

East Asia's Fluid Dynamics: Whither Obama's Pivot to Asia?

Frank Jannuzi

President Obama's pivot to Asia accomplished some of its core objectives, most notably strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance, stabilizing U.S.-Japan-ROK security relations, and establishing diplomatic relations with Myanmar. However, it has left key tasks undone for the incoming Trump administration, including reining in North Korea's nuclear ambitions and finding equilibrium with a rising China. Moreover, the apparent demise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership casts a dark shadow over Obama's legacy in East Asia, and calls into question America's continued leadership of the global economic order. President Trump will need to navigate East Asia's fluid environment, a region lacking strong multilateral institutions. Trump's decisions, particularly his handling of a possible crisis on the Korean Peninsula and China's growing ambitions, will heavily influence how historians ultimately assess the wisdom of Obama's pivot.

Keywords: Pivot, Obama, TPP, DPRK, China

With Obama's return from his last foreign trip as President, and as his administration enters its last weeks in office, it is an appropriate time to make an initial assessment of the Asia policy foundation he has built for President-elect Donald Trump and the work that remains unfinished. Obama's much-touted rebalance of U.S. security, economic, and diplomatic might toward the Asia-Pacific region has fulfilled some of its key objectives — a “solid double” as one of pivot's architects recently concluded.¹ Of note, President Obama has upgraded U.S.

1. Jeffrey Bader, former senior director for Asia, National Security Council, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/08/29/obamas-china-and-asia-policy-a-solid-double/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

military capabilities in the region, adopted revised defense guidelines for the U.S.-Japan Alliance, stabilized U.S.-ROK-Japan security relations, including intelligence-sharing, by facilitating a diplomatic resolution of the “comfort women” issue, enhanced maritime security cooperation with Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, Singapore, and Indonesia, implemented the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), and normalized diplomatic relations with Myanmar. It is an impressive list of accomplishments.

And yet, as supporters and critics of the pivot are quick to point out,² Washington has struggled to regularize its dealings with Beijing. It has frankly failed to reach a strategic entente with East Asia’s largest and most influential player. Washington and Beijing have cooperated on issues such as climate change and Iran’s nuclear program, but tensions between Beijing and Tokyo in the East China Sea and between Beijing and Washington in the South China are rising, with open talk of the possibility for armed conflict. Although a military clash between the United States and its allies and China remains very unlikely, there is a growing risk of a costly arms race in Asia. Moreover, strategic mistrust between Washington and Beijing is hampering policy coordination on the region’s most vexing security challenge; North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. In all fairness, the Obama administration inherited a nasty situation from its predecessor. The best efforts of four Presidents have failed to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But there is no denying that the problem has grown much more acute on Obama’s watch. The current trajectory of U.S.-China relations runs through dangerous Pacific shoals and Korean mountains. Frequent course corrections will be necessary, and should be expected. If the United States proves unable to react to East Asia’s changing security and economic landscape, the pivot will have failed — the “base runner” left stranded at second base.

The defining characteristic of East Asia’s regional architecture during the Obama administration has been its *fluidity*. The Obama

2. Victor Cha, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

administration has proven nimble in responding to events in a region in transition; one being shaped by economic, security, and political forces of enormous magnitude. President Trump will need to be equally agile — perhaps *rebalancing the rebalance* — if he hopes to complete three core strategic objectives of the U.S. pivot to Asia: opening markets for trade and investment, reining in North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and forging a more candid, constructive, and cooperative relationship with China.

It is frankly too soon to say whether real estate mogul-turned-politician Donald Trump will choose to build on Obama's Asia policy platform or bring in a wrecking ball and start from scratch. The 2016 campaign surfaced a new obstacle to U.S. leadership — a nativist, "America-first" trend in politics vividly illustrated by popular opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Trump's demand that U.S. allies pay more for Washington's security commitments. With voters urging Washington to concentrate on the home front and expressing growing skepticism over the value of alliances and free trade agreements, there is a real risk that the Trump administration will undo whatever progress Obama has made toward strengthening the United States' overall position in East Asia.

Taking Stock of Obama's Pivot to Asia

Historians are wary of reaching any grand conclusions on recent events when the ink is not dry. The most famous illustration of this reluctance occurred when Richard Nixon in 1972 asked Zhou Enlai what he thought of the French revolution two centuries before. Zhou's response? "It's too early to say." Although we now know that Nixon's question had been misunderstood by Zhou — who thought Nixon was asking about the events of May 1968 in Paris — Zhou's zinger has come to symbolize both the danger of prematurely judging historical events and the difference between China's "long view" of history and the shorter time horizon of Western powers.

We probably won't be able to gain sufficient perspective on

Obama's pivot to Asia to judge its full effect for a few decades, at least. Long-term, the resolution of the Korean War may determine whether historians judge the pivot a success or failure. At this juncture, the best one can do is tally some positives and negatives. The centerpiece of the pivot's economic plan — TPP — is on life support. President-elect Trump has vowed to withdraw from the agreement on day one of his Presidency, perhaps to renegotiate it, perhaps to replace it with a series of bilateral agreements. And despite the security accomplishments chronicled by Bader, the Obama administration has neither resolved the vexing problem of North Korea's nuclear ambitions nor established a comfortable equilibrium in U.S. relations with China. These two challenges are linked, and President Trump's legacy may well be determined by how well he adapts a regional architecture constructed in the aftermath of World War II to cope with both.

Demise of TPP Blunts, but won't Halt, Process of Asian Economic Integration

A process of economic integration has been underway in East Asia for decades. President Obama sought to secure a leadership role for the United States through the negotiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and appeared to be on the cusp of victory before the 2016 Presidential campaign heated up. During the campaign, most of the candidates — even those seeking the nomination of the historically pro-trade Republican Party — came out against TPP. To the dismay of many in the Obama administration, even Hillary Clinton denounced TPP, a pact she once championed as the “gold standard” in free trade agreements. Donald Trump decried not only TPP but also previous trade agreements, especially the North American Free Trade Agreement. Trump won his long-shot bid to become President in part by appealing to Americans in the industrial heartland of the country who believe their economic prospects have been undermined by free trade agreements that did not create a level playing field.

With the demise of TPP, at least for the foreseeable future, the ability of the United States to “write the rules” of trade with East Asia has taken a big hit. It is not clear whether Trump, as President, will seek to renegotiate TPP or find other mechanisms to advance U.S. trade and investment with Pacific partners. It is possible that the other TPP nations may seek to amend the agreement and proceed without the United States — an approach recently advocated by Brookings economist Mireya Solis.³ In any event, the processes of trade liberalization and increased foreign direct investment seem unlikely to reverse course. The nations of Asia are today more economically intertwined than at any time since the height of the Silk Road. Over the past 20 years, China has emerged as the largest trading partner for almost all of its neighbors, in the process becoming the factory floor for companies from the United States, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the European Union. Intra-Asia trade is growing rapidly, encouraged by free trade agreements, investment treaties, and infrastructure upgrades, and encouraged by a veritable alphabet soup of multinational organizations with a strong economic focus, including the Association for East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Economic interdependence contributes ballast to relationships otherwise prone to listing, and the growing trade and investment links can serve as a check on nationalistic or xenophobic behavior. One can see this phenomenon at work in China’s relations with Taiwan.⁴ The interdependence among the region’s great powers also provides a firm foundation for regional stability and an incentive for political

3. Mireya Solis, *The TPP is Dead. Long Live the TPP*, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Mireya-Solis-The-TPP-is-dead-long-live-the-TPP> (accessed November 28, 2016).

4. For a nuanced view of this cross-Strait dynamic, see Maike Okano-Heijmans, Sander Wit, and Frans-Paul van der Putten, *Towards Greater EU-Taiwan Economic Cooperation?* Netherlands Institute of International Relations analysis, [https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/2015%20-%20Towards%20Greater%20EU-Taiwan%20Economic%20C%20ooperation%20-%20Clingendael%20Report%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/2015%20-%20Towards%20Greater%20EU-Taiwan%20Economic%20C%20ooperation%20-%20Clingendael%20Report%20(FINAL).pdf) (accessed November 28, 2016).

reconciliation. This is true across the region, to include the Russian Far East, which is looking to Asia (especially Japan) as a market for natural resources and as a source of capital investment to bring oil and gas reserves on line. President Putin's interest in seeking some accommodation with Japan over the Northern Territories issue is motivated more by economics than by geopolitics.⁵

TPP was designed to reinforce these positive trends. The TPP nations together represent more than 40 percent of global GDP, and the agreement promised not only to promote trade and investment, but also to help balance China's growing economic clout, providing fresh opportunities to countries like Vietnam and Indonesia to expand links with the United States. Assurances from Washington that China could eventually join TPP helped assuage concerns in Beijing that the TPP is part of a U.S.-led containment strategy, and senior Chinese Communist Party voices have cautiously welcomed the challenge of readying the Chinese economy for the demands of the TPP regime.⁶ Trump's victory has called all of this into question, and so has cast a dark shadow over Obama's pivot to Asia.

Security Challenges Loom on Near Horizon

North Korea is also casting a shadow over Obama's legacy, and the DPRK seems likely to confront President Trump with an early test of his administration's ability to manage U.S. affairs in East Asia. North's Korea has a track record of forcing itself onto the agenda of new Presidents, and 2017 is not likely to be an exception to this rule. Add in the uncertainty of President Park Geun-hye's pending impeachment proceedings, and you have a made-to-order "three AM wake-up call" for an administration before it even has a chance to get its bearings or

5. Gil Rozman, editor, *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, http://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Sasakawa_Japan-Russia.pdf (accessed November 28, 2016).

6. Paul Bowles, *China Debates the TPP*, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/03/20/china-debates-the-tpp/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

secure Senate confirmation of its key cabinet secretaries.

Thanks in large measure to concerted diplomacy by Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry and their Deputy Secretaries, Jim Steinberg and Anthony Blinken, the region's great powers today generally share a common assessment of the dangers posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Apart from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the other five members of the defunct Six Party Talks share the view that the DPRK must abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons and demonstrate a genuine commitment to keep the peace and respect international norms. At their 2015 summit meeting, Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye demonstrated remarkable solidarity on how best to respond to North Korea's continued intransigence.⁷ That unity was also on display at the UN Security Council, which swiftly condemned the DPRK's missile launch on September 5, 2016, and its fifth nuclear test on September 8, 2016. In each case, the UN body conferred for less than 24 hours before condemning the North for flagrantly violating repeated resolutions of the Security Council.

Unfortunately, the "Five" have not always maintained solidarity, especially when it comes to enforcing sanctions, negotiating with the DPRK, or using military moves to deter DPRK aggression. Chinese sanctions enforcement has been lackluster, often falling short of U.S. hopes and expectations.⁸ China and Russia repeatedly have urged the United States and ROK to engage the DPRK in dialogue *without preconditions*, while Washington and Seoul have insisted that the DPRK first take "concrete steps" to prove its sincere interest in denuclearization. The big story on the diplomatic front in 2016 was not the *convergence* of views on the DPRK, but the *divergence* of Beijing and Seoul over the Republic of Korea's decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system as a military response to the DPRK's grow-

7. Foster Klug, *China Snubs North Korean Leader in Visit to Seoul*, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/chinese-leaders-seoul-visit-snubs-north-korea> (accessed November 28, 2016).

8. Stephen Haggard, *Once Again, Sanctions Enforcement*, <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/once-again-sanctions-enforcement> (accessed November 28, 2016).

ing ballistic missile capabilities. Despite assurances that THAAD would in no way compromise China's ballistic missile capabilities, Beijing chose to vehemently condemn Seoul's decision in July to deploy the system. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi argued that Seoul's decision had "harmed the foundation of mutual trust between the two countries." Beijing is likely worried that by integrating the ROK into its missile defense architecture, the United States, long term, will improve its ability to monitor Chinese ICBMs. My guess is that President Xi is less concerned about THAAD, per se, than he is about Seoul moving closer into Washington's strategic orbit.

The bottom line is that China and the United States do not agree on how best to steer the Korean Peninsula toward a future marked by unification and peace. Disagreements among the ROK, China, and the United States over how best to orchestrate/encourage/respond to the prospects for Korean unification are likely to strain ties for years, if not decades.

Competing visions for the future of the Korean Peninsula illustrate a core truth about contemporary East Asia. Despite progress toward regional cohesion and evidence of complementary economic and security interests, countervailing trends of growing nationalism, and zero-sum thinking, exacerbated by many territorial disputes, have accompanied the rise of China. The U.S. pivot to Asia hasn't calmed these waters.

Strategic Rivalries...

Nowhere are the tensions more pronounced than between Japan and China. China's rise and two decades of economic stagnation in Japan have flipped the two nations' relative positions. Officials in Tokyo lament "Japan's passing," while officials in Beijing brag that the 21st century belongs to the Middle Kingdom. The Sumo wrestling between Japan and China for dominance in East Asia necessarily involves the United States, Japan's treaty ally and ultimate security guarantor. The strategic rivalry between Beijing and Tokyo is compounded by com-

peting interpretations of history, particularly the roots of the Second World War and Japan's responsibility for crimes against humanity during that conflict. Prime Minister Abe's controversial 2014 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine brought these issues back into play.⁹

To listen to some prominent voices on the current state of affairs in Northeast Asia is to hear dire warnings of the potential for great power conflict. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe caused a big splash at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 23, 2014, when he compared contemporary Sino-Japanese relations to German-UK relations prior to the start of World War I.¹⁰ Taking the analogy further, he blamed China's rapid increase in military spending — double digit growth for more than a decade — for causing instability in the region. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's rebuttal of Abe's remarks — calling them a “total disorder of space and time” — was biting enough to underscore, in fact, Abe's central point: tensions among the great powers of Northeast Asia are high, and growing. More recently, expanded Chinese air and naval patrols in the waters surrounding Japan have prompted hundreds of sorties by Japan's Air Self Defense Forces. Something needs to be done to restore equilibrium. As ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se said, “Our choices will dictate whether we will be able to overcome the confrontation and conflict and usher in an era of trust and cooperation, or shall let the specter of old history, i.e. ‘the curse of geopolitics’ return to haunt us.”¹¹ Or as Henry Kissinger warned in 2014: “Asia is more in a posi-

9. Martin Fackler, *Japan's Foreign Minister Says Apologies to Wartime Victims Will Be Upheld*, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/asia/japans-foreign-minister-says-apologies-to-wartime-victims-will-be-upheld.html?_r=0 (accessed November 28, 2016).

10. Kiyoshi Takanaka, *Abe sees World War One echoes in Japan-China tensions*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/23/us-japan-china-idUSBREA0M08G20140123> (accessed November 28, 2016).

11. Yun Byung-se, *Korea's Vision for Unification and the Future of East Asia*, http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=14137&seqno=313852&c=&t=&pagenum=1&tableName=TYPE_ENGLISH&pc=&dc=&wc=&lu=&vu=&iu=&du= (accessed November 28, 2016).

tion of 19th-century Europe, where military conflict is not ruled out.”¹²

Abe’s words at Davos resonated with his audience — even those who disagreed with his historical analogy — because the world has never been deft at accommodating the rise of a new great power. China’s emergence on the global stage is unlikely to be an exception to this rule. China’s rise is already reshaping East Asia’s geopolitics. China has tried to reassure its neighbors that its rise will be “peaceful,” but the very formulation — China’s peaceful rise — underscores the fact that many in the region and beyond are nervous about the implications of China’s growing comprehensive national power. No one talks of India’s peaceful rise or Brazil’s peaceful rise.

... in a Region Lacking Security Regimes

East Asia is marked by the relative absence of effective multilateral security arrangements. As Former Japanese Defense Minister Yuriko Koike observed in April, 2013, “Although Asia is the world’s most dynamic region, it has a paucity of institutional mechanisms for resolving — or at least mitigating — international disputes of the type that are ratcheting up tension across the region.”¹³ The East Asia Summit provides a venue for high level policy deliberations, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) affords an annual opportunity for defense officials to meet and compare notes on regional developments. But these talk shops provide only a veneer of regionalism to an architecture defined more by growing nationalism than by the subservience of national ambitions to a shared vision of regional prosperity and security.

12. Jonathan Tirone and Patrick Donahue, *Kissinger Says Asia is Like 19th Century Europe on Use of Force*, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-02-02/kissinger-says-asia-is-like-19th-century-europe-on-use-of-force.html> (accessed November 28, 2016).

13. Yuriko Koike, *Northeast Asia on the Brink*, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/defusing-tensions-between-northeast-asia-s-big-three-by-yuriko-koike> (accessed November 28, 2016).

In fact, as at last year's ARF meeting in Singapore, recent gatherings of East Asian security officials seem as likely to *inflame* passions as to calm the waters and foster collegiality.

East Asia has no NATO-like structures to provide strategic reassurance to smaller states worried about the potential consequences of the rise of China across all dimensions — economic, military, and political. Instead, the still dominant and most enduring security structure of East Asia is the U.S. “hub and spoke” system defined by a series of bilateral relationships woven into a defacto regional alliance structure. U.S. treaty allies Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines anchor this hub and spoke system. Strong defense ties between the United States, Singapore, Indonesia, and Taiwan, augmented by growing security partnerships with Malaysia and Vietnam, provide additional capability to mitigate regional strife, fight piracy, and respond to humanitarian disasters. But much of this architecture is both politically and militarily antiquated, and badly in need of refresh. It was built, as Chinese critics are quick to point out, with the Cold War in mind, and is only just now beginning to adapt to the security challenges of the 21st Century. Ironically, it is on the divided Korean Peninsula — where the shadows of the Cold War still linger — that the United States, its Korean and Japanese allies, and China and Russia may soon be forced to adapt their thinking and their modes of interaction.

Korean Unification: Ultimate Test of the Pivot and of U.S.-China Relations

Although it is impossible to predict precisely when and how the Korean Peninsula will be united, it seems inevitable that one day the Korean people, long divided, will join together as one nation. And although the mode of unification — peaceful, violent, voluntary, coerced — will have a huge impact on the unified state that emerges, certain ground truths will likely prove decisive. The ROK is a vibrant, politically stable, economically developed, democratic society, fully

integrated into the global community. It has twice the population of the DPRK and its economy dwarfs that of its northern neighbor. It enjoys a close military alliance with the United States, and its own armed forces are much more capable than those of North Korea, with the important exception of their lack of nuclear weapons. But that deficiency is more than compensated by the credible extended deterrence offered by the massive U.S. nuclear arsenal. By contrast, the DPRK is an impoverished, underdeveloped, politically anachronistic state. It is isolated diplomatically and economically, and heavily sanctioned for its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Its military is equipped with antiquated weapons, and personnel are undertrained and undernourished. The North most likely has a small stockpile of nuclear weapons, but, as yet, no proven delivery systems.

Whenever unification does come, the people of South Korea and their elected leaders will wield decisive influence over the final disposition of a unitary Korean state. That will be a good thing for the Korean people, for the contrast between North and South does not stop with “rich and poor,” or “strong and weak.” The government of the DPRK — marked by feudal succession — is responsible for a system characterized by massive human rights abuses. As Roseanne Rife wrote in her capacity as Director of East Asia Research at Amnesty International, “The gravity and nature of human rights violations are off the scale.”

Amnesty’s conclusions were validated in 2013 by the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) into the human rights conditions in the DPRK. The key findings of the commission about the DPRK include the following:

- There is almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion;
- Entrenched patterns of discrimination, rooted in the state-assigned class system, affect every part of life;
- Discrimination against women is pervasive in all aspects of society;
- The state has used food as a means of control over the population and deliberately blocked aid for ideological reasons, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people;

- Hundreds of thousands of political prisoners have died in “unspeakable atrocities” in prison camps in the past 50 years; and
- Security forces systematically employ violence and punishments that amount to gross human rights violations in order to create a climate of fear.

The COI found that crimes against humanity have likely been committed by North Korea, and it wrote to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, warning him that senior officials may be held responsible.

Assuming that Korea will one day achieve unification, what kind of state will emerge? I believe it is reasonable to expect several things:

- The new state will adopt political, economic, and social systems closely resembling those of the ROK, bringing a higher quality of life to the people of the former DPRK;
- The unified state will likely enjoy normal relations with all its neighbors, including China — just as the ROK does today; and
- The unified state will be a member in good standing in the international community.

Will a unified Korea remain a treaty ally of the United States? That will be up to the Korean people to decide. It seems unlikely that the Korean people would ignore all the benefits of the alliance — security assurances in a region where Korea is surrounded by larger powers, access to advanced military hardware and intelligence assets, interoperability with a global superpower, and a track record of six decades of joint struggle against common adversaries — once the threat of the DPRK was removed. But the nature of the alliance would almost certainly change, and there would be a reassessment of the balance and disposition of military forces. Some Koreans would probably advocate for a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces. A significant draw-down, particularly of Army troops, seems very likely in the context of peaceful unification. But if Washington coordinates closely with Seoul to manage the process of unification, the alliance will endure post-unification.

Americans would surely welcome peaceful unification, as it

would remove a dire national security threat to both the USA and the ROK, and bring about an improvement in the lives of more than 23 million Koreans living north of the DMZ. It would free up military resources to be deployed elsewhere or to be demobilized. And despite the enormous challenges associated with modernizing the DPRK, unification will not only be a “burden,” but also an opportunity. It will create new economic opportunities, including trade links to Europe, raw materials, inexpensive skilled labor, and sparsely populated land, that the people of a unified Korea will jointly exploit. There will be plenty of tasks, and the investment and energy not only of the Korean people, but also of Europeans, Americans, Japanese, and Chinese, will be needed to bring about a transformation of the North.

Chinese Pragmatism will Trump History and Ideology

The impact of Korean unification on U.S.-China relations is harder to foresee. Much will depend on the means of unification, and we simply cannot predict that with any certainty. Some Chinese may lament the loss of their traditional “buffer state” and ally. The People’s Liberation Army dispatched upwards of 1 million “volunteers” to fight in the Korean War, and Mao’s son was among the casualties. There will likely be voices in China who ask on unification, “What were we fighting for?” Others may be concerned that unification would undermine China’s privileged economic position in the North. Sanctions on North Korea have left China with a strangle hold on DPRK trade and investment opportunities, such as they are. But overall, China-DPRK economic relations are much less important than China-ROK trade, which now exceeds \$200 billion. The North is more an economic liability for China than an asset, standing in the way of greater Chinese prosperity in Dongbei.

Ultimately, China seems likely to respond pragmatically to unification, concluding as U.S. scholar Minxin Pei did, that the smart bet for Beijing is on Seoul.¹⁴ Officially, the Chinese government is on record welcoming unification, but with the caveat that Beijing would

prefer to see an “independent” nation. Beijing’s support for the Six Party Talks, which include a mechanism to negotiate an end to the war and a process of North-South rapprochement, provides further evidence of China’s embrace of unification as a desirable end state.

Future Regional Order

The ultimate test of the pivot will be whether the United States and China avoid the established power-rising power security dilemma. Projecting into the future, East Asia’s regional order will likely hinge on whether China and the United States make room for each other. The process of Korean denuclearization and unification may be the first test of the ability of the great powers to cooperate — a test of whether China will view the U.S. hub and spoke security architecture as a strategy of containment or a bulwark of stability. That test may come sooner than we think.

For the better part of 30 years, the United States and its allies have been trying to convince the DPRK to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, with disappointing results. President Trump will certainly rethink Obama’s approach. As an experienced business man and deal maker, he may decide it’s time for the United States to launch a multilateral initiative designed to attack the DPRK’s nuclear ambitions enfilade rather than by frontal assault. The objective would be to shift the focus of diplomacy from the North’s plutonium to its people through a multifaceted engagement strategy based on the Helsinki process launched by the United States and its allies during the Cold War.

A Helsinki-style engagement strategy could be designed to augment, rather than replace the Six Party Talks, assuming they can be resuscitated. The Helsinki-style approach would begin with a modest agenda focused on confidence and security building measures to

14. Pei Minxin, *Would China Block Korean Unification?* <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/would-china-block-korean-unification/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

reduce tensions and the risk of conflict emerging from miscommunication or miscalculation. Other dialogue topics would include energy security, economic modernization, agriculture reform, international trade and finance, social welfare, health policy, education, legal and judicial systems, women's rights, refugees, freedom of religion and belief and the rights of the disabled.

Engagement of this sort would have to be given time to succeed. It does not offer a quick fix to end the North's nuclear ambitions or eliminate its human rights violations, but neither do the alternatives of coercive diplomacy or military strikes. And all military options run the risk of exacerbating, rather than alleviating, great power tensions. The goal would be to so fundamentally alter the situation that a treaty ending the Korean War and denuclearizing the Korean peninsula would be within reach rather than a bridge too far.

This approach has a number of advantages. First, it has the potential to unify South Korean progressives, who first embraced the notion under the presidency of Kim Dae-jung, and conservatives, who see potential for it based on the German model of unification. Second, Helsinki-style engagement has proven its value already, helping to promote economic reform and greater respect for human rights inside the nations of the Soviet bloc. Third, it offers a step-by-step approach suited to a political environment devoid of trust. Initial small-scale confidence building measures — reciprocal actions that signal peaceful intentions — could create an environment more conducive to taking larger risks for peace. Finally, an inclusive, regional approach allays concerns that any one country would dominate the structure. It would also allow middle powers to play a constructive role — note the helpful advice on freedom of expression Mongolian President Elbegdorj offered Kim Jong-Un in a speech to students at Kim Il Sung University during his recent visit to Pyongyang.

So why hasn't the Helsinki concept gained more traction in the corridors of the Old Executive Office Building or the State Department? Perhaps because the necessary preconditions for a Helsinki process have not been met. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act did not begin the process of *détente*; it followed it.

Jump-starting détente in Northeast Asia will require a bold diplomatic opening — think “Kissinger to China” bold. President Obama would have had to channel the “Yes, We Can” spirit of 2008 rather than the “Oh, No We Shouldn’t” spirit of 2016. Perhaps President Trump, who craves being the center of attention, will take the plunge. North Korea’s neighbors will likely embrace any U.S. move that breathes fresh life into the diplomatic process.

It’s hard to say exactly how the DPRK might respond to such an opening from Trump. DPRK officials managing energy policy, agriculture, light industry, science, and education have much to gain from reducing North Korea’s political and economic isolation and cultivating foreign investment, trade, and exchanges. But their clout has been undercut by years of failed nuclear diplomacy and heightened military tension. Kim Jong Un, on the other hand, can probably survive, if not thrive, even if the DPRK remains a pariah state. But he might be flattered to deal directly with a world leader with whom he shares certain character traits. If approached and offered a deal, Kim Jong Un might defy expectations and try to navigate a path toward peace and denuclearization. It would be supremely ironic if President Trump negotiated an end to the Korean stand-off and charted a course toward denuclearization and unification — ensuring a positive historical legacy for Obama’s most identifiable foreign policy initiative, his pivot to Asia, by securing a peace the Nobel laureate couldn’t grasp.

■ Article Received: ■ Reviewed: ■ Revised: ■ Accepted:

Bibliography

- Foster Klug. *China Snubs North Korean Leader in Visit to Seoul*. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/chinese-leaders-seoul-visit-snubs-north-korea>.
- Gil Rozman. *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*. http://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Sasakawa_Japan-Russia.pdf.

- Jeffrey Bader. *Obama's China and Asia Policy: A Solid Double*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/08/29/obamas-china-and-asia-policy-a-solid-double/>.
- Jonathan Tirone and Patrick Donahue. *Kissinger Says Asia is Like 19th Century Europe on Use of Force*. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-02-02/kissinger-says-asia-is-like-19th-century-europe-on-use-of-force.html>.
- Kiyoshi Takanaka. *Abe sees World War One echoes in Japan-China tensions*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/23/us-japan-china-idUSBREA0M08G20140123>.
- Maïke Okano-Heijmans, Sander Wit, and Frans-Paul van der Putten. *Towards Greater EU-Taiwan Economic Cooperation? Netherlands Institute of International Relations Analysis*. [https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/2015%20-%20Towards%20Greater%20EU-Taiwan%20Economic%20C%20operation%20-%20Clingendael%20Report%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/2015%20-%20Towards%20Greater%20EU-Taiwan%20Economic%20C%20operation%20-%20Clingendael%20Report%20(FINAL).pdf).
- Martin Fackler. *Japan's Foreign Minister Says Apologies to Wartime Victims Will Be Upheld*. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/asia/japans-foreign-minister-says-apologies-to-wartime-victims-will-be-upheld.html?_r=0.
- Mireya Solis. *The TPP is Dead. Long Live the TPP*. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Mireya-Solis-The-TPP-is-dead-long-live-the-TPP>.
- Paul Bowles. *China Debates the TPP*. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/03/20/china-debates-the-tpp/>.
- Pei Minxin. *Would China Block Korean Unification?* <http://thediplomat.com/2013/01/would-china-block-korean-unification/>.
- Stephen Haggard. *Once Again, Sanctions Enforcement*. <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/once-again-sanctions-enforcement>.
- Victor Cha. *The Unfinished Legacy of Obama's Pivot to Asia*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>.
- Yuriko Koike. *Northeast Asia on the Brink*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/defusing-tensions-between-northeast-asia-s-big-three-by-yuriko-koike>.
- Yun Byung-se. *Korea's Vision for Unification and the Future of East Asia*. http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/engreadboard.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=14137&seqno=313852&c=&t=&pagenum=1&tableName=TYPE_ENGLISH&pc=&dc=&wc=&lu=&vu=&iu=&du=.