

Korean Reunification in the Context of Changing Triangular Relations

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Abstract

Three triangles are featured in recent analyses of the changing diplomacy centered on the Korean Peninsula. While Russia is taking the initiative in trying to shift the northern triangle, and Japan is trying a new approach straining the alliance triangle, China and South Korea are preparing for the long run as each keeps close watch on the United States within the triangle that matters most. The US strategy—misleadingly belittled as strategic patience—endorses South Korea’s approach and welcomes China’s increasing pressure on North Korea and priority for South Korea, but it is wary of China’s primary objectives when a new stage will be reached with the potential to lead toward reunification. The focus has shifted from restarting the Six-Party Talks or deterring provocations by North Korea to maneuvering within triangles to shape the geopolitical environment when the North Korean leadership decides to move in one direction or another. While it appears that China is cooperating with South Korea for that transition, competitive approaches—especially in the role the other two seek for the United States in this process—lurk ominously in the background.

Keywords: triangularity, the northern triangle, the alliance triangle, the Xi-Park summit, strategic patience

Introduction

Over the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula has loomed as an objective that South Korea has had to pursue more through regional diplomacy than through direct breakthroughs with the North Korean leadership. Moreover, bilateral relations have not sufficed. As has become increasingly clear in 2014, diplomacy must take an overlapping array of triangles into consideration. This article concentrates on three of them,

all in the midst of significant change with uncertain consequences for the process of reunification if it should begin.

Diplomacy related to North Korea intensified in mid-2014. Russia stepped up bilateral relations with optimism about expanded economic ties and geopolitical influence that would follow. Japan cut back some unilateral sanctions in response to progress in talks on abductees. Xi Jinping's early July visit to Seoul saw new efforts with Park Geun-hye to find a path toward negotiations, albeit on terms unacceptable to Kim Jong-un. The only participant in the earlier Six-Party Talks to be left on the sidelines was the United States. Yet, when we focus on triangular relations related to North Korea and involving the "Other Four" in these talks, the US presence is strongly felt. Keeping in mind the ramifications of the Ukraine crisis, the showdowns in the South China and East China seas with Southeast Asian states and Japan, and the impact of North Korea's recent behavior, this article looks at three triangles comprised of some combination of China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, North Korea, and the United States and their implications for diplomacy that eventually may have relevance for the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.¹ The article showcases three triangles of special importance within the overall Six-Party framework.

In 2014, the shadow of Ukraine extends as far as the Korean Peninsula. Whereas the tug-of-war that is splitting Ukraine and threatens to remake its borders may appear to be the opposite of the multilateral search for a path to reunite Korea amid insistence that it must be made whole, there are important similarities. First, each stands on the front line of a struggle with a great power that insists on being recognized as a civilizational pole and regards its bordering states as the principal test for extending this civilization as well as for claims of regional influence. Vladimir Putin considers Ukraine to be a part of the old order led by Russia, and it must not be allowed to enter a different order centered in the West, while Xi Jinping considers North Korea to be part of an old order opposed to the West, which cannot be allowed to switch sides to the United States-led order joining South Korea. Second, both Ukraine—separated between east and west—and the Korean Peninsula are divided in attitudes toward national identity, which pose challenges for those who seek unity. Third, with Ukraine having forsaken nuclear weapons and North Korea having embraced them and with the Security Council struggling to reach agreement in dealing with the two as challenges to peace and stability in Europe and Asia, respectively, the developments in

one arena are becoming increasingly intertwined with those in the other. Indeed, if the world enters a new cold war, then the combined effect of these two hot spots could be the tipping point. If, however, a peaceful path toward unity in one arena is realized, it could result in positive spillover for the other regional hotspot. At opposite ends of Russia, diplomacy is being tested.

The contrast between Xi's courting of Park and Putin's alienation of leaders involved in the Ukrainian crisis is unmistakable. Ever-increasing Chinese clout is manifest in moves to steer the diplomatic balance in ways that force Kim Jong-un's hand, while denying the United States much leverage and isolating Japan. Putin, however, is overreaching as he colludes with separatist forces and enables their military resistance and, appallingly, the shooting down of a civilian airline, appealing to distant China for support in this gambit. Putin projects the image of a strong leader intent on dictating the flow of events, but it is Xi whose strategy provides greater leverage as he conveys an image of strength too. Both Putin and Xi have North Korea in their crosshairs, as they strive to forge the most favorable geopolitical and geo-economic environment in Northeast Asia.

Looming in the background to the diplomacy over the Korean Peninsula is the deepening rift over the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the overall regional architecture with China on one side and the United States and Japan on the other. While South Korea seemingly strives to keep peninsular concerns separate, this is increasingly cited as China's primary motivation for how it is handling peninsular affairs and as the driving force for the increasing focus on deterrence in US policy toward China. For China, support for reunification depends on its geopolitical impact, which puts pressure on South Korea to move away from both Japan and its US alliance. For the United States too, there is awareness that a tug-of-war over South Korea may be beginning well before reunification itself might appear feasible. In 2014, Park has skillfully steered between such rival attitudes about the peninsula, but if Kim Jong-un shifts in one direction or another or global developments strain relations—as could happen with new sanctions against Russia or more open Chinese confrontation with Japan and the United States—this balancing act will prove difficult.

The Sino-Russian-North Korean Triangle

In the spring and summer of 2014, Chinese and Russian relations with North Korea have proceeded on different tracks. In applying more pressure on Kim Jong-un and conducting an uplifting summit with Park Geun-hye, Xi Jinping has made it clear that North Korea's "guns and butter" strategy, which involves waving the guns more ominously and seeking the butter from threats rather than reforms, is unacceptable. At no time since the start of the Six-Party Talks in 2003 has the rift between China and North Korea been so large. In contrast, Vladimir Putin has recently embraced Kim Jong-un, reaching beyond his prior outreach to Kim Jong-il with debt forgiveness, intensified economic ties (albeit only a fraction of China's trade with North Korea), and renewed geopolitical support. Russian commentators have left no doubt that alienation from the West connected to the Ukraine crisis is reverberating in plans for closer relations with North Korea.² Yet, despite the clear gap in dealing with North Korea at this time, each state strongly supports both the unconditional resumption of the Six-Party Talks and North Korean aspirations to alter the geopolitical balance and US alliance network in the course of any crisis resolution.

During the Cold War, Pyongyang played Moscow and Beijing off against each other. This appears to be its intention today, as it beckons anew to Moscow at a time of troubled ties to Beijing. Russians are focusing economic cooperation on Rason in the northeast corner of North Korea, while continuing to try to persuade South Korean leaders to proceed with long-discussed projects for north-south corridors for transportation and energy.³ Recently, special economic zones on the Chinese border, by contrast, have lost their momentum in the aftermath of the arrest and execution of Jang Sung-taek and as China curtails oil shipments to North Korea.⁴ There is reason to think that China and Russia differ on the vector of development each prefers for North Korea's infrastructure and on the degree to which North and South Korea become integrated economically. Yet, in comparison to the scenarios desired by South Korea and the United States, they share much in common, and are more likely to win the ear of North Korean leaders. After all, they seek a strong and economically vibrant North Korea as a force to balance South Korea and to alter the geopolitical balance in Northeast Asia, thereby greatly weakening US influence.⁵

Many assume that this northern triangle will take a backseat to South Korea in a process of reunification. Yet, this is not what any of these

countries intend. China and Russia are in favor of a revitalized North Korea negotiating from strength to cut a deal favorable to economic integration with their countries and unfavorable to the US alliance with South Korea. While China seeks one-sided dependency on it and Russia prefers a much more multilateral approach that makes it the gateway to various trans-Korean corridors, the similarity in their positions—as manifest at the Six-Party Talks and in their overlapping proposals for resuming them—is considerable.⁶ Human rights issues in North Korea are not their concern. Regime collapse has, at least, appeared to be anathema. Each seeks to assist in reviving the North Korean economy, as if that is the key to a softening attitude in talks and, eventually, denuclearization. What they deem necessary to secure agreement on denuclearization is essentially what they prioritize as serving their own interests, which, for over a decade have coincided despite the recent divergence.

The United States-South Korean-Japanese Triangle

This combination of two strong US alliances and an oft-strained relationship between two neighboring states, which have allowed historical memories to overshadow their strategic commonalities, matters more for a South Korean-led process of reunification than recent analysis has indicated. If the alternative to substantial Japanese involvement is economic dominance by China over North Korea as the determining force in the transition, then the other states in the Six-Party Talks framework, including North Korea, are likely to seek a consequential Japanese role. As Abe's 2014 foreign policy activism and negotiations with Kim Jong-un's regime indicate, Japan is unwilling to be left on the sidelines. Its expected provision of roughly \$10 billion of assistance to North Korea in lieu of reparations places it close to the center of global financial arrangements, and Japanese firms from the 1990s were eyeing infrastructure and other projects once prospects for investment improve. The bulk of attention to the process of reunification apart from China has concentrated on the need for South Korean-US planning, combining security with economic concerns, but to overlook Japan is short-sighted. The fact that North Korea expects to gain leverage by balancing Japan's contributions against others is reason enough to take note.

In July 2014, the Abe cabinet issued a new interpretation of collective self-defense much to the consternation of South Koreans. A survey of their attitudes in May and June put the percentage that views

Japan as a military threat at 46.3 (second only to North Korea's figure of 83.4 and above China's 39.6—a sharp contrast to the 15.1 figure for Japanese viewing South Korea as a threat (fourth after North Korea—72.5, China—71.4, and Russia—29.0)). Indeed, only 9.2% of Japanese thought that a military confrontation could arise with South Korea versus 40.8% of South Koreans with such concern. A still higher number—53.1%—consider Japan's society and political system to be militarist, and the past year has seen a 17.1% increase in the level of Japanese feeling negative toward South Korea.⁷ This is not a propitious environment for cooperation against the North's provocations, let alone in case of an opportunity for reunification.

After the nadir in the alliance triangle in the winter of 2014, Obama's personal diplomacy in March and April led to some separation of defense cooperation from angry exchanges over the handling of historical memories.⁸ Yet, as seen in South Korean worry about Japan's reenergized diplomacy to North Korea (including the lifting of unilateral sanctions in response to North Korean assurances about a fuller investigation concerning the abduction of Japanese citizens) there was little trust in Japan's intentions.⁹ Similarly, Japanese have grave doubts about South Korean diplomacy with China,¹⁰ These were not diminished by Xi Jinping's "charm offensive" to Park Geun-hye, on display at their summit in early July. While South Koreans are suspicious that Tokyo's unilateral outreach will be harmful to the coordinated diplomacy deemed necessary to steer North Korea onto a new path, leading first to stability and then toward reunification, Japanese fear that Seoul will cut some deal with Beijing that serves the latter's designs on the peninsula even as it can isolate Japan in the region and, in any eventual process of reunification. US planning for military contingencies is complicated by tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, and trilateral preparations for the reunification process are, naturally, even more problematic.

Yomiuri shimbun and *Sankei shimbun* used the same expression "kyoto" or joint combat to refer to the collusion between Xi and Park against Japan.¹¹ Paying scant attention to China's pressure on North Korea and South Korean strategic thinking about how to expand cooperation vital to its security, Japanese conservatives dwell instead on Park's failure to press Xi on China's aggressive behavior in the East and South China seas. Yet, *Nihon keizai shimbun*, concerned about Korean firms gaining an advantage in the Chinese market from the free trade agreement (FTA) that Xi and Park hoped to sign by year end, urged

Japan to avoid isolation in this triangle.¹² *Asahi shimbun* took a similar stance. Opinions were also split on the intensification of diplomacy between Tokyo and Pyongyang. In its isolation as Sino-South Korean relations improved, Pyongyang is reaching out to Tokyo, all had recognized. *Tokyo shimbun* and *Mainichi shimbun* strongly supported Tokyo's diplomacy to Pyongyang, but as North Korea tested missiles in July, *Sankei shimbun* wondered why Tokyo was failing to buttress the Japan-U.S.-South Korean triangle instead.¹³ There is a lack of clarity about whether Abe's move is rooted in national identity—the abductions are an “identity card” he has been riding with success—or geopolitical strategy, sending a message to Seoul and Beijing.

In the July 2014 issue of *Toa*, Kimura Kan puts the US-Japan-ROK triangle in a different light.¹⁴ Noting the dubious response in Seoul in contrast to the welcoming tone in Japanese publications over the May 29 announcement that Tokyo and Pyongyang would conduct bilateral talks on the normalization of relations, including the abductees issue, Kimura finds it odd that Seoul would object, given its refusal on May 31 in trilateral defense consultations to support intelligence sharing with Japan or join in the missile defense network that the other two states are developing, in this way undermining security cooperation and irrationally leaving in doubt the response to a contingency in North Korea despite Japan's importance, given the US bases on its territory. Yet, he finds a rational explanation for the divergence in strategic calculations in Tokyo and Seoul in both Park's need for China's assistance in her policy toward North Korea and Obama's two-sided approach to China. Previously, Lee Myung-bak's hardline stance toward North Korea failed because China increased economic ties with it, and Park realized that US-Japan ties could not exert much influence on the North. To be effective, Seoul needed to cooperate with Beijing—rather than viewing it as a rival, she treated it the most important partner in this pursuit, while taking into account its reactions to joint missile development and intelligence sharing with Washington and Tokyo. Kimura does what few other Japanese analysts of Park's foreign policy have ventured to do; he explains why it makes sense in the context of her North Korean strategy.

Kimura further argues that US policy toward China no less than history and territorial disputes is the driving force in the widening gap between Japan and South Korea. They serve different roles in a strategy both to counter China's maritime assertiveness and to keep under control

with help from China North Korea's assertiveness to the north. Whereas Washington strongly supports Japan in its territorial dispute with China and increased military role while also harshly criticizing China for its actions in the South China Sea, it invites China to the RIMPAC naval exercises with US allies and others and supports South Korean efforts to work closely with China in countering North Korean belligerence. Since South Korea's army is the center of its military power needed to counter the North's threats, it has little significance for the Sino-US maritime competition. In the two-sided US approach to China, Japan and South Korea have different roles, and this should be taken into account in reassessing how to manage their bilateral relationship, Kimura concludes. Given China's greater importance for the reunification process, which could also put stress on relations between Seoul and Tokyo, a reassessment should be broadened to that theme.

The Sino-South Korean-United States Triangle

No triangle is more important than the Sino-South Korean triangle for the reunification process. Roh Moo-hyun alienated the George W. Bush administration, leaving his designs for reunification through engagement with scant regard for reciprocity in shambles. Lee Myung-bak antagonized the Hu Jintao administration, eviscerating his agenda of unification through pressure to cooperate. In contrast, Park Geun-hye has nurtured close ties with both Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, boosting the potential for Seoul to capitalize on outside support as it both invites Kim Jong-un to embrace "trustpolitik" and strengthens defenses ready to respond to acts of aggression. Her administration showcases an active diplomatic agenda, which depends on its ability to keep the support of both Washington and Beijing. So far, diplomacy has upped the pressure on North Korea, but success increases the possibility that new conditions will draw attention also to views on reunification.

This triangle is the principal framework for preparing for developments in North Korea that could change calculations about the prospects for reunification. Coining the phrase, "unification bonanza," giving a speech in Dresden refocusing discussions on North Korea on reunification, and establishing a preparatory committee for unification in July, Park has put the future of the peninsula on center stage for over half a year. In doing so, she also has intensified her outreach to China, manifest in Xi's visit to Seoul. As Victor Cha has noted, this approach is changing the way unification is perceived.¹⁵ Park's concentration on

“peace and prosperity” for Northeast Asia refocuses attention away from the competing strategies for transforming North Korea to a joint vision capable of becoming a “jackpot” for all. Xi’s cooperative attitude has intrigued South Koreans, but there is little clarity on how far it may go. Meanwhile, US skepticism is pronounced, related to the absence of any serious discussion about reunification rather than management of new belligerence. Yet, the fact that China is putting increased pressure on North Korea and putting priority on South Korea opens the door to renewed Sino-US cooperation on how to approach new developments in North Korea. This triangle may be viewed in Beijing as of value in isolating Japan or in achieving its own, little-acknowledged objectives in North Korea, but it has squeezed Kim Jong-un for more than a year in ways that suggest greater coordination than at any time since the breakdown of the Six-Party Talks in 2008. It needs to be tested further.

With the regional balance of power in mind, Xi must tread carefully to avoid South Korea further strengthening its alliance with the United States. It is clear that Park regards a strong US alliance as the foundation for improving ties with China. Yet, the ROK-US alliance is primarily directed at resistance to North Korean aggression. To the extent that Xi can keep it focused on that target and convey optimism to South Korea about China’s cooperation in controlling such aggression, he can expect success in limiting the scope of the alliance or even affecting the balance of power. Park’s Dresden speech with its renewed emphasis on reunification and outreach to the people of North Korea was deemed threatening by North Korean leaders, but China may assume that there is little opportunity for that strategy to succeed. Yet, it may reinforce China’s pressure on North Korea’s leaders to shift their course and launch economic reforms and some openings that open the door to new diplomacy. If China and South Korea are both offering economic assistance along with investment, then their ties will further improve without undermining China’s strategy of using the North to weaken the US-ROK alliance and diminish the US presence in the region.

In the summer of 2014, Park is basking in the warm glow of diplomatic success after Obama made Seoul in late April the most visited foreign stop on his presidential itinerary and Xi in early July met with her for a fifth time in a year, while failing to meet even a single time with Kim Jong-un. Yet, there has been a tendency in South Korea to exaggerate the success of this balancing act between two great powers, with which many other states are increasingly feeling obliged to choose

sides. Behind the scenes there is concern that Obama is tilting away from Seoul, as some US observers question Park's embrace of Xi and her scorn not only for the revisionist tendencies of Abe Shinzo but also for his defense policies. Many suspect that Xi's continuous courting of Park—even signs of deferential treatment—is a temporary tactic with three principal goals: 1) isolating Japan and fraying the weak link in the US triangular alliance system; 2) capitalizing on South Korea's growing economic dependency on China to tilt public opinion China's way and in only a matter of months secure a breakthrough bilateral FTA, as Xi was accompanied by a large delegation of China's corporate leaders; and 3) pressing North Korea with the expectation that it will have little choice but to accept China's strategy for regional transformation. As a starting point, China wants the United States to relax its conditions for restarting the Six-Party Talks and expects South Korea to agree, starting a process of tradeoffs conducive to China's broad goals.

On July 25, a Chinese article analyzed Kim Jong-un's strategy in the face of ever-improving ties between China and South Korea, China growing increasingly stronger, and a United States becoming increasingly weaker as its alliance triangle with Japan and South Korea is changing.¹⁶ South Korea is beginning to doubt the US security capability and to recognize that it cannot rely one-sidedly on the United States to realize peace on the peninsula. At the same time, without abandoning its nuclear weapons, North Korea still has an opportunity to improve relations with the West, as seen in recent news about breaking the ice with Japan. China seeks to change the international order in Northeast Asia, the article notes, and closer Sino-South Korean relations are inevitable, as the US capacity to manage Japanese-South Korean tensions declines and Japan now presses for a course more independent of the United States. This is the background to the Tokyo-Pyongyang agreement as Japan strives to contain China. With Kim Jong-un discarding the traditional friendship with China and opening to the West, he has turned to Japan as he also opens special economic zones on an unprecedented scale and pursues "globalization" rather than China.

The two authors of this article argue that Kim Jong-un is serious about establishing a parallel market economy to North Korea's command economy, processing natural resources in industrial parks that attract foreign investment, as the command economy atrophies. This would appear to favor South Korea and the United States, as well as Japan, widening the distance with China.

In other Chinese publications in July, we read that relations between China and South Korea have an historical opportunity for development related to the bad relations between Japan and both South Korea and China and China's bad relations with North Korea. As China puts economic pressure on North Korea, Russia is stepping up its oil exports to the North. Although Obama went to Seoul in April to bolster the US presence, we read that the United States is proving powerless to deal with North Korea's nuclear program. The message is that South Korea must make its own choice also in the face of Japan's rising militarism and expansionist ambitions. Despite a context of Sino-US zero-sum competition with South Korea in the middle, the Japan factor is raised as a means of establishing a historical and values context in which South Korea must draw closer to China, even at the expense of the United States, which has opted to side primarily with Japan.

Another source blames US pressure for worsening China's neighborhood environment, obliging China to focus more on "security space." Considering South Korea along with China as a force for peace and for shared historical understanding (in both respects, as opposed to Japan), With the export level of South Korea to China 2.5 times that to the United States and public opinion over 70% positive about future relations with China, the July summit was viewed as an exceptional opportunity to raise bilateral relations to a new level, helping to shift not the balance of power in the region, to capitalize on economics for security, and to solidify a view steeped in history, which erases lingering Cold War thinking while pressing North Korea to improve ties to China.¹⁷

One assessment of the Xi-Park summit was so glowing that it envisioned jointly creating a new framework for East Asia. Expecting an FTA by year end as South Korea's economy grows more dependent on China, the article finds geopolitical significance as well: 1) an economic framework outside of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); 2) a bilateral FTA without Japan joining that will serve to limit Japan; 3) a force that will lead to choices between economically relying on China and for protection on the United States; and 4) a move that strengthens China's hand with North Korea.¹⁸ As the economic giant in the region, China is clearly the driving force in this interpretation of how four states will be pushed into a corner more to China's liking. In the long run, this would redound to its benefit in shaping the transformation of the Korean Peninsula to meet China's strategic objectives.

The closely coordinated US-ROK strategy toward North Korea has not changed much since Park took office. This involves: endorsement of Park's attempts to probe the willingness of Kim Jong-un to accept denuclearization, however complicated the transition; deterrence tightened through both military readiness and increased pressure, but not to the extent that secondary sanctions would alienate China and Russia and end their cooperation; and persuasion of China and others that fear unilateralism and pursuit of regime change through proof that both Obama and Park are intent on working jointly with the other states in pursuit of dialogue with the North. For those not blinded by impatience to transform North Korea or alarm over North Korea's rising threat capabilities, this has been a successful strategy. It has achieved three realistic objectives. It has fostered a consistent, close relationship between Seoul and Washington with no objections to the approach from Tokyo. Thus, it has supported alliance triangularity despite other sources of strain, which oblige security cooperation to fly mostly under the radar. It has also minimized the tendency of China to focus blame for the tensions on the Korean Peninsula on the United States and South Korea rather than on North Korea, serving as one force to raise the level of Chinese cooperation. Finally, this strategy has had some impact in slowing the buildup of North Korea's arsenal, starving it of resources and keeping it under the threat of increased sanctions as its degree of isolation keeps increasing. While some critics charge that "strategic patience" is weakness or neglect, it actually is a carefully considered long-term strategy for a problem for which both options of negotiations and of military action are almost certainly to be counterproductive unless North Korea changes course. Approval for resumption of the Six-Party Talks would satisfy China but undermine South Korea, while a more aggressive military posture might have satisfied some in South Korea but antagonized China. This course is vital to triangular coordination, even if that is at a low level, with Washington at times in the shadows as Seoul seeks more from Beijing.

The recent upbeat mood in Sino-South Korean relations and the impression that Washington has so much on its plate in Ukraine and the Southwest Asian belt from Gaza to Afghanistan that it is subcontracting its North Korea policy to China both belie the reality that expectations for China are modest. Its pressure on North Korea is deemed helpful in blocking the *byungjin* strategy of guns and butter—the feared path to confirmation of the North as a nuclear power. Yet, few hold out hope

that China would agree to joint action, let alone a pathway toward reunification, and even fewer expect Chinese approval of US or joint US-ROK plans. The most that can be expected is quiet, unilateral Chinese actions that press North Korea to shift direction, albeit in ways desired by China that only in certain respects overlap with what the other two are seeking. To the extent that North Korea stays on course, defying China's appeals, South Korea will be particularly eager to avoid giving offense to China, while the United States will keep weighing other priorities in relations with it. This triangle may be tested more by other challenges, but eventually it is likely to be put to a severe test by different responses to North Korea's actions, since China's priority is sustaining the communist regime to reshape the geopolitical balance in the region and South Korea's is to reduce the threat of instability caused by North Korea while preventing any rebalance of the regional order from leaving it vulnerable to heavy pressure.

Conclusion

In 2014, three triangles matter most for responses to North Korea and prospects for coordination in considering plans for reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Depending on which triangle is at the center of attention, the impression is strikingly different. Russian analysts suggest that their northern triangle with North Korea and China can be strengthened and put added pressure on the United States, while offering an attractive opening to South Korea. Assuming that China has not altered its basic goal of restarting the Six-Party Talks with regional geopolitical transformation on the agenda, Russians seek to strengthen North Korea's hand in this triangular context. Japan aims to cut a separate deal with North Korea on its abductees while continuing to rely on the United States and South Korea to keep pressure on the North regarding nuclear weapons and missiles—the other two arrows in the North's quiver, which have alarmed Japan. Russia and Japan are keen on reasserting their voice in a process that could lead toward reunification, partly from doubts that China, in the former case, and South Korea, in the latter case, want to marginalize their input. The most consequential triangle is the one at the top of China's agenda, as it strives to strengthen its influence over the Korean Peninsula by drawing South Korea closer at the expense of the United States while lessening North Korea's potential to disregard what is China's strategic blueprint.

To the surprise of many, talk of reunification has intensified in 2014. Park's Dresden speech is one impetus, but so too is Xi's more holistic and long-term approach, tilted for the time being, toward Seoul. While Park puts inter-Korean relations in the forefront, Chinese discussions put Korea in a transformed regional context, increasingly under China's sway and decidedly outside the US and Japanese spheres of leverage. The alliance triangle is not to be a major force in the reunification process. The northern triangle may be, although Sino-Russian differences and China's insistence on dominating the process and orienting the peninsula on an east-west axis rather than a north-south one make it unlikely that Russia's voice will be heard loudly, despite North Korea's desperate shift in that direction. Instead, Beijing is focused on the triangle with Washington, using Xi's "charm offensive" aimed at Park, the carrot of a bilateral FTA that is welcomed by South Koreans, the "history card" against Japan with wider implications for shared values and, above all, fear in South Korea of losing Beijing's cooperation against Pyongyang, to position itself for eventual reunification. This strategy is aimed at winning the trust of South Korea (China is seizing the opportunity of "trustpolitik") and increasing the pressure on North Korea. It is early to judge the outcome since this is a strategy that likely will take many years to play out. So far, China seems rather satisfied with the results, since North Korea is cornered and Japanese-South Korean relations are deeply troubled, while the United States is left to pursue its own long-term strategy unsuccessful in convincing Japan and South Korea to narrow their divide or North Korea to change course. China has the more active diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula.

Notes:

¹ This is a follow-up to four chapters by four authors in Part I, "South Korea's Triangular Relations," in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies--Asia's Slippery Slope: Triangular Tensions, Identity Gaps, Conflicting Regionalism, and Diplomatic Impasse toward North Korea* (Korea Economic Institute, 2014).

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⁵ Valery Denisov and Alexander Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Korean Peninsula,” in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies--Asia’s Slippery Slope*, pp. 55-70.

⁶ Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, revis. edit. 2011).

⁷ “Nikkan yoron chosa: taikan kanjo kyusoku ni akka, tainichi mo izen takaku,” *Mainichi shimbun*, July 10, 2014.

⁸ Sue Mi Terry, “Japan-South Korea-U.S. Relations,” in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies--Asia’s Slippery Slope*, pp. 7-21.

⁹ Park Cheol Hee, “Nitcho gaisen no Higashi Ajiateki imi,” *Tokyo shimbun*, June 8, 2014.

¹⁰ Gilbert Rozman, “China, South Korea, U.S. Relations,” in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies--Asia’s Slippery Slope*, pp. 43-53.

¹¹ “Sankei shimbun,” July 16, 2014, p. 6; *Yomiuri shimbun*, July 5, 2014, p. 3.

¹² *Nihon keizai shimbun*, July 6, 2014, p. 2.

¹³ *Sankei shimbun*, July 16, 2014, p. 6

¹⁴ Kimura Kan, “Kankoku was doko ni iko toshite iru ka?” *Toa*, July 2014, pp. 34-43.

¹⁵ Victor Cha, “Five Theories of Unification,” *CSIS Korea Chair Platform*, July 22, 2014.

¹⁶ Liu Gui and Zhou Jingjing, “Jin Zhengen shitu zhongjian Chaoxian,” *Gongshiwang*. http://www.21ccom.net/articles/qqsww/qqgc/article_20140725110055.html.

¹⁷ Wang Sheng, “Zhonghan guanxi de fazhan buhui yingxiang Zhongchao guanxi,” *Gongshiwang*, June 30, 2014. http://www.21ccom.net/articles/qqsww/zlwj/article_20140630108603.html.

¹⁸ Zhongguo anbang jiduan yanjiu zongbu, “Zhonghan keneng kaichuang xin geju,” July 7, 2014. <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001057101>.