

‘Strategic Talks’

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Institute for Security & Development Policy

ABOUT ISDP

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‘STRATEGIC TALKS’ DEBUT: A REPORT

Contextual Background

In June, the ISDP Stockholm Korea Center launched “Strategic Talks,” an online series focusing on developments on the Korean Peninsula and regional and international security. The inaugural session on June 4, 2024, featured Professor Ramon Pacheco-Pardo from King’s College London and Dr. John Nilsson-Wright from the University of Cambridge. Subsequent sessions included talks on June 19 with Mr. Heino Klinck, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, and Mr. Frank Aum, Senior Expert on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the U.S. Institute of Peace, as well as a final talk on June 20 with Lieutenant General (ret.) Chun In-Bum, Distinguished Military Fellow at ISDP, and Dr. Lee Sang Hyun from the Sejong Institute. All three talks were moderated by Maj. Gen. (ret) Mats Engman, Head of the Stockholm Korea Center at ISDP.

This report summarizes and compares the perspectives from these three talks, aiming to identify commonalities and differences from their insights. Key issues discussed included the evolving Russia-DPRK alliance, marked by a new mutual defense agreement between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, and its impact on regional stability. The Republic of Korea’s recent National Assembly elections and potential shifts in foreign policy were also examined, including how domestic changes might influence relations with the U.S. and the DPRK. Additionally, the DPRK’s policy shift, abandoning peaceful reunification with the ROK and designating it as an

enemy, was highlighted for its potential to escalate tensions.

The discussions further explored the emerging regional security architecture, contrasting alliances like the U.S.-Japan-ROK-Australia bloc with the China-Russia-DPRK-Iran axis. The impact of the Ukraine conflict on East Asian security and the potential ramifications of a possible return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency on U.S. policy toward the DPRK were also considered. Notably, the talks took place before Biden’s withdrawal from the 2024 U.S. election and Kamala Harris’ candidacy, suggesting that future changes in direction are possible.

Key Takeaways from Each Strategic Talk

In the first Strategic Talk providing a European perspective, it was noted that President Yoon is strengthening ROK’s global ties through technical cooperation with AUKUS nations, enhancing relations with Australia and NATO. Facing threats from the DPRK and the PRC and U.S. policy uncertainty, the ROK is diversifying its alliances. The DPRK’s influence is also significantly becoming pre-eminent in its relationship with Russia. On the other hand, the U.S. is fostering different partnerships in the Indo-Pacific including the trilateral agreement between the U.S., ROK and Japan. A change of leadership in Washington D.C. after the November 2024 Presidential elections could affect these alliances and partnerships. Rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula is marked by the

DPRK's military modernization program, continued provocations and opportunistic behavior, creating more extensive threats and increasing conflict risks, while new security architectures are forming in Asia, partly due to U.S. political uncertainties.

Offering a U.S. perspective, the second Strategic Talk mainly focused on the DPRK's ongoing military provocations, including increased activity along the DMZ and fortifications by North Korea, and the implications of its mutual defense agreement with Russia for U.S.-ROK operational planning. The discussion also highlighted failures in global deterrence mechanisms, citing recent conflicts like the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The DPRK's refusal to engage in talks with the U.S. over denuclearization and its hardened stance towards the ROK, now viewed as an enemy, was also covered. The need for adjusted strategies and policies, emphasizing deterrence and risk management, was discussed, along with the critical role of the PRC in maintaining regional stability and managing DPRK provocations. Three transformational shifts were mentioned: 25 years ago the DPRK asking for dialogue to now turning away from dialogue, for decades DPRK supported unification to now scrap the idea of unification and lastly solidifying its relations with Russia.

The third Strategic Talk, concerned with ROK perceptions, examined the 2022 DPRK's aggressive nuclear doctrine, including advancements in its missile and nuclear capabilities and the development of tactical nuclear weapons. The discussion highlighted the DPRK's shift in policy towards the ROK, now seen as an adversary rather than a partner, and its potential impact on regional stability. The growing

strategic partnership among DPRK, Russia, and PRC was analyzed, raising concerns about regional security and a possible new Cold War dynamic developing in Northeast Asia. The suspension of the Comprehensive Military Agreement and increased activities in the Demilitarized Zone were mentioned as examples of increased tension. Effective escalation control mechanisms, such as enhancing communication channels and establishing confidence-building measures, were recommended, along with maintaining an open dialogue with the DPRK and a coordinated international approach to manage provocations and reduce conflict risks. The concept of "escalate to de-escalate", was mentioned to address the worsening security situation.

Unveiling Common Threads and Divergences in Strategic Insights

The three Strategic Talks converge on several critical points regarding the DPRK's evolving role and its implications for regional security. All discussions emphasize the growing threat posed by the DPRK, marked by its aggressive nuclear doctrine and strategic partnership with Russia and the PRC. These developments are viewed as potential sources of escalating tensions and conflicts on the Korean Peninsula.

The recent Russia-DPRK alliance was highlighted across all tasks as a significant destabilizing factor, with potential repercussions for U.S.-ROK operational planning and regional security dynamics. This partnership is seen as a catalyst for broader geopolitical realignments, between authoritarian regimes. The increased DPRK support for Russia and Russian reciprocal support gives DPRK more policy options as well as increases the DPRK's military capability.

Uncertainties surrounding U.S. leadership and its impact on regional security was a common concern in all three talks. The potential shift in U.S. policy, depending on whether under a Biden (now Harris) or a Trump administration, are influencing ROK strategies and broader geopolitical alignments.

Consensus emerged on the need for strategic adjustments in response to the changing security environment. This included balancing deterrence with diplomatic engagement and reassessing strategies to address new challenges more effectively.


The discussion compared the perspectives of Europe, the United States, and ROK on the growing security challenges posed by the Russia-DPRK alliance. The European perspective focuses on ROK's strategic efforts to diversify its international relations, highlighting its diplomatic balancing between major geopolitical blocs like NATO, AUKUS, and PRC's influence. In contrast, the U.S. view emphasizes the need to reassess traditional pressure-based tactics against the DPRK, with a focus on engaging the PRC to maintain regional stability. The ROK perspective focused more on the immediate security threats from the DPRK-Russia partnership, advocating for specific operational and strategic responses. This viewpoint also explored internal debates within the ROK, particularly regarding nuclear deterrence and possible national nuclear capability development and military alliances, emphasizing the need to balance deterrence with the risks of escalation.

The summary of the three talks and comparison of the different perspectives identifies, not surprisingly, somewhat differing priorities: the European

perspective was concerned with ROK's diplomatic actions, the U.S. one with recalibrating strategies to address dual threats, and the ROK, quite naturally, with the more direct security challenges and national defense policy. This highlights the complex interplay of different threat assessments, international cooperation, military alliances, risk management, escalation management and internal security considerations in both global and regional security discussions.

Conclusion

The three Strategic Talks have both generated several common aspects on threat assessments and policy priorities and identified nuances and in some areas differing views. Maybe the most challenging development discussed and mainly agreed upon was the growing threat posed by DPRK's nuclear ambitions and new doctrine and its partnership with Russia. To manage these new developments, each talk highlighted the urgent need for updating strategies to address these evolving threats and regional instabilities. The discussions also brought up the importance of enhancing diplomatic efforts, increasing engagement with allies and partners and developing a long-term coordinated policy. More specifically, but not directly covered in the three talks was the sometimes-diverging U.S. and South Korean policies and even internal domestic differences in South Korea. To address the many complex challenges, it would seem beneficial to have a long-term bipartisan agreement in South Korea and harmonize this with Washington and even with Tokyo.



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