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# Amidst the Dragon and the Bald Eagle: A geopolitical approach to the Republic of Korea

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## **ABSTRACT**

South Korea finds itself in the middle of the geopolitical ambitions of regional giants, while at the same time addressing their own conflictive relation with their northern counterpart. Because of that, a global and also a peninsular overview of their characteristics from an international relations perspective has been analyzed, with the objective in mind of identifying the main dynamics and driving factors that strategically influence South Korea in the present times with an eye into the future. Pursuing that analysis, a global perspective and an inter-Korean perspective were suitable to better address the main issues, with special attention to the influence of the two big powers in relation with Seoul, the US and China, as well as the constant uncertainty North Korea generates in the relations between both Koreas. Findings regarding key aspects such as the US military presence in South Korean soil, or the possibility of a Korean reunification suggest the primacy of continuity and controlled stability for the next ten years, as the stakes are too high for the actors involved to take high-risk high-benefit decisions. The main conclusions follow the same direction, with stagnation as present condition South Korea will have to find its way, always with the inter-Korean relations in mind, if it wants to survive and develop its own path under the shadow of two giants.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

At one of the eastern-most tips of the Eurasian continent lies the Korean peninsula, a mountainous strip of land currently divided into two rival states by the 38th North parallel. Being surrounded by the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan, this peninsula constitutes a strategic chokepoint for the dominion of the inner seas of the Far East, and thus has been the object of dispute for many empires and powers throughout history. From the Han subjugation of the first Korean Kingdom of Gojoseon, to the rather recent Japanese occupation; Korea has always been coveted by foreign powers, although its people have always managed to perpetuate their existence.<sup>1</sup> So is the situation we find today, as the current division is nothing more than a consequence of the most recent example of foreign intervention in the region, since, after the events of the Second World War and the Korean War, the peninsula has remained divided into two antagonistic states, both of which were initially created as client states for the Cold War world powers. To the north stands the socialist authoritarian Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

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<sup>1</sup> Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), "Dangun, Father of Korea: Korea's Foundation Tale Lends Itself to Many Interpretations," Korea.net: The Official Website of the Republic of Korea

(henceforth DPRK, North Korea or NK), under the Kim dynasty, created under the influence of the USSR, and later China. Whereas to the south, there is the free-market Republic of Korea (from this point on ROK, South Korea or SK), created by the US liberation of the South. This latter also started as an authoritarian dictatorship under the military, however, it was able to democratize and become one of the most thriving liberal democracies in the world.<sup>2</sup> It is about the latter that this report shall be focused on.

Being at such a strategic location, South Korea plays an essential role in how geopolitical relations work on several levels, and it is on the future development of these various trends that this paper shall focus on. Firstly, on a global level, SK is of great importance due to their relations with their main ally, the United States, and the role it has within the broader American strategy in Asia-Pacific, especially in regard to the containment of China. Relations with this latter have been historically characterized by the SK attempt to maintain its independence, despite their physical and cultural proximity. Another important aspect in its global role is the relation with its northern counterpart that constitutes one of the main threats to world peace, given its unilateral development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, some of which are often tested outside its borders, in international waters. More recently, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Korea has stood out as an example of prevention and containment, with an almost ideal system to mitigate the possible damages that said disease could have caused both sanitarilly and economically, as it happened in most countries in the West.

Nonetheless, the most important geopolitical challenge that the ROK will be facing in the near future is its formal relations with the DPRK. Historically characterized by conflict and tensions, the capacity of both Koreas to manage their relations will greatly impact the peninsular status quo. In spite of the substantial differences in both Koreas, the possibility of a united Korea could completely change the regional scenario in East Asia, while also being a temporary solution to many national problems of the South, such as the energetic and demographic challenges. However, for it to happen, a series of very specific premises would have to happen, as we shall analyze further ahead.

## **2. KOREA FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE:**

It is widely agreed that the 21st century is to be the Asian century<sup>3</sup>, in which the Far East is expected to regain the historical weight that it used to have before European colonialism. The demographic revolution for it to take place has already happened with giants like China and India covering today over one third of the global population<sup>4</sup> and so, thanks to that, the due economic revolution has been slowly taking place since the end of the 20th century as well. This global shift towards the East has also provoked an increase of the ROK's importance in the global arena, thanks to its geographical privileged location between Japan and China, the second and third biggest world's economies respectively.

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<sup>2</sup> Stack, Liam. "Korean War, a 'Forgotten' Conflict That Shaped the Modern World." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 1 Jan. 2018

<sup>3</sup> Neville, Laurence. "The Asian Century." *Global Finance Magazine*, March 5, 2021

<sup>4</sup> "Countries in the World by Population (2021)." *Worldometer*

SK has surely known how to take advantage of said situation, by becoming one of the so-called Asian Tigers and having reached the position of 10th biggest economy in the world according to the IMF 2020 estimates.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, SK is one of the main US allies in the region, a world power whose global hegemony is slowly being replaced, and whose position in the area is threatened by the neighboring expansionist Chinese Dragon along with the Northern Korean “troublemaker” state, whose nuclear program poses a serious threat to the current international *status quo*. In an ever-globalized world, the Republic of Korea seems to be finding its due place as a global medium power and a respected developed economy, whose standards of living have already surpassed many Western countries.

A good example of how efficient the Southern Korean state has become is its method to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which was not able to be replicated anywhere else in the West. Since the very early reported cases by China, Seoul decided to take measures to prevent the virus from spreading. To do so, it adopted an early tracing system that followed the origin of every single case and thus was able to mandatorily isolate whoever had been in contact with the virus. Furthermore, checkpoints at ports and airports, as well as massive testing were used as early as possible, much before than the West.<sup>6</sup> This strategy has proven to be a complete success, given that, to this day, SK has had less than 2 000 deaths and only around 100 000 cases.<sup>7</sup> All of this, thanks to the fact that the spreading features of the virus were taken into account to create it. If a virus of similar characteristics were to appear in the future, this strategy could easily be replicated as an advisable method of containment, however, if the spreading mechanism happened to be different, then the measures to be taken ought to be different.

Despite this great success in combating COVID, Korea still faces many challenges in the global dimension, many of which are closely related to some of the aforementioned issues, as we shall now explore in further detail:

## **2.1. Threat from the North**

The utmost important issue for the Republic of Korea at a global level is currently the threat posed by its northern counterpart, as the socialist DPRK is one of the nine sovereign states actually owning a nuclear arsenal, in spite of several international efforts to prevent its nuclear program from achieving success. As previously mentioned, both states were created under the influence of rival powers, which later ended up triggering the Korean War, after an Northern attempt to reunite the peninsula by force, under Pyongyang’s rule. After the 1953 armistice, there have not been more than small skirmishes between both armies, however, the war is technically still happening, since no formal peace treaty has ever been signed.<sup>8</sup> That being so, the level of tensions between both Koreas has rarely decreased ever since. However, it is important to understand how

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<sup>5</sup> World Economic Outlook Base: Report for Selected Countries and Subjects: October 2020

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Matthew, and Jun Michael Park. “South Korea COVID Strategy.” Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg

<sup>7</sup> “South Korea.” Worldometer

<sup>8</sup> Stack, Korean War, 18

the current nuclear situation came to be, in order to comprehend the dynamics being at stake nowadays.

Since the armistice of the Korean War, the Kim dynasty has always intended to create their own nuclear arsenal. Their first attempt was in the early 60s, within the “all-fortressization” policy adopted by Pyongyang, whereby it sought to develop nuclear weapons by asking for shared knowledge both from China and the Soviet Union; a demand that was obviously denied by both nuclear powers.<sup>9</sup> However, the USSR did accept to share some of its know-how and assisted it in the creation of a peaceful nuclear energy facility at Yongbyon in the 80s. The DPRK signed the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) in 1985, under pressure from Beijing and Moscow; however, inspections by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over North Korean nuclear energy plants were not made until 1992, when suspicions on the intention of several NK nuclear facilities arose, after the DPRK refusal to show the destination of the nuclear waste of some of their plants.<sup>10</sup> In 1994, IAEA left NK without results, although an Agreed Framework was reached shortly after with the US, whereby NK would stop the process of enriching uranium and plutonium in Yongbyon in exchange for some peaceful light water energy reactors. Pyongyang complied with the agreement until 2003, when, following US President Bush’s labeling of NK as part of the “Axis of Evil”, the lone socialist state left the NPT and officially resumed activities in regard to its nuclear agenda; although it is suspected that, during the time span from 1994 to 2002, secret activities were still being conducted in hidden facilities.<sup>11</sup>

The main reason for North Korea to insist so vehemently in its endeavor for reaching atomic weaponry has been traditionally considered to be a sort of national quest for survival, since, following the fall of the Communist Bloc, the DPRK had lost one of their main trading partners and a main source of funding. This would lead it to fear for their own survival as a socialist regime in a world whose hegemonic power was one of its main ideological rivals, i.e. the US. That being so, the North Korean government considered that the best way to ensure its future existence in a US-led world was to develop nuclear assets in order to completely prevent any foreign invasion whatsoever.<sup>12</sup> Thus, any hope of denuclearization from NK is inexistent as long as the US still holds its position in Asia-Pacific, more specifically in the Korean peninsula, as Pyongyang has already stated more than once.<sup>13</sup>

This line of thought does coincide with the DPRK explanations on the matter, as it has always strongly insisted on the defensive nature of their nuclear program within their so-called Songun Policy that consists of a North Korean political doctrine whereby the military defense of the nation is considered to be the first priority for the government.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ramani, Samuel. “These 5 Things Help Make Sense of North Korea's Nuclear Tests and Missile Launch.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, April 18, 2019

<sup>10</sup> “Yongbyon - North Korean Special Weapons Facilities.” *Federation of American Scientists*.

<sup>11</sup> “North Korea and NPT.” *International Peace Institute*, April 2010

<sup>12</sup> “Chronology of U.S.- North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy.” *Arms Control Association*, July 2020

<sup>13</sup> McKirdy, Euan. “North Korea Drops Withdrawal of US Forces as Condition of Denuclearization, Moon Says.” *CNN*. Cable News Network, April 20, 2018

<sup>14</sup> “Política Songun.” *Asociación de Amistad con Corea (KFA)*, November 15, 2018

However, it must be noted that, alongside its nuclear program, Pyongyang has been simultaneously developing its own long-range ballistic missile program, whose main goal seems to be the development of missiles capable of reaching the US mainland. The furthest point hit by NK missile tests to this day has been with the Hwasong-15 in 2017, whose trajectory was purposely shortened and ended up landing in the Sea of Japan, having travelled around 1000km. However, taking into account the height reached by the Hwasong-15, many experts have claimed that theoretically it could be able to hit any point in the US main-land, as well as most of the Earth's surface, save for South America, the Caribbean and parts of Antarctica.<sup>15</sup>

If such capacity were proven to be real, the threat posed by the NK nuclear ambitions would go way beyond what a merely defensive nuclear program would encompass, as it would reach a global level, given the fact that the US and most of its allies could be under the threat of a nuclear attack. Nevertheless, there is still an on-going discussion on the matter of whether these missiles are capable of carrying the weight of an atomic bomb inside. That is to say, there is still not enough evidence that NK scientists have been able to miniaturize a nuclear warhead up to the point of being able to fit within a missile of such; especially with regard to the hydrogen bomb that NK claims to have developed—a bomb with a level of power one thousand times higher than the traditional atomic bombs, whose existence is still put in doubt.<sup>16</sup> In 2019 a paper from the Japanese Ministry of Defense recognized that NK would have achieved the miniaturizing technology required, in spite of the US experts' reluctance to accept such claims.<sup>17</sup> However, even if it is still not able to do so, it is only a matter of time until it reaches such a level of technology.

Whichever the case, Pyongyang has already proven its nuclear capability by having six nuclear tests in North Korean soil up to this day. Thus, even if its Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) are not yet able to reach US soil with a miniaturized bomb, its capacity to reach Seoul or Tokyo is absolutely uncontested, as it is much simpler to fit a nuclear warhead within a short or medium-range missile. Furthermore, the US Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that with the amount of uranium that could be enriched in its known facilities, it should have enough material for up to 60 nuclear warheads, at most.<sup>18</sup> A low amount compared to the thousands of bombs owned by the US or Russia; nonetheless, these are still enough bombs to transform the Korean peninsula into a nuclear wasteland.

Taking this data into account, any possibility of a military intervention in NK is totally discarded, as long as NK does not start an attack themselves, whether it be against SK, the US or Japan. This would likely be the only red line that the US could put, before risking a nuclear war that could escalate to a global level, since, as we shall see further ahead, China and Russia would not simply allow a US-led intervention against their old

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<sup>15</sup> "North Korea's Missile and Nuclear Programme." BBC News. BBC, January 18, 2021

<sup>16</sup> "North Korea Nuclear Test: Hydrogen Bomb 'Missile-Ready'." BBC News. BBC, September 3, 2017

<sup>17</sup> "Japanese Report to Say North Korea Has Miniaturized Nuclear Warheads: Newspaper." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, August 21, 2019

<sup>18</sup> "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs." Federation of American Scientists, January 5, 2021

ally. Even if the unlikely possibility of China and Russia allowing a US attack against North Korea were to happen, the attack itself would be suicidal, as the level of retaliation against SK, Japan and even the US itself, in case the miniaturizing process for the ICBM has been achieved, would be utterly catastrophic, with the risk of losing entire metropolis such as Seoul, Tokyo and Los Angeles. It could be argued that, in case the US starts the attack, it would only be necessary to preemptively attack their nuclear facilities before advancing into any further military action; however, the level of intelligence on the North is relatively scarce, given their isolationist border policy, thus leading to a great degree of uncertainty in regard to the geographical disposition of NK nuclear assets, as well as the number thereof. Therefore, any preemptive military action is utterly discarded.

## **2.2. Containment**

Given the impossibility to tackle the North Korean threat in a rather direct manner, i.e. a military intervention, several other paths have been taken by the US and SK in order to mitigate the effect of a threatening neighbor in possession of a nuclear arsenal. The two most relevant options in this matter have been the permanence of the US military in South Korea, as a way to deter any thought of invasion from Pyongyang; as well as the usage of international sanctions in order to paralyze the North Korean economy, thus obliging it to dismantle their nuclear program. We shall now explain in further detail the implications and future expectations for both thereof, as well as the recent Trump's administration policies in regard to this situation.

### *Sanctions*

After the DPRK decision to leave the NPT and thus resume its nuclear ambitions, the international community attempted to provide a solid response, given that this was the first time that a sovereign state left unilaterally the NPT. First, it intended to use rather diplomatic means, of which the most relevant was the Six-Party talks, which consisted in a series of multilateral meetings from 2003 to 2007 between the US, the ROK, the DPRK, China, Russia and Japan; its main goal was to prevent the North Korean nuclear program from reaching success. In 2006, NK carried out its first nuclear test, thus turning the purely diplomatic path into a rather useless one, and something utterly unthinkable nowadays.<sup>19</sup>

Given the failure of the multilateral diplomatic approach, the international response changed into a rather aggressive form, i.e. sanctions. Thus, in December 2006, Resolution 1718 was approved by the UN Security Council (UNSC), consequently leading to the application of the first sanctions on military and luxury goods, as well as the creation of the UNSC Sanctions Committee on NK. Throughout the years, NK increased the number of nuclear and missile tests, which led to the simultaneous increase of sanctions adopted by the UNSC. This escalation reached its height in 2017, coinciding with the beginning of the Trump administration, during which an unprecedented geopolitical crisis took place in the region, as we shall explore further ahead.

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<sup>19</sup> Bajoria, Jayshree, and Beina Xu. "The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program." Council on Foreign Relations, September 30, 2013

Initially, only the NK elite and the materials needed for military equipment were targeted; nonetheless, the scope of sanctions increased and the overall national economy slowly became the main target. This can be observed with the sanctions imposed on NK financial assets, and the ones from the 2017 UNSC Resolution 2375, targeting nearly all NK exports, including agricultural and mineral products which form the base of the NK economy,<sup>20</sup> as well as the restrictions on hydrocarbon fuels imports.<sup>21</sup> These sanctions have heavily damaged Pyongyang's economic power, however it seems to have managed to evade many of said restrictions through various methods such as falsifications and concealed cargo transfers.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, China has been accused several times of not complying with the sanctions, despite its supposed approval in the UNSC.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, in spite of some initial success, sanctions do not seem to have been able to prevent the DPRK from further "going nuclear." An additional number of sanctions does not seem to be the solution, and so is not very likely to happen in the next few years, given that most strategic sectors of the North Korean economy are already included within the current ones. Nonetheless, the real cause for preventing the sanctions from working properly resides in the way they are being implemented, rather than the current scope. Consequently, to duly tackle the problem, the main solution would be to implement further inspections, especially in the case of China, due to its close ties with Pyongyang.

### *US in South Korea*

Following the Korean War of 1950-1953, US troops were deployed in a permanent way in the Republic of Korea under the US-SK Mutual Defense Treaty<sup>24</sup>, as a way to provide a solid defense for a then impoverished US ally, who was not capable of making any resistance against a heavily militarized Socialist North. Up to this day there are around 29 000 US soldiers stationed throughout the southern half of the Korean Peninsula, most of which are land army soldiers, with only a small amount of navy, marines and air force troops.<sup>25</sup> These forces are currently stationed in twelve army bases, two air bases and one small navy base. All of these are directly operated by the United States, and they vary significantly in size and importance; among them the most important one is Camp Humphreys due to its overall size, located 40 miles south of Seoul.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, during the Cold War, the US government deployed tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea and Japan,<sup>27</sup> as a way to threaten the USSR at the height of the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) doctrine. With due time, this nuclear arsenal would be slowly dismantled, although it was never totally removed until 1991, following the fall of

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<sup>20</sup> "CIA Factbook: North Korea." Central Intelligence Agency, March 18, 2021

<sup>21</sup> Albert, Eleanor. "What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea." Council on Foreign Relations, July 16, 2019

<sup>22</sup> "North Korean Sanctions Evasion." North Korean sanctions evasion – The Diplomat

<sup>23</sup> Brunnstrom, David. "U.S. Accuses China of 'Flagrant' N.Korea Violations, Offers \$5 Million Reward." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, December 1, 2020

<sup>24</sup> "Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea." Avalon Project. Yale Law School

<sup>25</sup> "US Military Bases in South Korea." Military Bases, March 7, 2018

<sup>26</sup> "U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys." U.S. Army Garrison Humphreys : USAG Humphreys

<sup>27</sup> "South Korea." Nuclear Threat Initiative, October 2018



the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup> Since then, the option of redeploying such weapons was considered by SK in 2017 amidst the escalation that took place in that year, although it was finally discarded.<sup>29</sup> However, following those events, SK public opinion in regard to the ownership of nuclear weapons has been turning positive, reaching up to 60% of support in 2017. Nonetheless, the creation of a SK nuclear arsenal does not seem to be in the current government's agenda, nor does it seem that the US would allow it.<sup>30</sup>

Another important point on the American troops in SK is the matter of the Combined Forces Command. Since 1978, following a bilateral US-SK agreement, all SK and US troops stationed in the Korean peninsula, in case of direct conflict, are to be subjected under a joint command, whose commander is always a US 4-star general, whereas the deputy commander is a South Korean general with the same rank.<sup>31</sup> Actions taken by the Combined Command must answer before both US and SK governments, however, in the short-term, this clause gives the US a substantial amount of power over the military scenario in the area, given that in times of war all units in the ROK armed forces, which number up to more than 400 000 active personnel,<sup>32</sup> basically become a part of the US military. It must be noted that the said clause is highly controversial amongst Koreans, as some of them consider this to be a violation of their national sovereignty.

One last line of the defense added by the US-SK alliance was the so-called THAAD Shield (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), i.e. an anti-missile system to counter NK missiles threatening SK territory. These were deployed in 2016, as a result of the escalation of NK tests; however, a huge controversy was created with China, who threatened to impose sanctions on SK, in case of deployment. During nearly a year, relations between both countries stagnated, but an agreement was finally reached in 2017 and SK was able to keep the THAAD without putting at risk the relations with one of their main trading partners.<sup>33</sup>

### *Trump*

As we can notice up to now, the US foreign policy in the Korean peninsula has historically been more of a state policy, rather than a personal one, that depends on whoever is in charge in a given moment. This situation would slightly change with the arrival of Donald Trump to White House in 2017. With his famous "America First", he

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<sup>28</sup> Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris (2017) A history of US nuclear weapons in South Korea, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 73:6, 349-357

<sup>29</sup> Fifield, Anna. "South Korea's Defense Minister Suggests Bringing Back Tactical U.S. Nuclear Weapons." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, September 5, 2017

<sup>30</sup> Sanger, David E., Choe Sang-hun, and Motoko Rich. "North Korea Rouses Neighbors to Reconsider Nuclear Weapons." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2017

<sup>31</sup> Botto, Kathryn. "Why Doesn't South Korea Have Full Control Over Its Military?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 21, 2019

<sup>32</sup> "2021 South Korea Military Strength." *Global Firepower - World Military Strength*, 2021

<sup>33</sup> Kim, Christine, and Ben Blanchard. "China, South Korea Agree to Mend Ties after THAAD Standoff." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, October 31, 2017

broke with many state policies that were consolidated for many years, including the deployment of US troops in several parts of the globe, such as Syria and Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

In South Korea, his administration coincided in time with the mandate of the liberal president Moon Jae-In, which led to a high level of deterioration in the relations between both countries. This worsening situation was mainly because of two issues, both of them related to the “America First” doctrine, aiming at decreasing what Trump considered to be superfluous expense and protecting the national industry. The first one was Trump’s decision to review the Free Trade Agreement between the ROK and the US (FTA KORUS), by increasing tariffs to SK exports to the US that “threatened” the American economy, mainly high-tech products and solar panels. Some threats were also professed in regard to the automotive industry, whose exports to the US amount up to 16.4 \$ billions.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, such a huge hit to the Korean economy was finally never put into motion.<sup>36</sup> The second and most important question that led to some tensions between both allies was the renovation of the agreement on the costs of maintenance of the US troops in Korea. Regarding this matter, Trump initially demanded a 400% increase in comparison to the amount that SK paid according to the last treaty. These conditions were unacceptable for Seoul and thus a limbo was in place from 2018 until Biden’s arrival. During this period of tensions, Trump even threatened to withdraw all US troops in the area, if the ROK did not agree to pay as much as he asked.<sup>37</sup> Something that, as we shall explain in the next section, was nothing more than pure rhetoric.

With regard to North Korea, Trump’s foreign policy could be accurately described as an emotional roller coaster, as we shall further explain. In 2017, NK repetitive testing of ballistic missiles, along with the massive nuclear test of 2017, led to an escalation in tensions within the region. Some experts state that these provocations from NK would be a form to test how far the new US president would go with his commitment to defend South Korea. In response thereto, Trump started a rhetorical conflict by insulting Kim Jong-Un in the UN General Assembly Annual Meeting and by calling him “little rocket man”.

What initially seemed like an ever further increase in the level of tensions ended up being a surprise and in a matter of weeks, both leaders seemed to have become nearly best friends, with Trump praising Kim’s leadership skills and the good relation between both. In this period, NK seemed to have reached an agreement with the US and SK, whereby they agreed to dismantle the Punggye-ri nuclear testing site.<sup>38</sup> It must be noted that back in 2008 NK had already dismantled a plutonium enriching tower at Yongbyon

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<sup>34</sup> Galioto, Katie. “Trump Defends Decision to Withdraw Troops from 'Mess' in Syria, Afghanistan.” POLITICO, February 1, 2019

<sup>35</sup> “South Korea (KOR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners.” OEC

<sup>36</sup> 변덕근. “Trump's Push for KORUS FTA Revision Added Uncertainty to Alliance: CRS.” Yonhap News Agency, January 26, 2021

<sup>37</sup> Michael Flynn, Michael Allen. “Analysis | Trump Wants South Korea and Japan to Pay More for Defense.” The Washington Post. WP Company, November 26, 2019

<sup>38</sup> “5 Dudas sobre el desmantelamiento de Punggye-Ri, el sitio de pruebas nucleares de Corea del Norte.” BBC News Mundo. BBC

as a way to show the end of their nuclear program.<sup>39</sup> However, all of this apparent progress ended at the Hanoi summit of 2019, in which NK refused to continue negotiating after members of the Trump administration had publicly admitted to be following a denuclearization process similar to the one in Libya. This sounded the red alarm in Pyongyang, as Gaddafi's Libya had dismantled their nuclear program only to be later attacked by a US-led coalition, and thus their position toward the US returned to the historical aggressive stance.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.3. US in the East China Sea

As mentioned before, the main initial purpose of the US military presence in the Republic of Korea has been the defense against the northern counterpart; however, with the recent growth of China, these troops, along with all of the US military stationed in Japan, Guam and previously in the Philippines have taken the purpose of deterring Chinese expansion into the East and South China Seas.

This containment strategy is a solid policy adopted several decades ago, much before the economic boom of China, as it was raised to provide defense for Taiwan, against any sort of expansionism, or “unification”, intended by Beijing. Thus, within this bigger picture, due to its geographical proximity, South Korea is an essential part of the US military presence in East Asia, especially after the fact that one of the US main traditional allies in the area, i.e. the Philippines, decided to expel most US troops from their territory in the 90s.<sup>41</sup> This action was unexpected from such a close ally, however, to many Filipinos the US was a colonial power who had invaded and directly controlled them for several years. Thus, within this anti-colonialist discourse, along with the fall of the Communist bloc, the Philippines considered that the need for US defense in the area had become irrelevant. This could not be further from the truth, since, after the US withdrawal from the Philippines, China started pressing some old territorial claims on the area, leading to the current occupation of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea due to the defense gap left by the US armed forces, which was impossible for the Philippines to fill.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Biden*

The new Biden Administration appears to be determined to undo most of the “eccentric” policies adopted during Trump’s mandate. By looking into Joe Biden’s career, it is not difficult to infer that he is a supporter of the US state policies in regard to foreign affairs, as well as their interventionism throughout the globe, justified by the purpose of keeping the so-called *Pax Americana*. Although this idea was confirmed in the US Interim National Security Strategy, released in March 2021, President Biden has not been

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Wroughton, Lesley, and David Brunnstrom. “Exclusive: With a Piece of Paper, Trump Called on Kim to Hand over Nuclear Weapons.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 29, 2019

<sup>41</sup> Branigin, William. “U.S. Military Ends Role in the Philippines.” The Washington Post. WP Company, November 24, 1992

<sup>42</sup> Gomez, Jim. “Philippines Rejects China's Territorial Label on Island.” AP NEWS. Associated Press, April 30, 2020

followed so strictly as thought, given his decision to continue the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In spite of this, with Biden in power, the chances of a US withdrawal from Korea have basically returned to zero, at least if it depends on Washington, as the situation is incomparable to that of the Middle East. Furthermore, Biden seems to be interested in a rapprochement with Seoul,<sup>43</sup> as we could see with the recent agreement reached on the matter of the funding of US troops in Korea, where he was finally able to close a much more reasonable deal whereby SK will pay around 14% more this year.<sup>44</sup>

This rapprochement toward Seoul would fit inside Biden's major strategy for Indo-Pacific, where he seems to attempt to recover some of the initiatives started by Obama in the region, as a sort of new Pivot to Asia. This notion has been confirmed in the latest meeting between both countries' presidents in late April 2021, whereby Biden expressed clearly his intention to try to approach Seoul to the US Indo-Pacific broader strategy, whose major goal is that of containing China's influence in the area.<sup>45</sup> Aside from China, NK seems to be willing to challenge the new US president, given their latest missile tests at the end of March 2021.<sup>46</sup> Despite Pyongyang's provocations, in this case, the situation is unlikely to escalate as much as it happened during the first stage of the Trump Administration.

## 2.4. The neighboring Dragon

One last key player regarding the role of the ROK on a global scale is the People's Republic of China. Despite its proximity with the US, Seoul has never been dominated by a harsh anti-Chinese ideology such as other pro-western countries in the region, and so president Park Chung-hee attempted to achieve economic cooperation back in the 60s, while looking forward to business opportunities.<sup>47</sup> As Korea grew into an exporting economy during the 1970s China proved to be the best market for their products. There was a short phase of setbacks from 2008 to 2013 in this bilateral relation due to President Lee Myung-bak's attempt to deepen the American-Korean relations. However, after the end of his administration, Seoul has shown to be willing to improve their relations with China, while being in an environment of increasing tensions between Beijing and Washington. In order to solve this both Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in tried to use "balance diplomacy" between the two, balancing the economic interests of Korea with the defense activities of the American army, such as the implementation of the previously mentioned THAAD in the Peninsula.<sup>48</sup>

### *Economic and demographic ties*

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<sup>43</sup> Zhou, Laura, and Rachel Zhang. "South Korea, US Set to Move Closer under Joe Biden, but China Has Concerns." *South China Morning Post*, January 30, 2021

<sup>44</sup> Lee, Jeong-Ho. "Biden Troop Deal With South Korea Calls for Modest Increases." *Bloomberg.com*. Bloomberg, March 10, 2021

<sup>45</sup> Bernal, Gabriela. "Biden Pulls South Korea Closer in Alignment With US Indo-Pacific Strategy." *The Diplomat*. The Diplomat, May 25, 2021

<sup>46</sup> "North Korea Test Fires Two Ballistic Missiles in Challenge to Biden." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, March 25, 2021

<sup>47</sup> Byun, See-won. "China-Korea Relations: Sweet and Sour Aftertaste." *Asia Foundation*, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Lee, Ji-Young. "The Politics of South Korea - China Relations." *Rand Corporation*, 2020.

One of the main reasons for this ‘openness’ towards Beijing is basically an attempt of economic pragmatism, as mentioned before, given that China supposes a huge near market in which they can sell their products. Moreover, due to trade tensions with Japan Korean businesses have been looking into China for substituting providers and customers. Companies like Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motor, Kia Motors, and LG Electronics have considerably increased their profits by establishing plants in China and selling their products there. For instance, Xi'an plant is the only overseas memory semiconductor manufacturing hub of Samsung Electronics with a total of 15 billion dollars invested<sup>49</sup>. Another relevant aspect is that China is currently the main supplier of Metals and Machinery to the ROK. Both of these materials are vital for the Korean Industrial production and most specifically for the production of technological items like phones, computers and cars, thus creating further dependence on Beijing for a good amount of their industrial supply chain. All of this, with time, has rendered China Korea's biggest trading partner.<sup>50</sup>

Another less known aspect in the relation between Seoul and Beijing is the fact that there are over 1 million Chinese immigrants living in SK. To this day, they are the first nationality among the immigrants and they represent around 55% of the total of migrants in Korea. The reason for these to move are mostly economical, as Chinese occupy low paid jobs mostly in the cities as labor migrants<sup>51</sup>. In the last few years, there seems to be a stagnating trend here due to the fact that many of these migrants have suffered racism in their areas of work and hence some do not find the country as attractive to migrate anymore.<sup>52</sup> They are not too relevant for the moment, due to the overall low number of migrants in SK. However, in the long term it would be possible to see a rise in the numbers of Chinese migrants because of South Koreans’ low birth rate.

Even though South Korea has tried to cultivate a good relationship with China it is important to say that this has been done despite of and not because of the opinions that Koreans have about China. A poll conducted by Pew Research Showed that 83% of the Koreans did not trust Xi Jinping or think he would do the “right thing in world affairs.”. The same poll claims that around two thirds of the Koreans show a negative view of China.<sup>53</sup> Most of the people of Korea condemn the nationalistic turn of the country following the rise of Xi Jinping, as well as the violent and suppressive actions of Beijing in Hong Kong.

### *Chinese dependence?*

The fear of Japan and the US is that, by seeking its own independence and retribution from the Japanese war crimes of the Asian War, the ROK might be throwing

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<sup>49</sup> NA. «S. Korean companies send around 550 employees to China» *The Dong A-Ilbo*, 23 May 2020.

<sup>50</sup>OEC. South Korea economy report. OEC, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Kim, Hyemee, Jin Gyung Lee, Byung Chul Lee, and Soyoung Kim. “Understanding the Life of Chinese Immigrants in Korea: Forgotten People in the Land of Multiculturalism.” *Asian Social Work and Policy Review* 11, no. 3 (2017): 184-92.

<sup>52</sup> Chan-kyong, Park. “Why are ethnic Chinese leaving South Korea in their thousands?” *The Week in Asia*, 9 April 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, Chung Min. “South Korea Is Caught Between China and the United States.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2020.

itself into the arms of China. However, even though a potential dependence on China too big to stop might be a risk that does not seem to be in the interest of Seoul or the Koreans at all. As said before, Koreans have a bad image of both Xi Jinping and the new Chinese policy and they certainly do not want to be in a situation that could remotely look like the one happening in Hong Kong. Certainly, Chinese intentions in the Korean Peninsula have been mainly centered on “de-freezing the Cold War”, meaning that the current Chinese administration is trying to move away from the stalemate in which the Peninsula has been living since the 1950s, in order to get reliable partners in the region and move Seoul away from the United States. China does not need Korea to be its ally though, its main priority is to guarantee the neutrality of the country that could in the future eventually make the American troops move away, an hypothesis that we shall explore further ahead.<sup>54</sup>

To sum up, Korea is unlikely to become a new client state of China, at least not voluntarily, but it will not commit to a Cold War style foreign policy either. Its objective seems to be to forge a relationship with each country around a very specific and strategic point, and in the case of China is trade. The ties that the former leaders of South Korea have been forging are characterized mainly by pragmatism and long-term objectives of diplomatic sovereignty.

## **2.5. US presence scenarios**

### *Driving forces*

In order to better illustrate how the US presence in the region could change in the next few years, we have developed a series of future scenarios, within a scope of 7 years, regarding more specifically the situation of US troops in the Korean peninsula. Yet before proceeding to explain the possible scenarios themselves, it is important to take into account what drivers of change are considered to be of importance in this case:

First off, the first relevant driver in regard thereto would be in relation to the occupant of the White House by 2028, without considering the elections that would take place in that same year, that is to say, who would win the 2024 US presidential election. Whoever takes power in the US in that year will have a great deal of influence in relation to what the future of US troops in Korea will be. Not only due to their executive power, which would allow them to directly withdraw troops from there, but also because of the US image projected into the South Korean public opinion. The former is highly unlikely to happen, unless a far-left or far-right candidate rises to power. However, the latter would be more within the scope of possibilities, given that SK opinion on the US has been slowly decreasing in the last decades, especially after the aforementioned incidents with the Trump administration. Thus, our second driving force for this scenario would be the level of support from the Korean population in relation to the US, and its military presence in the area.

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<sup>54</sup>Sik, Kan Den. "Korean Peninsula Problem in the Light of the Latest Events." *Ukrainian Policymaker* 3 (2018): 51-57

Lastly, the third element to be considered would be the party in control of the Korean ruling institutions, i.e. the executive and the parliament. Both main parties in Seoul have extremely different opinions with regard to the US alliance, although none of them is directly opposed to it. However, the Democratic Party (DP), who is today in power, does prefer to keep a certain level of distance with the US, and prefers not to be dependent on it. Whereas the People’s Power Party (PPP) is rather reluctant to distance itself from the US, as the American-Korean alliance is one of its main foreign policy priorities.

*US reinforcements*

One of the possibilities considered was a reinforcing of the US position in the area. This situation is possible to happen if a moderate Republican were to be elected. This candidate would be aligned with the US establishment, US doctrines of interventionism, as well as the traditional state policies, such as the one in Korea. Biden’s current administration does share some of these features; however, a neo-conservative (neocon) Republican would be more prone towards interventionism and the idea of American Exceptionalism, as a justification for such policy.

<b>MORE TROOPS</b>	<b>US PRESIDENT IN 2024</b>	<b>KOREAN PUBLIC OPINION</b>	<b>SK POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS</b>
<b>FIRST POSSIBILITY</b>	THE DEMOCRATS ELECT A FAR-LEFT CANDIDATE	THE MAJORITY OF KOREANS BECOME ANTI-US	<b>BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP</b>
<b>SECOND POSSIBILITY</b>	BIDEN OR HIS SUCCESSOR IS REELECTED	INCREASED CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE OPINION ON THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP
<b>THIRD POSSIBILITY</b>	<b>THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 BUT A MODERATE REPUBLICAN COMES TO POWER</b>	MOST KOREANS ARE FAVORABLE TOWARD THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP
<b>FOURTH POSSIBILITY</b>	THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 AND TRUMPISM COMES BACK	<b>NEARLY ALL KOREANS LOVE THE US</b>	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP

Furthermore, a neo-conservative would be totally committed to the proper defense of the ROK, without putting at risk the current alliance and the quality of their diplomatic relations, as it has happened under Trumpism. That is because for him, the security of South Korea would be in the best interest of the United States. This strong commitment from the US could eventually lead to an increase in the level of popularity of the US within the South Korean public opinion, which in turn would mean that the PPP would return to power, both in the executive and the legislative. The PPP, in turn, has a rather apathetic stance in relation to the Inter-Korean relations, thus an increase in tensions could be possible. Finally, with the PPP in power and a neocon in the White House, as well as an increase in tensions with the North; it would be a matter of time until the US agreed to increase its military presence in the area

*US Withdrawal*

An opposite scenario could happen if relations between Washington and Seoul were to deteriorate. For this to happen, Trump or one of his successors would have to win

the 2024 elections, which would, in turn, likely lead to a further worsening of bilateral relations between the US and SK, as it happened during Trump’s mandate. If this were to happen, a majority of South Koreans could become anti-US by the end of 2028, due to the implementation of nationalist policies by the White House. In case that happened and the DP were still in power by then, which is likely if the population becomes anti-American, SK could attempt to reach total independence from the US. Despite the “America First” policy, Washington would be reluctant to agree to it, however, in case they did not reach an agreement, Seoul could push for an unilateral withdrawal, following the example of the Philippines in the early 90s.<sup>55</sup>

US WITHDRAWAL	US PRESIDENT IN 2024	KOREAN PUBLIC OPINION	SK POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS
FIRST POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS ELECT A FAR-LEFT CANDIDATE	THE MAJORITY OF KOREANS BECOME ANTI-US	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP
SECOND POSSIBILITY	BIDEN OR HIS SUCCESSOR IS REELECTED	INCREASED CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE OPINION ON THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP
THIRD POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 BUT A MODERATE REPUBLICAN COMES TO POWER	MOST KOREANS ARE FAVORABLE TOWARD THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP
FOURTH POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 AND TRUMPISM COMES BACK	NEARLY ALL KOREANS LOVE THE US	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP

Nevertheless, this extreme situation is unlikely to happen in the near future, as most South Koreans still believe that the US is essential for maintaining their national security. Although, if a rupture with the US was to happen, China could attempt to replace the Americans, as the guardians of the Korean peninsula. Seoul would likely not agree to it, but unless they had achieved further development in their military, including a nuclear program for deterrence -which is nearly impossible due to the ROK ratification of the NPT<sup>56</sup> -, they would not really have a choice.

*Maintaining the status quo*

Finally, the most probable scenario is the one in which the current *status quo* is maintained in Korea, that is to say that the number of US troops is unlikely to diminish in the next few years. If Biden is reelected in 2024 or a Democratic candidate following his policies wins that year—or even if a moderate Republican becomes president—the US military policy toward the region is very unlikely to change. In this case, public opinion in regard to the US would likely stagnate, meaning that most of the population would still be favorable to the US presence; however, it would not be an overwhelming percentage.

<sup>55</sup> Gomez, Philippines Rejects. AP NEWS. 2020

<sup>56</sup> “South Korea.” NTI, 2018



STATUS QUO	US PRESIDENT IN 2024	KOREAN PUBLIC OPINION	SK POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS
FIRST POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS ELECT A FAR-LEFT CANDIDATE	THE MAJORITY OF KOREANS BECOME ANTI-US	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP
SECOND POSSIBILITY	BIDEN OR HIS SUCCESSOR IS REELECTED	INCREASED CONTROVERSY REGARDING THE OPINION ON THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP
THIRD POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 BUT A MODERATE REPUBLICAN COMES TO POWER	MOST KOREANS ARE FAVORABLE TOWARD THE US	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP
FOURTH POSSIBILITY	THE DEMOCRATS LOSE 2024 AND TRUMPISM COMES BACK	NEARLY ALL KOREANS LOVE THE US	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP

Unless something as big as a corruption scandal happened, there is no reason to believe that DP would not be in power by 2028, given their current absolute majority in parliament. Moreover, further escalation, to the level that happened in 2017, seems unlikely; however North Korea does not seem to be willing to find a rather peaceful solution either. Since for them, denuclearization is unthinkable unless the US withdraws from the South first. One extra possibility, within the current status quo, would be an increase in SK autonomy within the alliance, for instance by removing the Combined Forces Command.

### **3. DYNAMICS IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

#### **3.1. Freedom expectations in North Korea**

Regarding the political aspect of the North Korean regime, the conversations about its capacity to last and endure change have followed it since its creation, but against general expectations it has proven to be a solid state with a reasonable independence from the outside world. Under these circumstances, a more open regime only could develop from two processes, internal reforms conducted from the higher hierarchies of the administration, or an internal revolution pursuing more civil and political liberties. On a first assumption the reformist option may appear more likely, due to the continued external pressure and their deficient economic performance, but North Korea's unique characteristics may differ, so a revolution prospect will be analyzed beforehand as a more likely option.

##### *Revolution as the driving force*

The first and foremost characteristics to be noted are communism, Confucianism, nationalism, and Juche ideology as the driving factors behind North Korea's political system.<sup>57</sup> It cannot be understood without the relevance they hold in sustaining and directing the political life of the North Koreans. Juche ideology is especially relevant to the case as it is a unique local product, focused on a national idea of survival through self-sustenance and self-protection from foreign powers.

<sup>57</sup> Noland, Marcus. *Korea after Kim Jong-il*. Washington, DC: Inst. for Internat. Economics, 2004

On the same path, the combination of the Juche ideology and Korean nationalism keeps the country together and lowers the possibility of nationalism being used as a revolutionary motivation.<sup>58</sup> With the additional guarantee that ethnic disturbances are nowhere to be found, having an almost entirely Korean ethnic population.<sup>59</sup> North Koreans have achieved a unified political belonging where the mixture of the previous intellectual backgrounds is assumed as essential for the nation, and therefore is promoted and actively enforced in the citizens daily life.

Focusing on the willingness of the current population in engaging in revolutionary activities, a distinction should be made between urban and rural populations and high or lower classes, having always in mind the hermetic nature of the country makes real information scarce and subject to manipulation.<sup>60</sup> The urban elite accounts for the higher positions in the administration that are close to the Kim family and their ideas, many descended from guerrilla fighters against the Japanese and thus are coherent with the establishment and its ideology.<sup>61</sup> Their social and economic position grants them benefits and status, so they are less likely to revolt, a regime change would likely affect their position and they lack the moral motivation to take such a high risk. Even more considering the repression and persecution from the state against the dissidents,<sup>62</sup> that turns any attempt into a life or death situation.

For a revolution to happen in an authoritarian regime massive mobilization of the lower and middle classes is required, followed by incapacity of the state force to put down said insurrections. The Eastern European case provides a useful case example, when the Soviet Union failed to militarily back its satellite governments against the protestors.<sup>63</sup> Rural lower classes lack the capacity of organization, and lower classes in general have profited from some economic de-regularization since the 1990 famine<sup>64</sup> that has mildly improved their life conditions. On the social aspect their strength relies on two doctrines. First, on the strong nationalism against the US as foreign threat that is making them fight for their own survival. Secondly, collectivism,<sup>65</sup> embodied in the history of Korean people through Confucianism, makes the North Korean social cohesion one of their strongholds that other authoritarian regimes may have lacked. What's more, due to the high degree of militarization of the country it is fair to assume that they have the capacity and willingness to put down a small-scale insurrection before it expands nationally.

The durability of the North Korean state has been a subject of doubt since its creation, but especially after the death of the founding father Kim il sung and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when few expected it to endure much longer. A poll that asked 48

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>59</sup> The World Bank. "International Migrant Stock (% of Population)

<sup>60</sup> Roberts, Sue Lloyd. "North Korea: Life in Cultural Isolation." BBC News. December 20, 2011

<sup>61</sup> South Korea. Ministry of Reunification. *Understanding North Korea* (2017). Seoul.

<sup>62</sup> Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. "Repression and Punishment in North Korea: Survey of Prison Camp Experiences." *East-West Center* 20 (October 05, 2009)

<sup>63</sup> Saxonberg, Steven. *Transitions and Non-Transitions from Communism: Regime Survival in China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam* Cambridge, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Seth, Michael J. "North Korea's 1990s Famine in Historical Perspective." *Asian Studies*, Winter 2011

<sup>65</sup> Chung, Young Chul. "The Suryong System as the Institution of Collectivist Development." *Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007)

international analysts about the chances of the North Korean state to survive with a similar regime for the following years, 60% of them expected it to collapse from 1995 to 2010, but as we know today, it did not happen.<sup>66</sup>

This just proves the durability of the regime to cope with the crisis, even when in between there has been two hereditary delegations of power and big crises like the 1990 North Korean famine, where around 1.5 million North Koreans starved to death.<sup>67</sup> Another factor that contributes to unity and diminishes the possibility of an internal revolution is the role of the Kim dynasty. Dynasties as a political model were common throughout Korean history, and this model has created a political socialization similar to religious devotion found in Ancient and Middle Ages. The main benefit for social cohesion is that it provides the ruler with confidence and justification to exert its rule, so it ends up serving as a nation unifier.<sup>68</sup>

Another aspect to consider is the capacity of foreign actors to encourage or promote internal divisions, potentially creating an internal revolutionary movement. North Korea provides for a unique case on this aspect, as its restricted flow of information and people makes it a highly hermetic country. Furthermore, the lack of international involvement, recently proven by a year and a half complete national lockdown, avoids the capacity of foreign influence in transforming the society.<sup>69</sup> South and North Korea had a propaganda war for decades centered around the demilitarized zone; <sup>70</sup> it ended up proving to be more disturbing than effective, and after claims from South Korean representatives it officially stopped in 2018.<sup>71</sup>

Closing up, there are more arguments to believe that North Korea will remain a stable regime in the short term, but it is possible that a revolutionary movement could emerge. One of the more accepted outcomes, inside the already marginal chance of it, would be a change in the regime, towards a differently governed military regime without the Kim dynasty. It would be supported due to the perceived foreign threat and the high degree of militarization the country experiences,<sup>72</sup> while a more economically open governing force could be attractive for a population still facing scarcity of resources.

On the other hand, the Spanish and South African cases show how peaceful transitions of power can be achieved after authoritarian rulings, but North Korea does not share similar conditions.<sup>73</sup> Mainly, due to the fact that there is no institution capable of channeling that revolutionary process, in the sense that no opposition movements and

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<sup>66</sup> Noland, Marcus. *Korea after Kim Jong-il*

<sup>67</sup> Seth, Michael J. "North Korea's 1990s Famine."

<sup>68</sup> Seth, Michael J. *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*. Lanham, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Shin, Mitch. "What Is the Truth About COVID-19 in North Korea?" *The Diplomat*. January 08, 2021

<sup>70</sup> Reuters Staff. "North Korea Retaliates against South with Loudspeaker Propaganda." *Reuters*. August 18, 2015

<sup>71</sup> Jeung, Park. "How Residents on the DMZ See South Korea's Anti-Leaflet Bill." *The National Interest*. February 17, 2021

<sup>72</sup> Albert, Eleonor. "North Korea's Military Capabilities." *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 16, 2020

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell, Kenneth. "Spain's Transition to Democracy: A Model for Eastern Europe?" *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 38, no. 1 (1991)

structures exist. The state governs the religious life, there are no combative wealthy social classes or they are directly linked to the government and the labor unions are part of the unique party<sup>74</sup>. As a conclusion of this tight control, the confrontation with the government will be generalized and radicalized or it will not exist, there is very little room for a moderate opposition to have the chance and time to grow up. In conformity with previous statements, a revolutionary movement towards a more open regime is not likely in North Korea, but it's even less likely a medium intensity confrontation with the administration. A revolution will happen or not, but no there is no in-between.

### *Internal reforms as the driving force*

Coming back to the possibility of a North Korean change towards openness, the other possible outcome is an internal reform process, to which extent it will contribute to freedom is still a question of debate. First, why would the North Korean regime want to implement notable reforms? And what's more, why those reforms would be directed towards the objective of greater freedom? Studies on authoritarian regimes show that a close calculation of gains and losses, rather than politico-economic reform in itself, is the key driver for change.<sup>75</sup>

Based on previously mentioned core values of the North Korean political society, North Korean leaders have structural difficulties to implement change, as the leader faces the problem that any serious reforms would be interpreted as an admission that he and his father have been fallible.<sup>76</sup> Is one of the problems that the dynastic structure brings up but not the only one. A distinction should be addressed regarding economic or political liberties, even though they usually interconnect and grow on each other. In the present times and in the short term if the conditions do not change, the administration would have a keener view of economic changes rather than political changes. Firstly, based on the primary needs of their people that they need to satisfy to stay in power; and secondly, because some minor reforms were made in past years under Kim Jon-un's rule, and they did not compromise the general structure while slightly benefitting from the economic liberalization.<sup>77</sup>

In conclusion, Kim Jon-un is likely to make a reformative policy choice that will be effective in attracting the initial capital the country needs, without violating the traditional ideologies. Directly answering the initial premise, looking at the past and present conditions, it is hard to believe that the regime will implement any substantial reform, and even less likely that such reform would direct the country towards openness.

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<sup>74</sup> Noland, Marcus. *Korea after Kim Jong-il*

<sup>75</sup> Lee, Hanhee. "Inevitable Reform? The Politico-Economic Choices Facing North Korea Under Kim Jong-Un's Rule." *North Korean Review* 11

<sup>76</sup> Lee, Hanhee. "Inevitable Reform?"

<sup>77</sup> Lankov, Andre. "North Korea under Kim Jong-un: Reforms without Openness?" Foreign Policy Research Institute. June 13, 2018

### 3.2. Unstable inter-Korean relations

Once the possibility of change in NK has been analyzed, the focus must shift into Inter-Korean relations in the present and near future, as a key aspect that drives South Korean internal politics and peninsular issues. They have proven to be increasingly important over the time, since both states were *de facto* vassals of the superpowers of the time. The relations have gone through a series of stages, with the trend being more independent relations as time has passed on, they went from being at mercy of the great powers' relations and dynamics to being able to conduct their relations in a less externalized way. However, both Koreas remain tied by their ideological confrontation and conflicted interests, causing their relations to be unstable by nature, characterized by periods of dialogue and periods of rising tensions.

#### *Present Conditions*

Even if there have been improvements since the 50's, both countries remain heavily constrained in their capacity of conducting relations with one another. The North due to its compromised economic situation and internal power dynamics, while the South is still bound to US military compromises that limit its sovereignty<sup>78</sup>. What's more, the US highly conditions the relations between both Koreas with their thousands of troops stationed, as well as Japan and their rising economic and political discrepancies with SK on one side, and China being Pyongyang's undercover supporter, but at the same time pressuring so they can have stability in their borders and in the region.

Recently, the trends between both Koreas have suffered from a disparity in intentions. On one hand South Korea has been pursuing reconciliation under president Moon's mandate, specially starting 2021 as there is only one year left before his mandate ends, and he has set the North-South relations improvements as one of its biggest objectives<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, they are trying to not increase the belligerence of their northern counterpart while trying to accommodate the continuous demands of the United States.

On the other hand, North Korea has been displaying a hostile rhetoric based more on communication than on actions. It blames Washington for the US interference in the peninsular affairs and ask for troops reductions to continue the negotiations. One of the tensest situations happened in May 2020, when after some intense threats to the South regarding propaganda from Kim Yo-jong,<sup>80</sup> sister of Kim Jong-un, they blew up a two years old South Korean financed building with a cost of 70 million.<sup>81</sup> To add tension to the situation, it was not just a generic building, it was a joint liaison office where the two Koreas maintained offices for communication and cooperation, so blowing it up sent a straight message to the south regarding their willingness to cooperate. However, it must

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<sup>78</sup> "Combined Forces Command." USFK Combined Forces Command. Accessed March 22, 2021

<sup>79</sup> King, Robert. "The Outlook for Inter-Korean Relations after North Korea's 8th Party Congress." Korea Economic Institute of America. February 16, 2021

<sup>80</sup> Jeong, Andrew. "Kim Yo Jong: What We Know About Kim Jong Un's Sister and Her Role in North Korea." The Wall Street Journal. March 16, 2021

<sup>81</sup> Berlinger, Joshua, Jake Kwon, and Yoonjung Seo. "North Korea Blows up Office Used for Talks with the South." CNN. June 16, 2020

be understood under the general vision of North Korea's rhetoric, so it is not interpreted as a total deterrence of the relations, they tend to aggressively respond when encountered by a disliked decision, but return to the tables of negotiation once some time has passed on<sup>82</sup>.

### *Future conditions*

Even if Korean relations are not in their best period, there are reasons to believe this situation could improve in the short term. On one hand, both actors know that tension is an unavoidable characteristic of their relationship, meaning that both sides believe in the resilience of their relations even at the tensest moments, as history has shown repeatedly.<sup>83</sup> On the other side, both Koreas have interests and motivations that hinder their relations, but those same interests and political willingness make up for the sufficient base to consistently come to negotiate, they are forced to try to at least cohabit peacefully.

Regarding the reasons to restart engagement, as said before the main motivations have been historically consistent, but new present conditions may encourage both sides to set apart recent confrontations. Accordingly, even when the relations are in worse shape the political motivations of both sides do not disappear, they are just hidden, that is the reason why once the situation has been assimilated the talks continue repeatedly.<sup>84</sup> An illustrative example can be found in 2013, when at the inauguration of President Park came a period of high tension: North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in February 2013 and responded strongly as the US and ROK began conducting joint military exercises the following month. NK declared the Armistice Agreement completely nullified, severed the last inter-Korean military hotline, declared a state of war, and also withdrew its 53,000 workers from the KIC.<sup>85</sup> Such a tense situation was managed through diplomatic means in a few months, reaching agreements to continue relations on good faith bases.

Some new factors may be able to push for a restart as well, as Biden's starting presidency offers an opportunity, as well as Moon's ending presidency. President Moon is eager to make some political gains for its internal politics, and Kim Jon-un may want to test the new administration in their relation to the Korean affair, so there is a room for opportunity highly dependent on the actions and the tone of the United States.<sup>86</sup> Proving this point, just recently on March 24, 2021, North Korea conducted a trial of a ballistic missile according to Japanese and Korean authorities, in line with the hostile rhetoric and pressure exercise over the United States<sup>87</sup> Moving on into other aspects, the Covid-19 global crisis could offer a window of opportunity when the situation is managed to acceptable levels. At the moment North Korea has cut ties from the outside to contain the

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<sup>82</sup> King, Robert. "The Outlook for Inter-Korean Relations"

<sup>83</sup> Wertz, Daniel. "An Overview of Inter-Korean Relations - NCKN." The National Committee on North Korea. January 2017

<sup>84</sup> "Important Events from 2009 to Present." Ministry of Unification

<sup>85</sup> Wertz, Daniel "Overview of Inter-Korean"

<sup>86</sup> Youcheer, Kim. "The Strategic Background Behind the ROK-U.S. Joint Military Exercise and Its Impacts on Inter-Korean Relations." *Korea Institute for National Unification*, August 24, 2020

<sup>87</sup> Sang-hun, Choe. "North Korea Fired 2 Ballistic Missiles, U.S. and Japan Say." *The New York Times*. March 25, 2021

virus and South Korea has movement restrictions,<sup>88</sup> but when the situation calms down would be the best opportunity to relaunch the joint commissions and older common projects like the Kaesong Industrial Complex, using the impulse of the reopening as a new time to try again.

Precisely the Kaesong Industrial Complex exemplifies the more material motivations behind another rapprochement. Unilaterally closed in 2016 under Park's administration in response to the NK's fifth nuclear test, it hosted 55.000 North Korean workers and more than a hundred South Korean enterprises in North Korean land, proving to be one of the most successful examples of political and economic collaboration between both Koreas.<sup>89</sup> In a post-COVID era, where NK needs to revitalize its economy and provide decent jobs to its population, and SK needs to boost their exports through cheaper labor and easier supply chains, both countries complement each other's necessities.<sup>90</sup> What's more, president Moon could sell it as an electoral victory given the relevance it had in previous years, and it could lead to other relevant re-openings for both countries such as the MT Geumgang resort.

In any case, in the bigger picture the trend toward greater interaction, interdependence, and integration between the two Koreas will continue based on their common interest and necessities,<sup>91</sup> even if at the moment the North keeps trying to leverage its position in order to destabilize the South and their allies.

### **3.4. The hardships of a long-awaited reunification**

The final reunification of the two Koreas is a matter of great importance, not only for both countries, but also for the regional dynamics considering the impact of a newly united Korea. When addressing the issue, a systematic approach has been taken by analyzing the main actors' roles and the potential driving forces in a space of time of ten years. By doing so three main plausible scenarios were designed, further developing two of them, the one where a reunification would take place and the most probable one.

Addressing the actors involved, an actor map was suited as the best method to graphically portray them, as well as displaying their main relations. Having South Korea as the central actor of the equation, the surrounding actors are the ones who more directly influence the inter-Korean relations, so it be North Korea, the United States of America, China, Japan and Russia. It should be addressed that all of them share a regional location except for the United States, who as seen before is notoriously influential based on its global presence as a superpower, as well as for the direct control they exert over the South Korean military.

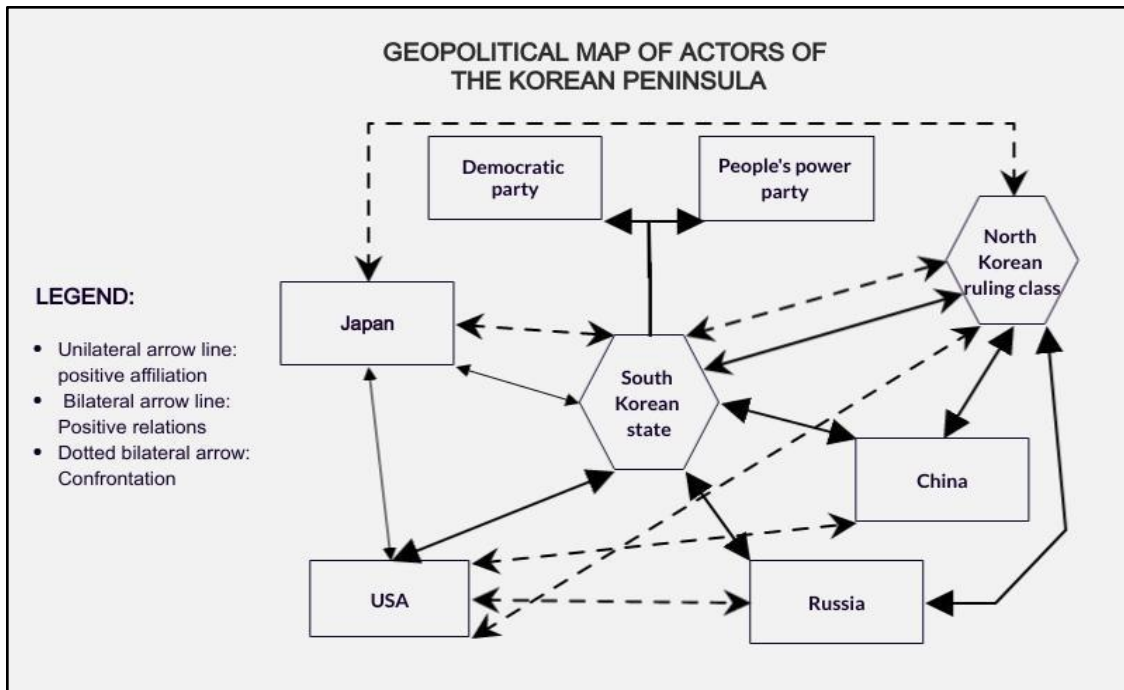
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<sup>88</sup> Schwak, Juliette. "K-Quarantine: Exporting South Korea's COVID-19 Management Strategy." East Asia Forum. March 11, 2021

<sup>89</sup> Wyeth, Grant. "Time to Reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex? A Conversation With Jinhyang Kim." The Diplomat. February 27, 2020

<sup>90</sup> Kim, Samuel S., and Matthew S. Winters. "Inter-Korean Economic Relations." Inter-Korean Relations, 2004

<sup>91</sup> Ho, Shing Jon. "A Paradigm Shift in Inter-Korean Relations and 'Decentralized' North Korean Policies." *Korea Institute for National Unification*, August 22, 2018.



### *Necessary Conditions*

In the same way as the actors, the identified drivers or factors of possible change are shared among the final scenarios. The selection process revolves around two variables, likelihood of influencing the possibility of reunification and the intensity of such influence in the final result. Furthermore, only the main drivers, that are very likely to have a say and would greatly impact the reunification, have been considered, being arranged in order of bigger to smaller influence.

Individually addressing the selected drivers, the first is legislative and executive control of the South Korean state. It was previously stated that South Korea was the reference point for a reunification to happen, and within that role the players who can push for the process are South Korean policy makers and governments. Inside this driver the possibilities revolve around the two main Korean parties, The Democratic Party nowadays in power represented by President Moon and the People's Power Party.

The justification for South Korea being the center of the equation relies on the different nature of both Korea's systems. While the North is more self-restricted upon a personalistic rule and tight political control the South enjoys a liberal democracy where political willingness can be better pursued, thus relying more power on the South Korean representatives.<sup>92</sup> Considering so, there are four main possibilities, with the two parties possibly controlling none, one or both legislative and executive branches. Even if both parties have had reunification as a national goal their approaches differ. The Democratic Party has been showing a softer side with North Korea to lure them,<sup>93</sup> while the People's Power Party holds more conservative positions and tighter relations with the United States, thus diminishing their persuasive capacities toward North Korea.

<sup>92</sup> Noland, Marcus. *Korea after Kim Jong-il*

<sup>93</sup> Han, Yong-Sup. "The Sunshine Policy and Security in Korean Peninsula" *Asian Perspective* 26, no. 3 (2002)



Following on the second most influential driver, the international sanctions towards North Korea represent the main response of the international community to affect the isolationist country. The last set of measures was implemented in 2018 and approved by the UN Security Council, having few North Korean assets not targeted by some kind of sanction.<sup>94</sup> The potential of international sanctions relies on the pressure they exert over the already fragile North Korean economy. Although due to secrecy reliable sources on the state of the economy are scarce, there is a consensus that the economy is in a bad shape and hardly grows, the point of discrepancy is to which extent is damaged and to which extent is due to the imposed sanctions.

Their relevance in the bigger picture is to determine the economic viability of the North Korean state, due to the limited resources the state disposes of, the biggest variables will come from external interventions.<sup>95</sup> What's more, it is not only about the economic perspective, as the nuclear program and the viability of the social cohesion is directly linked to some expected incomes, thus representing a notable destabilizing force. Ultimately, the option ranges from exclusion to inclusion of new sanctions and according to this variable the predisposition of the North Korean state to a reunification would vary.

Thirdly, the economic viability of the North Korean state to continue with its nuclear program represents a fundamental change option. In the mentioned Juche ideology the concept of survival is core in the philosophy, and specially for the Kim Jong Un era the relevance of the nuclear weapons as a deterrence method to assure their own survival is crucial for the state. Accordingly, the North Korean governing elite hardly conceive of a North Korean state without nuclear capacities, as they would feel too vulnerable to a conventional military aggression by South Korea and the US in a forced reunification attempt.<sup>96</sup>

Given the core magnitude of the nuclear and ballistic program for the state, it is a fair assumption that only if the state was on the verge of collapse would abandon or pause its programs, as already shown by the fact that the great famine did not dismantle the program even when millions died by starvation.<sup>97</sup> On that assumption, the previous driver of international sanctions and their own capacity of revitalizing their economy will be the main factors to look after.

Lastly, the management of the considerable number of US troops stationed in Korea will also be an influential driver. This topic has already been discussed in previous pages, however regarding the reunification the main point would be the willingness of the North Koreans to accept a deal where the US troops are no longer part of the equation. What's more, the position of the North Korean state in a high-pressure situation could depend almost entirely on the perceived US threat against their survival, under the assumption that the less involved the US is more favorably would react North Korea

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<sup>94</sup> United Nations. Security Council. *United Nations Security Council*. 2018

<sup>95</sup> Byrne, Leo. "PoE Says North Korea "flouting Sanctions": Report: NK News." NK News - North Korea News. February 10, 2017

<sup>96</sup> Nah, Liang Tuang. "Explaining North Korean Nuclear Weapons Motivations: Constructivism, Liberalism, and Realism." *North Korean Review* 9, no. 1 (2013)

<sup>97</sup> Goodkind, Daniel, and Loraine West. "The North Korean Famine and Its Demographic Impact." *Population and Development Review* 27, no. 2 (2001)

towards the reunification.<sup>98</sup> In addition, it would be coherent with a more ambitious South Korean perspective to get rid of the US military patronage and regain their entire defense sovereignty.

As previously noted, based on these conditions there are three main scenarios that are created. Two of them will be further explained due to their relevance, one being the most probable in a ten-year time-frame and the other the scenario where a Korean reunification is more likely, the third and not developed scenario covers an escalation of the confrontation in the peninsula.

Regarding the more probable scenario, it would be rooted on both South Korean legislative and executive powers being in charge of the Democratic Party. The reasoning behind this is the political trends in present Korea and the different predictions of next year's elections. The consequences would be a more passive Korea regarding the reunification, as the necessity of forming alliances on the internal politics would reduce their assertiveness abroad. Accordingly, the political sphere would not be focused that much on reunification but on solving other important problems like the ageing population,<sup>99</sup> with a bigger focus on internal politics.

Following up with the international sanctions, there are reasons to believe they will remain stable over a short-medium term. Such reasons revolve around two main variables, the first being that there are few targets that are not already subject to sanctions and relate with the most basic needs of the North Korean population such as food products.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the possibility of states to increase their sanctions is limited by the sanctionable subjects themselves, as there is lack of motivation to pass a United Nations Security Council resolution for a set of sanctions that cover a very small scope.

The second one is about time and the effectiveness of new sanctions, the last set of sanctions approved by the council was implemented in 2018, but the first sanctions have been around for three decades now. International sanctions already constrain the North Korean economy, but there needs to be some time to analyze the real influence of the last set of measures, until then a new set is unlikely to develop.<sup>101</sup> On a similar path, the assumption is that North Korea will be able to sustain their nuclear and ballistic programs as they have done for the last decades. Given the importance the government has allocated in both programs, which are now linked with their own survival as a nation in the collective psyche, it is very unlikely that they will give it up if there is not a huge material constraint that forces them to do so.<sup>102</sup>

Regarding the management of US troops in South Korea, the more probable scenario taking into account the previous drivers is the maintenance of the Status Quo, meaning a similar amount of troops without notable changes in the way they are managed.

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<sup>98</sup> Snyder, Scott, Ellen Swicord, J. James Kim, Chungku Kang, and Yumi Ko. Report. Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Yoo, Sam Hyun, and Tomáš Sobotka. "Ultra-low Fertility in South Korea: The Role of the Tempo Effect." *Demographic Research* 38 (2018)

<sup>100</sup> Security Council, 2018.

<sup>101</sup> Philipp, Elizabeth. "States Adopt New North Korea Sanctions." *Arms Control Today* 46, no. 3 (2016): 20-22. Accessed March 22, 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Nah, Liang Tuang, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons"

Given the stability that the scenario was portraying, the United States would not want to disturb the region with a notable increase, as well as South Korea lacking the willingness and reasons to push for a smaller presence of the troops in their territory.

In conclusion, the most probable scenario is one with few changes compared to the present situation, portraying a stagnated situation. South Korea would have a divided executive and legislative, while the US troops would fulfill the same role they are doing now. In North Korea's case they would keep their nuclear and ballistic programs, thus maintaining their deterrence factor and would not be highly pressured by new sanctions, opening a path for economic stabilization that would back up Kim Jong-un's mandate.

STATUS QUO	CONTROL OVER THE EXECUTIVE AND THE LEGISLATIVE IN SK	INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AGAINST NORTH KOREA	ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF THE NUCLEAR PROGRAM	US TROOPS IN KOREA
FIRST POSSIBILITY	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP	INCREASED SANCTIONS, ADOPTED BY ALL COUNTRIES, INCLUDING CHINA	NUCLEAR AND BALLISTIC PROGRAM CANCELLED DUE TO ECONOMIC FAILURE	US COMPLETELY WITHDRAWS TROOPS FROM THE KOREAN PENINSULA
SECOND POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP	MORE SANCTIONS BUT CHINA DOES NOT COMPLY	NUCLEAR IS MAINTAINED, HOWEVER IT IS NOT ABLE TO PROGRESS DUE TO POOR ECONOMIC RESULTS	US DIMINISHES THEIR PRESENCE, LEAVING ONLY TRAINING AND SUPERVISING MISSIONS
THIRD POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP	<b>SAME SANCTIONS</b>	<b>THE NK ECONOMY IS ABLE TO PROPERLY SUSTAIN THEIR NUCLEAR PROGRAM</b>	US WITHDRAWS SOME TROOPS AND DELEGATES CONTROL OVER THE REMAINING ONES TO SK
FOURTH POSSIBILITY	<b>BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP</b>	LESS SANCTIONS		<b>THE CURRENT STATUS QUO IS MAINTAINED</b>
FIFTH POSSIBILITY		REMOVAL OF SANCTIONS		US INCREASES ITS PRESENCE IN THE AREA

Regarding the reunification scenario, it will be noticeable that it does not share many conditions with the previous scenario, thus implying that it is more unlikely to happen in the ten years frame. On South Korea's side, both legislative and executive would be under the control of the Democratic Party, as their connection with younger generations is notable and they have displayed a softer side towards North Korea.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, the control over both bodies would grant them the political strength to push for such an ambitious project like a reunification of 75 million people.

Speaking of international sanctions, they would surpass the actual barriers and increase their pressure over the North Korean regime. New subjects of sanction would be established, focusing on the intermediary figures that allow the North Korean government to conduct its limited trade relations with the rest of the world. Especially relevant would be the position of China, as they hold the capacity to effectively control the land border with North Korea where most of the smuggling and defections happened.<sup>104</sup> If China would seriously subscribe to the sanctions and strengthen the controls, as they already did before, the pressure over North Korea would be suffocating for their already fragile economy.

Closely related to the previous point, if the North Korean economy is pushed on its limits, it may not be able to maintain their nuclear and ballistic programs. This would

<sup>103</sup> Lee, Sean. "Moon Jae-in Holds on to His Dream of North Korea Diplomacy." The Diplomat. June 02, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Nanto, Dick K., and Mark E. Manyin. "China-North Korea Relations." North Korean Review 7, no. 2 (2011): 94-101.

represent a situation where the North Korean administration needs to choose between their immediate survival as a state or the continuation of the program that would grant them long-term survival.

As seen on the analysis of the revolutionary capacities of North Korea, a core part of it was to maintain the people satisfied and not allow mass demonstrations of indignation. If North Korean were to suffer again a famine and the administration would keep the costly nuclear and military program it would be a strong reason to start a small-scale stand off against the state, with a real possibility to grow in strength all over the country. Thus, social pressure could make a difference in cancelling both programs, which in return would push for the reunification in an attempt to benefit from economic aid,<sup>105</sup> as well as to assure that a South Korean-US conventional invasion would not happen.

Finally, once North Korea is in a fragile position and willing to negotiate a beneficial reunification for the South, the US troops would become an obstacle. Firstly, they would no longer have the original reason to be in the country, as North Korea would have lost deterrence and would be in the process of reunification. What's more, for the integration to happen North Korea would require to keep it a purely Korean matter, keeping out of the equation the US and their troops, and South Korea could take the chance to restore their defense sovereignty once the threat that sustained it no longer exists.<sup>106</sup>

INCREASED TENSIONS	CONTROL OVER THE EXECUTIVE AND THE LEGISLATIVE IN SK	INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AGAINST NORTH KOREA	ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF THE NUCLEAR PROGRAM	US TROOPS IN KOREA
FIRST POSSIBILITY	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP	INCREASED SANCTIONS, ADOPTED BY ALL COUNTRIES, INCLUDING CHINA	NUCLEAR AND BALLISTIC PROGRAM CANCELLED DUE TO ECONOMIC FAILURE	US COMPLETELY WITHDRAWS TROOPS FROM THE KOREAN PENINSULA
SECOND POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP	MORE SANCTIONS BUT CHINA DOES NOT COMPLY	NUCLEAR IS MAINTAINED, HOWEVER IT IS NOT ABLE TO PROGRESS DUE TO POOR ECONOMIC RESULTS	US DIMINISHES THEIR PRESENCE, LEAVING ONLY TRAINING AND SUPERVISING MISSIONS
THIRD POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP	SAME SANCTIONS	THE NK ECONOMY IS ABLE TO PROPERLY SUSTAIN THEIR NUCLEAR PROGRAM	US WITHDRAWS SOME TROOPS AND DELEGATES CONTROL OVER THE REMAINING ONES TO SK
FOURTH POSSIBILITY	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP	LESS SANCTIONS		THE CURRENT STATUS QUO IS MAINTAINED
FIFTH POSSIBILITY		REMOVAL OF SANCTIONS		US INCREASES ITS PRESENCE IN THE AREA

<sup>105</sup> Kim, Nam Kyu. "Anti-regime Uprisings and the Emergence of Electoral Authoritarianism." Political Research Quarterly 70, no. 1 (2017): 111-26

<sup>106</sup> Friedhoff, Karl. Report. Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2020. Accessed March 23, 2021..

REUNIFICATION	CONTROL OVER THE EXECUTIVE AND THE LEGISLATIVE IN SK	INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AGAINST NORTH KOREA	ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF THE NUCLEAR PROGRAM	US TROOPS IN KOREA
FIRST POSSIBILITY	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE PPP	INCREASED SANCTIONS, ADOPTED BY ALL COUNTRIES, INCLUDING CHINA	NUCLEAR AND BALLISTIC PROGRAM CANCELLED DUE TO ECONOMIC FAILURE	US COMPLETELY WITHDRAWS TROOPS FROM THE KOREAN PENINSULA
SECOND POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE PPP, EXECUTIVE BY THE DP	MORE SANCTIONS BUT CHINA DOES NOT COMPLY	NUCLEAR IS MAINTAINED, HOWEVER IT IS NOT ABLE TO PROGRESS DUE TO POOR ECONOMIC RESULTS	US DIMINISHES THEIR PRESENCE, LEAVING ONLY TRAINING AND SUPERVISING MISSIONS
THIRD POSSIBILITY	LEGISLATIVE BY THE DP, EXECUTIVE BY THE PPP	SAME SANCTIONS	THE NK ECONOMY IS ABLE TO PROPERLY SUSTAIN THEIR NUCLEAR PROGRAM	US WITHDRAWS SOME TROOPS AND DELEGATES CONTROL OVER THE REMAINING ONES TO SK
FOURTH POSSIBILITY	BOTH POWERS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE DP	LESS SANCTIONS		THE CURRENT STATUS QUO IS MAINTAINED
FIFTH POSSIBILITY		REMOVAL OF SANCTIONS		US INCREASES ITS PRESENCE IN THE AREA

To sum up, a reunification scenario is more likely when North Korea loses its bargaining position and is in their best interest to pursue a reunification for their survival. Once the Democratic Party controls the political sphere of South Korea, sanctions would increase the economic pressure over North Korea, thus rendering their nuclear program unaffordable and erasing the necessity of US troops in the peninsula, then that's when reunification would be on its way.

#### *A unified Korea's internal potential*

Focusing on the consequences of such reunification, it would considerably change the role and capacities of both Koreas separately. Internally, the room for improvement and potential in the middle and long term is notable, including the possibility of an evolution in demography, resources available for the new Korea, economic development and more. Not to forget the cost and possible problems that could arise from the reunification, due to the different material and social conditions both states have been experiencing since their separation.<sup>107</sup>

In regards to demography, the union would enhance the power projection and economic capacities thanks to it. At first it would increase the total population to around 75 million, in similar levels to Germany or Turkey, making it a bigger market with more impact abroad, but not only that, it would increase the fertility rates thanks to the North Korean rate being almost double, at 2.<sup>108</sup> The input of 25 million people with a higher fertility rate would help moderate the steadfast decline South Koreans are expecting, even though it will not completely solve the fertility decline by itself. Another relevant aspect is the assimilation of North Korean population into a unified society, South Korea holds one of the best education systems in the world and has around a 39% of adults with tertiary education, while NK's population with tertiary education limits to a 9% of the total.<sup>109</sup> It would be a facilitator for the integration, as North Koreans could fulfill the new jobs that do not require so much qualification without entering a direct competition with the previous South Koreans.

<sup>107</sup> Weathersb, Kathryn. "Imagining a Unified Korea." Nikkei Asia. June 06, 2018

<sup>108</sup> Choi, Ji Young. "(Population Aging of Reunified Korea)." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017

<sup>109</sup> Stephen, Elizabeth Hervey. "Demography of a Reunified Korea." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, January 2013

A reunification would also imply a merge in resources, where the unified Korea could greatly benefit from the southern parts' great technology and the northern vast number of natural resources. Some estimates show that North Korea could have 30 times more mineral resources than the South,<sup>110</sup> but due to their restricted market access and technological capacities they remain severely underperforming. The benefits from those resources would represent an economic boost for the north, which could be used to fund the wealth gap and invest in normalization projects. A unified Korea would be one of the biggest extractors of minerals, having numerous reserves of gold, silver, copper, zinc and more.<sup>111</sup> On the other side, the southern land is more suitable for food production and has enhanced capacities thanks to their technological innovations, thus rendering it capable of improving the food shortage North Korea has been experiencing for decades. Not only that, but North Korean knowledge and facilities on nuclear energy could join the already developed South Korean nuclear facilities to amount for the necessary energy consumption of the new state.<sup>112</sup>

As seen before, the economic aspect is one of the most challenging, due to the high risk and high reward situation it generates. The estimated costs of merging both economies are measured in trillions, as the expectation are that Korea would rise up to the top of the global economic powers,<sup>113</sup> allowing the new state to fulfill its regional ambitions, and even start developing a global presence similar to the Japanese. It is not just the actual merging of the economies that would allow North Koreans to work in a more productive environment; it must be considered as well how it would affect the peninsular role in global trade. With the peninsula connected from North to South it gains terrestrial access to China and Russia, allowing train transportation of goods and services to connect to the global market,<sup>114</sup> diversifying their wealth sources. The main obstacles would be the financing and the successful merge of the economies, on both aspects South Korean's have been willing to lend their resources and know how to share their success with their northern counterparts,

#### *External potentiality of the reunification*

As expected, the changes that a reunification would foster would not be limited by internal borders, as this new Korea would still keep its ambitions and interests abroad. Especially benefited from its ambitions as a middle power, being able to expand its influence among ASEAN members as analyzed before, now with a bigger demographic weight and the potential economic leverage to lead the group.

In their relationships with China lies another key, as the continental power maintains its growth and ambitions that could lead to tensions. A united Korea could

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<sup>110</sup> Soo, Choi Kyung. "The Mining Industry of North Korea,2012

<sup>111</sup> Soo, Choi Kyung. "The Mineral Resources of North Korea." *North Korea Resources Institute*, September 2010

<sup>112</sup> "U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA- U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). August 27, 2020

<sup>113</sup> Ballard, Barclay. "The Economics of Korean Reunification." *World Finance*. July 26, 2019. Accessed March 26, 2021

<sup>114</sup> Chengevelyn. "North Korea Could Account for Nearly a Quarter of a Unified Korean Peninsula's Economy One Day, UBS Says." *CNBC*. June 27, 2018

represent a bigger competitor for Beijing, now sharing a terrestrial border and closer maritime space, but a neutral position would benefit both in their quest for internal growth and regional stability.<sup>115</sup> What's more, the neutrality could be based on one common ground that the three countries share, their resentment and tense relations over Japan.<sup>116</sup> Tokyo would be the most damaged country in the new regional scenario, as both Koreas hold resentment against it, and now they would be competing on more equal terms on regional influence and economic and technological supremacy.

Equally, the long-standing relation with the US should be readjusted so it better suits the new reality. Once both Koreas' have settled the US troops would be more of an impediment for the nation, as it compromises a smooth transition between them and difficult neutrality towards China, Korea would like to reshape their relations in a more independent way portraying itself as a capable regional leader.<sup>117</sup> However, their relationship with the US is too important to be totally discarded, thus they could agree to a rearming of the Korean forces, now counting on the already powerful South and North armies. Accordingly, Korea would have recovered the previously mentioned command over their forces in case of war, and very likely have drastically reduced the number of US troops in their territory, while keeping good economic and diplomatic relations.<sup>118</sup>

The last actor to be directly affected by the changes is Russia, who could fulfill their old goal of connecting their eastern part to the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia directly through the peninsula. Thus, Russian interests are primarily economic with the rich in resources north being a clear objective for Russian mining companies, as well as promoting their defense industry and keeping the balance of power with the US, all those objectives seem partially achievable under this scenario, making Russia a small winner from the reunification.<sup>119</sup> In general terms, both Koreas hold the higher risks and possible benefits, while China and the US each gain and lose a small margin, and Japan is the true victim of the new order in which they have been left with a triumvirate of resented states that represent a competition on all their main fields.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The very title of this report summarizes the situation that Seoul is stuck in. The unpredictable government of Pyongyang, with its nuclear arsenal, forces South Korea to remain within the limits that history itself has imposed over the peninsula, i.e. under the sphere of another major power. In this case, it is the US, and if it were to leave

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<sup>115</sup> Weathersb, Kathryn. "Imagining a Unified Korea."

<sup>116</sup> Driver, Strobe. "A Unified Korea: Good for All (Except Japan)." *E-International Relations*, February 10, 2019

<sup>117</sup> Cronin, Patric, Van Jackson, Elbridge Colby, Richard Fontaine, David Eunpyoung Jee, Brian Kirk, Darcie Draudt, and Hannah Suh. "Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification." *Center For a New American Security*, December 2015.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Westermann, Jacqueline. Report. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2018.

Washington, Seoul would immediately have to be replaced by Beijing, as the path for total independence is still a long one for the Korean people.

However, despite its unfavorable position, in recent years Seoul has managed to practice a sort of selective diplomacy, in order to balance their relations with other relevant powers. Taking this into account, we have considered that the Republic of Korea has two main options for its foreign policy in order for it to increase its global influence. On the one hand Korea could follow a “Northern Expansion” in which Korea prioritizes its relationship with the Eurasian continent, therefore China, Russia and the Northern regime. Under this policy the main objective is to firstly try to achieve reunification to a certain degree and then to develop its markets through China. Meanwhile it will distance itself from the US and the Quadrilateral Dialogue. It would also mean that tensions with Japan would continue increasing. As a counterpart, relations with the North have demonstrated to be very stable in their instability, poisoning the operations that lead for long term evolution and turning a permanent diplomatic ceasefire into a wish more than an option. On the same line, China still needs to prove its reliability as a partner as the conflicts of interest in the South China Sea steadily increase.

The second possibility of Korea would be the “Southern Expansion” in which the objective of Korea is to substitute its trade with China through the markets of Southeast Asia by further developing the partnership between Seoul and the ASEAN. This would give the ROK a partner that would not suppose an immediate threat and that could also supply Seoul with natural resources. It would also allow South Korea to separate its defense policy from the economic policy. Following this path would not interfere in the relations between the United States and the ROK, being it just a relocation of already available resources into new markets. Accordingly, it would allow South Korea to manage their relations independently from these activities while expanding their ambitions. However, China would not be pleased to see more competition in the region, as well as Japan, who might want to interfere with the diplomatic expansionism of Korea in their nearby region.

Whichever path ends up being chosen by Seoul, it will likely lead to a bigger weight within the global sphere, whether it is under the US or under China. Thus, it shall not come as a surprise to see the Korean Tiger, slowly awakening in the near future, while trying to move away from both the dragon and the bald eagle.



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