CHAPTER 6.
Indo-Pacific Views of Korean Peninsular Security
Duyeon Kim
Introduction

Korea was historically a victim of conflicts among imperial powers, the United States, China, Russia, and Japan. For centuries, Korea sought to regain its sovereignty only to be divided as a result of great power contestation. Even today, power politics and strategic competition among key countries in the Indo-Pacific continue to affect and exert control over the peninsula. Challenges pertaining to regional security and Korean Peninsular security are not separate, but rather, affect each other.

Meanwhile, South Korea after the Korean War had no choice but to rely on the United States as its primary security guarantor. South Korea’s subsequent economic growth and transition to democracy and emergence as a net provider of security and global public goods have enabled it to seek greater autonomy. But the country’s strategic objectives, common among all states, to be able to defend itself and promote its own economic prosperity, continue to be constrained by South Korea’s unique geographical and geopolitical position and its surrounding strategic environment.

Peninsular security concerns continue to structure South Korea’s foreign policy and shape how regional players view recent developments on the peninsula. This chapter argues that they also influence security in the broader region and examines each major regional power’s perception of peninsular security. As South Korea grapples with the Indo-Pacific construct purported by its allies and partners, domestic politics, ideology, and geopolitics will either challenge or enable its policymakers to stretch their diplomatic reach beyond the constraints of peninsular security. It concludes with a discussion on how the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic might affect Korean Peninsular issues and geopolitics.
Korean Peninsular security concerns and South Korean foreign policy

South Korea’s security concerns have been and continue to fall into two broad categories: survival (security and prosperity) and the threat of renewed inter-Korean conflict. These security concerns have been caused by geopolitics (great power rivalry and alliance dependency) and the North Korean threat. They have been recurring themes until the present day, although each South Korean administration since the Park Chung-hee military dictatorship (1963-1979) have framed their policies differently depending on circumstances and ideology.

South Koreans are largely divided into conservatives (anti-Communism, pro-U.S.-South Korea alliance) and progressives (nationalism, autonomy from big foreign powers, sympathetic to North Korea). An examination of the foreign policies of successive South Korean presidential administrations show the extent to which they were shaped by peninsular concerns.

Fundamentally, survival is what shapes South Korea’s national and foreign policies for security and prosperity. Historically, the Korean Peninsula was a battleground for great power contestation for centuries—Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), US-Soviet Cold War and eventual Korean War (1950-1953); and decades of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). Ever since the Korean War, the two Koreas have been engaged in a competition to claim the entire Peninsula while South Korea has had no choice but to rely on the United States as its protector (security) and gateway to economic development and democracy (prosperity).

During the Cold War, South Korea’s security concern about renewed inter-Korean conflict stemming from the North Korean threat shaped its key foreign policy decisions, most of which were framed by concerns about abandonment by the United States. Such decisions included the normalization of relations with Japan, deploying troops to Vietnam, North Korean engagement in the early 1970s, and pursuit of a secret nuclear weapons program in the mid-1970s.

After the Cold War, the first nuclear crisis of the early 1990s became South Korea’s top security concern. Its interests simultaneously became more internationalised with its modernisation and new trade relationships. Since the conservative and first democratically-elected Roh Tae-woo government (1988-1993), South Korea also began to exhibit the trappings of a middle power: participating in multilateralism, and coalition- and institution- building to exert influence. Roh described the country as a “middle power,” expressing desire to build stronger political and economic ties in the region. South Korea debuted on the world stage by hosting the 1988 Summer Olympics, which helped it diversify relations beyond its alliance with the U.S. for the first time. Roh’s Nordpolitik aimed to overcome inter-Korean hostilities by promoting co-prosperity and normalising relations with the Communist bloc. His policy saw Seoul playing a central role instead of the Peninsula becoming another variable in the region’s
great power politics. In a roundabout way, Roh’s ultimate objective was to establish dialogue with Pyongyang through a summit.

The moderately conservative Kim Young-sam\textsuperscript{108} government (1993-1998) then officially professed a middle power identity\textsuperscript{109} with its segyehwa [globalisation] policy and 1996 membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It aimed to induce reform and openness in North Korea by promoting the effects of freedom and capitalism developing in the South and helped by the end of the Cold War\textsuperscript{110}. Kim’s ultimate goal was also to hold an inter-Korean summit followed by a series of high-level cross-border meetings, but simultaneously took a hard-line approach toward Pyongyang since the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993. The sudden death of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung in 1994 squashed prospects of an inter-Korean summit and differences in policy approaches with the William Clinton administration caused tensions in the alliance.

Foreign policy during South Korea’s first progressive government under President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) was rooted in the principles of “open nationalism, positive pacifism, and global democracy” that gave smaller countries an equal voice with bigger countries\textsuperscript{111}. But through Kim’s Sunshine Policy, Seoul placed inter-Korean relations at the centre of its foreign policy and great power relations in support of it, using economic relations with neighbours to transform the security environment on and around the Korean Peninsula.

Then, the progressive Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2008) aspired to play a “balancer role” in Northeast Asia amid increasing China-Japan rivalry and strained relations with Washington. He aimed for South Korea to play a leading role in establishing a Northeast Asian economic and security community, but was met with criticism from conservative South Koreans and scepticism from Americans who saw it as an attempt to distance the country from its U.S. ally\textsuperscript{112}. Roh’s government revitalized Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy but was split into the alliance faction favouring a more conservative approach to foreign policy and the independence faction favouring the centrality of inter-Korean relations. Both factions desired more autonomy from big-power control but the alliance faction sought this in the context of the US-South Korea alliance while the independent faction desired a foreign policy outside the alliance.

The conservative Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013) then widened South Korea’s foreign policy beyond traditional, hard security challenges and Northeast Asia by pursuing its “Global Korea” initiative. Lee’s aspirations included more multilateralism by expanding Seoul’s networking capacity and convening power (e.g., hosting of the G20, Nuclear Security Summit, OECD, etc.), tackling climate change, contributing more to international development, working to bridge rich and poor countries, and becoming a
respected global citizen. A key pillar was contributing to the global common good, still underpinned by a strong security alliance with the US and engaging in trilateral security cooperation with Japan, even during tense bilateral relations, to combat the North Korean nuclear threat. Lee worked to regain trust with Washington, lost during the Roh administration, and saw the alliance as critical to raising South Korea’s global standing. His “Denuclearisation and Opening 3000” vowed to raise the North’s per capita GDP to $3,000 per year through comprehensive yet conditional economic assistance in exchange for denuclearisation and integration into the international community.

The conservative Park Geun-hye government (2013-2016) refocused South Korea’s foreign policy back more narrowly to Northeast Asia\(^\text{113}\). Her “Trustpolitik” philosophy included trust-building toward Korean reunification, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and the Eurasia Initiative. A key focal point was rethinking Seoul’s engagement with China because Park saw Beijing’s strategic value in reducing Korean tensions and pressuring Pyongyang to disarm. This led to South Korea’s 2015 accession to the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Park’s attendance at Beijing’s World War II Victory Day ceremony, which again sparked criticism and suspicion that Seoul was tilting toward Beijing. Park saw the alliance with the US as key to achieving a robust defence posture, developing future-oriented defence capabilities, and becoming more autonomous or an equal partner to Washington.

Under the current progressive Moon Jae-in government (2016-present), however, path dependency has enabled South Korea to continue participating in existing multilateral fora and institutions, but domestic political aims are especially strong in shaping South Korea’s current foreign policy with ideology as its centrepiece. In other words, foreign policy in the Moon government is constructed through the lens of inter-Korean reconciliation, nationalism, and self-reliance from big, foreign powers. The current progressives prioritize inter-Korean relations and self-reliance over the US-South Korea alliance, believing that if cross-border relations improve, then South Korea can be less dependent on the United States\(^\text{114}\). While they are fundamentally opposed to a nuclear-armed North Korea, they need to see progress in US-North Korea denuclearization talks in order to begin lifting sanctions on Pyongyang to achieve the progressives’ top agenda of inter-Korean peace.

National security policy decisions under Moon are also constructed through the lens of nationalism more so than geostrategic considerations. This was exemplified in Seoul’s decision to terminate its intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan (General Security of Military Information Agreement, GSOMIA), despite the purpose of the mechanism being a vital security cooperation tool among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to deal with the increasing North Korean
nuclear and missile threat. It also believes that the two Koreas cooperating together could effectively pressure Japan to repent for its war-time and colonial wrongdoings. Due to the Moon government’s nationalistic aims, Seoul is opposed to engaging in multilateral security cooperation in the region, whether it is vis-à-vis China or other challenges, with Japan’s involvement\textsuperscript{115}.

Compared to previous conservative and progressive administrations, there is also less strategic attention given to how to build up South Korea’s middle power status in the region and the world because of the Moon government’s domestic agendas. This means that the narrower, domestic focus might be limited or even unable to reflect the evolving security environment around the Korean Peninsula.

The Moon government has crafted a “New Southern Policy” (NSP) aimed at decreasing South Korea’s dependence on great powers (US, China, Japan, and Russia), dealing with a renewed American focus on its domestic priorities and China’s expanding influence in the region. It also seeks to diversify its foreign relations in the broader Asian region by strengthening relations with ASEAN and India. But such goals are still underpinned by the parochial aims mentioned above—survival (security and prosperity) and inter-Korean peace\textsuperscript{116}. While the US-China competition demands South Korea to manage contradicting pressures coming from them, Seoul will aim to increase its strategic leverage against superpowers by forging coalitions with like-minded countries\textsuperscript{117}. Moreover, the Moon government’s priority focus on inter-Korean relations and the North Korean nuclear issue will continue to pull the presidential office’s attention away from implementing a broader foreign policy agenda and toward its domestic goals.

**Regional views of recent Korean Peninsular developments**

North Korea conducted 13 ballistic missile tests in 2019, threatened to unveil a “new strategic weapon” in 2020, and revealed plans to double down on both nuclear and economic development in an “offensive for [a] frontal breakthrough” in its “long confrontation with the US\textsuperscript{118}”. Pyongyang also replaced its foreign minister from career diplomat Ri Yong Ho to military veteran and hardliner Ri Son Gwon who has much experience negotiating with South Korea but none with the nuclear issue or Americans\textsuperscript{119}. It remains to be seen whether his appointment is merely symbolic of Kim Jong Un’s tougher stance toward the US this year.

Against this backdrop of growing uncertainty in the months ahead, the views of regional stakeholders—the US, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia—regarding recent Korean Peninsular developments are mixed. In addition, differences in policy objectives and national interests among the US, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia pose challenges to reaching a consensus or
agreement on a common approach to Korean Peninsular security issues. These challenges could also constrain regional players’ engagement with South Korea depending on the political party in power in Seoul and the state of geopolitics and the security environment on and around the peninsula.

The United States continued to prod North Korea to resume nuclear negotiations despite the regime’s refusal, a meeting ending with no results in Stockholm in October 2019, and continued missile tests. During his trip to Asia in December, US envoy Stephen Biegun dismissed Kim’s year-end deadline saying, “The United States does not have a deadline. We have a goal... Let me speak directly to our counterparts in North Korea. It is time for us to do our jobs. Let’s get this done. We are here, and you know how to reach us.”

Washington’s public reactions to North Korea’s missile tests of 2019 and threat to showcase a “new strategic weapon” have been simultaneously condoned by Trump and condemned by senior US officials. Trump continued to praise his relationship with Kim, expressing confidence that Pyongyang would not resume testing long-range missiles or nuclear devices. He said, Kim “did sign a contract, he did sign an agreement talking about denuclearization. That was done in Singapore, and I think he’s a man of his word, so we’re going to find out.”

On the other hand, US Ambassador to the United Nations, Kelly Craft, warned that North Korea’s “deeply counterproductive” ballistic missile tests risked closing the door on negotiations and that continued testing “will not bring the DPRK greater security.” While top policymakers downplayed the seriousness of Pyongyang’s recent missile tests and proclaimed weapons plans for this year, to make room for diplomacy, the military continues to see North Korea as its most immediate challenge. Admiral Philip Davidson, head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, said, “until we get a final, fully verifiable denuclearized peninsula, it’s going to remain my most immediate concern.” At the same time, the US Indo-Pacific Command does not see regional challenges as separate issues but inter-related, and while it understands South Korea’s sensitivities toward potential backlash from China, it would like to see Seoul participate more widely in its broader security strategy.

Meanwhile, the US has publicly expressed its frustration over Seoul’s decision not to renew GSOMIA with Tokyo. United States Ambassador to South Korea, Harry Harris said, “Korea elevated it into the security realm and that security realm affects us. So, now it affects the US and our ability to defend Korea, and puts our troops at risk... so that is why we reacted quickly and strongly in expressing disappointment at Seoul’s decision.” The US sees the intelligence sharing pact as a vital tool for trilateral security cooperation with its allies amid growing uncertainty from North Korea and longer-term challenge posed by China.
The US sees the North Korean nuclear threat as a threat to American interests in the region, to the homeland, and its allies but it has never been a prominent factor in US grand strategy. The fundamental differences between the US and South Korea in their approach to North Korea continue to cause tension between the allies. The Moon government’s desire to speed up inter-Korean relations and lift sanctions before significant denuclearisation measures coupled with its progressive ideology is a source of distrust among American officials.

South Korea has estimated that Pyongyang will refrain from any major provocation in the first half of this year and Seoul is pushing to revitalize inter-Korean relations during a period of relative calm. But in June, Pyongyang unleashed a series of threats toward Seoul and even demolished the inter-Korean liaison office Moon and Kim had established after their 2018 summit.

Moon has also pledged to facilitate another Trump-Kim summit before the November US presidential election, but Pyongyang has publicly rejected this.

Prior to recent North Korean coercion, Moon stated there is a “desperate need of practical ways to improve inter-Korean cooperation” and called for the resumption of cross-border economic projects as a way to expedite US-North Korean diplomatic talks. Seoul needs progress on the nuclear issue to lift sanctions and achieve Moon’s peace agenda. In January, South Korea announced plans to resume inter-Korean projects including what it is calling “individual” (non-governmental) tours to North Korea for South Korean civilians. But the announcement already caused friction with Washington with Ambassador Harris warning that Seoul needs to consult Washington through proper channels beforehand. The comment caused a negative reaction among progressive South Koreans who misinterpreted it to mean that Seoul needs to receive Washington’s approval.

The planned cross-border projects still raise eyebrows among Korea specialists because of the foreign currency North Korea could earn through hidden costs, contrary to Seoul’s claims that they would not violate international sanctions. It so far seems unlikely that Pyongyang will accept Seoul’s proposal for tours—still disappointed with Seoul’s failure to convince Washington to lift sanctions—but its future decision could shift depending on the amount of money the regime would earn from them.

In contrast, continuing the inter-Korean rail/road project would be much less controversial politically and in terms of less potential to violate sanctions than tours to North Korea. Still, Seoul should discuss the pace of operations with Washington to coordinate respective policies and because North Korean workers will need to be paid, which could raise some red flags depending on the amount of labour costs.
For South Korea, Korean Peninsular security issues are a matter of survival (security and prosperity). Since the end of World War II, the strategic objective of every South Korean government has been reunification, or national unification. But in practice, reunification has been an aspirational goal because they understood that achieving it was unlikely in the near future due to the interplay of complex domestic, inter-Korean, and geopolitical factors.

China turned a blind eye during North Korea’s testing binge of short-range ballistic missiles in 2019 despite its endorsement of all UN Security Council resolutions banning flight tests of all ballistic missiles. Beijing appears to be taking a page from Trump’s “red line” of long-range missile tests and nuclear tests, and its continued silence seems to be in line with prioritising its efforts to improve China-North Korea relations since their reset in 2018. A growing North Korean nuclear challenge and necessary US-South Korean responses to it will continue to provide opportunities for Beijing to drive a wedge between them. For example, such intentions were displayed in China’s economic coercion against South Korea for installing a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery (THAAD) requested by Washington, which became a source of friction for the alliance. This highlighted the tensions between South Korea’s military alliance with the US and vital economic relationship with China.

Beijing also appears to be aiming to reinsert itself into the denuclearization negotiations process between the US and North Korea because the interrelated issue of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula has implications for China’s role and influence in Northeast Asia. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in March 2019 that China-North Korea relations will not be affected by “temporary incidents,” in reference to a failed summit between Trump and Kim in Hanoi, and that Beijing will support Pyongyang’s “legitimate concerns addressed in the process” of nuclear negotiations. For example, China co-sponsored and tabled a draft UN Security Council resolution with Russia in December 2019 calling for the lifting of sanctions, the resumption of US-North Korea talks, and the revival of the Six-Party Talks, a dialogue among the two Koreas, the US, Japan, China, and Russia. Interlocutors say the draft resolution was Beijing’s way of trying to prevent Pyongyang from delivering an ominous “Christmas gift” to the US and engaging in a bigger provocation in the new year because it included all of North Korea’s demands and was pushed by Pyongyang’s closest allies who are key actors on the Council. On Christmas eve, China then hosted the leaders from South Korea and Japan, which were then in the midst of their own bilateral diplomatic row, in Chengdu.

Beijing’s greatest concern regarding North Korea is instability or conflict on their shared border, which is a far greater priority than Pyongyang’s nuclear disarmament. China will continue to call for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula publicly, but in practice, some experts suspect it might be preparing
to live with a nuclear-armed North Korean permanently if it believes those weapons are not pointed at China\textsuperscript{134}.

For China, Korean Peninsular security issues are a matter of regional influence and order. It has long seen a nuclear-capable North Korea as a buffer between it and the US and is opposed to a reunified Korean Peninsula allied with Washington. Beijing desires the withdrawal of US military presence and influence from the region. This means that China would consider a progressive South Korean government as an attractive partner in achieving this goal if Beijing were able to successfully drive a wedge between the US and South Korea.

Japan’s major security concern is North Korea’s nuclear weapons advancement, especially missile developments, and renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula in addition to China’s militarisation. Tokyo’s immediate concern was its hosting of the 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympic Games and did not want any North Korean missile tests around that time, particularly since Kim Jong Un declared his country is no longer bound to its unilateral testing moratorium this year. In November 2019, North Korea threatened that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo “Abe may see what a real ballistic missile is in the not distant future and under his nose”, in response to Abe’s condemnation of Pyongyang’s “repeated launches of ballistic missiles” that fell in the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan\textsuperscript{135}. North Korea claimed those were a “super-large, multiple-rocket launch system” and not ballistic missiles. In October 2019, Pyongyang tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile that Tokyo claimed landed in Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone\textsuperscript{136}.

Tokyo has also been a staunch advocate and supporter of sanctions against Pyongyang. Hosting the Olympics, however, may have weakened its leverage in maintaining a hard-lined position toward North Korea, demanding the return of Japanese citizens abducted by Pyongyang during the Cold War as a precondition for lifting sanctions and normalising Japan-North Korean relations.

In addition, Tokyo is closely watching US-South Korean negotiations over how they will split the costs to station American troops to renew their Special Measures Agreement (SMA). Likewise, Japan will be holding its own talks with Washington this year ahead of its SMA expiring in 2021. These negotiations will be held as Japan—despite its strong alliance and relationship between their leaders—is re-evaluating its dependence on the US for its security, particularly when they hear Trump’s public disdain for allies, his exorbitant demands for a price increase for allies to host US troops, and his “America First” stance. The core motivation behind Japan’s interest to rearm its military is North Korea’s growing nuclear ambitions and China’s increasingly aggressive maritime activities; Tokyo does not want to limit its military while its neighbours expand theirs, especially when they are questioning American defence commitments\textsuperscript{137}. 
Not only are North Korean missiles launched in the direction of or over Japan a serious threat to the country, but a fundamental interest for Japan is preventing another conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Ever since the 1953 Korean armistice, Japan has been an important operating base for the US in contingency scenarios on the peninsula because it has provided critical rear-area logistical support for US forces during the Korean War. This is why the security of South Korea has been essential to Japan’s own security, more so because it does not want to be drawn into a war with China or Russia nor see the de-coupling of its alliance with the US damaged as a result of a conflict on the peninsula. However, the state of Japan-South Korea relations and any differences in their approach to North Korea would constrain cooperation on Korean Peninsular security issues during the Abe and Moon administrations.

While Russia officially opposes a nuclear North Korea, like China, it prioritizes a stable North Korea more because the security of the Kim regime means stability along the North Korea-Russian border absent North Korean refugees. In this regard, Moscow continues to skirt its UN Security Council sanctions obligations. For example, Russia admitted to missing a UN-mandated deadline...
to repatriate all North Korean workers by December 22, 2019 due to “objective difficulties.” 139 Its Interior Ministry released statistics in January 2020 revealed a surge in Russian-issued tourist and student visas to North Koreans in 2019. 140 One significant source of foreign currency for the North Korean regime has been the wages earned by its overseas workers. Moscow also co-sponsored and tabled a draft UN Security Council resolution on the revival of the Six-Party Talks with Beijing in December 2019.

Russia does not play a direct or decisive role on Korean Peninsula affairs. But like China, Moscow sees Korean Peninsula security issues as a matter of geopolitics and regional order vis-à-vis the US. Russia does not want to see renewed conflict on the peninsula nor an increase in US military presence on its doorstep in response to the advancement in North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability. Russia is concerned about a growing US missile defence system in the region—starting with the 2017 deployment of the THAAD battery in South Korea and installation of land-based Aegis ballistic missile defence systems in Japan—that could eventually undermine Russia’s strategic nuclear deterrent 141.

**Implications for security in the broader region**

The US-South Korea alliance, widely referred to as the linchpin for security and stability throughout the Asia-Pacific region, will remain strong. But the alliance will inevitably continue to experience challenges because of current differences in ideology and policy approaches between the allies, especially on the North Korea problem. The resilience of the alliance will be tested by an evolving geopolitical environment with a rising China and waning US influence.

The Moon government’s priorities of nationalism, self-reliance, anti-Japanese sentiment, and sympathy towards North Korea will also require more alliance coordination efforts by Washington to manage stability in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, Seoul’s latest push to allow tours to North Korea without conditions comes at a time when Pyongyang is showing increased nuclear weapons development. If Pyongyang agrees to inter-Korean cooperation projects proposed by Seoul, it could not only become another source of friction for the allies but also weaken leverage in negotiations for the regime’s nuclear disarmament if North Korea is not required to take some steps toward denuclearization in exchange for those projects in proportionate trade-offs.

Another challenge for the alliance is Seoul’s desire to speed up and complete the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) from the US to South Korea within Moon’s presidential term. Washington sees a conditions-based approach to be the best way to guarantee the security of the Korean Peninsula amid a growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat. Meanwhile, South
Korean policymakers do worry about Chinese aggression and its rise in the region, but they also do not want to anger Beijing by going public with any activities or policies that might appear to be pro-America and anti-China. Further complicating matters is Beijing’s strategic objectives to divide the US and its allies.

Washington is also adding to growing uncertainties in the region. For one, Trump’s insistence that the North Korean threat has been significantly reduced merely because of the absence of long-range missile and nuclear tests sends the wrong message to Seoul, Tokyo, and Pyongyang. His “America First” isolationist approach to American foreign policy, unrealistic price demands to host US troops in Asia, and nonchalant comments about withdrawing US military personnel from the region are also regarded by Asian allies as insulting. They have fuelled scepticism about the reliability of the US extended deterrent to defend them against North Korea and China. These have all led to renewed debates in Seoul and Tokyo about their own nuclear and defence options. If either ever embark on serious policy considerations for nuclear weapons, then the potential becomes greater for a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. If Japan exhibits further enhancements of its military capabilities (as demanded by its politicians) and any actions that are perceived by its neighbours as moving away from its pacifist post-war constitution toward offensive intentions, these could also trigger an arms race and lead to instability in Northeast Asia.

Trilateral security cooperation among the US, South Korea, and Japan will prove to be even more essential as Pyongyang’s arsenal grows to overwhelm regional missile defences and as Beijing continues its own assertive actions. However, the latest bilateral row between Seoul and Tokyo—driven by nationalism in both countries, especially by both leaders themselves, and manifested as their inability to compartmentalise their various foreign policy challenges—will continue to impact their ability to efficiently and expeditiously deal with North Korea’s missile tests and growing nuclear weapons capability together. The acrimony between Seoul and Tokyo coupled with Trump’s insults to his allies presents opportunities for Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang to divide America and its allies and further test the region’s balance of power. The latter was demonstrated by a Chinese-Russian intrusion of the airspace over South Korean and Japanese disputed islands in July 2019.

Japan’s hosting of the Summer Olympics, now delayed until 2021, could also place Tokyo in a weaker position with regard to North Korea. While Tokyo has been active on enforcing sanctions violations, it also does not want North Korean missiles flying through its airspace and into its waters ahead of or during the sporting event. If Pyongyang launches more missiles and Tokyo
and Washington turn blind eyes to them, then North Korea could become emboldened to continue testing missiles, which will help perfect the regime’s technology and raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula. If Prime Minister Abe resumes calls for a summit with Kim to seek a breakthrough in the abductee issue without conditions, Tokyo might also find itself in a relatively weaker negotiating position.

China may also see an opportunity to prolong and even accelerate all of these trends while capitalising on its more stabilised relationship with North Korea toward their shared regional goals. The traditional Cold War allies both seek the withdrawal of US military presence and influence in Asia, an eventual break in the US-South Korea and US-Japan alliances, and dissolution of US-South Korea-Japan trilateral security cooperation. If Beijing is in fact prepared to live permanently with a nuclear-armed North Korea and continues to prioritise border stability over denuclearisation, then nuclear negotiations could become even more complicated, and existing security concerns in Seoul and Tokyo could intensify. China will also aim to claim a seat at the negotiating table if and when US-North Korea negotiations involve a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula or a peace treaty to end the war and weaken the rationale for US military personnel in Korea.
Conclusion

Since the initial time of writing, the coronavirus (COVID-19) has further complicated Korean Peninsular security and South Korea’s foreign policies. The virus unexpectedly emerged as a most urgent threat, first faced by China, the two Koreas, and Japan and quickly spread to every continent. Amid South Korea’s own struggle with the virus, Seoul was apparently wary of potential Chinese backlash if it closed its borders to Chinese tourists and students, coming under harsh criticism and accusations domestically for mishandling the outbreak in its early stages and placing relations with China above the health of South Korean citizens.

As all major stakeholders, including North Korea, grapple with their own COVID-19 epidemics, dealing with traditional Korean Peninsular security challenges will be paused for the next several months. The pandemic is also exacerbating geopolitical and geo-economic rifts in Northeast Asia and globally, which will likely overshadow or disrupt the attention key stakeholders can give to the North Korean nuclear issue. The US presidential election in November disincentivizes both Washington and Pyongyang from initiating major diplomatic feats like negotiating agreements or holding summits. These circumstances buy Pyongyang more time to steadily advance its nuclear weapons capability without the usual interferences of timely reactions from Washington and other stakeholders.

The landslide victory of Moon’s ruling party in South Korea’s April general elections provided the domestic momentum to push his policies more aggressively, but Pyongyang’s latest military threats have cast serious doubt on achieving his peace agenda. Moon also continues to propose a series of inter-Korean projects, including COVID-19 cooperation, but Pyongyang has yet to accept.

The eventual subsidence of the virus will bring existing peninsular security challenges on and around the Korean Peninsula back to the fore. South Korea will also need to focus on economic recovery. These two combined could further complicate and delay policy coordination between Washington and Seoul on peninsular and regional security challenges. A more advanced North Korean nuclear weapons capability, enabled by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of a nuclear agreement, would further complicate denuclearisation negotiations because of Pyongyang’s increased leverage. Over the longer term, if China’s power and influence grows, South Korean scepticism of the durability of the American security commitment continues to deepen, and North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability continues to advance, Seoul will be under even more pressure to consider alternative options for its security.

*The views are the author’s own.*


Chapter 6


108 Before Kim Young-sam became president, he was considered a progressive during both Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-wan (1980-1988) authoritarian rules because anyone opposed to authoritarian governments were considered progressive.


113 The Park government still focused on non-security MIKTA activities involving Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia

114 Author’s interviews of a leading South Korean progressive scholar, January 2020.

115 Author’s interviews of key South Korean officials, 2019-January 2020.


124 Author’s interviews with the Indo-Pacific Command, January 2020.


126 Author’s interviews of South Korean senior officials, January 2020.

127 Simon Denyer and Min Joo Kim, “South Korea’s Moon was once given VIP welcome by the North. He’s now mocked as Korean crisis deepens,” Washington Post, 18 June 2020.


130 Ibid.


132 Author’s discussions with officials from UN Security Council member states and UN officials, December 2019.


At the time of writing, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were not yet postponed over the coronavirus pandemic.

Over 505,000 Chinese tourists entered South Korea through November and there are reportedly 70,000 Chinese students enrolled in South Korean universities, https://kto.visitkorea.or.kr/eng/tourismStatics/keyFacts/KoreaMonthlyStatistics/eng/inout/inout.kto


Chapter 7


Ibid.

Ibid.
