In Northeast Asia, History Matters

By Robert E. McCoy

What to do about North Korea? Few international relations problems have proven as intractable as how to convince Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program, embrace economic reform and move toward reunification with South Korea. But retired US Air Force intelligence expert Robert E. McCoy argues that a straightforward look at the different historical perspectives of the participants in the Six-Party Talks explains why progress has been hard to come by.
UNDERSTANDING the history of Northeast Asia is key to dealing with North Korea today, because the complex and interwoven pasts of the region provide the contexts in which regional players act and react. Those contexts determine how the actions of one are perceived by the others.

The nations of Northeast Asia hold disparate understandings about their common history. They also have unique national interests. It should be no surprise that regional players do not see North Korea — or even each other — through the same eyes.

The particulars for each country in the region have been discussed in depth many times. However, there are few efforts to collect such commentaries into one succinct piece. What is needed is an understanding of each regional player’s specific interests and concerns, and how they often do not mesh with those of the others. Here I attempt to set out the issues for each of the players.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea relies upon China, plus non-governmental organizations such as the World Food Program, for food provisions and fuel supplies. South Korea and the United States also contribute as their political climates allow. However, despite its reliance upon China, North Korea tends to act independently, without regard to consequences. As a result, relations between China and North Korea are at an all-time low.

North Korea rejects the Chinese claim that much of Northeast Asia, including parts of the Korean Peninsula, was once Chinese territory, and that Korea actually belongs to China. Depending upon what historical period one looks at, North Korea could make a counter claim that much of Northeast China is actually ancient Korean territory and that the northeastern Chinese provinces belong instead to North Korea.

Japan is seen as a tool of the United States, and North Korea is still quite aggrieved by the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. There are vivid memories of Japan’s campaign to wipe out Korean culture and language during the annexation.

Nonetheless, North Korea has reached out to Japan, offering to resolve the decades-long concern over the fate of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. In doing so, North Korea is obliging Japan, thus driving a wedge between Japan and other potential allies in Northeast Asia.

The general population in North Korea is thought to have been highly indoctrinated against the West, especially against Americans, though this may be changing as information about the outside world penetrates North Korea. Inroads are being made through smuggled cell phones, news via trade across the Chinese border, small radios that receive South Korean broadcasts, and thumb drives that are safer to use than VCR tapes or DVDs — thus making it impossible to keep awareness of the South’s prosperity and the emancipations of the world from spreading.

One of North Korea’s greatest fears is that its citizens will learn of the astonishing success of South Korea. The regime cannot explain why North Koreans must sacrifice and remain poor while South Koreans are doing so well. Thus, North Korea tightly controls the flow of information into the hermetic country and contact with the outside world.

North Korea’s only objective is for the very top leaders to survive — through continued support from senior military staff and inner circle party “elites” who benefit from the regime’s largesse. North Korea’s suspected nuclear-missile capability — along with its formidable array of South-facing artillery and rockets along the DMZ — is seen as the only barrier to US or South Korean invasion.

In case of conflict, North Korea would likely launch heavy waves of rockets and artillery fire into South Korea, and possibly missiles to Japan and to US bases in the western Pacific Ocean. The regime is unlikely to go down without some sort of fight.

CHINA

China wants a buffer state between its northeast and US-backed South Korea. It does not want a unified pro-West Korean Peninsula on its doorstep. Despite the difficulties that North Korea presents to China, North Korea serves as that buffer.

China does not want any chaos or instability on its borders. Therefore, China only nominally supports sanctions against North Korea, which is why China continues to donate food and fuel to keep North Korea afloat. China worries about the hundreds of thousands of refugees that could flee North Korea should that government falter. Accordingly, China recently strengthened its military garrisons in the areas adjacent to North Korea.

China does not want a nuclear-missile capable North Korea. It fears that eventually both Japan and South Korea would develop their own nuclear forces to counter North Korea. The prospect of having two US-aligned nuclear powers in its own neighborhood greatly alarms China.

Further, China does not want Japan, with or without nuclear weapons, becoming even more nationalistic and turning further to the political right, which might lead to an increased foreign presence in the East China and Yellow Seas. This would challenge China’s regional hegemony, and it clearly wants to be a player that can influence both Koreas to counter Japan and the US.

China too has enduring memories of Japanese atrocities during World War II. The barbarisms committed in Nanking come to mind, and this is one reason why China sides with South Korea in its issue with Japan over “comfort women.” It is an attempt to drive a wedge between two potential allies that could align against China.

Despite some Western perceptions that China exercises considerable sway over North Korea, China recognizes that it is losing influence over North Korea. When North Korea walked out of the Six-Party Talks years ago, it was a great loss of face for the Chinese, who had sponsored the meetings. China strongly discouraged North Korea from conducting its third nuclear test and its last inter-continental ballistic missile launch, yet North Korea went ahead with both anyway.

China has a deep interest in Northeast Asia, only some of which is part of modern China. In particular, China is concerned about the two million ethnic Koreans in its northeast provinces, the old Manchuria. While those two million Koreans are indeed Chinese citizens, they...
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have never fully assimilated into Chinese society, and many of them still speak Korean and observe Korean customs.

Consequently, China is apprehensive that a heavy influx of North Korean refugees might be enough to ignite a sense of Korean nationalism in the area, which a number of Koreans still claim as their own. As it is, there are thought to be from 60,000 to 100,000 North Koreans illegally in Northeast China already.

To be sure, China enjoys cheap North Korean labor and extractive raw materials from North Korea as it develops its northeast provinces just across the border. Roughly three-fourths of the trade between China and North Korea goes through the Chinese city of Dandong at the mouth of the Yalu River in the Yellow Sea.

China wants to influence South Korea so as to blunt the South’s alliance with the US. By increasing trade with South Korea, China is pursuing economic means to accomplish precisely that.

China recently dedicated a monument to an ancient enemy just across a narrow sea. Concerning its interests and concerns, China is likely willing to endure the status quo only for lack of better alternatives.

JAPAN

Like other regional states, Japan doesn’t want a nuclear missile-capable North Korea. Aside from the threat of nuclear weapons aimed at its islands, Japan fears radioactive fallout from North Korean nuclear mishaps as well as the effects of conflict on the Korean Peninsula reaching its shores.

Furthermore, Japan is still resentful of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens years ago. In addition, Japan wants closure on the fate of Japanese wives of the North Koreans that returned home at the conclusion of World War II.

Anxious about the economic power of a unified Korea, Japan does not want a prosperous competitor having ready access to North Korea’s raw materials and cheap labor. Although reunification would undoubtedly tax South Korea’s economy for years, Japan looks to the long future. An expanded and invigorated Korean tiger would be a serious and unwanted trade rival.

Partly in response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and its belligerence, Japan is showing a stronger sense of nationalism along with a demand for a greater regional voice. Its political personality is turning to the right and, in the eyes of many of its neighbors, it is becoming more militaristic. In truth, Japan simply yearns to be a normal country with all traditional military rights.

For this to be accepted, however, the Japanese government must squash the rising anti-Korean sentiment that arises from Japan’s failure to resolve the lingering Korean “comfort women” issue.

Japan is locked into a territorial dispute with South Korea over the uninhabited islands of Dokdo (in Korean) or Takeshima (in Japanese), in the waters between them. In fact, there is argument about the very name of those waters, Japan demanding that they continue to be called the Sea of Japan, while South Korea insists that is actually their East Sea. At the same time, Japan finds itself embroiled in a clash with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

On the other hand, Japan is working closely with the US in order to contain China. In doing so, it recently snookered the naive Americans into acknowledging Japan’s claim on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

Japan, as well, wants a buffer state between itself and China. The history between the two nations goes back at least to the 1590s, and it is not a peaceful narrative. Although divided, the Korean Peninsula still shields Japan from China. However, should North Korea fail and China invades North Korea, Japan would face with an ancient enemy just across a narrow sea. Considering this, even a divided Korea poses a security threat to Japan.

Some Japanese in recent years have brought up the right of a preemptive first strike against North Korea, just to get the matter over with. At the moment, though, Japan is likely to tolerate even a nuclear missile-capable North Korea, but it is difficult to say how long that will be the case.

RUSSIA

Still distressed by collapse of the Soviet empire, Russia wants to be seen as a world power again. Worried about losing influence in Northeast Asia, Russia sees the Korean Peninsula as an area where it can play a major role and serve its own interests.

To begin, Russia covets a year-round ice-free port like Rajin or Wonsan on North Korea’s east coast. Vladivostok is ice-free only in the summer. And Russia would benefit tremendously from having a direct land route to South Korea energy markets.

Russia does not want China to be in control of North Korea. Recall the Soviet-Chinese border tensions of the 1960s that culminated in actual hostilities during much of 1969; they are hardly friends, despite appearances otherwise on occasion.

Additionally, Japan is the historical enemy of Russia. Remembering its defeat in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, Russia doesn’t want Japan becoming more militaristic with a new “interpretation” of Article 9 of its Constitution.
that would result in expanded roles for Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

In part due to its weakened power and its current economic frailty, Russia is likely to wait on the sidelines for economic or political opportunities should North Korea collapse. In the meantime, North Korea's cheap labor is very attractive, and tens of thousands of North Korean laborers are already working in the sparsely populated Russian Far East.

However, Russia doesn't want the burden of North Korean refugees. It actually prefers the status quo, any change to which would be seen as benefiting China, Japan or the US.

But North Korea is reaching out to Russia for assistance since North Korea's relations with China have soured. Russia, in turn, has agreed to fund transportation projects that would facilitate Russian energy exports. Relations between the two players seem upward bound, and Russia seems less concerned than others about North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles.

**SOUTH KOREA**
Notwithstanding some reports that desire for reunification is waning, South Korea would prefer a unified Korean Peninsula under its control, but is greatly worried about the cost of reunification. Needing to deal more effectively with North Korea, the South recognizes that neither the Sunshine Policy of unconditional engagement nor the North Wind policy of “tough love” toward North Korea by past administrations has worked.

South Korea doesn't want a nuclear-missile capable North Korea. Equally worrisome, the South does not want to be neighbor to a bellicose country aiming thousands of artillery pieces and rocket launchers at its capital.

South Korea desires to be free of any foreign influence, specifically from China and Japan, but also from the US, for it is unfortunate that the nearly 30,000 American troops stationed in the South often leave an offensive footprint.

At the same time, however, South Korea recognizes that US support in the form of American troops and weaponry is needed to deter — or in the event of conflict, to help defeat — North Korea. South Korea bristles at claims that areas of Korea are ancient Chinese territories. And being labeled as a “little brother” of China is patronizing, given the political enlightenment and the economic successes of the South.

While South Korea's businesses look to grow their trade with China, commerce with the giant across the Yellow Sea already accounts for 25 percent of South Korea's total foreign exchange. Some in South Korea are beginning to see that as an over-dependency.

In light of Japan's efforts to re-interpret Article 9 of its Constitution, South Korea is particularly perturbed about Japan's refusal to face its own history from the late 1800s to 1945. Predictably, South Korea does not want any help from the Japanese, and certainly not anywhere on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea is concerned that the drain on its resources that reunification would cause would have lengthy opportunity costs affecting its competitive standing with China and Japan. While the entire region would benefit immediately from improved political stability and a unified Korea would emerge stronger, South Korea is mindful that its competitors would be forging ahead while it would be occupied with absorbing North Korea.

South Korea is gravely aware that northern parts of South Korea, including its capital Seoul, would suffer grievous civilian casualties and heavy material damage in a conflict with North Korea. There have even been some discussions in private about the right of a pre-emptive first strike against North Korea.

South Korea has yet to develop a long-term strategic balance between itself and other Northeast Asian players. This thwarts multilateral efforts by China, Japan, South Korea and the US to work together against North Korea. As a consequence, South Korea is likely to endure the status quo, hoping to somehow reach consensus with other regional players in dealing with North Korea.

**UNITED STATES**
The US perceives the foundation for regional security as coming from regime change in North Korea, a stance that doesn't win negotiating points with North Korea. Meanwhile, the US acknowledges its obligation to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression, only proper since the US is largely responsible for the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945.

However, the US would like to reduce its presence in South Korea to lessen military expenditures. Additionally, it really does not want to get involved in another Asian land war, the stalemate of the Korean War and the fiasco of Vietnam apparently being enough. Nonetheless, American troops will continue to be stationed near the Demilitarized Zone that separates South from North.

Clearly, the US doesn't want a nuclear missile-capable North Korea. This, of course, ignores the bedrock belief held by North Korea that only its nuclear deterrent keeps the regime alive. In keeping with its self-imposed mission of preserving peace and stability in Northeast Asia, the US doesn't want to give up its role as hegemon in the western Pacific Ocean. Despite claims to the contrary, it is very wary regarding China's intentions as Beijing begins to flex its new economic, military, and political muscle — often in very indelicate ways.

Seeking support in its role as guardian of the world, the US is unwilling to discourage Japan, whose intent to remove Constitutional restrictions on its Self-Defense Forces would bolster any American efforts at addressing a conflict in Northeast Asia.

The US is most likely preparing for some level of military intervention on the Korean Peninsula, should the situation deteriorate into chaos or actual conflict. Witness the US Department of Defense's contract with the Mansfield Center in 2012 to provide Korean language and cultural training for soldiers stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord near the northwest coast of the US. Statements about the possession of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles being “unacceptable” and the need for regime change in North Korea notwithstanding, the US is likely to endure the status quo, simply because no one has yet figured out any achievable alternatives.

**CONCLUSION**
From this, one can see that the interests and concerns of Northeast Asian players do not align, and that makes co-ordination and collaboration in solving the North Korean problem very difficult. In the absence of some innovative political thinking, dissimilar historical perceptions and differences in national interests will continue to make effective teamwork by China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States regarding North Korea improbable.

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