



Tangled Threats

**Integrating U.S. Strategies toward
China and North Korea**

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Executive Summary

China and North Korea pose intertwined challenges for U.S. and allied policy. The Korean Peninsula constitutes just one area among many in U.S.-China relations. Meanwhile, issues on the peninsula remain central to the future stability and security of Northeast Asia and implicate many broader questions about regional and global order. Dealing with China and North Korea as an interlocking pair requires integrated policies that balance the risks and rewards of various possible approaches. This policy brief explains how to develop such policies and why they are the best option for the current regional landscape.

North Korea plays several roles in China's foreign policy. These include diverting geopolitical attention away from China, providing Beijing with an opportunity to cooperate with other states, creating a point of leverage for China to extract concessions on separate issues, and acting as a flashpoint with the potential for a regional war that directly affects China's security. At any given time, some roles will be more pronounced than others, but each of them is always present to some degree.

Any integrated U.S. strategy toward the pair will have to account for a volatile geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia. Major trends include closer ties between Beijing and Pyongyang, deteriorating U.S.-China relations, and South Korea's desire, especially under the government of President Moon Jae-in, to engage North Korea while balancing ties with China and the United States.

The United States should employ a strategy toward China and North Korea that blends calibrated pressure and results-oriented engagement. The goal of this strategy should be problem-management rather than problem-solving. Washington should implement this approach across four areas: shaping U.S.-China relations regarding the Korean Peninsula; engaging North Korea on political and security issues; promoting stable deterrence in the region; and coordinating a shared inter-Korean and foreign policy with South Korea.

Key recommendations for the United States include acknowledging that major breakthroughs are unlikely with either China or North Korea; proposing four-party nuclear and peace talks with South Korea, North Korea, China, and the United States; and standing up a Nuclear Planning Group that includes Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to bolster deterrence and stem nuclear proliferation pressures.

Introduction

Geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia are increasingly volatile, as U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies and tensions persist on the Korean Peninsula. Addressing issues on the Korean Peninsula constitutes just one area among many in U.S.-China relations, but challenges on the peninsula remain central to the future of Northeast Asia's regional political and security arrangements. This reality raises the parallel questions: Where does the Korean Peninsula fit into U.S.-China strategic competition? And how will competition between Washington and Beijing affect Korean Peninsula affairs?

This policy brief explores the intersection of the China challenge and the North Korea threat and assesses the implications for U.S. national security policy. It proceeds in three parts: The paper starts by detailing the multiple strategic roles that North Korea plays in China's foreign and security policy. It then examines the current environment in and around the Korean Peninsula with a focus on U.S. and Chinese approaches toward peace and nuclear negotiations in the context of strategic competition between the two major powers. The last section considers potential policy frameworks for approaching China and North Korea as an interlocking pair and concludes with recommendations for policymakers.

North Korea's Roles in China's Foreign Policy

The Korean Peninsula plays a major role in U.S.-China relations, and Beijing holds significant influence over events on the peninsula. The longstanding debate about whether North Korea is a strategic liability or asset for China does not fully capture the situation's complexity, however.¹ A more apt way to view the situation is to recognize that Pyongyang plays four major strategic roles for Beijing: (1) geopolitical diversion, (2) cooperation opportunity, (3) leverage option, and (4) flashpoint. At any given time, some roles will be more pronounced than others, but each of them is always present to some degree.

Geopolitical diversion. The North Korean military threat requires China's competitors in the United States, Japan, and especially South Korea to devote a significant share of their defense resources and policy attention to countering Pyongyang. Absent the North Korea threat, at least some of those resources

would likely be redirected toward balancing China's expanding military power. Given the growing military imbalance in East Asia between China and its neighbors and the continued demand for U.S. forces both regionally and globally, this dilutionary effect matters for the overall balance of power in the region. Policymakers in Beijing are unlikely to acknowledge this dynamic publicly. But it is reasonable to infer from their actions that Chinese leaders understand it and that North Korea's role in reducing military pressure on China itself is not something Beijing is eager to change. That is true even as Chinese leaders simultaneously understand that North Korea's provocations provide a legitimate justification for deepening military cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and, in certain areas, Japan.

Cooperation opportunity. China has at times coordinated with the United States and others—including South Korea, Japan, and Russia—to help constrain North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and generally promote peace and stability on the peninsula. The most prominent example of Beijing playing this role came during the Six-Party Talks that ran from 2003 until 2009, when Pyongyang formally withdrew.² China also agreed to and appeared to enforce

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new United Nations (U.N.) sanctions on North Korea in the 2016–2017 period.³ Although it is difficult to ascribe motivations for Chinese leaders' decisions, both examples of cooperative periods came on the heels of high tensions on the peninsula and reports that the United States was considering military action against North Korea's nuclear apparatus. Beijing might have felt compelled to cooperate to head off strikes. More broadly, the other parties seek out China's assistance as a partner for engaging North Korea because Beijing is a major power in Northeast Asia; North Korea's main neighbor other than South Korea; Pyongyang's top trading partner and nominal ally; a fellow authoritarian regime; and an established nuclear power. Those attributes mean that China has more influence with North Korea than any other state.

Leverage option. The attributes listed above simultaneously give China leverage with other states that it can use to try to extract concessions on separate issues—ranging from Taiwan to human rights to trade—in return for China’s help on dealing with North Korea. China could, in theory, use its influence to rein in Pyongyang if Beijing had the right incentives to do so. Some policymakers spend less time evaluating how much influence China actually has or is willing to use over North Korea. That topic merits closer examination given Beijing’s apparent concern that any meaningful pressure on Pyongyang could itself cause a crisis or collapse. Instead, policymakers often focus on the possibility that China could theoretically squeeze Kim Jong Un’s regime. Just the potential for China to exert pressure on North Korea has historically been enough to persuade policymakers in Seoul, Washington, and elsewhere to consider concessions on other issues as a means of enticing Beijing to act in a constructive manner. Chinese leaders relish this type of valuable leverage.

Flashpoint. Finally, the Korean Peninsula is a major flashpoint in U.S.-China relations along with areas such as Taiwan and the East and South China Seas.⁴ In fact, it is the only place in history where U.S. and Chinese forces have fought each other in direct combat (as opposed to through proxy forces). Today, the peninsula remains a flashpoint where forces from the two countries, along with U.S.-allied South Korean forces, could come into contact again during a collapse or conflict scenario.⁵ North Korea is often characterized as a “buffer zone” between China and U.S.-allied South Korea, but there is a flipside to the buffer zone argument. Beijing does not directly control Pyongyang’s actions; the latter has a large amount of autonomy and could take actions that entangle Beijing in a conflict. North Korea also constitutes an indirect flashpoint for Beijing whenever security issues on the peninsula become an area of contention between China and South Korea. The most prominent example of this type of exchange is the dispute over Seoul’s plans to allow the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile defense system in South Korea, which began in 2016 and saw China employ large-scale economic punishments against South Korean businesses to try to compel Seoul to reverse its plans.⁶

A Volatile Geopolitical Landscape in Northeast Asia

The geopolitical roles previously enumerated play out against a dynamic political and security landscape in Northeast Asia generally and on the Korean Peninsula specifically. This section explores recent developments from the major regional players for whose interests and objectives Washington will have to account, before turning to U.S. policies in the next section.

China has revised its stances toward both North Korea and the United States in recent years. Amid fast-moving diplomacy in 2018 and 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping engineered a personal thaw in relations with Kim that reverberated down through each of their highly personalized governments.⁷ The pair have met a total of five times, including during Xi’s visit to Pyongyang in June 2019, the first for a Chinese leader in 14 years (although Xi had visited in 2008 as vice president).⁸ In 2021, the pair reaffirmed their bilateral Sino–North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance on the 60th anniversary of its signing, although how the parties would interpret their obligations to each other during a conflict remains murky.⁹ More concretely, reporting indicates that China has drastically reduced enforcement of U.N. sanctions on North Korea.¹⁰

None of these developments erase a history of endemic distrust between Beijing and Pyongyang,¹¹ but they do suggest Xi and Kim have established a common understanding about aligned interests for the time being. China’s legacy policy toward North Korea, predicated on the three no’s of “no war, no chaos, and no nuclear weapons,” has partially failed. Beijing’s policy now tacitly cedes the nuclear nonproliferation component for the sake of preserving peace and order. Separately, China, along with Russia, proposed a “freeze for freeze” interim agreement in the summer of 2017 that would suspend North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile testing for a reciprocal suspension of U.S.-South Korean joint exercises. More recently, China has called for the United States to lift some categories of sanctions on North Korea to coax Pyongyang into negotiations.¹²

Improved China–North Korea relations align with larger initiatives in Beijing’s foreign policy. These include increased diplomatic activism, especially in China’s neighborhood, under the auspices of “periphery diplomacy,”¹³ “actively promot[ing] the peaceful resolution of regional hotspot issues,”¹⁴ and leveraging party-to-party diplomacy, in this case between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers’ Party of Korea. Moreover, in 2020, Chinese rhetoric around the 70th anniversary of



Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping (right) hosted North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (left) in the Chinese city of Dalian from May 7–8, 2018. This was the second of five meetings between the men. (Xinhua/Xie Huanchi via Getty Images)

the start of Chinese involvement in the Korean War tied into current U.S.-China tensions and portrayed Beijing's role in that war as part of a larger struggle against the United States.¹⁵ One article in the state-run Xinhua summed up the Chinese government's preferred historical narrative by asserting, "The victory in the war defied the invasion and expansion of imperialism, safeguarded the security of the [People's Republic of China], stabilized the situation on the Korean Peninsula, and upheld peace in Asia and the world."¹⁶ Beijing also views the U.S. alliance system in East Asia, including the U.S.-South Korea alliance, as an anachronistic holdover from the Cold War that threatens China security.¹⁷ One key objective of Chinese policies toward both Koreas, then, is to undermine the political, legal, and military underpinnings of that alliance.

For its part, North Korea has effectively demonstrated and largely consolidated its nuclear and missile arsenal. Pyongyang's goal is to become a de facto nuclear power, even if other states do not recognize its status as legitimate. In this regard, time is on Pyongyang's side because the longer the country possesses nuclear weapons, the

harder denuclearization becomes. And although North Korea has not conducted a nuclear or long-range missile test since November 2017, it has conducted more than a dozen short-range ballistic missile tests, as well as displayed a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and other new advanced military hardware during a parade in October 2020. The Kim regime has also announced plans to develop tactical nuclear weapons, deploy multiple warheads on a single missile, improve the accuracy of its ICBMs, and launch a spy satellite—all ambitions that would likely require additional testing.¹⁸

North Korea's military ambitions contrast with an apparently dire economic situation in the country created by restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the lingering effects of sanctions.¹⁹ The need for economic assistance and the loosening of sanctions could eventually prompt Pyongyang to seek negotiations, but it also might simultaneously carry out provocations, such as longer-range missile tests, to build leverage. As of this writing, North Korea has resisted substantial outreach from both the United States and South Korea, although in July 2021 the North reconnected cross-border communication links with the South.²⁰ North Korea has also kept restrictions on cross-border trade with China despite some indications earlier in the year that those limits would be lifted.²¹

Meanwhile, South Korea has been able to resolve some areas of tension with the United States during the early months of President Joe Biden's administration. In March 2021, the two countries reached a Special Measures Agreement on how to share costs for the military alliance through 2025 after years of acrimonious bargaining during former President Donald

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Trump's administration.²² High-level South Korean and U.S. representatives have met bilaterally, as well as tri-laterally with Japanese counterparts. Most prominently, Biden hosted South Korean President Moon Jae-in for a summit at the White House in May 2021.²³ One of the meeting outcomes was the termination of limits on South Korea's conventional ballistic missile arsenal that had been in place since 1979.²⁴

On China, while Seoul sees Washington as a valuable ally in dealing with Pyongyang, South Korea is hesitant to align too closely with U.S. policy toward China and wants instead to maintain autonomy in its foreign policy. Moon calls this “balanced diplomacy.” Seoul also worries about taking any action that might prompt Beijing to renew its campaign of Chinese economic coercion similar to the THAAD dispute. The search for balance could prove elusive, though, and already South Korean concerns about China are evident.²⁵ South Korean attitudes toward China are frustrated by Beijing’s apparent inability or unwillingness to push North Korea to engage with the South. Moreover, Beijing’s assertive behavior in the region increasingly implicates South Korean security directly, not just via the North Korea threat. Chinese military and fishing vessels occasionally probe around territory in the Yellow Sea/West Sea, including around Baengnyeong Island near the Northern Limit Line—the maritime boundary between the two Koreas.²⁶ China also conducted joint bomber patrols with Russian forces in July 2019 and December 2020 over the East Sea/Sea of Japan, the first of which entered South Korea’s air defense identification zone and prompted South Korean forces to fire 300 warning shots.²⁷

And while hardly a security issue, cultural spats like a recent instance in which Chinese diplomats and commentators claimed to have invented Korean dietary staples, such as kimchi, touch a nerve with the public and hint at broader concerns about China’s aspirations to regional dominance.²⁸ Burgeoning South Korean foreign policy ambitions as a middle power exerting influence beyond the peninsula could also beget more instances where Seoul comes into tension with Beijing’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. South Korea will hold presidential elections in March 2022, and the country’s next president will need to chart a course among these forces.

Finally, additional countries play roles in influencing Korean Peninsula affairs, including Japan, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, a few European powers. Tokyo’s position largely aligns with Washington’s, albeit with a special focus on the issue of locating and returning Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Moscow’s policies mostly track with Beijing’s. A full exploration of these countries’ role on the peninsula is beyond the scope of this paper. In general, these states play important but ultimately secondary roles in shaping the situation, despite each having major interests in the outcomes.

Exploring U.S. Policy Options

The Biden administration has thus far staked out a firm stance toward both China and North Korea, while also leaving the door open for diplomacy. The administration has placed a special focus on revitalizing alliances and partnerships, notably with South Korea and Japan. On China, administration officials have said the era of bilateral relations characterized by “engagement” has ended, and Biden has instead said he expects “extreme competition” with Beijing.²⁹ For North Korea, Biden has said he will deal with the country “through diplomacy, as well as stern deterrence.”³⁰ More broadly, Biden has articulated a view that the defining contest in contemporary world politics is between autocracies and open, democratic systems.³¹ Still, the administration has left open the possibility of forging diplomatic agreements where interests overlap. U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy Ambassador Sung Kim has said Washington is ready to talk with Pyongyang “anytime, anywhere without preconditions.”³² And Secretary of State Antony Blinken said U.S. policy toward China includes being “collaborative when it can be.”³³

It is in this environment that Washington will have to construct and implement integrated policies toward the China challenge and North Korea threat. These approaches could be structured in different ways. Exploring the alternatives can help clarify the benefits and drawbacks of each and point the way

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toward a successful approach. Five options are worth considering. Four of these options are combinations of two standard policy approaches—pressure and engagement—and the fifth is an amalgamation of those options. “Pressure,” in this context, refers to actively taking steps to coerce the other state to acquiesce to U.S. and allied objectives. And “engagement” refers to seeking out talks to resolve disputes, including potentially by offering meaningful concessions. Figure 1 shows the four ways these two standard policy options could be combined in relation to China and North Korea. The rest of this section examines each possibility before offering recommendations.

POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS OF STANDARD POLICY OPTIONS TOWARD CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

	Maximum pressure on North Korea	Engagement toward North Korea
Maximum pressure on China	Maximum pressure on both states	Pressure China, engage North Korea
Engagement toward China	Engage China, pressure North Korea	Engagement toward both states

Maximum pressure on both states. One option is to exert maximum pressure on both China and North Korea. This strategy would aim to sharply increase the pressure and costs for Pyongyang’s misbehavior on both Pyongyang itself and its patron, Beijing. This option would rely on measures such as expanded secondary sanctions on Chinese entities doing business with North Korea. Another included action would be military exercises or operations designed not only to bolster deterrence, but also to signal a willingness to threaten or use force to compel Pyongyang to give up its nuclear arsenal. This approach has the benefit of clarity and a sense of taking the initiative, but its focus on pressure and even confrontation has three potential downsides. First, it would heighten the risk of a military crisis or even a contingency. Second, it would diverge from South Korea’s preferences and therefore create a rift in the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Third, it would likely prompt Beijing and Pyongyang to further deepen their cooperation to thwart pressure from Washington.

Engagement toward both states. The second approach would take the opposite tack. It would accept both diplomatic and security risk to pursue engagement with both states at the same time. This strategy would aim to convince China and North Korea that the United States seeks improved relations with both states and reduced regional tensions generally. This approach could increase the potential for Beijing and Pyongyang to engage in talks with Washington and perhaps Seoul as well. The costs of this approach, however, likely would be that the United States would need to provide up front and possibly unilateral concessions to entice North Korea and China to pursue diplomatic engagement. Some of those concessions could be reversible, but others might be irreversible and therefore at risk of being “pocketed” without any discernible reciprocal actions. Moreover, beyond the initial steps,

both China and North Korea might conclude that they can make progress on their own objectives without giving anything in return. They would likely demand U.S. concessions on important issues—like Taiwan or accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state—that would compromise major U.S. interests just to keep the diplomatic process active.

Pressure China, engage North Korea. The third strategy would seek leverage by increasing pressure on China while engaging North Korea. Some analysts detected elements of this approach in the Trump administration’s outreach to Pyongyang in 2018 and 2019, assessing that the previous administration’s goal was to try to “flip” North Korea away from its alliance with China and toward a tacit partnership with the United States and South Korea.³⁴ This approach would attempt to leverage Pyongyang’s presumed interest in maintaining geopolitical autonomy and avoiding overreliance on Beijing, while also asserting Korean nationalism. The upside of this strategy is the possibility of a realignment in North Korea’s foreign policy that reduces Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia generally. The prospect of improved inter-Korean ties and reduced risk of conflict also favor this strategy. The major drawback is feasibility. North Korean leaders simply do not trust the United States; they have officially labeled Washington as Pyongyang’s “biggest enemy.”³⁵ A sustained thaw in relations with the United States would require a degree of political opening that could threaten the Kim regime, so North Korea will be hesitant to progress too far down this road. And for its part, China has demonstrated both a desire and a capability to insert itself into U.S.-North Korea diplomacy to avoid being isolated. Finally, while Seoul supports trying to improve relations with Pyongyang, headlong engagement with North Korea risks undermining the readiness and deterrence backed by the U.S.-South Korea alliance.



North Korea held a large-scale military parade in October 2020 to mark 75 years since the founding of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images).

Engage China, pressure North Korea. The fourth strategy would focus on engaging China with the aim of getting Beijing to facilitate progress using its unique relationship with Pyongyang to both provide incentives and exert pressure on North Korea. Several U.S. administrations have attempted a version of this strategy. It appeared most promising when China and North Korea were at odds during the early years of Kim Jong Un's reign and when Beijing's commitment to stopping Pyongyang from acquiring nuclear weapons seemed potentially credible. Also, amid other disputes in U.S.-China relations, some U.S. observers believe that North Korea could be an area of cooperation. Here again, though, the downside of this strategy is feasibility. Seeking to convince China to pressure North Korea through inducements has a poor track record and would likely not work now that relations between Beijing and Washington have deteriorated significantly. It would require offering concessions to Beijing with scant hope of progress in return. Simply put, the types and degrees of pressure that China would be willing to put on North Korea are not likely to be significantly increased by U.S. inducements.

Recommendations

All four of the options enumerated above come with significant drawbacks. To integrate U.S. strategies toward the China challenge and the North Korea threat, Washington—along with Seoul and other allies and partners—should pursue a fifth strategy toward Pyongyang and Beijing with regard to the Korean Peninsula. It might be described as calibrated pressure and results-oriented engagement. Critics might call it a conceptual muddle, even though it is anything but. Rather, it reflects an active decision to weigh the tradeoffs among the four strategic roles North Korea plays in China's foreign policy, and among the four standard strategies for approaching Beijing and Pyongyang as a pair.

By choosing a strategy of calibrated pressure and results-oriented engagement, Washington can avoid the major downsides of the other options. It is by design problem-management more than problem-solving and seeks evolution rather than revolution on the peninsula. Specifically, U.S. policymakers should adopt the following recommendations across four categories.

Shaping U.S.-China relations regarding the Korean Peninsula.

- Make policy based on the understanding that the Korean Peninsula plays a critical role in U.S.-China competition, and that the China challenge and the North Korea threat will always be linked because there is no way to truly compartmentalize them.
- Recognize that Korea is a major regional flashpoint that has the potential to escalate into a U.S.-China conflict. Relatedly, acknowledge major breakthroughs are unlikely with either China or North Korea. Neither will “flip” on the other and make big changes to align itself with the United States.
- To the extent that Beijing is willing to participate without preconditions, propose a return to talks with Chinese civilian and military officials regarding deconfliction during contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. Those exchanges are difficult but critical to reducing risk and avoiding unintentional escalation during a crisis. Track 1.5 talks with both officials and outside experts, as well as Track 2 unofficial talks can supplement formal diplomatic channels.

Engaging North Korea on political and security issues.

- Define the outer bounds of U.S. policy for the Korean Peninsula to reassure South Korea and improve the prospects for constructive diplomacy with both North Korea and China. Specifically, Washington should rule out preventative—as opposed to preemptive—“bloody nose” strikes against North Korea while also continuing to reaffirm the enduring U.S. commitment to the U.S.–South Korea alliance to uphold peace and security on the peninsula. (Preventative strikes generally seek to neutralize potential future threats, while preemptive strikes are conducted to head off imminent threats by moving first.³⁶) Relatedly, Washington and Seoul should reaffirm that they will remain allies as long as the governments of both countries believe doing so advances their interests and values, regardless of the views of other countries.
- Continue to engage Beijing in high-level diplomacy surrounding North Korea, including with China’s Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming.³⁷ Seek coordination on truly common interests but reject linkage with other issues.

- Propose restarting nuclear and peace talks in a four-party format with the two Koreas, China, and the United States. Those talks should be held among representatives who are empowered but below the leader level, as well as technical experts. In those talks, prioritize risk reduction and arms control as a near-term goal, while affirming that all parties share an interest in stable deterrence.
- Consider an end of war declaration, not a formal peace treaty, as a low-cost political statement of peaceful intentions and reflection of the current reality.
- Support Chinese steps to use its leverage over North Korea—including economic, financial, energy, and diplomatic pressure points—to incentivize restraint on nuclear and missile testing but keep expectations low about additional Chinese cooperation.
- Explore whether additional security assurances or guarantees, whether unilateral or multilateral, could create a stabilizing effect on North Korean behavior.

Promoting stable deterrence in the region.

- Take steps to better understand and address the impact of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal on U.S. extended deterrence to reduce the security pressures on South Korea and Japan, which could eventually lead those allies to seek out their own nuclear capabilities. This can be done without prejudicing the possibilities for the eventual denuclearization of North Korea.
- Stand up a Nuclear Planning Group for East Asia based on the model used by NATO members in Europe.³⁸ Such a group would put in place processes to jointly assess the need for changes to nuclear strategy and force posture in the region and build consensus on future plans. Initial members should include South Korea, Japan, and the United States, but other allies—such as Australia—could be added later.
- Jointly bolster U.S.–South Korea conventional deterrence capabilities, building on the termination of missile guidelines for South Korea. Continue consultations on expanding theater missile defense, including for medium- and short-range conventional missiles, rockets, and artillery. Explore whether a defensive system like Israel’s Iron Dome could have applications for South Korea.
- Deepen and expand cooperation in other strategic domains, including cybersecurity and space, where capabilities are directly applicable to countering challenges from both North Korea and China.

Coordinating a shared inter-Korean and foreign policy with South Korea.

- Engage South Korea on its China policy, but quietly and with modest expectations, and tie that engagement to an affirmative vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific in which Seoul is a core member. Continue to account for South Korea's desire to engage China regarding issues on the peninsula.
- Where possible, construct Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Group of Seven, and other multilateral or minilateral initiatives in ways that are open and inclusive so South Korea can participate if Seoul possesses the political will in any given area, even without being a member of those groups.
- Consider South Korea's experience—and the potential for Beijing to target Seoul again—when developing multilateral initiatives to counter Chinese economic and political coercion.

Conclusion

U.S.-China strategic competition is now the animating focus of American policy in the Indo-Pacific region and increasingly across the world as well. North Korea is in some ways a diversion or distraction from the broader strategic competition with China. However, North Korea is also a critical issue in U.S.-China relations, both because of the danger Pyongyang poses as a nuclear-armed state with a history of aggressive actions located in the heart of Northeast Asia. And because events on the peninsula implicate many of the diplomatic, security, economic, and governance questions that sit at the center of the U.S.-China contest over the future trajectory of regional and global order. For these reasons, the tangled threats from China and North Korea require integrated policies to address them. A policy of calibrated pressure and results-oriented engagement that balances the risks and rewards of various possible approaches offers the best path forward to deal with China and North Korea as an interlocking pair.

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