

## Shifts in ROK approaches to the DPRK under President Moon

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### Introduction

When South Korean leader Moon Jae-in assumed office in May 2017, he was confronted with more formidable policy challenges than most newly incumbent presidents. Domestically, Moon faced the imperative of distinguishing his administration from that of his embattled predecessor, the dramatically ousted Park Geun-hye. His greatest quandary, however, lay in the foreign policy realm: North Korea was traversing technical thresholds in its nuclear and missile programs at breathtaking pace. Adding fuel to this crisis was an escalating war of rhetoric between Kim Jong-un and Moon's ostensible ally, Donald J Trump.

In his presidential campaign, Moon convinced the South Korean public that he was the leader to navigate these challenges, vowing to enhance policy and procedural transparency and promulgating a new approach to dealing with North Korea. Signalling a departure from Park Geun-hye's hardline stance towards Pyongyang, which was predicated on



U.S. President Donald Trump with President Moon Jae-in at the 2017 Cheong Wa Dae Summit, Seoul, November 7, 2017. Image courtesy flickr user [Republic of Korea](#).

isolating the regime, Moon's North Korea stratagem harked back to the 'Sunshine Policy', emphasising dialogue and engagement through sports diplomacy and other means. He furthermore pledged to reconsider the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Missile Defense (THAAD) system—intended to intercept North Korean missiles—and expressed a will to pursue greater autonomy for South Korea within the confines of the US alliance.

How did these purported policy shifts hold up once Moon came to power? This paper examines the extent of change in South Korea's approach to the DPRK under President Moon across five realms of North Korea policy:

- missile defence
- the ROK–US alliance
- ROK–US–Japan trilateral defence cooperation
- prospects for a nuclear-armed South Korea
- diplomatic engagement.

It argues that, as the realities of North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear capabilities set in, Moon was steered down a more pragmatic and centrist course than originally laid out in his electoral campaign. This manifested in the form of strong continuity from the Park administration in several policy realms, with some muted twists and turns. The main element of change has evidently been on the diplomatic front, where Moon's openness to engage North Korea has led to a de-escalation of the nuclear crisis (at least for now) and a return by Pyongyang to the negotiating table. Despite Moon having reversed various other electoral promises, this monumental latter achievement has boosted his approval ratings to an almost unprecedented high—hovering around 85%—for a South Korean president nearing the end of his first year in office.

## Operationalising THAAD

When Moon took office, he faced the policy conundrum of whether to proceed with installing the controversial US anti-missile system known as THAAD. This defence measure was initially approved under the Park Geun-hye administration, and its deployment was hastily triggered once her political demise set in. Yet THAAD was only partially installed and operational when Moon came to power, and, given the intense criticism it had attracted from South Korean citizens and Chinese officials alike, he had strong incentives to reverse it. Indeed, he pledged to that effect in his electoral campaign. Ultimately, though, Moon was impelled to push ahead with full deployment of the system by the increasing sophistication of Pyongyang's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons arsenal. In contrast to Park, though, he was mindful of addressing citizens' concerns about the system, which in turn resulted in greater public support for it.

To deter against North Korean missile provocations, Park Geun-hye opted to purchase the THAAD system in the summer of 2016; this was in preference to developing an indigenous surface-to-air missile. Despite vehement civic objections that her decision-making process was undemocratic and more aligned with American than ROK interests, Park remained resolute. Officials on both sides of the alliance then designated Seongju County in South Korea's North Gyeongsang Province as the THAAD deployment site, on the basis that it would allow the system to achieve maximum operational effectiveness. Local Seongju residents were incensed at this announcement, raising concerns about the possibility of radiation seepage and contamination from the system's powerful AN/TPY-2 radar.<sup>1</sup> Those objections culminated in large-scale protests. In response to the public outcry, US and South Korean officials declared in September 2016 that THAAD would be relocated from the town's main residential area to the Lotte Skyhill Seongju Country Club. However, that did little to alleviate citizens' anxieties.

By the time that President Moon ascended to the presidency in May 2017, two THAAD launchers had been deployed to the Seongju site and the system was partially operational. Yet, in the light of mounting civic opposition and the discovery that four additional launchers had entered South Korea without his knowledge, President Moon suspended further deployment of THAAD-related equipment.<sup>2</sup> This decision turned out to be short-lived, though, as North Korea successfully launched successive intercontinental

ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on 4 and 28 July, demonstrating a newly acquired capability of striking the US mainland. In view of this development, President Moon felt compelled to fully operationalise THAAD and thus promptly ordered the installation of the four remaining launchers. Although he stressed that this was a temporary arrangement, an announcement from the North a mere two months later served to consolidate the THAAD deployment: Pyongyang's official mouthpiece—KCNA—reported that the nation had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb intended to be mounted on an ICBM.

This rapid escalation in North Korea's military capabilities served to justify in part the need for the THAAD system in the eyes of Moon's domestic constituents. As there were still lingering concerns among citizens in the Seongju area, he ordered a full-scale environmental assessment of the system and sought to clarify its technical defence capabilities. Those efforts resulted in a substantial increase in domestic support for THAAD: in June 2016, under the Park administration, a Gallup Korea survey indicated a 53% approval rating for THAAD;<sup>3</sup> by August 2017, that figure had risen to 72%.<sup>4</sup> This increased support was partially a product of growing concerns among the South Korean public about North Korea's military capabilities and the prospects of war on the peninsula; it was also a reflection of the relative procedural transparency with which Moon implemented the system.

A more difficult problem for Moon to tackle, however, was the continued opposition to THAAD from China. Despite Beijing having launched a sustained diplomatic and economic offensive against South Korea since the initial THAAD policy announcement, Moon ultimately refused to back down on the policy, demonstrating that Chinese concerns wouldn't override the national security threat posed by North Korea in Moon's defence planning. Moon has opted, rather, to seek to placate Beijing by stressing that no additional THAAD batteries will be deployed. This is a response to Chinese officials' concerns about Seoul developing an anti-missile system that might evolve to a scale that would affect China's own military planning. While Beijing's oppositional stance to THAAD remains unchanged, in October 2017 the two governments agreed to make amends and attempt to move forward in their bilateral relations.

## Realigning the ROK–US alliance

The state of the US–ROK alliance, an institution that forms a critical pillar of Seoul's North Korea policy and broader regional security strategy, posed a second major challenge for the newly elected Moon Jae-in. In his presidential campaign, Moon expressed a desire to pursue greater independence for Seoul within the bounds of the alliance. That wasn't surprising, given the stark divergences between his and Trump's respective approaches to Pyongyang. Owing to this, when Moon came to power the alliance was on a shaky footing, exacerbated by Trump's unhidden preference for his Japanese ally, his heated exchanges with Kim Jong-un, and declarations to the effect that the US–Korea Free Trade Agreement was 'the worst deal ever'. But despite Moon's intentions, the North Korean nuclear problem necessitated a realignment of the alliance towards greater cooperation rather than increased autonomy for Seoul.

Signs of strain in the US–ROK alliance and the bilateral relationship more broadly were apparent from the early stages of Moon's term. In September 2017, Trump took to his Twitter account to rebuke Moon's diplomacy vis-à-vis Pyongyang: 'South Korea is finding, as I have told them, that their talk of appeasement with North Korea will not work, they only understand one thing!' This criticism from Trump was not only a source of frustration for Moon but also had societal effects in Korea. Many citizens sensed that, despite being in closest proximity to North Korea, their nation was being sidelined by Washington in the evolving nuclear crisis. This perception—labelled 'Korea passing' by the ROK media—was buttressed by Trump's decision to visit Tokyo ahead of his visit to Seoul to discuss the North Korea problem on his 12-day Asia tour in November 2017. South Korean citizens were also concerned about the possibility of Washington engaging in unilateral military action against the North, particularly given Trump's threat to meet any further provocations from Pyongyang with unprecedented 'fire and fury'.

In this context of deteriorating relations with the US and the escalating war of rhetoric between Trump and Kim, Moon had little option but to go into damage control on the alliance front and work to strengthen the US–ROK bilateral defence posture. Trump's visit to Seoul provided an opportune forum for realigning the alliance, at least as far as North Korea policy was concerned. Towards this end, Moon expressed his support for the US-led UN sanctions on Pyongyang, affirmed that denuclearisation was the priority,

and concurred that a combination of pressure and engagement was the best way to proceed. Their summit meeting culminated in a joint statement emphasising the commitment of both countries to further squeeze Pyongyang, including the prospect of a new round of sanctions. For his part, Trump extended an overture to Moon by agreeing to meet with former Korean ‘comfort women’, and in so doing simultaneously dealt a diplomatic blow to Tokyo.

While this realignment of North Korea policy served to stabilise the alliance to an extent, certain troubling elements in the partnership have persisted. Indeed, since Trump took office in January 2017, Washington had failed to appoint an ambassador to South Korea. This dereliction was difficult to fathom in the light of the fact that North Korea constitutes Trump’s greatest foreign policy challenge. Despite months of speculation that Professor Victor Cha of Georgetown University would fill the role, his nomination was abruptly withdrawn by the Trump administration in January 2018. That decision was problematic for the bilateral relationship on two fronts. Cha is an internationally renowned expert on North Korea with extensive experience in policy and was highly suited to the position. More worrisome, however, is the reasoning behind his nomination withdrawal: according to media reports, Cha was cast out of the running on account of objecting to a proposal by the Trump administration to launch a limited strike against North Korea. Admiral Harry Harris, who was originally appointed to the US ambassador post in Australia, has been abruptly redirected to fill the vacant South Korean position. This chain of events exemplifies the broader trend of disorder in Trump’s ambassadorial appointments.

### Consolidation of US–ROK–Japan trilateral defence cooperation

Under the Moon administration, we have witnessed a further strengthening of trilateral defence cooperation between the ROK, Japan and their mutual US ally. This has eventuated despite Moon taking a hardline stance against Tokyo during his presidential bid and expressing a desire to refrain from trilateral exercises. As the threat emanating from North Korea continued to escalate following his election, Moon was again prompted to renege on his campaign pledge.

The institutional foundation for US–ROK–Japan trilateral defence predates the Moon presidency, having been paved primarily under the Barack Obama, Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzō administrations. It has been Washington’s long-cherished goal to coordinate its two key alliances in Asia, and this objective was pushed to the forefront under Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy. What stood in the way, however, were lingering history problems between South Korea and Japan. This became starkly apparent when then ROK president Lee Myung-bak attempted to enact an intelligence sharing accord, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), with Tokyo in 2012. This was intended to enable the two neighbours to directly share sensitive information regarding Pyongyang’s activities, thus rectifying a trilateral intelligence deficit. But it fell through at the eleventh hour amidst a sharp domestic backlash in South Korea. While there were a variety of factors in play in this backlash, a prevalent sentiment driving it was that Seoul should refrain from engaging in bilateral (or trilateral) security cooperation with Japan as long as its leaders remained unapologetic about the colonial past, particularly the ‘comfort women’ system.

Park Geun-hye was key to dislodging this history-related obstacle, thereby paving the way for Moon’s trilateral defence cooperation. After ascending to power in the midst of the re-politicisation of the comfort women issue in 2013,<sup>5</sup> President Park indicated to Abe that there would be no substantive cooperation between the two countries until Abe made a significant overture towards resolving the issue. His overture materialised in late December 2015, in the form of a bilateral ‘comfort women’ accord; this entailed the transfer of US\$8.3 million from Japanese to Korean government coffers, which was intended to be funnelled down to the victims. While the accord was not without its shortcomings and has yet to fully resolve the problem—indeed, there remains the controversial matter of ‘comfort women’ statues erected by activists in front of Tokyo’s diplomatic missions in Seoul and Pusan—it provided President Park with the domestic sanction required to push the GSOMIA through (in November 2016). This was facilitated by the rise in provocations from North Korea and because—as Park and Yun ironically note—the turmoil surrounding Park’s corruption scandal helped to divert public attention from the deal.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this considerable progress, prospects for trilateral cooperation appeared rather grim when Moon ascended to the presidential helm. This was because he raised the possibility of re-evaluating both the ‘comfort women’ and GSOMIA accords during his electoral campaign. While the former accord ostensibly constituted a ‘final and irreversible’ deal, the terms of the

GSOMIA were valid for one year and subject to reassessment thereafter. Yet, with the rapid advancement of North Korea's weapons program in 2017, which saw two ballistic missiles fly through Japanese airspace in quick succession (29 August and 15 September), the GSOMIA became all the more a necessity. In this context, Moon's approval ratings dipped somewhat, as the Korean public—mostly the middle-aged and older generations—began to doubt Moon's North Korea policy and call for a more hardline approach. As for the 'comfort women' accord, while Moon declared it 'seriously flawed' in February 2018, the imperative of presenting a combined defence posture with Tokyo and Washington vis-à-vis North Korea has so far prevented him from revising it.

Against this backdrop, Moon proceeded to enhance trilateral defence cooperation with Japan and the US through intelligence sharing and joint military exercises aimed at improving their capacity to launch coordinated responses to Pyongyang's provocations. To cite but a few examples of such cooperation, Seoul shared intelligence with Tokyo relating to the North Korean intermediate-range ballistic missiles (Hwasong-12s,) that overflew Hokkaido in August and September 2017. Then, in the following month, elements of the three countries' defence forces participated in a missile warning drill—using Aegis destroyers—in order to enhance their collective ability to detect and track incoming missiles and integrate their missile defence systems. And less than two weeks after Pyongyang test-fired the aforementioned ICBM (the Hwasong-15), the ROK, the US and Japan responded with a trilateral drill involving information sharing and simulations of ballistic missile tracking and detecting.

Similarly to the THAAD deployment, these trilateral exercises have been a major source of consternation for Beijing. However, with a clear focus on the ROK's own national interests, Moon once again opted to reassure Chinese officials rather than accommodate their objections, emphasising that such exercises will never evolve into a formal trilateral alliance.

## Prospects for a nuclear-armed South Korea

A more alarming turn in South Korea's approach to the DPRK in the first year of the Moon presidency has been the emergent policy discourse on the notion of Seoul pursuing nuclear armament to deter against North Korean threats. There have been two strains to this discourse. The first and more dominant strain focuses on the prospect of a redeployment of US tactical and theatre nuclear weapons to South Korea; this has primarily been driven by the escalating tensions on the peninsula. The second strain is centred on the idea of South Korea developing an independent nuclear arsenal; this has developed from a domestic perception of US withdrawal from East Asian security under the Trump administration. While Moon neither instigated nor endorsed these notions, they have nevertheless gained considerable traction—the first discourse in particular—among conservative domestic policy circles and the Korean public.

The nuclear armament discourse emerged in full swing in August 2017. It was sparked when ROK Defense Minister Song Young-moo, in a dialogue with US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, raised the prospect of Washington deploying tactical nuclear weapons to the South Korean theatre. Essentially, this would constitute a redeployment of tactical nukes, since Washington first stationed such weapons in the ROK in 1958 under the Eisenhower administration; at the time they were intended to deter against the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and they were removed at the end of the Cold War in 1991. Following his nuclear armament discussion with James Mattis, Minister Song then took his proposal to Seoul's National Defense Committee.

This defence plan sparked immediate controversy, not least because it directly conflicted with the intention of the Moon administration to extend \$8 million in humanitarian assistance to Pyongyang. Moon thus felt the need to express his objections on record, conveying in an interview with CNN that he 'disagrees with the idea of [the US] redeploying tactical nukes'.<sup>7</sup> He stressed, rather, his preference to pursue joint defence as a means to address the North Korean security threat. Moon was supported in his position by members of his ruling Democratic Party (the Minjoo Party of Korea, MPK), who argued that the stationing of US nukes in South Korea would only serve to fuel the security crisis. Hong Ihk-pyo of the MPK issued a statement in September 2017 to the effect that:

... the US's strategic nuclear umbrella is dozen times better than tactical nukes to protect us from North Korean nuclear weapons. Tactical nukes will have no effective value. The talk of tactical nukes or nuclear armament only means that as soon as local provocations occur like the ones we saw in Yeonpyeong Island, we will only be replacing mortars with nukes to throw at each other.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Moon's attempt to rein in the controversy, the discourse on nuclear redeployment continued to gain traction as his political opponents seized upon the issue. The ROK's main conservative opposition party, the Liberty Party of Korea, expressed its ardent support for Song's defence scheme, even going to the extent of establishing a Special Committee on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis and dispatching committee members to pressure US officials to deploy tactical nukes to the ROK.<sup>9</sup> The prospect of a nuclear arsenal in South Korea has also been met with wide public approval in South Korea: as many as 68% of citizens are in favour of the idea.

The second and less prominent discourse has centred on the prospect of South Korea developing an independent nuclear arsenal. The major thrust behind this notion has been the loss of confidence among Korean policymakers in the US nuclear umbrella and its attendant guarantee of extended deterrence. This perception was initially triggered during Trump's election campaign, when he tweeted about 'free riding allies' and their complacent attitude towards nuclear weaponisation; he specifically called out South Korea for shirking its alliance responsibilities. Trump went so far as to suggest, in March 2016, that Seoul should consider developing an indigenous nuclear capability to deal with North Korea—and Beijing. This resulted in leading lawmakers in Seoul publicly advocating South Korean nuclear armament. While chairing a forum in August 2016, for instance, leader of the Saenuri Party, Won Yoo-Chul, remarked to the effect that: 'If North Korea conducts a fifth nuclear test, South Korea should immediately move to arm itself with nuclear capabilities.'<sup>10</sup> Like the previous discourse, this notion, too, has met with increasing public support: a Gallup poll conducted in 2016 indicated that 60% of those questioned were in favour of developing a nuclear arsenal.<sup>11</sup>

While Moon has attempted to rein in these nuclear discourses, we can expect that they will gain further momentum as conservatives incorporate them into their political platforms leading up to the 2018 provincial elections. Yet it remains highly improbable that Washington would accede to redeploying nukes in forward bases in the ROK. Even less likely is the notion of South Korea developing its own nuclear arsenal, as that would doubtlessly trigger a host of new problems for the nation. A more likely scenario would entail US defence officials responding to South Korean security concerns by intensifying their deterrence dialogue with Seoul, increasing the rotation of nuclear delivery vehicles throughout South Korea, and striving to enhance the capabilities of US regional ballistic missile defence.

### Engaging North Korea through sports diplomacy

The most notable shift in South Korea's approach to the DPRK under the Moon administration to date has been the willingness of Moon to engage his northern brethren through the medium of sports diplomacy, moving rapidly to diplomacy between the two countries' leaderships. It is in this arena that Moon's DPRK policy has aligned most closely with his electoral platform, and where his clearest departure from Park Geun-hye's policy line can be evinced. This diplomatic pursuit led to the joint participation of the two Koreas in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, marking the first sign of de-escalation in the nuclear crisis that had otherwise mounted incessantly throughout 2017. Ultimately, it resulted in North Korea agreeing to return to the negotiating table.

When Kim Jong-un reached out to Seoul in his 2018 New Year's speech, Moon seized that overture as a lifeline, ushering in a mood of inter-Korean rapprochement. His willingness was premised in part on a desire to ease the tensions on the peninsula, but also on the assumption that Pyongyang might disrupt the Winter Olympics if excluded. Following Kim's New Year's speech, officials from both sides met at the border truce village of Panmunjom to discuss the prospect of North Korea sending performers—for the first time in 18 years—to the impending Pyeongchang Olympics. Over the course of three high-level meetings held during a one-week period, it was further agreed that North Korea would dispatch a 140-member orchestra to perform at the games, a [joint women's ice hockey team](#) would be established, and athletes from both sides would [march together under a single unification flag](#) in the opening ceremony.

Despite Moon having been elected on a platform advocating engagement with North Korea, his decision to accept Kim Jong-un's conciliatory gesture drew criticism from various quarters. South Korean youth and conservatives alike accused their president of forfeiting Olympic ideals for diplomatic gains. 'We are turning the Pyeongchang Olympics ... into the Pyongyang Olympics,' claimed the leader of the conservative opposition party, Hong Joon-pyo. This criticism manifested in Moon's approval ratings,



which fell to a four-month low of 67% following the joint-Olympics announcement. Meanwhile, a number of Korea observers chastised Moon for buying into Kim's ploy, which they read as an attempt to diminish the effect of US-led international sanctions and buy time to further his nuclear weapons program.

Moon, however, was confident that North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics would 'serve as a chance to warm solidly frozen South-North ties', and possibly lead to a breakthrough in the nuclear crisis. He found a level of support for this initiative in Washington, where US officials agreed to postpone scheduled joint military exercises until after the Paralympic Games in March. However, the Trump administration continued to have reservations: US Vice President Mike Pence gave a lukewarm reception to North Korea at the Pyeongchang Games, and prior to the closing ceremony Washington levied its most severe set of sanctions on the regime to date.

Moon's forecast prevailed. The successful joint-Olympics venture triggered a series of diplomatic advancements in Seoul-Pyongyang relations, leading to a decision to hold an inter-Korean summit meeting for the first time in over a decade. Seoul capitalised on this stunning diplomatic achievement to broker an agreement between Trump and Kim to convene a US-DPRK summit, which is expected to take place in June 2018. Kim is now allegedly open to negotiating denuclearisation and concluding a peace treaty with Seoul, and has agreed to pause his testing program in the lead-up to the summits. Given the incessant drive with which Kim has pursued the development of this program, however, we have every reason to be sceptical of his stated intentions.

### Where to next?

In sum, with the exception of remarkable advancements through diplomatic engagement, DPRK policy under Moon has entailed more continuities than divergences from the Park Geun-hye administration. As Moon is only in the first year of his five-year presidential term, however, it may be premature to surmise that there will be no significant structural changes in the other realms of his North Korea policy during his presidential tenure. In fact, judging from recent developments, there are two variances that can be forecast for the remainder of his term.

First, despite Moon's recent affirmations that the US-ROK alliance is 'rock solid', it's probable that we'll see increasing policy disparities in the two governments' approaches to Pyongyang, particularly if the summit meetings don't produce the desired outcomes. This likelihood became strikingly apparent during the Winter Olympics: at a time that Moon was accommodating Kim's requests to jointly compete in the games, US policymakers were apparently deliberating the pros and cons of launching a pre-emptive limited strike against North Korea; this option seemed well beyond Moon's conception of applying 'pressure' on Pyongyang. Then, as Moon was basking in the diplomatic success of the games and considering a return to the negotiating table with Kim, Washington was formulating its heaviest sanctions package vis-à-vis North Korea to date. Evidently, there's a lack of coherence in the exertion of pressure and engagement by the two leaders, with the former favoured by Trump and the latter by Moon.

These policy divergences are likely to be reinforced by the fact that Moon is determined to see South Korea regain wartime operational control (OPCON) of its defence forces in the near future; at present, Seoul is only permitted to control its military in peacetime, while wartime control falls under US jurisdiction. The installation of THAAD was a significant step towards meeting the necessary OPCON transfer conditions. It will take skilled diplomacy by officials on both sides to navigate this transition and ensure that it doesn't serve to weaken the US-ROK alliance. Yet, in the light of the disorder surrounding the US ambassadorial post in South Korea, such diplomacy may not be straightforward. Policy differences can mean more at a time like the present, when fundamental issues that the alliance has worked around are in a state of flux.

Second, while we can expect further deepening of ROK-US-Japan trilateral defence cooperation—particularly in the event that North Korea's intended denuclearisation does not ensue—Seoul's capacity to cooperate is likely to be constrained by a number of factors and be more limited in scope than Washington hopes. Indeed, from Moon's perspective, joint exercises will potentially undermine the recent progress in inter-Korean relations and will further adversely affect Seoul's ties with Beijing. The 'comfort women' issue, meanwhile, will continue to simmer below the surface of the ROK-Japan leg of the trilateral relationship,

threatening to boil over and impede cooperation. The issue was reignited as recently as February 2018, when Tokyo objected to the Korean Foreign Minister's use of the 'sex slave' terminology when giving a speech about the victims at the UN. The diplomatic management of this issue will be contingent upon Moon's willingness to implement the 2015 bilateral accord and developments concerning the 'comfort women' statues in South Korea. Traditionally, the US ambassador to the ROK has played an important role in mediating history problems between Seoul and Tokyo and limiting the parameters of the diplomatic friction surrounding them. In the light of this, the decision of the Trump administration to pass over Victor Cha for the role was a missed opportunity, given his expertise in both ROK–Japan relations and North Korean affairs.

### Conclusion: a role for Australia

Finally, what are the implications of this state of affairs for Australia? Is there a role for us in shaping South Korea's dealings with Pyongyang? Given that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would undoubtedly have devastating consequences for the region, and Australia would be involved to some degree through our alliance with the US, we have a strong incentive to promote a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis. Since Canberra and Seoul don't share a security partnership, it's infeasible that this would take the form of unilateral leverage. It's more probable that we could exert indirect influence through Washington.

As a platform of indirect influence, Australia should use its alliance partnership with the US—and specifically its ambassador in Washington DC—to encourage Trump to continue to follow Moon's approach of remaining open to dialogue with North Korea, even if the summit meetings don't unfold as hoped. While Trump seems to need no encouraging, it's also in Australia's interests to ensure that the larger strategic interests in play in any negotiations with Kim are not forgotten. Concessions that undermine the US alliance network in Asia wouldn't be in US, ROK, Japanese or Australian interests. Without these larger strategic issues being emphasised by allies, this perspective might be lost in the heat of 'the deal'.

Given that the stakes of conflict have been so high over the past year, Moon's policy of pursuing diplomatic engagement—even while exerting strong pressure through sanctions—is of crucial importance and is proving highly successful. And in the likely event that tensions vis-à-vis North Korea flare once again, Australia and other US allies must persuade Trump to avoid military options and, in preference, steadfastly pursue a diplomatic settlement to the crisis. As the door to negotiation with North Korea is now open, Australia should urge the US to not insist upon denuclearisation as a prerequisite for dialogue, as that approach proved problematic in the Six-Party Talks. Rather, denuclearisation needs to be pursued incrementally through diplomatic negotiation, with concessions made by all parties. It would not be reasonable—nor, indeed, in the region's strategic interests—for those concessions to entail structural changes to the US – South Korea alliance; but if, for instance, Kim were willing to agree to an indefinite moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, then Washington and Seoul could in turn concede to a scaling down of their joint military exercises.

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
GSOMIA	General Security of Military Information Agreement
MPK	Minjoo Party of Korea
ROK	Republic of Korea
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
UN	United Nations

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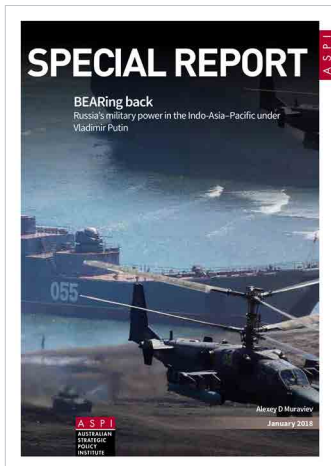
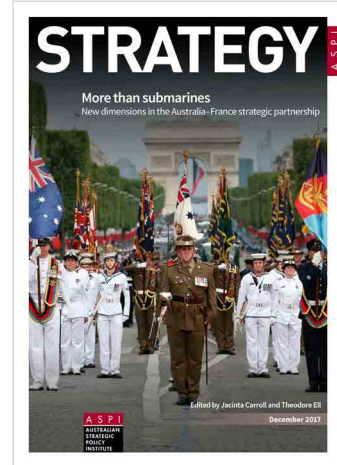
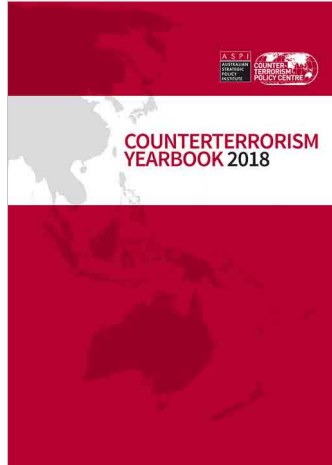
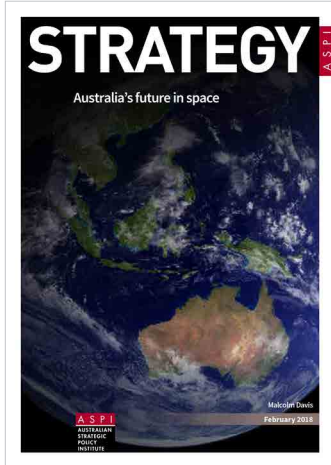
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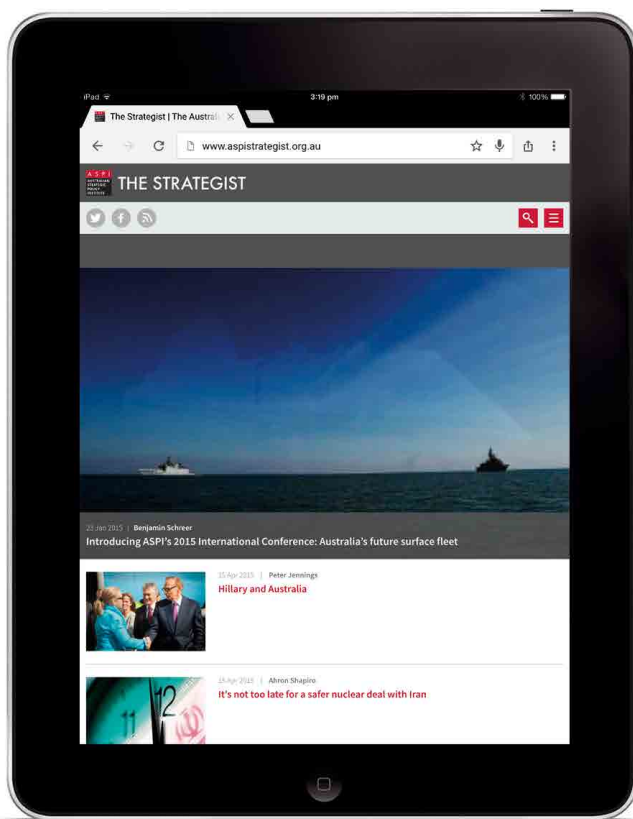


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