



**Struggling with the Gray Zone:  
Trilateral Cooperation to Strengthen Deterrence  
in Northeast Asia**

**A Conference Report from the  
US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue**

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## **Pacific Forum CSIS**

Based in Honolulu, the Pacific Forum CSIS ([www.pacforum.org](http://www.pacforum.org)) operates as the autonomous Asia-Pacific arm of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. The Forum's programs encompass current and emerging political, security, economic, business, and oceans policy issues through analysis and dialogue undertaken with the region's leaders in the academic, government, and corporate areas. Founded in 1975, it collaborates with a broad network of research institutes from around the Pacific Rim, drawing on Asian perspectives and disseminating project findings and recommendations to opinion leaders, governments, and members of the public throughout the region.

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, founded in 2008, is an independent, non-partisan think tank with the mandate to undertake policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as Korean reunification. The institute conducts research in national security and foreign policy, area studies, public opinion and domestic politics, social science methodology, and global governance.

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## Key Findings/Recommendations

The Pacific Forum CSIS, with the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and with support from the Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering WMD (PASCOC) and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), held a US-ROK-Japan Extended Deterrence Trilateral Dialogue on July 19-21, 2015. Forty-one US, ROK, and Japanese experts, officials, military officers, and observers, along with 19 Pacific Forum Young Leaders, attended in their private capacities. Key findings include:

The primary challenges that the United States faces from its chief competitors in Northeast Asia – China and North Korea – are similar. Each is trying to use speed, geography, and asymmetry of stakes to reach their objectives, while avoiding a US military response.

All participants support increased trilateral cooperation but understand that political dynamics between Seoul and Tokyo will limit progress. One ROK participant insisted that political support for trilateralism in South Korea is only possible if the three countries focus on countering a North Korean threat. “China is the ceiling to how far trilateral cooperation can go,” an argument consistent with previous meetings. A US participant argued that trilateral cooperation and coordination is not sufficient. He called for greater interoperability that leads to deep integration of security policies.

South Korea and Japan remain concerned with gray zone challenges from North Korea and China respectively and want more clarity about how the United States will contribute to their defense in these situations. Some US participants noted that the US can only do so much to help allies to counter provocations. Others encouraged more seamless integration of planning and greater US support for allied efforts to protect their interests if challenged. Some US participants, however, stressed that allies are primarily responsible for their own defense against gray zone challenges.

ROK participants remain concerned about Japan’s move toward collective self-defense (CSD). They recognize that Japan could play an important role in the Asia-Pacific, but want assurances that Japan will not be involved in a Korean Peninsula contingency without prior approval from Seoul.

Japanese participants heard the ROK message and provided assurances that no action would occur in a Korean contingency without Seoul’s consent. They supported CSD and the new US-Japan defense guidelines, while emphasizing the limitations of each.

With its new security legislation, Japan faces assurance problems similar to those the US has addressed with its allies: Regional countries, especially South Korea, want more detail about the circumstances in which CSD will be exercised. Japanese participants countered that ambiguity is inevitable as not all contingencies can be anticipated.

An ROK participant proposed a trilateral strategic deterrence committee to coordinate nuclear plans and policies in an effort to show joint nuclear resolve.

*The conference featured a tabletop exercise in which teams representing the US, Japan, and South Korea responded to a crisis. In the first move, North Korea invaded and overran Daechong Island, taking hostages and seizing control of the island. In move two, the DPRK responded to ROK threats of retaliation by insisting that it plans to keep Daechong, demanding that Seoul*

*abandon a neighboring island, Baengnyeongdo, renewing its commitment to redraw the Northern Limit Line, dispersing road mobile missiles, and issuing thinly-veiled weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats against the ROK and Japan. In an interjection during deliberations, it was revealed that North Korea detonated a nuclear device over the Sea of Japan.*

### ***Areas of convergence***

- Participants from all three countries were unsure of North Korean goals and objectives in the scenario, but thought that they were likely limited, perhaps to achieve territorial gain or to demonstrate strength to a domestic audience.
- US and South Korean participants were determined to respond to North Korea's aggression decisively, including rolling back territorial gains, recovering hostages, and punishing Pyongyang for its provocation. Participants from each country did, however, recognize the potential for escalation after the US/ROK response.
- South Korean participants proposed a unilateral ROK military response to retake the island, strike North Korean military bases that had supported the initial invasion, and additional escalatory steps. They expressed a strong sense that, after five years of North Korean provocations, Seoul is itching to strike back at North Korea decisively (and disproportionately).
- Initially worried that the United States might try to restrain their military action, South Korea participants were surprised at the extent of US support for decisive military action.
- Japanese participants supported the parameters of the US and ROK response and offered support. They also expressed concern with overreaction and escalation, particularly if it might spillover and affect Japan, and hoped to be consulted as response options were developed and pursued.
- After the second move, all three teams supported a decisive military response to include retaking the lost island and conventional strikes in North Korea. The ROK team thought the situation was quickly moving from a limited provocation toward a full-scale war and it needed to prepare for inevitable escalation. They also proposed that eliminating the North Korean nuclear threat be the top priority.

### ***Areas of disagreement***

- While generally supportive of South Korea's actions, US participants expected that Seoul would pursue greater consultation and coordination with Washington and Combined Forces Command if such a crisis arose. Many argued that North Korean invasion of an island would be an act of war that should initiate the transfer of operational control to the United States.
- Areas of potential disagreement between Japan and the ROK arose during the first move. First, the Japan team was more concerned with escalation than the ROK team. Second, the Japanese proposed preparing for non-combatant evacuation operations, while the ROK side cautioned against such a step, arguing that it would induce panic. Third, the Japan team proposed taking the issue to the UNSC, while the South Korean team supported an initial unilateral response.
- In move two, Japan cautioned that it would support a tactical response but not full-scale war, all-out invasion, or regime change. The team again expressed a desire to be consulted before the US and ROK decided on a response. The US team also hoped that

the ROK would not, at this point, establish regime change as its military objective, which caused some consternation among Korean participants.

### *Nuclear signaling*

- ROK participants expected that, in this type of scenario, North Korea would be likely to issue nuclear threats early in the crisis. They requested that the United States show nuclear resolve. While they did not express a clear preference for a mechanism of doing so, the deployment of nuclear-capable assets to Guam was seen as a desirable initial step.
- The ROK team said that North Korea's detonation of a nuclear weapon changed their discussions. This showed them that North Korea was willing to escalate all the way. The US team also saw use of nuclear weapons as a game changer and argued that it changed the US interests at stake.
- Japan, however, saw the nuclear detonation as an attempt at coercion, not an indication that North Korea was preparing to use additional nuclear weapons. They noted that North Korea's overriding interest in regime survival would prevent it from using nuclear weapons against a population center.
- Use of a nuclear device did not surprise US, ROK, and Japanese participants, all of whom seemed to have accepted that nuclear use was a real possibility, although most (but not all) thought it would initially be limited to a warning shot or signaling as opposed to an attack on troops or population centers.
- A Korean participant argued that if North Korea was able to hold on to the island by using nuclear coercion, then Seoul would likely leave the NPT and acquire nuclear weapons.

### *De-escalation*

- It is essential that the three countries agree on what constitutes North Korean de-escalation (or what would constitute "offramps" for the crisis). Participants reached no consensus on what Pyongyang could/should do to defuse the crisis that would satisfy their need to punish North Korea for its aggression.
- When the US and ROK speak of escalation they use different contexts: Americans speak of escalation in the context of nuclear use, Koreans are talking about escalation of aims – i.e., unification.

### *China's role*

- Participants from the US, South Korea, and Japan all acknowledged that China would play a critical role in this type of crisis. For some, China would be unlikely to offer support and may even side with North Korea; others saw an opportunity to distance Beijing from Pyongyang.
- ROK thinking about China was inconsistent. On one hand, ROK participants argued for taking Chinese sensitivities into account when considering action in Northeast Asia to maintain leverage with Beijing to deal with Pyongyang. Yet, in the scenario, the ROK side wanted to act before the UNSC could take up the issue for fear that China would block consideration – which suggests China won't support the ROK.

***Other points***

- The ROK team noted that the ROK would need time for full-scale mobilization and proposed an operational pause. US participants were skeptical that North Korea would allow this to occur unchallenged.
- A Japanese participant highlighted the absence of established channels through which the SDF could communicate with Korea in a crisis. Any communications would be ad hoc and indirect.
- The exercise highlighted the difficulty of effectively managing a North Korean initiated crisis. Several participants wondered whether it would be possible for the US, ROK, and Japan to achieve their goals and objectives without accepting a significant risk of nuclear escalation.



## Conference Report

The need to ensure that the US extended deterrent in Northeast Asia remains credible and effective has never been more pressing; the obstacles to doing so have never been higher. North Korea's increasingly capable nuclear program, combined with the unpredictability of Kim Jong Un, demands that the United States, South Korea, and Japan closely coordinate – and deeply integrate – their thinking and policies. A more powerful and assertive China is challenging the institutions and norms that gird the regional order; again, coordinated trilateral responses are one of the most effective weapons. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo have to strengthen security. Well-known political issues inhibit trilateral cooperation, but there are other equally powerful and less well understood forces that impede the efforts of the three countries to work together to check regional threats.

For nearly a decade, the Pacific Forum CSIS has probed the seams and the substance of extended deterrence in Northeast Asia. This effort began with bilateral programs and has evolved into a groundbreaking trilateral dialogue that offers, in the words of one well-traveled Korean participant, “a rare chance for frank and straightforward remarks.” In 2015, this track 1.5 discussion involved 41 US, ROK, and Japanese experts, officials, military officers, and observers, along with 19 Pacific Forum Young Leaders (all attending in their private capacities), who addressed concerns about the capacity of the three countries to sustain and strengthen their deterrent in the face of new and enduring challenges. Partnership with the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, and support from the Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering WMD (PASCC) and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), ensured that the US-ROK-Japan Extended Deterrence Trilateral Dialogue built upon previous meetings to clarify misunderstandings and misperceptions and to identify ways to ensure that the US extended deterrent remains credible and effective – to ally and adversary alike.

### Comparative Security Perspectives

The foundation of effective trilateral cooperation and credible deterrence is a shared assessment of regional security challenges. Fortunately, the perspectives of the three countries largely converge. All presenters agreed that the North Korean threat is ever more complex, with traditional capabilities being enhanced and evolving and expanding to encompass new dimensions. Dangers include not only the threats of missiles, nuclear weapons (and other weapons of mass destruction), and cyber attacks, but those triggered by weakness, too: regime instability or an accident within North Korea could create large numbers of refugees that could prove extremely destabilizing. While questions persist about the extent of North Korean capabilities – can they put a nuclear warhead on a missile? Can they reach the continental United States? – all three governments assume that the threats are real and plan accordingly. The success of the byungjin policy (dual development of the military and the economy) means that dangers will grow over time as Pyongyang avoids the choice of butter or guns.

There was similar agreement that China's rise is equally problematic. Beijing is not only becoming more assertive and aggressive, but it is playing an increasingly sophisticated diplomatic game, pushing a vision of regional architecture that challenges existing institutions and could undermine prevailing norms. This approach, in tandem with an increasingly powerful military, allows China to challenge US supremacy in the region, raising issues for US extended deterrence. Our US speaker was especially troubled that "too many" in the PLA believe that they can fight a war with the US and, as a result of China's growing might, keep it below the nuclear threshold. Concerns about the growth of the PLA Navy and the increasing capabilities of the submarine fleet are shared by all three defense establishments. While the South China Sea has become the focal point of regional anxiety, there are fears that tensions there could spill over into other areas, such as the East China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, especially after Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, a ballot that looks increasingly likely to be won by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a traditionally pro-independence party that has had poor relations with Beijing.

Finally, there is a lengthening list of nontraditional security threats, such as public health, WMD proliferation, maritime safety and security, and environmental destruction, that consume the time and attention of defense planners. These issues offer many opportunities for multilateral cooperation, but they tend to be obscured by more pressing and sensational dangers (and don't seem to address US extended deterrence). There are bilateral efforts to strengthen cooperation and coordination in new domains such as space and cyberspace, but those programs are in their infancy and there is a need to explore cooperation with new partners.

Our speakers also acknowledged that not all the significant changes occur in other countries; there are equally (or potentially as) disruptive events occurring within our three countries. The Russian challenge to the post-Cold War settlement in Europe, in tandem with the rise of ISIS in the Middle East, raise doubts about the durability of the US commitment to the rebalance. Stronger militaries in South Korea and Japan allow those two countries to do more in their own defense; those shifts raise questions about role and responsibilities within each country's alliance with the United States.

Discussion challenged one important element of the emerging consensus on deterrence: the significance of new domains such as space and cyber. There was considerable push back against hyping threats to these domains. While they are increasingly important to the effective functioning of modern militaries (and society more generally), several speakers insisted that they are "just capabilities to use in a contingency." In other words, these new domains may not pose new problems, but may instead require the application of existing intellectual constructs, leaving aside the problem of attribution.

### **Trilateral Cooperation to Deter and Respond**

Rising uncertainties about deterrence have typically been the result of changes in the capabilities of adversaries. Equally important, however, are shifts in the thinking and

capabilities of the US and its allies. Agreement on threats or how to combat them is a prerequisite for action. And even if governments agree on what constitutes a danger and the appropriate response to it, they must have the tools to act. One of the most important recent developments in Northeast Asian security, and one that dominated discussions at this meeting, previous iterations, and similar sit-downs, has been changes in Japanese thinking about its regional security role and the policy shifts that are a consequence of this evolution.

There is a large gap in the understanding of what Japan is undertaking and why. Our meeting took place after the announcement of the new Guidelines for US-Japan Security Cooperation and before the Diet passed legislation implementing those changes and reflecting the new interpretation of the exercise of the right of collective self-defense (CSD) promulgated by the Cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on July 1, 2014. The Japanese national debate on these changes has highlighted three key points. First, the changes are intended to help Japan be a better ally and partner of the United States and to be able to contribute to regional security in a manner consistent with the benefits Japan has reaped from such stability. Second, the changes will be far less sweeping than many anticipate: Japanese participants in our dialogue have repeatedly emphasized that a great danger is that of inflated expectations of what Tokyo will be able to do in a crisis. Third, the new security legislation continues to unnerve some South Koreans (and a significant portion of the Japanese public as well, judging from the protests, demonstrations, and legislative tactics of the opposition).

Many South Koreans (experts, officials, and the general public) are uncomfortable with ambiguity in Japanese government statements about future policy, forgetting that contingencies define strategic planning and uncertainty (and hence ambiguity) are inherent in such thinking. In our meetings, Korean participants generally welcomed (with some qualifications) the anticipated changes. At the same time – and understandably since debates in Tokyo are ongoing – there remains uncertainty about what Japan will be doing. Almost all Korean participants emphasized the need for Japan to get the consent of countries with which it “interacted”: in plain speak, Tokyo must get Seoul’s prior approval for any security activities that it undertakes on Korean territory or in its waters. Consultation is a must, a reality that all Japanese acknowledged. (Not without some small amount of frustration, however: when South Koreans are not present, some Japanese complain that Koreans seem to forget that the changes are intended to facilitate a response that helps South Korea in an emergency, and to strengthen deterrence – which benefits Korea – more generally.)

To their credit, Japanese participants seized the opportunity of this meeting – as they did last year – to address US and Korean concerns about new security thinking and policies. Speakers highlighted the importance of the whole of government mechanism for alliance coordination in the new defense guidelines and stressed the opportunities for cooperation with the US and “other partners.” They emphasized the “stringent conditions” that will limit Japan’s exercise of CSD, particularly the necessity of a request from the country under armed attack. Speakers underlined that the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) will not participate in armed operations.

Still, the door is now open to more operational integration between the US, Japan, and other forces beyond Japan's territorial waters. The allies, and perhaps others, will be able to share information, promote situational awareness, and begin joint planning. As one speaker explained, these changes offer the potential to alter the traditional division of labor within the alliance, in which Japan provides the shield and the US is the spear. Now, Japan can help in both roles, although its spear will be short. The new guidelines can stimulate conversations among the allies and other partners about new roles in areas such as antisubmarine warfare (ASW), intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), search and rescue, and refugee management. But, critically, these efforts demand a structure for operational coordination and such a framework does not exist.

Those last points commanded universal agreement and other speakers noted that increasing congestion in the various domains (air, sea, cyber, outer space) means that conflict anywhere in the region has the potential to quickly spread. "Provocations are," warned one US speaker, "threats to all." In this environment, a failure to communicate, coordinate, and cooperate risks failure and fratricide. A failure to work together is not just a lost opportunity but a genuine loss because it creates conditions for a failure to secure national interests. In fact, our US speaker argued, coordination is not enough: interoperability that leads to integration and then interdependence should be the goal.

Yet despite steady US efforts to de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in its defense planning and policy and to rely instead on other tools in the deterrence tool kit, a South Korean speaker reiterated a troubling bottom line: only nuclear weapons deter nuclear weapons, and only the US has those weapons. As a result, Seoul and Tokyo remain dependent on the US extended deterrent. While that may be a statement of first principles, one implication is disturbing: As a result of this dependence, our South Korean skeptic explained, "there is no urgency to create trilateral cooperation. Bilateral cooperation is enough."

To deal with this problem and to help prevent US allies from free riding, our ROK speaker endorsed a trilateral strategic deterrence committee to coordinate nuclear plans and policies and to show joint nuclear resolve. An active role for the two allies in controlling nuclear retaliatory capability would, he insisted, "make trilateral cooperation much easier to achieve."

Two issues loomed large as the group sought common ground, and China figured prominently in both. The first was defining the scope of challenges that would invoke the US deterrent – or to put it another way, what is the US expected to deter? Today, the test is dealing with behavior that remains below the threshold that invites a kinetic response, in the so-called "gray zone," such as salami-slicing in the South China Sea or other moves that threaten to erode the status quo. One US participant warned that China, like other adversaries, will take advantage of "speed, geography, and asymmetries of stake to obtain strategic objectives without a US response." Japanese, in particular, sought greater clarity about how the US would respond to Chinese efforts to change the status quo that did not invite military action. It is telling that one Japanese participant offered effusive praise for forthright US statements of commitment regarding the Senkakus, a declaration

that indicates a readiness on the part of the US to impose costs on adversaries. That is not enough for some, however. They seek more details on how the US will wage a long-term competition against China.

Acknowledging the broader spectrum of potential challenges in Northeast Asia demands a reassessment of the appropriate division of labor among allies when responding to crises, with some arguing that allies are primarily responsible for their own defense against gray zone challenges. In lower intensity conflicts, the most important military capabilities will often be those of South Korea and Japan as they confront immediate challenges to their national interests. They therefore must have both the forces and the doctrines to deal with those threats with the US in a supporting role (while providing its extended deterrent). While there was some disagreement about the respective roles of each country in particular contingencies – and both allies sought greater clarity on how the US could contribute to their defense – there was agreement on the need for a US forward presence in the region.

That claim that the US should be playing a more of a supporting role was buttressed by the claim that war-weariness in the US would prevent any government in Washington from fighting another war, especially if the trigger is a gray zone incident. “The US public will not go to war over a provocation,” declared one US participant. This is an especially unsettling assertion if China seeks, as some assert, to make the gray zone as big as possible. Other US participants pushed back against that argument, asserting that public fatigue is overstated and that is no reason to not meet alliance commitments.

Nevertheless, as in the past, US participants warned against demanding too much from the US nuclear deterrent. Not all crises demand a military response and nuclear signaling is to be reserved for only the most severe cases, high-intensity contingencies. US participants recalled the *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* which articulated US strategy as intended to prevent adversaries from escalating their way out of failed conventional aggression. That reminder triggered some discord among the US participants, with several warning that an emphasis on de-escalation risked sending the wrong signal about US priorities, and one reminding the group that it is a means to an end – crisis management in pursuit of broader US objectives – and not an end in itself. If deterrence aims at preventing a crisis from arising, then the focus of trilateral cooperation should be shaping conditions before a crisis arises. Given the range of issues and potential threats involved, the framework for such cooperation must be multidimensional to deal with multifaceted challenges. By implication, then, the current focus on an information sharing agreement, while welcome and essential, is just a preliminary step. To call it an accomplishment says volumes about the current political relationship between Seoul and Tokyo.

While much of the discussion involved ways to respond to Chinese provocations, Northeast Asian political dynamics afford China another way to shape thinking about deterrence: Beijing currently sets the ceiling on trilateral cooperation. While opposed to US alliances in general and being especially wary of institutional steps that consolidate links between the US and its security partners, Beijing is thought to be prepared to

acquiesce to trilateral cooperation only as long as it is seen to be focused on North Korea. If there is any chance that such cooperation can be used against China, then Beijing will bring political pressure on Seoul to stop. Ever-expanding economic relations between China and South Korea, a belief in Seoul that the road to Pyongyang runs through Beijing, and a convergence of views about history – especially Japan’s behavior in the first half of the 20th century – between Beijing and Seoul, has prompted many observers to question the durability of the US-ROK alliance. Some openly suggest that Korea is falling into China’s sphere of influence. Korean participants have acknowledged a growing consideration of Chinese views in South Korean decision making on a variety of subjects, but they rejected – as they have every time we have discussed this issue – that this constitutes an erosion of South Korea’s commitment to the alliance. They respond that the China-Korea relationship is based on profit, while the US-Korea partnership is forged by shared sacrifice (to protect shared interests and values), and that China only takes South Korea seriously because of its alliance with the US. Nevertheless, there is clear consensus (evident at this meeting and its predecessors) that trilateral security cooperation to strengthen the deterrent is only possible toward North Korea.

### **Tabletop exercise – move 1**

As at last year’s meeting, the conference featured a two-move, tabletop exercise in which teams representing the US, Japan, and South Korea responded to a crisis scenario. In the first move, North Korea invaded and overran Daecheong Island, a small, thinly populated island near North Korean territory, taking hostages and seizing control of the island.<sup>1</sup>

*US* objectives in move one included a demonstration of commitment and reassurance to allies (on the Korean Peninsula, regionally, and globally); reversing North Korean aggression; showing US leadership in the crisis; preventing further aggression (and reducing the DPRK capability to do so); enhancing trilateral cooperation; and maintaining domestic support for such actions. Deliberations also emphasized a need to move quickly – the example of the first Persian Gulf War, when the US took six months to assemble a global coalition to crush Saddam Hussein, was deemed inappropriate. Yet merely returning to the territorial status quo was insufficient. The US team agreed that North Korea must be worse off than before the aggression and must lose some of its standing military capability. Hanging over these objectives was the thorny question of how to engage China. The group assumed that Pyongyang wouldn’t have acted without being prepared to ignore Chinese objections.

Its military reactions included moving to DefCon 3 and beginning a flow of forces consistent with OP5027; preparing and supporting ROK military action – to get the hostages, impose costs on North Korea, and to protect Seoul – in immediate response to the crisis; flowing C4ISR as much as possible; protecting the US and the US military from North Korean cyber attacks; taking action to signal commitment to the language of the 2014 *QDR* not to allow escalation out of aggression, although there was no agreement on what that entailed. The US group considered whether nuclear signaling was

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<sup>1</sup> The details of the TTX are available in Appendix C

appropriate – whether “to show a little nuclear leg” – but concluded that there was no need for an open display of nuclear forces at this point. Options included moving nuclear forces closer to the region, flowing BMD, and deploying strike assets.

Americans expected the ROK to lead militarily and anticipated the prompt recovery of ROK cyber systems. They wanted Japan to facilitate the flow of UN forces and logistics, raise its military alert level, and ensure that it was reducing its cyber vulnerabilities. At the same time, Americans anticipated that Japan would send no signal of any kind that could be interpreted in Seoul or Pyongyang as a sign of independent Japanese action; indeed, Americans expected Japan to take no action in the Korean theater at this point, although Tokyo could act on the high seas and assist with ISR. From Seoul, it expected signs of restraint even as the ROK took action: there should be clear distinctions between military strikes against forces occupying Daecheong Island and crossing the DMZ or hitting Pyongyang. In other words, red lines should be respected. This is no invitation to start a full-scale war or try to decapitate the North Korean regime.

*ROK* participants first assessed North Korean motives and concluded that the distance of the provocation from the mainland meant that Pyongyang had limited intentions and was not trying to start a full-scale war. Seoul’s priorities when responding therefore were putting the armed forces on the highest level of alert; obtaining support from allies and the international community, including China and Russia; blockading and isolating Daecheong island (including a no fly zone); retaliating against parts of the North Korean mainland; requesting the deployment of US strategic assets; and retaking the island.

They wanted the US to warn North Korea against further provocations and demonstrate strong support for the ROK by, among other things, the deployment of military assets to the theater – sending nuclear capable equipment to Guam was suggested because ROK participants expect North Korea to issue nuclear threats early in a crisis of this nature – and real-time intelligence assessments. A concern about the economic impact of the crisis impelled the ROK team to request a currency swap with Washington. Tokyo should also warn North Korea, declare its strong support for Seoul, share intelligence, and provide logistical support for forces on the Peninsula and those passing through Japan. A currency swap would also be high on the lists of ROK requests to Tokyo. (As in last year’s exercise, the Koreans were the only team that put a priority on economic responses to the crisis.)

Both countries should refrain from unilateral measures that might cause panic in the ROK, such as noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs). Koreans also do not want to hear calls to “act with restraint” when such statements in fact mean “do not retaliate.” The Korean team anticipated heavy international pressure to avoid actions that could lead to escalation; this threatened to undercut the more compelling need for Seoul to take action to signal strength. Korean participants also worried that the UN would intervene and freeze the situation, a move that would, among other things, open the door to Chinese intervention in the crisis (at least diplomatically).

Americans noted that the ROK desire for a nuclear signal from the US was inconsistent with its assessment of North Korean intentions; if the takeover was “just a provocation,” why bother? Moreover, given the presence of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Americans in Seoul, symbols of US commitment should be evident to ally and adversary alike. If that is not sufficient, then Seoul needs to be explicit in its request for more. Moreover, US participants noted a potential disconnect in the allied response: while Seoul is eager to strike back quickly, the US emphasized the need to engage OpCon procedures. A Japanese participant highlighted another disconnect: despite arguing that Seoul cannot take any action that might alienate Beijing, Koreans also assume that China will not support its actions in the UN. If the working assumption is that China won’t back Seoul in peninsular crises, then why defer to Beijing in other matters?

Koreans explained they were tired of self-restraint. While they have no desire to start a war, they will not be attacked with impunity and will seek to lead in any response to North Korean provocations. As for China, there is “some confidence” that the PRC will play a constructive role in crisis resolution, but there is also a premium on quick action by the ROK – and especially to retake the island – to hedge against Chinese obstructionism.

*Japanese* participants distinguished this attack from other, previous North Korean provocations. As an armed attack, it legitimates an armed response by Seoul. That risks escalation to full-scale war but it is not a foregone conclusion. Their priorities included: support for an ROK government proportional response to return to the status quo based on the 1953 armistice agreement; a demonstration of political will to stop further aggression, while harboring some concern about ROK over-reaction; individual actions to protect Japanese citizens in the ROK (preparation for NEOs); the avoidance of any spillover attack against Japan; and engaging China to help de-escalate the crisis.

Japanese military steps included intelligence gathering, along with increased ISR efforts; preparation for BMD measures; the activation of alliance coordination mechanisms, which include the recognition that this is a “situation in areas surrounding Japan” (SIASJ), which allows the Tokyo government to invoke the US-Japan Defense guidelines; and putting the SDF on higher alert. Washington is expected to fully support the ROK; condemn Pyongyang; help the ROK manage escalation; make use of flexible deterrence options; recognize the need to protect Japanese citizens in South Korea; pursue action at the UN Security Council (which would legitimate Japanese assistance), and engage China diplomatically. The ROK should be mindful of the need to protect Japanese citizens on the peninsula, work through the UNSC, and share intelligence. Japanese urged their ROK counterparts to make requests to Japan clear and incapable of misinterpretation and to make escalation control a priority. Similarly, among their no-noes was bypassing Tokyo on major decisions; they specifically warned South Koreans against going to Beijing with information or decisions before Tokyo. Japanese participants emphasized that while their country has little to offer militarily in a crisis, Tokyo must have prior consultation with the ROK and the US. Neither Tokyo’s acquiescence nor its active/passive participation can be assumed.



Assessing round one, it was clear that no country had a firm grip on North Korean goals and objectives but all assumed they were limited – perhaps to achieve territorial gain or to show strength to a domestic audience. US and ROK participants sought a decisive response to Pyongyang’s moves: recovering the territory, freeing hostages, and punishing it for the provocation. All recognized the potential for escalation, however. While backing Seoul, there was an expectation by Americans of greater consultation and coordination with the Combined Forces Command if such a crisis arose. One potentially important disconnect was if and when the transfer of OpCon would occur, with Americans expecting it earlier than South Koreans – who sought more autonomy to strike back. Indeed, ROK participants seemed surprised by the extent to which the US backed decisive military action.

Divergences between the ROK and Japan were evident. Japanese seemed more concerned with escalation than South Koreans; Japanese preparation for NEO was problematic for Koreans for a number of reasons – the signal it sent and the prospect of Japanese military forces on ROK soil being the two most prominent. Finally, Japan proposed taking the issue to the UNSC, while the ROK team supported an initial unilateral response.

### **Tabletop exercise – move 2**

In the second move, North Korea responded to ROK threats of retaliation by insisting that it plans to keep Daecheong, demanding that the ROK abandon Baengnyeong-do (a nearby island even further north and closer to the Korean Peninsula), renewing its commitment to the redrawing of the Northern Limit Line, dispersing road mobile missiles, and issuing veiled threats regarding the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against both the ROK and Japan. In an interjection during the deliberations, it was revealed that North Korea detonated a nuclear device over the Sea of Japan.

For *South Korean* participants, these developments meant that their original goals – reversion to the status quo and stabilizing the situation – were no longer possible and asserted that the survival of the ROK regime was at risk if the government did not respond. The situation had escalated from a local provocation to an act of war and the country had to respond accordingly. This meant continuing with the deterrence regime while quietly preparing for war, and notifying allies – and China – that Seoul was doing so.

Specific military measures include moving the threat level to WatchCon 1 and DefCon 2; activation of OP5027; the total mobilization of resources; deployment of strike and missile assets, along with a request to the US to deploy ISR measures, a priority for which was the location of mobile targets that had been dispersed. In addition, the government would take steps to stabilize the economy (such as the imposition of capital controls), and ensure the safety of all foreigners in the ROK (including Japanese, Americans, and Chinese). Korean participants conceded that retaking the island had become a secondary goal; the primary objective was the full deployment of all military

assets to retaliate against North Korea (being ready if necessary to start a larger war), while sending a strong message to Russia and China to not intervene in ways that interfere with ROK intentions and to pressure Pyongyang to not use its nuclear weapons.

The US was expected to deploy all its assets (diplomatic, economic, and military) on behalf of South Korean goals and to restrain Japan from engaging in a preemptive strike. Japan should only act in tandem with the ROK and the US, while providing ASW capabilities and intelligence. It should also refrain from any NEO without Seoul's consent.

The US was warned away from any back-channel discussions with China (without ROK knowledge); while any such talks would be seen as prejudicial to South Korean interests, the ROK team was especially insistent that there should be no talk of escalation control without Seoul's participation.

For the South Korean team, nuclear use changed everything. While there was concern about escalation in move 1, the detonation signaled to South Koreans that the North was ready to use nuclear weapons and the group believed that the only way to control escalation was to threaten all-out war. If the South merely insisted on reverting to the status quo there was a fear that the country would be subject to ongoing nuclear blackmail. As a result, ROK objectives shifted to regime change ("the beginning of the end of the North Korean state") and all necessary means would be enlisted in that effort. Some participants noted a problem in the ROK logic: team participants conceded that they needed time to mobilize assets, but they didn't want to give Pyongyang time to strike. Significantly, South Koreans believe that if the ROK president pushes hard enough for regime change, "the US will have to listen."

For the *Japanese* team, nuclear use constituted escalation but not to a point where full-scale war was necessary or justified. They reasoned that Pyongyang's overriding objective is regime survival and therefore it would not launch a warning shot; if it was going to use a nuclear weapon, it would only be to attempt to coerce or to launch an all-out war. As one participant explained, "North Korea won't commit suicide; offer them the chance of survival if they behave." The reluctance to accept the necessity of such a war shaped Japanese thinking throughout the exercise. So, even while some Japanese participants were prepared to endorse a crossing of the DMZ for limited tactical objectives, "war" was to be avoided. National objectives did change, however: enhancing allied deterrence and defense remained the top priority, but avoiding a spillover of tensions on Japan became equally important. The team also noted that new significance was attached to engaging Russia.

Anticipated military steps included the convening of the National Security Council (NSC) and mobilizing and issuing the preparatory order for defense cooperation. This would include moving to DefCon 3 and requesting telephone summit talks with Washington and Seoul. In that conversation, the US would be asked to enhance its deterrent and defense of Japan while Tokyo would offer full support for US forces. As part of that effort, the US would be asked to forward deploy strategic assets to the

Western Pacific (moving SSBNs to Guam was mentioned). Japan seeks a show of US strategic resolve, coupled with a posture that demonstrates patience. Japan would back US and Korean efforts to locate and take out mobile North Korean missiles – the deployment of which was identified as “a grave threat to Japan.” Washington would also be asked to back Japan in expressing caution in moving toward war. President Park would be given full support and assistance, but Japan would caution that it does not yet back an all-out war. She would also be asked to enhance the protection of Japanese nationals in the ROK.

The Japanese team explained that it would rally domestic support with a press conference to explain its actions and the logic behind them to the public and world. While condemning further escalation by North Korea, the government would comfort the public by noting that extended deterrence is secure and Japan is safe.

Nuclear detonation would trigger a second round of measures – another NSC meeting, more phone calls, and another public statement. Tokyo would step up measures to protect Japan against a possible terrorist attack by North Korean sleeper cells and call for the evaluation of Japanese nationals in ROK, with ROK assistance. The UNSC would be asked to convene. The US would be expected to take the lead in convening a conference among Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing to discuss the crisis. Japanese participants explained that Tokyo would not fight a decision by the ROK and the US to promote regime change in Pyongyang, but it would not actively back such a step; in something of an aside, one explained that he wouldn't really expect the US to listen to Japan's arguments in this setting. Other Japanese participants highlighted that of course Japan favors unification of the Korean Peninsula under Seoul.

For the US team, step 2 made trilateral cooperation more difficult. The nuclear dimension transforms the nature of this crisis and makes managing that problem the number two US objective, overtaking even the commitment to US allies. Thus, its first five steps were a public statement and private diplomacy by the White House to establish US views of the stakes, highlighting that the nuclear detonation changed the characterization of US interests. Assurance to allies and the US public would continue to drive US thinking and actions, with a message that the world is not at the brink of nuclear war, that the situation can be managed and de-escalated, that the responsibility for de-escalation rests on Pyongyang, and that China and Russia can play a constructive role – as long as they were not complicit in the events of step 1. The US would expect the ROK and Japan to issue a statement backing the US position.

At the same time, the US would be seeking to clearly and fully understand ROK military intent and ascertain how Seoul will escalate. Military forces would move to DefCon 2 and more tactical and strategic assets would be deployed to the theater, with a focus on getting the islands back and ensuring that a second island isn't seized. Homeland BMD would be ramped up and the government would prepare NEOs.

While backing the Seoul government, the US team did not embrace regime removal as a military objective. And action to demonstrate military resolve – sending US

soldiers to the second island under threat or preemptive attacks on missiles deployed and artillery in range of Seoul – would stop short of nuclear strikes. The US is also ready to signal using nuclear-capable assets.

Explaining what it expected allies to do, the US team distinguished between anticipating the following actions without necessarily desiring them. First, Seoul and Tokyo are thought to want to engage actively with US in assessments of nuclear and cyber threats and responses. It expects both allies to engage in discussion about nuclear assets that they wish to have displayed. It wants both to also discuss realistic options regarding preemptive strikes against the North. The US expects both allies to mobilize the military in both countries, including their full MD systems. Japan is anticipated to call for a NEO. The US also would be preparing for radiation response and US aid after the nuclear blast.

The US team hoped that the ROK would not cave in under pressure from Pyongyang (it didn't) but also hoped that Seoul wouldn't seek regime change as its new objective (it did). Americans also hoped that ROK government would not issue a public declaration of intent to reunify the Korean Peninsula by military means. It was hoped that Japan would remain resolute – concern focused on the Diet, not the government – and would not constrain US/UN forces in Japan. There was also some trepidation that either government in Seoul or Tokyo might be seduced by Beijing during the crisis.

### **Assessing the exercise**

For the most part, the three countries' response to the crisis was positive; each government understood the motivations and concerns of the others and did not act in a manner that would generate tensions among the three. The biggest division emerged during move two: while all three country teams supported decisive military action to retake the island and to inflict a blow against Pyongyang, the US and the ROK were more inclined to move to broader political objectives, while Japanese participants were only prepared to back tactical moves, not full-scale war. Japanese insisted that the North Korean regime was not suicidal and would therefore not be signaling its desire (or readiness) for a war it could not win. By this logic, even a nuclear warning shot was just another provocation.

American participants countered that the nuclear detonation constituted a radical shift in the situation. As conflicts become more nuclear, the nature of the US interests that are involved change: the focus shifts to the credibility of US commitments as well as the reputation of nuclear weapons. As one US participant explained, nuclear use would constitute a radical move that would “be shocking and decisive in its political effect.” It is important to recognize this dimension of US thinking and distinguish it from more mundane reasons for restraint: Washington is not constrained by North Korea's *KN08* threat, and the homeland is not vulnerable. Nevertheless, the US team was not convinced that North Korea was prepared to fight an all-out war; this was blackmail, not the prelude to full-scale conflict. (Yet even if “just” nuclear blackmail, the three countries had to show Pyongyang that it would not work.) At the same time, it was clear that even if

North Korean actions were not sufficient to validate a new political objective – regime change – they did oblige the allies to start thinking about and preparing for escalation.

De-escalation could prove difficult. What would happen if, for example, North Korea called for a ceasefire while still in possession of Daecheong Island (and abandoning its demand for the second one)? A ROK participant was blunt about what would follow: a failure to get the island back would convince the South Korean public that deterrence failed, prompting the country to withdraw from the NPT and acquire its own nuclear weapons. Would South Korea be satisfied if North Korea returned the island before Seoul got in a “sufficient” retaliatory strike? This question exposes an important distinction in how the ROK and the US think about escalation. For Americans, escalation involves the nuclear ladder; South Koreans, in contrast, think about escalation of political objectives (retrieving territory, disarming the North’s nuclear capability, promoting regime change in Pyongyang, or reunifying the Peninsula).

Two other important issues emerged during the exercise. The first was the reluctance of all countries to use the cyber attacks that were part of the scenario as justification for retaliatory steps against North Korea. All individuals who commented on this dimension of the problem focused on the difficulty of attributing the origin of attacks and this restrained any response.

The second issue concerned Japan. The scenario took place before Japan passed new security legislation on exercising the right of collective self-defense. In those circumstances, Tokyo was severely constrained to take any action beyond defense of territory and territorial waters. Even the prospect of nuclear contamination from a detonation would not be considered an attack and justify an armed response. The limited range of Japanese measures that the government could take in this scenario created some exasperation among US participants; it is hoped that the new security legislation will lift some of those constraints, although any US relief at the new latitude is likely to be balanced by concern among South Koreans.

Most significantly, however, Japan must establish mechanisms that allow the SDF to join a conversation about how it can contribute to the resolution of regional contingencies. Throughout the exercise, it was emphasized that the speed of decision making was critical to the successful conclusion of this crisis on terms amenable to the allies. Yet there is currently no way for the SDF to communicate with the operational command in Korea. That must be remedied.

Finally, more attention must be paid to China. While no one believed that Beijing was prepared to turn its back on Pyongyang, most participants believed that North Korea is becoming a burden, if not a liability, for China. There is evidence of growing irritation among Chinese decision-makers that offers the allies a chance to drive a wedge between the two communist partners. At the same time, the government in Seoul must be sensitive to Chinese attempts to separate it from its ally (the US) and partner (Japan).

## Next steps

Like its predecessor, this meeting was applauded as a unique opportunity to air concerns and explore options during Northeast Asian crises that simply is not available in official dialogues. The candid and frank dialogue is a result of the seriousness with which all three countries take these issues, and this meeting reflects years of engagement to build trust that allows participants to address sensitive topics despite sometimes fierce disagreements.

Plainly, there is more work ahead for the three countries to sustain and strengthen deterrence. More needs to be done to build stronger, more durable relations between Seoul and Tokyo. The bar for bilateral (and trilateral) cooperation is still too low. While this reflects broader political and social phenomena, it is vital to start building a cadre of individuals in the defense and foreign policy communities in all three countries who accept trilateral cooperation as a good to be pursued; we should not have to argue on behalf of such cooperation as a goal. Meetings such as the Maui dialog can be instrumental in creating that cadre. (This is in addition to taking the results of the Maui discussions to broader audiences in Japan and Korea and build public support for trilateral cooperation, as is called for in the grant that supports this effort.)

Second, more needs to be done to raise knowledge and awareness of nuclear issues and the effective functioning of deterrence. While participants at the Maui meeting are generally quite good, there is a sense that the benches in Japan and the ROK are not deep. As the nuclear dimension of crisis management in Northeast Asia grows, as the capabilities of allies and adversaries increase, and as the gray zone expands, it is critical that US allies have a better understanding of the stakes in crises and the respective apportioning of roles. It is not enough to ask the US to signal using strategic assets. Allies need to be more specific in their requests and must be better able to explain the rationale for such requests. This turns, fundamentally, on a clear understanding of how deterrence works, what the US strategic capabilities are for, and how responses to regional crises have impact and significance beyond their immediate circumstances.

The new apportioning of roles and responsibilities takes on more significance as Japan passes legislation that could afford it a new role in regional security affairs. This new capability demands that Japan prepare for the actual use of the armed forces (pursuant to the new legislation) and simultaneously do more to blunt regional concerns about the potential destabilizing impact of this new role.

Successful trilateral cooperation against North Korea rests on a shared understanding of how Pyongyang thinks, its intentions, and its theory of victory. Failure to reach consensus – at least beyond the most superficial level – means that concerted action will not be possible. Our exercise suggests that common ground is missing. While there is agreement that North Korea is not suicidal, that the regime makes survival its top priority, and that it will do everything it can to blackmail other countries and exploit opportunities to drive wedges between allies and partners, consensus quickly erodes when the conversation turns to ways to deal with the North in specific scenarios. All

governments zealously protect their own equities, while worrying excessively about escalation and spillover when another party is Pyongyang's primary target. That potential conflict could be reduced if there is agreement on specific North Korean intentions in the event of a crisis.





## **Summary and Conclusions From Young Leaders' Assessments**

The Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders program was established in 2004 to nurture the next generation of Asia-Pacific security specialists. We identify rising stars between the ages of 25-35 and introduce them at this early stage in their careers to Track 1.5 and Track 2 processes. Ideal candidates are good ambassadors for themselves, their institutions, and our program. They are motivated, eager to learn, and capable of contributing to our network of senior and junior experts. Young Leaders are invited to participate in the table-top exercise (TTX) activities through critical analysis of the senior teams. We aim to identify any generational differences between the senior and more junior experts. The below summaries reflect the Young Leaders' analysis of the performance and process of the TTX from the perspectives of their country teams. Their next generation assessment emphasizes diplomacy and cooperation and provides a hopeful foundation for the future of trilateral dialogue in Northeast Asia.

In many areas, the YL groups' assessments of the TTX matched those of the senior participants. The ROK YLs emphasized domestic political dynamics that would force the South Korean president to respond quickly and decisively. The Japanese group focused on Japan's legal limits, both before and after the reinterpretation of the constitution, that would constrain its actions. The Americans hoped US allies would take on a large role in their own defense, encouraging advances in South Korea's ability to respond to provocations and greater missile defense cooperation.

But in other areas there were clear differences in how the YLs viewed the TTX. The YLs felt the exercise accurately portrayed the type of provocation that North Korea might pursue, the different interests between the United States, Japan, and South Korea, and the reluctance that the United States would have in using nuclear weapons. But they doubt that North Korea would use nuclear weapons so early in an escalating conventional conflict. The Japanese YLs also felt that the way the device was delivered, a detail not provided in the TTX, could have a significant effect on Tokyo's thinking about how to respond.

A second major difference was the emphasis that the YL and senior groups placed on engaging with China and Russia. The senior groups acknowledged the need to engage China during the crisis, but gave little credence to diplomacy with Beijing. Instead, they assumed that Pyongyang wouldn't have acted without being prepared to ignore Beijing's objections. The YLs, by contrast, thought that Beijing could play a productive role, both as an intermediary to discern Pyongyang's intentions and potentially as partner to offer carrots and sticks to persuade Pyongyang to deescalate the crisis. The US YLs also felt that the United States, Japan, and South Korea would benefit from reaching out to Moscow during the TTX, while the senior groups hardly mentioned Russia.

Third, compared to the senior groups, the YLs were less hawkish. The YL groups nearly universally thought that their colleagues put too much emphasis on military instruments at the expense of diplomacy. ROK YLs thought that the ROK should have

initiated negotiations with North Korea after the first move to try to recover the hostages and find a peaceful solution. Japanese YLs similarly thought that there were more opportunities for diplomacy than the teams availed themselves of, while US YLs felt that, even in the military realm, there were more restrained options that the three countries could have chosen that would have achieved their objectives with less risk of escalation.

There are a number of possible reasons why the YLs reached different conclusions, but, with a small group and a sample of one, they are mostly speculative. Some have postulated, for example, that the generation that grew up after the Cold War and lived through the second Iraq war is now more reserved about using US military force abroad. A better explanation, however, is the different professional backgrounds of the YL and senior groups. The senior group was comprised of far more deterrence specialists, who tend to be more hawkish. As a result, they were comparatively more worried about the North Korean nuclear threat, less confident in diplomatic options, and more concerned with maintaining the credibility of US alliance commitments.

Despite differences in how they assessed the exercise, however, many of the YL recommendations mirrored those of the senior participants. The YLs encouraged greater trilateral cooperation between the US, ROK, and Japan, supporting additional bilateral Japan-ROK meetings and intelligence sharing and a US-Japan-ROK TTX at the official level. In addition, Japanese YLs called for greater confidence building measures with China to prevent miscalculation during a Korean Peninsula crisis, while American YLs suggested that the three countries reinforce international norms on nuclear non-use and seizures of territory to prevent the type of crisis envisioned by the TTX from happening.

## **Table Top Exercise: US Team**

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The US-ROK-Japan Table-Top Exercise (TTX) exposed gaps in expectations of allies' responses to an escalating conflict on the Korean Peninsula and the three teams missed opportunities for regional cooperation.

The TTX began with an offensive first-move by North Korea. It is feasible such a large-scale provocation by an increasingly isolated North Korea would focus on an indefinite maritime border such as the northern islands, or a furtive cyberattack as it allegedly perpetrated in 2014.

The TTX also realistically captured potential US-ROK-Japan dynamics, demonstrating a divide in willingness to respond to an escalating conflict. US and ROK policymakers have downplayed the risks of an escalated event on the premise that the North would not risk facing retaliation. However, as the 2010 *Cheonan* sinking and Yeonpyeong island shelling demonstrated, Pyongyang may still choose to use provocation for bargaining power or intimidation in the belief that the US preference for the status quo will restrain escalation. While ROK participants posited that escalation of the conflict might be a scenario under which they could seek regime change or reunification, the US and Japanese participants were wary, seeking to maintain stability instead. They proposed a rollback against the North to regain the captured island, and perhaps destroying DPRK land and sea assets nearby. This reveals a gap among the allies and partners – one that is not surprising, given the current strategic outlook and domestic politics in the three countries.

The most unrealistic aspect of the TTX was the use of a nuclear device by the DPRK. North Korea's continued advancement in nuclear weapons and mid- to long-range delivery systems makes the potential of a deterrent nuclear detonation possible, but the speed with which North Korea "went nuclear" in this scenario is dubious. Most likely the North would limit the use of nuclear weapons to the case when a US-ROK invasion was imminent. The ally response to focus on conventional tactics rather than nuclear retaliation was, however, realistic.

The US responses to the TTX lacked specificity in "demonstrating US commitment and resolve." Specific signaling and escalation control mechanisms were comparatively overlooked. North Korean aggression presented three challenges. First, DPRK advances presented a tactical challenge by seizing territory and hostages. Second, corresponding cyber-attacks threatened the larger ROK civilian base. Third, DPRK nuclear coercion not only presented the possibility of mass war, but also challenged the group with important questions about global deterrence. The first two challenges – seized territory and cyber-attacks – were eclipsed by the broader threat of nuclear war. This approach led the US to neglect important military counter-offensive options for hostage rescue, retaliation, aerial campaigns, cyber-attacks, and amphibious assault. Options for US-ROK-Japan interoperability were similarly neglected.

North Korea's nuclear detonation posed a larger conceptual and practical problem. Although the US team agreed they should "show a little nuclear leg," there was only limited discussion as to what this meant. Mobilization of the nuclear bomber force, cancelling pre-planned exercises, and putting nuclear assets on active alert status would have sent different signals than the forward deployment of bomber nuclear assets, for example. Here again options for interoperability were neglected, especially with global nuclear powers such as Russia and China.

Even though conditions for cooperation were prime, the US team neglected to involve Russia and China in the TTX, even after the North detonated a nuclear weapon. In the current international system – particularly when dealing with non-great power adversaries – the actions of Russia and China can influence outcomes, an influence that should be heeded by the US. Although Russia and China often act as spoilers and prevent the US from achieving its goals in the manner desired, there are some important instances in which Russia and China have acted to support US goals: chemical weapons in Syria (Russia); securing Pakistan's cooperation for US military action against Afghanistan after 9/11 (China) for example. In the TTX, the US could have approached China and Russia with three conditions that might have laid the groundwork for cooperation. First, North Korean nuclear use would need to have been de-coupled from other issues on the US-China or US-Russia bilateral agenda and treated as singular in nature. Second, the US could have secured Russia and China's cooperation via back-channel bilateral diplomacy, not through public declaratory statements or UN negotiations. Third, the issue could have been framed in terms of Russia and China's national interests, as they both have strong interest in preventing nuclear conflict on the peninsula.

The US response to the TTX failed to account for the above observations. It is likely that North Korea's actions would be affected strongly by their perceptions not just of US-ROK resolve, but also by whether China and Russia would offer tacit or actual support to either party. The US team did not recognize of importance of managing relations with Russia and China. To the extent that the US discussed Russia and China at all in response to the DPRK's actions, the focus was on either: (1) bringing the issue to the Security Council; or (2) making firm public statements to both states to signal US resolve. Neither of these tactics is likely to be successful in securing cooperation or at least acquiescence from these powers with regard to US strategy in response to a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

The DPRK exploited two vulnerabilities of US-ROK deterrence in the TTX: North Korean forces rapidly seized ROK land and hostages, and then attempted to compel a favorable end to the conflict through the first-use of a nuclear device. Deterrence failed because North Korea believed it could successfully accomplish its objective without incurring prohibitive costs. Because it is difficult to threaten to impose further costs during peacetime, we recommend a three-part denial strategy to minimize the likelihood of a comparable deterrence failure.

First, to convince the DPRK that military success in gray zone provocations is unlikely, the US-ROK alliance should work to enhance ROK ability to independently

respond to limited attacks. The US could provide operational support and training, such as increased training in amphibious counterassault techniques. Second, to convince North Korea that nuclear demonstrations in support of nuclear blackmail will fail, the US should work with Japan and South Korea to ensure that a variety of missile defense capabilities (such as THAAD and Aegis) are actively deployed. Effective missile defense capabilities will enable the US and its allies to reduce the likelihood that North Korea can successfully engage in nuclear blackmail. Finally, to convince the DPRK that gray zone provocations will incur political consequences, the US and allies should reinforce international norms on nuclear non-use and seizure of territory. The establishment of nuclear non-use norms has been effective in delegitimizing nuclear use and increasing its political cost. Similarly, normative condemnation of seizure of territory by force increases the political costs of gray zone military aggression.



## **Table Top Exercise: Republic of Korea Team**

Yuri Kim, Minjung Lee, Seunghyuk Lee,  
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Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have greatly intensified due to North Korean provocations, including nuclear tests, the sinking of the ROK naval vessel, *Cheonan*, and North Korea's artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island. However, unlike these incidents, the scenario of the Table-Top Exercise (TTX) demonstrated unprecedented, war-provoking actions from Pyongyang.

In the exercise, the Republic of Korea (ROK) team realized that North Korea's nuclear threat was no longer theoretical and was likely to occur again if Seoul did not respond decisively. President Park Geun-hye's approval rating had declined steadily following the *Sewol* ferry incident, a bribery scandal, and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak, and a passive reaction and failure to regain ROK territories would mean she could face both incessant public criticism, and possibly impeachment, according to the ROK Constitution Chapter IV, Section 1, Article 66-2. As a result, the ROK team did not seek to merely restore the status quo by recovering national territory, but instead took the opportunity to prepare for a full-scale war. The scenario provided conditions that could open the possibility of unification, and the ROK team was eager to take advantage.

Yet, the ROK team, moving in the direction of reunification by force, did not fully anticipate opposition from Japan and the United States. The Japanese team worried that conflict might escalate and embroil Japan and the US team clearly prioritized a strategy of maintaining a balance of power and regional stability in Asia by preventing the further escalation of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. As such, the exercise realistically captured the conflictual nature of US-ROK-Japan trilateralism and each country's approach to dealing with the existential threat North Korea poses.

While the main discussion within the ROK team focused on further military action, a diplomatic strategy was not analyzed sufficiently as an alternative approach to resolve the volatile situation more peacefully. While the TTX assumed North Korea would threaten to use nuclear weapons, the possibility of North Korea resorting to a mere 'threat' and rather than actual 'use' should have been differentiated. Military retaliation or countermeasures should have been accompanied by – or come after – requests for hostage release negotiations. As a redrawing of the Northern Limit Line was North Korea's (ostensible) reason for the assault, the ROK government would have likely needed to include that on any negotiation agenda. Unless Pyongyang was preparing to rush into an all-out war or to use a nuclear weapon regardless of Seoul's response, the ROK would have gained time by requesting negotiation. In this time, Seoul could find a better solution, or buy time to prepare its forces for the next stage. Negotiations would also help cool public opinion in Seoul.

The ROK team should have better anticipated the negative reactions from the US and Japan to its decision and strategized better to persuade them in a systematic way,

instead of emphasizing the ROK team's unilateral desire to achieve unification by force. When the ROK team proposed its political decision, it would have been better if it were accompanied by research studies on post-reunification plans for reconstruction, education, and the economy. This, in part, could have helped support Seoul's strategic thinking and ease some of the Japanese and US teams' concerns. Moreover, besides listing its own benefits, the ROK team should have clarified mutual benefits to Japan and the US that may result from Korean reunification in order to receive support. For instance, the ROK team could have talked up the important role a united Korea could play in the Obama administration's grand strategy of the rebalance to Asia. Likewise, the ROK team should have considered its approach more carefully in dealing with Japan, such as trade benefits, to move the decision forward.

The different reactions and solutions suggested by the three countries toward North Korea's provocation, as outlined in the TTX scenario, portray the present realities of trilateral cooperation. Before pushing political and military cooperation, the United States, ROK, and Japan should have found more opportunities to discuss trilateral issues and develop a better understanding of each country's goals. During the TTX there was a gap between the three governments' interpretation of Pyongyang's intent—a full-scale war or limited military response. In this context, consensus on operational cooperation between the three countries is required for clearer standards and language for various conflict scenarios. As briefly mentioned at the TTX, Washington's current bilateral relationships with ROK and Japan can be a baseline for a future trilateral cooperative mechanism. By examining the existing practice of bilateral relationships, the three countries can build clear and consistent policy responses against the common challenges they are facing, such as North Korea's nuclear program and threats in the cyber domain.

During the TTX, uncertainty emerged as a significant challenge in the security environment, just as it was portrayed during the *Cheonan* incident of 2010. Because North Korea denied responsibility for both the *Cheonan* and Sony Pictures attacks, it takes time to investigate problems, to assess damage, and share conclusive evidence with allies. The so-called gray area of coercion issue thus adds difficulties as time can escalate a crisis and destabilize trilateral cooperation. Therefore, the establishment of an effective information-sharing channel should be developed between the three countries, something that was not really discussed during the exercise.

In conclusion, the policymakers of the three countries need to develop a robust and cohesive mechanism for a wide range of contingency scenarios that can threaten the security environment in the region. While each government can have its own national interest in the same contingency situation, a clear framework can deter potential security threats to the region by ensuing timely and proportionate responses. The three countries met in trilateral and multilateral settings for the past few years but bilateral meetings between ROK and Japan have not been frequent. These can be an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues that are vital for trilateral cooperation and build trust, which is a starting point for the three governments to take action together during a time of crisis.



## **Table Top Exercise: Japan Team**

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Yoko Mori, Akira Igata, and Masashi Murano

The Table-Top Exercise (TTX) was analyzed, focusing on four points; (1) how the TTX captured the reality of a potential crisis; (2) whether particular capabilities were missing through the exercise; (3) diplomatic and political action that should have been considered during the exercise; and (4) measures to reduce the risk of a potential crisis.

Addressing three points would have clarified Japan's responses in the TTX. First, the Japan team needed more information on the nature of the nuclear explosion in the Sea of Japan. For example, if information of the explosion came from the US government, then the participants should have been able to determine if the nuclear device was delivered via missile (through surveillance). In contrast, if the information came through the CTBT surveillance network (detection of unnatural explosion) and the MD system didn't detect a firing of missiles, then the participants could have concluded that this was a suicidal dirty bomb explosion of a ship (or something similar). This information would be critical for the Japan team's discussion. The key discussion point for the Japan team in step 2 of the simulation was whether the nuclear explosion constituted an "attack on Japan." This interpretation hinged on whether the nuclear explosion was a suicidal dirty bomb explosion of a ship or from a nuclear-tipped missile. Thus, if this information had been provided, Japan's response would have been clearer. In other words, if the explosion was due to a nuclear-tipped missile, then the Japanese government would infer the intention of North Korea to be much more hostile. A nuclear-tipped missile launched toward Japan can be interpreted as at best a clear case of nuclear blackmail against Japan and at worst as a failed nuclear missile attack against Japanese territory. Either way, Japan can interpret the situation as North Korea breaking the nuclear taboo of no use of nuclear weapons that has lasted for 70 years. On the other hand, if the explosion was a suicidal dirty bomb, then the situation is more ambiguous. The former case would have enabled Japan to act in self-defense, whereas the latter case would have led to the restrained actions taken by Japan in the simulation. Second, the scenario should have anticipated a situation in which Japan's new security bills passed the Diet. The Japan team analyzed the situation under the current legislation; new security bills would have provided us with broader sets of options. In addition, there is concern about the new security bills in the ROK. If the TTX demonstrated how the new security bills would work, it would have helped eliminate such concerns among ROK participants. Third, the discussion lacked analysis of China's responses. In a real contingency on the Korean Peninsula, China's actions would have huge implications. Hence, even though the discussion focused on trilateral security cooperation, participation of Chinese experts would have made the simulation more dynamic.

Issues related to the use of the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) and the Coast Guard was one of the primary focuses in the Japan team's breakout session, so all relevant defense resources seem to have been put to use in Japan's response. However, there are alternative ways to interpret the situation in the scenario that determine how much of these defense capabilities Japan can legally use, such as whether the nuclear

detonation constitutes an attack against Japan. During the discussion, the initial reaction to the nuclear explosion was that if dispersing radioactive materials constitutes an attack against a country, then nuclear power plant accidents – like the one in Fukushima – could be interpreted as such as well, so a nuclear explosion outside of the territorial Sea of Japan would not constitute an attack on Japan. However, it would have been possible to argue that since JSDF assets have already been deployed in the Sea of Japan, a nuclear explosion in the Sea of Japan by North Korea was intended to and has the potential to harm JSDF personnel, so this nuclear detonation constitutes an attack against Japan. If the situation was interpreted this way, broader sets of capabilities to react to the situation could have been considered.

The importance of diplomatic initiatives was largely missing in the main discussion. Yet, under the current security legislation, the military options Japan can take are very limited so Japan should be as active politically as possible. The Japan team should have identified more specific ways to bring China and Russia on board to pressure North Korea from further escalating the situation. For example, through channels such as bilateral, Six-Party-Talks-like framework, and the United Nation's Security Council, Japan could encourage China and Russia to pressure North Korea to keep it from escalating.

To reduce the risk of a crisis, policymakers in Japan should consider the following actions now. First, they should continue to closely coordinate with countries concerned including the US, the ROK, China, and Russia in urging North Korea to refrain from any further provocation and to take concrete actions toward denuclearization and other goals in compliance with the Six-Party Talks Joint Statement and relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Second, establishing and administering an intelligence-sharing mechanism (GSOMIA) with the ROK will be critical in dealing with crises. This would not only be helpful when a North Korean contingency occurs, but better preparation for these crises would also reduce the risk of a crisis by sending North Korea the message that the three countries are ready to deal with whatever action North Korea would take, thus deterring North Korea from moving up the escalation ladder. Third, there should be a joint operation plan of Japan-US-ROK for a Korean Peninsula contingency. That is, OPLAN 5027 should be shared with Japan. This will better prepare the three countries for a crisis.

In addition, policymakers should do a crisis simulation such as this TTX with allies. The Maui TTX revealed key questions regarding Japan's responses to a crisis; would the ROK bypass Japan in making its decisions vis-à-vis China? What would the ROK demand the US do? Would the ROK give Japan information? If so, which organization would be the principle counterpart on the ROK side? What would ROK want from Japan? Will the ROK accept Japan's request for Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)? Answering these questions would help policymakers clarify what each country wants and expects from the others, clarify who their primary counterparts would be in what situation, help determine what would be acceptable actions and what would be sensitive. Fourth, the policymakers should establish measures to avoid misunderstanding or miscalculation in a crisis. In particular, they should establish a confidence-building mechanism with neighboring countries, including China, at the

Track 1.5 level. In such meetings, concerned countries can share a concept and definition of deterrence and crisis management.



## APPENDIX A



sponsored by the  
**US DEFENSE THREAT REDUCTION AGENCY**

**US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue  
Royal Lahaina Resort, Maui, July 19-21, 2015**

### AGENDA

#### Sunday, July 19, 2015

6:30 PM      Opening Trilateral Dinner

#### Monday, July 20, 2015

8:00 AM      Continental breakfast

9:00 AM      Introductory remarks

9:15 AM      **Session 1: Comparative Security Assessments**

In this session, each presenter will explain how his or her country assesses Northeast Asian threats. What are the most imminent challenges and concerns to your country's security? What are medium-term and longer-term threats? Specifically, what are your country's threat perceptions of North Korea? Of China? What could cause escalation to a military engagement in the region? What are the most likely escalation risks? Which are most worrisome? Presenters should be as detailed as possible and discuss conventional, chemical, biological, cyber, space, and nuclear challenges and interactions between them. Discussions of how to address these concerns should be withheld to the next session.

ROK presenter: Dr. Kang CHOI

US presenter: RADM Michael MCDEVITT (USN, Ret.)

Japan presenter: Prof. Tomonori YOSHIZAKI

10:30 AM      Coffee break

10:45 AM      **Session 2: Trilateral Cooperation to Deter and Respond**

Each presenter will describe ways to improve US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation to address the Northeast Asian concerns discussed in the previous session. How can trilateralism improve deterrence and how is deterrence weakened by the failure of trilateralism? What are your country's roles and responsibilities to deter *and* respond to these threats? What are your expectations of the other two countries' roles and responsibilities? How can each of these roles and responsibilities be enhanced and better coordinated? How can we build upon the recently-concluded memorandum of understanding on a trilateral agreement to exchange intelligence about North Korean

nuclear and missile programs? What next steps should receive priority to improve cooperation in peacetime and during a contingency? US and Japanese presenters should address how the outcomes of the Japan-US Security Consultative Committee and the revision of Japan-US Defense Guidelines could enhance such cooperation. Japanese presenter should also address the impact of changes in Japan's policy toward collective self-defense.

Japan presenter: Ms. Ayako SHIMIZU, Mr. Tetsuo KOTANI

US presenter: Lt. Gen. Wallace "Chip" GREGSON (Ret.)

ROK presenter: Dr. Woo-Taek HONG

12:30 PM      Boxed Lunch in breakout rooms: Tabletop exercise: Groups get exercise, prepare answers to questions

2:30 PM      **Round One Assessment**

Plenary reconvenes to provide answers to questions and how each group reached those conclusions. After each presentation, the group is questioned by others on process and outcome.

5:00 PM      Session *adjourns*

### **Tuesday, July 21, 2015**

8:00 AM      Continental breakfast

8:30 AM      Round two begins

10:30 AM     Round two assessment

12:30 PM     Lunch

2:00 PM      **Session 3: Assessing the TTX**

This session critically examines the outcomes of the TTX, focusing on expectations among all players, especially as identified in Session 2. What divergences among countries were revealed? How did responses differ from expectations? What are the key lessons learned from this exercise? What differences are there between this year's TTX and last year's?

4:00 PM      **Session 4: Next Steps**

What should be done to close those gaps, to move trilateral cooperation forward, as well as next steps for Pacific Forum and this DTRA process.

5:30 PM      Meeting *adjourns*

6:30 PM      Dinner

## APPENDIX B



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Royal Lahaina Resort, Maui, July 19-21, 2015**

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## **APPENDIX C**

### **US-ROK-Japan Tabletop Exercise**

**July 21-22, 2015**

#### **The setting**

It is mid-September, 2015. While there has been little concrete progress in bilateral military cooperation, South Korea and Japan have scheduled for November their first level-leader summit since President Park and Prime Minister Abe each took office. The summit reflects negotiations throughout the summer over issues such as the comfort women and the content of Prime Minister Abe's speech to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. That statement was condemned by North Korea, and Pyongyang slammed the government of ROK President Park for "abandoning the interests of Koreans" and "bending to the will of her imperialist masters, the United States."

China has halted land reclamation activities in the South China Sea, declaring that it had completed all planned projects. The US and other nations have denounced those efforts and Washington announced that it would send air and sea patrols to assert freedom of navigation through contested waters. China has stepped up patrols near the disputed Senkaku/Daiyou islands. In Europe, Greece continues to have difficulties implementing the repayment plan and "Grexit" remains a real possibility. The Minsk 2 ceasefire has broken down, and there is open skirmishing between Ukrainian forces and separatist rebels. Moscow continues to deny official Russian involvement in the fighting, but it is confirmed by independent observers. Russia has moved heavy equipment to the border with Ukraine and has warned the West that active engagement by NATO would trigger a similar response by its military.

Unrest in Europe has unsettled global financial markets. A plunge in the Nikkei has forced the Abe government to focus on economic policy. This reorientation and high levels of disapproval of legislation to permit the exercise of the right of collective self-defense forced Tokyo to extend debate on the bills.

#### **The incident**

Under cover of night, North Korean amphibious forces assault Daechong, a small island 4.88 sq miles in size that is 12 mi from the coast of North Korea. It has a population of just over 1,200, with an additional 1,000 soldiers, primarily doing intelligence work. ROK defenses are overrun. The Pyongyang leadership calls the attack "the liberation of occupied territory, unjustly taken from the North by the so-called armistice authorities," and a redrawing of the maritime boundary that divides the two countries. As the attack was occurring, there was a massive cyberattack on ROK government computer networks, media and financial institutions. It is now 8 AM on the following morning; information regarding casualties is unreliable but it is clear that some ROK citizens died and all remaining on the island were taken hostage.

**Questions:**

1. What are your government's five goals, in descending order of priority, in this situation?
2. What are the five immediate military steps your government takes to respond?
3. What five things do you expect each of the other two countries to say or do?
4. What do you not want each of the other two countries to say or do?

**Step 2**

It is 24 hours later. Preliminary and unverifiable information indicates that about half the ROK forces were killed and the other half wounded and captured. Virtually all island civilians were taken hostage. The ROK demands that North Korean forces abandon the island, return all hostages, both civilian and military or face massive retaliation. North Korea responds that the ROK must now abandon the island of Baengnyeongdo which is nearby and vulnerable. If Seoul does not withdraw from the island, Pyongyang is prepared to use a device that will render it uninhabitable as a demonstration of its determination, its strength and its commitment to redrawing the Northern Limit Line. Pyongyang also tells Seoul that it will never return Daechong; one way or another it will be North Korean territory. After dispersing road mobile missiles, the National Defense Commission, led by First Chairman Kim Jung Un, tells Japan that it is "prepared to use every tool in its newly modernized arsenal" if Tokyo should aid South Korea in any way.

The United Nations Security Council has convened and there are preliminary indications that Moscow and Beijing are not prepared to punish Pyongyang for actions that "right historical wrongs."

**Questions:**

1. Does step two change any of your answers to question 1 in the previous step?
2. What are the five immediate steps your government takes to respond?
3. What five things do you expect each of the other two countries to say or do?
4. What do you not want each of the other two countries to say or do?

One hour into the discussion, it was announced that North Korea had detonated a nuclear device in the Sea of Japan. There were no reports of casualties or any additional information about the type of explosion or explanation for why the blast occurred.