



Understanding the Hermit Kingdom: Assessing North Korea's Future

TRANSCRIPT

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Patrick Cronin:

Good day everyone. I'm Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair at the Hudson Institute. I'm delighted to be joined today via video with David Maxwell and Jenny Town here in Washington DC, and Dr. Lee Seong-hyon in Seoul. For the next hour we want to discuss, in light of recent events, our understanding of what we call inscrutable North Korea.

Just when you thought you might know it all and that there was little new to unearth about the secretive Kim family dictatorship that has run North Korea from its inception since World War II, something happens to humble us and remind us, we still don't know a lot about South Korea's poor but nuclear armed neighbor. "Where in the world is Kim Jong Un?" has been a constant headline and refrain in recent days. Responding to the endless speculation about Kim's location and condition, the ROK Unification Minister declared that speculation had reached "infodemic" levels.

It's interesting because health has been turned into a national security issue of the year in 2020, first COVID-19, and then the whereabouts and condition of Kim Jong Un. Since dropping out of public view after April 11 and conspicuously missing from the April 15 celebration memorializing his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, the speculation has been rife. Has he been hunkering down in Wonsan to avoid the coronavirus? Has he been recovering from surgery or from wounds suffered during a missile test mishap? Has he been in a coma or is he dead as a result of botched surgery, heart failure, injury or disease?

It was Machiavelli who said that fortune is the ruler of half of our actions. And regardless of whether Kim Jong Un reappears in good health, we are reminded that security on the Korean Peninsula, security in Northeast Asia and beyond, can be significantly affected by the life of a leader.

On Monday evening in Washington D.C., President Donald Trump added to the intrigue by announcing he hopes Kim is well, and he knows relatively speaking, his condition, adding that the world would soon discover the truth about Chairman Kim.

So with that preamble, let's discuss lessons to be drawn from a temporary mystery about a leader of North Korea. Questions about contingency and succession that might occur if not now at some point in the future, and the impact of the policy of major actors, especially the United States, South Korea, and China.

David Maxwell is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. But he spent a career in the United States Army retiring after 30 years as a Special Forces Colonel, having specialized a great deal on preparing for North Korean contingencies.

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon is Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the influential South Korean think tank, the Sejong Institute. Dr. Lee, among many other achievements, earned his PhD in Beijing and lived in China for 11 years. He brings deep understanding to North Korea and China.

Jenny Town is a Fellow at the Stimson Center, and the Deputy Director of Stimson's distinguished 38 North publication, a website devoted to providing policy and technical analysis on North Korea. Indeed some of that analysis was all over the news recently because it was the imagery that showed that Kim Jong Un's train had stopped and been stuck in Wonsan where the Kim family has a major retreat.

So let's have a first round of questions, and the same question really for all three panelists here, about the implications of uncertainty about the condition of the Supreme Leader of a potential adversary armed with nuclear weapons. And what further can be done to ensure readiness, early warning, better information and intelligence, and avoiding acting either too slowly or too precipitously should there be sudden change?

This is, in other words, a question about the lessons of this mystery of Kim Jong Un's whereabouts and not to mention the mystery about whether COVID-19 has struck North Korea deeper than reported since they've almost reported no cases in North Korea, and the analytical problem of understanding North Korea here in 2020 when we thought we knew a good deal more.

Let me begin with David Maxwell, and then we'll turn to Jenny Town, and then last but not least, Dr. Lee. David, over to you.

David Maxwell:

Thank you Patrick, and thank you for having us. I think it's a very important topic and of course timely. I'm reminded of the old saying that war is God's way of teaching Americans geography. I think that the most important thing to take away from all of this is exactly what you said in your preamble, is that what happens to the leader can have effects on the peninsula, regional effects, and really global effects.

And so the fact that we are looking at this so deeply and that really the American public, South Korean public, and really the global public is concerned and worrying about this, is actually a positive thing. Because I think what we're really learning is, and what most of us know is North Korea is a hard target.

And again, you described that in your preamble. It's a closed society and information is tightly controlled. The health of Kim Jong Un is a national secret, and I think we are only going to know about his health when the regime decides to release information.

But that being said, we are looking at many different scenarios and I think that the open source reporting on this is really all over the map. And again, it's an indication that we just don't know what is happening. But again, I want to take away the fact that we need to really look at this as a wakeup call. We really need to examine some key questions.

The first key question is, if we learn that Kim Jong Un is dead today, what actions are we going to take? What actions will the United States, South Korea, and most importantly from a ROK-US alliance perspective, what are we going to do? I think that this question is really one that needs to be deeply thought about. I expect that the real answer will be, "Well, we'll wait and see, and see how it develops."

But if that happens, we cede the initiative. We cede the initiative to China, perhaps. We cede the initiative to internal infighting inside North Korea. We need to be ready to react and most importantly react from an alliance perspective. And of course there's tremendous friction within the alliance right now, that is going to prevent us from orchestrating and synchronizing a solid combined response.

And so we need to look at this as a wake-up call. Now, if there is a smooth transition of power, there are opportunities that we should take advantage of. And of course, in the worst case, if

there's not a smooth transition of power, there's a whole range of contingencies that we need to be prepared for. Massive humanitarian disaster inside North Korea, refugees, and of course the worst cases have to do with the military, the North Korean military and its weapons of mass destruction.

North Korea is a complex problem for a security problem for South Korea, for the United States, and for the region. And so we need to really think through what might happen in all of these scenarios. And so this is an opportunity and my recommendation to US and South Korean policy-makers would be to establish a combined inter-agency task group to really look at these problems and do some tabletop exercises to really determine a combined way ahead.

And again, I think this is an opportunity, as dire as the situation might be due to the myriad outcomes that we could see if Kim Jong Un is incapacitated, if he is dead, and if there is instability and ultimately regime collapse resulting from that.

Patrick Cronin:

David, when we come back to a second round of questions and talk a bit about succession and contingency, it'll be interesting to hear your advice on how to avoid inadvertent escalation. Because when you're talking about a smooth transition, how do we know if it's smooth or not? In North Korea, it is an open question. But let's turn now for opening comments from Jenny Town.

Jenny Town:

Thank you, Patrick, and I would agree with David on a lot of those points. This is a wakeup call. Kim Jong Un's health, even if he is okay, alive and well as the South Korean government is suggesting right now, he does run a number of health risks given his body mass size, given his lifestyle. And so this is something that may happen again even if it didn't happen this time.

It's something we do need to be prepared for and think through and the stakes are enormously high. You have a population of 25 million people, you do have an extensive weapons of mass destruction, arsenal, and infrastructure, some parts of which are decentralized. You have a million-man army that can be mobilized even though right now, there's major parts of the army that are mobilized for economic purposes, but they certainly can be mobilized for military purposes as well. And you have a pervasive social control infrastructure and mechanism.

The regime has complete control over the mass media and the country as well, so they can control the narrative. They also can control what information gets out to the people, but it also means that the people are unlikely to know what's happening in real time in the country if something does happen, and there is rising instability. But more importantly, we won't necessarily know in real time either. And that's a huge problem when you're dealing with such a complex issue and the stakes are so high.

It also comes at a time, as David alluded to, when we do have friction within the US-Korea Alliance. We have growing frictions within the US-Japan Alliance as well. Those burden-sharing agreements start to come up for renegotiation, and at a time when you have rising competition between US and China rather than rising cooperation.

All of these relationships have been exacerbated over the past few years. So you don't have the kind of unity you had back in 2017 when North Korea was being extremely provocative and it really kind of brought public sentiment together. Certainly a lot of the contingency planning and

tabletop exercises that David had talked about, a lot of it has been done in the past, but the political conditions are so different now that it is something that does need to be revisited and at the very least right now, there should be a high priority on all of the countries involved that are invested in this issue to at least be setting up mechanisms for communication, consultation, information sharing, and start that dialogue on how do we coordinate.

I think a big part of that is also resolving the burden-sharing agreement with South Korea, the US and South Korea as this stands in the way of actually being able to cooperate in a coherent manner if something does happen.

Patrick Cronin:

Excellent, Jenny. I want to come back to you in a second round and ask a little bit about just the question of certainty on understanding North Korea's intentions or actions. 38 North has made a great contribution to open source intelligence, because we rely on 38 North to know whether missiles are on platforms, whether there are going to be tests, what's exactly happening. And yet here we're dealing with a situation where we can see his train parked, but we don't really still understand what's happening and I want to come back to that.

As we turn now to Dr. Lee, I mean, are we in the West in particular just hyperventilating about the temporary absence of Kim Jong Un? Is China? They're taking it in stride. They don't seem to be, of course they control the state media, but at the same time, there doesn't seem even in South Korea to be quite the hysteria that we've seen in most of the second half of April about wondering about Kim Jong Un's whereabouts. But how do you see this situation from where you're sitting in your understanding of China as well, Dr. Lee?

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon:

Thank you, Patrick, for hosting this very important and timely discussion. And also, thank you for having me. I think that Kim's disappearance often creates intense fascination from the outside world because there's implication of instability in regional politics. China seems to be leaning to the view that there is nothing unusual about Kim's health or not something serious. But then China keeps mum on other details about the reported news reports about China's sending Mr. Song Tao, the head of the international department, the department in charge of China's affairs to the North Korea. China keeps mum about what China did to help North Korea with COVID-19.

From where I stand here in Seoul, we just had at the presidential office, the Blue House, the national security meeting they just held last Thursday, and they concluded that there's nothing unusual about North Korea.

So both China and South Korea are leaning to the view that the whole commotion was created by the absence of Kim Jong Un is not something that should be taken as something out of line. Then [again,] maybe [it's] something a bit different from now depending on where you stand.

But I think if you look at a more analytic perspective, I think there is something that we learn from this experience, [and] it has not ended yet. And that is we learn that we know very little about North Korea even though we live in the 21st century. I think like you, and me, and David, and Jenny, I think that when we analyze and conduct research in North Korea, North Korea is a country that you can't just simply go and visit and conduct a survey, ask questions, because you

can't be sure what they think about this, what they think about that. Do they plan to fire another missile? What do they think about the Trump Administration policy? You simply cannot do such kind of a normal social science research when it comes to North Korea.

So that's why I think there are a lot of rumors and speculations when it comes to North Korea, including the health of Kim Jong Un. So that usually analysts like me rely on state media, like Rodong Sinmun and the KCNA. We also rely on defectors. There are a lot of defectors and institutions like where I work for here. We have accumulated records of interviews with thousands of tens and thousands of defectors over the years. We have a record of opportunity interviews with the defectors.

Sometimes you really get to have a more personal glimpse of North Korea through the media only is when the international diplomacy happens such as the Singapore Summit, multilateral negotiations, Track 1.5 meetings. And still we have a very limited exposure and very limited sources to say on an occasion like this that whether what's happening with Kim Jong Un.

I think that North Korea is normally in a case like this, we used the term, the black box. This is a black box model that people used to apply to Soviet policy. And when they turn their head to North Korea, North Korea is another black box. So they use the frames of a Soviet policy for North Korea and in social science, a black box is a device, a political system which can be viewed in terms of inputs and outputs but without any knowledge of its internal workings.

So we know very little about internal workings of North Korea. That's why we call it a black box. But when it comes to Soviet Union, the US still has its embassy in Moscow, but then you don't have an embassy in Pyongyang. So you have even further limited access to ground the knowledge in what's happening in North Korea. That's why Thae Yong-ho, the North Korean diplomat who used to work in UK before he defected to South Korea four years ago, and he just got elected as a lawmaker, he defined North Korea as a unique state. That's what North Korea is on this planet, North Korea is simply a very unique state.

So I think when it comes to analyzing sometimes we tend to, frankly speaking, despair, even very seasoned analysts. But then particularly, for this occasion about the whereabouts of a Kim Jong Un, I think the focus should not be whether Kim is sick or not. I mean, we all get sick, we all get medical treatment. Sometimes we get hospitalized. So I think that the point should have been whether Kim is still in charge, and whether he's still calling the shots, whether there is any signs of instability or not, as should there have been at the focus of analysis rather than Kim the person even though Kim himself is important.

I talk with a lot of people here in Seoul and also in China, and I'm also leaning to that at the end of the day, Kim might show up just like nothing happened. Probably he's staying in Wonsan Resort, based on Jenny's picture that you mentioned, and maybe Kim Jong is looking over the news from his room. Maybe he's enjoying all this media attention that he has been generating so far, that makes him famous.

However, that makes him also more dangerous too because his disappearance makes the world realize how dictatorship without transparency would be a liability to the world. So I think that the lesson, the real lesson that I completely agree with David and Jenny, that lesson is that we need to be prepared for contingency in North Korea. We need a plan, and I think that's the lesson that we learned this time.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, excellent from all of you. Dr. Lee, you've just raised some interesting new questions in my mind about whether there would be a passing of authority should Kim Jong Un go under surgery. Would it legally pass or would it be unwritten and just unspoken? I'm even interested in if something were to happen to Xi Jinping and he had a surgery, is there a specific legal protocol in China for how authority and decisions are passed? I assume there probably is in China. North Korea, I wonder.

Well, let's move on to a second round and kind of dig a little deeper into the impact of potential succession, no matter when it happens, if it happens, and the impact of potential contingencies. I want to go back to Jenny first about again, the analytical question about, how would we know what's happening given our limits of information, especially using imagery for instance? And for the general question about North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs. I mean, Jenny, you might want to just give us your baseline read on where you think they've been going over the last couple of years of diplomacy, that diplomacy having been stalemated.

But what you think would happen to those critical capabilities in North Korea, the nuclear weapons and missiles, if there were a crisis, if there were indeed succession underway, and what would we be seeing and when would we see it? At least some general comments on those issues?

Jenny Town:

Well, all of the easy questions, right? Over the past couple of years, while North Korea has been engaged in diplomacy, I think there's been this expectation that they had decided to give everything up, they should stop all production, stop all development because we're negotiating. And that's simply not how negotiations are done. I think that the expectation was misplaced and certainly through satellite imagery we have been able to see signs that major facilities are still active. For instance, at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre, they're still continuing to work on the experimental light water reactor.

We haven't seen signs that the five-megawatt reactor is operating. However, we do still see activity around the uranium enrichment facility, meaning they're probably still producing fissile material and nuclear fuel in some manner to some degree. We don't know what, because there's obvious limitations to basic analysis on satellite imagery itself. But we know there's still movement there, there's still activity there.

We know the nuclear test site is still closed. It's still dysfunctional and we have not seen signs of them trying to reactivate it. We know that at Sohae, for instance, at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station, despite the commitment to permanently dismantle the engine test stand and the launchpad there, after the Hanoi Summit, they started to rebuild it. They refurbished it, they're operational. They have done engine testing, I think it was in December of last year of new liquid fuel engines that would be suitable for ICBMs or rockets.

So they do continue to develop these capabilities. They continue to test different, as we've seen lately, conventional weapons systems. They're diversifying with especially a focus on the ballistic missile side of solid fuel technologies and mobile technologies.

I think what you're seeing now, especially in recent times of the short-range ballistic missile tests is you see them kind of demonstrating capabilities that respond to changes in South Korea's capabilities as well. And so new systems that sort of fall between the thresholds of South Korea's missile defenses. And showing the political signal there to South Korea that the comprehensive military agreement they consider to be dead at this point. And if South Korea is going to continue to build up, that North Korea will as well.

I think there was a moment of opportunity there where they were reassessing their choices. If they could benefit from going down a different path, they were willing to try to see how far it went. When they didn't see quick results, and I think their expectations were probably overestimated as well as to how quickly things could move, they decided to continue down the path that they were before, and put diplomacy aside for the moment.

I'm sure they're watching the election cycle closely. I'm sure they're watching what's happening in Washington D.C., even with the COVID response very closely, to see if there are opportunities in the future to explore that again, and would they have any expectation to get something different?

But given all of this, it's very hard to determine the degree to which they're developing new systems. We know they're working on a new submarine for instance. We've seen glimpses of a summary that they're working on, but we can't tell much from those glimpses. We need to see the whole thing.

They have tested a new SL submarine-launched ballistic missile, and presumably they've done some ejection testing at that site as well, trying to build up their capabilities. But there's only so much we can tell from satellite imagery and this is the big problem if something does happen in North Korea and there is instability in North Korea, is that we're only going to be able to get bits and pieces of information at a time. It'll be very hard to see these signs of instability in the country, and to know how severe they are or how widespread they are.

We can do the all sorts of analysis and try and figure out from the propaganda. If those messages start to change, we get pinpoints of information from places that have informants in the country. But how representative those experiences are is anyone's guess. And so it's really a matter of information sharing and coordination among all the parties that have different pinpoints of information and it's going to be a very complex situation.

Patrick Cronin:

Thank you. I want to turn back to Dr. Lee and ask about not only China's view of this nuclear missile diplomacy and basically the continuing buildup that Jenny's just described, I think very well. But also, if there were a contingency to happen, whether China is fully prepared to intervene if Kim were dead, incapacitated, or so the United States may be moving with South Korea to influence the succession. So I'm just trying to get a sense of, from Dr. Lee, China's a role that they're playing to influence North Korean policy in the diplomacy but also in a contingency. Dr. Lee, back to you.

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon:

Well, this is a very good question, also a question that over the years I also ask a lot to my Chinese colleagues, and for them this is also a very sensitive topic. There is a limitation of how

much they could share with the scholars or an analyst like me. But then, when it comes to North Korean contingency, I think that there is at least a minimum of protocols that is that China has a plan. And then what the plan is about is murky, and the question about whether China will intervene unilaterally before US sends troops just in case.

I'm talking about a hypothetical situation, because before the US sends troops in North Korea to secure nuclear weapons. There are a lot of speculation about that, and people also talk about how China intervened in the North Korea and South Korean war, how China recently has been expanding its territory in South China Sea, and entering the Xi Jinping era, China's foreign diplomacy behavior is more assertive.

So that's speculating and also extrapolating from old pieces of reasonings and thinkings. Some people claim that China when there is a contingency and, I mean the deepening rivalry and conflict between the US and China, not to mention the bigger rivalry for leadership. Some people speculate that China will unilaterally send troops when there is a contingency in North Korea. This sounds feasible to uninformed ears.

I may be wrong, but my sense of having repeated conversations about this is that China will use an international body such as the UN, and China will use that international medium to legitimize China's behavior of intervening in a contingency situation in North Korea. And China will initiate, and so just sending a peacekeeping troops to North Korea, and China will be, I suggest that China will be reactive rather than proactive because China knows fully well that it is a country that has the most influence on North Korea.

And whenever China, if something happened in North Korea the whole world's attention, just fixated on China, and China gets a lot of misunderstanding, and the claims by the international community about what's happening in North Korea and the sanctions about North Korea. And even in the leading days to the Singapore Summit in 2018, President Trump publicly complained that China might be behind interrupting and persuading Kim Jong Un, when Kim Jong Un changed his behavior and a little bit hesitant to initiate the context that led to the Singapore Summit. Trump complained at least three times publicly that Xi Jinping might be behind pulling strings behind Kim Jong Un.

So interestingly, this is very interesting fact that China is very consciously aware about the international reputation, particularly when it comes to North Korea because it is the country that it has the most leverage and influence and it could be easily pointed out when things go wrong. So China wants to legitimize its actions.

I'm leaning to the views that China will be less inclined to first cooperate with the United States. Rather China will reach out to an international party such as United Nations to [do] peacekeeping operations [or] to send troops, medical troops, [or to do] rebuilding operations work. That's how China engages in North Korea when there is a contingency.

That's my sense so far, but maybe they have different plans, when the news reports for the last two weeks happening and kind of changed their mind. But at least up to that level, that was my understanding about China, what might China do?

Patrick Cronin:

Thank you, Dr. Lee. Finally, let's turn back to David Maxwell and talk a little bit about the US and the ROK-US alliance readiness to deal with contingencies to understand, how not to escalate or how to be ready to move in. David's been involved in some of the exquisite, secret defense plans between the United States and South Korea over the decades. It's great to have an exquisite plan. The question is, are we ready and are we politically willing to enact one of those plans? And separate from that, if we're only dealing with a very limited murky scenario, where you see the Chinese maybe as Dr. Lee's describing, have the agility to move health troops in or to respond to a limited situation quickly, are we in that situation as well? Do we have kind of a whole of government with the US-ROK alliance ready to move should things move quickly in North Korea in terms of succession? David, back to you.

David Maxwell:

Thank you, Patrick and great comments from Jenny, and Dr. Lee. I'd like to follow up on their points quickly before I cover that. For Dr. Lee, and I defer to his expertise on China, but it's been my experience that in addition to China wanting a UN mandate or some kind of international authorization, they also want an invitation. They want somebody in North Korea to invite them in. That's been my sense in Track IIs. And the only time that they might intervene unilaterally is if there's a serious situation that affects China directly, such as like a nuclear accident, Yongbyon, or something like that. Otherwise, I think you're right. They want the UN authority, and they want an invitation.

The other thing I think we should think about is we always think about North Korea resisting South Korea and US forces. I think an intervention by China might bring great resistance to Chinese forces. And I think any outsider is going to face resistance inside North Korea from some remnants of the military, the regime, and the population. It is after all a gorilla dynasty. And so I think we should consider that.

To the point about indicators on transition, and Jenny described the complex problems, the past two transitions, when Kim Il Sung died and Kim Jong Il died, the country locked down all the borders, stopped movement, and of course recalled all Politburo members to the big meeting in Pyongyang to really work on the transition.

I think it's complicated now because of the coronavirus that the country has been locked down. They've closed their borders. And so it's going to be even more difficult for us to see indications that they're going through a transition, because of the stringent control measures that have been applied really to defend against the coronavirus. I think some of those same measures will be taken, if there is a transition or better say, have already been taken. So I think that's going to even make it harder for us to see the transition.

Now, in terms of escalation and contingency planning, I think it's really important. We often think about our actions are going to cause escalation or cause a response from the North. And of course it's very prudent to think that way. But we also have to think about the effects of internal instability and what might happen to South Korea if there is an implosion where the effects are contained within North Korea, that transitions to an explosion where those effects spill over into South Korea, into China, into Japan, and which really requires defensive measures on everybody's part.

Now, one way that in some of the Track II discussions that I've been involved with in South Korea and China, one of the proposals is in times of emergency, we really need to establish some kind of joint coordination center with China, South Korea, and the United States. This is one measure to prevent miscalculation among the three major parties. And so that's something that we should really be in discussion with China and South Korea as a matter of routine. We should activate a joint coordination center to really keep each other informed and prevent any kind of miscalculation and escalation.

Now, in terms of instability inside North Korea, obviously we have a great humanitarian problem. Dr. Lee mentioned that China would want to send in medical people and people to help, and the like, but there's a huge security problem. Anything that goes on inside North Korea is going to be faced with a very real military threat. Whether South Korea intervenes, South Korea and the United States, or China, there's 1.2 million soldiers under arms, 6 million reserves. And so there's great potential for resistance. So even something benign as providing medical care and humanitarian assistance and feeding people. requires security. And of course that can easily lead to miscalculation. I mean, that will look like an intervention in occupation.

And so, one of the things that we've often talked about, which I don't think we've done well enough, is really to prepare the information environment. Nobody is really providing information to the Korean people in the North, to the Korean military, to the second-tier leaders, and to the elite on what comes next. At a time of uncertainty, there does need to be transparency. And I think that it's important for the ROK, for the United States, and even for China to be transparent about their plans.

Now, obviously we don't talk about secret plans, but they really need to be transparent about intentions. And so what is the intention? And that goes to the big question that we need to really focus on if these scenarios play out, what do we want to achieve in Korea on the entire Korean Peninsula? Or a better way, people talk about in States, what is the acceptable, durable political arrangement on the Korean Peninsula that is going to serve US or ROK-US Alliance interests for the long term?

Those are questions that we really need to ask. And of course China should be asking the same thing as well, and of course that makes things very complicated. But we need to be thinking through, what is the way ahead? And of course right now going back to Jenny's point about friction within the Alliance, we have disparate views. I think the Moon administration wants peace and reconciliation, which is a laudable goal. But I don't think that's realistic to think about in these kinds of situations. I don't think we're going to be able to put the genie back in the bottle if Kim Jong Un is incapacitated, if he is dead, if there is a transition process that goes awry.

And so we've got to think through beyond what we currently want and what is really the long-term outcome. And so we're going to have to be prepared to deal with the contingencies. And of course, Jenny talked about the nuclear problem, but WMD is more than nuclear. 5,000 tons of chemical weapons are assumed to be there, a biological program, that we believe exists. All of that is going to have to be dealt with. And all of those are very, very dangerous and are going to require security forces.

And of course, the nuclear program and all these programs are complicated because their proximity is to China, not to the DMZ. And so China has the proximity, the ability to get there first, which may not be a bad thing. But there's going to be this competition which I go back to the necessity for coordination among all the parties. And that's one of the things I hope we can

take out of this, because the uncertainty really requires that we have better coordination and sharing of information amongst all the parties.

That may be a naive thought, and it may be something that we will never get agreement on before something happens, but if we lay the groundwork now, maybe cooler heads will prevail in a crisis, and that we can implement some of those concepts that might prove useful in the way ahead. And I'll stop there.

Patrick Cronin:

David, thank you very much. Very important comments. I want to now go to just a third and final round here, starting with Dr. Lee, talking about China's expectations. Maybe whether they've changed as well in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in light of the economic recession, at least that seems to be spreading globally as a consequence of this pandemic. Whether this has altered Beijing's approach diplomatically, economically in terms of thinking about North Korea's future.

I also want to append to that question David Maxwell's last point, which is whether the Chinese would be amenable to a kind of a joint coordination facility, which I imagine could be both civil and military in nature to share information for possible contingency. Dr. Lee, over to you.

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon:

Well, thank you. And I just raised my hand really the important point that is that China probably needs invitation from North Korea to intervene in a North Korean contingency situation. With China and North Korea's history, even though Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, they claim to be a "blood alliance." That's the vocabulary they used during the Cold War, a blood alliance.

He even said North Korea and China relations should be a "one and only relationship" in the world and Xi Jinping also used the relationship between China and North Korea as a "lip and teeth" relationship. That is also vocabulary from the Cold War. So on the surface, the relationship is very close, very cozy. But then the reality is that, there are also accumulated historical grievances, words and invasions. North Korea that has been invaded by 14 countries over 900 times. And the interesting, the most invasions are from China actually.

So there are some historical trauma when North Korea was a smaller country dealing with China, even though there is the alliance relationship at this moment. So there is a joke that United States is a 50-year enemy for North Korea, China is a 5,000-year enemy for North Korea. That joke I heard from a North Korean interlocutor a few years back. I'm just sharing this joke as it's more like giving some nuances of the China-North Korea relationship on the surface. And also, what is the nature of the relationship?

This year, the China-North Korea relationship related to COVID-19, my understanding is that sometime in mid-March China sent medical equipment to North Korea, but then North Korea shut down their borders, land, sea and air. But then the international Red Cross team is operating in Dandong [a city on the China-North Korea border], so that the Red Cross team is sending medical packages to North Korea.

But then China is shy about how many, how much and when, and what are the items that they are sending to North Korea? They are also keeping mum about Kim Jong's health, probably because, going back to David's point that, China wants North Korea to say, if they say ever,

about the conditions about Kim's health from North Koreans rather than China saying that first because you're also giving the first issue and the delicate relationship with the history between China and North Korea.

Further down the road this year is a very busy year for Xi Jinping, because next year is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. China has a national mandate that is to establish, create or achieve an all around middle class society. And because of COVID-19, as you know, China's economy suffered a lot. From my perspective, China is more inward looking this year just like Trump is very busy with his elections this year. So Xi Jinping will be very busy in preparation for next year, for the 100 years celebration for Communist Party of China.

That means that North Korea issue could be put on a back burner, not just from Washington, also from China, as to why going back to the discussion about contingency, and scholars, think tank meetings to prevent any miscommunication, miscalculations, wrongly interpreted intentions, these should be very robustly communicated, when at the top government level might be busy with something else.

That's why in a similar level, I think scholars exchange is very important, and I also know that there is a October surprise discussion going on in Washington. In October, North Korea might do something to surprise or to undermine Trump. But then I think I might be wrong, but from local perspective here is that I think, does Kim Jong like Trump as a president or does Kim Jong like Democrat as president?

I think that Kim Jong likes Trump, because Trump is the only sitting US president who was willing to sit down with Kim Jong Un twice or even thrice, including DMZ meeting, Singapore, Hanoi, the DMZ. So there is a much more chance for Kim Jong Un to have Trump as a partner than any other Democratic president who focuses on human rights issues. Trump is not putting much emphasis on human rights, so North Korea finds it easier to deal with a person like Trump.

But maybe going completely 180 degrees opposite in October, maybe North Korea is doing something that might help Trump so that North Korea wants to continue to have Trump as the US president. So this is just the analytic I guess game that I play based on Kim Jong's preferences, just like the Xi Jinping, China, equally even though Trump isn't really tough with China, actually China prefers Trump as the US president because China believes that Trump is undermining the US democracy, the US power. Trump is internally undermining the system, which is the symbol of the US strength. So in a way both North Korea and China wants to have Trump there. I'll stop there.

Patrick Cronin:

Absolutely. Great comments. Turning back to Jenny, and to David, in order, talking about the diplomatic possibilities with North Korea or the lack of possibilities, interesting facets. One facet that's been raised is whether we need to shift the diplomacy to think not about denuclearization and peace, but just about avoiding miscalculation, avoiding misunderstanding, as a basic goal that needs to be reinforced through diplomacy, one official and unofficial Track II diplomacy, perhaps.

There was also the issue that the Inter-Korean diplomacy, at least officially from Seoul's perspective is continuing. And sort of sadly, Seoul had to have a unilateral remembrance day of the Panmunjom Declaration. I remember being in Panmunjom for the declaration on April 27, two years ago, and the optimism that permeated Seoul at the time and the world, was phenomenal when the first summit occurred between Moon Jae-In and Kim Jong Un. And now we have of course, a stalemated diplomacy.

And yet we also have the potential for, if not an October surprise, some movement during the Democratic election that will occur in the United States. South Korea, of course just having a successful but surprising election in the sense that they held it despite the pandemic. And they also had a resounding victory for the ruling party of President Moon, which was not forecast a few months earlier. It seemed to come down as a referendum on his handling of the COVID-19 crisis, frankly for the party.

It may come down to a referendum on the pandemic in the United States in November as well. And nonetheless an October surprise or some kind of provocation or gambit for diplomacy for the deal, could affect the outcome even of an American election.

So, Jenny, I put a lot on the table there for you to consider, and for David as well to follow up. And even though our time is running relatively short, would ask for you to address, Jenny, those diplomatic questions.

Jenny Town:

Thanks. There's a lot to choose from. I think in terms of the elections, I would agree with Dr. Lee that Kim Jong Un most likely prefers Trump to stay as president, especially if the choice is between Trump and Biden. Biden to Kim Jong Un, is the Obama administration and North Korea did not have a good relationship with the Obama administration. Did not like the policy of strategic patience, wasn't able to make any headway.

Trump of course has met with Kim Jong Un and continues to talk about Kim Jong Un in a friendly, cooperative manner. Even if there isn't negotiations ongoing right now, that relationship still seems to be intact on both sides. They haven't attacked each other personally. They haven't insulted each other personally, even if they have jabbed at people within the administration and within the negotiating parties.

So I think there's somewhat of an expectation if Trump stays in office in a second term, that at least some of those characters would be switched out, would be the normal trajectory, whether that happens or not is unknown. And that there may be opportunities in a Trump administration with a different negotiating team to try again. I think though it comes back down to a fundamental problem of approach and of expectation. And I think the US still approaches this from the perspective of the sequencing perspective of, "We have to have denuclearization first before we can build trust and have peace." And the North Koreans really look at it the opposite way of, "We have to have trust building and peace first before we get to the end of the denuclearization road."

Unfortunately, a different negotiating team, I don't think is going to change that US way of thinking about the situation. How do we trust North Korea if they still have a nuclear weapons program and aren't working towards diminishing that program and that capability?

So as David had mentioned before, there seems to be real disparate goals between the US and Seoul right now because Seoul also sees it as like, "Let's build trust, let's build peace." That sequencing as we can have peace and reconciliation before we have full denuclearization and as long as they're simultaneously working towards mutual goals. But for the US, I think it's much more staunch on the position of denuclearization, substantial denuclearization has to come first.

And as long as we have that, it kind of doesn't matter who's on the negotiating team, if that's really the promise that we're working off of. I think this is also where this relationship with South Korea, the US and South Korea, the alliance relationship is not only about burden-sharing, the tensions are not only about burden-sharing, but also about how both sides have approached the North Korea issue, where South Korea wanted us to move much faster, and I think built that expectation up both in South Korea, but in Pyongyang as well to Kim Jong Un that this is possible, we're on board. If the two Koreas want it, why would anyone stand in their way? I think they really underestimated what US interests in this process really are, and continue to want to move us in that direction. But the US I think is standing pretty firm.

Patrick Cronin:

Thank you very much. David, turning back to you. I'm reminded that when there was a succession with Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, and then from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un, there was some tactical progress made in diplomacy very significantly in '94 in terms of the agreed framework. But also the "Leap Day deal" that was short-lived, it created a lot of hope.

Jenny just raised the question of potential change in our negotiators. It's North Korean negotiators who could really change if someone like the 32-year-old Kim Yo Jong, the sister of Kim Jong Un were elevated in some kind of arrangement. For instance, since she's one of the names talked about, but even if not, if we're just in this sort of stalemate, does Kim Jong Un, want to wait out the American election and just wait until he sees who he's dealing with in 2021 before he makes any move, if he's willing to make any move toward diplomacy? David, your thoughts on the diplomatic course of relations here with North Korea in the coming months.

David Maxwell:

Yeah, great questions. Just to build on what Jenny said, I think, yes, we have a bad rap that we want denuclearization first and both North and South Korea want to build trust. But I think the fact is our negotiating team has been very flexible. We've offered liaison officers, we've offered ways to build trust, and without demand of total denuclearization. Our real demand I think has been substantive progress toward denuclearization, and we're willing to show signs of trust.

I think the comprehensive military agreement was a huge demonstration of trust from the South Koreans point, but also from the alliance point of view. All the trust building measures have been really from the alliance, and none from the North. But this idea of building trust and ending the US "hostile" policy, which are the North's words, I think we shouldn't be lulled into a sense of complacency that we just have to build trust and then they will denuclearize.

For North Korea's demand, for us to end our hostile policy is really the code word for ending the alliance, for removing US troops from the Korean Peninsula, for ending extended deterrence and the nuclear umbrella over South Korea and Japan. That is how they define being able to trust us. And of course, that's in keeping with their strategy, to be able to dominate the Peninsula. I don't think there's any sign that that strategy to dominate the Peninsula has been

walked back at all. And I doubt very much if Kim Yo Jong takes over that she would walk that back as well.

Although I agree with you that whoever comes to power following Kim Jong Un, we should make an attempt, to provide at least a short-term opportunity to move things forward. But I think we should not be lulled into a sense of complacency that all we have to do is build trust and then we can work towards denuclearization. I think our negotiating team has done very well from our side, as well as trying to maintain positive relationship with South Korea.

I think establishing the South Korean-US strategy working group between MoFA and State has been a very good development and has really tried to mitigate some of the friction within the alliance at least on that aspect. I think we really need to proceed with an understanding of what the North Korea strategy is, and I just don't see that changing. And so diplomatically, and the last thing I'd like to say, you mentioned about changing from a strategy of denuclearization to a strategy of preventing miscalculation, misunderstanding. Actually, I think that's been about 70 years built on a foundation of deterrence.

We can deter a nuclear attack, we can deter a conventional attack, and we've been successful at doing that. And I think our diplomacy has really been to back channel the New York Channel, through intermediaries, through China, through South Korea, has really been to try to prevent miscalculation, and misunderstanding behind the scenes.

But today we are where we are with North Korea with a real nuclear threat, and I think for us to back off that, would be probably political suicide for anyone, for President Trump or for his successors. I think we have to stay focused on the nuclear problem. And which really goes to the point we've got to be able to take the whole problem, enlarge the problem. We can't look just at the nuclear problem. And that's really, I think the key aspect. We've got to maintain deterrence, we have to conduct diplomacy, we've got to focus on denuclearization, transparency to prevent miscalculation and misunderstanding, and of course resting on the strength of the ROK-US Alliance. I think those are the things we have to do from a holistic perspective.

The last thing I'll say is while we can deter nuclear attack, we can deter conventional attack, we cannot deter the effects of instability and regime collapse. And that's why we need to use this as a wakeup call to dust off the contingency plans, to train for them. And even though, as Jenny said, we've had contingency plans for a long time and we've conducted exercises, very few people in power today in leadership positions have been around when we did that.

And so just the lesson I'll take away is that one of the reasons that South Korea has been so successful in the COVID crisis is because they did a huge exercise in December for a pandemic, and that prepared them. That was fortuitous, it was luck, but it shows the value of continuous training and preparation, and you can't wait for crisis to occur. You've got to continuously prepare and plan for the future. And of course, as Eisenhower said, "Plans are nothing. Planning is everything." It's got to be continuous and iterative. You just can't write a contingency plan and put it on the shelf. You've got to prepare for the worst case. I'll stop there. Thank you.

Patrick Cronin:

David, those are eloquent closing remarks, but I do want to come back to Dr. Lee, and Jenny at least, and just get, what is their one takeaway from this episode or this discussion. Just in 15 seconds or less, is there a key point here that you just want to highlight again or that comes to mind now, Dr. Lee?

Dr. Lee Seong-hyon:

Well, I just want to tag along the great eloquent comments made by David, emphasizing both the trust building, at the same time, the deterrence. And I think we could do more on trust building actually. For example, during the Hanoi Summit, Trump walked away from the prepared lunch. There are some cultural sensitivities, in Asian culture, a lot of important deals are done during the meal. Sometimes you couldn't make an agreement are actually agreed upon during the mealtime. Which is why, in a meal, diplomacy is very, very important.

But then the water was pulled and all the food was prepared, a table was setup and Trump walked away. It was a lunch hour. And what might have, even Kim Jong Un, might be a dictator, but as a human being, I think he for a few minutes insulted, from an Asian perspective. So it's kind of a cultural sensitivity I think is, even though it is minor compared to the real engineering of the negotiations, but then total diplomacy, understanding, what works best and what makes people comfortable and open up your mind is very important.

And particularly that is also coming from my experience as well, living in China socialist country for over 10 years. In a day or sometimes we say something but they become very suspicious. Even North Korea, I know American tour guide, I wouldn't name his name but then, when he was in Pyongyang, he had a lot of questions about, what's the historical background? Just tell me more about his background.

And then North Korea felt that he was a spy agent so they pulled his passport. He was just a tour guide asking more of a historical background so that he could play a better tour guide. But then North Korea became suspicious, they misunderstood, thinking he is working as an intelligence agent sent by the US government.

So when you're dealing with a different system, different cultural, political system, the sensitivity and knowing how the culture works, I think is very important as much as the process of the real negotiation itself.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, thank you. You have the trust building during the diplomacy when you're at a summit, like you were at Hanoi is one thing, having trust building when you're missing the leader of North Korea is maybe another matter. But let me turn to, Jenny Town for her final thought just in a few seconds.

Jenny Town:

Sure. And just to build on David's point about constant practice. When we saw Kim Il Sung die, and Kim Jong Il's death, the successor had already been named. The expectation was already there. It was a matter of looking at it, of will this work or not? But the question of who was going

to take over and how that was going to look was pretty set. We don't have that now. And as David said, a lot of the people who are in office now haven't been through that exercise.

The mechanisms for practicing, for consultation, for communication about this really do need to be constant and revived because there are so many contingency factors these days that are affecting this, and COVID-19 is a big example of something, this black Swan event that comes out of nowhere. That South Korea was prepared for because they've dealt with it more recently. The US has never dealt with it. And so we were completely unable to get a plan off the ground even though plans existed.

And so I think this is, as David said at the beginning, a wakeup call of planning needs to be constant and consistent and adapt to the times that we're in.

Patrick Cronin:

Well, on behalf of Hudson Institute, Dr. Lee Seong-hyon, Jenny Town, and David Maxwell, I think we're all just a little more informed, and North Korea is just a little less inscrutable than an hour ago. So thank you very much for joining us.