

SOUTH KOREA



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A PAWN NO MAJOR POWER IS WILLING TO SACRIFICE



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South Korea. A pawn no major power is willing to sacrifice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Korean Peninsula is central to the political, economic and military policies of several actors in the East Asia region. Due to its geographical location, the peninsula has seen the involvement of major powers throughout history, like the United States, China, Russia and Japan. Currently, the peninsula is a contested territory between the U.S. and China. The latter is the only country capable of challenging American interests and uses its economic power to increase its sphere of influence in the region.

The DPRK has built and maintained capabilities to target areas as far as U.S. soil. The North has always represented one of the biggest challenges for South Korea and its security guarantor, the U.S. President Biden will nevertheless sway for establishing a red line for Kim to potentially cross and instead, new sanctions could be expected despite their lack of effectiveness.

For the U.S. to maintain its dominant role in the East Asia region, deter North Korea, and keep China in check, it must reaffirm its military and economic alliances which entered into a period of uncertainty during the Trump administration. Currently, China is South Korea's principal trading partner and is openly evading international sanctions imposed on North Korea being its principal trading partner as well.

The prosperous South Korea will remain neutral in many aspects related to China, yet if put in a situation where it has to choose between the U.S. and China, it will incline towards the former, which remains its security guarantor. When it comes to Russia, its role in the Korean conflict is now secondary but over the years, Russia has used the U.S.-China battle to increase relations with the latter. In the case of Japan, a close U.S. ally, a shift in relations with the ROK is unlikely to happen any time soon since their political issues have evolved into legal ones. This will remain detrimental to the U.S' New East China Sea policy which requires cooperation between U.S. allies.

Diplomacy, openness and potential reunification in the peninsula depend on external actors. Neither reunification nor openness are likely to take place in the short term due to Kim's personality and the preference of external actors to maintain the *status quo*. A reunification led under peaceful terms would be most desirable and would ultimately lead to an even larger economic powerhouse in the region. For the U.S, this pathway would be most beneficial if a reunified Korea would align with the U.S. This would be detrimental, however, to China's geopolitical interests in the region. Russia could come out as being the greatest benefactor from a peaceful reunification. Lastly, Japan could continue to feel threatened by a reunified Korea, which is united by hatred over a colonial past under Japanese savage rule.

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INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING THE KOREAN CONUNDRUM

The Korean Peninsula has a trying yet strategic geographic location. Control of the territory has always played a weighty role, being that it is the continental gateway to China and the sea gate to Japan. As such, the peninsula has historically been contested by world powers. Brutal wars were fought due to the involvement of imperial Japan, the Soviet Union (USSR), Qing China and later the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United States (U.S.). This led to the conquering, colonizing, and dividing of the peninsula, with a Korea that lived through the Chosŏn dynasty from 1392–1910, colonial control by the Japanese from 1910–45, and an enduring division since the 1945 partitioning as a result of the Cold War.¹

It was the climax of the Korean War from 1950–53 that unraveled the nature of the Cold War in East Asia. From that point on, the slew of strategic choices in the Korean Peninsula have been guided by the opposing geopolitical interests of the primary regional stakeholders: China, the U.S. and Russia. The peninsula remains critical in shaping the region's security architecture because of the continued nuclear brinkmanship of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea. On the other hand, an assertive China in the region has led to a new reason for the U.S. to hold its stance and engage in efforts with its historical allies. This clash between the U.S. and China can be referred to as a "Cold War 2.0," considering the two superpowers are engaged in a global competition seeking greater influence.

Of the two divided countries on the peninsula, the Republic of Korea (ROK), or South Korea, continues to be the one that amazes the international sphere. The accomplishments are credited to a stable political system, an advanced market-based economy, and a progressive and free society. Nevertheless, South Korea is held on a tight leash by its two major problems: the DPRK's nuclear proliferation and the strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

In order to grasp the Korean conundrum, it will be important to understand the policies and standpoints of the major powers in the region, and analyze their current approach towards the peninsula. This is because much of the actions and policies pursued by the ROK depend on the actions of the two main international actors, the U.S. and the PRC, and vice versa. Analysis will

¹ Young Ick Lew, *Brief History of Korea: a Bird's-Eye View* (New York City, NY: Korea Society, 2000), 18-25.

try to explain how the relationship between the U.S. and China have directly affected relations between the ROK and the DPRK, and what steps will be necessary for achieving the long anticipated peace and hopeful reunification of the peninsula.

Prior to its collapse, the USSR had been the DPRK's protector and provider of nuclear intelligence, thus beginning the growth of a menacing DPRK that, to this day, uses brinkmanship and nuclear deterrence as a method of protecting its precious regime. The three generations of the Kim dynasty have continued building up their nuclear arsenal to prevent falling down the same path as their Middle Eastern counterparts. Seeing the fall of leaders such as Gaddafi in Libya, Kim has no guarantees that the U.S. will refrain from its hegemonic nature of violating agreements and attempting to transform societies to be compatible with the Western model.

During the beginning years of the Russian Federation, much of the focus had been placed on its internal matters, trying to overcome the effects of the USSR's collapse. Russia became less relevant geopolitically for the peninsula, and assumed a secondary role. The geopolitical strategy of Russia has thus transformed, and an analysis will be made on how the actor uses the U.S.-China conflict to align closer with the latter, while advocating for a peaceful peninsula to advance its regional energy strategy.

China has replaced the previous role of the USSR as the main actor in the peninsula in opposition to the U.S. Yet the relationship between the PRC and the DPRK is not one of providing security, per se, but one of providing economic guarantees to prevent humanitarian spillover into its borders. China also has a different relationship with the U.S., one of strategic competition, and thus despises the proximity of U.S. forces and the strong alignment they have with the ROK. In fact, regarding the division of the two Koreas, and the possibility of a reunification, China continues to express its objection to a U.S. aligned unified Korea, which would entail losing its buffer state and prevent its growth as a dominant power.

While Russia and China have focused their efforts in the region on the DPRK, the U.S. has also proven to do so, however with South Korea and Japan. Unfortunately, due to the unresolved historical hostilities between the two countries, relations have been frosty for years. While the U.S. has tried to mediate between its two valuable allies in the region, the political issues have transformed into legal ones, putting Washington's security and economic interests at risk.

The clashing of geopolitical interests between the major powers has led to increasing disparities between South Korea and North Korea. While South Korea has become an Asian Tiger and major economic power, North Korea has suffered famines and is completely isolated from the international market. While South Korea has successfully adopted a capitalist and democratic system, North Korea has followed its decades long authoritarian system based on the *Juche* doctrine. While South Korea has become a highly open, industrialized and educated society, North Korea has prevented class mobility and indoctrinated citizens in idolizing the Kim dynasty. While South Korea has become the pawn no major power is willing to sacrifice, North Korea represents an uncontrollable and menacing presence, even for its limited allies.

Although the COVID pandemic took the international community by surprise and caused a shift in priorities relevant to geopolitical goals in the region, solving the issue and using vaccines as a soft power tool could be relevant for actors to reshape the regional dynamics.

PART I: POLITICS AND POLICIES IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

On August 15, 1948, the pro-U.S. ROK was established in Seoul and was led by anti-communist leader Syngman Rhee. In the North, a pro-Soviet DPRK established its capital at Pyongyang and was led by Kim Il-sung. Two years later, South Korea declared its independence, which led to an immediate invasion by North Korea backed by the Soviet Union and China. The U.S. fought alongside South Koreans in the Korean War, which would ultimately come to a halt in 1953 with the signing of an armistice. The agreement established a demilitarized zone (DMZ) running along what is universally known as the 38th parallel. The Korean Peninsula would remain divided as it was before the war.

South Korea began to flourish as a sovereign nation and can indeed be considered a miracle story when reflecting on the challenges it has overcome in just over 70 years of existence. North Korea began its history on the same day and yet, sadly, its story is anything but a miracle.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Strong national productivity- Developed and diversified economy: 12th-largest economy in the world- Strong democratic institutions- Leader in high-end electronics- Coping with Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lack of natural resources- Export dependency (especially with China)- Inconsistent relations with North Korea- Ageing population + low fertility rate- Overrepresentation of chaebols² in the economy- Ongoing trade conflict with Japan- Social polarization- Geographical isolation due to DPRK's location- Energy dependence on the Middle East
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Free agreement trades with capitalist markets- Technological advancements and development- Substantial investments abroad- Future energy independence, Korea Green New Deal- A prospective OPCON transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Nuclear threat from North Korea- Japan's desire to remilitarize- North Korea's volatility- Chinese ambitions in the East China Sea

² These are large industrial conglomerates controlled and run by an owner or family in South Korea, often monopolizing a single industry. Criticism of these conglomerates has been brought about for three main reasons: they have direct influence in South Korea's politics and governance; their operations have led to increased costs and income inequality; and finally their grip on the Korean economy. Eleanor Albert, "South Korea's Chaebol Challenge," Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/south-koreas-chaebol-challenge>.

SOUTH KOREA'S RISE

The above SWOT analysis of South Korea provides a visual understanding of where the nation currently stands. Much of the weaknesses and threats will be analyzed in this report, as they are the major objectives for the ROK to tackle in the short and long term.

Success in tackling COVID

Among the many strengths of South Korea are developments in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The ROK has been able to soar as one of the countries that has best coped with the emergency situation, where as of May 17, 2021 there were 132,290 confirmed cases and 1,903 deceased.³ One can compare the situation to three countries of similar population size: Spain, Colombia and Kenya. Spain came in with 3,604,799 confirmed cases and 79,339 deaths, Colombia with 3,118,426 confirmed cases and 81,300 deaths, and finally Kenya was reported to have 165,465 confirmed cases and 3,003 deaths, all on the same day.⁴ Analyzing how it was possible for South Korea to have comparatively better results, it can be concluded that the ROK's government pursued the policy of "moving from containment to mitigation" through an early detection system where tracing the origin of the infection was essential.⁵ This contrasted the other methodology of applying a quarantine policy. The measures established in the mitigation plan can be classified into the 3T method based on testing, tracing, and treating.⁶ Aspects of South Korean culture and sophisticated IT systems also helped mitigate the spread of the virus. For instance, the greeting culture does not include shaking hands. In addition, they follow the "Pali-pali" culture, which encourages fast action and "assisted Korea to design the test kit quickly, also taking action from the first detected patient."⁷

It is important to highlight ROK's resilience when dealing with COVID-19. Much of this rapid and adequate response had to do with the country's ability to learn from the 2015 Middle East

³ Ministry of Health and Welfare, "COVID-19," Statistics Korea, 2021, https://kosis.kr/covid_eng/covid_index.do.

⁴ "COVID-19 Map," Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2021, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

⁵ Ladan Rokni and Sam-Hun Park, "Measures to Control the Transmission of COVID-19 in South Korea: Searching for the Hidden Effective Factors," *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health* 32, no. 8 (August 2020): pp. 467-468, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539520956438>.

⁶ The Government of the Republic of Korea, "Tackling COVID-19: Health, Quarantine and Economic Measures of South Korea," European Chamber of Commerce in Korea, March 31, 2020, <https://ecck.or.kr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tackling-COVID-19-Health-Quarantine-and-Economic-Measures-of-South-Korea.pdf>, 27.

⁷ Rokni and Park, (n 5), 468.

respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak, which resulted in deaths and “the government lost an estimated US\$2.6 billion in tourism revenue while spending almost US\$1 billion on diagnosis and treatment.”⁸ It was after MERS that the ROK implemented “48 reforms to boost public health emergency preparedness and response.”⁹ In addition, the ROK strategically began its vaccination phase when the government ensured doses for 56 million people, despite having a population of 52 million.¹⁰ Moreover, South Korean manufacturer SK Bioscience signed a license agreement with Novavax to produce 40 million doses that will cover 20 million people and will have exclusive rights to manufacture and sell the vaccine.¹¹ These tactics serve as an example for the international community to design similar future policies. This would prevent and mitigate the consequences and impact of future viral or bacteriological pandemics, and it can most certainly be said that the ROK will make use of their successful response in the future.

Challenges: Demographics and energy

The life expectancy in South Korea in the year 2020 averaged 82.8 years old. Due to advancements in technology, however, it is projected that by the year 2030, the life expectancy will increase to 84.2 years, and by the year 2040, the life expectancy is expected to reach 85.5 years.¹² But while life expectancy has slowly surged, the birth rate has gradually declined. Thus South Korea is undergoing a rapid demographic change which “have far-reaching implications for public debt, the welfare state and labour markets.”¹³ This has pushed policymakers to revise their country's restricting approach towards immigration. Currently, the country is at a crossroad between the public's hostile sentiments towards immigration and the country's need to attract foreign workers.

The ROK's historically restrictive immigration laws have contributed to the country's current low levels of miscegenation and the public's high hesitancy to support immigration and

⁸ Juhwan Oh et al., “National Response to COVID-19 in the Republic of Korea and Lessons Learned for Other Countries,” *Health Systems & Reform* 6, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23288604.2020.1753464>.

⁹ June-Ho Kim et al., “Emerging COVID-19 Success Story: South Korea Learned the Lessons of MERS,” *Our World in Data*, March 5, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exemplar-south-korea>.

¹⁰ Hyonhee Shin and Josh Smith, “South Korea Strikes COVID-19 Vaccine Deals for 23 Million People as Roll-out Set to Start Slowly,” *Reuters*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southkorea-idUSKBN2AF1Z4>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Antonia Cardenas, *Historia De Corea Después De 1945*, 2019.

¹³ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020*, PUB2019/006/L WMR 2020 (Geneva: United Nations, 2019), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf, 87.

multiculturalism.¹⁴ Overall, South Korean immigration laws have regularly established a hierarchy among migrants, thus subjecting them to social discrimination and making integration for them very difficult.¹⁵ Such a hierarchy started with the phenomenon of ethnic Koreans coming from China and/or the former USSR in the 1990s, like the ones coming from today's Uzbekistan, who were initially given visa privileges to enter South Korea because of their ethnic link. Nevertheless, ethnic Korean migrants were never given the opportunity to fully integrate in the receiving society, since they were largely barred from skilled employment and the public benefit system, and constantly "ostracised for linguistic differences and old-fashioned dress."¹⁶

Acknowledging the ROK's demographic challenges, in 2016, studies showed that South Koreans were more in favor of migrants from North Korea than of ethnic Koreans arriving from China of the former USSR. This is slowly changing, and an important stepping stone was a decision in 2019 to accept 56,000 foreign workers, in an effort to address labour shortages,¹⁷ as well bilateral labour agreements with countries such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸

Overall, South Korea's increasing willingness to adopt more-friendly migration policies can be seen as a reflection of a gradual and wider acceptance of migrants coming from different parts of Asia, specifically from Central and North Asia. Overall, immigration from neighbouring countries like China or Russia would not pose a threat to South Korean national identity and security in the long-term. Firstly, enhancing migration from East and Central Asia would not deteriorate South Korean culture and identity, but it would "increase the country's influence in international politics by adopting a leadership role amongst comparably smaller Asian economies."¹⁹ Secondly, if given the right opportunities to better integrate into South Korean society, immigrants from China or Russia would have access to skilled employment and would avoid creating their own communities to threaten South Korean identity. As fostered in the past, predesignating immigrants into subsets like "sub-South Korean, sub-Korean American, sub-Korean Japanese, and sub-North Korean" will

¹⁴ Timothy S. Rich et al., "What Influences South Korean Perceptions on Immigration?," *Diplomat*, October 5, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/what-influences-south-korean-perceptions-on-immigration/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Amelia Schubert, "Contesting Koreanness: Migration as a Challenge to the Ethnic Identity of the Korean Chinese," *University of Colorado Boulder*, 2011. https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/bk128b26g.

¹⁷ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020*, 80.

¹⁸ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2020*, 82.

¹⁹ Milana Nikolova, "South Korea Is Becoming a Real Alternative to Russia and China in Central Asia," *Emerging Europe*, January 22, 2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/south-korea-is-becoming-a-real-alternative-to-russia-and-china-in-central-asia/>.

limit full integration.²⁰ However, if properly assimilated into South Korean society, migrants would be unlikely to pose a security or cultural threat in the long-term, especially considering shared cultural links and the desire for a united Korea.

As for energy, the ROK is the world's 8th largest energy consumer yet almost 93.5% of its energy and natural resources consumption are imported. "In 2018, ROK spent 1,459 billion dollars on importing energy and resources equivalent to nearly 27.3% of its total amount of imports."²¹ South Korea's dependency on energy imports make the country highly vulnerable to shifts in the global energy market, thus linking its energy security to numerous geopolitical implications. The ROK's energy imports oftentimes come from geo-politically and economically unstable regions, like in the case of its oil imports, 73.5% of which come exclusively from the Middle East.²² In addition, by 2019, 26% of its crude petroleum imports came from Saudi Arabia, 12.8% of its refined petroleum came from the UAE and 35.1% of the gas petroleum came from Qatar.²³ Thus the diversification of providers has been a priority for the securitisation of South Korean energy policy.

The ROK's government has increasingly strengthened international cooperation on energy, and responds accordingly to the changes in the global energy security environment as a precondition to secure its energy supply. Consequently, the Korean Foreign Ministry (MOFA) created 47 "*Prioritized Missions for Energy Cooperation*" in key energy-trading countries in the Middle East, Africa, South and Central America, and Eurasia to enhance energy cooperation in their respective locations.²⁴ On the bilateral level, the ROK commenced dialogues with the U.S. that, since the shale revolution,²⁵ arose as an energy exporter, while on the multilateral level, South Korea has been engaging in dialogues on energy through the participation in multilateral forums, such as the G20, APEC, IEA and IRENA.²⁶ These huge multilateral and bilateral efforts made by the South

²⁰ Schubert, "Contesting Koreanness."

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea) "Energy," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed March 20, 2021, http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_5657/contents.do.

²² Ibid.

²³ "South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners," OEC, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor>.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Energy."

²⁵ The "Shale Revolution" refers to the combination of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling that enabled the United States to significantly increase its production of oil and natural gas, particularly from tight oil formations, which now account for 36% of total U.S. crude oil production. (See "The U.S. Shale Revolution," The Strauss Center, 2020, <https://www.strausscenter.org/energy-and-security-project/the-u-s-shale-revolution/>.)

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Energy."

Korean government are to ensure that the nation will be able to guarantee its energy security for the decade ahead. In addition, its New Green Deal and 2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy will allow progressive independence from its trading partners when it comes to energy security.

South Korea's Green New Deal proposed before the 2020 parliamentary election, is "a massive government-led program that aims to achieve net-zero emissions and to accelerate the transition towards a low-carbon and green economy."²⁷ This new 142.62 billion-dollar deal revolves around green industry innovation and infrastructure construction, and low-carbon energy implementation. In December 2020 the ROK presented its 2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy²⁸ which states that to achieve carbon neutrality, clean and renewable energy will become the central power sources.

The ROK plans to convert its coal power plants into LNG power plants and in the years to come will apply Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) technology to coal-fired power plants to minimize emissions.²⁹ Additionally, to prepare for a low-carbon and decentralized energy supply by 2025 the ROK will invest 35.8 trillion won to create 209,000 jobs in R&D facilities.³⁰ Considering the problem of storing renewable energy which is dependent on external climatological factors, the South Korean government has declared its commitment to "develop a power demand and supply forecasting system and provide enhanced support for future technologies such as the Energy Storage System (ESS) and hydrogen fuel cells for auxiliary power sources."³¹ In sum, through its commitment to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, the ROK will play an exemplary role in the international community.³²

The 2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy offers the ROK basis for cooperation with regional actors, more precisely when it comes to the development of renewable energy. In reality, collaborative relations can be built on renewables, since they do not have geopolitical implications and therefore do not

²⁷ Jae-Hyup Lee and Jisuk Woo, "Green New Deal Policy of South Korea: Policy Innovation for a Sustainability Transition," *Sustainability* 12, no. 23 (June 2020): p. 10191, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310191>, 2.

²⁸ Sarwat Chowdhury, "South Korea's Green New Deal in the Year of Transition," UNDP, February 8, 2021, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2021/south-korea-s-green-new-deal-in-the-year-of-transition.html>.

²⁹ The Government of the Republic of Korea, "2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy of the Republic of Korea," December 2020, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/LTS1_RKorea.pdf.

³⁰ "South Korea," KPMG, April 13, 2020, <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/south-korea-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>.

³¹ The Government of the Republic of Korea, "2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy."

³² Ibid.

require high-securitisation.³³ Nevertheless, the underdevelopment of regional power grids, the lack of mutual trust among regional actors and external actors in these affairs are among some of the main elements posing a challenge to Northeast Asian countries' cooperation in the energy domain.

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR ENDEAVOR

Since 1955,³⁴ and throughout the three generations of the Kim regime in the DPRK, North Korea has considered the need to develop and advance its nuclear program as the means to protect the regime from foreign threats. The looming scenario has been an invasion or an occupation from the south with the help of the U.S., which is considered the "primary obstacle" and biggest enemy to the development of the regime's revolution.³⁵

Accordingly, the regime considers a nuclear arsenal as necessary defense for the state, as it provides leverage with the U.S. and acts as a deterrent against other countries fancying a change in the Peninsula's status quo.³⁶ Consequently, during the Eight Party Congress Kim Jong-Un announced a massive military buildup confirming its nuclear escalation in the next five years including "the development of 'super-large hydrogen bombs', 11-axle missile trailers, mid-and long-range cruise missiles, anti-aircraft rocket systems, heavy tanks, howitzers, multiple-warhead missiles, new types of ballistic missiles, 'hypersonic gliding flight warheads', electronic weapons, unmanned aerial vehicles and military reconnaissance satellites."³⁷ He also stressed the need for DPRK's military to reach targets within a range of 15,000 km, the advancement in the development of a new nuclear submarine, the future operation of a military reconnaissance satellite, as well as drones with a range of 500 km.³⁸

The DPRK's nuclear and military escalation is to take place amid the current economic condition of the heavily sanctioned country, worsened by the flood damages occurring in the past months

³³ Meng Xiangchengzhen and Serafettin Yilmaz, "Renewable Energy Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Incentives, Mechanisms and Challenges," *Energy Strategy Reviews* 29 (2020): p. 100468, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2020.100468>.

³⁴ Carlos R. Fernández Liesa Emilio Boroque Lafuente, *El Conflicto de Corea, Conflictos Internacionales Contemporáneos*, November, 2013, 118.

³⁵ Frank Ruediger, "Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 2 of 2)," 38 *North*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-2-of-2/>.

³⁶ Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., "North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation," *Congressional Research Service*, July 27, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41259.pdf>.

³⁷ Ruediger, "Key Results (Part 2 of 2)."

³⁸ Ruediger, "Key Results (Part 2 of 2)."

which damaged 96,300 acres of farmland, 16,680 homes, as well as embankments and rail lines.³⁹ The situation was also worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a self-imposed closure of borders with China since December 2019, and the shutting down of business with China which accounts for 90% of DPRK's external trade. By August 2020, the drop of exports to China reached 75% at US\$27 million in comparison to the previous year, and the imports from China dropped 67% at US\$380 million. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service these factors have created a massive food insecurity problem affecting about 60% of the population; yet the regime is prohibiting humanitarian aid in fear of such aid spreading COVID.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, North Korea has a record of circumventing sanctions to engage in the trade of dual use materials related to nuclear and ballistic missile activities, in addition to selling conventional arms and military equipment. De-escalation of the threat will considerably be shaped by the way the major powers manage their rivalries and come together to develop a shared vision for the peninsula, though the possibility of achieving this is inconceivable in the short and medium term.

Challenges: Sanctions and more sanctions

To understand the rationale behind the establishment of sanctions on the DPRK, it is important to consider their two main proponents. In the first place, the United Nations (UN) has imposed sanctions, implemented by all member states, on behalf of the international community's will to hold the regime accountable for pursuing weapons programs in violation of international law. The first of such sanctions was proposed by the U.S. in the Security Council (UNSC) in 2006, following North Korea's first nuclear test in October of that year.⁴¹ Since then and until December 2017, the UNSC passed 10 additional sanctions resolutions, where it expanded the obligation of UN member states to cease diplomatic and economic relations with the DPRK.⁴²

In the second place, the U.S. has also imposed unilateral sanctions on the DPRK to increase the pressure on the regime. Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump issued executive orders targeting

³⁹ Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea, Fighting to Hold Back Virus and Floods, Says No Thanks to Outside Aid," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/asia/north-korea-floods-coronavirus.html?searchResultPosition=19>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Chanlett-Avery et al., "North Korea: U.S. Relations," 6.

⁴² Chanlett-Avery et al., "North Korea: U.S. Relations," 6.

North Korea and its entities.⁴³ Furthermore, the U.S. Congress has passed different specific statutes, including the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, expanding U.S. sanctions against the DPRK,⁴⁴ the Korean Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions Act and the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2017.⁴⁵ Moreover, in 2016, the Obama Administration designated the DPRK as a jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern, and in 2017, the Trump Administration redesignated it as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁴⁶

It is important to mention that the UN and U.S. sanctions have augmented the costs of the regime's nuclear program while exhausting its enablers, showing other potential proliferators that sanctions would levy factual costs on them if they followed the same path. Yet, sanctions have not been the most accurate measure to the size of the policy objective they are supposed to achieve.⁴⁷

It should be noted that UN sanctions are "unevenly enforced."⁴⁸ North Korea has evaded UN sanctions for many months by exporting coal, sand and petroleum, and importing luxury goods, alcohol and robotic machinery⁴⁹ as confirmed in March 2020 by the UN Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009)⁵⁰ which imposed further economic and commercial sanctions on the DPRK after an underground nuclear test was conducted on May 25, 2009.⁵¹

Most significantly, China, North Korea's primary trading partner, has failed to enforce sanctions despite requests from the U.S. to comply with the international commitment.⁵² As a result, the UN and the U.S. sanctions have merely "induced North Korea to shift exports to China rather than a more global market, and to similarly begin importing otherwise sanctioned goods from China."⁵³

⁴³ Chanlett-Avery et al., "North Korea: U.S. Relations," 8.

⁴⁴ "North Korea: A Chronology of Events from 2016 to 2020," Congressional Research Service, May 5, 2020,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Chanlett-Avery et al., "North Korea: U.S. Relations," 8.

⁴⁷ Joseph M. Dethomas, "Sanctions' Role in Dealing with the North Korean Problem," US-Korea Institute at SAIS, January 2016 <https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NKNF-DeThomas-Sanctions-Role.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ben Kesling and Alastair Gale, "Trump's North Korea Obstacle: Sanctions Are Unevenly Enforced," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sanctions-on-north-korea-arent-universally-enforced-diplomat-says-1493106632>.

⁴⁹ Edward Wong et al., "Armored Cars, Robots and Coal: North Korea Defies U.S. by Evading Sanctions," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/world/asia/north-korea-sanctions.html>.

⁵⁰ Resolution 1874 was unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council on June 12, 2009, after North Korea's second nuclear test. The resolution expanded the arms embargo by banning all imports and exports of weapons, excluding small arms.

⁵¹ Security Council Report, *UN Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009)*, S/2020/151 (March 2, 2020), available from <https://undocs.org/S/2020/151>.

⁵² Jacqueline Richards, "Are Economic Sanctions Effective? Not in North Korea," *Denver Journal of International Law Policy*, April 7, 2020, <https://djilp.org/are-economic-sanctions-effective-not-in-north-korea/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

Consequently, sanctions evasion is one of the main reasons for their failure as an effective way of achieving the denuclearization of the regime, as trade provides an indispensable share of the DPRK's funding, facilitating North Korea's GDP growth of 3.9% in 2016 according to the Bank of Korea.⁵⁴ Thus, international cooperation is not fulfilling its purpose when it comes to the collective imposition of sanctions. While there could be a stricter sanction regime where secondary sanctions on China are imposed for its behavior, this would be challenging considering the current tense relations between the U.S. and China.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Chinese commitment for sanctions on key lifelines for North Korea is unlikely.⁵⁶

Comprehensive knowledge of the domestic political economy and internal dynamics in the DPRK is essential for understanding why the regime has not yielded to the pressure of sanctions. The DPRK is founded on the *Juche* doctrine with high domestic resistance, partially instigated by the past sanctions. The main premise of the *Juche* doctrine is to achieve total independence from external actors who would intrude on the North Korean way of life and culture, representing a movement of isolation to the outside. In addition, the DPRK's centralized power structure is based on family dynastic succession, with individuals listed in the sanctioning list, the high-ranked military officials, the members of the Workers Party (WPK) and others maintaining a stake in decision making. The DPRK's public distribution system (PDS) and the strict social control, put the burden of the sanctions on the less privileged people.

Nonetheless, due to the social control and the repression of the authoritarian regime, the effects of this burden are not as heavy as is needed for the population to unrest and demand change.⁵⁷ On the contrary, the narrative of the regime has used the economic situation caused by the sanctions as a tool to promote the need for social cohesion and is essential for the maintenance of the pro-regime consensus. All this ensure great resistance among North Koreans against economic sanctions, while weakening the path through which pressure can lead to policy changes.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jiawen Chen, "Why Economic Sanctions on North Korea Fail to Work?," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 04 (2017): pp. 513-534, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740017500300>, 524.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Dethomas, "Sanctions' Role in Dealing with the North."

⁵⁷ Chen, "Why Economic Sanctions."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

PART II: MAJOR POWERS IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN RELATION TO THE PENINSULA

Biden's Policy in East Asia

Since the end of the Second World War (WWII), the U.S. has contributed to peace and stability in Asia through its strategic rebalancing toward the region. President Harry Truman, under the advice of George Kennan, director of policy planning at the State Department, was the first to consider the need to rebalance the U.S.'s Asia strategy, from China to Japan, after the Manchurian Incident and up to the Pacific War in the 1930s and 1940s.⁵⁹ The next rebalancing was in the early 1970s with President Nixon's rapprochement with China, advised by his national security advisor Henry Kissinger. Then under Obama's administration in the 2010s the U.S. reinforced defense cooperation with its allies and enlarged its naval capabilities in the region, marking the beginning of the Pivot to Asia due to China's rising role. The Pivot to Asia ultimately failed due to the low increase in U.S. armed forces in the Asia-Pacific region and the shortages in military spending.⁶⁰ More recently under the Trump administration, the U.S. abandoned its efforts to construct new regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific, as evidenced by withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁶¹

To date, the international panorama has changed. The Biden administration acknowledges that "China is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."⁶² The growing Chinese economic relations across East Asia is surpassing the position of the U.S. as the region's dominant trading partner.⁶³ In addition, China has steadily improved its military capabilities incorporating regional ballistic and cruise missile force, eroding the U.S.

⁵⁹ Yoichi Funabashi, "Why a New Asia Policy Is Needed under Biden," *The Japan Times*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/01/17/commentary/world-commentary/api-biden-asia/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ This partnership is a 12-member multilateral framework advocating free trade in the region. (See Funabashi, "Why a New Asia.")

⁶² President Joseph R. Biden, Jr, "Renewing America's Advantages: Interim National Security Strategy Guidance", March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, 8.

⁶³ Anonymous, "The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy," *The Atlantic Council*, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf>.

conventional military advantage in East Asia.⁶⁴ A report by the Royal United Services Institute on Chinese and Russian air defense capability stated in January 2020 that “the ability for the U.S. and its allies to project airpower within 1,000 kilometers of China’s mainland shore in a conflict will shrink dramatically on current trends through the 2020s.”⁶⁵

Thus, in the long term, American presence in the East China Region through the fortification of its military and economic alliances⁶⁶ will be fundamental if the U.S. wants to retain global leadership. With an internationalist approach to foreign policy headed by Biden, the administration highlights the need for the U.S. to “exercise its leadership as a great power to strengthen the international order as it is in their best interests to do so.”⁶⁷ In addition, U.S. efforts to deepen regional security co-operation and reincorporation in regional forums, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are expected. As argued by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, “President Biden will show up and engage the ASEAN on critical issues of common interest.”⁶⁸ By doing so the U.S aims to recover the lost space that China has gained in recent years.

In October 2020, Biden affirmed in an op-ed “We’re a Pacific power, and we’ll stand with friends and allies to advance our shared prosperity, security, and values in the Asia-Pacific region.” Biden revealed his plan for the U.S. to remain as a key actor in the region, being an imperative for the power projection capabilities of the U.S. and the preservation and forward deployment in the West Pacific.⁶⁹ Moreover, Kurt Campbell, who is considered a major strategic specialist on Asia, was appointed deputy assistant to the President and coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs on the National Security Council,⁷⁰ reaffirming Biden’s commitment to the region’s security.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Frank A. Rose, “Not in My Backyard: Land-Based Missiles, Democratic States, and Asia’s Conventional Military Balance,” *Brookings*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/09/10/not-in-my-backyard-land-based-missiles-democratic-states-and-asias-conventional-military-balance/>.

⁶⁵ Justin Bronk, Modern Russian and Chinese Integrated Air Defence Systems, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, January 2020 https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20191118_iads_bronk_web_final.pdf.

⁶⁶ Biden, Jr, “Renewing America’s Advantages.”

⁶⁷ Han-Bum Cho, “The Biden Administration’s Policy on the Korean Peninsula and ROK’s Response,” Korea Institute for National Reunification, November 11, 2020, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/0b6fb7b3-528b-448a-a994-fa9278b1ce03>.

⁶⁸ Yoichi Funabashi, “Why a New Asia Policy Is Needed under Biden,” *The Japan Times*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/01/17/commentary/world-commentary/api-biden-asia/>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bruce Klingner, “Japanese-South Korean Relations Need to Improve. The U.S. Can Help,” The Heritage Foundation, March 3, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/japanese-south-korean-relations-need-improve-the-us-can-help>.

Despite strategic competition between the U.S. and China, the former will pursue cooperation with the latter in aspects of common interest such as “climate change, global health security, arms control, and nonproliferation.”⁷² Cooperation is essential for the U.S. to continue to press for denuclearization and a unified Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, cooperation will be hard to achieve because “China is more likely to view a nuclear-armed North Korea as a useful geostrategic pawn in the Sino-US competition.”⁷³ But China should consider that a potential attack on the DPRK could provoke a crisis in Chinese cities nearby, and thus motivate China to restrain the North from triggering a hostile U.S. move. In Biden’s words “We will conduct practical, results-oriented diplomacy with Beijing and work to reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation.”⁷⁴ In addition, the two will continue to clash on issues that the U.S. considers “unfair and illegal trade practices, cyber theft, and coercive economic practices.”⁷⁵

On issues such as the Japanese Senkaku islands in the East China Sea, claimed by the Chinese as the Diaoyu islands, the U.S. will continue refraining from a final judgment on sovereignty despite reaffirming that the islands are covered by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.⁷⁶ Additionally, during the next decade, the U.S. will have to pay attention to China's ambition to bring the ROK closer to its sphere of influence—China has attempted to persuade the ROK that alignment with them would better mitigate the threat from North Korea.⁷⁷ Regarding the DPRK, the U.S. will be increasing the economic pressure through new sanctions that may be evaded by the regime through China’s help.⁷⁸ Consequently, the U.S. must coordinate its regional strategy with its major allies to collectively respond to China considering that during the 2020s, the gap between Chinese and U.S. power will be narrower and the best American response to this threat is aligning the role of its principal allies.⁷⁹

⁷² Biden, Jr, “Renewing America’s Advantages.”

⁷³ 38 North, “A Principled US Diplomatic Strategy Toward North Korea: 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea,” *38 North*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/a-principled-us-diplomatic-strategy-toward-north-korea/>.

⁷⁴ Biden, Jr, “Renewing America’s Advantages.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Anonymous, “The Longer Telegram.”

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Chen, “Why Economic Sanctions.”

⁷⁹ Anonymous, “The Longer Telegram.”

U.S. commitment to alliance with the ROK

The ROK-U.S. alliance can be traced back to the end of WWII in 1945, when the peninsula was divided in two, and ultimately led to the Korean War. During the war, the U.S. committed to the security of ROK and was deeply affected by the war, bearing in mind that 36,516 Americans died in the fight to expel North Korean troops out of the South.⁸⁰ Since then, the U.S. has the Wartime Operational Control Authority (OPCON) through the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).

The transfer of OPCON to the ROK has been a long-postponed issue since 1991, when North Korea advanced its nuclear program. Moreover, when Kim Jong-un's regime accelerated the development of its missile capabilities in 2013, the ROK and the U.S. agreed to postpone the OPCON transfer scheduled for December 2015. In the meantime, in 2014, the prerequisites for the transfer were set agreeing on three phases at the 46th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM).⁸¹ The first phase is the Initial Operational Capability (IOC), whose results were assessed by the allies in November 2019 during Command Post Exercises and the following assessment led to pursuing the second phase, Full Operational Capability (FOC). Yet due to the COVID-19 pandemic the allies failed to fully assess the results,⁸² making it impossible to carry on towards the third phase, Full Mission Capability (FMC).

The current progressive Moon administration in South Korea, which considers the OPCON transfer necessary for restoring the nation's military sovereignty,⁸³ faced a dilemma between pursuing the reactivation of large-scale joint military exercises with the U.S.—suspended during Trump's administration⁸⁴—to accomplish the verification of the three preconditions for the OPCON transfer, or pursuing its efforts toward inter-Korean reconciliation that will require the suspension of said military drills, being that North Korea considers them a rehearsal for invasion.⁸⁵ Moon finally inclined for the first option to proceed with the OPCON transfer, arguing it could

⁸⁰ Leon Whyte, "The Evolution of the U.S-South Korea Alliance," *The Diplomat*, June 13, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/the-evolution-of-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance/>.

⁸¹ "Military Considerations for OPCON Transfer on the Korean Peninsula," Council on Foreign Relations, March 18, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/military-considerations-opcon-transfer-korean-peninsula>.

⁸² Kang Seung-woo, "South Korea in dilemma over joint military drill", *The Korea Times*, January 9, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/01/103_302191.html.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

lead to the second objective, which would achieve the leading parties' prioritized nationalism, autonomy and inter-Korean relations.

There are currently 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea, despite the original Cold War logic of defending South Korea against communist invasion being purely a “historical memory.”⁸⁶ Although remaining in the region is fundamental for the ROK's security, considering its Northern counterpart continues posing a nuclear threat, the current justification behind the presence of U.S. troops in South Korean soil has evolved to combating the strategic competition posed by China.

U.S. forces in the ROK are an essential component for maintaining both the national security of the ROK and the U.S. This is evidenced by “recent tests [which] have demonstrated that North Korea is nearly if not already capable of striking the continental United States with a nuclear-armed ballistic missile.”⁸⁷ Said capabilities were also described by the U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command Commander General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy in a testimony for the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 2020, “recent engine testing suggests North Korea may be prepared to flight test an even more capable ICBM design that could enhance Kim's ability to threaten our homeland during a crisis or conflict.”⁸⁸ Thus, the need to halt any North Korean attempt to attack U.S. allies or the U.S. homeland has to commence in Kim's neighborhood where actions can be taken quickly to contain any future attempt to attack.

The Trump administration, with an approach to foreign policy guided by isolationism, as evidenced by a repetition of statements that “the US can ill-afford to exert its power to assume a global leadership role in maintaining the international order and should instead focus on its national interests,”⁸⁹ failed to serve its commitment towards the protection of South Korea and the stability in the region. Consequently, during the Trump administration, the alliance entered into a period of uncertainty that worsened when Trump threatened to pull U.S. troops out of the peninsula. He argued for the ROK to increase its contribution to US\$5 billion for the maintenance

⁸⁶ Whyte, “The Evolution of the U.S-South Korea Alliance.”

⁸⁷ Chanlett-Avery et al., “North Korea: U.S. Relations.”

⁸⁸ Congressional Research Service, “North Korea: A Chronology of Events.”

⁸⁹ Cho, “The Biden Administration's Policy.”

of the USFK under the 11th Special Measures Agreement (SMA).⁹⁰ This was seen as exorbitant by Seoul, considering that under the 10th SMA⁹¹ both parties agreed on US\$940 million and a one-year effective duration, which was already a sum approximately 10 times greater than the amount agreed to under the first SMA in 1991.⁹² In this regard, Seoul insisted that a 13% increase for the new SMA was the best offer it could make⁹³ in comparison to the average rate of increase in the past 10 SMAs of 8.5%. Consequently, for the remaining period of Trump's Presidency, a deadlock was produced on the cost-sharing agreement.

Under the Biden administration, the foreign policy approach is internationalist, highlighting the need for the U.S. to “exercise its leadership as a great power to strengthen the international order as it is in their best interests to do so.”⁹⁴ Consequently, Biden will promote U.S. political and security interest through cooperation and fortifying its alliances towards advancing shared prosperity, values, and security to meet global challenges. Furthermore, in a multipolar world and with China’s increasing ambitions in the region, the USFK not only counters North Korea but also functions as a regional force to preserve stability in East Asia.⁹⁵

Accordingly, the Biden administration will implement a strategy of containing China, which will require the fortification of the U.S.-ROK alliance and means the U.S. “is unlikely to substantially reduce or withdraw the USFK given the importance of the Korean Peninsula.”⁹⁶ Considering that for the U.S. the challenge created by a more assertive China in the region is a key priority, the alternative of shifting the USFK to another country is not an option, as to keep China in check and at the same time contain the DPRK, is to ratify its compromises with its allies in the region, namely Japan and the ROK. Even relocation of USFK within the region will put the security of the ROK at risk and destabilize the region, while also opening the door for a closer China-ROK relation,

⁹⁰ The SMA is aimed at determining the South Korean’s financial burden-sharing part for the USFK. It has financially stabilized the ROK-U.S. operations capabilities to protect the ROK from security threats.

⁹¹ “Korea, Republic of (19-405) - Special Measures Agreement - United States Department of State,” U.S. Department of State, April 5, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/19-405>.

⁹² Alex Soo Hoon Lee, “SMA in the Biden Administration,” Korea JoongAng Daily, January 20, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/01/20/opinion/columns/SMA-in-the-Biden-administration/20210120104100620.html>.

⁹³ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, “Exclusive: Inside Trump's Standoff with South Korea over Defense Costs,” Reuters, April 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-southkorea-trump-defense-exclusiv-idUSKCN21S1W7>.

⁹⁴ Cho, “The Biden Administration’s Policy.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

which will be detrimental for the U.S. strategy towards China. A China-ROK rapprochement will leave Japan alone in the region, heavily harming the credibility of the U.S. in the eyes of the Japanese while opening the path for the DPRK to find new ways to evade sanctions through a Chinese-sympathizer ROK.

To reaffirm that neither a withdrawal nor a relocation of USFK is an option for the Biden administration, on October 29th, 2020 he sent a letter titled “Hope for Our Better Future.” Biden wrote that he will “stand with South Korea, strengthening our alliance to safeguard peace in East Asia and beyond, rather than extorting Seoul with reckless threats to remove our troops. I'll engage in principled diplomacy and keep pressing toward a denuclearized North Korea and a unified Korean Peninsula.”⁹⁷ Consequently, Biden will seek to re-establish the U.S. global leadership by amending the U.S.- led alliance network.⁹⁸

The administration's goal is to break the deadlock produced in September 2019, when the first talks on the 11th SMA took place.⁹⁹ Hence, early in the Biden administration, South Korea's chief negotiator in defense cost-sharing, Jeong Eun-bo, met with the U.S. counterpart, Donna Welton, on March 5, 2021,¹⁰⁰ ending the 11-month gap which followed the seventh round of SMA talks in March 2020.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the costs of hosting USFK is unlikely to be a significant problem as the Biden administration is aware that “South Korea has consistently spent about 2.5% of its GDP on defense and unlike Japan, has also maintained sufficient military manpower through conscription.”¹⁰² Since the Biden administration includes similar traits to the Obama administration, an increase in defense cost will be based on the inflation rates.¹⁰³ It can also be expected that the new SMA will agree on a five-year period to maintain a stable alliance after Trump's demand in 2018 to reassess the agreement every year.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ President Joe Biden, “Special Contribution by U.S. Democratic Presidential Candidate Joe Biden,” Yonhap News Agency, October 30, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201030000500325>.

⁹⁸ Lee, “SMA in the Biden Administration.”

⁹⁹ Sarah Kim, “Chief Negotiator Aims to Conclude Talks to Renew SMA,” Korea JoongAng Daily, March 4, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/03/04/national/diplomacy/defense-costsharing-Special-Measures-Agreement-US-Forces-Korea/20210304171207563.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Mitch Shin, “South Korea Restarts Cost-Sharing Negotiations with Washington,” The Diplomat, February 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/south-korea-restarts-cost-sharing-negotiations-with-washington/>.

¹⁰² Cho, “The Biden Administration's Policy.”

¹⁰³ Shin, “South Korea Restarts Cost-Sharing Negotiations with Washington,”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Apart from Biden's desire to promptly sign a SMA is the reactivation of the annual U.S.-ROK joint military drills. Though they are usually scheduled in March¹⁰⁵ they were reduced in the wake of the inter-Korean summit on April 27, 2018 and the DPRK-U.S. summit on June 12 of the same year.¹⁰⁶ These are a key priority for the U.S. government which argues that "North Korea's nuclear ballistic missile program is a serious threat and joint drills are defensive exercises not meant to be provocative."¹⁰⁷ Consequently, both allies agreed to conduct a nine-day joint military exercise starting on March 8, 2021. The joint military exercise was conducted via computer simulations in lieu of field training exercise, due to the pandemic. Since 2018, joint exercises have taken place via computer simulations to support denuclearization negotiations between the U.S. and the DPRK.¹⁰⁸

U.S. attitude towards the DPRK

Biden is likely to have priorities towards both Koreas similar to those of previous U.S. administrations, reviving the economic and military ties with the ROK, while maintaining pressure on the DPRK to cease and eliminate its nuclear weapons program in the medium-term. Although the U.S. under Biden will keep combining sticks (sanctions and military deterrence) with carrots (potential sanctions relief) to put pressure on the DPRK to advance the denuclearization of the peninsula, the U.S. will also need South Korea to improve inter-Korean relations, especially through joint economic projects and confidence-building measures.¹⁰⁹

Secretary Blinken confirmed that the Biden administration conducted a full review of the North Korean Policy to find "ways to increase pressure on the country to come to the negotiating table over its nuclear weapons."¹¹⁰ It was not until April 30th that Press Secretary Jen Psaki announced the completion of said policy review emphasizing on the goal to achieve complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through a phased agreement built on the Singapore agreement and other

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Mason Richey and Rob York, "Resetting Relations Will Require True Grit," *Comparative Connections* 22, no. 3 (January 2021): pp. 45-58, <http://cc.pacforum.org/2021/01/resetting-relations-will-require-true-grit/>.

¹¹⁰ Reuters Staff, "Blinken Says U.S. Plans Full Review of Approach to North Korea," Reuters, January 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-state-northkorea-idUSKBN29O2QG>.

previous agreements¹¹¹. Yet, acknowledging that the previous four administrations had the same objective, Biden's North Korean Policy “will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience.”¹¹² Hence, Biden's approach will be calibrated and practical. It will aim to make practical progress to fortify the security of the U.S., its allies and the USFK. The most important component of Biden's policy on North Korea seems to be its understanding that the desired security improvements for both the U.S. and its allies can take place short of DPRK's complete disarmament.¹¹³

Steps towards the strengthening of alliances started early in the presidency considering that the first international trip by Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was to South Korea and Japan between March 14th and 18,th¹¹⁴ being the first such talks between the allies since April 2019.¹¹⁵ Among the arguments was the strengthening of the alliances and the push to denuclearize North Korea.¹¹⁶ After this meeting, Kim's sister, Kim Jong Un, warned the U.S. that Blinken's visit in the neighborhood was not liked in the DPRK.¹¹⁷

The Biden administration will need to combine the right mix of deterrence, containment, pressure and diplomacy in its approach to the DPRK,¹¹⁸ yet said combination will not include the establishment of a red line if North Korea resumes its nuclear tests despite arguments such as the ones on the “Longer Telegram” report published in January 2021 by the Atlantic Council which states that the U.S. should have a “short, focused, and enforceable” list of red lines where “any

¹¹¹ John Hudson; Ellen Nakashima, “Biden administration forges new path on North Korea crisis in wake of Trump and Obama failures”, Washington Post, April 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-administration-forges-new-path-on-north-korea-crisis-in-wake-of-trump-and-obama-failures/2021/04/30/c8bef4f2-a9a9-11eb-b166-174b63ea6007_story.html

¹¹² The White House, “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki Aboard Air Force One En Route Philadelphia, PA”, April 30, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/04/30/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-philadelphia-pa/>

¹¹³ Ankit Panda, “Biden's Next Steps on North Korea Contain a Dose of Realism”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 6, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/06/biden-s-next-steps-on-north-korea-contain-dose-of-realism-pub-84485>

¹¹⁴ Kylie Atwood, “Blinken and Austin Will Travel to Japan and South Korea Later This Month,” CNN, March 4, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/04/politics/blinken-austin-japan/index.html>.

¹¹⁵ Reuters Staff, “US' Blinken, Austin Set to Visit Japan from March 15 -Sources,” Reuters, March 4, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-japan/us-blinken-austin-set-to-visit-japan-from-march-15-sources-idUSXXN2L2003>.

¹¹⁶ Atwood, “Blinken and Austin.”

¹¹⁷ Amanda Macias, “Kim Jong Un's Powerful Sister Sends Warning to Biden Administration as Blinken, Austin Arrive in Asia,” CNBC, March 16, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/16/kim-jong-uns-sister-warns-biden-administration.html>.

¹¹⁸ Ken Moriyasu, “North Korea Goes Missing from Biden's Big Foreign Policy Speech,” Nikkei Asia, February 6, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-s-Asia-policy/North-Korea-goes-missing-from-Biden-s-big-foreign-policy-speech>.

nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons action by China against the United States or its allies, or by North Korea where China has failed to take decisive action to prevent any such North Korean action”¹¹⁹ will prompt direct U.S. intervention. The rationale behind the anonymous author of the Longer Telegram is that China is not interested in deterring North Korean nuclear policy against the U.S. and its allies. Thus, China should also be held accountable for the behavior of the DPRK.¹²⁰ This option is not viable for the U.S. as miscalculates the nature of its counterparts and the democratic flag it protects.¹²¹

Among the reasons why a red line on the DPRK will not be established, it should be noted that the denuclearization of DPRK is not an option for Kim Jong Un, on the contrary, Kim expressed on the 8th Party Congress of The Workers Party that becoming a nuclear weapons state is North Korea’s ‘strategic and predominant goal.’¹²² Kim also declared that in absence of “a shift in U.S. policy, his country’s qualitative nuclear force modernization will continue rapidly but may even sharply accelerate.”¹²³ Thus, Kim has already indirectly expressed to Washington that if negotiations are to take place, the discussion will not spin around the denuclearization option. This was also proven during the Hanoi Summit, when he did not accept a deal for total sanctions relief in exchange for complete denuclearization.”¹²⁴ Despite its unwillingness to denuclearize, the DPRK will continue negotiating with the U.S. for the purpose of persuading the Biden administration to accept the DPRK as a nuclear power and enter into arms control talks.¹²⁵

Secondly, the establishment of a red line will be detrimental to the Biden administration as the probability of Kim trespassing said red line is undoubtedly high. Kim has agreed on different occasions on the reduction of its nuclear programs, yet he has not complied with those agreements despite sanctions.¹²⁶ In case a red line is set, Biden will be placed in a position where on one hand,

¹¹⁹ Anonymous, “The Longer Telegram.”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Tanner Greer, “Oh God, Not Another Long Telegram About China,” Foreign Policy, March 4, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/04/china-us-relations-longer-telegram-response/>.

¹²² Ruediger, “Key Results (Part 2 of 2).”

¹²³ Christy Lee, “Experts: Biden Thought Likely to Reverse Trump's North Korea Policies,” Voice of America, February 2, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/experts-biden-thought-likely-reverse-trumps-north-korea-policies>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Scott A. Snyder, “What Kind of North Korea Will Biden Face?,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 25, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-kind-north-korea-will-biden-face>.

responding to DPRK's provocations will suppose a full-scale reaction that will not be supported by the American people nor the ROK—this is proven by Moon's progressive administration which looks towards inter-Korean relaxation of relations and less dependence on the U.S. On the other hand, acting passively will harm Biden's credibility within the U.S. and increase criticism from the international community, resembling Obama's failure after declaring a red line in 2012, where he stated that if Assad used chemical weapons in Syria, it would warrant U.S. military action¹²⁷ and did not act accordingly.

In lieu of articulating a 'red line,' the U.S. government should forge stronger alliances and define which national interests are most critical to protect on the Korean Peninsula. The uncertainty of Kim Jong-un's actions should signal U.S. concentration on protecting the U.S. homeland against attack, as well as preventing proliferation of nuclear and missile technology in the DPRK, and upholding alliance commitments. Ultimately the top priority must be maintained: preventing war.

Considering this panorama, the Biden administration will follow a phased approach where the U.S. will need to find the right moment to exchange partial sanctions relief for steps along the path towards partial denuclearization until the program is completely dismantled.¹²⁸ In October 2020, Biden stated that he will not pursue personal diplomacy practices like his predecessor until Kim reconsiders its posture towards denuclearization aiming for a nuclear free Korean Peninsula.¹²⁹ Besides, Biden will advocate for the reduction of military tensions and identify the steps to establish a peaceful U.S.-DPRK relations through the already mentioned phased approach.¹³⁰ To achieve this, the reactivation of the U.S.-ROK joint military exercises were a necessary step despite Kim's expected reaction leading to the reactivation of DPRK's missile tests in late March with the test of two short-range missiles.¹³¹

¹²⁷ Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited," Politico Magazine, July 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059/>.

¹²⁸ John Hudson; Ellen Nakashima, "Biden administration forges new path on North Korea crisis in wake of Trump and Obama failures", Washington Post, April 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-administration-forges-new-path-on-north-korea-crisis-in-wake-of-trump-and-obama-failures/2021/04/30/c8bef4f2-a9a9-11eb-b166-174b63ea6007_story.html

¹²⁹ Cho, "The Biden Administration's Policy

¹³⁰ Snyder, "What Kind of North Korea."

¹³¹ Josh Smith and Antoni Sokołowski, "North Korea missile launch tests Biden, alarms Japan ahead of Olympics" Reuters, March 24, 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-korea-missile/north-korea-missile-test-casts-shadow-over-biden-administration-japan-olympics-idUSKBN2BG3CO>

Furthermore, calculated ambiguity during the Biden administration on whether the U.S. would use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks will remain as it was seen during the previous administrations and stated in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) which avowed that “the United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners.”¹³² Moreover, considering the nuclear threat environment since the previous 2010 NPR, a No First Use (NFU) policy remains dangerous for the U.S. and will erode deterrence and affect allies’ confidence in American commitments towards their security.¹³³

“Retaining a degree of ambiguity and refraining from a no first use policy creates uncertainty in the mind of adversaries and reinforces deterrence by ensuring adversaries cannot predict what specific actions will lead to a U.S. nuclear response. Thus, implementing a no first use policy could undermine the U.S. ability to deter North Korean aggression, especially with respect to their growing capability to carry out nonnuclear strategic attacks.”¹³⁴ Thus, the U.S. will keep its commitment to defend the ROK as it is in their interest to fortify its alliance with the ROK and its allies in the region as a means to reposition themselves as their security provider while ensuring deterrence against China and the DPRK.

The 2020 Democratic Party election platform affirmed the Democrat belief that “the sole purpose of the U.S.’ nuclear arsenal should be to deter—and, if necessary, retaliate against—a nuclear attack.”¹³⁵ Additionally, during the Obama administration, Biden supported the “sole purpose” utilization of nuclear weapons¹³⁶ and during his presidential campaign stated the U.S. does not need new nuclear weapons.¹³⁷ Moreover, in spring 2020 Biden reiterated his affinity to the Sole Purpose approach to nuclear weapons and affirmed that “as president, he will work to put that

¹³² Department of Defense (United States of America), “Dangers of a No First Use Policy,” accessed March 25, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Apr/01/2002108002/-1/-1/1/DANGERS-OF-A-NO-FIRST-USE-POLICY.PDF>.

¹³³ Patty-Jane Geller, “Dangerous Nuclear Policy Idea No. 2: A U.S. Policy of No First Use or Sole Purpose,” The Heritage Foundation, February 16, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/dangerous-nuclear-policy-idea-no-2-us-policy-no-first-use-or-sole-purpose>.

¹³⁴ Department of Defense, “Dangers of a No First Use Policy.”

¹³⁵ <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-07-31-Democratic-Party-Platform-For-Distribution.pdf>

¹³⁶ Toby Dalton, “Between Seoul and Sole Purpose: How the Biden Administration Could Assure South Korea and Adapt Nuclear Posture,” War on the Rocks, February 9, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/between-seoul-and-sole-purpose-how-the-biden-administration-could-assure-south-korea-and-adapt-nuclear-posture/>.

¹³⁷ Kingston Reif, “Biden’s First Budget Should Reduce Nuclear Excess,” Defense News, March 4, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/03/04/bidens-first-budget-should-reduce-nuclear-excess/>.

belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”¹³⁸ Yet, if Biden consults with the U.S. military and allies to push forward the adoption of said policy by Congress, he will most likely reach the same conclusion as his predecessors—he won’t find support in them¹³⁹ despite the Democratic Party control of both chambers of Congress.¹⁴⁰ As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford explained, the “policy of calculated ambiguity complicates an adversary’s decision-making process, thus he would not recommend any change to simplify an adversary’s decision making calculus.”¹⁴¹

Consequently, Biden’s support towards a NFU policy ensures that despite the different positions and views in Congress and among U.S. allies concerning said policy, under the Biden administration an American attack towards North Korea is not expected as a first mover option. Moreover, following Democrat principles Biden will pursue its commitment to “maintain a strong, credible deterrent while reducing overreliance and excessive expenditure on nuclear weapons.”¹⁴² In the eyes of Biden, Trump’s proposal to build new nuclear weapons was unnecessary, wasteful, and indefensible.

Therefore, the approach of the Biden’s administration towards DPRK’s hostile activities will be marked by new U.S. sanctions in coordination with U.S. allies against North Korea as Secretary Blinken said to NBC News on February 1, 2021.¹⁴³ Moreover, under the Biden administration it is expected the appointment of a special envoy for human rights in the DPRK to bring to light the “regime’s brutal repression of its citizens through mass surveillance, torture and political-prisoner camps.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, a hard line on human rights, the process leading to denuclearisation and pressure

¹³⁸ Joseph R. Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

¹³⁹ Geller, “Dangerous Nuclear Policy Idea.”

¹⁴⁰ Seamus P. Daniels, “Defense Budget Priorities for the Biden Administration,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/defense-budget-priorities-biden-administration>.

¹⁴¹ “Hearing To Receive Testimony On The Department Of Defense Budget Posture In Review Of The Defense Authorization Request For Fiscal Year 2020 And The Future Years Defense Program,” March 14, 2019 <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-25-03-14-19.pdf>

¹⁴² Reif, “Biden’s First Budget.”

¹⁴³ “Blinken Criticizes Russia’s ‘Violent Crackdown’ on Protesters and Weighs North Korea Sanctions,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/01/antony-blinken-russia-crackdown-protesters-north-korea-sanctions>.

¹⁴⁴ John Hudson; Ellen Nakashima, “Biden administration forges new path on North Korea crisis in wake of Trump and Obama failures,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-administration-forges-new-path-on-north-korea-crisis-in-wake-of-trump-and-obama-failures/2021/04/30/c8bef4f2-a9a9-11eb-b166-174b63ea6007_story.html

through sanctions, are the first measures that the Biden administration will address in its North Korea Policy.¹⁴⁵

The most likely forecast is that these new sanctions will not meet their purpose in the medium-term. As already mentioned, sanctions have not accurately measured the size of the policy objective they are supposed to achieve. Not to mention, South Korean President Moon's approach to the DPRK, which stresses the importance of the process leading to unification, is not entirely aligned with the U.S. position in regard to the enforcement of possible new sanctions, creating greater cracks in the international front against Pyongyang apart from those already existing (namely China's lack of commitment to enforce the sanctions on the DPRK). ROK's unification minister in charge of inter-Korean affairs considers that reinforcing sanctions will not necessarily bring the DPRK back to negotiations.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun pointed out that the "U.S. and the DPRK should seek an initial deal including a halt to the North's nuclear activity and a cut in its program in exchange for sanctions relief."¹⁴⁷ In late 2018, ROK's foreign minister said Seoul was considering lifting some unilateral sanctions on North Korea, to which Trump responded the ROK "won't do that without their approval."¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, under the Biden administration, President Moon expressed his commitment to strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance,¹⁴⁹ and has already started taking steps on this issue such as the return of the ROK-U.S. Joint Military exercises despite Kim's opposition. Moreover, in his 2021 New Year's Eve conference, Moon did not call for the relaxation of sanctions as he did in the previous year.¹⁵⁰ This time, he called for inter-Korean cooperation on health care and reiterated his "effort to achieve a major breakthrough in the stalled DPRK-U.S. talks and inter-Korean dialogue."¹⁵¹ This leaves his position towards new sanctions under the Biden administration as a question mark, but nevertheless, he is inclined to align with U.S. initiatives despite the harsh

¹⁴⁵ Smith and Sokołowski, "North Korea missile launch."

¹⁴⁶ Hyonhee Shin, "South Korea Urges U.S. Flexibility on Sanctions to Restart North Korea Talks," Reuters, February 3, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-northkorea-idUSKBN2A319F>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Hyung-Jin Kim, "South Korea's Moon Could Seek Exemption of UN Sanctions on North Korea," The Diplomat, January 15, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/south-koreas-moon-could-seek-exemption-of-un-sanctions-on-north-korea/>.

¹⁴⁹ Moon Jae-in, "2021 New Year's Address by President Moon Jae-In," Cheong Wa Dae, January 11, 2021, <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/931>.

¹⁵⁰ Kim, "South Korea's Moon Could Seek Exemption."

¹⁵¹ Moon Jae-in, "2021 New Year's Address."

economic situation of its neighbor.

Sanctions cannot be the sole tool in Biden's new strategic approach to the DPRK acknowledging the strong commitment of the regime towards its nuclear program, the failure of sanctions to accomplish its purpose, and the cracks in the international community to enforce possible new sanctions on the DPRK. Implementing sanctions as a means of impeding North Korea's nuclear program ambitions will only be suitable if it is accompanied by diplomatic measures, at least in the medium-term prospect.¹⁵²

THE SLEEPING GIANT AWAKES

When it comes to the actors opposing the U.S. influence in East Asia, China is the primary competitor. The historical relations between China and the ROK can be summarised in the following elements: "historical ties, strategic calculations, cultural affinity and ideological solidarity."¹⁵³ The two countries first established relations, specifically tributary relations,¹⁵⁴ during the Song dynasty and formally institutionalised them in the 19th century, under the Ming dynasty.¹⁵⁵ Back then, China had a tributary system and referred to Korea as a model tributary "fervently emulating and internalising much of China's ruling ideology and statecraft."¹⁵⁶ Despite the formal tributary relationship, on most occasions Chosŏn¹⁵⁷ was independent except for the payment of tribute to the Ming and later to the Qing dynasty.¹⁵⁸ From a pre-divided Korean perspective, China was a reliable protector and a source of high culture.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, the Korean Peninsula has always been of strategic geopolitical importance for the security of China. In the late 20th century, China lost Chosŏn to Japan, thus breaking their official ties to the Korean Peninsula.

¹⁵² Dethomas, "Sanctions' Role in Dealing with the North."

¹⁵³ Chae-ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York (NY): Columbia University Press, 2007), 13-16.

¹⁵⁴ 'Tributary relation' refers to Korea's ideological and trade subordination to Imperial China. In this report, in order to address the likelihood of a future 'tributary relation' between South Korea and China, the term is going to be interpreted as a relation of subordination in the political and security domains.

¹⁵⁵ Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, 13-16.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 13-16.

¹⁵⁷ Chosŏn refers to the ancient Korean kingdom and dynasty, which were founded by Yi Sŏng-Gye in 1392 and which lasted until 1910 thus being the longest-lasting Korean dynasty and kingdom (Riotto, pg.199-348).

¹⁵⁸ Chung, *Between Ally and Partner* 13-16.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 13-16.

However, since the Cold War and the consequent division of the Korean Peninsula, China has maintained very close ties with the DPRK, which in geopolitical terms, serves as a buffer state between Chinese territory and U.S. presence in the region. In the short and medium term, China will continue using the Korean conflict to promote its rising power, while simultaneously hoping for the U.S. to divert its attention from the peninsula and East Asia region. Looking closer at Chinese-ROK relations, prior to China's decision to open up to the world in the 1970s, there was limited economic relationship and no diplomatic connections.¹⁶⁰ Since the 1970s, economic linkages started between both. In those years, the ROK was a source of capital and technology for China as well as a great example of economic miracle.¹⁶¹ On the other hand, from the ROK's perspective, having a closer economic relationship with China meant having access to a very large market and to China's influencing power over the DPRK, in the prospect of pursuing peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula.¹⁶²

The Sino-South Korean reconciliation process has faced several oppositions, among others from the DPRK, which throughout the 1980s managed to blockade some of their joint projects, and from Taiwan as well.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, after having strengthened their economic ties, in 1992, China and the ROK established formal diplomatic relations, and since then, their bilateral trade has grown 55 times to US\$290 billion in 2014.¹⁶⁴ During 2020 China was South Korea's first trading partner in terms of export sales, reaching a total value of US\$132.6 billion, counting for 25.8% of total South Korean exports.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, South Korean exports to China provided important support for the ROK's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, despite the potential for stronger economic ties, in the past few decades their political relationship has undergone several ups and downs, mainly due to the two countries' fast economic development, which despite taking place at different times in history, has "reshaped both countries'

¹⁶⁰ Min Ye, *China-South Korea Relations in the New Era: Challenges and Opportunities* (Lexington Books, 2017).

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid, 3-15.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Daniel Workman, "South Korea's Top Trading Partners," World's Top Exports, February 14, 2021, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/south-koreas-top-import-partners/>.

¹⁶⁶ Huo Jianguo, "Cooperation with China Crucial to South Korean Economy," Global Times, August 4, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196686.shtml#:~:text=China%20remains%20South%20Korea's%20largest,Korea%20were%20at%20%24173.57%20billion.>

foreign policy and domestic politics.”¹⁶⁷ As a consequence, the current Sino-South Korean relationship can be referred to as being one of hot economic ties and cold political ones.¹⁶⁸ Overall, China is starting to assert itself as the dominant power in the region, and the likelihood of South Korea accepting it will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

Bilateral Trade and Diplomacy: China’s new supply chains and rivalry with the U.S.

China is asserting its position as a regional power in a variety of ways, that might be of ‘soft’ nature, like economic relationships, or of ‘hard’ nature, like territorial claims in the South China Sea. In recent years, China has proved to be a master in soft power, particularly when looking at its Belt and Road Initiative. Currently, the economic rivalry between China and the U.S. has urged both countries to restructure their supply chains, especially due to the post-pandemic changing approaches to international commerce and growing global protectionist trends.¹⁶⁹ Overall, geopolitical dynamics have become of primary importance for businesses around the world.

In these shifting post-pandemic scenarios, China is planning to prioritise ‘internal circulation’ of goods over ‘external circulation’, that is to say a strategy of domestic consumption.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the Belt and Road Initiative will keep being a priority for China’s supply chain. Furthermore, China will rebuild a supply chain with the ROK in addition to increasing its connectivity with its neighbouring countries, thus incorporating “East Asian supply chains into the economic development of Northeast China.”¹⁷¹ Trips were made by Politburo member and director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party, Yang Jiechi, to the ROK and other countries in late 2020, and these types of encounters are understood as “supply chain diplomacy.”¹⁷²

China is already the largest commercial partner of many regional players and is using its economic power to increase its sphere of influence. China historically had a great ability to exert influence

¹⁶⁷ Ye, *China-South Korea Relations*, 3-15

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Hiroyuki Suzuki, “Building Resilient Global Supply Chains: The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 19, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-resilient-global-supply-chains-geopolitics-indo-pacific-region>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

and leverage through economic means over smaller countries, with the ultimate purpose of bringing them under Chinese ‘protection’. Thus as South Korea’s economic ties with China strengthen, it could be argued that the ROK could accommodate the role it historically played as China’s tributary country in the long term. Nevertheless, China and the ROK have limited political affinities, where the two countries do not share the same political ideology and have different positions on delicate topics. For instance, China’s political stance on issues such as the DPRK’s evasion of sanctions and the Taiwan and Hong Kong autonomy issues. This poses an obstacle for South Korea to fully engage with China’s supply chain diplomacy, and therefore preventing the ROK from accommodating its historical role as tributary state in the long-term.

In sum, the potential for the ROK to accept China’s dominant position in the region in the long-term will not necessarily imply the accommodation of its historical role as tributary state. This is evidenced by Moon’s recent commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance. Therefore, future deeper economic relations are not likely to move the ROK towards providing the PRC with diplomatic support in its actions regarding relevant international political matters, nor bring South Korea closer to China in the ideological sphere.

Diplomatic and Security Affairs: growth in military spending

As mentioned in the previous sections, the U.S. is South Korea’s security guarantor. Nevertheless, in the past decades China has been largely increasing its military spending with the aim of replacing the U.S. as the dominant military power in East Asia, and eventually in the world. Currently, U.S.-PRC relations have reached their lowest point in a wide range of issues since normalisation in 1979.¹⁷³ China is increasingly attempting to gain leverage with U.S. regional allies, thus the U.S. will monitor the region through Kurt Campbell, who has been named the “Indo-Pacific coordinator,” a position created at the National Security Council this year.¹⁷⁴

When looking closer at the PRC’s 2021 defence budget, it can be noted that it increased to 6,8% from last year’s budget, reaching 1.36 trillion yuan.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, according to the International

¹⁷³ Stephanie Segal, “A Framework for U.S.-China Engagement,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 4, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/framework-us-china-engagement>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Bonnie S. Glaser et al., “Understanding China’s 2021 Defense Budget,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, March 5, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-chinas-2021-defense-budget>.

Monetary Fund (IMF), China's economy is expected to grow 8.1 percent in 2021, thus making way for a possible boost to its new defence budget.¹⁷⁶ In general terms, China's defence budget is second only to the U.S.' and it widely exceeds that of its neighbors. This budget increase aims at "safeguarding national sovereignty, securing development interests, fulfilling international responsibilities, and meeting the needs of military reforms."¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, this increase in military spending is shifting the balance of the region to China's favor. The PRC's increasing military power might also generate higher levels of trust among Asian countries, and in the ROK as well.

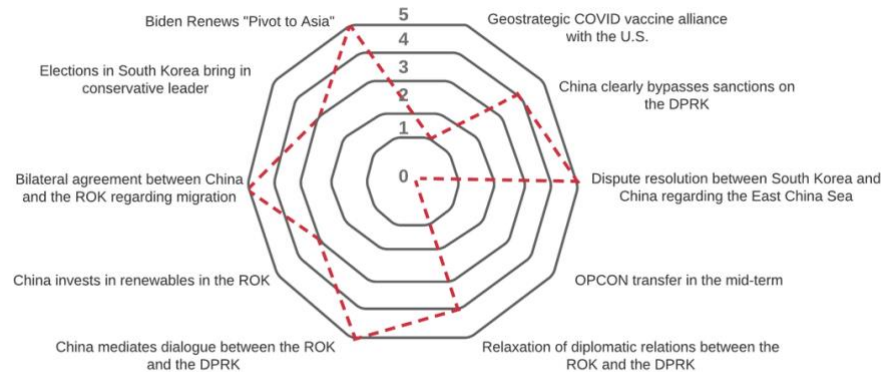
Looking at the interests of the two countries, the PRC and the ROK share a mutual goal of achieving peace in the Korean Peninsula by establishing a long-term constructive dialogue. A constructive and collaborative relationship between the two Koreas constitutes a key element for regional stability. The goal of a peaceful peninsula might serve as a basis on which China and the ROK can start building a relationship of trust in the security dimension, thus inducing South Korea to gradually accept China's dominant role in the region in the long-term. Nevertheless, the ROK is still highly dependent on the U.S.' military power, for which it plays a key role in assessing the DPRK threat. Therefore, for the ROK to shift towards an alliance with the PRC in the security domain and accommodate the role it historically played as China's tributary state, there would have to be a radical shift in the U.S. policy on East Asia towards supporting the reduction of U.S. military presence in the region. However, such a shift is unlikely in the medium-long term, since the Biden administration has already addressed its commitment to deepen its security alliances and cooperation with regional actors, particularly with the ROK.

¹⁷⁶ Glaser et al., "Understanding China's 2021 Defense Budget."

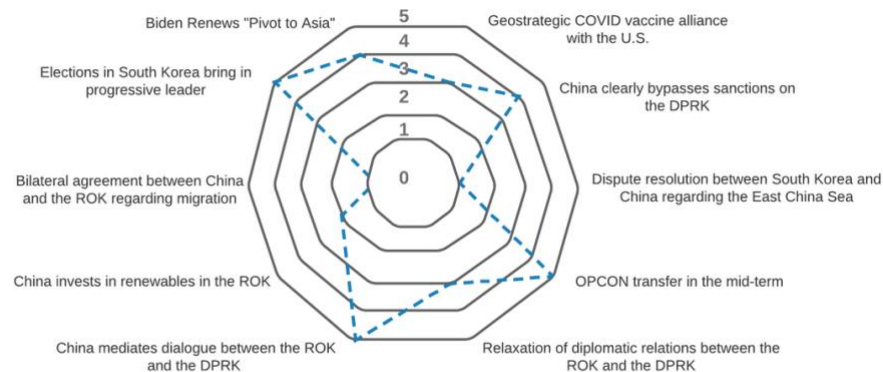
¹⁷⁷ Glaser et al., "Understanding China's 2021 Defense Budget."

U.S. versus China alignment scenario

Scenario 1. ROK aligns with China



Scenario 2. ROK closer alignment with the U.S.



Source: Author's elaboration

Key drivers of change have been compiled in order to assess how they would affect the plausibility of the two scenarios above. In the **first scenario**, it is concluded that if the ROK and the PRC were to resolve the dispute over free navigation in the South and East China Seas, there would be much more plausibility for the two countries to align closer. In addition, if President Biden would renew a "Pivot to Asia 2.0" it would also highly affect the plausibility, but in a negative way. This is because it would further drive the ROK closer to the U.S., as it remains dependent on the U.S. for maintaining security. Among the drivers of change, it is concluded that at face value, a successful OPCON transfer would not lead to alignment with China in the short-term, as making the ROK fully capable in the military aspect does not imply a shift to another security guarantor. The plausibility of the scenario would also be higher if China were to mediate a dialogue between the

ROK and the DPRK, as this would indicate greater trust among neighbors. Finally, the demographic threat that the ROK is enduring could be alleviated by a bilateral migration agreement, which can further strengthen their economic ties.

In the **second scenario**, it is conceivable that if the elections taking place in 2022 bring in a conservative leader, the ROK will align closer with the U.S. This is because “progressives have been more domestic politics-oriented in their approach to foreign policy and gave inter-Korean relations priority over the U.S.-South Korea alliance, while conservatives have placed importance on the U.S.-South Korea alliance and aspired for a more global agenda.”¹⁷⁸ In addition, the vaccine alliance with U.S. companies in the short-term could signal greater alignment with U.S. interests, especially in the public health sector. An OPCON transfer, while inconsequential for China’s interests, would have detrimental effects on the U.S. military presence in the case that the ROK would relieve the need for such a presence. In the case that the ROK would use the transfer as an opportunity to better support USFK, the relations would become even stronger. Finally, while the PRC continues to bypass international sanctions on the DPRK, the ROK will continue viewing China as an unreliable partner in international affairs, and thus lean closer to the U.S.

THE RUSSIAN BEAR

Russia is another relevant neighbouring authoritarian power which could take advantage of South Korea’s geopolitical position to advance its interests in the region, but not in a conventional way. The history of the relations between Russia and the Korea Peninsula is not ancient, with formal diplomatic relations between the two countries dating back to 1884, when the Russo-Korean Treaty was signed.¹⁷⁹ In the first period of their relationship, the USSR attempted to acquire greater influence on Korean economic and political affairs, which led to a conflict with Japan in 1905.¹⁸⁰ It wasn’t until the Cold War era that the USSR imposed its control and influence over today’s DPRK. Throughout the 1950s, however, the USSR started losing its influence, and finally the collapse of the USSR in 1991 led Moscow to becoming geopolitically irrelevant. At that time,

¹⁷⁸ Shannon Tiezzi, “Duyeon Kim on South Korea’s Foreign Policy Priorities,” *Diplomat*, February 2, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/duyeon-kim-on-south-koreas-foreign-policy-priorities/>.

¹⁷⁹ Eugene Bazhanov and Natasha Bazhanov, “The Evolution of Russian-Korean Relations: External and Internal Factors,” *Asian Survey* 34, no. 9 (1994): pp. 789-798, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1994.34.9.00p0422u>.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Russia did not play a relevant role in issues related to the peninsula.

Even nowadays it can be affirmed that the Korean Peninsula is of higher concern for China's security and development than for Russia's. Nevertheless, Russia's relations with the DPRK have slowly been renewed, while a meager relationship exists with the ROK. Thus Russia has tried to address its interests in the region, specifically in regards to the Korean national question, economic relations, and the opportunities of future energy cooperation.

The National Question: Matters of security

The conflict on the Korean Peninsula is not entirely beneficial for Russia's geopolitical strategy, neither in the short term nor in the mid term. Rather, Russia has prioritized its desire for peace and stability in the peninsula in order to emphasize the security threat it poses due to the proximity to its territory. Indirectly, however, the conflict between the U.S. and China has been used by Russia to strategically develop closer relations with China.¹⁸¹ In doing so, Putin hopes to advance Russia's economic, security and energy interests in the region while avoiding friction with its counterpart.

When it comes to the DPRK and the nuclearisation of the peninsula, the Kremlin tends to sustain Beijing's actions, which leads to an unsteady relationship with the ROK. In general terms, "both Russia and China oppose the placement of the THAAD¹⁸² missile system in the ROK."¹⁸³ As of now, this has led to further straining of relations with the ROK, which supports THAAD deployment. Additionally, considering Russia's seat in the UNSC, its position on the DPRK's nuclear issue is key, especially since the country plays a supportive role in favor of China's interests.

Relations between the ROK and Russia got colder in 2019, when China and Russia conducted their first joint air patrol over the East China Sea, during which "South Korea accused Russian planes of entering its air defence identification zone."¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, relations between Russia and

¹⁸¹ Reuters Staff, "China, Russia Share Opposition to U.S. THAAD in South Korea: Xi," Reuters, July 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-thaad-russia-idUSKBN1900N8>.

¹⁸² This is the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, "an American anti-ballistic missile defense system designed to shoot down short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles," and seen by the ROK as necessary defense. (See Doug Bandow, "What Putin Wants with North Korea," Cato Institute, May 2, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/what-putin-wants-north-korea>.)

¹⁸³ Nivedita Kapoor, "Russia-South Korea Relations: Prospects and Challenges," Observer Research Foundation, June 15, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-south-korea-relations-prospects-challenges-67837/>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

the DPRK have become friendly once again. Kim Jong-un mentioned that the WPK has developed cooperative relations with Russia, and in 2019, Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin held their first ever summit, serving as a message to the U.S. that the DPRK has cooperative partners. Relations improved even further in 2020, when Putin presented a medal to Kim for his efforts at “preserving the memory of Soviet soldiers who died in the Asian country.”¹⁸⁵ The DPRK will likely continue to advance its alliance with Russia and China in 2021 with hopes of solidifying the relations for the decade.

Economic relations

Looking closer at the relations existing between the ROK and Russia, both contributed to the implementation of the Eurasian Initiative, which was “a declaration of intent to launch a mega-project encompassing not just Southeast Asia but a far greater space” put forward by South Korean President Park Geun-hye in 2013.¹⁸⁶ The plan dealt with a wide range of issues, like economic, diplomatic and security matters related to the Eurasian region, with the ultimate goal of advancing global peace. For the ROK, the initiative primarily represented a path leading towards peace in the Korean Peninsula.

On the economic front, Russia will use the conflict between the U.S. and the DPRK to approach the ROK, who has been isolated from Eurasia and has reduced the country to an island. In the past twenty years, Russia has been trying to facilitate connectivity between the Korean Peninsula and Eurasia mainland, through the development of linkages such as “the railroads of North Korea and South Korea to the Trans-Siberian Railway.”¹⁸⁷ The 2013 initiative was not very effective, mainly due to poor communication between the Russian Federation and South Korea.¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, whether successful or not, promoting projects like this has widely been one of the main means for establishing cooperative and peaceful relations between Eurasian countries. In 2016, Russia promoted the Greater Eurasian Initiative, “to better integrate into the developing

¹⁸⁵ “Putin Honors Kim Jong Un with a WWII Memorial Medal,” Deutsche Welle, May 5, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/putin-honors-kim-jong-un-with-a-wwii-memorial-medal/a-53337147>.

¹⁸⁶ Alexander Vorontsov, “Eurasia Right to Left,” Russia in Global Affairs, March 19, 2015, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/eurasia-right-to-left/>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Anton Lisin. “Prospects and challenges of energy cooperation between Russia and South Korea.” *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 10, no. 3 (2020): 130.

economies Asia-Pacific region as well as to increase Moscow's strategic presence in Asia," and in 2017, President Moon Jae-in announced his New Northern Policy (NNP), "to improve ties with northern neighbours, in which Russia is a 'key partner.'"¹⁸⁹ Within the NNP, South Korea has expressed its willingness to cooperate with Russia in nine main areas of focus, namely "gas, railways, seaports, electricity, Arctic shipping routes, shipbuilding, industrial complexes, agriculture and fisheries."¹⁹⁰ As such, in the short term, Russia will prioritize these goals, but will be limited by the ROK's strong alignment with the U.S.

In general terms, Moscow sees the ROK "as an important investor and economic partner, especially for the economically underdeveloped Russian Far East."¹⁹¹ Before the pandemic, bilateral trade between the two countries showed an upward trend, mainly consisting in Russia supplying natural resources and importing finished products.¹⁹² [See Annexes 1 and 2] Thus in the medium term, Russia will attempt to create a dialogue between the DPRK, ROK and Russia in order to further develop its Far East project.

Future energy cooperation?

In the third place, the promotion of energy collaboration could be a valuable card that Russia could play in its favor to deepen cooperation with the ROK. In the past, collaboration in the energy sector has been hindered by sanctions imposed on Russia, which highly limited the Federation's capabilities. More recently, Seoul and Moscow have shown interest in promoting joint projects in the energy and infrastructure sector to overcome political obstacles. From a Russian perspective, enhancing investment and financing infrastructures in the oil and gas energy sector could contribute to the increase of Russian export volumes of energy resources to the ROK and increase cooperation.¹⁹³

One of the most discussed projects is the building of a Trans-Korean gas pipeline that runs from Russia to the ROK through the DPRK.¹⁹⁴ The construction of the pipeline would see the

¹⁸⁹ Kapoor, "Russia-South Korea Relations."

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Lisin, "Prospects and challenges of energy cooperation."

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

involvement of China and could play an important role in enhancing not only cooperation between China, Russia and the ROK, but also between the two Koreas in the medium-term. Nevertheless, the implementation of the project has undergone several delays and is still hindered by some relevant factors. Among these are the ongoing international sanctions on Russia and South Korean untrustworthy public opinion towards the nature of Russian economy. In fact, the majority of businessmen in the ROK still believe that “Russia has not changed its policy towards the nature of its economy since the existence of the USSR” and that “the country has not truly switched to a market economy,” thus not feeling safe in investing in joint projects.¹⁹⁵

In conclusion, there are good economic bases for establishing a close cooperation between Russia and the ROK, and for mitigating security tensions between them. Russia could use the tensions to enhance its position in the region and advance not only its economic interests in the Far East, but also its political interests which mirror those of China. On its side, the ROK should take advantage of its relations with Russia as well, and “apart from the economic dimension of NNP, it is also a means to boost its presence as a middle power in Asia in helping it ‘shape the regional geopolitics.’”¹⁹⁶

WILL JAPAN REMAIN A FOE?

Japan and South Korea are two very similar Asian countries in terms of political rule. Both are ‘westernised’ liberal democracies, as opposed to other big regional powers, like China and Russia, which tend to be authoritarian. Moreover, they are both U.S. allies hosting numerous U.S. military bases, thus playing a key role in the U.S. security strategy in East Asia.

Despite their similarities, the two U.S. allies do not have a very collaborative and constructive relationship. In the past few years, ROK-Japan relations have been undergoing a deep crisis, which has its roots in Japanese colonial rule of Korea in the 20th century. The current tensions in the South Korean-Japanese relations are being fuelled by four main factors, namely: historical wounds, trade frictions, disputes around territorial sovereignty and the cancellation of a new sharing IT information system.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Kapoor, “Russia-South Korea Relations.”

Historical wounds

South Koreans are still suffering from the outrages and abuses committed by the Japanese during their occupation of the Korean Peninsula in the XX century. In the past few years, these historical sensitivities have been highly influencing South Korean hostile political actions and attitudes towards Japan. Numerous rulings of the South Korean Supreme Court “ordering Japanese corporations to pay reparations for forced labor during Japan’s occupation of the Korean Peninsula,” have been showing South Korea’s refusal of recognising the 1965 re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Japan.¹⁹⁷ Among others, the 2018 rulings that the top court in Seoul carried out against some of the largest Japanese companies, like Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal.¹⁹⁸

During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), the Korean Peninsula was subjugated by Japanese harsh rule, which led the Korean Peninsula through a process of ‘Japanisation’, that is to say a higher industrialisation of the country and consequently, higher standards of living. Nevertheless, industrial success was obtained through a brutal colonial system, which was responsible for the exploitation and abuse of the Korean people. The most painful brutality, which highly keeps Seoul and Tokyo apart, is known under the euphemism of *Comfort Women*: a system that forced Korean women into sexual slavery and exploitation by Japan’s troops during WWII.¹⁹⁹

After one victim came forward and made the first public testimony in 1991 of the brutalities she suffered, other testimonies have come to light.²⁰⁰ This has led the ROK to legally challenge Japan, asking for compensations and a public apology. In 1995, Japan created the Asian Women’s Fund in order to compensate for these damages, and in 2015, the ROK and Japan agreed to settle the dispute through an agreement foreseeing a payment and a Japanese apology for the crimes committed.²⁰¹ Nevertheless, the agreement did not “represent the ‘final and irreversible’ resolution to this issue” as was intended.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Nicholas Szechenyi, “Mounting Tensions: A Timeline of Japan-South Korea Relations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 22, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/mounting-tensions-timeline-japan-south-korea-relations>.

¹⁹⁸ Robin Harding, “South Korea Orders Reparations over Japan Wartime Forced Labour,” Financial Times, November 29, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/b2c1a11c-f372-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>.

¹⁹⁹ Choe Sang-hun, “South Korean Court Orders Japan to Pay Compensation for Wartime Sexual Slavery,” The New York Times, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/world/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-japan.html>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Yuki Tastumi, “The Japan-South Korea ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement Survives,” The Diplomat, January 11, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-japan-south-korea-comfort-women-agreement-survives-barely/>.

²⁰² Ibid.

The issue continues to linger. In January 2021, a South Korean court brought forward a very symbolic ruling recognising Japan's responsibility in forcing Korean women into sexual slavery and asking Japan for compensation.²⁰³ This recent ruling, which was rejected by the Japanese government, is likely to further aggravate the tensions between Japan and the ROK. Moreover, "the decision could further complicate Washington's efforts to bring South Korea and Japan closer together to counter North Korea's nuclear threat and China's growing military influence in the region."²⁰⁴ However, during the Obama administration, Blinken and Campbell played a vital role in the 2015 agreement on reparations for Korea's "comfort women."²⁰⁵ With both individuals recruited by the Biden administration, the U.S. could lead mediation and promote a more collaborative relationship between its two allies in the short-term.

Trade frictions

In 2019, the South Korean-Japanese relationship deteriorated mainly due to a spontaneous economic war. In the summer of 2019, Japan imposed export controls on the ROK and "removed it from a list of trusted trading partners."²⁰⁶ Specifically, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry imposed export restrictions to the ROK on three chemicals, namely fluorinated polyimides, photoresists, and hydrogen fluoride, which are critical for the production of mobile phones and semiconductors, which are South Korea's largest exports.²⁰⁷ The ROK is the world's second largest producer of semiconductors and its economy mainly depends on exports, of which semiconductors account for one third.²⁰⁸ In this dispute, South Korea's exports loss exposure was higher than that of Japan, whereas Japanese monthly exports of the three chemicals were US\$33.6 million worth compared to the US\$8.4 billion value of South Korean semiconductors' monthly exports.²⁰⁹

²⁰³ Choe Sang-hun, "South Korean Court Orders Japan to Pay Compensation for Wartime Sexual Slavery," The New York Times, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/world/asia/south-korea-comfort-women-japan.html>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Shashank Mattoo, "Biden's East Asia Challenge," Observer Research Foundation, January 31, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/biden-east-asia-challenge/>.

²⁰⁶ Szechenyi, "Mounting Tensions."

²⁰⁷ Bruce Klingner and Riley Walters, "The U.S. Must Limit Damage from the Japan–South Korea Trade Dispute," The Heritage Foundation, August 7, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-us-must-limit-damage-the-japan-south-korea-trade-dispute>.

²⁰⁸ Stephen Ezell, "Understanding the South Korea-Japan Trade Dispute and Its Impacts on U.S. Foreign Policy," Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, January 16, 2020, <https://itif.org/publications/2020/01/16/understanding-south-korea-japan-trade-dispute-and-its-impacts-us-foreign>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

The reasons for the Japanese moves are still unclear. On the one side, Japan justified them as being related to national security concerns without specifying much, appealing to Article 21 of the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which allows security exemptions "necessary for the protection of its essential security interests."²¹⁰ On the other side, Seoul filed a complaint with the WTO, since it "considered it retaliation for the supreme court decisions and subsequently downgraded Japan's status as a trading partner."²¹¹

In November 2019, South Korea halted its action to the WTO in order to heal mutual grievances with Japan; however, due to Tokyo's lack of commitment, in the summer of 2020, Seoul reopened "a complaint filed with the WTO over Japan's tightened controls on technology exports to its companies."²¹² Consequently, the WTO ruled a settlement on the dispute by assenting "to the request from South Korea despite Japanese claims that the export restrictions are needed for national security."²¹³ Nevertheless, the settlement of the dispute will take months of dialogue and preparation, and in any case, Japan could potentially appeal a decision against it.²¹⁴

Although Japan and the ROK have consequential economic relations and foundations within the U.S. foreign policy in East Asia, the current economic hostilities between the two countries is putting the U.S. strategic goals at risk, giving the floor to U.S. competitors.²¹⁵ In the long-term, South Korean companies might start to rely more on imports from China, which together with Russia, has already presented itself as an alternative profitable import and export market for South Korea's trade.²¹⁶ In order to safeguard its interests and objectives in the region, Washington must get directly involved and assume the role of mediator, thus facilitating a compromise between the two Asian fellow democracies.

The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute

²¹⁰ World Trade Organization, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, 1994, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/agrmntseries2_gatt_e.pdf.

²¹¹ Szechenyi, "Mounting Tensions."

²¹² Tong-hyung Kim, "South Korea to Reopen WTO Complaint Over Japan Trade Curbs," The Diplomat, June 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/south-korea-to-reopen-wto-complaint-over-japan-trade-curbs/>.

²¹³ Jamey Keaten, "South Korea-Japan Trade Fight Moves to Global Dispute Panel," Associated Press, July 29, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/global-trade-seoul-technology-south-korea-japan-35b09834d5fbf2e963865deb2733ca45>.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Klingner and Walters, "The U.S. Must Limit Damage."

²¹⁶ Ibid.

The Dokdo/Takeshima islands are located halfway between Japan and South Korea and have been a source of dispute between the two countries since 1945. Japan refers to them as ‘Takeshima islands’ while South Korea refers to the islands as ‘Dokdo islands’ and affirms its sovereignty over such territories. During the Japanese occupation, the islands came to be under the control and sovereignty of Japan, nevertheless “in 1954, South Korea gained control of Dokdo/Takeshima and has since exercised de facto control over the islands.”²¹⁷ Since then, Japanese governments have been arguing that South Korea is illegally occupying the islands.

For the ROK, the island's territories are “a symbol of pride and a marker of Korean independence from Japanese colonisation.”²¹⁸ Japan instead, claims sovereignty over the Takeshima islands mainly to strengthen other territorial claims to resource-rich islands it disputes with China and Taiwan, and to islands inhabited by ethnic Japanese it disputes with Russia.²¹⁹ For both the ROK and Japan, the islands are of particular interest since they are rich in natural resources, most notably natural gas and abundant fishing grounds.²²⁰

Throughout the years, this territorial dispute has highly worsened the diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 2005 “the Japanese prefecture of Shimane declared an annual Takeshima Day” and in 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Education encouraged teachers “to instruct their students that the islands constitute Japanese territory.”²²¹ In response there have been numerous protests outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, anti-Japanese sentiments have been growing across South Korea, and formal responses of the South Korean government, like the recall of the South Korean ambassador to Japan in 2008. Again, in 2012 South Korean President Lee Myung-bak officially visited the Dokdo islands and this led to Japan summoning their ambassador to Seoul.²²²

Furthermore, the territorial dispute over the islands is tied to further elements of friction, namely

²¹⁷ Olivia Tasevski, “Islands of Ire: The South Korea–Japan Dispute,” *The Interpreter* (The Interpreter, April 27, 2020), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/islands-ire-south-korea-japan-dispute>.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Tasevski, “Islands of Ire.”

²²² Ibid.

air defense identification zones (ADIZs) and overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZs).²²³ On the one side, ADIZs are fundamental for monitoring air traffic for national security purposes, while on the other side, EEZs are relevant for the exploitation of natural resources, like fisheries. In the case of the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, the ADIZ is not well-defined and the EEZs are tangled due to overlapping claims of sovereignty over such territories. In order to delimit the EEZ, the territorial dispute between the two countries needs to be settled, though this seems unlikely to happen any time soon.

Cancellation of the sharing IT information agreement

In the 1980s, South Korea advanced the proposal of a pact with Japan known as General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) on sharing intelligence and classified military information to counter the threat posed by the DPRK. The U.S. has been active in promoting the pact since it would create a security hub in the region. Both Japan and the ROK were expected to sign it in 2012, however, due to rising tensions, the signature has undergone several delays. In 2016 the two parts signed the agreement, which according to then U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter allowed them to “enhance their deterrence posture against North Korean aggression and strengthen their ability to defend against continued missile launches and nuclear tests.”²²⁴

The GSOMIA was at the center of escalating tensions in ROK-Japan relations in 2019. Following the export controls imposed by Japan in August, South Korea reacted by declaring its intention not to renew the GSOMIA with Japan, which usually gets automatically renewed every year, thus raising the levels of uncertainty in bilateral relations and in the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation.²²⁵ However, by November, under U.S. influence the ROK communicated the suspension of its earlier notification to end the intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, thus resuming security cooperation. Washington has played a pivotal role in encouraging dialogue between its two Asian allies, especially by emphasizing “the importance of U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation to

²²³ Terence, Roehrig, “The Rough State of Japan–South Korea Relations: Friction and Disputes in the Maritime Domain,” The National Bureau of Asian Research, January 15, 2021. https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/analysis_roehrig_011521.pdf.

²²⁴ “Statement by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter on Signing of the Japan-ROK General Security,” U.S. Department of Defense, November 23, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1012704/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-ash-carter-on-signing-of-the-japan-rok-genera/>.

²²⁵ Szechenyi, “Mounting Tensions.”

address the security challenges posed by the DPRK and China.”²²⁶ The continuation of the GSOMIA has demonstrated the U.S.’ ability to convince Tokyo and Seoul to overcome their historical differences in the short-term.

To sum up, open wounds originating in the XX century have prevented and still prevent the ROK and Japan from building a relationship of trust in the medium and long term. Unresolved disputes stemming from Tokyo’s wartime control of the Korean Peninsula seem to be the main cause of current friction in the political, diplomatic, economic and security spheres. The recent South Korean courts’ rulings against Japanese corporations are a demonstration of the cooling of ties between the two countries. Although the promotion of new cooperation paths based on common security grounds could allow Washington to promote a collaborative relationship between its two allies in the short-term, due to historical reasons and consequent current legal issues Japan and South Korea are not likely to build a relationship of trust in the medium and long term.

ROOM FOR A FIFTH?: QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad, is composed of the U.S., Australia, India and Japan, and is “a four country coalition with a common platform of protecting freedom of navigation and promoting democratic values in the region.”²²⁷ The platform began as a dialogue between the four countries in 2007, and later on, it started being formalised through joint declarations and consequent bilateral, trilateral and multilateral joint military exercises, which eventually helped the countries build integrated capabilities. It is widely acknowledged that the coalition was formed as a response to China’s increasing economic and military power in the region, provoking a series of diplomatic oppositions.

Following the pandemic’s effects, tensions with China have increased for the four members of the Quad, driving them to engage in deeper collaboration on security matters. For the Asian members, a real and complete engagement of the U.S. in the coalition is of primary importance for the mitigation of the perceived Chinese threat. Moreover, with the Trump administration, the group was used to antagonise China, therefore the ROK was highly reluctant to be included in it; as a

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Emma Chanlett-Avery, K. Alan Kronstadt, and Bruce Vaughn, “The ‘Quad’: Security Cooperation Among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia,” Congressional Research Service, November 2, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11678.pdf>.

matter of fact, if the ROK had joined, it would have probably suffered from economic repercussions from China. The fear of economic pressure coming from Beijing is the main reason why the ROK has not joined the Quad yet.

However, when looking at the ROK, it can be said that the country would perfectly fit in the Quad, since it is a U.S. ally and it is “a democracy with maritime interests and growing naval capabilities.”²²⁸ Furthermore, under the Biden administration the Quad is seen as a group of countries sharing the same values and supporting a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific, thus not openly antagonising China.²²⁹ The Biden administration has already stated its commitment to strengthen economic and security ties with its allies during the first Quad online meeting of the year, held on March 12, 2021. While the Chinese threat was not openly mentioned, allies called for “a free, open, inclusive, healthy, Indo-Pacific region that is ‘anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion.’”²³⁰

As a consequence, the ROK has recently become closer to the group, as displayed by its participation in some “ad hoc Quad meetings focusing on sharing knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic.”²³¹ On the one side, joining the Quad would highly benefit the ROK, since it would strengthen South Korean power “in regional and global affairs, potentially helping provide extra support for Seoul to achieve its foreign policy goals.”²³² On the other side, South Korea’s membership in the coalition would also benefit the Quad itself, since the alliance would gain more credibility.

To sum up, the current Quad seems to be less China-centered, thus making it more difficult for Beijing to retaliate.²³³ Nevertheless, South Korea’s fear of economic repercussions coming from China is still high, and it is not completely ready to take on a confrontational relationship with China.²³⁴ Therefore, it can be said that in the short-term Seoul will not join the Quad, unless

²²⁸ Chanlett-Avery, Kronstadt and Vaughn, “The ‘Quad.’”

²²⁹ Ramon Pacheco Pardo, “South Korea Would Benefit from Joining a Quad+,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 26, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-would-benefit-joining-quad>.

²³⁰ Major General Shashi Bhushan Asthana, “Quad Summit 2021: Why Is China Rattled?,” The Financial Express, March 14, 2021, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/quad-summit-2021-why-is-china-rattled/2212544/>.

²³¹ Pacheco Pardo, “South Korea Would Benefit.”

²³² Ibid.

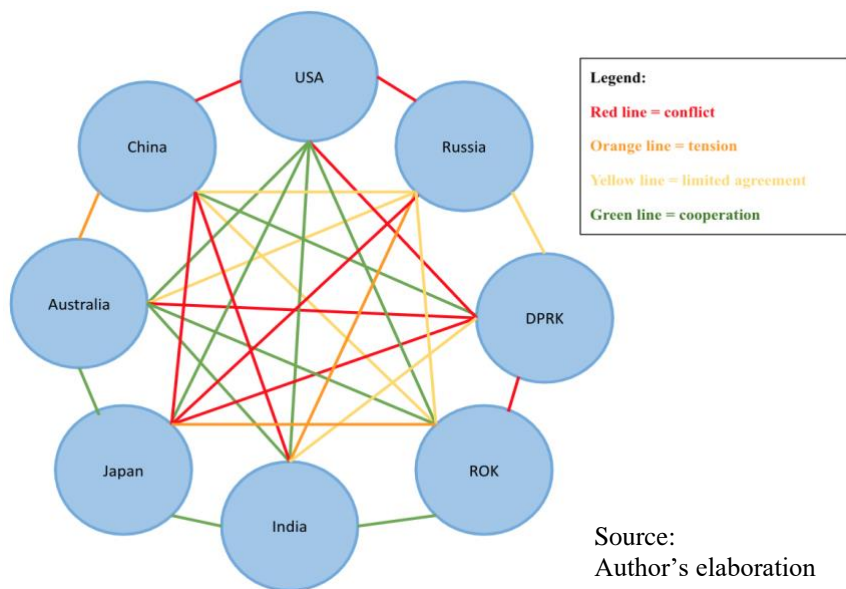
²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

Washington were to grant full diplomatic and economic support to counter a Chinese retaliation.²³⁵ Nevertheless, a deeper and more continuous cooperation between the Quad and the ROK, as an external actor to the coalition, is more likely to happen and to define the relationship of the ROK with the Quad in the long-term.

Relationship between the major actors in the East Asia region

The bilateral relations between the different actors involved in the region are constantly changing and evolving accordingly to new global dynamics. The graphic below displays the current bilateral relationships between the key regional players analysed in the paper.



The reason for including a yellow and orange line is to align those actors that are leaning closer to cooperation or closer to conflict respectively. Among the relations classified in yellow, it can be found the relation of the ROK with China, while a relation classified in orange could be the one between the ROK and Japan. The red lines indicate conflicting relations, which can be of economic, military, diplomatic or legal nature. For instance, the relationship of the DPRK with the ROK, Japan, Australia and the U.S can be classified as a conflictual one. Finally, the green lines refer to cooperative bilateral relations, like the ROK relations with India, Australia and the U.S. This allows us to group alliances and further display the peninsular conflicts.

²³⁵ Ibid.

PART III: PROSPECTS FOR REUNIFICATION

In the long run, the international community desires a more open DPRK, in both economic and political terms. Even more ambitious for this decade is that many maintain high hopes for the regime to abandon “communism”²³⁶ altogether. After all, the country suffers from extreme poverty, intense political oppression, and is isolated from the rest of the globalized world by a strict information barrier. Yet, the DPRK finds itself in the third generation of Kim family dictatorial rule and has successfully maintained its political system intact despite the fall of its former sponsor, the USSR.

The nation has survived a crippling economy and detrimental famine; it has diminished the political-military menace once posed by its neighbor, the ROK; and it has arguably outmanoeuvred the U.S. and China to emerge as the region’s most dangerous nuclear power. The execution of this has required undeniable expertise and rational calculations. Understandably, the DPRK has represented a wild card in the strategic future of East Asia for decades, and its unpredictability remains today.

OPENING UP OF NORTH KOREA

The potential for the DPRK to politically evolve and economically open up in the following decade depends on the objectives of the leadership and Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), as well as knowledge of the past. Objectives for the DPRK have been formalized through the congress of the WPK, an event which examines the regime’s advancements and drawbacks, and sets strategic goals for the future of the country. During late Kim Jong-il’s rule, the congress which was supposed to be held every four years had only been held once, in 1980, and left the status of affairs extremely unpredictable. It wasn’t until 2016 that his successor and son, Kim Jong-un, had a significant “coming-out” as leader and held the Seventh Party Congress.²³⁷ Corresponding with the schedule set for the following congress, Kim Jong-un held the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021.

²³⁶ North Korea is not considered to be communist under traditional understanding of the term. For example, North Korea is governed by a monarchic family clan; its 'socialism' has been broadly replaced by corruption (at the top) and informal marketisation (at the bottom). It does, however, retain elements of old Stalinist states—its iconography, obsession with ideology and anti-Western foreign policy relationships are two examples of this.

²³⁷ Frank Ruediger. 2021. “Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 1 of 2)”. 38 North. <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-1-of-2/>

The Congress was larger (5,000 delegates compared to 3,467 in 2016, and 2,000 observers compared to 1,545 in 2016), longer (it lasted eight days, whereas in 2016 it lasted five days), and far more extensive in the material that it covered than the previous event.²³⁸ In the opening of his speech, Kim bluntly admitted the five-year plan implemented in the Seventh Congress fell short in almost every sector, but that aggrieved lessons were ultimately learned. Kim argued that the economic shortfalls could be blamed on external factors such as the impact of the COVID pandemic in diminishing trade with their most valuable ally, China,²³⁹ and the fierce sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the UN. He nevertheless argued that the DPRK has created a foundation for sustainable economic development in the future.

The linkage between economic opening-up and political openness

In the WPK Congress, Kim stressed the importance of the *Juche* ideology, which represents one of the key pillars for the five year plan.²⁴⁰ The reason for this is to maintain a distance from foreign actors, advocating an inward-oriented economic approach. In addition, Kim highlighted *Byung-Jin*, or the policy of developing a self-reliant economy whilst building nuclear deterrence.²⁴¹ However, since Kim established that nuclear deterrence has been developed, he stated that economic development will be the most crucial undertaking. Kim has “called upon the party to approach economic management from a strictly political perspective and not only focus on economic aspects. This signals a strategic decision and the dominance of ideology and politics over the economy.”²⁴²

The main areas covered by the congress was state control over the market. Kim deliberately avoided giving analysts a reason to believe the DPRK will politically evolve in the short term by highlighting the need to enhance the centralized state’s role in the economic sector.²⁴³ After years of an expanding economy, Kim emphasized a centralized role of the state after “many private

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea Party Congress Opens With Kim Jong-Un Admitting Failures,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/05/world/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-un-party-congress.html>.

²⁴⁰ Ruediger, “Key Results of The Eighth Party (Part 1 of 2).”

²⁴¹ Sungmin Cho, “Why North Korea Could Not Implement the Chinese Style Reform and Opening? The Internal Contradiction Between Economic Reform and Political Stability,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (June 2020): pp. 305-324, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020962625>, 308.

²⁴² Ruediger, “Key Results of The Eighth Party (Part 1 of 2).”

²⁴³ Ibid.

markets and businesses sprung up in the face of government failures to provide in the 1990s.”²⁴⁴ This is perhaps reference to the economy having been complemented by an unofficial black or grey²⁴⁵ market. They have endured due to prevalent corruption, and in the end, the markets enable continual capital flow.

The broader political changes that were included within the Congress are thus not in the direction of evolution, at least not in the short term. Some may argue that Kim’s desire to modernize the DPRK’s economy could be a crack towards greater openness. The main barriers for achieving this, however, will be the enduring Kim dynasty and strong *Juche* doctrine. To the leaders in North Korea, the notion of “opening up” would be unthinkable.

Beyond Kim’s plans for the regime, political openness has not occurred as “many analysts in the West have argued that the Kim family regime is afraid of their adverse effects on the stability of the political system.”²⁴⁶ Though China has gone through political opening in the past, North Korea fears that relaxing state control and entering the global economy would “endanger the very stability of the political system that Kim Jong-un aims to strengthen in the first place.”²⁴⁷ Furthermore, “North Korea has failed to implement...reform and opening policies because such policies, if successfully executed, could lead to the collapse of the political system.”²⁴⁸ Therefore, the threat of being “absorbed” by the south looms in the minds of the regime leaders and decision makers carefully consider instituting reforms to the system.

To protect the Kim dynasty, there has been a pattern of “implementing reforms but not openness.” Kim Jong-un prefers to have a market economy to please the people and maintain political legitimacy, but simultaneously wants to keep the level of state control and restrictiveness.²⁴⁹ Even in the long term, embarking on modernization and market capitalism will only hasten the demise of the Kim regime.

²⁴⁴ Josh Smith, “Kim Jong Un's Big Plan to Grow North Korea's Economy Faces Harsh Reality,” Reuters, January 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-politics-analysis-idUSKBN29F04T>.

²⁴⁵ The black market refers to transactions outside of the official economy (dealing with illegal goods or services or bypassing taxes), whereas the grey market refers to diversion or counterfeiting.

²⁴⁶ Cho, “Why North Korea Could Not Implement,” 314.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 319.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 307.

²⁴⁹ Andrei Lankov, “North Korea under Kim Jong-Un: Reforms without Openness?,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 6, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/06/north-korea-under-kim-jong-un-reforms-without-openness/>.

RESTARTING INTER-KOREAN DIALOGUE

The DPRK and the ROK have a history of ups and downs in diplomacy. The decades following the Korean War were marked by competition between the north and south for legitimacy and international recognition, leading to essentially absent contact between the two governments.²⁵⁰ In addition, being that they were products of Great Power politics and the Cold War, progression in inter-Korean relations largely depended on changes in Great Power relations. Thus, once the Cold War ended, inter-Korean relations shifted toward internally driven measures, predominantly initiated by South Korea.²⁵¹ Nowadays, inter-Korean diplomacy is dominated by the internal dynamic, but nevertheless is bound by external drivers, such as the nuclear confrontation between the DPRK and the U.S. and strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Evolution of diplomacy between Seoul and Pyongyang can be divided into five stages: the first is represented by a zero-sum game of mutual antagonism prior to 1972; the second is represented by a period of on-again, off-again negotiation which resulted from the collapse of the USSR and led to the Basic Agreement of 1991;²⁵² the third is a tentative opening of North Korea to external economic and political forces, following the famine crisis²⁵³ and Kim Jong-il's "charm campaign"; the fourth is a period marked by intensifying linkages on the Korean Peninsula within broader evolution of regional dialogue;²⁵⁴ and finally the fifth is identified as a period of discord between the major players, especially surrounding the topic of denuclearization, and a rebirth of unification hopes. This final period is currently ongoing, dominated by bilateral and multilateral exchanges.

When progressive leader Moon Jae-in was elected as President of South Korea in 2017, he promised to return to the "Sunshine Policy" and renew peaceful relations with the DPRK. In April 2018 it came to the attention of the rest of the world that there was potential for inter-Korean rapprochement—it was in that month that Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un met in Panmunjom in the DMZ and, for the first time, stepped hand in hand across the border between their countries.²⁵⁵ The

²⁵⁰ Charles K. Armstrong, "Inter-Korean Relations: A North Korean Perspective," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): pp. 1-20, <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8888/1/0001477267.pdf>, 1.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵² A pact of nonaggression and cooperation, leading to a pledge against the production, possession or use of nuclear weapons.

²⁵³ "How Did the North Korean Famine Happen?," Wilson Center, April 30, 2002, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/how-did-the-north-korean-famine-happen>.

²⁵⁴ Armstrong (n 248), 3.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

two declared that they would accelerate attempts to reunify through augmenting economic cooperation and increasing personal dialogues, and vowed to formally end the Korean war is merely paused by an armistice. Most importantly, they agreed to work towards a “nuclear-free” Korean Peninsula.

As mentioned before, inter-Korean dialogue not only depends on the cooperation between the DPRK and the ROK, but also their allies China and the U.S., respectively. On his part, Moon began to work to improve the ROK-DPRK-U.S. relationship by arranging a summit for all three leaders. At the summit, there were negotiations regarding nuclear weapons and pipelines and “the Korean leaders even talked about a possible reunification of their countries and appeared together at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics together.”²⁵⁶ These proposed exchanges in sports and tours were a means to cooperate without violating sanctions.²⁵⁷

As mentioned before, sanctions have been contested even by Moon, who expressed that UN sanctions are an impediment for improving inter-Korean ties. In January 2020 Moon said, “he could seek exemptions of U.N. sanctions on the DPRK to bring about improved inter-Korean relations that he believes would help restart nuclear negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington.” Moreover, he said “If exceptions from U.N. sanctions are necessary for South-North cooperation, I think we can make efforts for that.”²⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Moon has been unable to convince others to lift the sanctions.

The harmonious attitude was short-lived, as Kim accused Moon of wanting to sabotage his regime. Further provocation by the North in the following years could lead to escalation of the threat of conflict on the peninsula, and the 2019 “explosion of the de-facto embassy that was the symbol of the Korean détente proves that there is still a road ahead on the way to peace between these two countries.”²⁵⁹ Thus without advancement in the North Korean nuclear crisis, the U.S.-DPRK relations will remain at a deadlock, and consequently inter-Korean relations will remain constrained.

²⁵⁶ Rebeka Papp, “Relations To Worsen Between North And South Korea,” The Organization for World Peace, June 19, 2020, <https://theowp.org/relations-to-worsen-between-north-and-south-korea/>.

²⁵⁷ Kim, “South Korea’s Moon Could Seek Exemption.”

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ “On June 16, North Korea blew up a liaison office and de-facto South Korean embassy that represented the détente between the two countries.” (See Papp (n 254)).

For the DPRK to have close relations with the ROK in the short term, much depends on bilateral dialogue between the U.S. and the DPRK. But Kim Jong-un maintains a progressively assertive stance vis-à-vis the U.S., and although relations between both countries had somewhat been boosted by the Trump administration, it is clear that Pyongyang will not have the same relationship with Biden. Kim has suggested that Biden withdraw from the historically hostile policy of the U.S. toward the DPRK, and pressures the administration to steer away from instigating bilateral tensions. In relation to the ROK, Kim expressed that inter-Korean relations have been wrongly directed, and that the ideal of a national reunification is becoming a distant idea, and even said “the prospects for improving relations between North and South Korea are uncertain.”²⁶⁰

Moon sought to improve relations within the boundary of sanctions by pursuing humanitarian assistance and joint anti-virus efforts against COVID-19 with the DPRK. But Kim refused the offers, maintaining that the ongoing military exercises with the U.S. are hostile actions against the DPRK.²⁶¹ Thus the conditions for diplomacy to restart, and to ultimately lead to rapprochement, entail constructive adjustments by the Biden administration. Moon has stated “The start of the Biden administration provides a new opportunity to start over talks between North Korea and the United States and also between South and North Korea.”²⁶² An important starting point is the Singapore declaration, which under the Trump administration had been a very important step for denuclearization and building peace in the Korean Peninsula. Thus if Biden uses the Singapore declaration as the starting point for negotiation to resume, it is possible for diplomacy between South and North Korea to salvage momentum. As of now, the odds are greatly against Moon considering the hard-line attitude of the Biden administration towards the DPRK.

Moon’s final year will present his greatest dilemma, and his eagerness to push forward inter-Korean relations will have to prioritize convincing the U.S. to renew dialogue with the DPRK. Nevertheless, there could be speculation that the ROK’s strategy of ensuring COVID-19 vaccines for 79 million²⁶³ people when the population is 52 million could be a move to bring the DPRK closer together. Will it be a last effort during the Moon administration to have a unified peninsula?

²⁶⁰ Ruediger, “Key Results of The Eighth Party.”

²⁶¹ Scott A Snyder, “Back to Square One for Inter-Korean Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 26, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/back-square-one-inter-korean-relations>.

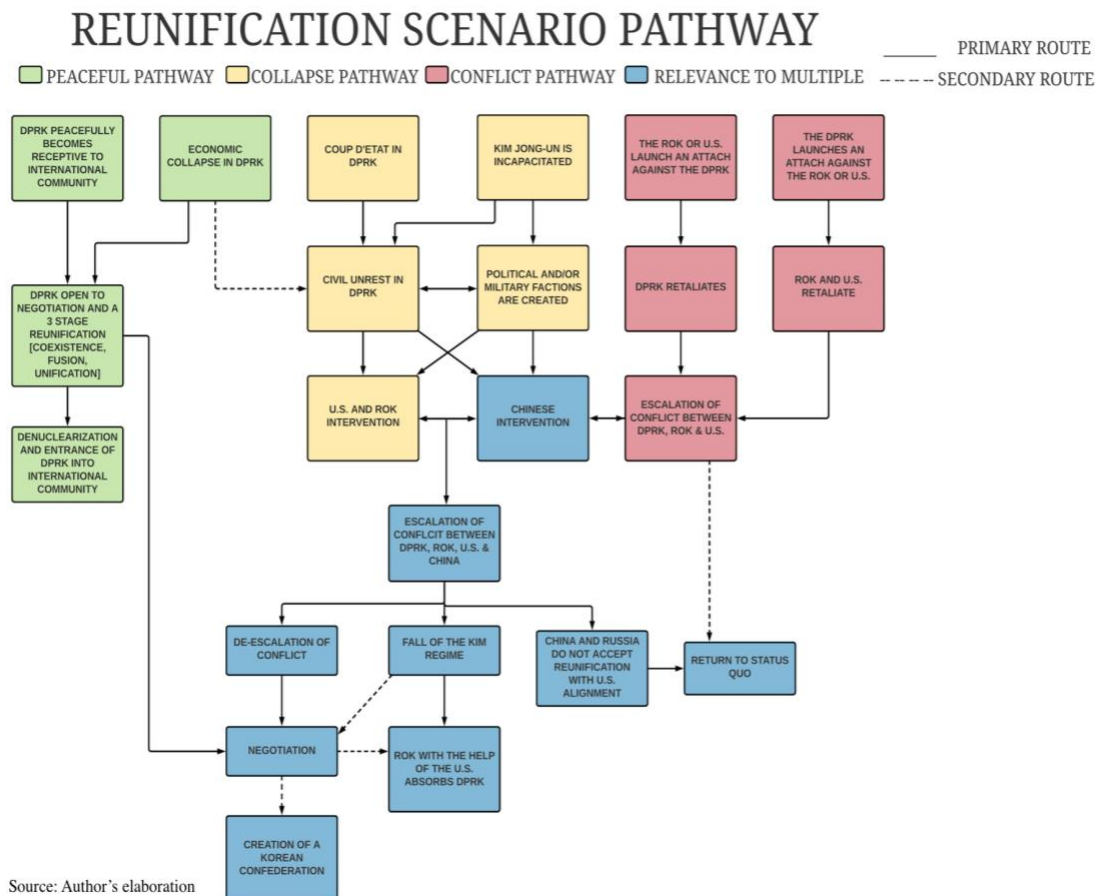
²⁶² Tiezzi, “Duyeon Kim on South Korea’s Foreign Policy Priorities”

²⁶³ Shin and Smith, “South Korea Strikes COVID-19 Vaccine Deals for 23 Million People as Roll-out Set to Start Slowly,”

REUNIFICATION PATHWAY

The division of Korea is a relic of the Cold War. Hence, in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR many believed a Korean unification was impending. Korean reunification (Korean: 남북통일; Hanja: 南北統一) refers to the unrealized restoration of political unity between North Korea and South Korea into a single Korean sovereign nation. While in the past the two Koreas were forced to accept the policies of their power neighbors, a future unified Korea would make a powerful nation with twice the land and resources, thus making it a double-threat and fundamentally changing the international order.

Understanding the different scenarios and their plausibility is vital, especially for the major powers. Although the main unification framework consists of the two Koreas, it is important to consider the role of external actors like China, the U.S, Japan and Russia, who have certain expectations and roles in pursuit of unification. As seen in the figure below, the reunification currently prospected can be obtained through various simple scenario pathways divided into three main categories: Conflict, Collapse or Peaceful. In every scenario there are economic and political repercussions, social clashes, and domestic policy consequences.



Military conflict or collapse

The first scenario examines the potential of a collapse of the DPRK's government. A coup d'état seems like the least probable first step, since the "Kim family regime has effectively developed the coup-proof mechanism and prevented popular uprising in North Korea."²⁶⁴ On the other hand, another first step in a collapse scenario is the incapacitation of Kim Jong-un. This comes from the short disappearance of the leader in 2020, which led to speculation and contemplation over what the DPRK would do in such a scenario.²⁶⁵ In either case, there would be widespread panic throughout the region, thus sending major economic and political shockwaves throughout the international community who would be urged to provide relief. In the past, the ROK has shown resilience towards absorbing such external shocks and will be willing to accept external assistance to achieve the end state through this scenario—absorption of the North by the South.

In a similar manner, there is always potential for military conflict to arise. For this to happen, North Korea might unexpectedly engage in pre-emptive military moves on the South, or brinkmanship diplomacy could trigger a surgical strike on nuclear and missile facilities in the North by the U.S. and its allied forces. As seen in the graphic, both the collapse and conflict pathway would lead to external involvement and escalation of conflict, and the conflict would either have to be de-escalated, the regime would have to fall, or China would push for a status quo. In the event of negotiations, however, the end result would most probably be a takeover of the North by South Korea and its allies.

Without a solid handle on the economy of the DPRK, the merger as large as it is will be a messy, exhausting, and above all costly endeavor, where an internal collapse has already been projected to sum in the trillions.²⁶⁶ Therefore, the longer the two economies continue down separate paths, increasing the economic gap, the higher the costs of unification will be. Other economic consequences arising from such a reunification would be the surge of refugees southward, and the necessity to build modern infrastructure in the North.

²⁶⁴ Sungmin Cho, 305.

²⁶⁵ Amanda Macias, Yelena Dzhanova, and Mike Calia, "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Recently Had Surgery, Could Be Incapacitated, US Officials Say," CNBC, April 21, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/21/north-korean-leader-kim-jong-un-recently-had-surgery-could-be-incapacitated-us-officials-say.html>.

²⁶⁶ Daniel Runde, "It Would Cost Trillions: The Day North Korea Collapses," The Center for the National Interest, July 3, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/it-would-cost-trillions-day-north-korea-collapses-164127>.

The option of a scenario in which either an internal collapse or an external conflict would lead to absorption, however, seems to be the **least realistic scenario**. For one, both governments have been holding onto their half of Korea firmly. Even if leadership were to transform outside of the Kim family, the government would nevertheless remain authoritarian and military-run unless there were no means of maintaining control. Additionally, both conflict and collapse scenarios are based on the premise of stabilizing the region. The pursuit of this regional security through processes lacking cooperative elements, however, hinders the achievement of peace. Finally, a negative peace would most likely be established through these processes, and therefore lasting order is not guaranteed.

SOUTH KOREAN LEADERS & THEIR RESPECTIVE POLICIES TOWARDS THE DPRK

Park Chung-hee 24 March 1962 - 26 October 1979 (Assassinated)	Inter-Korean tensions were at their highest point since the war, but negotiations were still held. - First Joint Statement on reunification, issued on July 4, 1972. - Periods of dialogue did not last long.
Roh Tae Woo 25 February 1988 - 24 February 1993 First democratic president	Significant inter-Korean dialogue under: - <i>Nordpolitik</i> led to South Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea's traditional major allies, the Soviet Union and China; - In December 1991, the two Koreas signed a "Basic Agreement" on reconciliation, non-aggression and cooperation.
Kim Young Sam 25 February 1993 - 24 February 1998	Initially took a hard line as the first North Korean nuclear crisis mounted. Kim Il Sung died a few weeks before the first presidential summit was to take place. North-South relations continued on an up-and-down track.
Kim Dae Jung 25 February 1998 - 24 February 2003	<i>Sunshine Policy</i> : The ROK government allowed South Korean NGOs, businesses, and private citizens to have contact across the DMZ and ramp up bilateral food and fertilizer aid to the North, which was recovering from a devastating famine.
Roh Moo-hyun 25 February 2003 - 24 February 2008	Policy for Peace and Prosperity: Increased bilateral aid and humanitarian assistance from South to North following the Six-Party Talks.
Lee Myung-bak 25 February 2008 - 24 February 2013	Initiative for Denuclearization and Opening up North Korea which is also known as the "3,000 Policy."
Park Geun-hye 25 February 2013 - 10 March 2017 (Impeached)	<i>Trustpolitik</i> : premised on building trust through renewed dialogue while responding forcefully to any new provocations.
Moon Jae-in 10 May 2017 - Incumbent	Moon's Peace Initiative: First principle is to achieve peace, second principle is adherence to a "no nukes" policy and the third and final principle is of "no regime change" in North Korea.

Source: Author's elaboration, using Dong-Jin Jang, "The Characteristics and Moral Grounds of Political Leadership in Modern Korea By Dong-Jin Jang," The Academy of Leadership, accessed March 15, 2021, <http://www.hawaii.edu/intlrel/pols605c/leadership/Modern%20Korea/jang.htm>.

The well-tried peaceful reunification

The traditional pathway would be identified as peaceful, envisioned by previous leaders Kim Young-sam and Roh Moo-hyun as consisting of three stages: in the first the Koreans would recognize one another as separate entities and engage in exchanges and cooperation to achieve coexistence; in the second there would be a South-North fusion in which the two systems would coexist; in the final stage there would be unification through the creation of a unified constitution and single government.²⁶⁷ Moon Jae-in has undertaken a process along the well-tried three-stage formula.

Moon's government favors a more gradual process, and understands that a prerequisite would be inter-korean diplomacy and consistent dialogue. In addition to dialogue, a prerequisite for reunification is achieving social and economic harmonization. Moon refers to this as the "new northern policy," which argues for a phased opening of North Korea through the rebuilding of railways, pipelines and roads, and intensifying trade links across north-east Asia.²⁶⁸ This harmonization and dialogue would additionally require the DPRK to cooperate with denuclearization terms.

This is the **most desirable**—and in the long term most probable—**scenario** because it would be the cheapest and most manageable. It would also lead to a stronger unified Korea, which is the predominant desire for Moon as it would ultimately lead to regional peace and security. This would mainly be possible through consistent political settlements and incremental economic integration. However, it would require that North Korea adopt a market economy and give up its nuclear armaments.

An additional proposal by the DPRK has been the formation of a confederation. This, however, is seen by some in the South as merely a ruse to get the South to lower its guard for the North to gain a foothold. Given the extreme differences in governments, a confederation **does not seem plausible**, and would resemble a divided Korea with solely economic ties. In addition, it can be

²⁶⁷ See-Won Byun, "North Korea's Regional Integration: An Enduring Dilemma for China, South Korea, and the United States," The Asan Forum, February 21, 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/north-koreas-regional-integration-an-enduring-dilemma-for-china-south-korea-and-the-united-states/>.

²⁶⁸ Barclay Ballard, "The Economics of Korean Reunification," World Finance, July 26, 2019, <https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/the-economics-of-korean-reunification>.

assumed that China would not accept a confederation because it would risk anything other than a communist nation at their border.

ENVISIONING A UNIFIED KOREA

Stabilizing a unified Korea will require a high magnitude of effort, regardless of the scenario. It will require the international community to share the burden and provide assurances to the process and help alleviate financial, logistical, and man-power pressures on South Korea. While it was concluded that a unified Korean Peninsula has the potential of taking on a number of different personas, the most probable scenario will be considered for envisioning a unified peninsula. The most likely to emerge from reunification is a nation similar to the modern day ROK, which is founded on democracy and an open-market economy. The main priorities would be maintaining a transparent government to reduce security concerns, create a foundation for future economic cooperation throughout the international community, addressing the nuclear issue in the North, and managing social integration.

Economic and social consequences

The focus on economic development appears to remain a top priority, as the new nation will strive to balance the living conditions throughout the peninsula. Firstly, by creating a single market economy that consists of 75 million people, a unified Korea would lead to long-term economic benefits.²⁶⁹ The benefits would go in both directions. Following reunification “it is highly likely that North Korean wages would rise substantially, creating a larger consumer market on the Korean Peninsula.”²⁷⁰ North Koreans would be liberated from starvation and malnutrition, as a unified Korea would have to manage their migration to southern regions while providing aid for health. Meanwhile, South Korea would benefit from the introduction of cheap labor.²⁷¹ As a result, Korea would be projected to have a GDP that “[exceeds] that of all the current G7 nations except for the US within 30 to 40 years.”²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Carlotta Rinaudo, “Korean Unification: What Can Seoul Learn from Berlin?,” Strife, February 8, 2021, <https://www.strifeblog.org/2021/02/08/korean-unification-what-can-seoul-learn-from-berlin/>.

²⁷⁰ Ballard, “The Economics of Korean Reunification.”

²⁷¹ Rinaudo, “Korean Unification.”

²⁷² Ballard, “The Economics of Korean Reunification.”

On the negative side, although there would be a high increase in cheap labor, this would reduce the salaries of South Koreans, if not replace them, thus generating discontent among the society.²⁷³ In addition, it could be argued that North Koreans would struggle to adjust in the capitalist environment of South Korea. Nevertheless, these would most likely be short-term consequences. While the economies of both the ROK and the DPRK are distinct at face value, if analyzed deeper, they are not entirely incompatible. While the DPRK is known for its informal jangmadang markets, in South Korea “‘state power and the up-and-coming capitalists have formed a symbiotic relationship’ that has blurred the line between private enterprise and the centrally planned economy.”²⁷⁴ Similarly, the DPRK’s *Juche* philosophy could be beneficial for allowing the ROK to engage with the DPRK on a solely intra-Korean basis. This would give the ROK an advantage to set goals beneficial for the Korean state.

Geo-economically, South Korea would have access to import and export via land, which is currently impossible due to North Korea’s geographical position.²⁷⁵ This would mean a vastly increased potential, connecting the peninsula eventually by rail and allowing unhindered shipment of goods from Busan to Rotterdam. Equally, North Korea would be integrated into a regional supply chain with access to shipping lanes. Moreover, direct access to natural resources like coal, iron ore, and other materials found in the Northern half of the peninsula would increase the export market of a unified Korea. Inevitably, unification would redefine the economic order of the region.

The final question would be regarding denuclearization and demilitarization, which would continue posing an external threat. The potential for the new government to retain its nuclear capability, however, remains low since the international community would persuade the nation to dismantle its arsenal through diplomatic channels. In addition, security concerns would most likely be internalized after unification, therefore the focus of the nation would be on national development and prompting rule of law. This in consequence would mean international disputes currently present will not be resolved, as the new government will wish to maintain the status quo until internal issues are resolved.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

Shifting the balance of power

Uniting the Korean Peninsula would have effects stretching far beyond its geographic vicinity. The result would remove a buffer state from the Chinese border, thus raising questions regarding the foreign and security interests of a unified Korea. Presently, the PRC prefers the stability of the surrounding Northeast Asian region, and the recurrence of the DPRK's nuclear problem threatens potential for regional unrest or an outbreak of war to occur. While this is highly unwarranted by China, it does not mean the PRC is hoping the current division will be fixed. As of now, the main threat to China would be intervention of external forces, namely the U.S., which would most likely destroy the ties between China and the East Asia Region. In addition, considering the view of South Koreans, as of now a unified peninsula would lean towards U.S. alignment.²⁷⁶

From a geo-economic standpoint, Russia has the most to gain from the unified nation. Russia has long expressed a desire to realize its regional economic project and development of the Far East.²⁷⁷ Constructing a pipeline from Russia to South Korea, and eventually to Japan, would create new energy link-ups and a prospective East Asia energy grid connecting the region. Not to mention, it would solve the ROK's current dependence on Middle Eastern supplies.²⁷⁸ In hopes of achieving this, Putin established diplomatic relations between both and expressed willingness to promote peace on the peninsula.²⁷⁹

Reunification poses questions for Japan, whose hatred by Koreans has historically united the divided Korea. Currently, "gradual democratization of North Korea and economic and humanitarian assistance by Japan is considered by Japanese experts to be the best-case scenario for unification"²⁸⁰ which would reduce the unpredictability and the threat emanating from North Korea. Although Japan has an irrational fear of the DPRK, it "has not developed a clear-cut position on the possibility of a military solution, and in any case, does not have the military might

²⁷⁶ Chung Min Lee, "A Peninsula of Paradoxes: South Korean Public Opinion on Unification and Outside Powers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2020_UBB_final.pdf

²⁷⁷ Ballard, "The Economics of Korean Reunification."

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Georgy Bulychev and Valeriia Gorbacheva, "Bilateral and Multilateral Aspects of a Probable Peace Regime on The Korean Peninsula (The View from Experts in Russia)," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): pp. 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.33728/ijkus.2020.29.2.001>.

²⁸⁰ Karina Korostelina and Yuji Uesugi, "Japanese Perspective on Korean Reunification: An Analysis of Interrelations between Social Identity and Power," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (2020): pp. 47-71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2667078x-02101003>, 51.

to change the situation on its own.”²⁸¹ In the case of a unified Korea to be unable to look past Japan’s misconduct, the fear would continue since Korea would be provided “stronger control over disputed island, and intensify its ability to harm the position of Japan in the world.”²⁸²

The U.S. would rationally protect its ally and press for peaceful relations. A strong alliance between the U.S. and a unified Korea, and consequently with Japan and Taiwan, would be groundbreaking. The combination of the nations could form a force that can compete with a powerful Chinese nation while keeping Russia from gaining further influence throughout the region. To ensure a successful alliance, all parties involved must accept apologies for past atrocities, while focusing on a common set of goals for the future, both economically and militarily. Without a doubt, this would transform global politics.

²⁸¹ Bulychev and Gorbacheva, “Bilateral and Multilateral Aspects.”

²⁸² Korostelina and Uesugi, “Japanese Perspective on Korean Reunification.”

CONCLUSION

The Korean Peninsula has a prominent role for the evolution of political, economic and military policies of several actors in the East Asia region. Its location has led to the involvement of major powers, including the U.S, China, Russia and Japan. Currently, the two main issues regarding the peninsula are the nuclear buildup in the DPRK, as well as the strategic competition between the U.S. and a rising China.

The Biden administration is aware that China is the only country capable of challenging U.S. geopolitical interests in the region and can ultimately modify the dynamics of the international system. Consequently, it will not be possible to prevent the rise of China unless the U.S. has partnerships with more than Japan to keep China in check. Thus the U.S. must strengthen its military and economic alliances with the ROK.

Due to Kim's bellicosity, the permanence of USFK in the ROK is a security imperative for the following decade. Kim Jong-un, however, views this as a threat to his regime and considers the U.S. its "biggest enemy," thus nuclear escalation in the next five years is expected. A direct attack on the ROK or U.S. homeland, however, is unlikely to take place because of its implications for the DPRK, and thus the U.S. will maintain calculated ambiguity when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons and will not establish a red line for Kim to potentially cross. Considering the harsh economic situation in the DPRK worsened by the closure of borders with China due to the COVID-19 pandemic and enduring sanctions, the DPRK will continue finding methods to evade sanctions through its Chinese counterpart.

Russia prefers a peaceful peninsula in order to advance its energetical and geopolitical aims, while China has used the Korean conflict to advance its presence and increase its role in the region. The two have aligned themselves in order to counter U.S. interests in the East Asia region. The PRC's closer economic ties with the ROK will prevent the latter from joining the Quad. Lack of trust in ROK-Japan relations will remain a threat to the U.S. plans in the region.

Diplomacy, openness and even reunification of the peninsula depend on the interests of external actors. The most desirable pathway for reunification would be along peaceful lines. Although scenarios exist in which a collapse or conflict would lead to such an end, considering neither side

of the nuclear war will make the first move and the Kim dynasty has endured for so long, the probability of either scenario is low.

It can be concluded that the *status quo* of the Korean Peninsula favors the interests of many nations. An eventual reunification would not satisfy the U.S., which would lose justification for its large presence in the area that currently aims at keeping control over China and Russia. Additionally, the reunification is against China's interests which would lose the buffer state between themselves and the U.S. It will also be threatening to Russia's economic interests in the region. Lastly, it would not even satisfy Japan, which feels threatened by a reunified Korea since it could be a potential commercial competitor.

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