

SOUTH KOREA



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS REPORT / MAY 2021

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South Korea's race against time

Prospectives for 2030



Universidad
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South Korea's race against time. Prospectives for 2030.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Korea is considered to have a middle power status, not only in the North-East Asian region but internationally. In this sense, this paper aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the stance South Korea might take regarding key international, regional, peninsular and domestic issues in ten years time.

In the international sphere, this paper has focused on the US-ROK stating the plausibility of a further enhancement, in view of the new Biden's Administration need to reduce the breach created by former President Trump.

Regarding the regional sphere, the present report addresses South Korea's relations with China, in economic matters; Japan, alliance-wise, and Russia, in relation with energy. These bilateral engagements are clearly impacted by South Korea's proximity to the United States, the country's historical memory and North Korea's willingness to be part of a trilateral understanding, respectively.

Second to last, the peninsular approach of the script assesses the development of inter-Korean relations in views of the two incompatible ideologies and approaches coming from the North and the South of the peninsula and presents the maintenance of the current status has the most plausible scenario.

To end up, there is an allusion to domestic concerns as they play an important role in South Korea's development capabilities. In this section the paper discusses the country's SARS-CoV-2 disease successful management and assess why export possibilities might not be taken for granted, the big South Korean concerns on the ever-worsening demographic situation and, lastly, the country's satisfactorily progression towards renewable energy sources.

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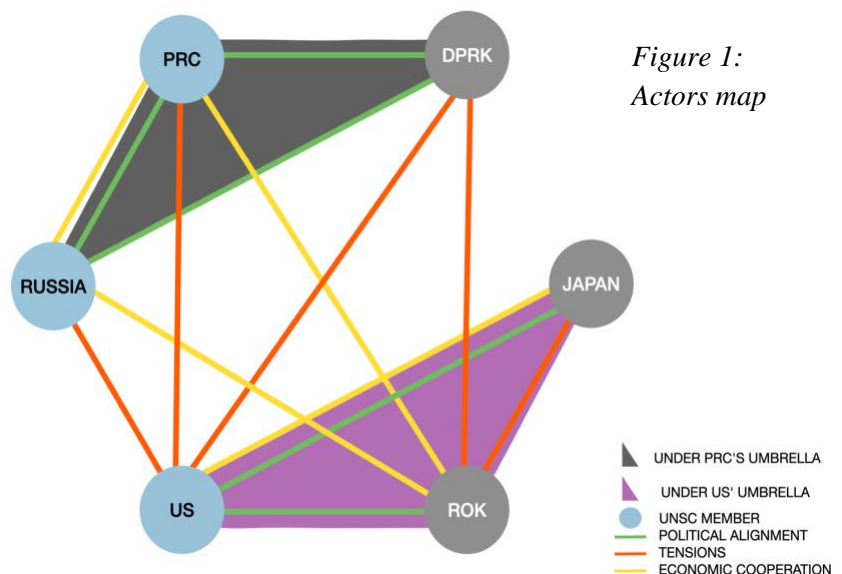
1. INTRODUCTION

*“Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island
Who rules the World Island commands the world”
John Mackinder (1904)¹*

Mackinder’s Heartland theory went on about the importance of Eastern Europe for the balance of power during the Cold War². As it is widely known, the international scene is in constant change and Mackinder’s heartland has now pivoted towards North-East Asia, thus turning dominance in the region a key objective for any state that thrives on world hegemony. Having this in mind, the increasing willingness of key international players to have a stake in the regional game does not come as a surprise.

In fact, after the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), it was the People’s Republic of China (PRC) who took the chance to rise as the new East Asian dominant power. Due to this, and the United States (US)’ permanent role as world rulemaker, two separate regional blocs have emerged involving several actors with overlapping interests and interactions.

There are not only economic and political cooperation ties between the bloc powers but also growing tensions, which mainly derive from the ongoing impasse in the Korean Peninsula and the con-sequent risk of nuclear escalation in the region³.



Source: Author's elaboration

¹ Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality; a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Forgotten Books, 2015).

² Mark Bassin and Konstantin E. Aksenov, “Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse,” *Geopolitics* 11, no. 1 (March 2006): 99–118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500524129>.

³ Federation of American Scientists, “North East Asia,” Fas.org, 2021, https://fas.org/irp/threat/prolif97/ne_asia.html.

Given the Republic of Korea (ROK)'s middle power status⁴, and the fact that it holds diverse relations with all the concerned actors, its role in this conundrum is decisive. It has the potential to determine whether the region evolves towards prosperity or, otherwise, deflates.

In line with the above, South Korea (ROK) has to deal with 4 open fronts which can be depicted through the following questions: (1) *How will the US-ROK security and military alliance evolve in 10 years time?*; (2) *Is the ROK on the right path to develop beneficial, consistent and enduring relations with its neighbours in the region?*; (3) *How will the internal situation in the Peninsula managed by the ROK? Will Moon's diplomatic efforts be successful?*; and (4) *How will South Korea's internal problems have an impact on its regional and international growth and projection?*

This paper is aimed at answering this and many more questions that might be relevant for the international community, and therefore is specifically addressed at governments and other international actors willing to take a conscious, comprehensive and clever stance in the region in the next decade.

Figure 2: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) of South Korea



Source: Author's elaboration

⁴ Victor D. Ch and Marie Dumond, "The Korean Pivot: The Study of South Korea as a Global Power" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

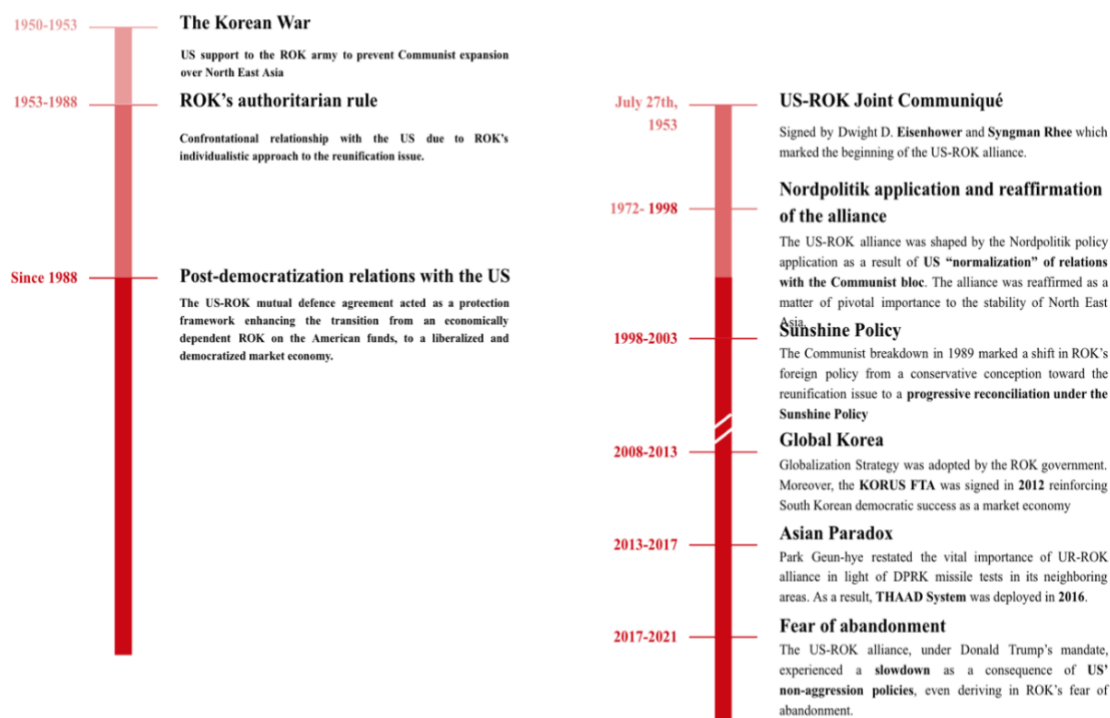
2. THE US AND THE DEFENSE OF THE ROK

2.1. Introduction to the US-ROK military alliance

In this section of the paper, “the US and the defense of the ROK – The nuclear issue”, the solidity of the US-ROK alliance over the 2030 horizon is analysed. It is for this reason that research has tended to focus on Biden’s commitment to the North East Asia region, considering how the ex-US President Donald Trump’s Administration eroded and destabilised the alliance⁵.

To better understand how the US-ROK security alliance has evolved over the Cold War, it is useful to highlight some relevant historical milestones of the partnership, since the American engagement to the Peninsula has not followed a unique strategy. In fact, it has fluctuated between a stronger fidelity and a laxer approach to the ROK Government⁶.

Explanatory diagram of South Korea’s Foreign Policy towards the Region and the United States from 1950 to 2021



Source: Author's elaboration

⁵ David C. Kang, “American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century,” 2017, 60–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316711620>.

⁶ Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

This section develops five main arguments. Firstly, the impact of Trump's Administration to the US-ROK alliance is analysed. Secondly, new US President Joe Biden's foreign policy prospective to the East China Sea region will be assessed. Thirdly, the US military commitment to ROK's security alliance will be developed. In the fourth point, the paper will examine the plausibility of an alternative to the US-ROK partnership, the PRC-ROK security alliance. Finally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s nuclear proliferation issue is addressed.

2.2. The US-ROK alliance constrained by Trump's strategy

The 2017-2022 ROK's presidency headed by the Democratic Party's leader, Moon Jae-in, initially appeared to break with Park Geun-hye's conservative and pro-US policies⁷. Nevertheless, as a result of the DPRK's Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and thermonuclear weapons tests, the 2017 elected party, shaped by its centrist and liberal values, expanded its alliance with the US towards a more proactive commitment in the Korean Peninsula⁸.

It is well known that, from 2017 to 2021, the personal and diplomatic relationship between the 45th US President, Donald J. Trump, and the DPRK's leader, Kim Jong-un, was configured by mutual distrust and extremely aggressive foreign policies. These tensions escalated to critical levels, especially as a result of the DPRK's nuclear tests in November, 2017⁹.

Considering these growing aggressions, efforts between the Koreas and the US government were exerted with the objective of reaching the denuclearisation of the Peninsula. However, the 2018 Singapore and 2019 Hanoi Summits made no progress to construct a nuclear deal¹⁰.

In 2019, following the "America First" approach, the US renegotiated the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) which dealt with the costs of the presence of 28,500 US forces on the Peninsula. The SMA burden-sharing agreement was particularly harmful for the historic alliance, increasing its annual payment of \$896 million (in 2019) to \$5 billion in 2020, a 500%

⁷ *Ibid* (192-212)

⁸ David C. Kang, "American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century," 2017, 60–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316711620>.

⁹ Sharon Squassoni, "The Latest North Korean Nuclear Test," Csis.org, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/latest-north-korean-nuclear-test>.

¹⁰ Efe, "Trump Leaves Hanoi after Summit with Kim Ends without Agreement," [www.efe.com](https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/trump-leaves-hanoi-after-summit-with-kim-ends-without-agreement/50000262-3911431), February 28, 2019, <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/trump-leaves-hanoi-after-summit-with-kim-ends-without-agreement/50000262-3911431>.

increase on the demand¹¹. Since Trump took office, these agreements were considered as a loss for the US military spending, thus callings were made to increase the ROK's monetary contribution to the Alliance¹².

Indeed, as a result of Trump's non-aggression policy and its growing protectionism towards China's economic growth, Moon Jae-in's fear of abandonment was captured by ROK's domestic and foreign policy. ROK's social skepticism about the "cruciality" of the alliance has grown exponentially, especially in social media platforms¹³.

Considering the alliance "freezing" during Trump's administration, two possibilities could be estimated for Biden's mandate: (1) Will Biden's foreign policy restore the damage done by its predecessor, thus renegotiating the alliance under more equitable terms? or (2) Will Biden follow the preceding "non-aggression" policy working on Trump's negotiated deals?

2.3. Biden administration's strategy towards the East China Sea region

Despite the growing tensions since late 2019, Joe Biden reaffirmed its commitment to the economic and military alliance in his first official conversation as President of the country¹⁴. Considering the US-ROK partnership, Biden's administration faces three main questions:

a) The SMA renegotiation

The multi-year cost sharing agreements, introduced by the US Government in 1991, have acted as the nexus of the alliance. However, the aforementioned Trump's renegotiation in 2019 eroded the existing and historical trust between the parties. For this reason, Biden's administration has stated the need to agree on mutual beneficial terms regarding defense cost sharing¹⁵.

¹¹ U.S. Mission Korea, "Korea Special Measures Agreement Negotiations October 22-24 | U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, October 18, 2019, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/101819-korea-special-measures-agreement-negotiations-october-22-24/>.

¹² Benjamin Zimmer, "Zimmer: A Logical Friendship 1 a Logical Friendship: The South Korea-United States Relationship 1", accessed February 24, 2021, <https://bush.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ALogicalFriendship-The-South-Korea-US-Relationship.pdf>.

¹³ Victor Cha, "U.S.-South Korea Cost-Sharing Negotiations Impacting Korean Public Support for U.S. Security Umbrella," Beyond Parallel, November 26, 2019, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/u-s-south-korea-cost-sharing-negotiations-impacting-korean-public-support-for-u-s-security-umbrella/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Benjamin Zimmer, "Biden's Peninsula: A Korea Policy Outline for a New Administration - Charged Affairs," Charged Affairs, February 26, 2021, <https://chargedaffairs.org/bidens-peninsula-a-korea-policy-outline-for-a-new-administration/>.

As a consequence of Biden's commitment to strengthen its alliances, a new SMA was reached on March 8th, 2021. Although no details have been officially published yet, it is likely that it introduces a 13% increase in the ROK's cost sharing of the United States Forces Korea (USFK), as well as an increase in the ROK's defense budget¹⁶.

By renegotiating the SMA, the US Government ensures the continuity of the alliance for six years, taking into account the ROK Presidential elections being held in March 2021. The strategy adopted stresses the US' fidelity to maintain the American status quo, considering the rapidly changing panorama in North East Asia¹⁷.

b) Ameliorating the ROK-Japan relations

The ROK and Japan symbolically represent US commitment in the North East Asian region as a major actor contributing to stability and democracy. It's for this reason that the US foreign policy is oriented to promote mutual trust and the "normalisation" of Japan-ROK relations. Nevertheless, regarding the trilateral relationship, the US role should be limited to act as a mediator rather than as a participant in agreements' drafting; this way, non-interference will be assured.

It could be stated that the ROK-Japan relations are at its lowest possible point since the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations was signed. The relationship almost sank as a consequence of the ROK's announcement of General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) termination in August 2019; however, this notification was suspended by the end of that year. The Agreement has an enormous value promoting security cooperation towards DPRK's denuclearization and PRC's growing influence in North East Asia. The continuation of GSOMIA prevented the ROK from sending an erroneous message to the region¹⁸.

If the ROK-Japan prosperous relationship wants to be safeguarded under the US sphere of influence, Biden's administration should ensure that the ROK and Japan are committed to the trilateral agreement. To achieve this, a renegotiation of the GSOMIA should be conducted,

¹⁶ Nicole Gaouette, "US and South Korea Reach Agreement on Cost Sharing for American Troops," CNN, March 7, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/07/politics/us-south-korea-cost-sharing-troops/index.html>.

¹⁷ Yonhap, "U.S. reaches consensus on new 'six-year' SMA with S. Korea: State Dept. spokesman", Yonhap News Agency, March 8, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210309000451325>.

¹⁸ John Pike, "General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)," Globalsecurity.org, 2019, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/systems/gsomia.htm>.

ensuring regional stability instead of failure because of historical differences between the parties¹⁹.

c) The US-DPRK relations

From 2016 to 2019, the US foreign policy towards the DPRK could be resumed by Trump's statement: "North Korea (DPRK) best not make any more threats to the US, they will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen²⁰." As a result, the relationship between both countries threatened the stability of the region with the North's unwillingness to cooperate in the proposed denuclearisation process. Furthermore, a report from the 8th Worker's Party Congress in January 2021 captured Kim's intentions to broaden its expansion of nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes²¹.

The recently elected US administration should balance its commitment to the US-ROK alliance with DPRK's extensive aggression policies. Although it is unlikely that the US levates the imposed sanctions as Kim's government demands considering what the US Press Secretary Ms Jen Psaki announced on April 30, it would be possible that Biden's administration moves away from the "traditional sanctions" regime, which has resulted in lax NK enforcement, to a "positive sanctions" regime, pulling the interests of the concerned regional actors - the PRC and the ROK - to converge with US concerns, thus applying the lessons learned from past administrations²². Consequently, the US maintains its complete commitment to the DPRK's denuclearisation objective, but from a "a calibrated, practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with the DPRK, and to make practical progress that increases the security of the United States, our allies, and deployed forces²³

¹⁹ U.S. Mission Korea, "Korea Special Measures Agreement Negotiations October 22-24 | U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, October 18, 2019, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/101819-korea-special-measures-agreement-negotiations-october-22-24/>.

²⁰ Associated Press, "Trump: NKorea Will Be Met with 'Fire and Fury,'" YouTube Video, *YouTube*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p1JlgTuKQk>.

²¹ Robert Carlin, "North Korea's Eighth Workers' Party Congress: Putting Things into Context | 38 North: Informed Analysis of North Korea," 38 North, January 20, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/north-koreas-eighth-workers-party-congress-putting-things-into-context/>.

²² Benjamin Zimmer and Kedar Pandya, "Logical Engagement: Using Positive Sanctions to Coerce North Korea," *Regionalsecurity.org.au*, December 2020, https://regionalsecurity.org.au/security_challenge/logical-engagement-using-positive-sanctions-to-coerce-north-korea/.

²³ Press Briefings, "Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki Aboard Air Force One En Route Philadelphia, PA," The White House, 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/>.

By conducting this foreign policy, the US Government seems to be committed to the maintenance of its dominating role in North East Asia in the next decade. As it has been analysed, it is likely that Biden's administration adopts a similar approach to the region to Obama's "Asian Pivot" by:

- i). Protecting its economic interests with its historical partners through trade agreements, as the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) and the US-Japan Free Trade Agreement (FTA)²⁴.
- ii). Enlarging its security engagement, preventing the rise of a regional hegemon hostile to US interests, as well as the polarisation of the region²⁵.
- iii). Maintaining North East Asia's status quo ante bellum, which includes US' commitment with Taiwan's foreign and military policy²⁶.

2.4. The US military and security commitment to the ROK over the 2030 horizon

Having understood the US' proximate future foreign policy approaches towards North East Asia, it is now possible to address what position such policies would lead the US to take. As a result of said analysis, the following four scenarios have been developed, which assess the future prospects of the US-ROK security and military alliance over a ten-year period, fixing 2030 as the horizon line.

²⁴ "U.S. - Korea Free Trade Agreement | United States Trade Representative," Ustr.gov, 2012, <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/korus-fta>.

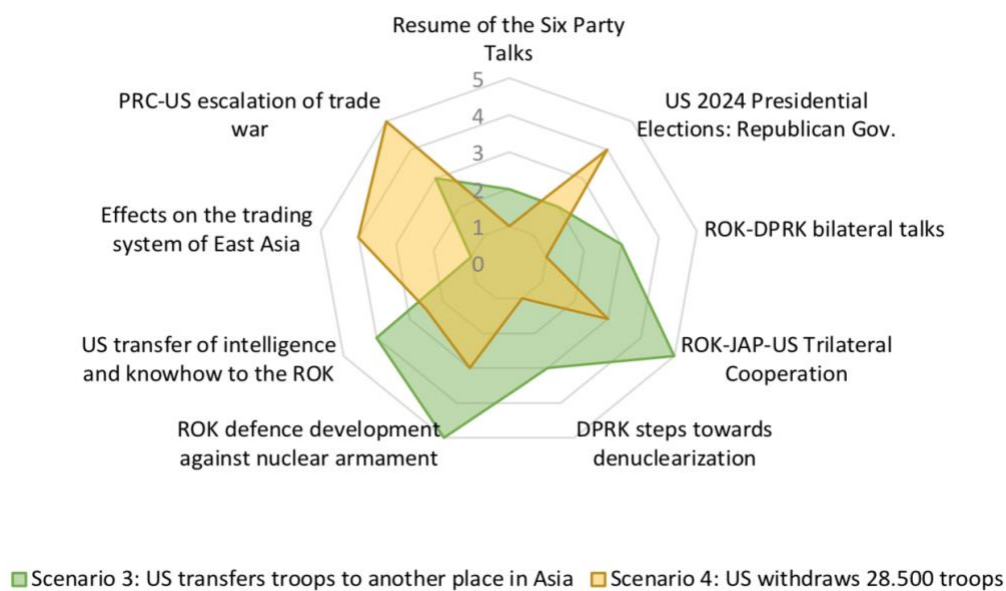
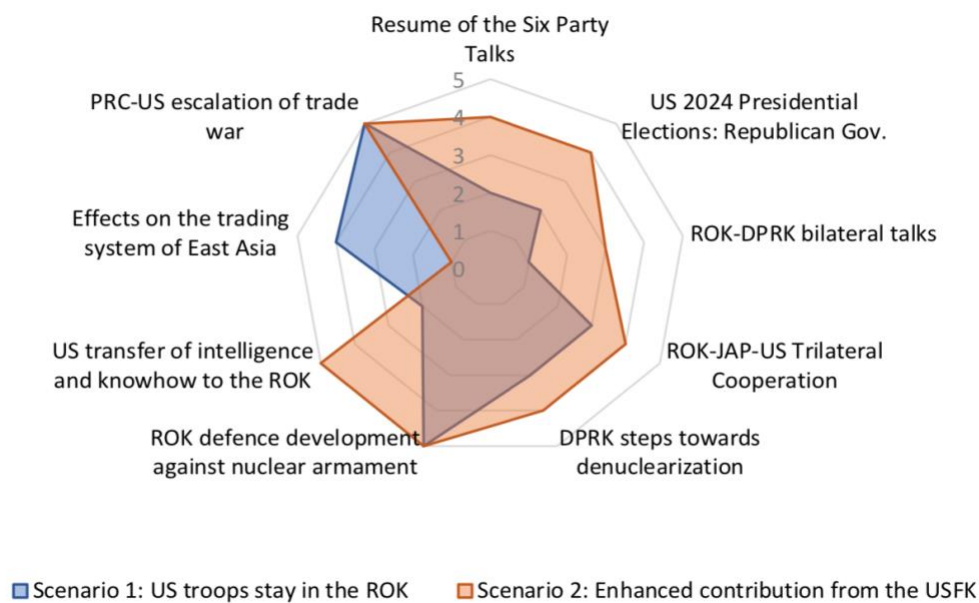
²⁵ David Shambaugh, "Assessing the US 'Pivot' to Asia on JSTOR," Jstor.org, 2013, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270763?seq=7#metadata_info_tab_contents.

²⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Status Quo Ante with a Twist: Biden's Probable East Asia Policy," Aspenia Online, December 21, 2020, <https://aspeniaonline.it/status-quo-ante-with-a-twist-bidens-probable-east-asia-policy/>.

Figures 3 & 4: Future plausible scenarios on US military and security commitment with the ROK in the 2030 horizon

LEGEND:

- 0 – Null impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- 1 – Very low impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- 2 – Low impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- 3 – Medium impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- 4 – High impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- 5 – Very high impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario



Source: Author's elaboration

The **first scenario** represents American troops keeping its security and military commitment with the US-ROK alliance. In the first place, Biden's "Asian Pivot 2.0" would erode the Sino-American trade relationship, evolving into a trade war between the parties. Due to the "heating" relations between the PRC and the US, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)²⁷. Secondly, as a side effect of the US presence on the Peninsula, the DPRK's nuclear escalation is likely to occur, enhancing South Korean military forces to develop not only offensive, but also defensive capabilities to deter the menace.

The **second scenario**, and the most possible one, arises as a consequence of the US enhancing contribution to the Alliance. This contribution does not only imply the increase in US troops to USFK, but also an intelligence and knowhow transferral to the Republic of Korea Armed Forces to strengthen the Alliance. As a result, South Korean Armed Forces would acquire the required knowledge to develop a domestic defensive system to deter North Korea's nuclear escalation, the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD)²⁸, plus the enlargement of American troops in the Peninsula. Moreover, to assure its strategic and dominant position in North East Asia, the US would pursue trilateral cooperation with Japan and the ROK, mainly enhancing intelligence collaboration. Considering the above, the US would simultaneously intensify international sanctions imposed on the DPRK through United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

The **third scenario** is the result of USFK troops removal and its relocation throughout the East Asia region. Considering the ROK's technological, cybernetical and military build up, the US-ROK security commitment would no longer be a priority to the South Korean government. As a result, US forces would be relocated in Japan (and maybe in Taiwan) to reinforce the US Army in Japan (and the United States Taiwan Defense Command); thus, reducing but sustaining its commitment with the East Asian region. However. This relocation in Taiwan would be a clear declaration of war to China, increasing the instability in the region. This hypothetical situation, despite being unlikely, would be viable if a peace agreement is signed in the Korean Peninsula or if a "Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Denuclearisation" (CVID) is assured by the DPRK²⁹.

²⁷ Jung Pak, "Trying To Loosen The Linchpin: China's Approach To South Korea", July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf.

²⁸ John Pike, "Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD)," Globalsecurity.org, 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/rok/kamd.htm>.

²⁹ Shin, Hyonhee. 2019. "Explainer: Why Have North Korea-U.S. Denuclearization Talks Stalled?", Reuters, December 9, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-nuclear-explainer-idUSKBN1YD0CI>.

The **fourth scenario**, and the least likely one, is based on US complete removal of the 28,500 troops in South Korea; this implying the no relocation of the military forces in any alternative base. The elected 2024 Republican Government could perpetuate Trump's "America First" policy advocating for a distancing from North East Asia. This scenario would foster inter-Korean peace negotiations, since North Korean calls to USFK removal would be met³⁰. Nevertheless, these conservative actions would derive in a PRC's rise of power, not only in the region, but at the global level.

As scenario 2 shows, the US troops reduction in the Korean Peninsula is not likely to happen as a result of Biden's foreign policy towards the region. Consequently, the strengthening of the US-ROK military alliance arises as the most desired scenario to take place in the 2030 horizon. Notwithstanding, it is important to bear in mind that 2024 US Presidential Elections could alter the status quo of North East Asia, and consequently, of the whole international arena.

2.5. Is the PRC-ROK alliance likely to materialise?

As it could be seen in scenarios 3 and 4, US abandonment of the US-ROK alliance, although not likely, could take place in ten years' time. If this situation were to happen, the PRC would arise as the only possible actor which could, in military terms, replace US protection to the ROK. However, is this shift in North East Asia status quo plausible in the medium-term? In this section, the viability of an alternative PRC-ROK alliance is analysed.

Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that the ROK is highly sensitive and dependent on the relationship between the US and the PRC. When a Sino-American friendly relations strategy is promoted by the parties, the ROK government enjoys a wider range of action to cooperate freely with both countries. However, when tensions arise, the ROK's government feels compelled to choose sides between both global powers³¹.

Secondly, the Korean Peninsula has historically been an ally of the greatest regional influence as a way to preserve its sovereignty. For this reason, post-World War Two (WWII) US emergence as the world rule maker favored the materialisation of the US-ROK alliance.

³⁰ Charlie Campbell, "What Would Korean Reunification Look Like? Five Glaring Problems to Overcome," Time (Time, April 26, 2018), <https://time.com/5255381/north-south-korea-kim-jong-un-reunification/>

³¹ Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) Pg. 212-237

Considering PRC's exponential economic growth and trade interdependency with the ROK since 1992, could President Xi Jinping's government pose a risk to the American alliances and surpass the US dominant role in the region³²?

Although it may appear, at first sight, that the PRC's and the ROK's domestic and foreign policies collide more than convey, both East Asian states pursue two common regional outlooks; (1) a Japanese distrust derived from colonial rule from 1910 to 1945, and (2) the commitment to the DPRK's denuclearisation as a key factor to ensure regional stability.

From this point of view, if the ROK drives closer relations with the PRC, an opportunity would arise to lose its long-standing military dependence on the US. Nevertheless, no desired freedom of action would be achieved in light of the fact that the ROK government would fall under PRC's communist sphere of influence.

In analyzing the plausibility of the ROK-PRC alliance three main obstacles arise:

First of all, ideological differences between the ROK and the PRC cannot be ignored. The ROK democratic values are attached to US world governance. As a result, frictions would arise in pursuing the convergence of this hypothetical alliance. **Second**, since 1953, the US-ROK alliance has become progressively institutionalised, resulting in one of the most successful and durable partnerships of the post-Cold War international arena. **Third**, the ROK, as a middle power, is constrained by major powers' influence, such as the US or the PRC. It is for this reason that the South has always needed the protection of the most influential power in the region, in this case, the US. In this case, unless the PRC steals the US' capacity of "global rule maker" the Sino-ROK entente is unlikely to materialise.

For the time being, the US-ROK security alliance will continue to be a reliable union in the North East Asia region. For this reason, it is unlikely that the ROK government will pursue (1) a security rapprochement with the PRC or (2) an independent foreign policy strategy. Nevertheless, China's growing economic interdependence with the ROK may derive in the South's willingness to adopt a counterweight strategy between the two countries. Unfortunately, this approach will be unsustainable in light of the US-PRC escalating rivalry³³.

³² "Excerpt: China's Rise and the Two Koreas," Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-chinas-rise-and-two-koreas>.

³³ Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads :Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Pg. 212-237

2.6. Future plausible scenarios for 2030 on the DPRK's nuclear programme

DPRK's possession of nuclear capabilities is one, if not the main, concern of most regional actors in North East Asia and the world as a whole. Thus, prospectively analyzing its potential denuclearisation can help key international players implement better policies.

The following section aims at exposing three plausible situations with regards to this matter taking into account various decisive factors such as the nature of US' security contribution to the ROK, the presence of THAAD in the ROK, the tone of relations between the US and the PRC, the state of inter-Korean discussions and the direction of the well-known Six Party Talks, which have been stagnated since 2017.

Figure 5: Three plausible scenarios on the DPRK's nuclear issue

DRIVERS	US TROOPS	THAAD	US-PRC	INTER-KOREAN	SIX PARTY TALKS
SCENARIO 1 Current nuclear program	Keeps current numbers (28500)	SK development of KAMD and continuation of US THAAD	Tensions continue	Armistice	NK stays out of the talks
SCENARIO 2 Steps towards denuclearization	Reduces number (removes/relocates)	US-SK agreement for THAAD removal (2030)	PRC-US shared views: Positive sanctions	Resume of bilateral talks	NK rejoins the talks
SCENARIO 3 Intensification of nuclear program (and testing)	Increases number and shares technology/know-how/cybersecurity	THAAD continuity and extended-range version + talks for Aegis Ashore ballistic missile system	End of trade war: Cordiality between US-PRC	Status Maintenance: Coercive Measures	NK stays out of the talks

Source: Author's elaboration

The **first and most likely scenario** portrays a situation in which the DPRK would keep its nuclear programme unchanged, this is, in which it would maintain its current capabilities and also acquire the ones that it had already planned to. For this to happen, the US should have had restated its military and security commitment towards the ROK and reassured the latter that US troops would not be removed from its territory. Despite pressures from Russia and the PRC, both the US and the ROK should have agreed on keeping the THAAD deployed, which would maintain the DPRK on high alert. In the same line, US-PRC relations do not evolve for the better, which would only mean more disproportionate sanctions from the US towards the DPRK, disincentivising the latter from reducing its strike capability. In this situation Inter-

Korean relations would remain stagnated and defined by the current Armistice. Without the perspective of a formal peace agreement and the DPRK's determination to remain out of the Six Party Talks, it is only logical that it would remain committed to nuclear deterrence.

As to the **second scenario**, it predicts a more positive outcome. As a result of generally improved relations between the US and the PRC, both countries would take a similar approach on sanctions towards the DPRK in the UNSC. These sanctions would be of a more positive nature than the ones currently in place, incentivising the DPRK to gradually denuclearise in exchange for concessions. The US would have less excuse to keep the totality of its troops in the ROK territory and would remove or relocate some of them to places like Japan or Taiwan. It would also yield to external pressures from the PRC to start negotiations on a possible THAAD removal in the course of this decade, while simultaneously assisting the ROK in the development of its KAMD. The ultimate result of this scenario would be that the DPRK, less wary of the US influence in the ROK and less coerced by the international community, would more likely agree to resume bilateral talks with the South and to rejoin the Six Party Talks.

Finally, the **third and less likely scenario** shows a destabilising regional situation characterised by the intensification of the DPRK's nuclear programme. The DPRK would not only improve and develop its existing arsenal but would also purchase new and more powerful weapons and resume testing outside the Peninsula. This would most likely derive from the worsening of Sino-American relations in the context of their long-lasting trade war and thus from the distancing of their positions with regards to sanctions on the DPRK. The latter would be harsher, causing the DPRK to react violently, and this would in turn force the US to increase the number of troops deployed in the ROK. As in a vicious cycle, the DPRK would threaten with more and more weapons and the US would respond with measures such as increasingly cooperating with the ROK on its security and technological development, enhancing the scope and efficiency of the THAAD and restarting talks for the deployment of the Aegis Ashore Japanese ballistic missile system. Not surprisingly, with this turn of events the DPRK would not only keep the current status of no relations with the South but also impose coercive measures against it. Six Party Talks would definitely be abandoned.

Taking into account that the first scenario is the most plausible one according to the current data that can be managed, it is fair to say that UNSC and unilateral sanctions against the DPRK might not be as effective as intended. International key players might have to diversify their strategies if they want to deal with a more cooperative DPRK.

3. RELATIONS WITH JAPAN, CHINA AND RUSSIA

In this section of the paper, the relationships between South Korea and some of its neighbours will be discussed. More precisely, the past and present roles of Japan, China and Russia in the regional scenario and their impact on the Korean Peninsula.

The ROK is the 12th world economy and a strategic asset for great powers in North East Asia. Despite its position as a middle-power, it can indirectly provide different advantages to various actors and thus help them advance their national interests.

Even if the US is deeply involved in the region and focused on determining the future of the Korean Peninsula, other major powers, such as China and Russia also have a big stake in this divided country. Ideological proximity with the North, economic and trade relationships with both North and South, and leverage against the US are the main reasons for Chinese and Russian implication in the issues of the Peninsula.

In the same line, Japan, the 3rd largest economy in the world, is aware that being left behind in this conundrum would certainly not be beneficial and is therefore trying to reform its foreign and security policy to adapt to all possible future scenarios.

3.1. ROK-China past and present relations

In order to understand the ROK's approach to China it is necessary to go back to a period in its regional foreign policy, the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. In the year 1973, the 3rd President of the ROK, Park Chung-hee, formulated its Nordpolitik, which aimed at pressuring the DPRK to reduce its military buildup by working on a rapprochement and diplomatic normalisation with China and the USSR, its main allies in the region. This was a response to the DPRK's 1960s four-line military policy, in which it attempted serious military provocation to the South and even tried to assassinate Park³⁴. Simultaneously, US nuclear strategy seemed to be changing during those years and was becoming more flexible.

³⁴ "South Korea - Foreign Policy - Basic Goals and Accomplishments," Countrystudies.us, 2021, <http://countrystudies.us/south-korea/75.htm>.

For the ROK, a friendly relation with the North's socialist allies would serve as a bridge to smoothen the regime and induce it to be more open to negotiations³⁵. Nevertheless, Pyongyang probably got the impression that the ROK was competing with it by trying to win over the trust of its main allies.

Initially conceived by Park but strengthened by the next President, Roh Tae-woo, in the 1980s, the "Northern Policy" was also intended at balancing the ROK's aim to maintain its traditional links with the West and its objective of taking advantage of the new opportunities, mainly regarding trade relations, that the region was offering. In this sense, it was a successful policy as, already during that decade, it was the world's 10th largest trading nation and economic cooperation with socialist countries was at its peak. Moreover, it was also a diplomatic success, reflected in the 1988's Olympic Games that took place in Seoul and which welcomed both China and Russia together with 157 other nations³⁶.

In spite of these events, the lack of official relations between the ROK and China certainly complicated and limited the possibility of strong trade and exchanges between both countries.

Only one year after the games, however, the famous Tiananmen Square Protests took place in Beijing, demanding more democracy and transparency from the part of the Chinese Communist Party. While the international community and mainly the West reacted by imposing embargoes on China, the country isolated itself to prevent international coverage of the massacre and of the repression it had undertook against the protesters. As a consequence, and due to similar social unrest in the ROK due to other democratization movements, both countries realised that they could use some economic prosperity and growth. This, together with the facts that Cold-War structures were disappearing (Sino-American and Soviet-Korean normalisation of relations), both countries were modernising and the ROK was pursuing its Nordpolitik, led to the much-expected normalisation of relations between them in the year 1992³⁷.

This has to be understood in the context of China's transformation of its revolutionary and ideological foreign policy into a more pragmatic and realistic one since it's "Open Door"

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ Kim Woosang, "South Korea's Diplomatic Normalization With China And Its Impact On Old Ties Between South Korea And Taiwan On Jstor," Jstor.org, 1993, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23254194>

policy. In fact, it was this approach that ultimately led it to become a permanent member of the UNSC and achieve great international presence³⁸.

There has been a progressive upgrading of the PRC-ROK relationship since the start of diplomatic relations. “According to scholar Min Ye: ‘from “friendly cooperative relationship” in 1992; to “collaborative partnership for the 21st century” in 1998; “comprehensive cooperative partnership” in 2003; “strategic cooperative partnership” in 2008; and “enriched strategic cooperative partnership” in 2014’³⁹.”

The best moment for Sino-Korean partnership was without a doubt the period between 2013 and 2016, where China’s neighbourhood diplomacy together with the ROK’s President Park Geun-hye “balanced diplomacy” with the US and China facilitated the signing of their bilateral FTA in 2015 and the ROK’s inclusion in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)⁴⁰.

On the 15th of November of 2020, leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including Japan, China and the ROK, signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), the association’s “biggest free trade pact to date⁴¹.” This will undoubtedly improve relations between both countries, push progress in their 2015 bilateral FTA and “promote the China-Japan-ROK FTA talks⁴².” Later on, a Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister visit to Seoul for talks to deepen the China-ROK strategic cooperation for the pandemic ended in both countries agreeing to establish a committee for future development of their relations⁴³.

It seems like Seoul is now more focused in restoring a basic and sustainable peace in its neighbourhood than in demanding the CVID of the DPRK, as ex-US President Donald Trump

³⁸ Dean Cheng, “The Complicated History of U.S. Relations with China - Library CHINA US Focus,” Chinausfocus.com, 2012, <http://library.chinausfocus.com/article-1048.html>

³⁹ Jung Pak, “Trying To Loosen The Linchpin: China’s Approach To South Korea”, July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ “ASEAN Hits Historic Milestone with Signing of RCEP - ASEAN | One Vision One Identity One Community,” ASEAN | One Vision One Identity One Community, November 15, 2020, <https://asean.org/asean-hits-historic-milestone-signing-rcep/>

⁴² Li Chunding, “An Upgraded China-ROK Free Trade Deal Good News for Regional Integration, Growth - Global Times,” Globaltimes.cn, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1214283.shtml>

⁴³ Shan Jie and Bai Yunyi, “China-South Korea Cooperation in Health, People-To-People Exchange a Model to the World: South Korean Ambassador - Global Times,” Globaltimes.cn, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209229.shtml>

has been referring to⁴⁴. In fact, Moon has continuously and unsuccessfully demanded the US to declare peace with the DPRK.

This type of mismatches with the US are for sure being exploited by China. In the words of Jung H. Pak, “Beijing perceives Seoul as the weakest link in the U.S. alliance network, given its perception of ROK’s deference and history of accommodating China’s rise relative to other regional players, such as Japan, which considers China a long-term security threat⁴⁵.”

Despite all the positive signs above and the increasing economic interdependence between China and the ROK, there are several reasons why analysts don’t believe either in the breaching of the US-ROK alliance nor in a real political rapprochement between China and the South of the Peninsula.

China’s main objective has always been and still is to undermine one of the ROK’s key protectors in North East Asia, the US, and this has obvious consequences for their political and strategic relationship.

In addition, it is, although indirectly, one of the main contributors to Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programme. It has been helping in the clandestine supply of some necessary materials and has also unified positions with Russia in the UNSC to reduce the effect of United Nations (UN) sanctions⁴⁶. The reason for this is that it wants to use the country to further its own national interest and the instability and consequent collapse of Kim’s regime would be highly detrimental for its ambitions. A pro-US unified Korea is the worst scenario for Beijing.

In this line, one of the points of tension between China and the ROK is the coercive economic approach that the former implemented against the latter in retaliation to the ROK deployment of the US THAAD⁴⁷, an anti-ballistic missile defense system, and the continued presence of USFK in the ROK territory.

Even if the THAAD was a reaction to the DPRK’s 4th nuclear test in 2016 and the principal target of Chinese sanctions should have been the US, the regionally present ally will always

⁴⁴ Hyonhee Shin, “Explainer: Why Have North Korea-U.S. Denuclearization Talks Stalled?,” U.S., December 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-nuclear-explainer-idUSKBN1YD0CI>

⁴⁵ Jung Pak, “Trying To Loosen The Linchpin: China’s Approach To South Korea”, July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf.

⁴⁶ Titli Basu, *Major Powers And The Korean Peninsula Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. (S.L.: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020). Introduction.

⁴⁷ Darren J. Lim, “Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute | the Asan Forum,” Theasanforum.org, 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute/>

take the shots. “Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Qiu Guohong bluntly said that the deployment could destroy the bilateral relationship”⁴⁸. As part of the Chinese boycott of the ROK it banned Chinese tourists and students from going to the ROK and closed over 30 Korean stores that were established in its territory. These measures cost the ROK over \$7 billion and nearly \$900 million to China⁴⁹. The ROK’s reaction wasn’t the one expected either: after Pyongyang’s 2017 ICBM tests, Moon completed and reinforced the deployment of THAAD⁵⁰.

In spite of Chinese determination to improve relations with the ROK, or more precisely maintain equi-cordial relations with both sides of the 38th parallel, it must be remembered that it is more importantly the DPRK’s largest trading partner. In addition, and as has already been mentioned in Section 2.5.), the ROK is a liberal democracy and its core values might always be incompatible with a communist China, tearing both systems apart.

The fact that the ROK is not part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (see Section 3.4) along with Japan, India, US and Australia either, also means that it has less strategic freedom and leeway with the PRC.

Despite Moon’s “three no’s” in 2017 (no more THAAD deployment; no joining US anti-missile system; and no military alliance with US and Japan)⁵¹, in his 3rd year of Presidency he seemed to be leaning more towards the US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy⁵². The latter will for sure have a negative impact on China and its South China Sea ambitions.

All in all, Chinese President Xi Jinping might have seen (and had) a few opportunities of a breach in the alliance between the US and the ROK during Trump’s and Moon’s administrations, but now that Biden is in power this tendency is bound to vary. A good example of this is that, even if along 2019 and 2020 Trump had been unsuccessfully pressuring Seoul to increase its payment for the US troops stationed in its territory as part of the SMA⁵³, Biden and Moon were able to agree on this as recently as March of this year⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ Jung Pak, “Trying To Loosen The Linchpin: China’s Approach To South Korea”, July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*

⁵² Cheol Hee Park, “South Korea Is a Hesitant, but Friendly, U.S. Ally in the Indo-Pacific,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/south-korea-hesitant-friendly-us-ally-indo-pacific>

⁵³ Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Inside Trump’s Standoff with South Korea over Defense Costs,” U.S., April 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-southkorea-trump-defense-exclusiv-idUSKCN21S1W7>

⁵⁴ Michelle Ye Hee Lee and Dan Lamothe, “U.S., South Korea Reach Military Cost-Sharing Agreement after Deadlock under Trump,” *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-korea-military-agreement/2021/03/08/b7a121d8-7f86-11eb-9ca6-54e187ee4939_story.html

Although it is hard to determine what the region dynamics will look like as of 2030, we know that 2022 will be critical for North East Asian relations in the long-term: Beijing will celebrate its Winter Olympic Games (who is invited will be crucial); Moon will leave office and be replaced by a new President (further increasing the possibilities for change in the country's foreign policy); and both events coincide with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the ROK⁵⁵.

3.2. ROK-Japan past and present relations

Through the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, the former country placed the latter under its rule and occupation. Only five years later a formal annexation took place with another treaty and Japan got to rule Korea indirectly until 1945.

With the end of WWII, Japan surrendered to the US and the USSR who decided to divide Korea into two, separate political and economic systems.

Even if it was one of the major powers of the Axis during the War, Japan soon adopted the form of a unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy with a bicameral legislature and most of the attributes of a liberal democracy. With the inclusion of Article 9 (Peace Clause) in its new 1947 Constitution, it established its intention not to become a military empire ever again and since it has only worked on its defense capabilities⁵⁶.

As such, it has become one of the US' main and closest allies in the region, with which it signed in 1951 the now called US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. Both countries agreed that if there was any threat to any of them within Japanese territory, they would both take action for defense. Japan also allowed US military presence and troops in its jurisdiction as a way to safeguard peace and stability in the region⁵⁷.

In addition, after the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, the US and the ROK signed a Mutual Defense Treaty which, among other things, also guaranteed some front-line protection for Japan⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ Shan Jie and Bai Yunyi, "China-South Korea Cooperation in Health, People-To-People Exchange a Model to the World: South Korean Ambassador - Global Times," Globaltimes.cn, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209229.shtml>

⁵⁶ Olivia B Waxman, "How the U.S. And Japan Became Allies Even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki," Time (Time, August 6, 2018), <https://time.com/5358113/hiroshima-nagasaki-history-reconciliation/>

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ Titli Basu, *Major Powers And The Korean Peninsula Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. (S.L.: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020). Chapter 8.

Despite the fact that bilateral relations between Korea and Japan have never been too positive due to their shared history and Korean resentment of the Japanese occupation, it is worth mentioning that due to political and ideological similarity, common allies and common enemies, and economic reasons, Japan and the ROK are definitely closer to each other than any of them is to the DPRK. In fact, they signed a Treaty on Basic Relations in 1965 (see Section 2.3.b).

Since the DPRK's exponential development of its nuclear and missile programme Japan is feeling pressured to change its post-war security orientation towards a more aggressive one. After some Pyongyang missiles flew over its territory, it started developing ballistic missile defense and considered acquiring striking capabilities while increasing the scope of the "Peace Clause"⁵⁹. Simultaneously, it has supported all UNSC resolutions for sanctions against Pyongyang and implemented its own secondary sanctions against the nuclear power. In this matter, it strictly follows a "maximum pressure" campaign⁶⁰. Given its closeness to the US and its fear and rejection of the DPRK as a nuclear power, one could see the ROK and Japan as circumstantial allies.

In fact, since November of last year the South Korean President, Moon Jae-in has been trying to improve the relationships with its neighbour. Symbolic actions have been taken such as the visit of the Korea National Intelligence Service Director to Japan, the words of the leader of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea calling for a bilateral meeting, and the appointment of a new Korean Ambassador to Japan⁶¹.

Even as regards the 'wartime labour issue', which is the most controversial block to the Japan-ROK relations, steps have been taken to reach an agreement. Moon, who is hoping that the new Japanese Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, will be more open to negotiations, says South Korea might take a step towards compensating for the losses incurred by the Japanese companies⁶².

According to Japan authorities and media, however, the main obstacle to this is ironically the Blue House itself, which advocates for the original scheme of equal donations from Japanese and Korean companies and deeply supports the ROK Supreme Court ruling ordering Nippon

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Chapter 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Chapter 12.

⁶¹ Kimura Kan, "Japan-South Korea: The Limits of Outreach without Trust," *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/japan-south-korea-the-limits-of-outreach-without-trust/>

⁶² *Ibid*

Steel (where forced labour occurred during the war) to pay to each plaintiff the requested compensations⁶³.

Japan's distrust of the ROK leadership might actually be at a new peak. In 2017 Moon dissolved the fund created under the 2015 Comfort Woman's agreement, and this led to increased export controls from Japan to the ROK⁶⁴. Responding to it and furthering the tension, in 2019 the Korean public boycotted Japanese products and most trips to Japan. According to some sources, Prime Minister Suga might be waiting for Moon to leave in 2022 to continue with reconciliation efforts⁶⁵.

On a bigger scale, Japan is also wary of the stability of its security alliance with the US. With the DPRK's threat of using ICBMs against the US, Suga is concerned that the latter will prioritise the protection of its territory and be less available for its allies⁶⁶. This would signify an end to US extended deterrence in North East Asia, although perspectives might change with Biden as the new US President.

Another expression of Japan's suspicion towards the US and the ROK is its demand that any use of its bases to support Seoul is previously consulted⁶⁷. Kim Jong-un might use this opportunity to put pressure on Japan. In the end, Japan might have a clear and strong position towards Pyongyang in what concerns the nuclear and missile issue and its position as a US ally, but one has to be aware that it also has other national interests. One of its main weaknesses is the abduction issue. For Japan, the normalisation of relations with the North mainly depends on the solving of this issue and in 2014 it even smoothened its sanction policy against the DPRK based on promises from Kim's regime⁶⁸.

The development of a robust deterrence posture between the US, Japan and the ROK and trilateral cooperation in terms of defense might be the best option to maintain common security and stability in the region, but the public opinions in both Japan and the ROK (mainly in the

⁶³ Hiroshi Minegishi, "Tokyo and Seoul Struggle for Compromise on Wartime Labor Issue," Nikkei Asia (Nikkei Asia, September 26, 2020), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Tokyo-and-Seoul-struggle-for-compromise-on-wartime-labor-issue>

⁶⁴ Kimura Kan, "Japan-South Korea: The Limits of Outreach without Trust," The Diplomat, December 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/japan-south-korea-the-limits-of-outreach-without-trust/>

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ Titli Basu, *Major Powers And The Korean Peninsula Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. (S.L.: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020). Chapter 12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*. Chapter 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*. Chapter 12.

latter) are still very full of resentment towards each other due to their shared history, and leaders know that this is an inescapable obstacle for their policies.

In spite of this, both countries are developing long-term policies and initiatives that indirectly reflect their need to remain close against other more important threats, like China or North Korea. The ROK and Japan might be having a hard time solving their past disagreements, but their main focus is still on building better future scenarios, shedding a bit of light on what could come out of this decade and how the region might look like in 2030.

3.3. ROK-Russia past and present relations

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's interests in the North East Asia region have mostly been of economic nature, searching to develop the Far East and to increase its energy and gas export market⁶⁹.

These objectives naturally imply a need to improve relations with most relevant actors, such as the ROK, the DPRK or Japan. With the former, diplomatic relations were established in 1990. From then on, cooperation and trade between both countries has been growing and as recently as 2019 the ROK was Russia's seventh-largest trading partner and the third in Asia⁷⁰.

We could say that Russia's involvement mainly derives from the benefits this type of relation with the ROK (and the Korean Peninsula) would have on its economic security, and thus on its security in general terms. In its national security strategy, it makes clear that it's "vision for its Asia Pacific territories is based on the concept of security by means of development"⁷¹. If it achieves the position of controlling the technology and infrastructure hub in the region, it will certainly have more leverage against other major powers, such as China or the US.

Nevertheless, this relationship is not only beneficial to Russia. Trade with this country accounts for 2.1% of the ROK's total trade⁷² and it also helps the ROK gain importance and security in the international and regional field.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Chapter 11.

⁷⁰ Do Je-hae, "Moon's New Northern Policy Gaining Spotlight," *Korea Times*, February 21, 2020, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/02/356_283818.html

⁷¹ Anthony Rinna, "Decrypting the Russia-South Korea Relationship | East Asia Forum," East Asia Forum, June 13, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/06/13/decrypting-the-russia-south-korea-relationship/>

⁷² Do Je-hae, "Moon's New Northern Policy Gaining Spotlight," *Korea Times*, February 21, 2020, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/02/356_283818.html

Even if at the moment bilateral trade mainly consists on the exchange of mineral (Russia) and industrial products (ROK)⁷³, when Moon Jae-in took office in 2017 he made very clear that one of his key policy objectives was to improve ties with the Kremlin, mainly through its Northern Policy and more specifically using the Nine Bridges Initiative, which he presented in the 3rd Eastern Economic Forum that same year⁷⁴. Far from being a mere political declaration of intentions, the latter clearly defines the areas of cooperation that should be worked on and includes a definite programme for it. All this can be better understood taking into account the strategic partnership that both countries “officially implemented in 2008”⁷⁵.

The body responsible for overseeing and coordinating the activities of the Initiative is the Presidential Committee on Northern Economic Cooperation, and as soon as November 2018 it organised the first Interregional Summit between both countries⁷⁶. The second and most recent of them took place in September 2019.

The first of Moon’s bridges is the “**gas**” bridge. Gas exchange between the two countries is not new (Russia entered the Asian gas market in 2009⁷⁷), but Russia has a higher aim: becoming one of the top exporters to the ROK. If the latter increases its purchase of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG)⁷⁸ it might eventually displace its main current suppliers: Qatar, Australia, the US and Malaysia⁷⁹. Also related to this is the project of a gas pipeline that would connect both countries through the DPRK. This trans-Korean transmission system would be connected to the Sakhalin-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok one⁸⁰.

⁷³ Liudmila Zakharova, “Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy”, December 10, 2019, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/kei_aps_zakharova_191206.pdf

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

⁷⁵ Anthony Rinna, “Decrypting the Russia–South Korea Relationship | East Asia Forum,” East Asia Forum, June 13, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/06/13/decrypting-the-russia-south-korea-relationship/>

⁷⁶ Liudmila Zakharova, “Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy”, December 10, 2019, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/kei_aps_zakharova_191206.pdf

⁷⁷ Titli Basu, *Major Powers And The Korean Peninsula Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. (S.L.: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020). Introduction.

⁷⁸ Liudmila Zakharova, “Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy”, December 10, 2019, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/kei_aps_zakharova_191206.pdf

⁷⁹ Hellenicshippingnews, “Northern Asian LNG Imports Top 200 Mt | Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide,” Hellenicshippingnews.com, 2020, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/northern-asian-lng-imports-top-200-mt/>

⁸⁰ Valentin Voloshchak, “A Closer Look at South Korea’s Plan for Cooperation with Russia,” The Diplomat, January 9, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/a-closer-look-at-south-koreas-plan-for-cooperation-with-russia/>

Railroad connections are also vital for effective trade in the region and that's why a trilateral project that would involve Russia and both Koreas is underway. The Trans-Korean Railway would have to be reconstructed and then linked to the Trans-Siberian one⁸¹.

As to **maritime** connections, the ROK is vividly interested in the construction and use of Russian ports such as those of Zarubino (also in China's mind), Slavyanka and Fokino. These would facilitate the ROK's use of the International Transport Corridors (ITCs) of Primorye-1 and -2, and that's why its investment and participation in their development constitutes the third bridge of the Initiative⁸².

As shipping through the Arctic would be a major advantage and highly beneficial for any trading Asian nation, it is also expected for Russia and the ROK to cooperate on an **Arctic Shipping Route**⁸³.

The latter fourth bridge is extremely related to the next one, which is all about "**shipbuilding**" and ship maintenance. Although this project could also eventually help the transportation of Russia LNG into the ROK territory, there is still competition between Russian and ROK shipbuilders, undermining bilateral cooperation in this respect⁸⁴.

The sixth bridge consists of developing the **Asian Super Grid**, it being a regional energy transmission network that would connect the individual networks of Mongolia, both Koreas, Russia, Japan and China. The energy would be electrical, mainly coming from Mongolia (wind and solar) and Russia (hydropower)⁸⁵.

Other two fields of cooperation, corresponding to the seventh and eighth bridges respectively, are fisheries and agriculture. Regarding the first one, the ROK is considering investing in the development of a fish processing complex in Russian territory. As to the second, Hyundai is expected to invest in the building of a mineral fertiliser plant in Kozmino, which will be finalised in 2022⁸⁶.

Last but not least, it is expected that both countries (and the DPRK) cooperate in the creation of an industrial complex in the Russian federal subject of Maritime Province⁸⁷.

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ *Ibid*

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

⁸⁷ *Ibid*

In spite of this political commitment and willingness to advance good relations from the part of both the Kremlin and the Blue House, the advancement of the Nine Bridges' projects highly depends on the evolution of political, military and strategic events in the Korean Peninsula.

UNSC and US sanctions against the DPRK are far from beneficial for trilateral cooperation between this state and the ones of Russia and the ROK, and thus also detrimental for the Russia-ROK bilateral relations. Moreover, it is yet to see how the new Biden Administration will deal with them.

First, in affecting Russian companies too, sanctions are an obstacle to ROK investment and will to make deals with Russia. And second, these coercive economic measures may only motivate Pyongyang to continue its nuclear development⁸⁸.

Even if the USSR supported and contributed to the nuclearisation of the DPRK Peninsula with materials and shipments of steel during the Cold War⁸⁹, it is understandable that the position of the Kremlin is completely different nowadays. It is no longer in the interest of Russia to create such military tension in North East Asia, as this only means political destabilisation, distrust between powers and the stagnation of economic relations and growth.

This is the reason why the latter is not keen on imposing such harsh sanctions on the DPRK and rather prefers a diplomatic solution to the inter-Korean crisis. In 2018 it signed a Joint Communiqué with China stating that denuclearisation of the Peninsula should be carried out step by step and through reciprocal concessions from the part of each involved major power⁹⁰. In spite of officially supporting (and not vetoing) the UNSC sanctions, it has been found to be illegally transferring oil in the form of gasoline and diesel fuel to Pyongyang through private companies⁹¹.

In the same line, another shared view with Beijing is that the THAAD is nothing but detrimental to the region, as it increases the risk of an arms race and military confrontation. Taking into account that it borders the DPRK, it would be one of the most affected countries if there was a sudden outbreak of violence. According to the Kremlin, it would be a strategy by the US, part

⁸⁸ See-Won Byun, "North Korea's Regional Integration: An Enduring Dilemma for China, South Korea, and the United States | the Asan Forum," Theasanforum.org, 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/north-koreas-regional-integration-an-enduring-dilemma-for-china-south-korea-and-the-united-states/>

⁸⁹ Titli Basu, *Major Powers And The Korean Peninsula Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. (S.L.: K W Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2020).Chapter 3.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Introduction.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Chapter 11.

of its pivot to the Asia Pacific, to “create a new regional segment of the US global missile defense system in North East Asia”⁹², encircling China and Russia and undermining the military balance in the region.

With all, sanctions against Pyongyang are not the only challenging factor for bilateral cooperation between Russia and Seoul. The fact that the Far East is not as developed in terms of connectivity and infrastructure, especially in what concerns links between the interior and the ports, prevents a fully trusting investment from the part of the ROK⁹³.

Resolution of the investment issue is fundamental for the advancement of relations, as it is currently an obstacle for the signing of their FTA. Moon’s initial intention was to sign one with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) but, as a member, Russia has opposed this, as it considers that the ROK would benefit more from the agreement than the rest of nations. In other words, the Kremlin expects more investment from the ROK before it proceeds with trade liberalisation and this is why in 2019 they initiated bilateral FTA negotiations only concerning the service and investment sectors. For the ROK the next step would be to have separate talks with the EAEU⁹⁴.

It must not be forgotten that the Northern Policy is oriented for the long-term, which means that from here to 2030 it might be interrupted at certain points when the ROK government changes. As President Moon leaves office in 2022, it is essential to take this factor into account when making predictions about the Russia-ROK relations in the next decade.

3.4. The ROK and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

As has already been mentioned in Section 2.5. of this report, when the US and the PRC are in the midst of an escalated confrontation, the ROK might have to lean towards one side or the other to preserve its security and stability.

For Washington, Quad+ is not just an excuse to get closer to the ROK as one of its main allies in the Asia Pacific, but also a way to generally increase the size and importance of the strategic group. There are several debates around the US’ intention of turning this informal alliance into

⁹² *Ibid.* Chapter 11.

⁹³ Anthony Rinna, “Decrypting the Russia–South Korea Relationship | East Asia Forum,” East Asia Forum, June 13, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/06/13/decrypting-the-russia-south-korea-relationship/>

⁹⁴ Liudmila Zakharova, “Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy”, December 10, 2019, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/kei_aps_zakharova_191206.pdf

an “Asian-North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)”, which would serve to enhance cooperation in various and useful areas but mainly to counter what it considers its biggest threat at the moment: China⁹⁵. One has to consider, however, whether the existing involved actors really share that many and important common interests as to compare the situation to Europe’s creation of NATO against the rise of the USSR in the 1950s.

Even if along 2020, the ROK did participate in some of the Quad+ meetings, Moon and his administration have continuously tried to clarify that Seoul’s participation only concerns management of the SARS-CoV-2 disease (COVID-19) pandemic and that the government only conceives of cooperation in this line⁹⁶.

The country is, however, facing quite an important dilemma on this matter. It realises that being a member of the forum could be a huge opportunity to become a more important regional and international player at the security and strategic levels, and maybe even serve as a bridge to eventually enter the G7⁹⁷. Nevertheless, it is also aware that the Quad is basically an informal alliance against China⁹⁸.

As explained in Section 3.1., China is one of the ROK’s largest trading partners and a very useful actor when trying to get the DPRK to the negotiating table on the nuclear issue.

Moreover, the fact that China has already imposed some coercive economic measures against the ROK due to the THAAD deployment shows that fearing PRC’s retaliation is not too far-fetched⁹⁹. Xi Jinping could also react by creating a similar coalition, a 2.0 Warsaw Pact, and this wouldn’t be beneficial for any regional actor.

Last but not least, liberal ideology predominance in the ROK’s political sphere cannot be disregarded. Unlike pro US-alliance conservatives, the new liberal majority prefers to advocate for the ROK autonomy, long-term strategic neutrality on US-China frictions and the retrieval of operational control from Washington¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁵ Brad Lendon, “US-China Tech Rivalry Will Likely Continue under Biden Presidency. Here’s Why,” CNN, March 12, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/11/asia/quad-us-india-japan-australia-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁹⁶ James Park, “Biden Should Embrace South Korea’s Strategic Nondecision on the Quad,” The Diplomat, March 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/biden-should-embrace-south-koreas-strategic-nondecision-on-the-quad/>

⁹⁷ Cheng Xiaohe, “Seoul Shouldn’t Give up Strategic Ambiguity over Joining Quad,” Global Times, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218150.shtml>

⁹⁸ James Park, “Biden Should Embrace South Korea’s Strategic Nondecision on the Quad,” The Diplomat, March 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/biden-should-embrace-south-koreas-strategic-nondecision-on-the-quad/>

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*

Despite this, the ROK's strategic nondecision on the Quad issue is not the same as to say that it wants to distance itself from the US. For instance, it is considering an approximation to the US Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) and is advancing its New Southern Policy (NSP), which could eventually overlap with the former¹⁰¹.

Many events can and are likely to affect the ROK's decision in this matter along the next ten years, but what seems clear is that a pressure strategy from the part of the US is probably not the more effective path¹⁰².

¹⁰¹ Andrew Yeo, "South Korea and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," CSIS 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-and-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy>.

¹⁰² James Park, "Biden Should Embrace South Korea's Strategic Nondecision on the Quad," The Diplomat, March 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/biden-should-embrace-south-koreas-strategic-nondecision-on-the-quad/>

4. INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

In order to assess what possibilities does the future offer for relations between the two Koreas it is first important to understand their recent history, since the Korean War, and the current status of their relationship. This section aims at understanding the different issues that have taken place in the Peninsula since 1950 up until now and to address the present situation of both countries in regard to the Peninsular issues.

During the years, both the south and the north of the Peninsula have been involved in major international affairs, such as the Korean War or the Cold War among others. This has a huge impact on the prospects each country has towards the Peninsular issue in the present days, and thus it is important to assess the historical context of their relations. Moreover, in order to prospectively analyse the future link between the two Koreas it is also key to understand where each country stands as of the present day. Last but not least, this section will aim to foresee what options are open hereafter and how likely or not they are to happen.

4.1. Historical background of the inter-Korean relations

The Korean Peninsula has, since the Cold War, been an important player in the international arena. Before that, the Peninsula had a very mixed history made up of Japanese colonial rule and then Soviet and American occupations of north and south respectively, with the established division in the 38th parallel¹⁰³.

With the breaking of the Cold War, the two Koreas were found in the middle of confrontation. Although occupation had ended in 1948, the North was on the communist side with support of the USSR and China, while the South had the backing of the United States and later on the UN. On top of that, the Korean War was the first proxy war fought amidst the Cold War, in a third territory. The war on the Peninsula lasted for 3 years and ended with an armistice signed by the DPRK, China and the UN, that reestablished the 38 parallel division and created a new 4km demilitarised zone¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰³ Daniel Wertz, "Inter-Korean Relations," NCNK, April 11, 2017, <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/inter-korean-relations>.

¹⁰⁴ BBC, "The Korean War, 1950-1953 - the Cold War, 1948-1960," BBC Bitesize, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zq9hg82/revision/1>.

Even if the internal conflict had ended, tensions between the two independent countries were still latent and the cold war continued escalating worldwide. However, the conflict had created strong ties between the ROK and the US that were reflected in the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953¹⁰⁵ (as seen in section 3.2.), in view of the potential threat that could be posed by the DPRK in nuclear terms. In addition to this, there existed a mutual fear of ideology spreading. The North, being a communism-based country feared that the presence of the US in the Peninsula would trigger anti-communist movements. On the other hand, both the ROK and the US feared that communism coming from the DPRK, the USSR and China would easily spread in the Asian region¹⁰⁶.

4.2. Inter-Korean Politics: what the North and South want from each other

Even if the Cold War ended, tensions were still present in the Peninsula, mainly because the independence and division through the 38 parallel had created two independent countries that had in turn evolved in opposite grounds, ideologies and government forms. The South with the support of the US aimed for democracy and liberties, while the North, that stood on the communist side, followed the example of the USSR and China with the establishment of communist rule. This support varied in forms, in the South US troops remained present while the north had technical and financial aid from communist regimes but foreign troops were removed, leaving the Korean People's Army as the only defense in the border of the demilitarised zone¹⁰⁷.

Despite the huge differences, throughout the years efforts have been made, from both sides, to foster and enhance internal relations. This is a challenging issue for both the DPRK and the ROK as their main principles and terms for such reunification are confronted.

a) The DPRK foreign politics towards the ROK

The North Korean government after the war in the Peninsula was left alone militarily talking but still had support from the Soviet and Chinese governments. This foreign aid gave a strong boost to the North Korean economy making it stronger than South Korea. At this time, 1956, Kim Il-sung held power in the DPRK and made several propositions to the ROK concerning

¹⁰⁵ Bureau Of East Asian And Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations with the Republic of Korea - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, January 14, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-the-republic-of-korea/>.

¹⁰⁶ Michael J Seth, *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon Routledge, 2017), Ch. 26.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*

internal relations and possibilities for reunification. These propositions were founded in the firm belief of the communist triumph or, rather, the southern collapse that would eventually lead to the North getting back the whole Peninsula.

Even if the DPRK's strategy towards the South has evolved during the years the pillars behind it remain almost the same, them being: the belief of the DPRK as representative of the Koreans, and thus people being much more eager to a northern rule rather than one led by American beliefs, and moral "supremacy" of northern ideals and them being preferred by society¹⁰⁸.

Since 1953, one of North Korea's deepest beliefs or objectives was the emergence of a group of anti-government radicals in the Southern State. However, this faith has been shrinking over the time, and little support has been found in the South since the democratisation in the 1980s. This whole idea was behind what the DPRK called the United Front Policy.

Until the 1970s the relations with the ROK remained inexistent, simulating the Chinese policy towards Taiwan. In this sense, no contact nor recognition existed from the DPRK government towards the Southern one. However, in the 1970s, following the US-China resume of relations, the two states of the Peninsula were embarked in a series of meetings between their intelligence services. This culminated with a Joint Communiqué on the principles for a peaceful reunification in 1972.

Since then, the DPRK followed a much more aggressive policy towards South Korean political class, it could be seen as a "terrorist-like" policy. Attacks were launched towards political figures in order to destabilise and collapse the southern country. However, the US-ROK alliance remained strong and turned these attempts useless. Joint North-South meetings were held thanks to the before-mentioned communiqué until 1973, when the DPRK cut-off communications¹⁰⁹.

During the 1980s the North proposed the creation of a Korean Confederation as the correct path towards unification. Even if it was a harsh line proposal at first, it then softened to admit that both governments would be respected¹¹⁰. This proposal was similar to the one that would be later made by the ROK. Inter-Korean talks were resumed and the Basic agreement was

¹⁰⁸ Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

signed in 1991, and a year later the two countries were committed to denuclearisation with the signing of a joint declaration¹¹¹.

Since the collapse of the USSR and the fall of communism North Korea was standing alone out of support. Its ever worsening situation led to the development of the nuclear programme which, as stated by Paul Bracken, “Was a way to buy time for the regime to adapt to new international circumstances¹¹².” Considering this lack of backing, the DPRK was immersed in a new relation with the United States. This communications in turn made possible an agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on nuclear inspections which in the end was not successful at all due to the DPRK’s disengagement. Following this, the DPRK withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993^{113 114}.

Tensions were rising again and, with the US as mediator, inter-Korean talks were agreed to resume, which, in fact, never happened. After the death of Kim Il-sung, relations worsened and reticence was felt from both sides. After some years of uncertainty, humanitarian relations were resumed in the 1990s due to the crisis in the DPRK.

With the new leader, Kim Jong-il, the country entered a much more military policy that would be later continued by his son. During Kim Jong-il’s regime and due to this more aggressive policy, talks with the US and the ROK were terminated, and the DPRK was catalogued as being part of the “Axis of evil”^{115 116}. However, some steps were taken in the economic sphere with the ROK with the creation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in the North¹¹⁷ and the nuclear issue was also addressed with the creation of Six Party Talks¹¹⁸, but despite these effects

¹¹¹ Austin Ramzy, “When North Met South: A Short History of Inter-Korean Summits (Published 2018),” *The New York Times*, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/world/asia/north-south-korea-summit.html>.

¹¹² Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹¹³ Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, “The Six Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Program,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/background/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>.

¹¹⁴ Michael J Seth, *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon Routledge, 2017), Ch. 26.

¹¹⁵ History.com Editors, “George W. Bush Describes Iraq, Iran and North Korea as ‘Axis of Evil,’” HISTORY (A&E Television Networks, January 27, 2020), <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/bush-describes-iraq-iran-north-korea-as-axis-of-evil>.

¹¹⁶ Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹¹⁷ Hyonhee Shin, “Factbox: History of Inter-Korean Summits,” Reuters, February 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-2018-northkorea-factbox-idUSKBN1FU0BO>.

¹¹⁸ Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, “The Six Party Talks on North Korea’s Nuclear Program,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/background/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>.

tensions raised again with the start of nuclear testings by Kim Jong-il on 2002, and the withdrawal from the before mentioned talks on denuclearisation¹¹⁹.

b) The ROK Policies towards the DPRK

It is evident that policies from the two Koreas in respect to unification are completely opposed, be it due to their different ideologies or future prospects for the Peninsula¹²⁰. In the case of the ROK, through the years, with changing presidencies the view and position towards the DPRK has also changed¹²¹.

It has been mentioned before that the DPRK firmly supported the destruction of the South's democracy. On its side, the ROK included in its constitution, Article IV, the idea that if reunification was to be carried it should be based on a free and democratic order. This further highlights a point that has already been made, the two antagonistic national identities in the Peninsula¹²².

As for the ROK's government views towards the DPRK, it could be said to be an ever-changing issue. The position taken during the authoritarian rule had nothing to do with that of the Sunshine policy, for example. During the Authoritarian rule inter-Korean relations were seen as a simple way of drawing attention off domestic problems in the South.

This vision was completely changed by President Roh Tae-woo and his well-known Nordpolitik. After the ROK's democratisation the country started building relations with the PRC, the USSR and European countries. The Nordpolitik turned the public's vision of the DPRK, it became not only known as a threat and adversary, but the government allowed the society as a whole to gain knowledge on the country, its history and society. Moreover, during his presidency the ROK assisted the northern state during the famine crisis through the UN. In turn, this political change was not to approach governments but rather societies^{123 124}.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*

¹²⁰ Olivia Berntsson, "South Korea Aims to Make 'Last-Ditch' Effort for North Korea Breakthrough," The Organization for World Peace, February 2, 2021, <https://theowp.org/south-korea-aims-to-make-last-ditch-effort-for-north-korea-breakthrough/>.

¹²¹ Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹²² *Ibid*

¹²³ *Ibid*

¹²⁴ Michael J Seth, *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon Routledge, 2017), Ch. 26.

With the change in government, the ROK's position towards the DPRK changed drastically, this new era was the Sunshine era. This new policy was based, as the President stated, in “actively pursuing reconciliation and cooperation between the South and the North.” The actions of the government in regards to the Sunshine policy were seen with skepticism, as the DPRK seemed too demanding. In turn the sunshine policy turned out not to be as effective as it was portrayed in the first place, by augmenting incursions by the North, naval clashes, Nevertheless, Kim Dae-jung managed to announce an inter-Korean summit and regained some of the public’s support¹²⁵.

From this announcement on, two main inter-Korean summits have been held in 2000 and 2007, resulting in a joint declaration and an eight-point agreement respectively. However, with the end of the Sunshine policy in 2010, no more face-to-face dialogues were held until Moon Jae-in came into power¹²⁶.

4.3. Inter-Korean Relations: Current status

In the present day, the DPRK is still under a communist regime presided by Kim Jong-un and the democracy of the ROK is led by Moon Jae-in. Indeed, two completely different ideologies which may, and in fact have, difficult the amelioration of relations inside the Peninsula¹²⁷.

The government of the ROK has elaborated a policy plan under the ministry of unification. This plan is aimed at creating peace and prosperity, not only in the Peninsula but in the region as a whole. It has been said that Moon Jae-in is what’s left of the sunshine policy’s legacy¹²⁸ and this is a clear example. The President is focusing on engagement with the North in a peaceful and mutually respectful way in order to achieve cooperation and understanding¹²⁹.

¹²⁵ Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹²⁶ Hyonhee Shin, “Factbox: History of Inter-Korean Summits,” Reuters, February 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-2018-northkorea-factbox-idUSKBN1FU0BO>.

¹²⁷ Olivia Berntsson, “South Korea Aims to Make ‘Last-Ditch’ Effort for North Korea Breakthrough,” The Organization for World Peace, February 2, 2021, <https://theowp.org/south-korea-aims-to-make-last-ditch-effort-for-north-korea-breakthrough/>.

¹²⁸ Marcus Noland and Kent Boydston, “President Moon Jae-in and Sunshine Policy 3.0,” PIIE, May 9, 2017, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/president-moon-jae-and-sunshine-policy-30>.

¹²⁹ Ministry of Unification, “Three Goals< Moon Jae-In’s Policy on the Korean Peninsula< Policy Issues< 통일부_영문,” Unikorea.go.kr, 2017, https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/policyIssues/koreanpeninsula/goals/.



Having in mind the vision of the South it is easy to think relations between the two countries could be resumed in the near future. However, it is also important to analyse the North's point of view. The figure of Kim Jong-un is that of a powerful and committed leader, he is focused on turning the north's economy into a modernised one that fits in the XXI century. This might lead to thinking that such evolution should be accompanied by a relaxation of the communist ideology that has been present in the country for decades now. However, he is one of the most determined leaders the DPRK has had and is really committed to continuing the communist legacy¹³⁰.

Taking this into account, there are some remarkable events that have been key in the evolution of the internal relation in the Peninsula. As already stated, the DPRK is still under a communist regime which means its policies and views are nowhere near those of ROK's President Moon Jae-in. The leader of the DPRK is of course in the need to make several changes in the country's structure, however these measures seem incompatible with his desires to ensure the lasting of his dynasty in power. Adding on to this, Kim Jong-un is, as is Moon Jae-in, willing to create inter-Korean relations in a sustainable way. Where does the problem stand then if both leaders are focused on a similar outcome? Conditions are, however, difficult to meet from both sides. The North's leader is not eager to give concessions and even if he seems in "acceptance" of his

¹³⁰ Chung Min Lee and Chung Min Lee, "Why the Koreas Won't Achieve Peace as Long as Kim Jong Un Is in Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/11/05/why-koreas-won-t-achieve-peace-as-long-as-kim-jong-un-is-in-power-pub-80284>.

model of denuclearisation the conditions can't be met neither by the US nor by the ROK¹³¹. In all, Kim Jong-un wants to get outcomes without making concessions, he is committed to opposite ideas that cannot be compatible and thus is making sustainable peace in the Peninsula difficult to achieve¹³².

On top of everything that has been said before, even if Moon and Kim have met face-to-face which had not happened since 2007, there have been relevant events which make Moon's policy difficult to develop in its entirety. The 2018 summits between the two countries were, somehow, successful as they resulted in the signing of an agreement which contained the DPRK's steps towards denuclearisation¹³³. In spite of this, the agreement was not at all what the international sphere was expecting, as Kim Jong-un's path to denuclearisation is dependent on American action first with removal of troops from the Peninsula¹³⁴.

Ever since this small step forwards in 2018, relations have not been positively evolving. In the following year, the North repeatedly denied any offer made from the South, whether it was on inter-Korean summits or humanitarian aid, despite this Moon's government still insisted, on the grounds of his aforementioned unification policy. During that year, Kim constantly addressed the South as not compelling to the joint agreements from 2018. In the course 2020, tensions escalated with several dramatic events. Amongst them the agreement-established liaison office was destroyed by the North and never again reconstructed^{135 136}, a ROK official was killed by Kim Jong-un's government, who later apologised for such disgraceful event¹³⁷, continuous missile testing¹³⁸

¹³¹ Chung Min and Chung Min, "President Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Inter-Korean Détente," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/16/president-moon-jae-in-and-politics-of-inter-korean-d-tente-pub-77730>.

¹³² *Ibid*

¹³³ Alex Ward, "North and South Korea's Agreement Is Bad News for Trump," Vox (Vox, September 19, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/2018/9/19/17878428/north-south-korea-kim-moon-declaration>.

¹³⁴ Chung Min and Chung Min, "President Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Inter-Korean Détente," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/16/president-moon-jae-in-and-politics-of-inter-korean-d-tente-pub-77730>

¹³⁵ By Ankit Panda, "Kaesong Liaison Office: What Does North Korea Want?," BBC News, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53059491>.

¹³⁶ BBC News, "North Korea Blows up Joint Liaison Office with South in Kaesong," BBC News, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53060620> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53060620>.

¹³⁷ Khang Vu, "What Is behind Kim Jong Un's Apology for the Killing of a South Korean?," The Diplomat, October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/what-is-behind-kim-jong-uns-apology-for-the-killing-of-a-south-korean/>.

¹³⁸ Amanda Macias, "North Korea Fires off First Missile Test since Biden Took Office," CNBC, March 23, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/23/north-korea-fires-off-first-missile-test-since-biden-took-office.html>.

It is clear that what started as a positive path for inter-Korean relations in 2018 has in the last two years turned into internal tension escalation with the North committed to its nuclear programme and asking for too many concessions while wanting to give little in response and the South aiming for peaceful coexistence and cooperation through resuming of relations between the two countries. What is more, the two traditional allies, US and the ROK, are not as united as it could have been expected in this issue, being the former more concerned on the nuclear issue and the latter on the Inter-Korean peace process^{139 140}.

4.4. What to expect from inter-Korean relations in the next 10 years

Having studied the current status of the Peninsula in terms of inter-Korean relations it is now possible to assess what turn may said relations take in the following 10 years. In order to carry such prospective analysis, this paper has taken into account the main drivers that might influence such evolution security, politically, economically, energetically and opinion-wise. In each scenario, assessment has been given to the drivers in terms of how big their impact would be. From such analysis five different possibilities are open in terms of the North-South liaison. All these scenarios depart from the idea that Moon's policy is aimed at achieving the resuming of inter-Korean relations and thus efforts from the ROK would be made in this regard^{141 142}.

Figure 6: Future scenarios in the Korean Peninsula, a 2030 horizon

LEGEND

- - Very low impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- Low impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- +/- Medium impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- + High impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario
- ++ Very high impact of the driver on the plausibility of the scenario

¹³⁹ Soo Kim and Soo Kim, "Moon's North Korea Vision up in Smoke? Not so Fast....," Rand.org, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/moons-north-korea-vision-up-in-smoke-not-so-fast.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Sean Lee, "Moon Jae-in Holds on to His Dream of North Korea Diplomacy," Thediplomat.com, June 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/moon-jae-in-holds-on-to-his-dream-of-north-korea-diplomacy/>.

¹⁴¹ Samuel S Kim, *Inter-Korean Relations: Problems and Prospects* (New York Palgrave Macmillan Us, 2004), 21–57.

¹⁴² Chung-in Moon, "President Moon Jae-in and the Korea Peace Initiative," Global Asia, 2017, https://www.globalasia.org/v14no2/cover/president-moon-jae-in-and-the-korea-peace-initiative_chung-in-moon.

DRIVERS	Scenario 1 REUNIFICATION	Scenario 2 PEACE AGREEMENT	Scenario 3 STATUS MAINTENANCE	Scenario 5 ARMED CONFLICT
North Korea takes steps towards denuclearisation	++	++	+	--
Sanctions towards North Korea become Positive	+/-	++	+	--
2024 US Presidential elections: Republican Government	+	++	+/-	-
Trilateral cooperation: ROK-DPRK-Russia	++	+	+/-	--
The THAAD stays in place	--	-	+	++
South Korea succeeds in its renewable energy plan	+	++	+/-	--
South Korea lacks active population	++	+	+	-
Youth's indifference towards the Peninsula's reunification	--	-	+/-	+/-
New SK Government in 2022	++	++	-	--

Source: Author's elaboration

The **first scenario** foresees the reunification of the Peninsula. This scenario is evidently marked by the DPRK taking steps towards denuclearisation which would be triggered by the UNSC decision to implement the positive sanctions proposed by US President Joe Biden¹⁴³. Such a path towards denuclearisation would lead to the future removal of the THAAD owned by the US and placed in the ROK's territory¹⁴⁴, which would give the DPRK more reassurance in its denuclearisation. In terms of ameliorating relations, Russia's 9 bridges would be a key player in bringing back together the two countries with the creation of trilateral cooperation. Such rapprochement would be followed by bilateral cooperation in terms of labour force which is directly related to the success of the ROK's renewable energy plan, for which labour force is needed and the DPRK is the perfect candidate to provide it. If all these actions were to be taken simultaneously the likelihood of reunification would be as high as possible.

The **second scenario**, in which the, highly sought, peace agreement would finally be reached, departs from, again, a change to positive sanctions from the UNSC and a subsequent decision from the DPRK to denuclearise. In this case, trilateral cooperation between the two Korea's and Russia would impact positively because it would allow to create stability and promote a

¹⁴³ Benjamin Zimmer and Kedar Pandya, "Logical Engagement: Using Positive Sanctions to Coerce North Korea," Regionalsecurity.org.au, December 2020, https://regionalsecurity.org.au/security_challenge/logical-engagement-using-positive-sanctions-to-coerce-north-korea/.

¹⁴⁴ Jung Pak, "Trying To Loosen The Linchpin: China's Approach To South Korea", July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200606_china_south_korea_pak_v2.pdf.

ROK-DPRK partnership. Moreover, a ROK successful in its renewable energy plan would increase eagerness to resume relations on the side of the DPRK as it would lead to a lower dependency on the US in terms of energy, which is in fact one of the main constraints for the North.

For this two first scenarios the ROK elections in 2022 would have a high impact in the sense that it is Moon's party the one making the biggest efforts on inter-Korean relations. This means that, although it is difficult to foresee the results from said elections, no friendlier policy can be implemented towards the DPRK, at least if the ROK wants to keep the US-ROK alliance alive.

The **third scenario** goes along the lines of maintaining the current armistice. For such a situation, and considering Moon's policy, the DPRK would be reluctant to take any step on denuclearisation and sanctions would remain as they have been, meaning that positive ones would have no pressure effect towards the DPRK, this would lead to the maintenance of the THAAD in ROK's territory. In terms of cooperation, the DPRK would be unwilling to join Russia and the ROK. This stagnation of relations, would also be influenced by the ROK's youth's indifference towards a reunification on the Peninsula, which is to say that social pressure for bilateral cooperation and talks would decrease¹⁴⁵. Lastly, in 10 years time, the possibility of a new republican government in the US would be important due to the fact that such administration would go back to former Trump's policy which was not helpful at all in ameliorating the Peninsula's situation.

The **fourth scenario** explains the escalation of tensions in the Peninsula towards an armed conflict, as was the Korean War. In this case, the youth's perspective, alongside the continuation of sanctions maintenance of the THAAD, and recovering from the previous scenario building, an increased US-ROK cooperation in technology and know-how, and non-inclusion of the DPRK in the cooperation with Russia, would lead the northern part of the Peninsula to pursue its nuclear programme and take a step forward with an attack.

All scenarios presented and analysed it is clear that seeing the current policies of both the DPRK and the ROK reunification and armed conflict scenarios seem the least plausible at least in ten years time. In this regard, the reach of a Peninsular peace agreement has a higher likelihood taking into account the new Biden Administration and what is thought to be the

¹⁴⁵ Kim Jiyeon, Kildong Kim, and Kang Chungku, "South Korean Youths' Perceptions of North Korea and Unification," The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2018, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/43527/>.

“Asian Pivot 2.0” and Moon’s continuing efforts for stability in the Peninsula¹⁴⁶. Nevertheless, the possibility of an unchanging status in the inter-Korean relations seems the most plausible scenario.

Having said this, there are some important implications coming from the third scenario: 1) diplomatic relations would not be established in the short term even if there is willingness coming from the ROK’s side, the DPRK is not wanting to make any concession, 2) Kim Jong-un is highly committed to preserve his dynasty and communist regime in the North¹⁴⁷, 3) US would not yield unless the DPRK makes a pledge for denuclearisation, which, by looking at the recent resuming of ballistic tests, is not likely to happen¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁶ Ministry of Unification, “Three Goals< Moon Jae-In’s Policy on the Korean Peninsula< Policy Issues< 통일부_영문,” Unikorea.go.kr, 2017,

https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/policyissues/koreanpeninsula/goals/.

¹⁴⁷ Chung Min Lee and Chung Min Lee, “Why the Koreas Won’t Achieve Peace as Long as Kim Jong Un Is in Power,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/11/05/why-koreas-won-t-achieve-peace-as-long-as-kim-jong-un-is-in-power-pub-80284>.

¹⁴⁸ Justin McCurry, “North Korea Test Fires Two Ballistic Missiles in Challenge to Biden,” The Guardian, March 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/25/north-korea-missile-test-japan-south-korea>.

5. OTHER SOUTH KOREAN CONCERNS

The nuclear issue, regional and inter-Korean relations are critical issues not only for the future of South Korea but also for the international community as a whole. However, the ROK has other national concerns that can be seen as crucial in order to assess its future development and status within the region and the world. Considering this, the last part of this paper is aimed at analyzing the present status and future prospects and implications of three of the said national issues, them being: the COVID-19 pandemic management and its implications, the demographic problems the country is and might face in the future and lastly energetic security, more concretely how the ROK is approaching energetic dependency and the country's plan on renewable energy transition. Targeting these issues is essential as they affect the economic, health, energetic and labour sectors of the country which in turn have an impact on society altogether.

5.1. ROK and the Coronavirus Pandemic: lessons learned and future applicability

The coronavirus broke out in China at the end of 2019, since then outbreaks were found in each and every country of the world, turning the COVID-19 into a global pandemic. Global responses in such a short time are difficult to get and thus individual national responses were needed. The case of South Korea is internationally known as being one of the best COVID-19 crisis management¹⁴⁹. What has this crisis management consisted of? And, more importantly, has the ROK's strategy been simulated elsewhere, or could it be used for future pandemics¹⁵⁰?

In order to correctly assess the ROK's blueprint in regard to Covid-19, it is worth mentioning that unlike in the western countries, the ROK had had to face an outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015¹⁵¹. The MERS crisis made the Asian country build the capability to face any future health issue that was similar to it. Furthermore, society's trust on

¹⁴⁹ Sean Lee, "Moon Jae-in Holds on to His Dream of North Korea Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, June 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/moon-jae-in-holds-on-to-his-dream-of-north-korea-diplomacy/>

¹⁵⁰ Juliette Schwak, "K-Quarantine: Exporting South Korea's COVID-19 Management Strategy | East Asia Forum," *East Asia Forum*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/11/k-quarantine-exporting-south-koreas-covid-19-management-strategy/>.

¹⁵¹ Victor D. Ch and Marie Dumond, "The Korean Pivot: The Study of South Korea as a Global Power" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

the government, cooperation between public and private systems and a great political strategy, made possible the containment of the virus in the country¹⁵².

The ROK's policy had three main stages: detection, containment and treatment. The first phase was aimed at targeting all active cases with the help of massive testing. This capability was built by the government based on the previous MERS experience and great cooperation between private companies and the public system, the country reached a testing capability of 110,000 tests per day. In addition to massive testing the country developed a screening mechanism to avoid an increase in infections, and self-isolate those with clear symptoms until results were released.

At the same time, the second stage was aimed at containing the virus and avoiding its spreading. In this regard, the ROK followed the World Health Organisation (WHO) and instead of closing borders the government established strong conditions and requirements for entrance in the country. Adding to this, the country developed a safety protection app for those who were self-isolated either due to contact with a confirmed case, travel or having symptoms. This app controlled the compliance with the mandatory 14 days quarantine in such cases. Simultaneously, the government offered support for isolated persons, supplying food, psychological assistance and means for entertainment. Last but not least in its efforts at holding back the Covid-19 spread, the ROK built up a tracing system for those in contact with an infected person.

The third and last phase concerned the treatment of the virus. This stage focused on those that tested positive and consisted on classification of patients depending on the severity of their cases. This way more concrete treatment and attention was given to each and every COVID-19 case. Furthermore, the government designated health facilities exclusively to COVID-19 cases, which was in fact possible due to the high number of beds the country had available¹⁵³.

In all, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea was excellent, developing a strategy that was proven to be successful with only 133.000 cases and 1912 deaths on the country as of today¹⁵⁴. The ROK's government was well aware of this success and thus was

¹⁵² Juliette Schwak, "K-Quarantine: Exporting South Korea's COVID-19 Management Strategy | East Asia Forum," East Asia Forum, March 11, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/11/k-quarantine-exporting-south-koreas-covid-19-management-strategy/>.

¹⁵³ June-Ho Kim et al., "Emerging COVID-19 Success Story: South Korea Learned the Lessons of MERS," Our World in Data, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exemplar-south-korea>.

¹⁵⁴ "South Korea Coronavirus: 8,565 Cases and 91 Deaths - Worldometer," www.worldometers.info, May 19, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/south-korea/>.

eager to export its model to other countries in the world so as to help with worldwide pandemic containment. On top of that, several countries have asked the ROK for help dealing with the pandemic, and in sight of the critical situation that was hitting all over the world the government agreed to export its test kits and even donate some of them to partners in Asia¹⁵⁵.

Seeing the objective data of COVID-19 cases and deaths, it is evident that the model developed by the ROK was to be examined by other governments. Again, the ROK took the necessary steps to make such transfer possible and available to any state willing to implement it. However, it is important to note that there are other countries with similar success in the pandemic management and which were also willing to hand over their strategies, examples of them are Taiwan or New Zealand. What is more, there are a few elements that might make this emulation in other countries more difficult than it might seem. Firstly, the South Korean society is more used to data-sharing which has been critical in the tracing stage of the plan. The huge information that was available to public officials ranged from GPS location of isolated people to access to credit transactions to trace where people had been and when. This data-sharing is not a common practice in western countries where the population is much less willing to give up what is considered very private information¹⁵⁶. Secondly, the development of the plan was dependent on the technological knowledge the country had developed in the years following the MERS outbreak¹⁵⁷. Said technology is not easily available in developing countries as it requires a deep know-how which South Korea acquired through historical experiences.

In conclusion, the ROK's pandemic management has been hugely effective on the country itself but such success does not necessarily translate into export possibilities. In all, the national strategy was custom-made for the ROK, taking into account the specific situation and resources of the country. Thus, although countries might have been eager at first to emulate the "k-quarantine" method of the ROK some of the requirements were difficult to meet. However, what is actually a very viable scenario is that the ROK will be able to interiorise the acquired knowledge for future events, as it did after the MERS outbreak.

¹⁵⁵ Juliette Schwak, "K-Quarantine: Exporting South Korea's COVID-19 Management Strategy | East Asia Forum," East Asia Forum, March 11, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/11/k-quarantine-exporting-south-koreas-covid-19-management-strategy/>.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew Campbell and Heesu Lee, "South Korea's Successful Approach of Regimented Masking, Aggressive Testing, and High-Tech Contact Tracing Is a Blueprint for the U.S. And Other Democracies," Bloomberg.com, December 10, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2020-south-korea-covid-strategy/>.

¹⁵⁷ Juliette Schwak, "K-Quarantine: Exporting South Korea's COVID-19 Management Strategy | East Asia Forum," East Asia Forum, March 11, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/11/k-quarantine-exporting-south-koreas-covid-19-management-strategy/>.

5.2. The ROK's demographic challenges

With the largest decreasing birth rate population in the world, the ROK has become one of the countries with the most rapidly aging indexes ever seen¹⁵⁸. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has been reduced from an average of 6.33 children per woman in 1960, to its lowest rate so far, 0.84 children per woman in 2020¹⁵⁹. Moreover, Statistics Korea estimated that the national TFR would reach 0.86 children per woman in 2021, 0.02 points higher than 2020 recordings. As a result, this optimistic estimation is unlikely to be reached, putting faith in an alternative pessimistic projection set in 0.78 children per woman¹⁶⁰.

The 1960s “baby boom” derived from the introduction of Western health systems, provoking a decline in child mortality rate, excessively pressured land resources. As a result, Park Chung-hee's authoritarian government-imposed regulations on family planning. This fertility transition plan notably progressed, reducing the high fertility rate (6.3) to a stable replacement-level fertility rate (2.1) in 1980¹⁶¹.

As the UN elucidates, the Replacement-level fertility rate is set at “2.1 children per woman” since “this value represents the average number of children a woman would need to reproduce herself by bearing a daughter who survives to childbearing age”¹⁶². As a result, the ROK society is aging at great speed, with a median age of 43.7 years, considering that no population replacement is guaranteed¹⁶³.

¹⁵⁸ Darcie Draudt, “South Korea's Migrant Policies and Democratic Challenges after the Candlelight Movement”, 2019, http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_aps_draught_191017.pdf.

¹⁵⁹ Lee Kyung-mi, “S. Korea's Fertility Rate Marks Record Low in 2020,” Hani.co.kr, February 25, 2021, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/984524.html#:~:text=In%20a%20special%20long%20term,a%20more%20pessimistic%20alternative%20projection.

¹⁶⁰ Statistics Korea, “Birth Statistics in 2019,” Kostat.go.kr, August 6, 2020, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/10/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=385158&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&searchInfo=&sTarget=title&sTxt=>.

¹⁶¹ Kwon Tai-Hwan, “Population Change and Development in Korea,” Asia Society - Center for Global Education, 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/education/population-change-and-development-korea>.

¹⁶² United Nations Organization, “Total Fertility Rate Demographics Population Change”, 2006, https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/methodology_sheets/demographics/total_fertility_rate.pdf.

¹⁶³ “South Korea Demographics 2020 (Population, Age, Sex, Trends) - Worldometer,” Worldometers.info, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/south-korea-demographics/>.

a) Demographic transition consequences: immigration and resentment

The demographic transition has had notable implications for the ROK economy, as the national work force available in the country is decreasing¹⁶⁴. For this reason, the ROK has to cope with an insufficient domestic population to meet the demand, not only because of the population decline¹⁶⁵.

Despite the fact that the young Korean population's attainment of a college degree has grown in the last decade, a strong resentment towards Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) justifies its unwillingness to work out of *chaebols*. In the view of the fact that SMEs involve blue-collar occupations, young graduated South Koreans are reluctant to "become" unskilled workers¹⁶⁶. As a consequence, the Employment Permit System (EPS) allows immigrant unskilled workers to meet ROK's labor demand by conducting "3-D jobs" (dangerous, dirty and difficult) offered by those enterprises with less than 300 employers¹⁶⁷.

Nevertheless, the EPS', despite being scrutinised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹⁶⁸, protection of migrant workers is doubtful, since (1) it attaches the migrant workers' visa tied to the employer, thus being vulnerable to exploitation, work unpayments, sexual abuses, etc.; (2) it does not permit familiar displacements within ROK soil; and (3) it only allows labor visas to be renewed for a period of five-years maximum. In the light of these requirements, it appears that the ROK government is posing legal barriers to long-term settlement of migrant workers¹⁶⁹.

Due to these obstacles to non-domestic labor force, many decide to become undocumented workers, putting at risk their most basic rights, as the access to health service, or even their lives¹⁷⁰. Despite the fact that migrant workers are considered to be a necessity to guarantee the Korean economic stability, most nationals regret the acceptance of migrant workers on a

¹⁶⁴ United Nations Organization, "TOTAL FERTILITY RATE Demographics Population Change" (, 2006), https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/natlinfo/indicators/methodology_sheets/demographics/total_fertility_rate.pdf.

¹⁶⁵ Monet Stokes, "South Korea Needs More Workers, Easier Routes for Migrants," Foreign Policy (Foreign Policy, January 28, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/28/south-korea-migrant-workers/>.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁸ Lee Kyung-mi, "S. Korea's Fertility Rate Marks Record Low in 2020," Hani.co.kr, February 25, 2021, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/984524.html#:~:text=In%20a%20special%20long%20term,a%20more%20pessimistic%20alternative%20projection.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁰ Monet Stokes, "South Korea Needs More Workers, Easier Routes for Migrants," Foreign Policy (Foreign Policy, January 28, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/28/south-korea-migrant-workers/>.

permanent basis. As a result, crackdowns against undocumented migrants are growing across the ROK¹⁷¹.

b) Future provisions

Taking all the information and data available about TFR and population censuses since the 1960s, the Government of the ROK estimated that fertility rates will not reach positive levels in 10 years' time. Indeed, it is likely that the ROK continues leading the “lowest fertility rate countries” list, not only in Asia, but worldwide¹⁷². Indeed, the South Korean young population, especially women from 25 to 34 years old, are not only contributing to this “births lowdown”, some have even decided to abandon romantic relationships. As a result, the so-called “Sampo Generation” decided to give up (1) relationships, (2) marriage, and (3) children, as a way to safeguard their professional careers¹⁷³.

In light of the worsening situation, the Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy (PCASPP) has introduced new incentives for families to encourage the TFR growth. This policy will monthly proffer ₩300,000, less than \$300, to first year infant families, starting in 2022, and progressively incrementing the sum until 2025¹⁷⁴. This policy fits in the government's “5 tasks for creating a society in which all members care for one another and work together” which aims to (1) reduce financial burdens of childbirth, (2) secure more time for parents to spend with their children, (3) develop a sophisticated and safe childcare system, (4) create an inclusive family culture, and (5) set the bases for a 2040 stable generation¹⁷⁵.

Despite government efforts, the South Korean society, which heavily relies on individualism and classism, is likely to continue with its TFR decrease, posing a real challenge to its central executive power to ensure the replacement of its population.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*

¹⁷² Statistics Korea, “Population Projections for Korea (2015~2065),” Kostat.go.kr, 2015, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/8/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=359108&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&searchInfo=&sTarget=title&sTxt=>.

¹⁷³ Miriam Quick, “South Korea's Population Paradox,” BBC, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20191010-south-koreas-population-paradox>.

¹⁷⁴ South Korea announces incentives for more births, “South Korea Announces Incentives for More Births,” Aa.com.tr, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/south-korea-announces-incentives-for-more-births/2077452>.

¹⁷⁵ Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy, “저출산고령사회위원회,” Betterfuture.go.kr, 2019, <http://www.betterfuture.go.kr/eng/pcaspp/fertility.do>.

5.3. The energy issue: current dependency and future scenarios

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), energy security can be defined as “the uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price”¹⁷⁶. It has two dimensions, long-term and short-term. The first one has to do with a country’s ability to handle economic changes and environmental needs and to take measures on energy accordingly. The second one, however, is centered on how quickly its energy system can adapt to unexpected changes affecting demand and supply¹⁷⁷.

The question that arises here is whether the ROK will be able to maintain its energy security taking into account the economic and political uncertainty that surrounds it and the North East Asia region at the moment.

For the short-term energy security analysis one must take into account the economic setbacks that ROK has been suffering in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and, consequently, with regards to domestic energy demand.

The ROK regularly supplies neighbouring Asian countries, but mainly China and Japan, with electronics, semiconductors and petrochemicals¹⁷⁸. However, as a result of the former’s economic slowdown between 2018 and 2019 and regular trade clashes with the latter, the ROK’s GDP growth decreased substantially during that same period (from 2,9% to 2%) causing an overall decline in energy consumption in the country¹⁷⁹.

While the country expected to start recovering immediately, it has had to face other important obstacles. Not only is the country’s population aging worrying, but it also has to deal with the current COVID-19 pandemic and its long-lasting adverse effects (2020 GDP: -1.1%). Both of these scenarios are “expected to dampen domestic energy demand and the overall economic landscape”¹⁸⁰.

In spite of this and giving some hope to the South Koreans, “27 economists forecast the economy to grow 3%” in 2021, a prediction that is in line with that of the Bank of Korea and

¹⁷⁶ International Energy Agency (IEA), “Energy Security – Topics - IEA,” IEA, 2015, <https://www.iea.org/topics/energy-security>

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁸ Energy Information Administration (EIA)- South Korea,” Eia.gov, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*

that takes into account how vaccines may stimulate demand, both domestically and internationally¹⁸¹.

As to long-term energy security, it greatly depends on the general worldwide transition to renewable energies and the ROK's capacity to adapt to such changes, as well as on the evolution of regional economic and political dynamics.

As of today, the ROK highly depends on thermal generation of electricity, mainly from nuclear and fossil fuels. Due to its lack of oil reserves, in order to supply its population both in terms of fuel consumption and electricity, it has had to import great quantities of hydrocarbon, coal and LNG¹⁸².

Things are slowly changing with the increase in use of natural gas and the reactivation and development of many nuclear thermal reactors, but the ROK still “ranks among the world's top five importers of LNG, coal and total petroleum liquids”¹⁸³.

In global terms, in the past decade there has been increasing awareness about the state of the environment and human health, and thus about the need to reduce carbon emissions. In 2015, the Paris Agreement was adopted, which favored the cost reduction of the technology needed to implement cleaner energies and also paved the way for a more supportive political arena for this energy transition¹⁸⁴.

According to the IEA States Policies Scenario (STEPS), total energy demand will have increased by 9% in 2030 and 21% of it will be electricity¹⁸⁵. Moreover, renewable resources will most probably account for 40% of the world's electricity demand in that same year, with their share in electricity generation reaching 80%¹⁸⁶. Simultaneously, “advanced economies will see one-third of their coal-fired capacity and one-fifth of their nuclear fleet being retired in the next decade”¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸¹ Cynthia Kim, “South Korea Fourth-Quarter GDP Beats Expectations, Poised for Strong 2021 Rebound,” U.S., January 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-economy-gdp-idUNBN29U2NA>

¹⁸² “International - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)- South Korea,” Eia.gov, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁴ Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA - KEEI, “Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA,” IEA, 2021, <https://www.iea.org/reports/korea-electricity-security-review>

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*

Being a party to the IEA since 2002 (highest share among its member countries in 2018) and having signed the 2015 Agreement¹⁸⁸, the ROK is now compromised towards achieving a more “diversified energy matrix, (which would) contribute to improving energy security, but also require changes to the way the system is operated and planned”¹⁸⁹.

This new policy orientation is sustained by certain national institutional arrangements, such as the Electricity Utility Act and the consequent Basic Plans for Long-term Electricity Supply and Demand (BPLE), the first of these having been released in 2002¹⁹⁰. Although the 8th BPLE was established in 2017 for a period of 15 years (until 2031), in 2020 the 9th was ratified and will be effective until 2034¹⁹¹.

According to the latter, the ROK plans the “New and Renewable Energy (NRE) share in the installed capacity” to account for 40% of the total in 2034, the current value being around 15%¹⁹², as well as that their share in generation increases to 20% from current 7% in 2030¹⁹³. NREs mainly consist of solar PV, wind, hydro, oceanic, biogas, Integrated Gasification Combined-cycle (IGCC), fuel cell and landfill gas energy sources¹⁹⁴.

As a parallel policy, the government expects closure of all its coal-based plants by that time¹⁹⁵ and “a reduction in the share of nuclear power in power generation”¹⁹⁶.

In order to make this important transition to renewable energies, the ROK has to bear in mind several other factors such as¹⁹⁷:

Increasing flexibility (like preparing for the change from dispatchable to non-dispatchable generation, which could have an impact on market dynamics)

¹⁸⁸ “UNTC,” Un.org, 2021, https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVII-7-d&chapter=27&clang=en

¹⁸⁹ Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA - KEEL, “Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA,” IEA, 2021, <https://www.iea.org/reports/korea-electricity-security-review>

¹⁹⁰ “The 8th Basic Plan for Long-Term Electricity Supply and Demand”, 2017, <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/8th%20Basic%20Plan%20for%20Long-term%20Electricity%20Supply%20and%20Demand%20%282017%20-%202031%29.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ “9th Basic Plan for Power Supply and Demand | ESCAP Policy Documents Management,” Asiapacific-energy.org, 2020, <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/node/4314>

¹⁹² Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA - KEEL, “Korea Electricity Security Review – Analysis - IEA,” IEA, 2021, <https://www.iea.org/reports/korea-electricity-security-review>

¹⁹³ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*

Guaranteeing operational security (by creating Renewable Energy Zones, (REZs); and strengthening systems to increase visibility and quality of generators)

Improving long-term planning (by taking into account the economic impact of policies and better integrating existing resources)

Making improvements in the market (for more transparency and flexibility), and

Taking measures towards climate and cyber resilience (creation of new infrastructure for dealing with potential weather events).

Successive Korean governments have already realised that the fact that it has an isolated energy system will complicate its integration of Variable Renewable Energy (VRE). Other countries have better connections to nearby systems, allowing them to exchange best practices and share costs¹⁹⁸. The ROK, however, lacks natural gas and oil pipelines and is relatively far from most international transport routes, so it mainly imports its resources through tanker shipments¹⁹⁹.

But there is still hope for Seoul as it is already making attempts at increasing relations and interdependencies with other countries. For instance, although the Middle East is still its most important crude oil supplier, the ROK is now receiving more cargoes from Russia, the US, Kazakhstan and Mexico²⁰⁰. Moreover, it is using the fact that it is the “third-largest importer of LNG after Japan and China”²⁰¹ as a leverage to improve relations with Russia, with which it aims to carry out the Nine Bridges Initiative, explained in previous section 3.3. Its main LNG suppliers are Qatar, Malaysia, Australia and the US²⁰², but if the Blue House’s Northern Policy is successful, Russia might be able to take their place soon.

As part of the same policy, the ROK is willing to create a trans-Korean pipeline and connect it to the Russian Trans-Siberian one. All of these steps will surely help the ROK government improve how it responds to energy and electricity demand.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹⁹ Energy Information Administration (EIA)- South Korea,” Eia.gov, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*

²⁰¹ *Ibid*

²⁰² Anthony Rinna, “Decrypting the Russia–South Korea Relationship | East Asia Forum,” East Asia Forum, June 13, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/06/13/decrypting-the-russia-south-korea-relationship/>

In addition to this, if relations with China, Russia and Japan get better (see section 2.1., 2.2. and 2.3) and if there is a rapprochement with the DPRK, the Asian Super Grid plan could more easily be implemented. This huge electrical energy transmission network between Mongolia, both Koreas, Russia, Japan and China (to be supplied by Russia and Mongolia) would without a doubt benefit the ROK in many ways.

First, it would allow it to be part of a greater Asian economic and infrastructure project, which could give it leverage against other powers and maybe contribute to raising its status from middle to major power.

Secondly, increasing ties with the DPRK would be both a cause and a consequence of this initiative and there is no need to explain why this would be beneficial for both Koreas, for the region and for the international community as a whole.

Finally, yet importantly, even if the ROK is taking unilateral and successful measures to progressively change the nature and efficiency of its power system, it still has no capacity to sustain its conventional apparatus, which makes it hard to believe that it would be able to deal with a new fully renewable generation system on its own. In other words, it could use the help and assistance from all the neighbouring economies that are more advanced in this sector.

All in all, and as energy security is concerned, it is safe and reasonable to say that the ROK is not in the worst position. Not only is it part of international and regional initiatives, but it is also showing willingness and interest to adapt to changing demands and challenges. COVID-19, the aging of its population due to an increasingly low birth rate and political tension in its country and the region are still important obstacles with which it will have to deal in the road to 2030, but the countries that wish to see it flourish are not few.

6. CONCLUSION

This strategic analysis is a prospective study of 4 factors that directly concern South Korea: a) the strength of the US-ROK alliance b) the evolution of South Korea's relations with its neighbours in North East Asia, c) the state of the inter-Korean rapprochement, and d) the management of the ROK's internal affairs which, correctly exploited, could give it regional and international leverage. The paper is aimed at providing a reliable and comprehensive guide to governments and other international actors through the predictions made in *Figures 3,4,5* and *6* under a 2030 horizon line. To conclude, the core ideas of each section:

With regards to the US-ROK security and military alliance, it is likely to remain one of the most powerful partnerships in North East Asia. As *Figure 3* Scenario 2 foresees, an enhanced contribution from the USFK to the US-ROK alliance would not come as a surprise. US commitment, not only to the Korean Peninsula but to the whole North Eastern region, would erode PRC's opportunities to surpass the American loyalty to its core allies. Given Trump's erosion of the US-ROK partnership as a result of his "America First" policy approach, Biden now has to cope with new challenges to restore the reliability of the alliance. Nevertheless, as it is shown, the more US soft power and hard power influence over the ROK, the greater the risk of a DPRK's nuclear and ballistic escalation. Will the US find the perfect balance between safeguarding its interests in the region and maintaining North East Asian stability?

As to the ROK's role in the region, it is currently focused on securing relations with 3 major powers, China, Japan and Russia. In spite of its security alliance with the US, the ROK is highly dependent on its economic partnership with China and is exhaustively looking for ways to make full benefit from it. Improvements have been made in the past few years but due to ideological and political differences, disagreements over the deployment of THAAD and issues such as the PRC's long-standing economic ties with the DPRK, the road to rapprochement will not be an easy one. With regards to Japan, the reasons for cooperating appear less clear to the ROK. While the fact that both are US allies in the region prevents them from distancing and forces them to cooperate on certain matters, dissent over the deeply rooted war-time labor issue and distrusting public opinions in both countries since the Japanese occupation of Korea blur the positive impact of ongoing diplomatic efforts. Finally, closeness to Russia is one of the ROK's main policy objectives for the coming years, an intention that is reflected in its Northern

Policy and Nine Bridges Initiative. A FTA is underway, but progress is dependent on the DPRK's willing to contribute and enter trilateral talks.

The state of affairs in the Korean Peninsula is also one of the ROK's main concerns, as it might be key to its future development. In this sense, and as the prospective analyses carried out in this paper show, three aspects characterise intra-peninsular relations: 1) The existence of two conflicting ideologies which make stretching the gap difficult, 2) More readiness coming from the South and Moon's unification policy than from Kim Jong-un's communist regime and 3) Coexistence of two different perspectives: the American one, prioritising denuclearisation, and the ROK's one, centered on advancing peninsular relations. Despite the latter's initial attempt to tackle both issues at the same time, this duality of paths has contributed to the above-mentioned damage to the US-ROK alliance. While the efforts to resume relations are evident, countries are not yet ready to move on from the armistice signed in 1953, which is to say that, as of today, ideologies, alliances and history are still huge impediments for progress either towards a peace agreement or, more optimistically, the reunification of the Peninsula.

Last but not least, the ROK has to deal with three national issues, the management of which can either enhance or undermine the consecution of the rest of its political and economic goals. In demographic terms, the ROK should give incentives to increase the country's birth rate and modify its migration policy or otherwise it will lack a much-needed active population in the future. As to the resources sector, the ROK should keep with its efforts towards a renewable transition and use improved relations with regional powers to further integrate its power system. Finally, in what concerns measures against the still-present Covid-19 pandemic, South Korea can continue to develop and improve its already well-functioning methods, but whether these are applicable externally is unfortunately not up to the Blue House but rather to base similarities with other countries.

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