DESPITE the underlying strength and resilience of the US-South Korea alliance, bilateral relations between the two countries have periodically experienced subtle tensions. These arise as a result of both political differences between Washington and Seoul — for example, over the Sunshine policy during the George W. Bush presidency — but also differences in strategic perspective. Most recently, such concerns have centered on the question of whether President Park Geun-hye’s démarche toward Beijing would weaken or even undermine the alliance. Some have gone further, arguing that Chinese President Xi Jinping was actively seeking to drive a wedge between the US and South Korea.

The backdrop for these concerns is South Korea’s growing economic dependence on China, which now accounts for over a quarter of the country’s total trade. Although South Korea runs a healthy current account surplus with China, its exports to the country are roughly double those to the US, and imports from China are roughly equal to those from the US and Japan combined. There is ample evidence that China seeks to use its economic heft to political advantage, most notably in its divide-and-conquer approach to Southeast Asia on the South China Sea. Could growing economic dependence color Seoul’s judgment?

The concerns are strategic as well as economic. Park’s participation in the Chinese military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Pacific War fueled concerns in the US. Sharing the stage with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Park appeared to tacitly endorse China’s historical narrative, which continues to stoke anti-Japanese sentiment. Nor did Park’s initiative appear to yield any fruit. As in the past, China expressed greater concern for “stability” on the Korean Peninsula than it did about North Korea’s nuclear test and ongoing missile development. Indeed, China was more vocal about the issue of South Korea deploying the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system than the North Korean provocations that kindled the discussion of ballistic missile defense in the first place.

Recently, these very concerns are visible in South Korean politics as well. Public opinion on China has cooled sharply, and some conservatives have gone so far as to judge Park’s approach to China a failure.

Despite disappointments over how China has dealt with the North Korean issue, it is premature to reach a negative assessment on either the bilateral relationship between South Korea and China or on its possible effects on the alliance with the US. It would also be unwise for South Korea to try to pressure China on issues of common interest, or turn the alliance into an instrument of containment. China will be a crucial player both in getting North Korea back to talks and — in the longer run — any possible unification scenario.

A review of recent developments suggests that fears of South Korean drift are overblown. The Park-Obama summit did not simply reconfirm the alliance, but spelled out a range of new areas for cooperation between the two countries, from space to the environment and development. In response to the most recent round of North Korean provocations, the US and South Korea continued their long-standing military cooperation. Seoul also reiterated that while China had legitimate concerns with respect to missile defense, any decision on THAAD would depend entirely on Seoul’s judgment of the defense setting, not on a veto from Beijing.
The two allies also consulted closely with China in the negotiations that led to the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2270, by far the strongest multilateral sanctions imposed on North Korea to date. It remains uncertain whether these sanctions will work even if implemented, and there is also the question of whether China intends to strictly enforce them. But China has committed to these measures on paper and has restated its commitment to restarting the Six-Party Talks. No other country is in a position to persuade North Korea to come back to the talks, including South Korea and the US; China must now deliver on promises made. As US Secretary of State John Kerry suggested in recent remarks at Hiroshima, we should take China at its word and even follow its lead on whether it can reconstruct the Six-Party Talks.

That said, there are important challenges ahead for the trilateral relationship, and the US-South Korea alliance, over how future negotiations might be conducted. The first problem is that both the US and South Korea are in a difficult phase of their respective political cycles. If sanctions do not have the intended effect of pushing North Korea back into the talks soon, we could be in a period of sustained delay as Pyongyang waits out elections in the US and South Korea in 2016 and 2017, respectively. In the interim, North Korea will continue to expand its capabilities and the US and South Korea will need to respond appropriately.

The central challenge, however, will come over the format of future talks with North Korea. The US and South Korea have interpreted this to mean that the conclusion of a peace treaty — or even the initiation of such negotiations — can only be undertaken after significant progress or even completion of the denuclearization process. Furthermore, as the language of the Joint Statement suggests, there is controversy over who the “directly related parties” stipulated in Article 4 even are. It has long been an objective of North Korea to undertake direct negotiations with and even conclude a peace treaty with the US; this idea has been a centerpiece of North Korean strategy since the signing of a peace treaty between the US and North Vietnam in 1973.

North Korea’s legal rationale — such as it is — lies in a particular interpretation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The Armistice was signed by the military leaders of China and North Korea and by US Lieutenant General William Harrison, Jr., but in his capacity as commander of the United Nations Command. But South Korea was not a party to the Armistice. Since the US and China normalized their political relationship in the 1970s, it is left to the US and North Korea to reach an agreement that would normalize their bilateral relations and thus end the state of war reflected in the Armistice.

In addition, North Korea has consistently argued that the underlying source of tension on the Korean Peninsula is in the “hostile policy” of the US. It is precisely such a “hostile policy” that has driven it to develop nuclear weapons, and thus only normalization of relations between the two countries could establish the confidence required to restart nuclear talks.

This interpretation of events is at odds with both American and South Korean views. From South Korea’s perspective, the Korean War was first and foremost a war between the two Koreas. The US — through the UN — China and Russia were drawn into what was above all a domestic conflict over the future of the Peninsula. This interpretation of events naturally shapes South Korean views of the appropriate mechanism for negotiating a peace treaty. Although we have yet to see firm proposals from China on the negotiation of a peace regime, it is important that these proposals not divide the US and South Korea. From a South Korean perspective, the optimal sequence of events would be to revive North-South relations and conclude a peace treaty between the two Koreas first. Article 4 of the Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korea Relations, Peace and Prosperity signed by President Roh Moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il at the second inter-Korean summit on Oct. 4, 2007, established the foundation of such a move. The document states that “the South and the North both recognized the need to end the current armistice regime and build a permanent peace regime. The South and the North have also agreed to work together to advance the mat-

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As we have argued, there are several working Group on a Northeast Asia peace and first step toward the creation of a larger regional weapons program. It is impossible to imagine denuclearization. can be reached on how to negotiate a peace effort to deflect attention from its own nuclear desire to shift the discussion from the Six-party regime in the absence of meaningful progress on the 2005 Joint Statement and to the Six- party Talks process. In this regard, the recent North Korean offer to freeze its nuclear testing in return for a suspension of joint exercises is a complete non-starter in both Washington and Seoul. First, the offer amounts to blackmail: the implication is not only “cancel exercises and we will stop testing,” but “fail to cancel exercises and we will continue to test.” Moreover, it was made in the context of ongoing missile developments designed to convey threat.

Secondly, the offer does not address the central riddle of the day: whether North Korea has any agreement included a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, explicitly including all enrichment activities. North Korea also agreed to the return of IAEA inspectors to verify and monitor the moratorium and confirm that the 5-MW reactor and associated facilities were at least temporarily shut down. Such steps would now be seen as useful first moves in a negotiation process that might also lift some of the economic constraints on North Korea.

Despite concerns about strategic drift, we see little evidence of a fundamental divide between Washington and Seoul over the future direction of negotiations. Both believe that a prerequisite for any meaningful progress on the Peninsula is a return to the Six-Party Talks on the basis of a firm re-commitment of North Korea to the process. Both agree that for this to transpire, China needs not only to fully implement sanctions but also to use its diplomatic good offices to bring North Korea back into alignment with the Joint Statement of 2005, of which Pyongyang is a signatory. And both agree that these processes in no way affect the need for the US and South Korea to continue to maintain the defensive capabilities — including ballistic missile defense capabilities — that are required to counter North Korean threats.

At the same time, there is room for closer cooperation between the US, South Korea and China around the broader security architecture on the Peninsula. In particular, we believe it would be useful to consider a three-way strategic dialogue. One purpose of such a dialogue would be to co-ordinate on how to choreograph North-South peace regime and denuclearization talks. Another would be to prepare for contingencies on the Korean Peninsula.

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