

Can the United States and the DPRK Achieve Normalization in the Case of Trump Phenomenon?

Qin Zhu¹

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Abstract The relation between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is of substantial strategic prominence in the security landscape of Northeast Asia. The longstanding incompatibility between the two countries can be illuminated by drawing on three factors: the conflict of interest in the DPRK–ROK unification; the strategic interests of the nuclearization and the denuclearization-normalization dilemma; the Sino–U.S. dual power structure in Northeast Asia. In addressing these issues, this paper discusses the possibility of achieving diplomatic normalization between the U.S. and DPRK by examining in a comparative framework the feasibility of existing mechanisms. The paper concludes that unconventional mechanism is required to establish the initial momentum for a necessary political breakthrough, especially in light of the Trump phenomenon. Specifically, the author proposes a stepwise model to assist the diplomatic reconciliation and to further promote the restoration of peace, security and stability in Northeast Asia.

Keywords U.S.–DPRK relations · Normalization · The role of China · North Korean nuclear issue · The THAAD dispute · Trump phenomenon

The peace, stability and development of the post-cold war Northeast Asia region hinges on different factors and powers. The U.S. and South Korea deems North Korea as the perpetrator of the disruption of the status quo and identifies the resolution of the North Korea problem and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula as the path to peace. The major concerns in the ongoing discussion revolve around China's responsibility in assuming a greater role in defusing the tension of the region as well as demonstrate proactivity in compelling North Korea

✉ Qin Zhu
happyzhu2121@163.com

¹ Fudan University, Shanghai, China

to undertake reform and denuclearization. China advocates a more proportionate division of responsibility among the multiple parties involved and lays greater emphasis on seeking a comprehensive resolution to the Korean Peninsula issue,¹ the pertinence of which has been increasingly recognized since North Korea's initiating of its fourth nuclear test. Moreover, the heightened dispute over the THAAD installment in South Korea has further complicated the issue.

This paper argues that the application of sheer pressure may not expect to bring meaningful changes to North Korea's domestic and foreign policy, nor should China be held solely culpable for the Korean Peninsula issue. Rather, the general U.S.–DPRK relationship should be the primary focus for those seeking a meaningful resolution to the issue. The measures leading to substantial improvements in the U.S.–DPRK relations should be of primary concern. The first part of the paper presents a brief overview of the history of the U.S.–DPRK.

1 U.S.–DPRK Relations: The Three Stages

Since its founding, the DPRK has sought diplomatic recognition from the U.S. Over the past 70 years or so, however, a number of issues and events involved in the development of U.S.–DPRK relations have hampered the progress in recognition granting. Three stages can be roughly distinguished in the turbulent history of its interaction with the U.S.

1.1 Outright Hostility Period (1948–1972)

By the end of WWII, the Korean Peninsula was separately occupied by the two great powers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the United States. Aided by the two powers, the divided Korean independent factions established two independent states in 1948; the *de jure* and *de facto* division of the Korean Peninsula was thus established. The attempts made by the two sides in their initial hopes for a unified sovereignty by force led to the Korean War in June 25, 1950. The involvement of China and the U.S. in the war further complicated the political and military situation of the peninsula, which later exerted far-reaching influence over the relationship between China and the U.S., with strained ties and intensified confrontation between the two military alliances in the Cold War.

The Korean Armistice Agreement was followed by a series of agreements (e.g., the *U.S.–ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953*.¹⁰, the *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Between USSR and DPRK in 1961*.⁷, the *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Between PRC and DPRK in 1961*.⁸, the *Status of Forces Agreement between U.S. and ROK in 1966*.⁷.) which intended to draw a clear line “between friends and foe.” These agreements not only subordinated the separated Korea to the two Cold War great powers, more

¹ See Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), January 7, 2016, at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1330231.shtml.

susceptible to the confrontation between the U.S.-led and the Soviet-led allying forces, but also elevated the tension between the two alliances. As they gradually became chess pieces in the game controlled by the great powers to achieve global hegemony, the aim to claim full self-governance by the separated state grew even more distant.

During this outright hostility period, the U.S. and North Korea were constantly involved in diplomatic reproaches and occasionally engaged in military confrontations (e.g., the USS *Pueblo* Incident on January 23, 1968). Dissimilar to the difference-induced antagonism, North Korea shared marked resemblance with China in terms of political situation. Firstly, both were in a state of disunity given the U.S. diplomatic recognition for their political oppositions, namely the Chiang Kai-shek government in Taiwan and the Syngman Rhee government in Seoul. Secondly, both maintained limited autonomy in foreign policy while being affiliated to the Soviet Union and its military alliance. The comparable situations led the two countries to adopt an unwavering opposing stance against the United States. China kept providing unconditional support to North Korea in resolving the Korean peninsula issue until Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

1.2 Strategic Competition Period of the Cross-Recognition Proposal (1972–1992)

In July 1969, the implementation of the Nixon Doctrine led to a global strategic pullback by the U.S. indicating that its allies would shoulder a greater share of responsibility in maintaining peace and security. The strategic shift sent a signal of reconciliation to the U.S.'s military oppositions. While Nixon's visit to China in 1972 marked the breakthrough to rapprochement for the U.S. and China, U.S.–DPRK relations also saw possible improvements as North Korea clarified its willingness to establish a peace agreement with the United States in 1974. Despite their initial shared interest in striving toward diplomatic normalization, the U.S. later became reluctant to make concrete efforts, mainly due to the strategic consideration that the diplomatic recognition of South Korea by China and the Soviet Union ought to be made prerequisite for the U.S.–DPRK normalization. It is assumed that once the U.S.–DPRK normalization occurs without assured diplomatic normalization in ROK–Soviet and ROK–China relations, the balance of power on the Korean peninsula would be tipped in favor of North Korea sided by the Soviet Union, an unacceptable situation for both the U.S. and South Korea. A strategically more affordable choice for the U.S. therefore was to stand by ROK–USSR/China in preference to aligning with North Korea.

As a resolution to break the political impasse, U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger submitted his prescient proposal for cross-recognition proposal over the 30th United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 1975. The proposal suggested synchronized diplomatic normalization between South Korea, China and the Soviet Union and between the North Korea, U.S. and Japan. (Doug 1996a, b, p. 26).

Despite the intended peace-making effort, the proposal was rejected by North Korea as it was perceived as an attempt to formalize and permanentize the Korean

peninsula disunion. Turning down the well-intentioned offer on North Korea's part did not signal an end to the pursuit of diplomatic normalization with the U.S., but showcased its disapproval of South Korea's normalization with China and the Soviet Union. North Korea's contention with South Korea for political legitimacy called for improvements in U.S.–DPRK relations toward eliminating potential strategic edge for South Korea over the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, North Korea sought to improve relations with the United States without South Korea gaining an advantage. However, the U.S. deemed the assurance of South Korea's diplomatic normalization with China and the Soviet Union as the indisputable prerequisite for normalizations with North Korea. Siding with North Korea, China shared the same disapproval on the proposal; the cross-recognition proposal was thus declined.

A series of trends of development toward the end of Cold War have set the scene for recovery and reconciliation for the Korean Peninsula and the possibility for reconciliation. Through late 1980s to early 1990s, the political trajectories of the socialist Eastern European governments changed and began to lean toward the Western Bloc. The Soviet Union proceeds to normalization with South Korea on September 30, 1990, in spite of North Korea's opposition. The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War cast the shadow of "peaceful evolution" on China and North Korea's future. On Sept. 17, 1991, the two Koreas simultaneously acquired United Nations membership. Given the aftermath of these events, China became inclined to restore diplomatic normalization with South Korea and thus attempted to reintroduce the proposal of cross-recognition. The U.S. and South Korea nevertheless dismissed the proposal on the grounds that the normalization between the USSR and South Korea did not take into account the terms of the cross-recognition proposal.

It has been suggested that the position thus adopted was largely due to the underlying considerations shared by the U.S. and South Korea. First of all, after discovering North Korea's nuclear program, both insisted on its dismantling nuclear weapons as a precondition required for moving toward cross-recognition (Kim 2007, p. 46). Secondly, the popularization of the idea of "the North Korea collapse" led the U.S. to posit imminent collapse of the regime. Although the Nordpolitik declaration in 1988 by South Korean government was outwardly a re-attempt at cross-recognition, i.e., to reconcile the North with the capitalist countries, considering the fact that South Korea proved a hinderance against the progress of the U.S.–DPRK normalization (Kim 2007, pp. 51–2). In fact, the Nordpolitik was arguably a valid strategy to farther North Korea's isolation and accelerate the collapse of the regime (McCann 1997, pp. 27–8). The U.S. thus perceived diplomatic normalization as unnecessary. On August 24, 1992, the diplomatic normalization between China and South Korea was concluded, without achieving cross-recognition.

During this time period, the U.S. and North Korea saw but minor improvements in their relationship but failed to witness any qualitative change; confrontation exceeded engagement in general and the relationship was mainly characterized by hostility. China by contrast saw a transformation in its relation with North Korea: The country ceased playing a role of either the party's ally or enemy, and instead became a constructive mediator for both sides. From a historical point of view, the

cross-recognition proposal was yet a constructive formula for the various powers to reconcile and coordinate on improving stability and security on the Korean Peninsula.

1.3 The Hedge Period of Nuclear Brinkmanship Policy (1992–Present)

Starting from 1992, North Korea has been challenged with a considerably unfavorable international environment, with mounting pressure from the major powers. For instance, George W. Bush was expecting an imminent collapse of the North Korea's regime; the new Russia carried out the "leaning to one side" policy which exhibited diplomatic partiality toward South Korea and abolished its former alliance with North Korea initiated by the former Soviet Union. Although resuming its alliance with North Korea, China seemed to remain obscure with this commitment. Consequently, the North Korea's security situation deteriorated drastically with the withdrawal of military assistance and nuclear protection from its allies.

While the former Soviet-led alliance triangle was disintegrated, the U.S.-led alliance triangle remained intact. This shift in the balance of power landed South Korea in an advantaged position in its competition for power over the peninsula, in that it surpassed North Korea in terms of economic and military strength in virtue of its diplomatic normalization with the great powers as a strategically significant move. Contrarily, North Korea remained economically underdeveloped and unsuccessful in establishing meaningful diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Japan. Its domestic policies were widely criticized and the legitimacy of its regime was frequently called into question. Traumatized by its allies' past "betrayals," North Korea grew more inclined to procure nuclear weapons for security reasons. Therefore, while the unsuccessful pursuit for peace agreement and diplomatic normalization with the U.S. remained one of the primary concerns for North Korea, its nuclear program was made a troubling issue for Washington, Seoul and Beijing.

The Korean Peninsula bore witness to five nuclear crises over the years of 1992, 2002, 2013 and 2016. Despite being engaged in several bilateral and multilateral negotiations, North Korea and the U.S. nevertheless employed a nuclear brinkmanship policy. The move had heightened tension in the region as it was constantly overshadowed by the possibility of nuclear war. The brinkmanship policy was first adopted by the U.S. over its dissatisfaction with the outcomes of IAEA inspection to North Korea during the first nuclear crisis. The U.S. threatened with the use of force and conducted a series of conventional and unconventional joint military exercises with South Korea.² North Korea responded in the declaration that the joint military exercises have driven the Korean peninsula to the edge of war in the case of which it would withdraw from the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT) (Downs 1999, p. 227). In return, the U.S. adopted a tit-for-tat approach and enacted the "5027 Operation Plan" (Oplan 5027)—combined operations with goals

² The use of preemptive attacks on North Korea was implied in the "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America" published in September 17, 2002, see "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America", the White House, September 17, 2002, at: www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf.

explicitly stating that “North Korea will definitely be annihilated” and that actions should be taken to “try to topple the government of Kim Il Sung” (Lurie 1994; WT 1994). Specifically, a series of measures were taken, including “a ‘surgical operation-style’ strike at the ‘suspected nuclear facilities’ in the DPRK” and “a preemptive strike at the DPRK” (KCNA 1998). The plan was seen as a blatant attempt to achieve the reunification of the Korean peninsula by force for the establishment of a pro-American government (Oberdorfer 2002, p. 312).

While the prospect of war loomed large in the region, signs of possible shift in the country’s political situation began to emerge. The former U.S. president Jimmy Carter conveyed the message that North Korea was willing to negotiate in his visit to Pyongyang on June 15, 1994. The Carter-Kim meeting procured a DPRK agreement to freeze its nuclear program and to allow IAEA monitoring (Caprio 2003, p. 65). The outcome of the negotiation—the *U.S.–DPRK Nuclear Agreed Framework* (NAF)—was successful in pulling the region away from the brink of war. The NAF included terms of U.S.–DPRK normalization and full denuclearization on the Korean peninsula, the U.S. and North Korea, however, engaged in “buck passing behavior” and rendered NAF agreements futile in preventing the second nuclear crisis.

The shock and awe from the 9/11 attacks led to the declaration of the “war on terror.” As part of the warfare, George W. Bush proposed the Bush Doctrine as well as the “axis of evil” rhetoric which made North Korea a target of the preemptive attack (NYT 2002). The U.S. developed miniaturized and tactical nuclear weapons as part of the “limited nuclear attacks” strategy designed to eradicate North Korea’s nuclear facilities (Steinberg 2003; Shi 2003, p. 54). The DPRK responded to this threat with the declaration to battle “against any U.S. nuclear threat,” declaring that it was “fully prepared to decisively respond to any preemptive nuclear attack with a strong retaliatory blow.” In its response to the challenge, the DPRK withdrew from the NPT contending that it “will not be bound by the armistice.”³ As a result, both tension and chances for war outbreak on the Korean Peninsula were increased.

In 2003, China launched the six-party talks (6PT) as an attempt to resolve the Korean peninsula nuclear issue and to reconcile U.S.–DPRK relations. With the objective to achieve peace on the Korean peninsula and to moderate U.S.–DPRK relations, moderate progress has so far been made in such measures as the release of *the September 19 Joint Statement* of principles of the fourth round and *the February 13 Agreement* of the fifth round of six-party talks.⁴ Despite the positive outcomes of the aforementioned engagements, North Korea pulled out of the 6PT and soon contravened its initial active engagement (e.g., the leap day deal) and independently

³ See “U.S. Plans Pre-Emptive Nuclear Attack on North Korea”, at: <http://www.watchingamerica.com/koreanews000026.html>; “KCNA detailed report on circumstances of DPRK’s withdrawal from NPT”, January 22, 2003, KCNA (Pyongyang), <http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>; Seunghyun Sally Nam, “Has North Korea Terminated the Korean Armistice Agreement?” July 24, 2009, Blog of the European Journal of International Law, <http://www.ejiltalk.org/has-north-korea-terminated-the-korean-armistice-agreement/>.

⁴ See “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing”, US Department of State Archive, September 19, 2005, at: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>; “Initial Actions To Implement Six-Party Joint Statement”, US Department of State Archive, February 13, 2007, at: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/february/80508.htm>.

conducted another missile test.⁵ Hence, the North Korean nuclear issue was perceived to have entered a downward spiral of—“Nuclear Test—Sanction—Threat of Force (Military Drill)—Negotiation—Nuclear Test.” The development of events deprived any remaining trust between North Korea and the U.S. While termination of this negative cycle hinges on the cessation of the nuclear brinkmanship policy, there are still chances for the prospect to be realized. Otherwise, nuclear elevation and military conflict will continue to haunt the peninsula.

During this period, China withdrew from the “leaning to one side” policy of providing unconditional support to North Korea and shifted to adopt a balanced policy toward the two Koreas by acting along the line of nonalignment to avoid partiality. Its neutral intermediary role in the U.S.–DPRK relations led China to become more of a neighbor than a committed ally to North Korea. To a certain extent, this strategic shift in policy mirrors the Nixon Doctrine in the sense that it alerted North Korea to employ greater self-reliance in handling its own security affairs, the condition of which deteriorated as a result of its improvised and inconsistent practice. The upsurge of threat and lack of alignment from this period rendered North Korea’s incessant pursuit of nuclear weapon rather transparent in spite of its contradiction to the NPT.

2 Improving U.S.–DPRK Relations: Three Obstacles

The Cold War put an end to the U.S.–Soviet confrontation and bilateral relations thawed. However, U.S.–DPRK relations continues to be obstructed and improvement was minor to nonexistent. The prospect for normalization remained dim as multiple obstacles continues to be unsolved.

2.1 Nuclear Interests and the Denuclearization-Normalization Dilemma

It is of little doubt that the North Korean nuclear issue makes the major obstacle against any positive measures for U.S.–DPRK diplomatic normalization. The U.S. and North Korea’s fruitless embroilment over the issue was by virtue of the entangled interest involved which put restraint on the political leeway which both parties could take.

North Korea’s diplomatic and security interests can be generalized into three aspects: achieving normalization with the U.S., acquiring dependable security through nuclear weaponry, and reliable security assurance from relevant great powers (Wang 2010, p. 344). The development of nuclear weapons became the optimal option for North Korea as it is valued for its potential in improving regime survivability, defending its sovereignty, and in providing an effective bargaining chip in compelling Washington to engage in dialogues and negotiations to disintegrate the diplomatic blockade (Cheng 2009, pp. 62–63). The cause of the

⁵ On Feb 29, 2012, the U.S. and the DPRK concluded the “Leap Day Deal” with terms of providing food assistance to the DPRK, see “Background Briefing on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, Special Briefing, Senior Administration Official, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, February 29, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/02/184924.htm>.

ongoing persistence for nuclearization is mainly attributed to the regime's sense of insecurity and the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in dealing with international alienation and encirclement, in countering the perceived hostility and suppression exerted by the United States. Consequentially, the trust between Washington and Pyongyang was reduced to virtually nonexistent. On March 31, 2013, Pyongyang launched the dual-track development of nuclearization and economic construction and repeatedly attributed nuclearization to Washington's anti-DPRK policy, stating "United States' hostile policy toward the DPRK, which is the root cause for reinforcement of nuclear armed forces, and for making the correctness and inevitability of our choice and line known" (NCNK 2013). Furthermore, in the 2016 7th Party Congress report the DPRK portrayed itself as a "responsible nuclear weapons state" in spite of international disapproval (NCNK 2016). The credible regime security and survivability that nuclear weapons provide has rendered the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program increasingly difficult. Denuclearization is unlikely unless the conditions of either diplomatic normalization with the U.S. or pledge of security from a great and credible power are met.

For the U.S., the North Korean nuclear issue is a double-edged sword wielded to achieve multiple purposes. Firstly, the nuclear issue enabled the U.S. to maintain its military presence in Northeast Asia. Disregarding its dubious military capacity in opening fire toward the U.S., the U.S. is inclined to garrison its forces on the Korean peninsula to deter North Korea at proximity as well as achieve other mentioned strategic interests. Along these lines, the U.S. sees North Korea as the source of instability and insecurity in the region, which further allows disruption and terror generated by North Korea. The U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) nuclear deterrence capabilities provides legitimacy for the U.S. to station troops in South Korea. Nonetheless, as a non-trivial part of Washington's concerns, determination to deter nuclear weapons in general to guard against terrorist attacks (possibly resulting from the trauma of 9/11) has compelled the U.S. to pressure North Korea to renounce its nuclear program. The U.S.–DPRK normalization will lead to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, which shall further see the diminished role for USFK. Hence on part of the U.S., its potential interests in denuclearization conflicts with the interests in maintaining its military presence in South Korea (Li 2009, p. 10). In light of this statement, the U.S. deems a nuclearized but constrained North Korea as necessary.

Secondly, the nuclear program has provided the legitimate footing for the U.S. to alienate and antagonize North Korea. A nuclearized North Korea transgresses the international appeal for a denuclearized Korean peninsula and NPT, and Washington has along these lines successfully labeled North Korea as the "state sponsor of terrorism," "rogue state" and an "axis of evil."⁶ The resultant perception of a deceitful North Korea became evident and has consequentially generated nuclear terror and threat across the U.S. and Northeast Asia. Therefore, the negative

⁶ See Counterterrorism Office, US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, p. 80–81 at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/20177.pdf>; President Delivers State of the Union Address, The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002, at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

portrayal of North Korea acted as an obstacle for the American public and government against seeking better chances of diplomatic normalization.

While the U.S. is indisposed to normalize relations with North Korea, its government has concealed the disinclination and has listed denuclearization as the precondition for normalization in various statements. Hillary Clinton at the 2009 ASEAN Summit stated

“If they (North Korea) will agree to irreversible denuclearization, that the United States, as well as our partners, will move forward on a package of incentives and opportunities, including normalizing relations that will give the people of North Korea a better future”.⁷

As a response to the international appeal for denuclearization, Washington presented a positive image of justice through active pressurizing and supervision of the North Korean nuclear program. However, the strategic advantages which nuclear weaponry provides have been proven very difficult for North Korea to renounce. For the purpose of achieving the aforementioned constricted possession of nuclear capabilities for North Korea, the U.S. has accordingly formulated and imposed on North Korea a dilemma of denuclearization-normalization prioritization mirroring the causality dilemma—a classic chicken and egg situation.

Thirdly, the North Korean nuclear program served as leverage for the U.S. to balance the power of China, South Korea and Japan in the region. As John Feffer puts it, the North Korea’s regime has served the function of a “useful demon” (Feiffer 1999, p. 1). Pyongyang and its nuclear program was a power vacuum and a pivot of balance in the region which Washington has deliberately left unattended to in its power structure mainly out of strategic concerns. As demonstrated by the Obama administration’s Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, sustained balance of power in East Asia accords to Washington’s strategic interest of preventing the emergence of a dominant regional hegemony. In view of the China’s *de jure* alliance with North Korea, the U.S. is therefore prone to identify China as a close cohort of North Korea, thus more likely to hold China culpable for the North Korean nuclear issue. In the same regard, the threat of nuclear warfare and pollution has obliged China to cooperate with the U.S. on the North Korean nuclear issue. The North Korean nuclear program thus served as a political leverage to alienate Beijing from Pyongyang. Moreover, in its rendering China culpable for the nuclear issue, the U.S. intends to discredit China while glorifying its reputation, landing China in an awkward position.

Besides, it can be argued that Washington’s true intent lies in exploiting the nuclear terrorization to further its involvement in the region’s affairs. The United States has remained alert to “the North Korean threat” with claims that the development of North Korea’s middle and long-range ballistic missile will compromise the security of its allies, offshore troops and homeland (Gu 2001, p. 49). The Washington’s security umbrella provided little leeway for both Japan and South Korea to disaccord with Washington’s strategic interests.

⁷ See Hillary R. Clinton, U.S. Department of State Press Availability at the ASEAN Summit, July 22, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126320.htm>.

In sum, in spite of its contradictions with U.S.–DPRK diplomatic normalization, the strategic leverage provided by the North Korean nuclear issue has provided the U.S. with greater opportunities to exercise control over its allies and greater advantage in constraining China. North Korea’s nuclearization served as a pawn and a bargaining chip in Washington’s geopolitical chess match with the region’s powers.

2.2 The Dilemma of DPRK–ROK Unification

South Korea has long remained a palpable obstacle against the improvement of U.S.–DPRK relations. While both North and South Korea have renounced the use of force in achieving unification, political unification remains as the ultimate goal for both parties. The two Koreas mutually denies the sovereignty of their counterparts in spite of mutual recognition of administrative power; both parties proclaim itself as the sole legitimate sovereign state on the Korean peninsula. The antagonism between the two political powers has strained the relations to such an extent that there is little room for mutual tolerance or reconciliation for strategic gains. Along this line of thought, therefore, South Korea is likely to remain reluctant to see normalization between the U.S. and the DPRK.

Another confrontation between the two Koreas lies in their diverging and conflicting views on the specific type of unification to be achieved. Four political models have so far been proposed, on the basis of the sovereign or statehood aimed at upon unification, i.e., the unitary state, the federal state (akin to the U.S.), the confederate state, and the “one country, two systems” state (akin to the China). In fact, the DPRK proposes the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo (DCRK) as a federation model of “one nation, one state, two systems, and two governments” (Yoon and Han in Park 2010). South Korea on the other hand pursues to establish a unitary state or a Korean Community. On March 28, 2014, in Germany, South Korean president Park Geun Hye proposed the Dresden Doctrine for achieving North–South Korea reunification following Germany’s example. This tripartite model comprises an “agenda for humanity” that promotes humanitarian personnel exchanges and visits; an “agenda for co-prosperity” that encompasses cooperation on infrastructure projects in agriculture, forestry, communication and telecommunication; and an “agenda for integration between the people of South and North Korea” that suggests cultural exchanges (KH 2014). The proposed reunification following Germany’s model hinted at the strategic planning of the North regime collapse and reunification via absorption of North Korea, to which North Korea reacted with discontent, which reinforced the distrust between the two parties (Kang 2015).

Additionally, there is a paradoxical aspect to the U.S.–ROK alliance and normalization of U.S.–DPRK. In cases where tension on the Korean peninsula elevates, South Korea becomes reluctant in seeing normalization between the U.S. and North Korea as it will inevitably lead to breaking the balance in favor of the North. On the contrary, the U.S. becomes disinclined to see improved ROK–DPRK relations under circumstances where the regional tension eases. In scenarios where U.S. and the DPRK normalized their relations, the reconciliation between the two Koreas will more likely follow suit. However, in scenarios where the two Koreas

either conclude a peace agreement or reach an accord on reunification, the very foundation of the U.S.–ROK alliance and its strategic foundation in Northeast Asia will be undermined. Thus, for the U.S. there is a reasonable sense of reluctance against normalization with the DPRK, as weighed against the potential interest gained from preventing reconciliation between the two Koreas. Hence, the U.S.’s security arrangement with South Korea serves as a stable platform to exert its influence and to seek further strategic interests in the region.

2.3 The Sino–U.S. Dual Power Structure in Northeast Asia

China’s recent rise has displaced the U.S. unipolar structure in Northeast Asia with the emerging Sino–U.S. dual power structure. Dissimilar to the bipolar U.S.–USSR structure, this dual power structure secures the leadership role of the U.S. in security while allowing China to drive the economy ahead in Northeast Asia.⁸ Instead of challenging the superpower status of the U.S., China has alleged disinterest in becoming a global leader but the international respect. Strategic interests in the peninsula are neither mutually exclusive nor zero-sum for Beijing and Washington (Gu and Zhao 2013, p. 86). The “New Type of Great Power Relationship” was clear demonstration for a serious endeavor to avoid military conflict in the U.S.–China power confrontation, to bridge structural contradictions and to sustain strategic interdependence (Da 2013, p. 61; Gu 2013, p. 85). China is inclined to bolster cooperation, increase engagement and agreeably manage their relations. In spite of the foregoing, the U.S. persists to recognize China as the greatest threat to its global hegemony and thus the target for the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy.

Despite its pronounced emphasis on managing the U.S.–China relations and imposed request for China’s cooperative responses in various international affairs, as demonstrated in the “meeting at Annenberg Estate” and the “evening talks at Yingtai,”⁹ the U.S. has held its supreme interest in preserving its superpower status and global hegemony. Its growing awareness of China’s rapid development has, however, caused the U.S. to refrain from making further compromise on any of its strategic interests on the peninsula and to strategically suppress China by seeking various opportunities (i.e., the Korean peninsula issue and THAAD installment, the Chinese South Sea dispute, the Diaoyu Islands dispute)

The dual power structure between the U.S. and China has rendered the cooperation on grounds of shared interests with co-existing differences on the North Korea nuclearization issue. In this regard, the structural contradictions between the China and the U.S. provided exploitable opportunities for North Korea to secure its interests. North Korea has therefore strategically fueled the existing conflicts between U.S. and China, giving rise to further difficulty for China to mediate between the U.S. and North Korea. Such as U.S.–China nuclearization issue debate, wherein China supports a peaceful resolution within the framework of the 6PT as opposed to the U.S.’s peaceful talk not excluding force as a viable option. Such

⁸ See Zhang (2014), pp. 52–72 and Jin et al. (2013), pp. 117–127.

⁹ See “Yang Jiechi’s Remarks on the Results of the Presidential Meeting between Xi Jinping and Obama at the Annenberg Estate”, FMPRC, June 9, 2013, at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t1049263.shtml>.

dissonance was demonstrated in the recent THAAD installment issue where China argued that the deployment of the missile defense system would only escalate tensions. The U.S.–China discord resulted in the failure to issue a joint condemnation on North Korea at the Security Council meeting (Nichols 2016). Although China has lightened sanctions on North Korea by suspending its coal imports in 2017, it failed to stop the deployment of THAAD, which however worsening the situation of Northeast Asia. The structural contradictions and dissonance have resultantly created favorable conditions for North Korea, which fueled the general suspicion for China's resolution and efficiency in resolving the issue, which will in turn undercut China's efficacy in facilitating the U.S.–DRPK normalization.

In a word, the key of the normalization issue lies in the hands of the U.S. and North Korea. The obstacles between the U.S.–DPRK normalization will disappear with the discontinuation of U.S.'s discrimination for North Korea's political system. Refraining from demonizing North Korea will create favorable conditions for Pyongyang to denuclearize and integrate with the international system.

3 Achieving U.S.–DPRK Diplomatic Normalization: Three Possible Measures

Drawing from historical experience, this paper suggests three possible measures for achieving U.S.–DPRK diplomatic normalization in cases where U.S. intends to normalize its relations with the DPRK, i.e., the extreme, the unconventional and the conventional measure.

3.1 The Extreme Measure

The extreme measure accentuates the use of preemptive military action in toppling the current North Korea regime to capitalize the ensuing opportunity to establish diplomatic relations with the succeeding regime. In North Korea's perception, the possibility of this scenario is well supported by the various military interventions that the U.S. has conducted on the basis of anti-terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation (Wang 2010, p. 38). In consideration of Washington's superior military power, the use of force is the most immediate method to achieve the regime change necessary for solving the mounting nuclear issue. Since Trump's election, clear emphasis has been attached to allying with ROK and intensifying joint military drills. Trump administration remains indecisive concerning its policy toward DPRK, with its hawkish cabinet's review of policy on preemptive strike to North Korea's nuclear problem and pushing North Korea's regime change, which overcasts the peninsula with a misty future. However, the possibility and potential hazards of seeking this final resort is questionable. In a previous paper, the author employed the decision tree approach to present the argument that the possibility of U.S. resorting to force to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue is low and that such an act would likely produce insufficient results.¹⁰ In fact, the ominous outcome of military involvement

¹⁰ See Zhu (2011), pp. 58–62.

has been well documented in U.S. history, as demonstrated by the 1950 Korean war and the 2003 invasion of Iraq which, respectively, led to the unfavorable Korean War Armistice Mechanism and unsatisfactory prolonged post-war governance.

On the other hand, the favorability of the use of force makes it necessary to reconsider China's role in the balance of power. China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi pronounced three principles by which China's North Korea policy is guided, "First the Korean Peninsula cannot be nuclearized. This applies to the North and South. Second, there is no military solution to this issue. If there is a war or turbulence it is not acceptable for China. Third, China will not allow its legitimate interests including in national security interests to be undermined."¹¹ To say the least, China's interest in a peaceful, prosperous and nuclear-free Korea peninsula is substantive and ought not be regarded as mere political rhetoric. A scenario where U.S. and South Korea launches a joint military attack on North Korea will lead to the unfavorable collapse of the various ongoing engagements and cooperation. (e.g., the "New Type of Great Power Relationship," the Sino-ROK FTA and two countries' Strategic Cooperative Partnership).

Furthermore, the ideality of this approach is somewhat undermined by the prospect of Chinese military intervention in the case of war. This possibility is supported by China's alleged intolerance of "any troubles at its doors"¹² and aforementioned principles of "no nukes, no chaos and no war on the Korean peninsula." On the part of his business savvy and strategic target, the real purpose of Trump is more to play a Chicken Game rather than venturing to provoke a military conflict with China, or it would be an unwise choice. In sum, the extreme measure is in general the least favorable approach for achieving U.S.-DPRK normalization.

3.2 The Unconventional Measure

The unconventional measure to solving the political issue features the role of various peace and trust building mechanisms in advancing the U.S.-DPRK normalization, especially in form of breakthrough diplomacy, secret diplomacy and summit diplomacy. In this regard, normalization of Sino-U.S. relations initiated by President Nixon may have set a successful example, as demonstrated in his 1972 address:

"There will always be conflict in the world, and turbulent change and international rivalries. However, we can seek a new structure of global relationships in which all nations, friend and adversary, participate and have a stake. We can seek to build this into a world in which all nations, great and small, can live without fear that their security and survival are in danger, and without fear that every conflict contains for them the potential for Armageddon. In such a structure of peace, habits of moderation and compromise can be

¹¹ See John Irish, "China urges U.N. action to make North Korea 'pay price'", Reuters, Feb. 12, 2016, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-wangyi-korea-usa-idUSKCN0VL15S>; "President Xi Jinping calls to President Park Geun-hye", FMPRC, February 5, 2016, at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676524/xgxw_676530/t1338926.shtml.

¹² See Foreign Minister of Chinese Foreign Affairs Wang Yi's Address, Xinhuanet, April 7, 2013, at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-04/07/c_124544737.htm.

nurtured, and peoples and nations will find their fullest opportunities for social progress, justice, and freedom. This is what we mean by a generation of peace.”¹³

What Nixon refers to as “moderation and compromise” can lend valuable insights to present-day leadership in solving the political dilemma. The U.S. and both Koreas have made several failed attempts in solving the nuclearization issue. Whether U.S.–DPRK normalization can mirror Nixon’s diplomatic success still depends on whether the U.S., South Korea and North Korea leadership can break away from the cold war mentality and demonstrate keen diplomatic acumen.

For the U.S., despite the pervasive expectations for a major turn in policy toward North Korea with Obama’s presidential election, to a large extent, Obama’s policy has not departed far from that of its predecessors, i.e., hinging the normalization on the terms of denuclearization as well as the adoption of existing mechanisms (e.g., the 6PT). DPRK’s Institute for Disarmament and Peace of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in a article that the two joint military exercises—Key Resolve and Foal Eagle—and the failure to exclude North Korea from the “list of countries against which it will not use nuclear weapons” by Obama Administration has shown that “nothing had changed from the previous policy pursued by Bush Administration, which designated us as a target of a nuclear preemptive strike” (Kim 2016). No significant improvements in U.S.–DPRK relations have been observed. While Obama realized the country’s normalization with Cuba, he, however, failed to make substantial progress in U.S.–DPRK relations. Nonetheless, such unconventional measures as the summit diplomacy, e.g., U.S.–DPRK leadership meetings, may provide further possibilities of the normalization between the U.S. and the DPRK. This point can be supported by the expressed willingness to engage with Kim Jong-Un by the U.S. president-elect Donald Trump (Kopan 2016). The Trump phenomenon may play a key role in promoting the relations of U.S.–DPRK is not impossible.

For the two Koreas, North Korea’s “federation” formula closely resembles the Cross-Strait reconciliation policy of China. The Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) between Mainland and Taiwan was a diplomatic feat realized on basis of political trust, open communication and economic as well as cultural exchanges. While the Cross-Strait reconciliation was exemplary in settling political confrontations as well as bolstering economic and cultural exchanges, building political trust between the various interest parties involved in the Korean peninsula issues may call for more concrete efforts beyond political rhetoric. The accidental impeachment of President Park Gyeong Hye, which led to her being dismissed the presidential authority, who had been most expected to realize the two Korean leaders’ meeting, which added some uncertainty between the inter-Korea. For the North, despite the relentless pursuit of nuclear weaponry, North Korea should neither be perceived as unreconcilable nor irrational. As demonstrated in his 2014 New Year appeal to improve relations with the South, North Korea has made attempts at reconciliation with South Korea and the international community

¹³ See “Third Annual Report on U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1969–1976, Vol. 1, Document 104, at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d104>.

(KCNA 2014; RS 2014). The U.S. and South Korea nevertheless failed to respond positively to North Korea's gesture of reconciliation. The North's fourth and fifth nuclear test in 2016 as well as the South's deployment of THAAD has led to the rapid deterioration of U.S.–DPRK, inter-Korean, Sino–DPRK and Sion–ROK relations and subverted any of the trust previously established. Consequently, the prospect of improving DPRK–U.S./ROK relations by means of summit and breakthrough diplomacy became dim. Accordingly, the resolution of the normalization and the nuclear issue remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, the dim prospect does not entirely eliminate the possibility of a smooth diplomatic progress. How far the diplomatic approach may lead the two countries toward normalization, to a large extent, relies on the decisions of the leaderships and the changing international situation, specifically, to what extent will Trump inherit Nixon's diplomatic decisiveness in handling the U.S.–DPRK relations; his willingness in prioritizing the resolution of normalization over the North Korean nuclear issue. There is no indication that the U.S. will conform to North Korea's interests, but it will be a welcome practice on part of North Korea for gaining respect and trust. Whether Park's successors can generate trust between the two Koreas will eventually hinge on the leadership's commitment and drawing from experiences and wisdom of their predecessors, among others, the West Germany's eastward-looking policy on propelling inter-Korean summit diplomacy to achieve DPRK–ROK normalization and the subsequential improvement in US–DPRK relations.¹⁴ The concern boils down to whether Kim Jong-Un will consistently implement denuclearization and reconciliation as opposed to nuclearization and confrontation.

3.3 The Conventional Measure

Dissimilar to the previous two approaches, the conventional measure highlights the role of the conventional existing mechanisms (e.g., 6PT) and future peace mechanisms in achieving normalization (e.g., the Korean Peninsula Peace Regime).

In its attempt to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and propel the normalization between the U.S. and North Korea, China has launched a series of negotiation mechanisms, namely the three-party talks, the four-party talks and the six-party talks. However, in 2009 after the U.N. Security Council unanimously condemned Pyongyang of a missile launch conducted in April 9, North Korea declared to pull out of 6PT on April 14, claiming that the talks “have turned into a platform for infringing upon the sovereignty of the DPRK” and have become “useless” in addressing its security concerns (KT 2009; Moore 2009). On restarting the negotiation, Washington has listed a number of actions to be taken: “number one, it's going to take some time for these particular unilateral undertakings to play out and to pan out. Number two, we will need any number of consultations with the other parties in the six-party geometry. That is going to take some time. A final

¹⁴ The West Germany's Eastward-looking Policy was proposed by West Germany Chancellor, Willy Brandt in 1969. It implemented the compromise with the Soviet orbit and pursued the normalization between the two Germany.

thing is we will need to be able to signal to the North Koreans in a solid fashion, an undivided fashion, what will be on the table at six-party, and what can't be on the table at six-party. That's simply going to take a long time to work out.”¹⁵ This has shown that the 6PT has not been satisfactory in achieving normalization between U.S. and North Korea as an existing mechanism.

The emerging mutual skepticism between U.S. and North Korea has cast a shadow into the prospect of fruitful negotiation, reducing chances for compromise and agreements. Historical records have shown that agreements between these two parties usually fail to come through. No party is willing to venture on engaging with trust given the lack of punitive mechanisms enforceable to disrupters of the process. Additionally, even in cases of the successful restart of the 6PT, the current enmity and deficiency of trust will pose a serious threat on the U.S. and North Korea to depart from the “stag hunt dilemma” and proceed to normalization. This paper suggests that the resolution of the North Korea nuclear issues should be in an order where either normalization precedes the denuclearization or both occur concurrently.

In regard to prospective mechanisms, while the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Peace Regime (KPPR) will likely provide momentum for the U.S. and North Korea to proceed with normalization, the absence of formal diplomatic relation between the U.S. and North Korea per se is contradictorily the main obstacle for the establishment of such a mechanism. Given the enmity and lack of trust, there is significant difficulty in establishing the peace regime in the absence of diplomatic normalization.

This paper argues that the resolution of the aforementioned dilemma hinges on the policy choices of U.S. and China as well as their cooperation. China should demonstrate further independence from U.S.'s North Korea policy in its future policies. As the superpower status and the second-biggest economy, respectively, both the U.S. and China should act as responsible stakeholders of the region; U.S. should refrain from strategic hedging against China, develop trust and cooperate with China on regional affairs (Zhao 2007, pp. 609–637). The “New Type of Great Power Relationship” and its elements of “no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and win–win cooperation” should become the political keystone and code of conduct for the U.S. and China to cooperate on the establishment of the peace regime as well as provide other public goods conducive to the region's peace and security (e.g., multilateral Foreign Minister Meetings, summit diplomacy). With the cooperative provision of region public goods, summit diplomacy can be useful in outlining a reconciliation framework to be implemented through the existing and prospective mechanisms.

Other than the aforementioned three approaches to achieving U.S.–DPRK normalization, there is an additional approach to address the possible collapse of North Korea. Without closely discussing its possibility or possible outcomes, this paper explores two possible courses of how the U.S.–DPRK relations will develop in the event this popular assumption comes true. Scenario one shall see the development of events following the German experience, in that South Korea will

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, “Background Briefing on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea”.

advance and unify the peninsula and thus eliminate the issue of U.S.–DPRK normalization. Scenario two shall witness the North struggling to remain an independent nation after experiencing a regime change; the issue of U.S.–DPRK normalization will thus remain unresolved; this scenario will refer us back to the preceding three approaches in which the ultimate solution may reside.

In sum, over the last two decades, the U.S.–DPRK normalization and the North Korean nuclear issue have disrupted the peace and stability of the region, along with the fifth nuclear tests and the THAAD dispute, the situation has only exacerbated. The paper argues that the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is an extended and complicated process. Unconventional measures are thus required to establish the initial momentum to achieve a necessary political breakthrough, before promoting diplomatic reconciliation by following a stepwise conventional strategy, to contribute to the peace, security and stability in Northeast Asia.

4 The Three-Step Formula: Significance, Implications and Outcome

4.1 Proposition and Dimension

For either the unconventional-mechanism channel or the conventional-mechanism channel, both will call for a blueprint for the involving parties to follow. The paper suggests a three-step formula:

As the First step, as “warring parties” of the Korean War, China, the U.S., South Korea and North Korea shall sign a peace treaty to replace the existing Korean Armistice Agreement and terminate the technical state of war. The treaty concurrently takes effect with the establishment of the U.S.–DPRK diplomatic normalization. *As the Second step*, the four parties proceed to sign a security assurance agreement and restrain any party from resorting to the use of military force or threat of warfare. The effective enforcement of the agreement hinges on the joint collaboration between U.S. and China. The agreement takes effect concurrent with North Korea’s fulfillment of the denuclearization. *As the final Step*, all parties shall establish a joint peace committee on collective management for the purpose of overseeing the implementation of the agreements. The UN can complement this process by setting up a supervisory commission composed of third-party nations to keep informed of the progress.

4.2 Necessary and Significance

The existing armistice mechanism has been deficient in curbing tensions and preventing conflicts in Northeast Asia; North Korea and its nuclearization continues to disrupt the development and stability of the region. For the two Koreas, the technical state of war on the peninsula has entangled the two in a security dilemma and brought nuclear threat to the region. Considering China’s role as a combatant of the Korean War and a signatory of the Korean Armistice Agreement, its embroilment in the regional conflicts which may give rise to another inter-Korean war is unavoidable. The situation has generated friction with U.S. and South Korea

and has put restraint on the country's engagement in international affairs. While China's normalization with South Korea and U.S. was conducive to ameliorating the disagreements in relation to the North Korean nuclear issue, it was, however, an insufficient and doomed attempt to generate fundamental changes. In addition, the unfavorable conditions have disrupted the economic activities between China and the two Koreas, inhibited the U.S. and China from making further commitment to establishing the "New Type of Great Power Relationship," and threatened the security of China's Northeast with greater obstacles for its resolving disputes with neighboring countries over the Diaoyu Island and South China Sea issue. China is thus in a quagmire of fighting at two fronts: the contest for security at the north and sovereignty at the south. For the U.S., sure, the technical state of war situation can serve its balancing strategy to Northeast Asia, to exploit certain regional tensions and to stimulate certain regional conflicts, but it also is a double-edged sword, because the U.S. could be easily involved in the threat of war.

Given the aforementioned situations, the preceding three-step formula is significant in providing political guidance to remove the threat posed by the looming war between the two Koreas. The formula establishes a multitude of mechanisms to ensure non-interference in the affairs of the Korean peninsula by any third party. It leaves the two Koreas to their own devices to settle their inter conflicts and facilitate the establishment of a compatible model on the Korean peninsula inclusive of the U.S.–ROK/Sino–DPRK alliancing relationship. The formula also provides a collective security framework and a model for a collective governance. It also provides the condition for the establishment of a co-management mechanism indiscriminate of a nation's size and power, a result which the interests of all involving parties are satisfied. By addressing the collective interests of the stakeholders, several goals can be achieved: The U.S.–DPRK diplomatic normalization can be concluded; the Korean peninsula can achieve denuclearization and move toward reconciliation; both China and the U.S. can gain a favorable strategic position with increased influence over the peninsula; even Russia and Japan, by way of managing a supervisory commission as third-party nations, can also realize their own interests as long as they abandon their age-long ambition of seizing possession of the Korean peninsula. Even in case that a certain form of unification on the Korean peninsula happens to be actualized with the adoption of the three-step formula, the interests of the involved stakeholders will still be satisfied; all parties should enjoy a denuclearized, stable, secure and flourishing Korean peninsula. To achieve such a situation from which all party shall benefit is an astounding political feat.

4.3 Implications and Outcome

The successful implementation of the three-part formula holds extensive implications for the major interest groups in Northeast Asia, especially for China, the U.S., South Korea and North Korea. In this section, a detailed analysis will be presented on the implications for these three countries, respectively.

For China, confrontation with the U.S. similar to the cold war between the U.S. and the USSR will arguably become China's greatest fear. In addition, China is

unwilling to see the emergence of a hostile North Korea after its normalization with the U.S. While the U.S.–DPRK normalization will undoubtedly transform the bilateral relations between Beijing, Washington and Pyongyang; the transformed relationship between North Korea and other states will address the uncertainties. The three-step formula will provide a possible way to manage and balance them.

First, the formula is consistent with China's unwavering position of achieving denuclearization and maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula via dialogues and negotiations.¹⁶ China will be able to retain its alignment with North Korea, defend its interests and clearly define Sino–DPRK relationship; China can achieve balance in its diplomacy by upholding an impartial position in its engagement with the two Koreas in dealing with various diplomatic affairs. In addition, the formula allows U.S.–DPRK normalization to be established without further damage to China–DPRK relations.

Second, the strategic significance of North Korea as China's geopolitical shield is not to be dismissed. The geopolitical importance of the Korean peninsula has foregrounded China's interest in maintaining the peace and stability of the region as compared to the U.S. The current armistice as an unreliable mechanism is merely capable of maintaining an unstable and temporary state of peace. Given its obvious limitations, this scenario behooves China to provide a dialogue platform to propel U.S.–DPRK relations. The proposed formula for establishing peace regime will eliminate chances of war on the peninsula as well as secure China's northeast. The peace regime will provide a measure for North Korea to reverse its currently negative image and subsequently deprive U.S. of its strategic leverage against China. With North Korea's transformation into a credible ally, improved peace and security on the Korean peninsula will further offer a more favorable environment for China to safeguard its interests and sovereignty of Diaoyu Islands and South China Sea.

Third, the conclusion of the peace regime will ensure a peaceful and secure environment for North Korea to carry out domestic economic reform. In this regard, China's experience may provide insights for developing a North Korea's version of the "opening-up policy." An economically robust North Korea will in turn lead to greater dependence for the Chinese market, thus sustaining the momentum for growth of a healthy relationship with China. Presumably, an open North Korea market in the future will bring benefit to China, especially its northeast and will likely lead to a Sino–DPRK FTA, a favorable trend of development in economic ties which is expected to fill the "gap" in Northeast Asia for Beijing's "the Belt and Road" initiative. It is of little doubt that North Korea and China would mutually benefit from an economically promising relationship.

The United States as the most critical actor in the three-step formula is likely to adopt a less cooperative stance in tackling the changes. Such opposition is largely estimable given its apprehension of the proposition's potential infringement of its national interest, and possible damage to its Asia-pacific strategy, the U.S.–ROK

¹⁶ See Vice Foreign Minister of Chinese Foreign Affairs Liu Zhenmin's Comments on Asian Situation and Neighborhood Diplomacy, "Forging Ahead with Determination, Playing the Main Melody of Asian Cooperation", FMPRC, Dec. 31, 2013, at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjbxw_602253/t1113493.shtml.

alliance and the USFK; it may further impair the U.S.–Japan alliance and the United States Force Japan (USFJ). The misgiving on part of the U.S. is reasonable notwithstanding, it would be a different scenario seen from a different perspective.

First, does the establishment of the peace regime really contradict the U.S.–ROK alliance and the existence of the USFK? The compatibility of the peace regime and the U.S.–ROK alliance can be attained by remodification of the alliance in the same framework as the three-step approach is proposed. The current structural changes in the international system have inclined to mitigate the friend-foe dichotomy, which leads the intent of an alliance relationship to transform into coping to competition rather than hostility. Therefore, in the event the U.S.–DRPK normalization and successful denuclearization, the U.S.–ROK and the Sino–DPRK alliances will transform from an adversarial relationship to a benign competitive–cooperative relationship, enabling the two alliances to effectively contribute to the implementation of the three-step peace-seeking approach. The USFK can accordingly combine with Chinese and the two Korean military forces to develop into a peacekeeping force conducive to the operation of the proposed joint peace committee on collective management.

Second, the USFJ's presence will not be undermined by the adoption of the three-step approach given the distinction in the role of the USFJ and the USFK. The USFK as situated in the enduring inter-Korean war will likely lose its motivation for existence with the conclusion of a peace agreement. However, as part of the post-WWII arrangements, the USFJ acts mainly against Jingoism and to help maintain balance within the post-war international system. Given their different roles, the withdrawal of the USFK will not affect the USFJ for the same reason. Hence, the U.S. can maintain its military presence at Northeast Asia in either the scenario of transition or that of withdrawal of the USFK.

Third, while the ongoing conflicts on Korean peninsula have provided exploitable strategic opportunities for the U.S. to put constraints on China, the deficiency of the armistice agreement combined with the nuclearization has produced greater possibility for intense military conflicts which largely contradict with U.S.'s Asia-Pacific strategic goals. In this case, the sustaining of the armistice regime and the utilization of the nuclearization issue as a strategic pawn therefore turn into a double-edged sword which do not constitute a most favorable Nash Equilibrium¹⁷ for the United States. The three-step approach is conversely the Pareto-optimal outcome for the U.S. as it corresponds with U.S.'s national security interests as well as the goal of “peace and security” highlighted in the Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy.¹⁸ Whether or not Trump Administration will change this strategy, a peaceful peninsula seems more pertinent to “America First” doctrine and “Make America Great Again” strategy than a war-torn peninsula.

For North Korea and South Korea, the three-step approach will possibly put an end to the quasi-war, with mutual benefits to reap. *First*, the normalization with the U.S., the dismantlement of the nuclear program and the establishment of the peace

¹⁷ For more on Nash Equilibriums, see Nash (1950): pp. 48–49 and (1951): pp. 286–295.

¹⁸ See Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Century America’s Pacific Century”, US department of State, November 10, 2011, at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176999.htm>.

regime will terminate its being isolated from the international surroundings, improve the recognition of its regime legitimacy and subsequently create a favorable external environment for North Korea. This development will help draw North Korea out from its current security dilemma and restore its political stability, boost its economic development and improve its people's livelihood. *Second*, without the nuclear weapons' threat and with the elimination of South Korea's security dilemma, inter-Korean relations will change for the better, with increasing public recognition. The facilitated economic activities between the two parties will propel the normalization progress and ensure security, enabling the formation of a complementary relationship. The North can provide a lucrative market and material resources to the South, while the South can export technology and investment to the North; hence, FTA between the two Koreas can be expected. In addition, the existing armistice agreement fails to ensure security for the two parties to engage in major political cooperations. In contrast, the peace regime will see better chances to provide momentum for a breakthrough in political relations and will allow the unification of Korea to kickoff and progress spontaneously.

In sum, given the current hinderance and volatile political situation on the Korean Peninsula, the three-step approach may face many obstacles before being put into actual practice. However, the current situation behooves all stakeholders to adopt an *avante-garde* approach to overcome the current dilemma of the Korean peninsula.

5 Conclusion

The feasibility and practicability of the stepwise formula will be applicable if the interest groups involved are willing to take action, especially the cooperation between China and the U.S. The unified efforts of the U.S. and China at preserving security on the Korean peninsula should be made in the form of a co-management rather than shared domination of the region. As Hillary Clinton states,

“Now, some believe that China on the rise is, by definition, an adversary. To the contrary, we believe that the United States and China can benefit from and contribute to each other's successes. You know very well how important China is and how essential it is that we have a positive, cooperative relationship. It is vital to peace and prosperity, not only in Asia–pacific region, but worldwide. Now, from a Chinese aphorism that says, ‘when you are in a common boat, you need to cross the river peacefully together.’”¹⁹

In a similar note, Obama has been trying “to shape a new liberal global order with the United States still in the lead but sharing more responsibilities and burdens with others where possible or necessary” (Indyk et al. 2012 pp. 29–43). Therefore, there is a need for the U.S. and China to cooperate in providing regional public

¹⁹ See Hillary Clinton first major policy speech at Asia Society New York Headquarters, “U.S.–Asia Relations: Indispensable to Our Future”, Feb. 13, 2009, at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/117333.htm>.

goods conducive to the denuclearization and the improvement of security. The deficiency of the existing armistice mechanism and the full-ranged threat of the North Korean nuclear program have given impetus to the three parties of U.S., China and South Korea to compromise their respective interests and collaborate to achieve a win–win resolution.

The deployment of the THAAD has caused serious damage to China’s national interest and security, which is the intended consequence on part of U.S. using the North Korean nuclear issue as an excuse. With strengthened military installment on the peninsula, the security crisis between the two Koreas has been expanded into Sino–U.S. security dilemma. The THAAD disputes have posed threats on both Sino–ROK and Sino–U.S. relations; the dire situation makes it necessary for the U.S. and China to reconsider the security issue and to adopt a reciprocal stance toward safeguarding the countries as related to adopt a reciprocal stance toward seeking shared security rather than security for individual countries.

Admittedly, China cannot afford to dismiss the US’s prominent presence in the region and has expressed disinterest in challenging its hegemony. As Charles A. Kupchan argued, the structural changes of the international system are marked by the diffusion of power rather than by a transition from one great power (the United States) to another (China). The likely result of these structural changes is not a twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century multipolar system, but a mosaic of “multiple modernities” rooted in distinct histories and political models (Jentleson 2012, p. 173). Disregarding this general trend, the U.S. continues to emphasize its hegemony in a unipolar system, where distrust and confrontation shall persist. Historical records have well demonstrated the damage a jeopardized U.S.–China relationship would likely cause. Conversely, a benign cooperative relationship is argued to have a better chance to lead the world to a better future (Zheng 2013, pp. 13–18).

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Qin Zhu is a Research Assistant Fellow at Institute of International Studies, Fudan University and Collaborative Institute of Fudan University, Collaborative Innovation Center for Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights (CICTSMR). Her primary research focuses on the diplomacy thought of Chinese and Korean person, Sino–U.S. relations in regards with the Korean peninsula, the independent movement on the Korean peninsula and the dispute of China's Neighboring Maritime Rights.