President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un are scheduled to meet for a second summit meeting later this month, further animating the policy debate about a range of issues including the prospects for denuclearization and a peace declaration that would end the Korean War. What might such a peace declaration look like, and how might this impact Japan’s interests and regional dynamics in Northeast Asia? In this fourth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Dr. Mike M. Mochizuki of George Washington University and Dr. Sue Mi Terry of CSIS to assess developments in U.S.-DPRK diplomacy and the strategic implications for Japan.
A U.S.-DPRK peace declaration is good for Japan because it promotes Japan’s key interests regarding North Korea: (1) preventing another war on the Korean peninsula; (2) reducing and eliminating North Korea’s capabilities to threaten Japan, including nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and the missiles to deliver them; and (3) resolving the issue of Japanese abducted by North Korean agents during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although a peace declaration alone will not achieve these Japanese objectives, it does serve as a crucial initial step.

Critics of President Donald Trump’s June 2018 summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore charge that Trump gave too much to Kim without getting much in return, but this bold move did pull Northeast Asia from the brink of war. At the summit, the DPRK affirmed its commitment “to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.” The United States agreed to work with the DPRK “to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.” To re-energize diplomacy, the United States should follow up and declare with North Korea an end to hostilities. Sustaining the diplomatic process will help to avoid war, and this is certainly good for Japan.

A U.S.-DPRK peace declaration would also promote Japan’s interest in reducing and eliminating the North Korean threat to Japan. Dan Coats, the U.S. director of national intelligence, recently stated, “North Korea will seek to retain its WMD capabilities and is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capability because its leaders ultimately view nuclear weapons as critical to regime survival.” Although many have used this statement to assert that North Korea will not follow through on its commitment to complete denuclearization, a critical point in the Coats’s testimony is his assessment of Pyongyang’s paramount motivation: “regime survival.” In other words, to motivate North Korean denuclearization, the United States must reassure Kim Jong-un about the survival of the North Korean regime.

In his New Year’s address, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un made clear that if the United States is to expect him to make any progress on denuclearization, it will have to make major concessions such as easing economic sanctions, ending all joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea, removing the U.S. nuclear umbrella from Japan and South Korea, and agreeing to a “peace declaration” that would end the Korean War. As preparations are continuing for a second Trump-Kim summit, and given President Trump’s desire to accommodate Kim, there is good cause to wonder what the U.S. president might, in fact, agree to in his next meeting with Kim.

The most innocuous of North Korea’s demands would appear to be for a “peace declaration.” This would merely seem to simply recognize that the Korean War ended in 1953. Aside from sporadic clashes between North and South, principally acts of terrorism perpetrated by the North, there have been no large-scale hostilities ever since. So what’s wrong with recognizing reality with a peace declaration that would not even be legally binding? And wouldn’t a peace declaration be a good thing not only for U.S.-North Korea and inter-Korea relations but also for Japan, as it would likely reduce the threat of conflict on the Korean Peninsula?

The main problem is that it’s a slippery slope from a “peace declaration” to a “peace treaty,” which would formally end the Korean War. It would be difficult for the United States to undo a declaration that the Korean War is over, even if there was no formal peace treaty among all the parties. And if the Korean War is formally over, and South and North Korea are in a state of peace, what is the rationale for keeping 28,000 U.S. troops in South Korea? It’s logical to assume that if the war is officially over, it could cause all sides—including the South Korean and U.S. publics—to question the need for a continuation of the U.S. military presence in Korea, leading ultimately to their removal. The danger of an U.S. withdrawal is all the greater because Donald Trump is president, and he has made clear repeatedly that he views the stationing of U.S. troops in wealthy countries such as South Korea as a rip-off for U.S. taxpayers by
One should recall that the hardline approach pursued by the Bush administration in the early 2000s did not compel Pyongyang to abandon its clandestine nuclear weapons program. Instead U.S. talk of regime change and the U.S. invasion of Iraq motivated North Korea to accelerate its nuclear and ballistic missile programs to deter existential threats to its regime. A peace declaration is a vital step to reassure North Korea and to test Pyongyang's intentions. If the United States cannot even make this symbolic gesture, then it is hard to imagine that North Korea will feel comfortable enough about regime security to move meaningfully toward denuclearization, including a full accounting of its nuclear facilities.

Reassuring North Korea about regime survival also affects Japan's security interests. Now that Pyongyang has stopped testing intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States, North Korea probably sees its ability to strike Japan as an effective way to deter the United States from attacking North Korea. Therefore, getting Pyongyang to dismantle its missile arsenal capable of reaching Japan also requires enhancing North Korea's confidence about its own security.

Finally, a resolution of the abductee issue is likely to come only as part of a full normalization of relations between Tokyo and Pyongyang. Insofar as North Korea is focused on diplomacy with South Korea and the United States, Pyongyang is unlikely to do much in the near term that will satisfy Japan. Put differently, the more progress there is in U.S.-DPRK relations and North Korea-South Korea relations, the sooner will the diplomatic context become favorable for addressing the abductee issue. It is therefore in Tokyo's interest to encourage rather than impede peace negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, including supporting a peace declaration.

In the meantime, Japan can enhance its diplomatic leverage with North Korea by working energetically to repair its troubled relationship with South Korea. Tokyo should also re-frame the discussion of Japanese abductees in broader humanitarian terms. For example, Japan could also inquire further about the Japanese spouses of Koreans living in post-World War II Japan who were encouraged by the Japanese government to immigrate to North Korea as part of the controversial Korean repatriation campaign.

foreigners who are taking advantage of the United States. The United States and South Korea have just reached agreement on a cost-sharing deal for U.S. troops that will increase the subsidy offered by Seoul from $864 million to $1 billion (Trump had initially demanded $1.6 billion). But this is only a one-year deal, meaning that negotiations for next year must begin soon—and there is no guarantee that they will result in another agreement. It would not take much to lead Trump to withdraw U.S. forces—and a peace declaration could very well provide the excuse he is looking for.

From Japan's perspective, such a withdrawal without having achieved denuclearization in the North would be problematic. It would, in fact, hurt the defense of Japan itself. U.S. forces in South Korea and in Japan are closely interconnected and mutually supportive. Removing U.S. troops from South Korea would force a major adjustment of U.S. military plans for the region—especially if, as seems likely, the 28,000 troops are sent back to the continental United States rather than stationed in Japan. There is not, in any case, the basing and support infrastructure for 28,000 additional U.S. personnel in Japan primarily from the U.S. Army; most of the 54,000-strong U.S. military presence consists of the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and the presence of Marines in Okinawa is already a flash point in Japanese politics.

Removing U.S. troops from South Korea would decrease by one-third of the total number of U.S. forces in close proximity to Japan—and China. This would have an obvious impact on the regional balance of power. Even though U.S. troops are in South Korea to protect against North Korea, they are also projecting power on the Asian mainland and their presence is a sore point for China, which remembers the advance of U.S. troops to the Yalu River in 1950. Removing those forces would be seen as a win for China—and as a loss of deterrence and power projection for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

With U.S. troops gone, the U.S. nuclear deterrent against North Korea would also cease to be credible and North Korea would possess the only nuclear strike force on the Korean Peninsula. That would leave South Korea vulnerable to North Korean nuclear blackmail and over the long-run, leave South Korea with two options: either Finlandization...

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Some in Japan might object to a U.S.-DPRK peace declaration because it might be the start of a slippery slope to a formal peace treaty and North Korean demands for the withdrawal of U.S. forces in South Korea. This concern is misplaced. A formal peace treaty would become one of the pillars of “a lasting and stable peace regime,” but more has to happen before reaching that stage, including progress in denuclearization. A bilateral peace declaration is a symbolic, but critical preliminary step in a difficult process of reciprocated actions leading to denuclearization, dismantling of the missile threat, and North Korea’s incorporation into the world economy. Japan should not fear the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea if it takes place in the context of a negotiated conventional force reduction process on both sides of the Korean demilitarized zone and the establishment of an effective peace regime for the peninsula.

(i.e., adopting a policy of neutrality toward the North, being careful in practice not to offend the nuclear-armed state on its border) or nuclearization of its own. The latter option would be preferable from the standpoint of South Korean security. However, it could lead Japan to question whether it should nuclearize as well, which could then set off a potentially destabilizing four-way nuclear arms race involving not only the two Koreas, but also China and Japan that could resemble the Dreadnought race between Britain and Germany that preceded World War I.

As for now, given that leaks from the U.S. intelligence community and commercial satellite imagery show that North Korea continues to expand, rather than dismantle, its nuclear and missile arsenals, the threat from North Korea remains—even if for the time being it refrains from further missile and nuclear tests. Should President Trump agree to a peace declaration, or worse, a peace treaty and troop withdrawal without getting denuclearization, the impact on the U.S. standing in the world also would be severe, significantly fraying U.S. credibility and security guarantees from Europe to Asia and empowering illiberal states such as China and Russia. If this scenario plays out, Japan might be left on the front lines of regional security challenges by itself, worrying about the future of the U.S.-Japan alliance.
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CSIS Resources: Japan Chair, Korea Chair, Beyond Parallel, The Impossible States Podcast Series; “2019 U.S.-Japan Security Seminar: Challenges and Opportunities for the Alliance” (CSIS event on January 9, 2019); “Asia Forecast 2019” (CSIS event on January 23, 2019).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan’s resources on Japan-North Korea Relations

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea’s resources on Inter-Korean Relations

U.S. Department of State resources and factsheets on U.S. relations with North Korea

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