

**Korean Peninsula between Diplomacy and Paradox:
Republic of Korea, Japan and US Hold Trilateral Dialogues, Democratic People's Republic of
Korea Continues to Bolster its Defence Capabilities**

According to all parties involved, **the situation in the Korean Peninsula seems to not have significantly improved as we stepped into 2022. In the light of the newest developments at the beginning of the year, one could certainly envisage the need for Dialogue, Understanding and Diplomacy as the solution to the Korean Peninsula paradox: the more weapons are used for reassuring national security by both sides, the higher the danger for all parties concerned.**

Clearly, the newly held **trilateral dialogues between the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan and the United States** have reinforced the common position of the three countries with regard to addressing the security challenges in the Korean Peninsula.

The high-level meetings came after **Pyongyang carried out a series of missile tests in early 2022**, involving “medium and long-range” ballistic missiles, previously launched in September 2017. The launch could be interpreted as a possible end of the self-imposed moratorium **Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)** has adopted on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests starting by the end of 2017. While pursuing diplomatic means to find a mutually acceptable solution in the Korean Peninsula, **DPRK's Head of State Kim Jong-un** declared in April 2018 that “no nuclear tests and tests of intermediate and intercontinental ballistic missiles” were necessary at the time. Following a meeting of the **Political Bureau of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)** on January 19, 2022, DPRK has decided, however, to **consider resuming “all activities temporarily suspended”**, a wording which might refer to Pyongyang's nuclear and ICBM programmes.

The *February 9* telephone-conversation between the **Republic of Korea's Minister of National Defense Suh Wook, Japan's Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo and the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III** sought to reaffirm “the importance of trilateral security cooperation in addressing global security challenges and threats posed by the DPRK weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.” Certainly, the meeting represented an opportunity for the United States to reaffirm its “ironclad commitment to the defense of Japan and ROK”, as mentioned in the newly published “*Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*”.

Only three days later, on *February 12*, followed a similar trilateral meeting – in person, this time – among the **ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs Chung Eui-yong, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, and U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken**. In their Joint Statement, the three high dignitaries reaffirmed “the critical importance of strong U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation as we seek to address the most pressing 21st Century challenges”. The three parties “condemned the DPRK's recent ballistic missile launches and expressed deep concern about the destabilizing nature of these actions”, yet “emphasized they held no hostile intent towards the

DPRK and underscored continued openness to meeting the DPRK without preconditions.”

As some analysts interpreted the recent development as a common diplomatic front of Republic of Korea, Japan and the United States, **the two recent meetings have been considered to indicate there is no availability on behalf of the US to lift sanctions on DPRK without obtaining significant concessions with regard to their nuclear programme. However, the invitation to sit together at the negotiating table has been reiterated.**

Certainly, as February marks the beginning of the election campaign in ROK, to be followed by the Presidential Elections of March 9, the two high-level meetings could also be interpreted as **a reiteration of ROK’s consistency with regard to the “complete denuclearization and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula”.**

While not having issued – at the time – an official position with regard to the trilateral meetings presented above, **DPRK’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has presented a press statement citing the country’s “right to self-defence” as “part of its efforts for modernizing its national defence capability”,** while stressing that such tests *“did not target any specific country or force, and it did not do any harm to the security of neighbouring countries.”* A similar position has been reiterated in a rather-effervescent press-statement presented by **Ri Sang Rim, Chairman of Korea-Europe Association (DPRK is hereby referred to as Korea).**

In the light of the official documents released by **DPRK’s two neighbours, Russia and China seem to indicate that “sanctions and pressure will not work in solving the issue of the Korean peninsula”, asserting that “political dialogue is the only way to resolve the issue of the Korean peninsula”.**

One may infer that, as the ROK President seemed to suggest, the current situation in the Korean Peninsula may remind one of the tensions of 2017, posing a significant *“challenge toward the international society’s efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, stabilize peace and find a diplomatic solution”*. Clearly, **such challenging times could be used to restart principled dialogue as an expression of Diplomacy and Mutual Understanding among all concerned parties.** Most importantly, **without proper contextualisation, the situation in the Korean Peninsula may risk to become an expression of the on-going Great Powers competition,** which – in turn – **would add adjacent paradoxes to the already existing tensions.**

Naturally, **a significant role in identifying a diplomatic solution to stabilize peace in the Korean Peninsula belongs to both directly involved parties, which should together play the leading role in the negotiation process.** In the light of the diplomatic signals sent by DPRK, one may, however, wonder about the country’s readiness to sit again at the negotiating table after firmly rejecting any preconditioned offer for dialogue. Certainly, withdrawing – even partially – the existing sanctions sits highly on DPRK’s list of priorities.

Shall the negotiations witness a multi-format evolution, including – for instance – the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in the event the regional organisation is willing to accept such a role, one may envisage further opportunities for advancing the discussions. While ASEAN constantly reaffirmed the *“importance of continued peaceful dialogue amongst all concerned parties in order to realise lasting peace and stability in a denuclearised Korean Peninsula”,* one may opine that the Southeast regional organisation shared similar interests and outlooks with both parties in the Korean Peninsula. While bolstering a balanced approach to its foreign policy, **ASEAN enjoys the consideration of both sides in the Peninsula:** while the DPRK’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has highlighted the country’s willingness to work within the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN–South

Korea relations have witnessed significant growth in the aftermath of **President Moon Jae-in's** launch of the New Southern Policy (*NSP*). On a similar note, **Cambodia, which holds ASEAN's current rotating Presidency, has particularly excellent bilateral relations with both DPRK and ROK.** One may thus affirm there has been no better opportunity for an enlarged multi-actor peace dialogue to actively involve ASEAN in the continued peaceful dialogue in the Korean Peninsula.

Markedly, the **ROK-Japan-US trilateral dialogues represent what one may interpret as a reinforcement of the US Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, in accordance with the newly issued Indo-Pacific Strategy.** By further deepening the cooperation with its allies in the region, the **US stresses its position reiterating its commitment to security in the Korean Peninsula, as part of the greater Indo-Pacific area.** In fact, one may identify **multiple diplomatic démarches of the US in this regard;** co-opting India – one of the region's most significant players – in the Quad, relaxing the framework of cooperation with Taiwan (*also visible at several countries in Europe*), bolstering the Build Back Better World (*BBW*) initiative, represent US priorities in line with the Action Plan stated in the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Finally, **beyond formats of regional cooperation lays down the sheer power of Diplomacy, as main resource of the Global Community of Nations.** As Diplomacy comes pack and parcel with Compromise, one may expect that **DPRK's availability to sit down again at the negotiating table could represent a crucial step in de-tensioning the existing situation in the Korean Peninsula and creating the grounds for further enhanced negotiations involving all parties concerned.**

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