic leverage to bear to oppose a unified but nuclear Korea.

This is not to say that a unified Korea would surrender its nuclear weapons rapidly or unconditionally. As the most relevant example, Ukraine, after it achieved independence, insisted on three conditions (1) compensation for handing over

its stock of highly-enriched uranium, which had commercial value as nuclear fuel; (2) international funding for the cost of dismantling weapons, silos, and storage facilities on Ukrainian territory; and (3) security guarantees. The United States, United Kingdom, and Russia provided assurances against threats to Ukraine's territory and sovereignty in the "Budapest Memorandum" of December 5, 1994. North Korea undoubtedly noted the failure of Ukraine's security guarantees when Russia annexed Crimea and occupied eastern Ukraine in 2014, but this does not mean that a unified Korea would not seek some form of security assurances as a condition for surrendering its nuclear weapons.

A Different Future: North Korea Spins out of Control

The futures above are based on controlled, gradual steps. Experts at the symposium discussed other possible futures in which North Korean aggression or fragility created conditions which demanded outside intervention – whether by South Korea, potentially supported by the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) and the United Nations Command (UNC), or by China, or perhaps even Russia.

The symposium did not attempt to revisit specific North Korean collapse scenarios or to discuss the challenges posed by the stabilization and reconstruction of North Korea. The intent instead was to consider how an outside intervention or regime collapse could lead to a different regime in the North or rapid Korean unification, and how this would affect regional dynamics as opposed to the gradual changes discussed above.

Experts at the symposium agreed that international actors are not looking for an opportunity to move into North Korea and would be reluctant to act unless absolutely necessary. However, such intervention could be triggered by an internal collapse of the regime's control or an unacceptably aggressive act by North Korea such as a military attack on South Korea or the United States.

Only grave risks posed by “loose nukes,” mass refugee flows, or a widespread humanitarian disaster in the North would lead countries, including China, to intervene. Experts agreed that intervening in the North would be a high risk proposition because the consequences would be incalculable. How would the intervening country know which North Korean faction to support? Would it be possible to occupy and stabilize North Korea in the face of chaos or insurgency? What would be the cost of providing humanitarian assistance, let alone bearing the cost of reconstruction? What would be the exit strategy? If the United States and South Korea decided to run the risks of moving north, would they provoke China to move south – and vice versa?

Chinese intervention into North Korea has traditionally been viewed by South Koreans and Americans as a threat to be deterred or countered. Experts considered the possibility that Chinese intervention might be a positive development under certain conditions: if it were temporary, transparent, and effective, especially in controlling North Korea’s nuclear arsenal. One China expert noted that the presumption of U.S. opposition would be a primary reason for Beijing to see intervention as risky. Reassuring South Korea and the United States that China was not annexing North Korea or setting up a puppet regime would require a large degree of reassurance and consultation; extensive dialogue would be necessary before and during Chinese intervention.

South Korean management of North Korea in the event of a sudden collapse would challenge South Korea’s resources and capabilities, and might be impossible in the face of Chinese opposition. One expert suggested that a possible solution would be to declare the territory of North Korea to be a United Nations Trust Territory under Chapter XII of the UN Charter and to appoint South Korea as the administering state. This would give Russia and China, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, a role in supervising the South Korean administration of the trust territory, enable South

Korea to request assistance from UN agencies and member states, lend international legitimacy to South Korea’s presence in North Korea, and give North Koreans the right to decide their future in an eventual UN-monitored plebiscite on whether to join a unified Korea or opt for independence.

Experts also considered the role of Russia in dealing with a sudden change on the Korean Peninsula. They generally expected that Russia would allow China to take the lead but insist on having a voice in any multilateral negotiations regarding Korea. In case of a movement of external forces into North Korea, some experts thought it likely that Russia would seize at least a small portion of North Korean territory near its border to gain a seat at the table.

Ultimately, any crisis or conflict in North Korea severe enough to warrant direct external intervention, whether or not it results in Korean unification, would have important implications for U.S.-China rivalry and the long-term influence of both powers on the Korean Peninsula. China’s perpetuation of the division of the Peninsula through some form of intervention to install a new regime in North Korea could stabilize a crisis situation or even forcibly denuclearize the North. However, such an intervention would probably earn Beijing the enmity of South Koreans—while South Koreans would lose trust in Washington if the U.S. supported or allowed such a move. Similarly, a U.S.-R.O.K. military intervention into North Korea—however justified—could resolve the security challenges posed by North Korea, but this would concern Beijing and could trigger a military intervention by China to secure its own interests. In the end, if China does not choose to block it, a military intervention by the R.O.K. with U.S. support could lead to a unified Korea—but one with a hostile and suspicious Chinese neighbor.

Stability or Instability in a United or Divided Korea

Whether the Korean Peninsula remains divided or moves towards unification, and whether North Korean denuclearization is achieved or not, all

international actors today support the proposition that stability on the peninsula is desirable. This focus on stability seems unquestionable, but can have negative consequences for short-term and long-term interests. North Korean military provocations are destabilizing and should have negative consequences for the North Korean regime. Sometimes, however, the quest for stability seems counter-productive, as when China and Russia urge South Korea not to react to North Korean provocations in the interest of stability. North Korea also makes demands in the name of stability, such as calling for a halt to U.S.-ROK joint military exercises.

The status quo on the Korean Peninsula meets few countries' definition of stability. North Korea continues to develop its nuclear arsenal, albeit currently without testing, and is engaged in cyber-attacks and other illicit activity. Sanctions are not intended to be permanent and, as a practical matter, cannot be effectively enforced indefinitely without new action by the Security Council. North Korea's economy is fundamentally broken: even if all sanctions were lifted, growth would probably remain weak without significant reform. If the current situation on the peninsula is unacceptably unstable, what would make it stable, and what would stability look like?

Experts identified at least three variables on the stability-instability spectrum:

- *North Korea's nuclear weaponry.* One scenario explored whether a stable nuclear balance on the peninsula was possible; one expert suggested that stability would require a survivable second strike capability, clear nuclear doctrine, and confidence that the other side would not use nuclear weapons first. This implies a major expansion and operationalization of North Korea's nuclear arsenal, which would have its own potentially destabilizing consequences. The current security situation in Northeast Asia is not sustainable in the long run if North Korea continues to possess nuclear weapons without movement towards denuclearization. One expert

cited a Japanese scholar as saying that there eventually will be one nuclear power in Northeast Asia (i.e. China), or four (China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan), but there cannot be two or three;

- *The conventional arms balance between North and South Korea.* Both countries are heavily armed and there is a greater risk of a conventional conflict than a nuclear war—but would a major conventional war be able to stay non-nuclear?
- *Inter-Korean relations.* As long as there are two Koreas in roughly their current form, there will likely be areas of cooperation and areas of rivalry between them. At the same time, South Korea's prosperity and personal freedom are political threats to the North Korean regime and South Korea will resist the extension of North Korean authoritarian and criminal behavior into South Korea.

For North Korea, stability seems to depend on a manageable degree of tension with South Korea and the United States. One expert described it as North Korea's "sweet spot." North Korea must act belligerently enough to extract economic assistance and other concessions, but not cross a line that would invite serious retaliation. North Korea also must resist excessive economic assistance or too close an American or South Korean embrace. Doing so would endanger regime survival, which depends upon a level of control that reform would put at risk. The ideology of North Korea is based on revolutionary zeal and xenophobia. Could North Korea survive the absence of an outside threat? For the North Korean regime, stability may depend upon an appropriate balance between war and peace, rather than on peace.

The denuclearization of North Korea, per se, would not establish stability on the Korean Peninsula—nor would even unification; the competition of outside powers for influence in Korea would continue, even if the peninsula was united. The ages-long history of the Korean Peninsula has been one of a contest

for influence or control by China, Japan, and Russia. Like the Poles in Europe, Koreans have had the misfortune of living on contested property. It would be safer for the Koreans if the competition for Korea was diplomatic and economic, rather than military, but experts agreed that it would be naïve to assume that the “Korea problem” would actually be resolved without a regional settlement that addressed the underlying causes of tension among Korea, Japan, China, and Russia – some of which date back to the incomplete resolution of World War II territorial and reparation issues, and some of which stretch back even further.

U.S.-China Strategic Competition and the Peninsula

In the past, Korea was the subject of China-Japan-Russian competition. Today, it is an arena in which strategic competition between the United States and China is being played out. China values stability, but at the same time is steadily attempting to reduce American influence in Asia and erode U.S. alliances. This manifests itself as an overt Chinese attempt to create a regional sphere of influence. China openly states that countries bordering China, including both Koreas, must not act in ways contrary to Chinese national interests. The United States, conversely, believes that sovereign states have equal rights to determine their external relations (including alliances) and opposes a Chinese sphere of influence.

Experts agreed that South Korea has carefully endeavored to maintain good relations with China while remaining committed to its alliance with the United States. This balance has come under strain, both from increasing Chinese assertiveness and from American demands in regard to trade policy and burden sharing costs. One expert noted that the trend in recent years has been for South Korea to become more reliant on the United States to support it against China, even as its relations with the United States have become more fraught. China’s economic retaliation against South Korea following Korea’s deployment of the THAAD anti-missile

system has had a deep impact on the attitudes of South Koreans, in particular progressives, who have come to doubt whether China is as benign as they had hoped.

One expert described a change in China’s thinking on the Korean Peninsula. He said that there has been an evolution in China’s traditional policy of “no war, no instability, and no nukes.” Whereas these had been three separate elements, Chinese leaders are now starting to believe that they go together. It may be that there can be no stability if North Korea maintains nuclear weapons. Some Chinese are questioning the value of maintaining North Korea as “buffer state,” arguing that North Korea’s behavior has made it a strategic liability rather than an asset. North Korea may be drawing American power into Northeast Asia more than it is keeping it away. In addition, South Korea, which has grown into an economic and cultural powerhouse, has become more important to China than North Korea.

Experts thought that China may be readying for a bargain on the Peninsula. Beijing may be moving toward accepting unification largely on South Korea’s terms in exchange for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the peninsula. This would not end U.S.-Chinese diplomatic and economic competition for influence in Korea, but would reduce the security risk to the United States and China posed by the North Korea’s belligerent behavior. Even if this end state is acceptable, the problem is that there is no apparent way of getting there. One expert observed that China is attempting to nudge North Korea in the direction of economic reform in the same way that the United States is trying to push China towards economic reform – with equally limited success.

A World of Second-Best Outcomes

The United States and the countries of Northeast Asia have differing ideas about what a stable, sustainable, resolution of the “Korea problem” should look like – different theories of victory (in Professor Eliot Cohen’s phrase). There may be

areas of overlap that would allow the various theories of victory to be somewhat compatible rather than mutually exclusive. However, reaching a mutually acceptable outcome would likely require all countries to live with second-best outcomes.

The United States' ideal outcome would probably be a unified, democratic, denuclearized Korea remaining in close alliance with the United States but requiring little or no commitment of US military capabilities to ensure its security. However, such a Korea might see less value in a military alliance with the United States. What would be the external threat that would require it to remain dependent on American extended deterrence? China would prefer a unified Korea that falls firmly within China's sphere of influence. However, every attempt to exert control would push Korea further away from China and closer to the United States. North Korea needs South Korean economic assistance, but fears that external economic influence would be destabilizing. Japan would like a Korea that is peaceful and benign, but a unified Korea might become more self-confident and assertive.

One of the vexing problems with Korea policy, experts agreed, is that there are stubborn blockages to progress. The costs of conflict on the Korean Peninsula are so high that using force to achieve a country's goals—even ones as important as denuclearization—is hard to imagine, so threats to use force lack credibility while generating immediate criticism and opposition. North Korea has successfully closed off China's ability to influence policy through potential proxies (such as Jang Song-thaek and Kim Jong-nam) by killing them. China and Russia have hamstrung U.S. efforts to impose sanctions tough enough to change North Korea's policies by failing to fully enforce them—out of fear that they might trigger a destabilizing regime change in North Korea or push Kim to greater escalation. They are prepared to punish but not to topple the Kim regime, and ultimately believe that pressure will not force the North to give up its nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, North Korea has been unable to use threats and its steadfast commitment

to its nuclear and missile programs to force the lifting of sanctions. The Korean Peninsula is at a stalemate—but how much longer is this stalemate sustainable?

Areas for Future Research

Experts suggested that it would be easier to think through the consequences of future developments on the Korean Peninsula, if three additional topics could be explored in detail:

- (1) **The Internal Dynamics of a Unified Korea.** There has not been enough analysis of what impact absorbing 25 million North Koreans would have on South Korea. How would they vote? Would they join existing South Korean political parties or launch their own? Who would their leaders be? What would be their influence on foreign policy? What effect would they have on South Korea's attitudes and culture?
- (2) **A Regional Security Architecture for Northeast Asia.** North Korea or a unified Korea might reasonably demand security guarantees in exchange for denuclearization. Could those demands be met through a regional security mechanism? Alternatively, might South Korea's need for deterrence against a long-term North Korean threat be met by creating a Northeast Asia Regional Command within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command as a successor to U.S. Forces Korea (USFK)?
- (3) **The Regional Implications of a Stubbornly Nuclear-armed North Korea.** By 2025, could North Korea succeed in gaining de facto acceptance of its retention of at least some nuclear arms, if it recommitted to eventual denuclearization and kept its behavior within some acceptable bounds? What would this mean for U.S.-China strategic competition in Korea and for the North-South Korea relationship? Would South Korea and/or Japan choose to pursue their own nuclear arms as a result? Would this make the situation in Northeast Asia more stable or less stable?

###

This event report summarizes presentations and discussions at the symposium, which was conducted under non-attribution rules. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.