

North Korea between China, Japan and the ROK, 2012–2016

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Abstract

By using Lowell Dittmer's game-theoretical analysis as a method, this article examines how North Korea's room to maneuver has been affected by Chinese-South Korean, Japan-ROK, and Sino-Japanese interactions, and how the DPRK sought to exploit the various conflicts between Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul. Placing the period of 2012–2016 into historical context, it emphasizes that North Korea has consistently tried to hinder cooperation between South Korea and the other two Northeast Asian states by creating "romantic triangles." North Korean propaganda frequently highlighted local territorial disputes, Japanese historical revisionism, and the deployment of US missile defense batteries in South Korea, but it could also abruptly remove these issues from its agenda if Pyongyang's foreign policy underwent a shift. Still, the DPRK was not necessarily able to benefit from these disagreements, because a Japan-ROK conflict could reinforce China-ROK cooperation (or vice versa). In periods of inter-Korean confrontation, Pyongyang had less chance to take advantage of Sino-Japanese and Japan-ROK friction than in periods of North-South rapprochement. If China or Japan decided to confront Seoul, they could easily have found alternative partners that were more powerful and attractive than the DPRK (like Russia or the United States), which limited their readiness to engage a confrontational North Korea.

Keywords: North Korean foreign policy, Chinese-ROK relations, Japanese-ROK relations, Sino-Japanese relations, trilateral cooperation, inter-Korean relations

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In recent times, there has been growing academic interest in the triangular relationship between Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul, with particular respect to Chinese-Japanese-South Korean trilateral economic integration, the impact of Sino-Japanese rivalry on the Korean Peninsula, and Washington's efforts to broker Japan-ROK reconciliation in the face of the security challenges posed by China and North Korea. A number of scholars have examined how South Korea's alliance policies have been influenced by the conflicts between the major stakeholders in Northeast Asia and how Seoul has tried to pursue a multidirectional diplomacy in a region fractured by territorial and historical disputes (Armstrong et al. 2006; Calder and Min 2010; Cha 1999; Chung 2007; Rozman 2004, 2015; Teo and Lee 2014). In these narratives, North Korea appeared mainly as a challenge to which the other regional actors had to respond. As such, less attention has been paid to the questions of how Pyongyang's room to maneuver has been affected by the dynamics of Sino-Japanese, Chinese-South Korean, and Japan-ROK interactions, and how the DPRK reacted to the various diplomatic shifts in its regional environment (for earlier studies, see Gui 2013; Kim 2006; Stangarone 2012; and Teo 2014).

This paper seeks to broaden the scope of the existing literature by using Lowell Dittmer's game-theoretical analysis of triangular strategic relations. Dittmer's (1981, 489) model distinguishes three systemic patterns of exchange relationships: "the '*ménage à trois*,' consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the 'romantic triangle,' consisting of amity between one 'pivot' player and two 'wing' players, but enmity between each of the latter; and the 'stable marriage,' consisting of amity between two of the players and enmity between each and the third." This article describes North Korea's policies toward China, Japan, and the ROK and assesses their results, by means of Dittmer's typology. As a case study, I selected the period of 2012–2016, because the long-term impact of the China-ROK, Japan-ROK, and Sino-Japanese conflicts that occurred in these years is still keenly felt, the recent regional détente notwithstanding. I also placed these events into a broader historical context and attempted to draw some tentative conclusions for the future.

Historical Background

During and after the Cold War, the North Korean leaders habitually perceived the interactions between Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing through the lenses of a zero-sum mentality. Their most powerful strategic opponent was the United States, while their direct competitor for national unification was the Republic of Korea. As they saw it, any diplomatic factor that facilitated US-South Korean cooperation was inimical to their interests, whereas a factor weakening the US-ROK partnership could be at least potentially advantageous.

To apply Dittmer's terminology to this situation, the US-ROK alliance was a relationship of asymmetrical amity. Until the 1990s, this amity was based mainly on the two states' shared enmity for North Korea, and thus it constituted a stable marriage with Pyongyang as the excluded third player. Unable to form an amity either with Washington or Seoul, during the period 1955–1964, the DPRK sought to exploit the fact that America's simultaneous security cooperation with South Korea and Japan was a romantic triangle, with two potentially antagonistic wing players competing for the favors of the US pivot player. The North Korean leaders seem to have considered Japan—an economic great power but only a regional military power—a less serious security challenge (and as such, a more promising target for an engagement policy) than South Korea or America. Consequently, Pyongyang tried to prevent a US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* by forming an amity with Tokyo. Opposed to a US-brokered Japanese-South Korean marriage but unable to forge a Japan-DPRK marriage, Pyongyang strove to create a romantic triangle in which Tokyo (the pivot player) would not be exclusively committed to Seoul (Cho 1967).

This approach had much in common with the strategy of the Chinese Communist leaders, who initially sought to transform the US-Japanese marriage into a romantic triangle then successfully persuaded Japan to de-recognize the Republic of China (Taiwan). Since both the PRC and the DPRK faced a US-backed rival state, their interests often coincided. During the Cold War, the two communist states were treaty-bound allies vis-à-vis such excluded players as Seoul and Taipei. When the US-brokered Japan-

ROK rapprochement (1965) transformed the romantic triangle into a *ménage à trois*, both Pyongyang and Beijing condemned it. During 1969–1970, Japanese-South Korean-Taiwanese trilateral cooperation, inspired as it was by Nixon's Guam Doctrine, was countered by a Sino-DPRK partnership.

During 1971 and 1974, the North Korean leaders approved Sino-Japanese rapprochement, as this process transformed the Japan-ROK marriage into a double romantic triangle, with Beijing and Pyongyang as the new wing players (Ko 1977; Szalontai 2013, 124–132). Between 1977 and 1978, however, they concluded that Sino-Japanese reconciliation no longer served their interests. This time, the emerging romantic triangles caused more harm to Pyongyang than to Seoul, undermining the stability of the Sino-DPRK marriage.¹ The ratification of the Japan-ROK continental shelf agreement (which Pyongyang strongly opposed) became intertwined with the Sino-Japanese peace treaty, as it neutralized the influential “South Korean lobby” in Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).² In the 1980s, Japan not only reinforced its support to Seoul but also sought to facilitate China-ROK rapprochement. In response, North Korean diplomacy shifted from Sino-DPRK cooperation toward a Soviet-DPRK partnership (an alternative romantic triangle, which in turn unnerved Tokyo), only to suffer a setback when the Soviet bloc collapsed.³

From Pyongyang's perspective, the temporary improvement of inter-Korean and Japan-DPRK relations in 1990–1992 was only a partial compensation for the normalization of China-ROK relations, a step that formally transformed the gradually weakening Sino-DPRK marriage into a romantic triangle. In 1993–1998, North Korea's nuclear and missile

1. Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, Report, October 17, 1978, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (Hungarian National Archives, hereafter MNL), XIX-J-1-j China, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1, 002646/21/1978.

2. Hungarian Embassy to Japan, Report, September 19, 1978, MNL, XIX-J-1-j China, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1, 002646/17/1978.

3. Hungarian Embassy to Japan, Report, September 12, 1984, MNL, XIX-J-1-j South Korea, 1984, 87. doboz, 82-131, 004738/1984; Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, Report, March 11, 1985, MNL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1985, 91. doboz, 81-10, 001775/1985; Hungarian Embassy to China, Report, March 24, 1986, MNL, XIX-J-1-j China, 1986, 85. doboz, 78-10, 002227/1/1986.

programs led to renewed friction with Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. In 1997, the renewal of Japan-ROK disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima induced the DPRK to form an amity with Japan, rather than South Korea. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy could hardly lessen North Korea's dissatisfaction with Kim's simultaneous efforts to reinforce Japan-ROK cooperation, since in this triangular relationship, the pivot player was either Tokyo or Seoul but not Pyongyang (Szalontai 2013, 141–151; Wada and McCormack 2005, 1–18).

During 2000–2005, however, inter-Korean rapprochement (a process strongly supported by China) broadened North Korea's room to maneuver. Apart from enabling Pyongyang to temporarily improve its relations with Washington, the North-South dialogue created an opportunity for inter-Korean cooperation against Japan—and sometimes implicitly even against China—in the sphere of historical and territorial disputes (like Dokdo and Goguryeo). In 2005, the two Koreas and China equally opposed Japan's bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, and the DPRK began to show support for China's claim to the Japanese-held Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. During 2001–2004 Pyongyang also engaged Tokyo, exploiting the fact that Junichiro Koizumi's conflicts with Beijing and Seoul induced him to seek rapprochement with the DPRK. In sum, North Korea's bargaining position was enhanced not only by its ability to maintain contacts with all three Northeast Asian states but also by the disagreements between Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing (Rozman 2004, 276–285; Teo 2014, 173–183).⁴ Thus, the DPRK managed to create romantic triangles in which Pyongyang was an aspiring pivot player that had positive exchanges with both competing wing players (Seoul vs. Tokyo, Tokyo vs. Beijing, and Beijing vs. Seoul).

After 2006, however, North Korea's room to maneuver shrank considerably. In response to Pyongyang's first nuclear test, Japan drastically reduced its trade with the DPRK. In 2007–2008, Japanese-North Korean

4. On Pyongyang's attitude toward the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute, see "Japan's Wild Ambition for Military Supremacy Denounced," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), July 20, 2005, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1452005374-861010885/japans-wild-ambition-for-military-supremacy-denounced/>.

talks yielded no results, and Tokyo disapproved of Washington's decoupling of the issue of Japanese abductees from the nuclear talks. The post-Koizumi Sino-Japanese and Japan-ROK rapprochement further reduced Tokyo's readiness to engage the DPRK. Because the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2012) also adopted an increasingly hard stance vis-à-vis Pyongyang, North Korea had little chance to cooperate with Seoul against Tokyo, or vice versa. In Japanese and South Korean eyes, the nuclear tests transformed the DPRK from a wing player into an excluded player. These setbacks were only partially offset by the growth of Chinese assistance to the DPRK. During 2007–2009, Chinese leaders pursued a Chinese-Japanese-South Korean *ménage à trois*, and so they wanted to ensure tranquility in Northeast Asia and create a romantic triangle with the two Koreas, rather than to forge a stable marriage with Pyongyang against Seoul and Tokyo. Deliberately or not, North Korea eventually managed to create friction in Sino-ROK relations. During 2010–2012, Seoul's dissatisfaction with China's equidistant attitude toward the DPRK-provoked *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents stimulated the emergence of a US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois*. This shift displeased Beijing, all the more so because during 2010–2012, Sino-Japanese relations were increasingly strained due to a renewal of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. By the end of 2012, the Chinese-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* was gravely disrupted (Berkofsky 2011; Gui 2013, 116–118; Klingner 2012, 2–4; Nakato 2008).

The Rise and Decline of the Chinese-South Korean Partnership

In 2012, the final year of Lee Myung-bak's term, China-ROK relations were still strongly influenced by a shared desire for economic cooperation (Choi 2012, 30–33). In the security sphere, however, the two states lacked a comparable motivation to create a stable marriage against a third country, either Japan or the DPRK. On the contrary, Pyongyang's April 13 satellite launch induced Seoul and Tokyo to initiate talks about signing a General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a plan supported

by Washington but disapproved of by Chinese observers.⁵ Thus, North Korean propaganda could exploit the fact that the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared that the attempted agreement was “not helpful to settling the relevant issue of the Korean Peninsula.”⁶ In the end, South Korea’s last-minute decision to postpone GSOMIA and Lee’s Dokdo trip alienated Seoul and Tokyo from each other (Sheen and Kim 2012, 1–2). Still, a real re-orientation of South Korean foreign policy from Japan toward China occurred only after Park Geun-hye’s inauguration.

The deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations induced the Chinese leaders to cooperate with Seoul against Tokyo, and encourage the former to adopt a position of equidistance from Washington and Beijing. When Park visited China but refused to visit Japan, they reciprocated her gesture by displaying a similar preference for Seoul over Pyongyang. Breaking with earlier Chinese protocol, Xi Jinping paid a visit to the ROK but failed to travel to the DPRK. During Xi’s visit, he and Park expressed their shared enmity for Pyongyang’s nuclear brinkmanship and Premier Abe Shinzo’s nationalist stance (Hwang 2014; Ren 2016, 32–36). Thus the relationship between Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang was no longer a combination of romantic triangles but rather an increasingly stable China-ROK marriage directed against two excluded players.

North Korean propaganda alleged that Park Geun-hye “supported Japan in its moves to grab [the] Diaoyu Islands,”⁷ but since Seoul carefully avoided taking sides in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, this issue was unsuitable for generating Sino-ROK discord. The planned deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system provided more opportunities for Pyongyang. In October 2013, China’s Xinhua News Agency mentioned

5. “Info Treaty Hits Korean-Japanese Sore Spots,” *Global Times*, July 3, 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/718757.shtml>.

6. “Spokesman for Chinese FM Refers to Attempt to Conclude Military Agreement between S. Korea and Japan,” KCNA, July 3, 2012, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451892456-182556694/spokesman-for-chinese-fm-refers-to-attempt-to-conclude-military-agreement-between-s-korea-and-japan/>.

7. “KCNA Commentary Assails Park Geun Hye’s Sycophancy toward Foreign Forces,” KCNA, October 30, 2013, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1453314644-997992417/kcna-commentary-assails-park-geun-hyes-sycophancy-toward-foreign-forces/>.

for the first time that South Korea was “mulling over” adopting THAAD.⁸ As early as November 7, KCNA declared that Seoul wanted to participate in THAAD, which would pose a threat not only to the DPRK but also “to the whole of Asia beyond the peninsula.”⁹ Figuratively speaking, North Korea tried to weaken the China-ROK marriage by depicting Seoul’s attitude toward Washington and Beijing as a romantic triangle. Notably, Pyongyang started to present THAAD as a threat to China more than half a year before Beijing issued its first official protest.¹⁰

From mid-2014 to the spring of 2015, China frequently alleged that the THAAD plan was aimed at replacing the Sino-ROK partnership with a US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* (Rinehart et al. 2015, 11–18). In the spring of 2015, however, Beijing toned down its criticism. From April 25 to the end of the year, neither the English version of *Renmin Ribao* nor *China Daily* made any reference to THAAD. The *Global Times* (Beijing) covered that topic until September 22, then joined the news blackout that lasted until January 13, 2016. In contrast, the North Koreans continued their propaganda campaign against THAAD, depicting it as a threat both to the DPRK and China.¹¹ They also raised the issue of China’s maritime disputes with Southeast Asia for the first time. Their earlier silence mirrored South Korea’s similarly cautious stance, but in June 2015, when Washington started to urge Seoul to clarify its position on the South China Sea dispute (Lee 2016, 36–38), Pyongyang promptly accused the ROK of siding with the United States against China.¹²

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8. “S. Korea Mulls over Adopting THAAD to Enhance Missile Defense,” *Global Times*, October 15, 2013, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/817909.shtml>.
 9. “KCNA Commentary Accuses S. Korean Regime of Joining in US MD,” KCNA, November 7, 2013, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451895812-192312186/kcna-commentary-accuses-s-korean-regime-of-joining-in-u-s-md/>.
 10. “US Shield in SK Disrupts Stability: Chinese FM,” *Global Times*, May 29, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/862838.shtml>.
 11. “Minju Joson Accuses US Attempted Deployment of THAAD,” KCNA, June 9, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451904000-428370514/minju-joson-accuses-u-s-attempted-deployment-of-thaad/>.
 12. “S. Korean Authorities’ Policy of Dependence on US,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 18, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1450691305-28402824/s-korean-authorities-policy-of->

Beijing's decision to sidestep THAAD was probably interrelated with the resumption of Chinese-Japan-ROK trilateral talks in March and November 2015 (a different attempt at a *ménage à trois*) and the conclusion of a Sino-ROK Free Trade Agreement in June (T. Yu 2016, 22–24). In August–December 2015, North Korea adapted to this regional thaw, and temporarily softened its attitude toward the South—a policy shift that induced China to re-engage the DPRK (Snyder and Byun 2016, 103–104). In November, Beijing expressed its interest in a China-ROK-DPRK *ménage à trois* by welcoming the announcement that the two Koreas would hold vice-ministerial talks.¹³ In the end, however, Pyongyang's dissatisfaction with the China-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* may have influenced its decision to carry out a new nuclear test in January 2016, an act that was bound to re-ignite the THAAD dispute. The North Korean leaders seem to have concluded that the potential benefits of Sino-DPRK and inter-Korean rapprochement were less desirable than the prospect of disrupting the China-ROK marriage (Hong 2016).

To China's chagrin, the test did induce Park to revive the US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois*, and to announce that Seoul “would review the possibility” of deploying THAAD. To express his disapproval, Xi Jinping did not discuss the crisis with Park until February 5 (T. Yu 2016, 25). Thus, Pyongyang managed to drive a wedge between Beijing and the Washington-Seoul partnership, but at a certain cost, for China-ROK friction did not stimulate Sino-DPRK rapprochement. Instead, China opted for a policy of “critical equidistance,” treating both Koreas as excluded players. On February 7, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin upbraided the North for its latest satellite launch and the South for THAAD (Wang 2016, 50). Under such conditions, China's preferred partner was Russia (a country similarly concerned about America's global missile defense plans), rather than North Korea. During Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit in Moscow, both sides stressed that they did not accept Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions (B. Yu 2016).

dependence-on-u-s/.

13. “China Welcomes Talks between DPRK, ROK,” *China Daily*, November 27, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-11/27/content_22524633.htm.

In February and March 2016, the Chinese leaders seem to have still hoped that their support of UNSC Resolution 2270 might dissuade the ROK from deploying THAAD, but when both the THAAD talks and North Korea's missile tests continued unabated, Beijing became increasingly disinclined to cooperate with Seoul against Pyongyang. In response to the final decision on THAAD (July 8, 2016), China started to apply economic pressure on South Korea (Swaine 2017; Wang 2016, 49–55). In August, Chinese obstruction prevented the UNSC from sanctioning Pyongyang's latest missile tests.¹⁴ Predictably, North Korean propaganda tried to exploit this situation, and once again depicted THAAD as a threat to China.¹⁵

Still, the DPRK's efforts were only partially successful, because China stepped up its pressure on Pyongyang, too. Following a new nuclear test (September 9) and two missile tests, China's cooperation eventually enabled the UN Security Council to impose severe new sanctions on the DPRK (Fei and Saalman 2017, 5–7). Actually, North Korea's heavy-handed attempts to provoke friction between Seoul and Beijing may have ultimately backfired. As Chinese scholar Zheng Jiyong stated, “North Korea chose to launch the missile at this time [September 5] in an attempt to interfere with the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Park Geun-hye, as well as to disturb the discussions on North Korea at the G20 summit.”¹⁶

Monitoring the South Korean political crisis that culminated in Park's impeachment, Chinese observers hoped that her downfall might lead to inter-Korean rapprochement.¹⁷ In this respect, North Korean and Chinese views tended to converge, but they were only partly identical. Notably,

14. Eun A Jo, “Seoul's THAAD Decision and Its Implications for China-ROK Relations,” *The Asan Forum*, October 6, 2016, <http://www.theasanforum.org/seouls-thaad-decision-and-its-implications-for-china-rok-relations/#a6>.

15. Yong Nam Choe, “THAAD Deployment to Fuel Confrontation and Conflict,” *Pyongyang Times*, August 28, 2016, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1472221988-303764147/thaad-deployment-to-fuel-confrontation-and-conflict/>.

16. Cao Siqi and Leng Shumei, “Experts Slam NK Tests as UN Security Council Set to Meet,” *Global Times*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1005081.shtml>.

17. Lü Chao, “Drifting Seoul Needs to Right Relationships with Pyongyang, Beijing,” *Global Times*, December 7, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1022462.shtml>.

Global Times complained that Park's THAAD decision disrupted her earlier cooperation with Beijing and ended her relative independence from Washington and Tokyo.¹⁸ That is, China would have preferred to restore the China-ROK marriage, rather than to establish a Sino-DPRK marriage and exclude Seoul. These words revealed a major difference between Chinese and North Korean priorities, since from Pyongyang's perspective, the earlier period of China-ROK cooperation (2013–2014) constituted the nadir of Sino-DPRK relations, rather than a golden age.

Japan and South Korea: From Estrangement to Tortuous Rapprochement

During Park Geun-hye's term, Japan-ROK interactions followed an unusual trajectory. From Kim Young-sam to Lee Myung-bak, each South Korean president made considerable initial efforts to cooperate with Tokyo (an aim strongly supported by Washington), only to experience a later deterioration of relations. In contrast, Park initially rebuffed Tokyo's calls for a summit on the grounds that Abe was unwilling to face responsibility for Japan's wartime atrocities. Distrustful of Abe's defense reforms, Park was wary of pursuing a US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois*. Instead, she opted for a stable China-ROK marriage whose edge was directed not only against Pyongyang but also against Tokyo (Bong 2015, 64–69; Miller 2015, 79–82; Park 2015, 87–90).

In 2012–2013, the DPRK could draw only indirect benefits from these disagreements. While the breakdown of GSOMIA did suit Pyongyang's interests, it was politically uncomfortable for North Korea that conservative southern presidents like Lee and Park utilized anti-Japanese sentiments to buttress their legitimacy. During Abe's first year, Japan-ROK relations were not yet as confrontational as Sino-Japanese relations, and the occasional Japan-DPRK talks held between August 2012 and May 2013 did not yield concrete results. In December 2013, however, Abe's Yasukuni visit created a rift between Seoul and Tokyo large enough that both Beijing and Pyongyang

18. "Park Punished for Her Wrong Decisions," *Global Times*, December 9, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1022871.shtml>.

could exploit it, though in diametrically opposite ways (Park 2015, 89–90; Isozaki 2013).

Since the Yasukuni controversy reinforced the China-ROK marriage against Japan, Abe attempted to overcome his exclusion by reaching a deal with the other excluded player: the DPRK. At first Pyongyang condemned Tokyo's revisionism and irredentism so as to appeal to anti-Japanese sentiments in the ROK.¹⁹ However, in the spring of 2014—when Japan-DPRK talks finally started to make progress—North Korea temporarily toned down its propaganda about Yasukuni and Dokdo. During Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul (July 2014), Tokyo announced the partial lifting of Japanese sanctions on North Korea in exchange for Pyongyang's expressed willingness to find the Japanese abductees still unaccounted for (Halpin 2014; Kang and Bang 2014).

These Japanese steps incurred the United States and South Korean disapproval, and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida had to reassure Washington that Abe did not intend to visit the DPRK.²⁰ Creating a stable Japan-DPRK marriage was not a viable option; all what Tokyo and Pyongyang could achieve was to forge a romantic triangle with Seoul. Under such conditions, the North Koreans were reluctant to fulfill Tokyo's requests, whereupon in March 2015, a frustrated Tokyo extended its sanctions against Pyongyang (Kang and Bang 2015).

Chinese and North Korean efforts to drive a wedge between South Korea and Japan were countered by Washington's attempts to mediate between the two estranged states. On March 25, 2014, President Obama arranged a Park-Abe meeting—the very first one since either had taken office. Pyongyang evidently considered this *ménage à trois* inimical to its interests, all the more so because it was triggered by the three leaders' shared enmity for the DPRK's nuclear ambitions (Park 2015, 95).²¹ North Korean

19. "Japan's Moves for Grabbing Islets and Distorting History Slammed," KCNA, February 23, 2014, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451896649-800722964/japans-moves-for-grabbing-islets-and-distorting-history-slammed/>.

20. "Abe Must Stop Cozying Up to N. Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 18, 2014, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/18/2014071801746.html.

21. "KCNA Commentary Assails Criminal Nexus among South Korea, US, Japan,"

concerns were intensified by the conclusion of a US-Japanese-South Korean intelligence-sharing agreement (December 29, 2014). Unlike the ill-fated GSOMIA, this was a trilateral agreement of a deliberately limited scope, reflecting Seoul's lingering reluctance to cooperate with Tokyo (Manyin 2015, 4–5). These differences may have played a role in that the Chinese press did not criticize the new agreement in the same way North Korea did, or as China had done in 2012.²²

Japan-ROK rapprochement received a stimulus from a Chinese-Japanese-South Korean *ménage à trois*, too. Kishida's first trip to the ROK and Abe's visit to Seoul took place in the context of trilateral meetings—a form of interaction the Park Administration considered more convenient than bilateral cooperation with Tokyo (Zhang 2016, 320). The two states' shared enmity for North Korea was not wholly sufficient to bring about a reconciliation. During his visit to the ROK (October 2015), Defense Minister Nakatani Gen disagreed with the South Korean view that Japan should ask for Seoul's permission before launching military operations in the DPRK (Manyin 2015, 6).

To create a stable marriage or a US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois*, Japan and South Korea had to reach consensus over the problem of “comfort women.” Thanks to US mediation, on December 28, 2015, the two governments signed an agreement, in which Tokyo offered financial support to the surviving victims, while Seoul abandoned its quest for legal compensation (Kimura 2016, 168–171). Predictably, North Korea was quick to condemn the agreement,²³ but China also received it with veiled enmity. As *China Daily* put it, “this step . . . is not enough to signify Japan is ready to

KCNA, May 7, 2014, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451896511-985890621/kcna-commentary-assails-criminal-nexus-among-s-korea-u-s-japan/>.

22. “S. Korea, Japan, US Intelligence-Sharing Pact Takes Effect,” *China Daily*, December 29, 2014, http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-12/29/content_19194693.htm; “Retraction of Contract on Sharing Information Denounced in South Korea,” KCNA, January 2, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451904770-642007062/retraction-of-contract-on-sharing-information-denounced-in-south-korea/>.
23. “DPRK FM Spokesman Urges Japan's Apology and Reparation for Crimes against Humanity,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 2, 2016, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451715308-940133606/dprk-fm-spokesman-urges-japans-apology-and-reparation-for-crimes-against-humanity/>.

truly own up to its past.”²⁴ Since the settlement potentially enabled Abe to overcome his exclusion from the game, both Pyongyang and Beijing had a stake in opposing it.

Japan-ROK rapprochement may have influenced Pyongyang’s decision to resume its confrontational attitude toward Seoul, which in turn accelerated Japanese-South Korean security cooperation. Abe’s prompt discussion with Park of the new nuclear test stood in a sharp contrast with Xi Jinping’s long-delayed conversation with her, thus implying a shift from China-ROK cooperation to a Japanese-South Korean partnership (Wicker 2016, 2). In the spring and summer of 2016, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul held a series of bilateral and trilateral discussions about North Korea, and conducted joint ballistic missile defense exercises (Manyin et al. 2016, 7–8). On July 8, Japan promptly welcomed the THAAD agreement—a response that stood in a stark contrast with China’s sharp protests.²⁵ In essence, this US-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* treated the DPRK as an excluded player, whereupon China partly excluded itself from the game and turned toward a different player, Russia.

Since the security crisis increasingly overshadowed the remaining obstacles to Japan-ROK cooperation, the DPRK had little chance to create a romantic triangle, though North Korean propaganda attempted to exploit the Dokdo dispute, the unresolved aspects of the “comfort women” agreement, and the Yasukuni visits of Japanese cabinet ministers.²⁶ Actually, the nuclear crisis and the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations induced Abe to show flexibility in the sphere of historical issues. Chinese opposition

24. “Japan’s Apology to ROK Welcome, but Not Enough,” *China Daily*, December 30, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-12/30/content_22869061.htm.

25. “US to Deploy THAAD Missile Defense System in South Korea; China Says Move Is ‘Damaging,’” *Japan Times*, July 8, 2016, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/08/asia-pacific/u-s-deploy-thaad-missile-defense-south-korea-china-slams-decision/#.WGDSk_l97IV.

26. Sung-jin Choi, “Pyongyang Blasts Japan’s Dokdo Claim,” *Korea Times*, January 26, 2016, http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/01/113_196392.html ; “S. Korean Bodies Press on Erecting Girl Statues for Peace,” *KCNA*, January 22, 2016, <https://kcna.watch.co/newstream/1453476639-338510269/s-korean-bodies-press-on-erecting-girl-statues-for-peace/>.

to THAAD created a new Japan-ROK consensus, and alleviated Japanese fears of China-ROK collusion. In October 2016, Tokyo started to disburse the funds stipulated in the “comfort women” agreement. These Japanese concessions, combined as they were with Pyongyang’s provocations, eroded Seoul’s opposition to Tokyo’s insistent calls for a bilateral GSOMIA. On November 23, the agreement was signed (Chanlett-Avery 2017, 11–13). While the North Koreans were unable to block GSOMIA, they probably welcomed that Beijing also condemned it. Chinese analysts stressed that GSOMIA would aggravate not only inter-Korean relations but also Sino-ROK relations, because “the sharing of intelligence could relate to China.”²⁷

Since Tokyo had just managed to sign two long-awaited agreements with Park, Japanese observers were concerned that the political crisis that engulfed her in late 2016 might prevent the implementation of these agreements and hinder Japan-ROK cooperation against Pyongyang (Nishino 2017, 7). Such Japanese concerns sharply differed from China’s optimistic assessment of the crisis, which further confirmed that Chinese and Japanese aims were at variance as far as the “comfort women” agreement, THAAD, and GSOMIA were concerned. In this respect, the emergence of a Japan-ROK marriage was not only a challenge but also an opportunity for North Korea. It hindered Pyongyang’s efforts to create a romantic triangle with Tokyo and Seoul, but instead it created a rift between Seoul and Beijing.

North Korea in the Shadow of Sino-Japanese Rivalry

The improvement or deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations was less directly affected by the North Korean factor than China-ROK and Japanese-South Korean interactions. Instead, the implicit or explicit strategic rivalry between the two major powers, and their territorial disputes, considerably influenced their attitudes toward the DPRK. As Christopher W. Hughes persuasively argued, Japanese policy-makers, unwilling as they were to

27. Jingxi Mo, “ROK-Japan Intelligence Sharing Pact Criticized,” *China Daily*, November 24, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-11/24/content_27474523.htm.

openly identify Beijing as a threat, used North Korea “as the prime public legitimization for nearly all major changes in Japanese security policy that [were] addressed toward the looming threat from China” (Hughes 2009, 304). In turn, the Chinese leaders evidently regarded Japan as a more serious security challenge than South Korea, and thus their priorities often diverged from that of Pyongyang. From their perspective, a romantic triangle with the two Koreas was a satisfactory option if it excluded Japan from the game, but for the DPRK, it was not.

In the fall of 2012, when China-DPRK relations were still fairly cordial but Japan-DPRK relations were showing no signs of improvement, the North Korean leaders regarded the renewal of the Senkaku/Diaoyu conflict as a favorable development. From September to November, KCNA devoted 11 articles to the dispute, exclusively quoting the Chinese standpoint and thus reaffirming the Sino-DPRK marriage vis-à-vis an excluded player. In 2013, however, KCNA published only a single article that explicitly criticized Japan’s position, and this one appeared before Pyongyang’s third nuclear test. North Korea’s unwillingness to express solidarity with China seems to have been motivated not only by Pyongyang’s dissatisfaction with Beijing’s declining support but also by the consideration that the “Japan factor” created a new China-ROK marriage, and thus Sino-Japanese discord was no longer as advantageous to North Korea’s interests as before. Indeed, the Chinese leaders’ determination to exclude Abe from the game even induced them to gain Obama’s goodwill by adopting a hard stance toward North Korea’s new nuclear test (Szalontai 2015, 80–85).

In 2013, Pyongyang was not yet able to counter the Sino-ROK marriage by creating a romantic triangle with Tokyo. In this period, Abe’s own efforts to create a romantic triangle were focused on engaging Russia, rather than the DPRK. In February-March 2014, however, the Ukrainian crisis created new conditions that were at least partly advantageous to North Korea. Tokyo’s participation in the US-led sanctions against Moscow caused friction in Russian-Japanese relations, and stimulated Sino-Russian rapprochement. This shift in Russia’s attitude increased Abe’s need to engage the DPRK (and thus possibly contributed to the temporary Japanese-North Korean rapprochement in mid-2014), but at the same time reinforced the

US-Japanese marriage. In turn, the US-brokered Park-Abe meeting and Washington's expressed commitment to defend the Senkaku Islands made the Chinese leaders increasingly disinclined to criticize North Korea, though China preferred to engage Moscow, rather than Pyongyang (Szalontai 2015, 88–89; Izumikawa 2016, 62–67).

Since neither Russia nor the DPRK proved an effective counterweight to Chinese pressure, Tokyo eventually felt it necessary to reach out to Beijing. On Japan's initiative, Abe and Xi Jinping held a brief meeting in November 2014. During 2015, Sino-Japanese rapprochement created favorable conditions for a China-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois*. Still, China remained critical of Japan's new military legislation, the upgrading of US-Japanese security cooperation, the US-Japanese efforts to build up the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a counterweight to China, and Japanese "meddling" in the South China Sea (Capistrano and Kurizaki 2016, 86–97; Sakaki and Wacker 2017, 10–11). The DPRK leaders, unable as they were to create a romantic triangle with Tokyo, made repeated efforts to exploit Sino-Japanese discord. In 2015, North Korean propaganda stressed that TPP was aimed at "containing regional big powers" (i.e., China and Russia), criticized US involvement in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, and condemned the US-Japanese naval exercises in the South China Sea.²⁸

To express their aversion to Japan's military build-up and its "meddling" in the South China Sea, the Chinese leaders rebuffed Kishida's initial requests for talks about Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test in the same fashion as they blocked Park's attempts to reach Xi.²⁹ In mid-2016, Chinese

28. "KCNA Commentary Assails Dangerous US-Japan Military Nexus," KCNA, December 11, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1451904941-65657275/kcna-commentary-assails-dangerous-u-s-japan-military-nexus/>; Kum Hui Pae, "US Moves to Knock into Shape NATO of Asian Version," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 29, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1450688739-271163167/u-s-moves-to-knock-into-shape-nato-of-asian-version/>; "Revised Defence Cooperation Guidelines Give Japan More Power," *Pyongyang Times*, May 13, 2015, <https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/1450714654-241269962/revised-defence-cooperation-guidelines-gives-japan-more-power/>.

29. Ayako Mie, "Japanese, Chinese Diplomats Meet in Tokyo, Agree to More High-Level Talks," *Japan Times*, February 29, 2016, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/02/29/national/politics-diplomacy/japanese-chinese-diplomats-meet-tokyo-agree-high-level->

observers claimed that Abe used both North Korea's missile tests and China's maritime disputes as excuses to justify his US-backed security policy.³⁰ Since China also criticized GSOMIA and Tokyo's unilateral sanctions on North Korea, there was little, if any, chance of a Sino-Japanese marriage or a China-Japan-ROK *ménage à trois* against the DPRK. Still, the nuclear crisis induced both Beijing and Tokyo to exclude Pyongyang from the game. Instead, China turned its attention from Seoul to Moscow, whereas Japan engaged Russia and South Korea (Niquet 2016, 4–10).

The DPRK and Chinese-Japanese-South Korean Trilateralism

The progress of China-Japan-South Korea (CJK) trilateral cooperation has been considerably hindered by the recurrent bilateral disputes between Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul, but it could also produce a moderating effect on such disputes. The massive volume of trade and investment flows between the three countries necessitated a *ménage à trois*, and the quarreling states sometimes found it easier to reach rapprochement in trilateral forums than in the sphere of bilateral relations. In periods of trilateral cooperation, China greatly needed tranquility on the Korean Peninsula. Notably, one of the main objectives of the Changjitu Plan (a Sino-DPRK transport corridor initiated in 2009) was to forge economic linkages between Northeast China, Japan, and the ROK (Yeo 2012, 2–4; Lee 2011, 148–150). As such, a China-Japan-South Korea *ménage à trois* was implicitly at variance with North Korea's efforts to create romantic triangles with the neighboring countries.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of CJK trilateralism during 2008–2011 enhanced Seoul's bargaining position vis-à-vis Pyongyang in the very period when inter-Korean relations were deteriorating. If South Korea maintained a *ménage à trois* with its two big neighbors, the DPRK found it difficult to forge a romantic triangle with China or Japan against the ROK, nor was Seoul interested in a China-ROK-DPRK *ménage à trois* against

talks/#.WHdlyfkrLIU.

30. Chuanbo Xu, "THAAD Serves Japan's National Strategy," *Global Times*, August 14, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1000390.shtml>.

Tokyo. On the contrary, South Korea even played a mediating role between China and Japan. In 2011, the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat was set up in Seoul – a compromise solution that suited both Beijing and Tokyo but hardly pleased Pyongyang (Calder and Min 2010, 124–125; Zhang 2016, 317–328). Under such conditions, the North Korean leaders probably regarded CJK trilateralism as a trend inimical to their interests.

North Korea's confrontational acts repeatedly generated strain in the trilateral partnership. At the CJK summit held in May 2010, the three leaders failed to adopt a joint statement about referring the *Cheonan* incident to the UNSC. At the May 2012 summit, they agreed that they would not accept a new North Korean nuclear test, but their joint statement did not mention the DPRK. On both occasions, China opposed the sharply critical attitude that South Korea and Japan adopted toward Pyongyang. Chinese observers, who had hoped that CJK trilateralism would lessen the US-centrism of Japanese foreign policy (a view shared by Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio, 2009–2010), were concerned that the inter-Korean clashes might induce Tokyo and Seoul to create an alternative *ménage à trois* with Washington (Szalontai 2015, 75; Yeo 2012, 4–5; Zhang 2016, 318).³¹

Ultimately, the Chinese-initiated suspension of high-level trilateral meetings in 2013–2014 was triggered by Japan's territorial and historical disputes with China and South Korea, rather than by North Korea's belligerence (Sakaki and Wacker 2017, 27). Since the breakdown of trilateralism led to the emergence of a Sino-ROK marriage directed against Tokyo and Pyongyang, the DPRK could draw only limited benefits, if any, from the change. Excluded by China and South Korea, Abe was more willing to reach out to Pyongyang than the China-oriented Hatoyama administration had been, but this short-lived Japan-DPRK rapprochement could not offset the decline of Chinese support.

The first signs of a new *ménage à trois* appeared in September 2014, when a CJK meeting of deputy foreign ministers was held in Seoul.³²

31. On the 2012 CJK summit, see "China, Japan, South Korea Warn North Korea Against New Nuke Test," Nuclear Threat Initiative, May 14, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/china-japan-south-korea-tell-north-they-will-not-tolerate-new-nuke-test/>.

32. "S. Korea, China, Japan to Hold Senior-Level Diplomatic Talks," *China Daily*, September

Anxious to overcome its post-2012 exclusion from the game, Japan pressed for an early resumption of high-level trilateral discussions, but China and the ROK preferred a slower pace.³³ The first post-crisis meeting of foreign ministers, held again in Seoul (March 2015), reaffirmed the three countries' joint commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea (Kang and Bang 2015, 4; Sakaki and Wacker 2017, 28). In September, Park and Xi agreed to hold a new CJK summit—a decision signaling her shift from a Sino-ROK marriage to a *ménage à trois* (Lee 2015, 8). On November 1, the three leaders met in Seoul, and issued a joint declaration that welcomed the recent improvement of inter-Korean relations, and called for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks to achieve denuclearization.³⁴ The temporary DPRK-ROK rapprochement helped the three leaders to address the thorny North Korean issue, but Pyongyang was probably displeased by the reactivation of trilateral cooperation, not the least because the latest CJK meetings, held as they were in Seoul, potentially elevated South Korea to the position of a pivot player.

In the spring and summer of 2016, the three countries continued to hold various trilateral meetings, despite the tension generated by THAAD, North Korea's provocations, and the renewal of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. On August 24, the three foreign ministers met in Tokyo. Judging from the fact that the DPRK had that very day tested a submarine-launched missile, the North Korean leaders probably wanted to disrupt this *ménage à trois*.³⁵ In the short run, Pyongyang's action backfired, for the three ministers promptly condemned the test.³⁶ In the end, however, their *ménage à trois* did suffer a reversal, because the South Korean political crisis caused the indefinite postponement of the next CJK summit, to be held in Japan.³⁷

11, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-09/11/content_18580769.htm.

33. Cai Hong, "Japan Should Respect the Accord It Reached," *China Daily*, November 19, 2014, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-11/19/content_18938708.htm.

34. Seung-woo Kang, "Leaders Vow to Resume NK Nuclear Talks," *Korea Times*, November 1, 2015, http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/11/113_189940.html.

35. Qiangyi Jin, "Economy Can't Ease Northeast Asian Tensions," *Global Times*, August 28, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1003294.shtml>.

36. Hajimu Takeda, "Japan, China and South Korea Turn Up the Heat on North Korea," *Asahi Shimbun*, August 24, 2016, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201608240046.html>.

37. "Japan Calls off Trilateral Summit after Park Impeached," *Asahi Shimbun*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201612130025.html>.

Under such conditions, North Korea had good reason to regard Park's impeachment as doubly advantageous.

Conclusion

North Korea's relations with China, Japan, and South Korea have been asymmetrical in nature. The DPRK's military capabilities considerably surpassed its economic potential; its population was far smaller than that of its neighbors; its limited international recognition constrained its room to maneuver; and its political system was inflexible and repressive. This is probably why reciprocal positive exchanges have been so conspicuously rare in North Korean diplomacy. If the North Korean leaders were unable or unwilling to offer sufficiently attractive benefits to another state, they often resorted to negative exchanges (like sanctions and threats). Their behavior thus conformed with Dittmer's observations about the aggressive conduct of certain pariah states (Dittmer 1981, 509).

These aspects of North Korean diplomacy strongly influenced Pyongyang's views about triangular relations. In general, the North Korean leaders displayed a preference for zero-sum relations: a stable marriage directed against an opponent; a romantic triangle, with North Korea as the pivot player; and a romantic triangle directed against an opponent, with North Korea as a wing player. In contrast, they showed considerably less interest in win-win relations. If an existing *ménage à trois* or stable marriage was not directed against their opponents, they found it less useful than if it was.

Since they were of the opinion that any cooperation between South Korea and other states was inimical to their interests, North Korea's engagement tactics toward Seoul, Tokyo, or Beijing were usually directed against a player they wanted to exclude from the game, rather than being pursued solely for the sake of rapprochement. Notably, in October 1972 a Foreign Ministry official told a Hungarian diplomat that the DPRK welcomed the establishment of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations not only because this step might bring benefits to Pyongyang but even more so

because it was “disadvantageous to the enemy” (i.e., Seoul).³⁸

The North Korean media paid conspicuous attention to the territorial, historical, and security disputes between Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing, and its comments were mostly of a judgmental, rather than neutral, nature. If a problem was of direct relevance to Pyongyang’s interests (such as THAAD), North Korean propaganda often emphasized that it posed a threat not only to the DPRK but also to China, no matter whether the Chinese press adopted the same position or not. If an issue was not directly related to the Korean Peninsula (like China’s maritime disputes with Japan and Southeast Asia), Pyongyang handled it in a rather opportunistic fashion, highlighting it in certain periods and ignoring it at other times.

On several occasions, North Korea did benefit from regional disputes. For instance, the attempts Koizumi and Abe made to engage Pyongyang were influenced by their need to offset the exclusion Tokyo faced from Beijing and Seoul. The icy relationship between Abe and Park hindered Washington’s efforts to create a *ménage à trois* against North Korea, and when these efforts finally started to yield results, Chinese opposition to this *ménage à trois* reduced Beijing’s willingness to apply pressure on Pyongyang.

Nonetheless, Pyongyang was not always able to exploit regional disputes. Post-1990 Sino-Japanese rivalry proved as much a challenge as an opportunity for the North Korean leaders. Since both China and Japan found it easier to come to terms with South Korea than with each other, the DPRK could no longer expect them to reach rapprochement at Seoul’s expense along the same lines as in 1971–1974. On the contrary, the romantic triangle potentially elevated South Korea to the position of a pivot player. In 2013–2014, Sino-Japanese and Japan-ROK discord stimulated Chinese-South Korean cooperation, whereas Sino-ROK disagreements over THAAD accelerated Japan-ROK rapprochement. And if Beijing and Tokyo opted for trilateral cooperation, Seoul played an important mediating role.

Paradoxically, North Korea’s increasing reliance on military intimidation seems to have undercut its traditional divide-and-rule strategy. At the zenith

38. Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, Report, November 17, 1972, MNL, XIX-J-1-j China, 1972, 56. doboz, 78-10, 00701/34/1972.

of inter-Korean détente (2000–2005), Pyongyang skillfully exploited the fact that all three East Asian states strove to engage the DPRK while their mutual relations were marred by discord. This situation was fully in accordance with Dittmer's (1981, 510) thesis: "The pivot position in a romantic triangle is the most advantageous one available, permitting amities with two other players and enmities with none, thereby maximizing benefits." But since a pivot player's privileged position is based on its cooperative attitude, a switch to confrontation carries a risk of marginalization.

Indeed, in 2006–2017 North Korea was rarely able to cooperate with more than one partner at one time. If Sino-DPRK relations were improving, Japanese-North Korean relations were in a state of stagnation, or vice versa. Nor did China-ROK or Japan-ROK friction necessarily stimulate Sino-DPRK or Japanese-North Korean rapprochement. Since both China and Japan could easily find alternative partners that were more powerful and desirable than the DPRK, their interest in reaching out to Pyongyang remained limited as long as North Korea maintained a confrontational stance. THAAD induced Beijing to turn toward Moscow, rather than Pyongyang, whereas Abe's efforts to overcome his exclusion were focused more on the United States and Russia than on North Korea.

Seen through this prism, Kim Jong Un's recent "peace offensive" has been doubly advantageous. The dramatic improvement of North-South relations led to an unprecedented US-DPRK summit, while the prospect of US-North Korean rapprochement paved the ground for the long-overdue Kim-Xi Jinping meetings. Once again, Pyongyang has become a pivot player. At the same time, the new China-ROK-DPRK *ménage à trois* has increasingly isolated Japan. Starting in November 2017, Seoul refused to share China-related intelligence with Tokyo.³⁹ Predictably, Japan monitored the Chinese-backed inter-Korean rapprochement with thinly veiled anxiety. Kim's "peace offensive" enabled the DPRK not only to find partners but also to drive a wedge between its opponents. Amity has apparently brought greater benefits than enmity.

39. Jun-suk Yeo, "South Korea Refuses to Share Military Intelligence with Japan: Report," *Korea Herald*, November 19, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171119000240>.

Nevertheless, Pyongyang's penchant for divide-and-rule tactics suggests that the prospects of inter-Korean rapprochement are still dubious. Notably, the joint North-South statement of April 2018 revived the earlier ROK plans to connect the South with China and Russia through northern territory. Yet it must be remembered how these plans (East Asian Community, Northeast Asian Initiative, and Eurasian Initiative) foundered on Pyongyang's veiled opposition. The DPRK paid only lip service to the idea of regional cooperation, and effectively blocked Seoul's attempts to create a North-South transportation corridor (Calder and Min 2010, 190-203; Rozman 2004, 276–285). This structural divergence between northern and southern objectives is likely to persist into the foreseeable future, hindering ROK president Moon Jae-in's efforts to reconcile inter-Korean rapprochement with the aim of regional cooperation.

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