

# SOUTH KOREA



## POLITICAL RISK REPORT / MAY 2021

Andrea Izco Jiménez, Elena López-Dóriga and Lucía Sáez Ceballos



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de Navarra

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***South Korea. Political Risk Report. May 2021.***

By Andrea Izco Jiménez, Elena López-Dóriga and Lucía Sáez Ceballos

Center for Global Affairs & Strategic Studies

University of Navarra

Law School–International Relations

Campus Pamplona: 31009 Pamplona

Campus Madrid: Marquesado Sta. Marta 3, 28027 Madrid

<https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs>

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The purpose of this political risk report is to analyze how stable the political, economic, and social conditions of South Korea are to determine the best approach to invest in this country.

Firstly, regarding the Economic Outlook, the GDP is expected to increase 3.6% in 2021 and 2.8% in 2022 and the government has devoted to get out of the crisis through the Korean-New Deal. Concerning heavy industry, manufacturing, and AI and technology, South Korea is taking action to become a potential leader. In terms of energy, the country's high dependence on energy imports because of its scarcity of natural resources motivates them to move towards renewable energies as well as to maintain its energy security.

Secondly, in relation to South Korea's Social Outlook, the country has shown great social cohesion after the COVID-19 crisis with responsible action by the population. The birth rate is expected to remain very low, but still, the need for immigrants has not been an easy response as nationals feel a certain threat. Regarding religion, the notion of democracy is what brings South Korea closer to the Western World, not too much the notion of Christianity, but even having a democratic system, many Confucian values still remain. It is safe to say that even though Koreans are likely to become less institutionally committed, the decline on religion will be minimal and regarding social stability, there will not be social confrontations between the different groups.

Thirdly, in the Political Outlook we see how South Korea's democracy faces issues concerning the powerful executive connected to a crony capitalism system in which Chaebols have been related to political scandals in the last administrations. However, in the short-term, the government will focus on resolving socio-economic issues rather than taking system reforms, as a new form of populism is emerging claiming for solutions for inequalities and damage caused by modernity. Despite of the little economic progress carried out by the current administration under President Moon, it is likely that his party will win again the next presidential elections in 2022 thanks to the well management of the COVID-19 crisis.

Finally, the Inter-Korean question can be concluded by saying North Korea is not willing to open up and instead takes minimal reforms. Despite of the struggles caused by the crisis and the commitment to dialogue from South Korea under the so-called Sunshine Policy, little progress has been achieved.

## ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

- The GDP growth is expected to be 3.6% in 2021 and 2.8% in 2022.
- The general government gross debt in relation to percentage of GDP is expected to continue increasing, reaching 53.2% in 2021 and 57.2% in 2022.
- Heavy industry and manufacturing are becoming dynamic and competitive in the Asian region.
- The National Strategy of Artificial Intelligence aims at undertaking nine strategies and 100 initiatives in three main areas of Artificial Intelligence by 2030.
- By the end of 2022 the South Korean government is willing to invest \$11 billion in the Digital New Deal.
- South Korea is taking the steps to increase in renewable energy sources by 20% by 2030 and 30-35% by 2040.

## SWOT Analysis

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>STRENGTHS</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South Korea's strong capacity for facing economic crisis in a very short time thanks to its economic flexibility.</li> <li>• The good quality of infrastructure and the high level of research and development are an important added value for investors.</li> <li>• The labor force is particularly skilled.</li> <li>• South Korea has a high-level educational system.</li> <li>• Development of Artificial Intelligence and 5G.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>WEAKNESSES</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South Korea dependence on imports specially in the case of energy.</li> <li>• Gradual process of population aging.</li> <li>• Big business conglomerates inter-connected to the political elite.</li> <li>• Judiciary leniency.</li> <li>• Very powerful executive power</li> <li>• High level of youth unemployment.</li> <li>• Export dependence on China.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>OPPORTUNITIES</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The effective response to COVID-19 placed South Korea in a better economic position compared to other countries.</li> <li>• South Korea's high involvement in technology makes it attractive to investors.</li> <li>• South Korea's high commitment on renewable energies.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>THREATS</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because of South Korea's dependence on energy imports, it could face a risk of energy supply scarcity.</li> <li>• Competitiveness on shipbuilding industry from China.</li> <li>• Possible disputes with Japan could reduce Japan's exports of materials used in South Korea industries.</li> <li>• Emergence of a populism or <i>minjung</i></li> <li>• Decrease in quality democracy</li> </ul>

## **Macroeconomic picture**

The economy and its stability are relevant factors when it comes to investors making decisions about whether it is convenient or not for them to do business in a country. When it comes to South Korea, it is important to mention the phenomenon of the “Miracle of the Han River”, which refers to the time and process after the Korean War in which South Korea began to develop economically. For this reason, it is famous for its rise from one of the world's poorest countries, in which the rural activity was its main source of income, to a high-income developed country in a single generation.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is a country that during this economic growth has experienced two major crises: the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the Financial Crisis of 2008. Therefore, it has already experience serious economic events that can help it in subsequent crises such as the current one due to COVID-19.

In 2019, there was a slowdown in external trade due to high tensions with Japan and US-China trade war, which slowed down the economy of South Korea.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the fact that the annual percentage of GDP was already falling was even more worrying in 2020 because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, after the impact that a pandemic as such can generate, it is necessary to analyze different indicators that affect the country's economy to offer a macroeconomic picture that looks to the future.

## **GDP**

The onset of the pandemic led to a contraction of -1% of real GDP growth in 2020,<sup>3</sup> which was worrisome because no event like such had occurred since the Asian Financial Crisis. Nevertheless, South Korea's economic contraction in 2020 was significantly smaller than in most of the other advanced economies,<sup>4</sup> because of the good management of the crisis. This effective management was supported by its sound macroeconomic fundamentals, a timely and effective public health response, and the deployment of set of fiscal, monetary and financial measures, as well as exports of high-tech products and resilient investment

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<sup>1</sup> Nordea, “Country profile South Korea”, Nordea, March 2021, <https://www.nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/south-korea/economical-context..>

<sup>2</sup> MarketLine, “Macroeconomic Outlook Report”, MarketLine, May 2020, <https://advantage.marketline.com/Analysis/ViewasPDF/south-korea-macroeconomic-outlook-report-60629>.

<sup>3</sup> IMF, “Country Data”, IMF, 2021 <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/KOR>.

<sup>4</sup> IMF, “IMF Staff Completes 2021 Article IV Mission to Republic of Korea”, IMF, January 27, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/01/27/pr2125-korea-imf-staff-completes-2021-article-iv-mission-to-republic-of-korea>.

in machinery and equipment.<sup>5</sup> According to the IMF's October 2020 forecast, GDP growth was expected to bounce back to 2.9% in 2021,<sup>6</sup> but in the recent April 2021 update of the IMF is projected to grow 3.6% that year.<sup>7</sup> For 2022, the real GDP growth is expected to be 2.8%.<sup>8</sup> This increase is likely to happen due to the measures that South Korea took during the critic months of the pandemic and the ones that is willing to adopt.

### *Inflation rate*

The inflation rate (average consumer prices, annual %) had been decreasing in previous years, reaching 0.4% in 2019,<sup>9</sup> being the lowest number on the IMF graph. This drop in prices was attributed to the fall in the values of agricultural products and the stabilization of petroleum products, according to South Korea's official statistics agency.<sup>10</sup> However, in 2020 it grew to 0,5% and is projected to stand at 1.4% in 2021 and 0.9% in 2022.<sup>11</sup>

### *Unemployment rate*

In relation to the unemployment rate, it was already rising little by little in previous years. With the arrival of the pandemic, it is clear that this would not improve, and it grew to 3.9% in 2020.<sup>12</sup> During the crisis, the measures taken tried to favor those workers of South Korea who were suffering because of economic and unemployment reasons. For example, government subsidies for unemployment benefits reached a record \$917 million in June 2020<sup>13</sup> and on September 22 2020 the National Assembly adopted a 4<sup>th</sup> supplementary budget which explains that an additional 7.8 trillion won will be spent, for example, on support for small businesses and SMEs (3.9 trillion) and employment support (1.5 trillion).<sup>14</sup> Although some measures have been taken, the prediction for 2021 is that it will increase to 4.6% and that in 2022 it will improve, being the rate 4.1%.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> IMF, "Country Data".

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> n.a., "Inflation falls in South Korea for the first time since records have been kept", El Economista, October 1, 2019, <https://www.eleconomista.es/economia/noticias/10113555/10/19/El-IPC-baja-en-Corea-del-Sur-por-primera-vez-desde-que-hay-registros.html>.

<sup>11</sup> IMF "Country Data".

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Troy Stangarone, "Building South Korea's economic after the great pandemic recession", East Asia Forum, July 29 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/29/building-south-koreas-economy-after-the-great-pandemic-recession/>.

<sup>14</sup> IMF, "Policy responses to Covid-19", IMF, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#K>.

<sup>15</sup> IMF, "Country Data".

These percentages could vary; however, it would not be to a great extent and it would depend on the measures carried out by the country, which could provide a more medium-term solution. The unemployment situation would depend on policies like the new one announced by the government on July 14, 2020, the Korean New Deal, which aims to create jobs, or on March 2, 2021, the administration proposed a supplementary budget for 15 trillion won (0.8 percent of GDP) in which some measures would include relief for affected small business owners and workers.<sup>16</sup>

### ***General government overall balance***

The General Government Overall Balance was of -2.8% of GDP in 2020 during the crisis.<sup>17</sup> It is expected to be -2.9% in 2021 and -2.4% in 2022.<sup>18</sup>

### ***General government gross debt***

The general government gross debt in relation to % of GDP has tended to grow since 1997, with some slight drops at specific times or years. After a decrease from 2016 to 2018, it restarted growing again.

In 2019, it was a 42.2% of the GDP<sup>19</sup> and since then it has suffered a large increase, reaching 48.7% of the GDP in 2020.<sup>20</sup> The sharp increase in public debt was largely due to an increase in outstanding government bonds, which rose 50.9 trillion won (\$41.694 million) compared to 2019, amid declining tax revenues. and an increase in expenditure.<sup>21</sup>

The forecast for years 2021 and 2022 is that it will continue increasing, reaching 53.2% and 57.2% of the GDP, respectively.<sup>22</sup> This increase will depend on, for example, how many additional budgets from the government are created in order to continue facing the COVID-19 economic recovery.

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<sup>16</sup> IMF, "Policy Responses to Covid-19".

<sup>17</sup> IMF, "Fiscal Monitor. A fair short", IMF, April 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/FM/Issues/2021/03/29/fiscal-monitor-april-2021#Full%20Report>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> IMF, "Country Data".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> n.a., "South Korea's national debt exceeds 1,700 trillion won in 2019.", Yonhap News Agency, April 7, 2020, <https://sp.yna.co.kr/view/ASP20200407001700883>.

<sup>22</sup> IMF "Country Data.

**(Figure 1) MACROECONOMIC FORECAST**

	GDP growth (annual % change)	Inflation rate, average consumer prices (annual % change)	Unemployment rate (%)	General Government Overall Balance (% of GDP)	General government gross debt (% of GDP)
2020	-1%	0.5%	3.9%	-2.8%	48.7%
2021	3.6%	1.4%	4.6%	-2.9%	53.2%
2022	2.8%	0.9%	4.1%	-2.4%	57.2%

*Data source:* International Monetary Fund (WEO, April 2021).

### *South Korea's response to global crisis*

Indicators point at South Korea having the sufficient capacity to emerge from the crisis. As previously mentioned, this is not the first time that South Korea has had to handle a crisis. In fact, in 2009, after the global financial crisis, the country managed to recover in an exemplary way, thanks to experience and measures taken during the Asian Financial Crisis.<sup>23</sup> That is why during this crisis the lessons they had learned from previous ones also facilitated an effective response towards the economy, based on three characteristics: timely, targeted, and temporary. This means that rapid responses were given, prioritizing those most affected and acting only until a strong recovery.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from the ability of the government to contain the outbreak, it is important to mention that despite sharp declines in some export areas, others were increased, which contributed to keep its export economy active. For instance, exports of computers doubled due to increase work-from-home practices, as well as biopharmaceutical exports, led by strong demand for South Korean-made diagnostic COVID-19 test kits.<sup>25</sup>

Having taken different types of measures and budgets during the crisis to cope different areas, the best decision the country has adopted and that will help to get out of the global crisis is the Korean New Deal. It proposes not only a way out of the economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic but also a fast track for a nationwide digital

<sup>23</sup> Ana Cristina Calderón, Carola Pessino and Carola Pessino, "Restoring growth and fiscal sustainability: 4 strategic measures implemented by South Korea to cope with the emergency and the new normal", BID, September 14, 2020, <https://blogs.iadb.org/gestion-fiscal/es/restableciendo-el-crecimiento-y-la-sostenibilidad-fiscal-4-medidas-estrategicas-implementadas-por-corea-del-sur/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> New Zealand Embassy in Seoul, "South Korea: Impacts of Covid-19 on the South Korean Economy", New Zealand Foreign Affairs & Trade, July 13, 2020, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/publications/south-korea-impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-south-korean-economy-13-july-2020/>.

transformation and South Korea's leadership in the post-COVID-19 era.<sup>26</sup> The plan focuses on a Digital New Deal and Green New Deal and includes overarching policy support to strengthen employment and social safety nets,<sup>27</sup> which will include extending employment insurance, expanding benefits for a larger section of the population and ensuring livelihoods and employment stability for those not covered by employment insurance.<sup>28</sup> As youth unemployment is one of the most affected sectors, there will be support and incentives for businesses to hire young employees in IT-related fields and for providing short-term internship programs for young employees.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, apart from aiming at the creation of 1.9 million of jobs, which is important to decrease the unemployment rate,<sup>30</sup> the New Deal plans to continue with stimulus packages to small business and individuals.<sup>31</sup> For example, in March, the government has launched the five-year K-New Deal Fund, seeking to invest \$3.5 trillion in 2021, with 35% financed by the public sector and 65% being raised privately.<sup>32</sup>

The Korean New Deal represents a great opportunity to get out of the global crisis, but other measures could be taken to improve the situation such as additional fiscal and monetary policy accommodation that could help the economy to recover faster and bring discouraged workers back to the labor market.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the 2021 budget rightly aims at maintaining an accommodative fiscal policy stance, but there is scope for raising targeted transfers to adversely affected workers and firms and accelerating public investment plans to support the recovery.<sup>34</sup> A somewhat higher than currently budgeted deficit this year can be offset by gradual consolidation in subsequent years. In this context, the government's proposal to operate fiscal policy within a rules-based medium-term framework is welcome. Moreover, regarding financial support programs, as the economy recovers, the focus of support should change from liquidity provision to targeted measures that promote corporate restructuring and solvency.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dongwoo Kim, "South Korea's 'New Deal'", *The Diplomat*, August 1, 2020,

<https://magazine.thediplomat.com/#/issues/-MDE-7F61M6VBxni6HT/preview/-MDE-Gnuc6mpE958SD0o>.

<sup>27</sup> Sarwat Chowdhury, "South Korea's Green New Deal in the year of transition", UNDP, February 8, 2021,

<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2021/south-korea-s-green-new-deal-in-the-year-of-transition.html>.

<sup>28</sup> UNDP, "Korean New Deal for the post-Covid-19 era", UNDP, September 10, 2020,

[https://www.undp.org/content/seoul\\_policy\\_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/Collection\\_of\\_Examples\\_from\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Korea/korean-new-deal-for-the-post-covid-19-era.html](https://www.undp.org/content/seoul_policy_center/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/Collection_of_Examples_from_the_Republic_of_Korea/korean-new-deal-for-the-post-covid-19-era.html).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> IMF, "Policy Responses to Covid-19".

<sup>31</sup> Chowdhury, "South Korea's Green New Deal in the year of transition".

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> IMF, "IMF Staff Completes 2021 Article IV Mission to ROK".

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

## Heavy industry and manufacturing competitiveness

Heavy industry and manufacturing have become important sectors of the economy in South Korea over time, but today these industries are becoming more competitive and South Korea will need to take measures to maintain its status.

Initially, when the country's economy was underdeveloped, the main sectors were dominated by the primary industries of agriculture, forestry, and fishing until the early 1960s, when the country began a process of large-scale industrialization.<sup>36</sup> In the 1960s, the manufacturing sector began to play a notable role in South Korea's economic development, in which the role of the government was one of the keys drivers, and in the 1970s the Korean government embarked on an ambitious industrial policy to promote heavy and chemical industries.<sup>37</sup>

Today, South Korea has relevant companies in different sectors due to the measures that were implemented during the industrialization process and has become a country with powerful industries. In the case of ICT, electronics and home appliances are the biggest manufacturing products in South Korea with companies like Samsung and LG.<sup>38</sup> Regarding heavy industries, they are often divided into heavy equipment, heavy machinery and shipbuilding, and other products like excavators, generators engines and so on.<sup>39</sup> In this area, South Korea is home for Hyundai Heavy Industries, Samsung Heavy Industries, DSME and STX Group.<sup>40</sup> South Korea is also the birthplace of automobile giants as Hyundai and Kia and it also has developed an important industry for materials (petrochemical complexes, semi-assembled goods, materials...) and construction.<sup>41</sup>

The economy and industry in Asia have been dynamic over the years as it can be seen with the shipbuilding industry in South Korea. Historically, the leading country for shipbuilding was Japan in the 1950s.<sup>42</sup> The emergence of South Korean shipbuilding companies as competitive players occurred when the labor cost in Japan increased from

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<sup>36</sup> Il SaKong and Youngsun Koh, "The Korean economy: six decades of growth and development", Cepal, 2010, pg 131, [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/1449/4/S1800642\\_es.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/1449/4/S1800642_es.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pg 133,137.

<sup>38</sup> Hannes Humala, "South Korea Manufacturing Trends", Asian Insiders, February 5, 2020, <https://asianinsiders.com/south-korea-manufacturing-trends-2020/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Jang Seob Yoon, "Shipbuilding industry in South Korea-statistics and facts", Statista, February 1, 2021, [https://www.statista.com/topics/7200/shipbuilding-industry-in-south-korea/#dossierSummary\\_chapter1](https://www.statista.com/topics/7200/shipbuilding-industry-in-south-korea/#dossierSummary_chapter1).

the early 1990s due to the appreciation of the Japanese Yen.<sup>43</sup> By learning from Japan's industrial strategy, the South Korean government embarked on a similar shipbuilding program to develop its own shipbuilding industry and with extensive state support and aggressive business strategies, South Korean shipbuilders improved their global position, becoming the top shipbuilding nation in the early 2000s.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, South Korea suffered various crises that affected the shipyard sector, and it is when China took the opportunity to enter the market and become another potential country in shipbuilding industry, following the models of Japan and South Korea. Therefore, this has turned into a competition between South Korea, China, and Japan.

In this race, the main problem is that South Korea shipbuilding industry is more vulnerable to a financial shock than its Japanese and Chinese counterparts because its main disadvantage is the lack of domestic market support, as is an economy that is heavily dependent on international market.<sup>45</sup> According to a U.K.-based global market researcher Clarkson Research Services, South Korean shipbuilders won orders of 8.19 million compensated gross tonnage for 187 vessels in 2020, accounting for 43% of the global shipbuilding contracts of 19.24 million CGT, meaning that Korea held the largest share of the market last year.<sup>46</sup> Korea's overwhelming lead in high value-added vessels, in particular, enabled the country to outrun its rivals such as China and Japan.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, although it can be said that China has become a great rival, South Korea in 2020 had a greater market share. In addition, South Korea has a competitive advantage in LNG carriers and very large crude carriers, as well as having technological experience in high value-added ships and a favorable position in caring for the environment.<sup>48</sup> Even so, it should be noted that last year China was close behind Korea with a market share of 41%,<sup>49</sup> so it may in a short or medium term take away market from South Korea.

In conclusion, this specific example on the shipbuilding industry shows how heavy industry and manufacturing market in Asia are becoming extremely competitive and

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<sup>43</sup> Soo Kee Tam, "Race in the shipbuilding industry: cases of South Korea, Japan and China", *International Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2017, <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/IJEAS/article/view/18797/10214>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Hellenic Shipping News, "Korea leading global shipbuilding industry", *Hellenic Shipping News*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/korea-leading-global-shipbuilding-industry/>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

dynamic, because countries learn from other's successes to improve theirs and afterwards try lower down the prices. Furthermore, technological measures and progress keeps increasing and that is why in the medium-term Chinese firms and industries could position themselves in a higher level than the ones from South Korea, it all depends on how South Korea develops during the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution.

## Technology/Artificial Intelligence

For long has South Korea recognized the importance of technology and the development of artificial intelligence. This has led to the creation of measures that would help and promote the growth of this sector.

In 2017, the Moon government stressed South Korea's claim to be one of the world's leading AI nations and therefore in September 2017, he set up the "Committee of the Fourth Industrial Revolution".<sup>50</sup> This revolution referred to a series of innovations affecting all areas and industries, from ICT to manufacturing, healthcare, and agriculture, based on intelligent information technologies such as DNA (Data-Network-AI).<sup>51</sup> Therefore, also since 2017 the Korean Advanced Institute for Science and Technology (KAIST) has been operating an AI center that focuses on research in areas like brain research, machine learning, multimodal perception and interaction, natural language processing, emotional intelligence, smart chips and AI for robotics.<sup>52</sup> In 2018, the Presidential Committee on the Fourth Industrial Revolution proclaimed an AI R&D Strategy that called for South Korea to invest 2.2 trillion won over five years to support the evolution of AI technology and the creation of six AI graduate schools to train the talent needed for South Korea to be competitive in AI<sup>53</sup> and, in 2019, the Korean Government proclaimed its "National AI Strategy".<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Olaf J.Groth et al., "Comparison of National Strategies to Promote Artificial Intelligence", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2019,

<https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/4521287/Comparison+of+National+Strategies+to+Promote+Artificial+Intelligence+Part+1.pdf/397fb700-0c6f-88b6-46be-2d50d7942b83?version=1.1&t=1560500570070>.

<sup>51</sup> Presidential Committee on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, "People-Centered Fourth Industrial Revolution", February 17, 2021, <https://www.4th-ir.go.kr/home/en>.

<sup>52</sup> Growth et al., "Comparison of National Strategies to Promote Artificial Intelligence".

<sup>53</sup> Troy Stangarone, "Covid-19 Underscores the Benefits of South Korea's Artificial Intelligence Push", The Diplomat, December 7, 2020,

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/covid-19-underscores-the-benefits-of-south-koreas-artificial-intelligence-push/>.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Science and ICT, "National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence", The Government of the Republic of Korea, December 2019,

[http://english.msip.go.kr/cms/english/pl/policies2/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2020/03/23/National%20Strategy%20for%20Artificial%20Intelligence\\_200323.pdf](http://english.msip.go.kr/cms/english/pl/policies2/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2020/03/23/National%20Strategy%20for%20Artificial%20Intelligence_200323.pdf).

The need for a strategy arose from the competitiveness that already existed in the field. In particular, the world's major countries were concentrating their national capacity by leaders' declarations and announcements on AI strategies such as the U.S. President Trump's approval of the American AI initiative (Feb. 2019), Chinese President Xi Jinping's declaration of AI vision (Oct. 2017), and German Chancellor Merkel's resolution on AI strategy (Nov. 2018).<sup>55</sup> Therefore, South Korea knew that it was neither the first country to encompass AI nor the country with the best AI technology in that moment, but the document represented the commitment of Korean government towards building an AI-centric nation and the vision of the country in leading the world in the global AI sector.<sup>56</sup>

The National Strategy aims to undertake nine strategies and 100 initiatives in three main areas of AI by 2030.<sup>57</sup> In consequence, thinking about the future, even though China has made strides with some of the most remarkable investments in AI, South Korea is also becoming visible in AI potential and investment initiatives.<sup>58</sup>

The three main areas of the National Strategy were the establishment of an AI ecosystem, the utilization of AI and the creation of human-centered AI.<sup>59</sup> South Korea's goal is to achieve by 2030 the world's third largest digital competitiveness in comparison to its 10<sup>th</sup> position when creating this strategy, as well as opening 45,000 sorts of big data compared to 1,500.<sup>60</sup> In relation to the second one, an example of what it tries to achieve is that the economic effect of AI rise until 455 trillion won.<sup>61</sup> Finally, regarding to the realization of people-centered AI, it pursues, for instance, to be in the top-5 countries in terms of life satisfaction compared to the 31<sup>st</sup> position ranked during the development of this strategy.<sup>62</sup>

The measures of the National Strategy have been complemented with the Korean New Deal, which is a medium-to-long-term strategy that has come out of the COVID-19 crisis

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> INDIAai, "National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence-South Korea", November 21, 2020, <https://indiaai.gov.in/research-reports/national-strategy-for-artificial-intelligence-south-korea>.

<sup>57</sup> Kim&Chang, "Korean Government announces the 'National AI Strategy', Jointly Developed by all ministers", Kim&Chang, January 13, 2020, [https://www.kimchang.com/en/insights/detail.kc?sch\\_section=4&idx=20865](https://www.kimchang.com/en/insights/detail.kc?sch_section=4&idx=20865).

<sup>58</sup> Vishal Chawla, "Why we shouldn't underestimate South Korea in the race to AI supremacy", Analytics India Magazine, February 7, 2020, <https://analyticsindiamag.com/why-we-shouldnt-underestimate-south-korea-in-the-race-to-ai-supremacy/>.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Science and ICT, "National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence".

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

and an ambitious plan.<sup>63</sup> As digitalization has become a key factor both in driving innovation and determining the competitiveness of a country and its industry, the Digital New Deal part of the Korean New Deal seeks to accelerate the transition towards a digital economy in the post-COVID-19 era.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, it has four main areas and objectives in which it focuses: a stronger integration of data, network and artificial intelligence throughout the economy, digitalization of education infrastructure, fostering the “untact” industry and the digitalization of social overhead capital (SOC).<sup>65</sup> The main areas show us how they want to promote the use and integration of data, 5G network and AI in order to create new digital products and services, while also enhancing the productivity of the South Korean economy.<sup>66</sup> Integrating 5G and AI technology into primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy is also a goal, for example, with the construction of 160 smart museums and galleries based on ICT or the construction of 12,000 smart factories.<sup>67</sup>

This Deal is also willing to have an impact on society, so, in relation to digitalization of education infrastructure, it will create technology-based education infrastructure for grades 1-12 and it will strengthen the online education system of universities and job training institutions, for instance, a total of 2,045 lectures that address the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as AI and robotics, will be developed and made available to the general public via the Korean Massive Open Online Course (K-MOOC) by 2025.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, as it intends to foster the “untact” industry, which is something that it is going to remain important after the COVID-19 crisis, it is expected that 18 smart hospitals will be built by utilizing digital technology such as 5G and IoT to allow real-time monitoring, or smart technology based on 5G and AI will be integrated into microbusiness workplaces to set up 100,000 smart stores.<sup>69</sup>

These are just some of the measures proposed by the Digital New Deal but exposes South Korea’s willingness to maintain its reputation, and also achieve stability as a global ICT powerhouse by investing in innovative technologies such as 5G Network, Artificial Intelligence and Big Data.<sup>70</sup> Although it has some deficiencies, such as competitiveness

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<sup>63</sup> Kim, “South Korea’s ‘New Deal’”.

<sup>64</sup> UNDP, “Korean New Deal for the post-covid-19 era”.

<sup>65</sup> Ministry of Economy and Finance, “The Korean New Deal: National Strategy for a great transformation”, July 2020, <https://english.moef.go.kr/pc/selectTbPressCenterDtl.do?boardCd=N0001&seq=4948>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Privacy Shield, “Korea-Artificial Intelligence”, Privacy Shield, n.d, <https://www.privacyshield.gov/article?id=Korea-Artificial-Intelligence>.

or the inability to use the collected data efficiently, some of its most important ICT companies are aggressively pursuing AI technologies, such as Samsung, LG, SK Hynix and Naver.<sup>71</sup>

In relation to 5G, South Korea has been a leader, as it was the first country to deploy 5G and leads the world in coverage.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, LG Uplus used Huawei's equipment in its 5G network, but South Korea has largely been able to avoid dependence on the Chinese firm as it develops its network and instead uses Samsung, which is one of the world's leading 5G equipment makers.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the South Korean Ministry of Science and ICT (MSIT) aims for South Korea to pilot 6G in 2026, and for the technology to be commercially available from 2028-2030. To get this, it has set aside KRW200 billion (\$169) for five years (2021 to 2026) to create the conditions for 6G development.<sup>74</sup>

In conclusion, South Korea's position on future technology is positive, as they set long-term strategies. While most of the stimulus plans around the world have focused on helping firms survive the COVID-19 recession, the Korean New Deal is designed to invest in the capacity of the South Korean economy over the long term.<sup>75</sup> It has set the goal that by the end of 2022 the government will invest 13.4 trillion won (\$11 billion) in the Digital New Deal.<sup>76</sup>

## **Energy security**

### *Scarcity of natural resources*

The number of natural resources the country has is almost nil<sup>77</sup> due to its size and characteristics. Historically, South Korea developed broadly the agriculture sector, whereas North Korea focused more on mining. Therefore, since 1945, when the peninsula was divided, the difficulty of supplying the South with natural resources became a serious problem.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Troy Stangarone, "South Korea's Digital New Deal", The Diplomat, June 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/south-koreas-digital-new-deal/>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> GlobalData Technology, "Battle for 5G+ and 6G supremacy begins in the Trans-Pacific", Verdict, February 26, 2021, <https://www.verdict.co.uk/5g-5g-6g-trans-pacific>.

<sup>75</sup> Stangarone, "South Korea's Digital New Deal".

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Chan Lee, "South Korea", Britannica, March 18, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Korea/Armed-forces-and-security>

<sup>78</sup> Won-Ho Kim, "Korean policy in the field of energy security: implications for cooperation with South America", University of Chile, March 19, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41391926>.

Due to this national shortage, the country is one of the largest importers of liquefied natural gas (LNG), petroleum liquids and coal. Moreover, because of the fact that it lacks international pipelines, it is totally dependent on incoming shipments of LNG and oil. “In 2007, its overall dependence on energy imports stood at almost 97%”.<sup>79</sup> It is true that the country has coal reserves, but the extraction of these is very costly and it is much more economically profitable for the country to import coal.<sup>80</sup>

South Korea's main importing region is the Middle East. During the Cold War, South Korea began to establish diplomatic relations with a large number of Middle Eastern countries and it was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that bilateral cooperation was established. The alliances were mainly related to the energy and construction sectors. Gradually, the South Korean country started to rely more and more on the Middle East especially in energy security issues.<sup>81</sup> In fact, in 2019, 70 % of oil imports by the South Korean country, came from the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> The problem is that the country's high level of dependence has gradually increased its exposure to risk when doing business with the region. On numerous occasions, South Korean companies have had to deal with instabilities in the region as well as price fluctuations.<sup>83</sup> This is something that could become a serious problem for the country. It could happen that a conflict in the Middle East ended up blocking shipping and supply of resources from this region, which would conclude in a serious energy supply problem for South Korea.

### *Strategy*

To secure energy supply, South Korea has developed a strategy. The main objectives of this strategy are “diversification of energy sources, diversification of suppliers, consolidation of the strategic petroleum reserve, and conservation, rationalization and efficiency seeking.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> n.a., “Country Analysis Executive Summary: South Korea”, US Energy Information Administration, November 6 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/KOR>.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Hae Won Jeong, “South Korea’s evolving ties with the Middle East”, Asia Society Policy Institute, July 28, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/asias-new-pivot/south-korea#:~:text=South%20Korea%20remains%20highly%20dependent.refining%20capacity%20in%20the%20world>.

<sup>82</sup> N.a., “Seoul prepared for possible consequences of Middle East crisis”, Agencia de noticias Yonhap, n.d., <https://sp.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20200107001900883>.

<sup>83</sup> Hae Won Jeong, “South Korea’s evolving ties with the Middle East”.

<sup>84</sup> Pablo Bustelo, “Energy security with high external dependence: Japan's and South Korea's strategies”, Real Instituto Elcano, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42966183.pdf>.

On the one hand, geographic diversification of imports through increased imports of gas and oil from Russia and Central Asia by relying solely on the Middle East endangers South Korea in the event that it becomes unable to receive resources from this region. Therefore, an openness to import from other countries can be an effective measure for the country's energy security, and that is what South Korea is doing.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, the creation of a large strategic oil reserve is a good measure to avoid possible supply problems and also to satisfy the recommendations of the IEA regarding the oil reserves that each country should maintain.<sup>86</sup> In 2020 South Korea announced that it had run out of space to be able to store oil, so a change in this respect is necessary in order to be able to supply from domestic resources and avoid problems.<sup>87</sup>

In addition, Seoul stressed the need to achieve a quest for energy efficiency, conservation, and rationalization, as energy intensity is very high for a country like South Korea,<sup>88</sup> which is actually one of the world's leading consumers of energy resources. In 2018, the amount of electricity used per capita stood at 10.2 MWh, achieving a new record since data collection began in 1993.<sup>89</sup>

Another goal is the diversification of sources towards renewable and also nuclear energy, which collaborate with the need of decrease in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and a reduction in the level of external dependence. Nuclear energy faces issues related to public criticism due to the negative impact it has on the environment, therefore, an increase in nuclear energy will not be expected. Instead, renewable energies have been considered as the main target.<sup>90</sup> The South Korean government has pledged to achieve an increase in renewable energy sources to 20% by 2030 and 30-35% by 2040, thus improving energy efficiency and phasing out coal and nuclear power.<sup>91</sup> In fact, with the goal of achieving zero carbon emissions by 2050, the country plans to eliminate 30 coal-fired power plants and transform 24 of them into LNG plants.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Sharon Cho, "South Korea runs out of commercial crude oil storage space", *El Financiero*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/mercados/corea-del-sur-se-queda-sin-espacio-para-almacenar-crudo>.

<sup>88</sup> Pablo Bustelo, "Energy security with high external dependence: Japan's and South Korea's strategies".

<sup>89</sup> N.a., "Electricity use per capita reaches a new record high in 2018", *Agencia de noticias Yonhap*, May 27, 2019, <https://sp.yna.co.kr/view/ASP20190527000700883>.

<sup>90</sup> Pablo Bustelo, "Energy security with high external dependence: Japan's and South Korea's strategies".

<sup>91</sup> IEA, "Korea 2020", IEA, November 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/korea-2020>.

<sup>92</sup> N.a., "South Korea's electricity generation falls in 2020 for 2nd consecutive year amid coronavirus", *Yonhap News Agency*, February 17, 2021, <https://sp.yna.co.kr/view/ASP20210217000400883>.

Many of these measures will help South Korea to effectively advance its energy transition and thus improve its energy security. Interestingly, the government's promise of a “Green New Deal” for economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19 is also an important step towards the country's energy transition. In addition, the South Korean country has declared that it is willing to take advantage of the situation of the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” to boost the change in the energy situation by taking advantage of the facilities offered by technologies.<sup>93</sup> Thanks to these objectives and goals that the South Korean government has set, the country will be able to maintain its energy security.

### *Renewable energies in the medium term*

In the short term, a complete energy transition would not be possible because it is a long process in which a huge number of changes are needed in the country, so it takes time. It also requires a huge effort from individuals, companies, investors, politicians and politicians to act as quickly as possible.<sup>94</sup>

In the medium term, it may be possible for South Korea to achieve an energy transition to renewable energy. It is expected that by 2050 the country will use 100% renewable energy, which would be an improvement for employment, energy security, health, the country's growth and an important help to avoid potential global environmental catastrophes. Even if President Moon’s arrival has meant a great step towards renewable energies due to his great ambition to achieve this goal, it is true that it is necessary to make much more effort in order to achieve the future the country aims at.<sup>95</sup>

The good thing is that South Korea is in an economically favorable situation to face this change and it also has a great number of technologies and innovations, so it could become a world leader if it manages to take the right steps towards the future.

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<sup>93</sup> IEA, “Korea 2020”.

<sup>94</sup> WWF “Korean Energy Vision 2050”, WWF, 2017, <http://awsassets.wwfkr.panda.org/downloads/KEV-2050-SUM-EN.pdf>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

## SOCIAL COHESION OUTLOOK

- Due to South Korea's effective response to COVID-19, the country will be able to cope with a new infectious or bacteriological disease.
- During the pandemic emergency South Koreans have shown social discipline and no disruptive protests against strict measures are foreseeing in the medium term.
- The current low birth rate is expected to continue and make the country the oldest nation by 2045.
- Immigration levels are expected to increase to offset the negative impact of the low birth rate.
- Religion will continue playing an important role in civil society but the growth of Christianity will not signify an increase in tensions between other religious communities.
- Confucian values are still present in South Korea's society but it is the notion of democracy what brings them closer to the Western world, rather than Christianity.

### South Korea's response to COVID-19

#### *Epidemiological Overview*

China announced the first case of COVID-19 in Wuhan on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019. The virus quickly began to spread throughout the country. Little time passed since the virus reached the rest of the countries on Earth<sup>96</sup> and policy-makers were under pressure of finding solutions to reduce the number of infections and keep mortality in the lowest possible levels.<sup>97</sup> Responding to this pandemic, some governments have implemented more effective policies to contain, suppress and mitigate the disease than others.

South Korea was one of the first countries to be affected by COVID-19 mainly because of its proximity to China. On February 20, 2020, the first positive case was reported in and by February 29 the country had the highest number of cases (909) after China. This spike

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<sup>96</sup> Government of the Republic of Korea, "Spread of COVID-19 around the World and in Korea" in "All about Korea's response to COVID-19", (South Korea, 2020), 10-15.

<sup>97</sup> Guido Neidhöfer and Claudio Neidhöfer, "The Effectiveness of School Closures and Other Pre-Lockdown COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies in Argentina, Italy, and South Korea", SSRN, July 21, 2020, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3649953](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3649953).

occurred in a church in Daegu, a city of approximately 2.5 million people. However, just two weeks later, the spread of the virus was brought under control. In March, the country reduced its incidence rates by almost 95% from the peak that took place in February. However, during the following months there were several occasions when an increase in the number of cases happened like the second outbreak in August. Nevertheless, South Korea managed to keep the cumulative incidence and mortality rate in the lowest levels compared to other countries.<sup>98</sup>

### *South Korea's response*

A priori, it was thought that South Korea had everything going against it: its proximity to China, its economic dependence on exports and the little investment in the health system compared to other countries in the world. However, the combination of good health management and economic flexibility made possible the protection of both health and economy and placed the country as a model for others to follow.<sup>99</sup>

First of all, it is important to analyze how South Korea managed to have a health system prepared to overcome COVID-19. From 1960 to 1980, there was a reduction in the infant mortality rate from 80 deaths per 1000 births to only 13, and also an increase in the life expectancy from 55 to 72 years. This was thanks to the increased investment in public health during the country's development process in the 60s. But the government focused not only on guaranteeing that, it also made sure that the population used it.<sup>100</sup>

Of course, it is important to note that thanks to the economic development of the 1960s, there was a great boost in the development of the healthcare system, resulting in more qualified personnel and more developed medical institutions. Health education was also an important aspect. Even before South Koreans enjoyed a good education system, the government was disseminating information on health topics.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Katelyn J. Yoo, Soonman Kwon, Yoonjung Choi, David M, "Systematic assessment of South Korea's capabilities to control COVID-19", Science Direct, March 3, 2021,

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0168851021000543?via%3Dihub>.

<sup>99</sup> Federico J. Caballero, "South Korea's success in the face of the crisis", Economipedia, September 6, 2020,

<https://economipedia.com/actual/el-exito-de-corea-del-sur-frente-a-la-crisis.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Lee Jong-Wha, "How South Korea Built a Healthcare System to Beat COVID-19", World Economic Forum, August 21, 2020,

<https://es.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/como-corea-del-sur-construyo-un-sistema-de-salud-para-vencer-al-covid-19/>.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

By the time the pandemic began, the healthcare system was much more developed than that of other countries and this was thanks to the lessons learned from the previous infectious diseases that occurred in 2004 and 2015, something that has allowed the country to fight effectively against the COVID-19. Following criticism of the country's response to the outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015, the government focused on creating a plan to revamp the National Public Health Emergency Response System, which aimed to prevent the arrival of new infectious diseases, minimize the damage caused by them, and end them as soon as possible. After the creation of this plan, the government focused on the need to make a reorganization in the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) which was established in 2004 when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak occurred. Moreover, due to an increase in the awareness of the necessity for a strong initial response to any type of infectious disease after the MERS happened, the National Assembly's Special Committee for the Response to COVID-19 was created in February.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, specialized groups were formed to focus on different issues such as emergency operations or risk assessment. Gradually, hospitals were able to strengthen their capacity to control and prevent infectious diseases and this was a strong point in reducing the risks of infection for health care workers during the pandemic.<sup>103</sup> Besides, the country stood out for the enormous number of tests it performed, which allowed it to monitor and control the virus quickly.<sup>104</sup> By March the daily tests were between 18,000 and 20,000.<sup>105</sup>

Another measure imposed by the government was the limitation to get only two masks per person with the aim of avoiding the problem of mask shortages that occurred in the rest of the world. Once the domestic supply stabilized, the country began to help the other countries that lacked masks by sending them, which allowed the South Korean economy to continue functioning thanks to exports.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Government of the Republic of South Korea, "Spread of COVID-19", 218, 219.

<sup>103</sup> Dawoon Chung and Hoon Sahib, "Korea's response to COVID-19: Early lessons in tackling the pandemic", World Bank Blogs, March 23, 2020,

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/koreas-response-covid-19-early-lessons-tackling-pandemic>.

<sup>104</sup> Junhyoung Lee and Jorge Tamames, "Lessons from South Korea", Foreign Policy, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politicaexterior.com/lecciones-corea-del-sur/>.

<sup>105</sup> Yoo, Kwon, Choi, M., "Systematic assessment of South Korea's capabilities to control COVID-19".

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, it is interesting to highlight the response of South Korean population which showed the high levels of social cohesion the country has. From the very beginning they demonstrated a sense of cooperation and responsibility, which was a result of the MERS outbreak. The lessons learned from this infectious disease and the reforms made by the government after its outbreak, made it possible for trust to exist between the government and the citizens. In addition, the government focused on communicating the COVID-19 situation in a transparent way since the first day of pandemic, which made the population follow the government's guidelines. Without the cooperation of the public, it would not have been possible to respond effectively to the spread of the virus.<sup>107</sup> While the citizens of South Korea behaved in a responsible and cooperative manner, in many other countries such as Austria, Belgium or the Netherlands there were several demonstrations and violent acts against the restrictions imposed by the government.<sup>108</sup>

However, COVID-19 impacted not only on society and public health but also on the world economy<sup>109</sup> as analyzed before in the Economic Outlook. In fact, according to the June 2020 edition of the Bank's World Economic Outlook, it would be the most noticeably awful economic recession since the Second World War.<sup>110</sup> However, the case of South Korea stands out because its economy has been one of the most resilient to the effects of the crisis.<sup>111</sup> According to the IMF and as mentioned before, the country experienced the smallest drop in GDP in 2020 compared to other advanced economies.<sup>112</sup>

The wide range of measures implemented by the government allowed the economy not to be damaged as much as that of other countries. The South Koreans did not have to experience total confinement as in most countries, so this allowed the economy to keep functioning.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, as analyzed in the Economic Outlook, the country's economy managed to remain resilient thanks to the high levels of exports of Korean

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> n.a., "Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands: protests against restrictions are happening all over Europe", Euronews, January 2, 2021, <https://es.euronews.com/2021/02/01/belgica-austria-paises-bajos-las-protestas-contra-las-restricciones-se-suceden-por-toda-eu>.

<sup>109</sup> Government of the Republic of South Korea, "Spread of COVID-19", 171.

<sup>110</sup> World Bank, "COVID-19 plunges world economy into worst recession since World War II", World Bank, June 8, 2020, <https://www.bancomundial.org/es/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>.

<sup>111</sup> Caballero, "South Korea's success in the face of the crisis".

<sup>112</sup> IMF, "IMF Staff Completes 2021 Article IV Mission to Republic of Korea".

<sup>113</sup> Caballero, "South Korea's success in the face of the crisis".

semiconductors, other technological devices,<sup>114</sup> and masks.<sup>115</sup> In addition, the drop in China's production has indirectly benefited South Korean exporters, allowing them to stand out during the pandemic months.<sup>116</sup>

On the other hand, the South Korean economy has various attributes that have made it especially resistant to the pandemic. First, its internal adaptability. There is a wide mobility in the factors of production which permits the country to adjust rapidly to any changes that may happen.<sup>117</sup> Also, it is necessary to mention the importance of savings during this difficult health crisis. In the case of South Korea, where there is a very strong savings culture, the economy has shown great resilience compared to the United States or Europe. "It is no coincidence that South Koreans save around 36% of their GDP annually, and that they are now able to meet their current expenses without resorting to company closures or massive foreign borrowing".<sup>118</sup> Therefore, "economic openness, flexibility of the factors of production and domestic savings have so far been the most effective vaccine against the new crisis".<sup>119</sup>

#### *A model for possible future pandemics*

In short, the country's effective response demonstrates that it is one of the best prepared countries to face a health crisis of that sort, thanks to: its increasingly developed health system, its great capacity for rapid response developed during past crises, its economic flexibility achieved since the 1960s and the cooperative response of the population. Therefore, in the event of a new health crisis, the way the Asian country acted in the current crisis would be a perfect model to be followed by the rest of the world democracies. The country can teach an enormous number of lessons from this pandemic. First of all, it shows that lessons should be learned from all crises in order to deal with future ones. South Korea was able to learn from the mistakes made during SARS and MERS, and now could be a good time not only for this country but for the rest of the world to learn from what they have experienced and try to prevent a future pandemic from hitting as hard as COVID-19 did. In addition, the country has shown that in this type of

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<sup>114</sup> Sam Kim, "South Korea Eyes Rich Nation Status as Economy Holds Up", Bloomberg, January 25, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-25/korea-eyes-rich-nation-status-as-economy-holds-up-amid-pandemic>

<sup>115</sup> Yoo, Kwon, Choi, M., "Systematic assessment of South Korea's capabilities to control COVID-19".

<sup>116</sup> Caballero, "South Korea's success in the face of the crisis".

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

crisis, it is necessary to react as quickly as possible and in doing so, it is important to achieve cooperation between the government and citizens. Without the effective response of the population, the containment of the virus would not have been possible in South Korea, as the measures imposed by the government would have been useless. Therefore, any country must focus on improving communication with citizens to achieve the social cohesion that South Korea has demonstrated that it has.

## South Korea's demography and migration

### *Demography*

In the 60s, the country experienced not only a change in the economy but also in demography. This was the country's so-called "*demographic transition*", which today has become a serious problem for South Koreans due to the low birth rate and the progressive aging of the population. According to forecasts, if the birth rate remains as it is today, South Korea will be the oldest nation in the world by 2045.<sup>120</sup>

During the 50s (in the post-war years), the Total Fertility Rates (TFR) were around five and six children per woman.<sup>121</sup> However, in order to curb the number of births at a time when the country was recovering economically, South Korea adopted a series of birth control policies. The government encouraged the population to have only one child per couple and also offered free vasectomy services, for example. Due to these and many other birth control policies, the fertility rate dropped to 2.06 in the 1980s,<sup>122</sup> and even reached 0.87 in 2019.<sup>123</sup> In addition, today more and more South Korean women prefer to be educated, independent and pursue their dreams rather than marry and have children.<sup>124</sup>

Furthremore, thanks to the development and improvement of the healthcare system, life expectancy made a big change and increased from 52.4 in 1960 to 82.7 in 2019.

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<sup>120</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat, "World Population Ageing", 2015, [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015\\_Report.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2015_Report.pdf)

<sup>121</sup> Eumary Palacios and Sebastián Toro, "Dynamics of the Population of the Republic of Korea", World Asia Pacific, January-June 2016, <https://publicaciones.eafit.edu.co/index.php/map/issue/view/412/64>.

<sup>122</sup> Asia News, "South Korea, the desperate war against demographic decline", Asia News, January 17, 2017, <http://www.asianews.it/noticias-es/Corea-del-Sur-la-desesperada-guerra-contra-el-descenso-demogr%C3%A1fico-39686.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Constantine Simon, "In South Korea, the birth rate is in free fall", France 24, February 24, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/es/20200224-en-foco-corea-sur-ninos-natalidad-embarazos-feminismo>.

<sup>124</sup> Simon Maybin, "Why do women in the country with the lowest birth rate in the world don't want to have children?", BBC News, August 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-45207429>.

Moreover, the number of people over the age of 65 was only 2.9% in 1960<sup>125</sup> and reached 14.55% in 2018. So, the country is experiencing a period of progressive population aging, something that began to be a problem for the country since the 60s and remains so today.<sup>126</sup>

In addition, according to a report released in December by the Central Bank of Korea, falling birth rates and an aging population are likely to accelerate due to the impact of COVID-19. According to the report, “The pandemic led to greater job and income insecurity for young adults in their 20s and 30s, potentially disrupting their plans to start a family.”<sup>127</sup>

### *Migration*

The country is facing a serious demographic crisis and one way to reduce its negative impact could be to favor immigration.<sup>128</sup> However, this is not an easy solution for the country because its population is the most ethnically homogeneous in the world, and the arrival of immigrants to the country is a complicated thing for the South Korean population to accept. 99% of the population is of Korean descent and only 1% are of Japanese or Chinese origin.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, they have hardly had the opportunity to live with people from other ethnic groups.

South Korea is a country where nationalist sentiments have always been strong, based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity.<sup>130</sup> This patriotism goes back thousands of years to the birth of the Korean nation and race. But above all, it was Japan's occupation of Korea during the first half of the 20th century that brought about a resurgence of modern nationalism. As the Asian studies expert Steve Denney says, “It's a 'blood and soil' nationalism such as you might find in other countries.” According to him, this patriotism

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<sup>125</sup> Kwon, Tai-Hwan, “Cambio de población y desarrollo en Corea”, Centro de Educación Social Global, n.d., <https://asiasociety.org/education/population-change-and-development-korea#:~:text=Korea's%20demographic%20transition%20started%20in,52%20years%20during%201955%2D60.>

<sup>126</sup> n.a., “Age distribution of South Korea”, Indexmundi, December 31, 2019, [https://www.indexmundi.com/es/corea\\_del\\_sur/distribucion\\_por\\_edad.html#:~:text=65%20a%C3%B1os%20y%20m%C3%A1s%3A%2014,344%20\(2018%20est.\)](https://www.indexmundi.com/es/corea_del_sur/distribucion_por_edad.html#:~:text=65%20a%C3%B1os%20y%20m%C3%A1s%3A%2014,344%20(2018%20est.))

<sup>127</sup> Eun-Young Jeong, “South Korea’s population falls for first time, likely worsened by Covid-19”, The Wall Street Journal, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 [https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-koreas-population-falls-for-first-time-likely-worsened-by-covid-19-11609767528.](https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-koreas-population-falls-for-first-time-likely-worsened-by-covid-19-11609767528)

<sup>128</sup> Shang E. Ha and Seung-Jin Jang, “Immigration, threat perception, and national identity: Evidence from South Korea”, ScienceDirect, January 2015, [https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014717671400145X.](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014717671400145X)

<sup>129</sup> Santander Trade Markets “Corea del Sur: llegar al consumidor”, Santander Trade Markets, 2021, [https://santandertrade.com/es/portal/analizar-mercados/corea-del-sur/llegar-al-consumidor.](https://santandertrade.com/es/portal/analizar-mercados/corea-del-sur/llegar-al-consumidor)

<sup>130</sup> Ha and Jang, “Immigration, threat perception, and national identity: Evidence from South Korea”.

was born out of Japanese colonization, but was also influenced by ethnic nationalism, Darwinian socialism and the currents of racism coming out of Europe.<sup>131</sup> “A strong sense of national identity used to be natural, but it has been challenged as the South Korean society becomes more and more multi-cultural due to the recent inflow of immigrants.”<sup>132</sup>

Prior to the 1990s, immigration policies were limited, but since then, the government has gradually begun to open the borders to foreigners. The three main groups welcomed in the country have been: Korean Chinese, North Korean defectors and other ethnic immigrants. Firstly, after the famine of the 1990s, a large number of North Koreans left the country, and many went to South Korea. Secondly, the Korean Chinese are the largest number of immigrants in South Korea, especially they stand out as one of the largest groups among marriage migrants. Finally, immigrants from South Asia or Southeast Asia, who have ended up working in dangerous, dirty and difficult jobs that South Koreans do not want to do.<sup>133</sup> For example, the number of Mongolians migrating to South Korea is increasing. The main reason for this displacement is their desire to live in a country where the economic situation is better than in their origin country. In Mongolia there is a high level of unemployment and few job opportunities and this forces them to leave. Many immigrants see South Korea as an attractive country to move, because of the high salaries, the accessibility to a quality health care system or the possibility to get a good level of education.<sup>134</sup> However, it is not always easy for immigrants to live in South Korea. There are occasions in which they face discriminatory actions against them.

In response to the large influx of immigrants into the country, there have been various demonstrations by the population, fearing that their arrival may pose a threat to society. According to an empirical analysis using the 2010 Korean General Social Survey (KGSS), reactions to the arrival of immigrants in the country are basically cultural. A large number of citizens believe that immigrants eliminate completely the historical cultural unity of the country and for many, this destroys the existing national pride.

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<sup>131</sup> Alba Morgade, “South Korea: the dark side of one of the most prosperous countries in recent decades”, BBC News, July 24, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-44874358>.

<sup>132</sup> Shang E. and Seung-Jin Jang, “Immigration, threat perception, and national identity: Evidence from South Korea”.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Altanchimeg Zanabazar and Sarantuya Jigjiddorj, “The Push and Pull Factors Affecting the Migration of Mongolians to the Republic of South Korea”, ResearchGate, November 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348301781\\_The\\_Push\\_and\\_Pull\\_Factors\\_Affecting\\_the\\_Migration\\_of\\_Mongolians\\_to\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_South\\_Korea](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348301781_The_Push_and_Pull_Factors_Affecting_the_Migration_of_Mongolians_to_the_Republic_of_South_Korea).

However, it is important to note, that this is not an increase in economic concerns but only social and cultural.<sup>135</sup>

To sum up, the fact that South Korea has been an ethnically and racially homogeneous country for many years has contributed to a stable national identity that has remained throughout time. However, because of the massive influx of immigrants, it has been threatened on several occasions and the population has not responded very well to the threat of losing the historical cultural unity of the country. Therefore, if immigrants from other countries such as Russia or China were to arrive in South Korea, this would pose a threat to the national sense of security and identity, as a rejection of immigrants over the past decades has been shown. It is true that the arrival of immigrants could be the best solution for the demographic crisis to stop worsening, but again, due to the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the country, there have been several negative reactions, which have ended in demonstrations and protests. The arrival of people from other countries is not something easy to assimilate for South Korean citizens but if the country wants to continue growing, it should learn to live with immigrants, as they can greatly benefit from them, specially considering the demographic issue they face.

## **Religion**

South Korea has no “official” religion nor is there one dominant religion. Shamanism, Buddhism and Christianity as well as a whole new spectrum of new religious movements co-exist peacefully in one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world.<sup>136</sup> However, the growth of Christianity in South Korea has been exponential as it has become the only Asian country apart from the Philippines and East Timor, where Christianity is the most followed religion. According to Pew Research Center 2017, around 29% report being a Christian, 23% a Buddhist and 46% of no religion.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim “Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea: A Sociological Survey”, Springer, June 2002, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3512000.pdf?casa\\_token=aUKShNbTQ7cAAAAA:Hv3HO-7gr4jN-p3-Lj2NiE5cBuSFj5MJTAYdgDbtmS14nhjH7C8n9iuitKjY0HP\\_cUuqwmN8D8OJWbNIGRIE4tMHmYHTfwR3KeA7s1P6tfsjobm5Q](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3512000.pdf?casa_token=aUKShNbTQ7cAAAAA:Hv3HO-7gr4jN-p3-Lj2NiE5cBuSFj5MJTAYdgDbtmS14nhjH7C8n9iuitKjY0HP_cUuqwmN8D8OJWbNIGRIE4tMHmYHTfwR3KeA7s1P6tfsjobm5Q)

<sup>137</sup> N.a., “The changing global religious landscape”, PewResearchCenter, April 5, 2017, <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/04/07092755/FULL-REPORT-WITH-APPENDIXES-A-AND-B-APRIL-3.pdf>.

*The connection with Christianity and the West*

Korean Christianity began growing in the 1780s when Catholic converts came back from China during tribute missions to the court in Beijing and came back home with religious texts and started meeting secretly.<sup>138</sup> When Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910, in order to establish control over its new protectorate, the Empire of Japan imposed their culture and religion which caused a lot of resentment in the society.

Thus, the appeal of Christianity in Korea was partly spiritual, partly economic, because of its association with Western modernity (including modern education), and also partly nationalist, because it served as an expression of Korean civil society that was not completely under Japan's control.<sup>139</sup> The "success" of Christianity in Korea from that time forward, therefore, is a reflection of events and trends in Korean history, leading to the phenomenon that upwards of 30% of the South Korean population today identifies itself with Christianity.<sup>140</sup>

Nevertheless, as the percentage of Christianity has increased in South Korea going from 18% in 1970 to 29% in the year 2000,<sup>141</sup> surveys show that in the West, the tendency has been to decrease. The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center, where it showed that the number of Christians had dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.<sup>142</sup> Despite of the decrease in faith and practice, Europe and the U.S. have undeniable heritage from Christianity that continues to shape society specially regarding holidays, traditions and values that remain. A higher connection might be reached between South Korea and the West when it comes to social interaction, as a higher percentage of the Korean population will share western holidays, values and traditions. In regard to institutional relations, the changes would be insignificant as most of the Western countries are declared to be secular, and so does South Korea.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Donald N. Clark, "Christianity in Modern Korea", AsianStudies, October 1, 2006, <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/christianity-in-modern-korea.pdf>.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Why Christianity Quit Growing in Korea", TGC, May 14, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christianity-quit-growing-korea/>.

<sup>142</sup> N.a., "America's Changing Religious Landscape", Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

In socio-economic terms, more Catholics and Protestants are comprised in the middle class than Korean Buddhist. In a 1991 finding, more than two thirds of Catholics and Protestants belonged to the middle and upper-middle class strata, while only about half of Buddhists did so<sup>144</sup> and more Christians are found in urban areas and that more upwardly mobile young people have been converted to the imported faith. Buddhists also fared poorly in terms of income level. Therefore, more Korean Christians can afford travelling to Western countries and interacting with the people and the culture than the Korean Buddhists can. Christians and Buddhists also differ significantly in terms of education attainment, as only 30% of Buddhists have elementary education, and only 7% have a university degree. Indeed, it is likely that a higher percentage of the Korean students that study abroad is Christian or atheist, due to the socio-economic status.<sup>145</sup>

To sum up, it is the notion of democracy what brings South Korea closer to the Western World, not too much the notion of Christianity, even though it helps to have calendars, schedules and traditions in common with the West, as well as values such as freedom of expression, rule of law and basic human rights, rather than the Confucian “harmony” that is inherited from the Eastern culture.

### *The connection with Confucianism and the East*

Confucianism is the way of life propagated by Confucius in the 6th–5th century BCE and is often characterized as a system of social and ethical philosophy rather than a religion.<sup>146</sup> Although transformed over time, it is still the substance of learning, the source of values, and the social code of the Chinese, but its influence was extended to other countries, particularly Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Traditional Confucianism was either undemocratic or antidemocratic through its ‘emphasis on the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights’.<sup>147</sup>

Annexation by Japan led to the almost instantaneous collapse of the cultural and political authority of Korea’s traditional ruling classes, and left Confucianism thoroughly de-legitimized.<sup>148</sup> After the consolidation of South Korea as an independent nation the strive

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<sup>144</sup> N.a., “Population Index”, 1991, 315-322, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3645918>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Judith Berling, “Confucianism”, AsiaSociety, April 1, 2019, <https://asiasociety.org/education/confucianism..>

<sup>147</sup> Samuel Huntington, “Journal of Democracy”, 1991,

<https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf>

<sup>148</sup> Kevin Gray, “The Political Cultures of South Korea”, ResearchGate, 2013: 85-101,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276025216\\_The\\_Political\\_Cultures\\_of\\_South\\_Korea](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276025216_The_Political_Cultures_of_South_Korea).

for identity and modernization had a political component and was the driving force towards the construction of a democracy.<sup>149</sup> The modern world of the mid-twentieth century into which most Asian nations emerged as independent states was shaped by the forces that shaped Europe since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>150</sup>

Confucian ideals promote familial lifestyle, the strengthening of social bonds and the creation of an effective and nation-wide administration.<sup>151</sup> These factors are important today, having contributed to the rapid pace of recovery and development of South Korea after World War II and Korean War,<sup>152</sup> as well as to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in the most effective way. The emphases on self-discipline, diligence and hard-work are other precepts of Confucian value system that proved eminently important for South Korea's economic development.<sup>153</sup>

### *Social Cohesion*

Regarding the political orientation of each religion, Buddhists in South Korea have relatively stronger conservative and traditional attitudes which are expected to be politically more conservative, while Christians are expected to be more liberal and progressive. Unlike most of the industrialized nations, the rapid modernization and urbanization have not undermined the influence of religion in South Korea. In fact, the Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant organisations collectively are the nation's most powerful non-governmental organizations, operating a whole range of welfare agencies and commercial enterprises.<sup>154</sup> Despite of the religious organisations supporting a certain political party or leader, the publicists of politicians take care to emphasize that their personal beliefs are kept separately, suggesting less scope for tension between religious communities.<sup>155</sup>

Based on current trends, it is safe to say that even though Koreans are likely to become less institutionally committed, the decline on religion will be minimal. That is because

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<sup>149</sup> Samuel Vinay, "Christian mission in contemporary Asian", SAGE, July 1998, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43052468.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Abfb0f9315509499cde24ec5e33f314c8>.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Why Christianity Quit Growing in Korea".

<sup>152</sup> Tomasz Slezia, "The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korea Society", ResearchGate, January 2013, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272389562\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Confucianism\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_South\\_Korean\\_Society](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272389562_The_Role_of_Confucianism_in_Contemporary_South_Korean_Society).

<sup>153</sup> Andrew Eungi Kim "Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea: A Sociological Survey".

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Kevin Gray, "The Political Cultures of South Korea".

the rapid growth of religions in Korea in the last three decades has just began to slow down, and a rapid growth of a given religion in a short period of time is usually followed by a long period of slow growth and stability. Regarding social stability, there will not be social confrontations due to the difference in religion.

## **POLITICAL OUTLOOK**

- South Korea's democracy is characterized by a strong executive power and attempts to reduce its influence have failed. Trying it again will not be a priority in the short term, but rather socio-economic matters.
- Current illiberal practices with the media from Moon president favoring North Korea have worried the international community by worsening the quality of their democracy.
- Despite of the recent corruption cases involving chaebols, drastic measures will not be enforced in the short-term in order to change its structure.
- There is a possibility of a populism emerging if this government continues in a state-led nationalism allowing anti-Japanese sentiments and taking distance in the relations with the U.S. while prioritizing the Inter-Korean relations.
- By 2019 President Moon's approval rating had dropped because of economic slowdown and lack of progress on North Korea talks, but after an effective response to the COVID-19 crisis that has been considered successful at an international level, it is more likely that his party will win the next presidential elections in 2022.

### **Political evolution**

As a new-born nation South Korea adopted a democratic regime but in 1961 there was a coup that began with 26 years of military dominance in politics.<sup>156</sup> Starting with Park Chung-Hee as a dictator with 18 of years rule that brought enormous economic expansion at the cost of civil liberties and political freedom, claiming that all his measures were

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<sup>156</sup> Britannica, "Park Chung Hee, president of South Korea", Britannica, December 20, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Park-Chung-Hee>.

necessary to fight communism.<sup>157</sup> General Chun took the leadership of the country from 1980 to 1988. Democratization of South Korea displayed the hallmarks of a gradual or continuous transition from authoritarianism. These included: liberalization emanating from within the regime, continuity of personnel from the authoritarian ruling elite, continuity in economic and foreign policy and the exclusion from power of the representatives of the economically disadvantaged.<sup>158</sup>

The first two democratic presidents, Roh Tae-Woo (1988-1993) and Kim Young-Sam (1993-1998) launched anti-corruption drives at their coming to power, took measures against land concentration and acted against malpractice amongst top party and government functionaries, and yet each president would leave office with his reputation seriously tarnished by corruption scandals involving chaebol money.<sup>159</sup> The liberals ruled for the following two decades, having Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008). Kim Dae Jung's administration was characterized by the "Sunshine policy" that aimed at improving and engaging relations with North Korea.

Lee Myung-Bak, leader of Liberty Korea Party, won the elections of 2007, presenting it as New Right movement. His administration was market by promoting free market liberalism, cutting back inter-Korean joint military exercises adopting a vis-à-vis posture.<sup>160</sup> The 2012 elections were disputed between Moon Jae-In, successor to Roh Mu-Hyon, and Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of Park Geun-Hee. The conservative candidate won with 51 per cent of the vote promising the "democratization of the economy" and a "Korean-style welfare system" with increased pensions, healthcare reforms and relief for heavily indebted homeowners.<sup>161</sup>

President Park's tenure was characterized by an overarching political philosophy she called "Trustpolitik", a vision as well as a policy tool that saw "trust" as an indispensable asset required to foster cooperation. Japan and South Korea reached an intelligence-sharing agreement called GSOMIA in November 2016, and the US finished installing the THAAD anti-missile system at a US military base in South Korea in early 2017.<sup>162</sup> On

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Tat Yan Kong, "Power Alternation in South Korea", ResearchGate, April 2003, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230496152\\_Power\\_Alternation\\_in\\_South\\_Korea](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230496152_Power_Alternation_in_South_Korea).

<sup>159</sup> Kevin Gray, "The Political Cultures of South Korea".

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Hankyoreh, "When did the US start taking Japan's side?", Hankyoreh, February 16, 2021, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/983208.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/983208.html).

December 28<sup>th</sup> of 2015, the foreign ministers of Japan and Republic of Korea reached an agreement on the “comfort women” issue, supposedly bringing an end to a decades-old bilateral issue where Japan.<sup>163</sup>

After President Park was found guilty in a case of corruption connected to chaebols, she was impeached, and the elections of May of 2017 were won by the liberal politician Moon Jae-In. Compared to the scandal with the former president, Moon was seen as a clean candidate who would end corruption and revitalize South Korea’s sluggish economy with a plan to fight corruption centered on reining chaebols.<sup>164</sup>

### *The future of the South Korean democracy*

The presence of a democratic constitution and the regular holding of free and competitive elections alone do not necessarily make a political system function as a representative democracy.<sup>165</sup> One silent feature of South Korean politics is the lack of strong political institutions, including an established political party system. Political parties exist, but they consist of factions led by strong individuals thanks to the powerful executive and a “winner-takes-all” nature.<sup>166</sup> Whenever a president changes, the ruling party structure that is dependent on presidential power loses its core and integrity and for both ruling party and opposition parties makes it difficult for durable intraparty factions to form power bases independent from the party leader.

South Korea’s democracy is maturing and moderate and modern social policies that are regarded as mainstream in western and northern Europe are now becoming the norm.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, people usually look beyond the form of political democracy and demand the material substance of economic and social democracy.

The work of cleaning up the countless illegal and corrupt actions of the Lee Myung-Bak and Park administrations was carried out but the damage they inflicted on democracy was deep and extensive. To their credit, Moon and his party attempted to revise the

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<sup>163</sup> Prakash Panneerselvan and Sandhya Puthanveedu, “6 Months Later: The ‘Comfort Women’ Agreement”, The Diplomat, May 11, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/6-months-later-the-comfort-women-agreement/>.

<sup>164</sup> Jaewoo Choo, “South Korean Politics and Foreign Policy in 2017 and 2018”, East Asian Policy Kyung Hee University, 2020, 123-134, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930518000119>.

<sup>165</sup> Richard Rose and Doh Chull Shin, “Democratization Backwards: The Problem of Third-Wave Democracies”, British Journal of Political Science, 2001, 331-351, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3593267>.

<sup>166</sup> Tat Yan Kong, “Power Alternation in South Korea”.

<sup>167</sup> Stephen Costello, “Will South Korea’s progressive victory bring change to the Peninsula?”, East Asia Forum, May 20, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/20/will-south-koreas-progressive-victory-bring-change-to-the-peninsula/>.

Constitution, unsuccessfully in 2018 and in 2020 in order to decentralize the power of the presidency, change the five-year presidency to a four-year term with opportunity of a second term, lower the voting age, grant more autonomy to local governments and delegate more authority to the prime minister.<sup>168</sup> Even though Moon said he would not personally benefit from these measures, the National Assembly scuttled the proposal calling it “imperial” and stressing the polarization of politics.<sup>169</sup>

Lately, another concern is being seen raised in the South Korean democracy and it has to do with the way President Moon’s tries to normalize the relations with the North. Moon has pluralized public discourse about North Korea, exposing citizens to various views and information, and that generated public support for Seoul to pursue reproachment: but the government did not generate counter-narratives about Japan. Instead, left-wing groups accelerated negative portrayals and coopted state officials to censor dissenting views. Korean censorship follows illiberal trends in western democracies to ban certain public expressions considered offensive to historically victimized groups.<sup>170</sup> This has been criticized by domestic observers and international organisations, including the United Nations, for the illiberal practices related to North Korea defectors and human rights advocates in the country.<sup>171</sup>

If they do not liberalize the public discourse, the perception of democracy in South Korea country will be damaged, being considered an “illiberal democracy” instead.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, progress on strengthening South Korea’s democratic institutions will take time and political will, but in terms of priorities, the people want concrete economic and social benefits more than they want the removal of deep-rooted evils. Therefore, economic and social reforms are more urgently needed.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Erik Mobernd, “Has the Time Come to Amend South Korea’s Constitution?”, *The Diplomat*, July 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/has-the-time-come-to-amend-south-koreas-constitution/>.

<sup>169</sup> Kang Jin-Kyu, “Constitutional reform derailed”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 24, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2018/04/24/politics/Constitutional-reform-derailed/3047355.html>.

<sup>170</sup> Joseph Yi, Joe Philips and Wondong Lee, “Manufacturing Contempt: State-Linked Populism in South Korea”, *SpringerLink*, 2019: 494-501, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-019-00404-2>.

<sup>171</sup> Jeongmin Kim, “As North and South Korea cosy up, human rights groups struggle for cash”, *Reuters*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-rights/as-north-and-south-korea-cosy-up-human-rights-groups-struggle-for-cash-idUSKBN1JN00N>

<sup>172</sup> Joseph Yi, Joe Philips and Wondong Lee, “Manufacturing Contempt: State-Linked Populism in South Korea”.

<sup>173</sup> Sang-young Ryhu, “Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Reform in South Korea”, *Global Asia*, September 2018, [https://www.globalasia.org/v13no3/cover/moon-jae-in-and-the-politics-of-reform-in-south-korea\\_sang-young-rhyu](https://www.globalasia.org/v13no3/cover/moon-jae-in-and-the-politics-of-reform-in-south-korea_sang-young-rhyu)

### *Chaebols and corruption*

Coined from a combination of the words “chae” (wealth) and “bol” (clan), Chaebols are a core of business conglomerates consolidated in the 1970s with a heavily concentrated economic power and owned by a handful of families who were soon densely intermarried with the ruling elite.<sup>174</sup> Some of the biggest ones are the Samsung Group, LG Corporation, Hyundai motor group and SK Group. Chaebols are an essential part of South Korea's economy, and helped to transform what was once a poor nation into Asia's fourth largest economy. But along the way, every single political administration has been implicated with corruption scandals related to chaebols.<sup>175</sup> This political-economic situation that exists in South Korea can be referred to as “crony capitalism”, an indicator of the state of the economy where success in business is determined by the mutual relationship between businessmen and government officials.<sup>176</sup>

Despite of the attempts from previous governments starting from Kim Dae-Jung to control the influence of chaebols enforcing anti-corruption laws, the levels of governmental corruption have not declined in the eyes of the citizenry. Instead, the extent of corruption perceived has still remained considerable at all levels of government.<sup>177</sup>

In 2016 the political scandal revolving around South Korean President Park Guen-Hye and her life-long friend Choi Soon-Sil was extraordinary by any standards in South Korea's tumultuous democracy. In November 2016 prosecutors indicated Choi on exerting inappropriate influence over state affairs, charges of abuse of power and attempted fraud.<sup>178</sup> In February 2017 the Samsung Group chief Jae Young-Lee, also referred to as “the Crown Prince of Samsung”, was arrested for suspected role in the scandal, which was confirmed in March 2017 by a special prosecutor.<sup>179</sup> Choi was accused of extracting bribes from chaebols such as Samsung which was accused of planning to give her \$37 million in exchange for using her relationship with the president

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<sup>174</sup> Kevin Gray, “The Political Cultures of South Korea”.

<sup>175</sup> Jung H. Pak, “North Korea's long shadow on South Korea's democracy”, Brookings, January 22, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/north-koreas-long-shadow-on-south-koreas-democracy/>.

<sup>176</sup> Young-Chan Kim, “South Korea: Challenging Globalization and the Post-Crisis Reforms”, Chandos Publishing, 2008, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/9781843344728/south-korea>

<sup>177</sup> Kevin Gray, “The Political Cultures of South Korea”.

<sup>178</sup> Jaewoo Choo, “South Korean Politics and Foreign Policy in 2017 and 2018”.

<sup>179</sup> Elisa Kelly, ““Crown Prince of Samsung” jailed for bribery and embezzlement”, The Market Herald, January 19, 2021, <https://themarketherald.com.au/crown-prince-of-samsung-jailed-for-bribery-and-embezzlement-2021-01-19/>

to ensure favorable treatment.<sup>180</sup> Special prosecutors recommended 13 charges against Park at the time of the impeachment.<sup>181</sup>

The backlash to Park's allegations sparked months of mass street demonstrations that became known as the "Candlelight Revolution," the culmination of twenty successive Saturday night rallies that brought out over 16 million people. Former President Park Geun-hye was found guilty and sentenced to 24 years in jail.<sup>182</sup>

President Moon was elected with the promise of uprooting chaebol corruption but after almost 4 years of presidency, he has done little to reduce chaebols' stranglehold on the judiciary and economy. He did hire a so-called "chaebol sniper" to head the Korea Fair Trade Commission<sup>183</sup> but he began his tenure by lowering expectations and has not accomplished as much as expected.<sup>184</sup> In fact, there has been another corruption scandal surrounding Samsung and Lee Jae-Yong, after he was accused of accounting fraud and stock manipulation, but the Court denied an arrest.<sup>185</sup> This reveals another issue in the system, the judiciary leniency, and President Moon did not proceed to reform it as he called instead for courts to engage in "self-reform".<sup>186</sup>

The reason why chaebols are difficult to reform is because they are entrenched into the fabric of South Korea and are credited with transforming the South Korean economy into the technological powerhouse it is today. Another obstacle to reform is the fact that chaebols are large donors to politicians, which can make it difficult to get parliament to enact laws that credibly threaten chaebols' interests.<sup>187</sup> Besides, Chaebols have long been deemed "too big to jail" and the larger the company, the lighter the sentence because judges fear that harsh punishment for a major chaebol or its senior leaders could have adverse effects on the South Korean economy.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Jaewoo Choo, "South Korean Politics and Foreign Policy in 2017 and 2018"

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Lee Taeho, "Korea's Candlelight Revolution and Participatory Democracy", ALFP, 2016, [http://alfpnetwork.net/en/e-magazine001\\_06/](http://alfpnetwork.net/en/e-magazine001_06/)

<sup>183</sup> Eun-Young Jeong, "South Korea Names 'Chaebol Sniper' to Watchdog Role", The Wall Street Journal, May 17, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-korea-names-chaebol-sniper-to-watchdog-role-1495020959>.

<sup>184</sup> Hyunjoo Jin and Joyce Lee, "South Korea lowers hopes for drastic reform of chaebol", Reuters, May 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-politics-antitrust-idUSKCN18E0A7>.

<sup>185</sup> BBC, "Samsung: Court rejects Lee Jae-yong arrest warrant request", BBC News, June 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52960676>.

<sup>186</sup> Kang Jin-Kyu, "Moon asks court to 'self-reform'", KoreaJoongAng Daily, September 13, 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3053178>.

<sup>187</sup> Jaylia Yan, "South Korea's Moment for Chaebol Reform is Now", GAB, November 16, 2020, <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2020/11/16/south-koreas-moment-for-chaebol-reform-is-now/>.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Even though the chaebols are responsible for the majority of the country's investment in research and development, experts say they may also introduce challenges to the health of the Korean economy. Economists have warned that the behemoth conglomerates often use their monopolistic clout to squeeze small and medium enterprises (SMEs) out of the market, often copying their innovations rather than developing their own or buying out the SMEs. In this predatory environment, SMEs, which provide for most of the country's employment, are unable to grow.<sup>189</sup>

Therefore, taking into consideration the relation between chaebols and how they affect youth unemployment, a demand for changes in their structure will start being demanded in the upcoming years, specially by the young population that has to fight with the issue on unemployment. Nevertheless, drastic measures will not be taken by the government in the short or medium term due to chaebol's deep integration in the economic and political system.

### *Populism*

Two issues have come to dominate discussions of South Korea's future: modernity and national reunification. However, critical engagement with both has emerged from within South Korea's dissident minjung (populist) community with radical visions.<sup>190</sup> *Minjung* literally means the popular, and the movement can be inferred to represent a populist politics.<sup>191</sup>

On the one hand, one of the main critiques posed by this populism is based on the alienation and dislocation endangered by an imposed and foreign modernity. A new sense of nostalgia for traditional, rural life and folk culture with its community orientation appeared. Besides, they draw out social and economic injustices of modernity, as it increased the class differentiation and exacerbated social cleavages in South Korea.<sup>192</sup> On the other hand, the other dimension within this populism is an agenda of reunification under a minjung led socialist-democratic ideology. This minjung goal is to project a

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<sup>189</sup> Eleanor Albert, "South Korea's Chaebol Challenge", Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/south-koreas-chaebol-challenge>.

<sup>190</sup> Yea Sallie, "The culture and politics of resistance in South Korea", Pergamos, 1999, 221-234, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016328798001293>.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

cultural reunification of the Korean nation and aims to negate interference of the hegemonic forces currently operating in the peninsula.<sup>193</sup>

In South Korean politics, the movement of the minjung has historically been more represented by the left-wing parties as they do not deal with the North Korean issue in a stricter way as the conservatives do, but rather, enforce the Sunshine Policy that aims at dialogue in order to facilitate harmonious relations. The current presidency under Moon's administration has been called "populist";<sup>194</sup> in any case, we can see that the minjung movement is represented, as it is a priority for the Moon administration to improve relations with North Korea, trying to leave the former allies like Japan or the U.S. aside, as well as victimizing for the damage caused by Japan during their imperial rule.

Moon's administration coincided with Donald Trump's in the U.S. and as Trump worked under his slogan of "America first" President Moon also stressed a "National Interest First" policy that would prioritize the country's own interests ahead of those of its foreign allies like the United States.<sup>195</sup> Another critic moment in foreign relations was Moon's call for the reversal of the consensus the previous administration had with Japan on comfort women, concluding in January 2018 that the consensus wrongful; a renegotiation doesn't have happened yet.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, an anti-Japan sentiment is spreading rapidly in South Korea, even though there are also growing voices urging the government and authorities to remain cool and seek ways to resolve the issue to avoid a long-term standoff. The public criticism of the Seoul government's move to embrace a campaign for a boycott of Japanese-made products carried out in August 2019 is a good example.<sup>197</sup>

Thus, we see in the current government a populism emerging not so much by drastically challenging chaebols and modernity, but rather by developing a state-led nationalism provoking and allowing anti-Japanese and anti-U.S. sentiments while prioritizing the Inter-Korean relations.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Hyung-A Kim, "Moon's populist politics and its effects", EastAsiaForum, December 26, 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/26/moons-populist-politics-and-its-effects/>.

<sup>195</sup> Hankyoreh, "When did the US start taking Japan's side? Hankyoreh, February 16, 2021, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/983208.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/983208.html).

<sup>196</sup> Hankyoreh, "When did the US start taking Japan's side?"

<sup>197</sup> Tae-jun Kang, "Voices grow in South Korea to Oppose Anti-Japan Movement", The Diplomat, August 8, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/voices-grow-in-south-korea-to-oppose-anti-japan-movement/>.

*Future scenario: Moon's administration, COVID-19 and 2022 elections*

In foreign relations, Moon government's credibility as a nation-state in the eyes of foreign observers, especially the Japanese, got undermined. Moon has been apparently more concerned about improving inter-Korean relations than other aspects of his foreign policy as long as he could garner enough domestic support and high approval rating.<sup>198</sup>

Regarding domestic policy, his administration pledged to create more jobs, to reduce the number of non-regular workers, to improve their working conditions and to build a society that respected labor<sup>199</sup> as it was characterized for being very segmented and unequal. The labor world did applaud at the beginning the government's efforts to convert non-regular workers into regular workers in the public sector, raise the minimum wage and limit the working hours, but afterwards argued that the government changed its direction in the process of implementing the policies.<sup>200</sup> By the year 2018, Moon's government was facing a major crisis with a decline in available jobs linked to the exacerbation of income inequalities.<sup>201</sup>

However, the lopsided vote in favor of the Democratic Party is inseparable from the COVID-19 crisis. Moon's party is likely to have performed worse before the government earned plaudits for its pandemic response.<sup>202</sup> The South Korean government experienced a dramatic rise in its approval rating during the COVID-19 crisis, as those who stated that the government was "doing well" rose to 59% during in April, from a 46% in January.<sup>203</sup> There was not only a rise in approval ratings but also a landslide victory for the ruling party in the legislative election capturing near two-thirds majority of the National Assembly.<sup>204</sup>

During an outbreak of a population-wide infectious disease, the news framing government policy can greatly influence disease trends by affecting public opinion.

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<sup>198</sup> Robert E Kelly, "Moon Jae-in's foreign policy reorientation", *The Interpreter*, December 2, 2019,

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/moon-jae-s-foreign-policy-reorientation>.

<sup>199</sup> Jeong-Hee Lee, "Promises and reality of labor reform in South Korea", ResearchGate, December 2019,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338288818\\_PROMISES\\_AND\\_REALITY\\_OF\\_LABOR\\_REFORM\\_IN\\_SOUTH\\_KOREA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338288818_PROMISES_AND_REALITY_OF_LABOR_REFORM_IN_SOUTH_KOREA)

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Sang-young Ryhu, "Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Reform in South Korea".

<sup>202</sup> Stephen Costello, "Will South Korea's progressive victory bring change to the Peninsula?".

<sup>203</sup> Wonkwang Jo and Dukjin Chang, "Political Consequences of COVID-19 and Media Framing in South Korea", *Front Public Health*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7481441/>.

<sup>204</sup> Joseph Yi and Wondong Lee, "Pandemic Nationalism in South Korea", *SpringerLink*, 2020: 446-451, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-020-00509-z>.

Despite of the conservative newspapers reporting negative news about not banning Chinese entry on time, which caused COVID-19 broke out,<sup>205</sup> there was a turnaround. South Korea succeeded in flattening the curve and became a model of best practices in the world in terms of quarantine.<sup>206</sup>

Support for the government has a tremendous impact on the resolution of a situation as such. That is why, despite of the unsuccessful political reforms the Moon administration carried out regarding corruption, a failure in the reduction in the influence of the executive power and a bad economic performance, it could still be likely that his party, the Democratic Party of Korea, would win the next presidential elections of 2022 thanks to the good crisis management. This can also be justified in the so-called “Rally ‘round the flag” effect, meaning that people rally around the government during crises such as war, or in this case, a pandemic.<sup>207</sup>

Nevertheless, the arrival of vaccines as a solution to fight the coronavirus outbreak was not as efficient as the population expected in South Korea. The government was criticized due to the slow rollout in the first half of 2021 and even though they have now purchased enough vaccines for the nation’s total population, some people are still questioning the target date by November for herd immunity.<sup>208</sup> The main cause for this delay was the self-satisfaction of the government after the first infection wave in 2020, which bred complacency in signing vaccine contracts refusing to risk money by buying as many vaccines as possible, waiting on preliminary trial results and pricing visibility before deciding with which manufacturers to sign vaccine contracts.<sup>209</sup>

According to a recent poll, 49 percent of respondents said that the government was not handling the virus well anymore due to the slow vaccine rollout and the rising number of confirmed cases.<sup>210</sup> It was the first-time negative feedback from the public outweighed positive reviews for the Moon government since the coronavirus outbreak began last year. In the case that these events affected drastically the government’s reputation, the

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<sup>205</sup> Wonkwang Jo and Dukjin Chang, “Political Consequences of COVID-19 and Media Framing in South Korea”.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Mitch Schin, “As Vaccine Rollout Lags, South Koreans Sour on Government’s Covid-19 response”, The Diplomat, April 26, 2021,

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/as-vaccine-rollout-lags-south-koreans-sour-on-governments-covid-19-response/>

<sup>209</sup> Mason Richey, “South Korea’s no good very bad year”, Inkstick, April 16, 2021,

<https://inkstickmedia.com/south-koreas-no-good-very-bad-year/>.

<sup>210</sup> Mitch Schin, “As Vaccine Rollout Lags, South Koreans Sour on Government’s Covid-19 response”

conservative party, re-named as People Power Party, could make a come-back. Indeed, on April 7<sup>th</sup> of 2021 they won the mayoral races in the country's two largest cities Seoul and Busan, steamrolling opponents from Moon's ruling party.<sup>211</sup> If the conservatives maintain their momentum, a right leaning South Korean president could be elected and would adopt vastly different foreign policy views, being more drastic with North Korea and urging a reconciliation with Japan and the U.S.

If the future government is from the Democratic Party of Korea instead, it is not sure that it will continue in the line of the current one but certainly the next years will be consumed with economic and social responses to the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>212</sup> Looking at the advancements of the Sunshine Policy, North Korea does not seem to be currently trying to change the balance of power through nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile tests.<sup>213</sup> Besides, Moon's approach does not appear to be having intended effect on Pyongyang which strongly suggest that Moon's conciliatory approach is not working.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, with the election of Joe Biden as the new President of the U.S. more effort will be put in an improvement of the relations between South Korea and Japan, as a U.S. State Department spokesperson suggested that current tensions between these two countries can be regrettable.<sup>215</sup> Therefore, the Sunshine Policy may start to take a step back in the priority agenda of the government, in order to focus on the economic development of the country and an improvement in the other foreign relations once the pandemic eases.

## **The Inter-Korean Link – The National Question**

### *Hidden steps towards an opening of North Korea*

North Korea is one of the most isolated countries in the world. The roughly 24 million people who live there have minimal interaction with the outside world as internet is inaccessible to almost everyone, foreign media is forbidden and interaction with tourists is strictly controlled.<sup>216</sup> This regime has managed to survive but at the moment,

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<sup>211</sup> Andrew Jeong and Timothy W.Martin, "South Korea's ruling party is reeling as conservatives win big in mayoral polls", The Wall Street Journal, April 7, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-korean-conservatives-are-on-the-rise-a-year-before-presidential-election-11617782132>.

<sup>212</sup> Stephen Costello, "Will South Korea's progressive victory bring change to the Peninsula?".

<sup>213</sup> Jung H. Pak, "North Korea's long shadow on South Korea's democracy".

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Hankyoreh, "When did the US start taking Japan's side?".

<sup>216</sup> Charlotte Alfred, "How North Korea Became So Isolated", Huffpost, December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/north-korea-history-isolation\\_n\\_5991000](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/north-korea-history-isolation_n_5991000).

international sanctions and coronavirus lockdowns have resulted in an unprecedented level of isolation that is quickly becoming an existential issue for Kim.<sup>217</sup> Despite of being aware of this matter, it does not seem like North Korea would like to emulate China and its “openness and reform” policy. Instead, North Korean leaders want reforms, but they do not want openness.<sup>218</sup>

Regarding economy, signs of such a change first appeared in 1984 when the Joint Venture Law was promulgated inviting business from both socialist and capitalist countries to invest in North Korea jointly with North Korean enterprises.<sup>219</sup> It became obvious as the year progressed that the Joint Venture Law was only encouraging a handful of loyal North Korean citizens in Japan to invest in North Korea. This fact was not surprising, because even if North Korea had opened its door in the way China did, its attractiveness as an investment location would have been extremely low in view of its small domestic markets and its political economic problems.<sup>220</sup>

In 2016, Kim Jong-Un announced the nation’s first five-year economic plan whose main goals were: to bolster economic growth, to diversify economic partners, to decrease dependence on China and to improve the lives of the North Korean people. He emphasized the need to solve the problem of providing electric power as the nation suffers from shortages and the need to develop the metal and railway industries.<sup>221</sup> However, the sanctions regime that tries to decrease North Korea’s nuclear power has progressively expanded by the UN Security Council and the U.S. government, aiming at suppressing the ability of the economy to support its military ambitions. Specially since 2017, sanctions have also had major negative impacts on the ability of North Korea’s economy to support meeting the basic human needs of the civilian population in health and food security.<sup>222</sup> The tolerance and growth of markets coupled with expanded trade with China until recently have offset some of these systemic weaknesses, but the absence of an

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<sup>217</sup> Jonathan Corrado, “North Korea’s New Economic Plan looks a lot like the old one”, The Diplomat, January 20 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/north-koreas-new-economic-plan-looks-a-lot-like-the-old-one/>

<sup>218</sup> Andrei Lankov, “North Korea under Kim Jon-un: Reforms without Openness?”, Foreign policy research institute, June 6, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/06/north-korea-under-kim-jong-un-reforms-without-openness/>

<sup>219</sup> Hy-Sang Lee, “North Korea’s Closed Economy: The Hidden Opening”, University of California Press, 1998: 1264-1279, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2644745.pdf>

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Julie Makinen, “North Korean leader unveils 5-year plan for economy, but no radical reforms”, Los Angeles Times, May 8, 2016,

<https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-economy-20160508-story.html>

<sup>222</sup> Angelan Kane and Moon Chung-In, “Why COVID-19 could signal change on the Korean peninsula”, World Economic Forum, January 8, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/covid-19-signal-change-korean-peninsula/>

integrated approach to management of a mixed economy underlies structural inefficiencies and inequities in the economy and its management.<sup>223</sup>

Eventually, 5 years after the announcement of the five-year economic plan, North Korea's economy is showing deeply troubling signs, including a dysfunctional foreign exchange market, a steep drop-off in trade, and increasing food costs.<sup>224</sup> The confirmation of the failure of the five-years economic plan came in a Congress Report in January 2021 which conceded that growth targets were not met and that "serious mistakes" had been made in managing the economy<sup>225</sup> neglecting to address the governance problems and by saying that the country had faced "unexpected and inevitable challenges in various aspects"<sup>226</sup> such as the shutting of frontiers after the COVID-19 crisis and the U.S. sanctions.

Nevertheless, a new five-year plan has been announced by the leader Kim Jong-Un this year 2021 where it presupposes that the Cabinet will: improve economic management, normalize production, and increase self-sufficiency and "local provision of raw and other materials".<sup>227</sup> He said that "the state economic guidance organs should readjust and reinforce the economy substantially" and underscored "the need to tighten discipline in ensuring unified guidance of the state in the economic work".<sup>228</sup>

Experts say that with the new five-year plan in place, the rift between the North's planned economy that is explained on paper and the actual one that exists on the ground is expected to differ even more, putting in a more difficult situation the North Korean people to make a living.<sup>229</sup> Although the political situation of North Korea blunts growth and deters foreign investment, fixing it would require the deployment of political capital and an appetite for reform that has not been shown lately by Kim Jong-un,<sup>230</sup> not even after the COVID-19 crisis and admitting that the previous five-year plan had failed. Everything points to Kim Jong-un maintaining his attitude towards "reforms without openness."

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Jonathan Corrado, "North Korea's New Economic Plan looks a lot like the old one"

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> n.a., "North Korea announces congress on five-year economic plan", DW, August 20, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-announces-congress-on-five-year-economic-plan/a-54628882>

<sup>227</sup> Jonathan Corrado, "North Korea's New Economic Plan looks a lot like the old one"

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

*Inter-Korean diplomacy*

South Korea and North Korea share language, culture, and they also shared history until the nation got divided in the year 1945 after falling victims of the Cold War. Since then, they became enemies as they fought in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 but they did not end with a peace treaty, but rather an armistice. Afterwards, the different presidential administrations in South Korea have taken different approaches in order to avoid entering into a conflict again. While the conservative parties have generally been more drastic tackling the issue of North Korea and rather looking at the relations with the U.S., the left-wing parties instead have been trying to approach to North Korea claiming that security will be better guaranteed when they rely on each other.

The left-wing parties pursued their goal through the so-called Sunshine Policy from 1998 to 2008, and the result was an ambiguous failure.<sup>231</sup> During those years, South Korea gave North Korea \$8 billion in investment and assistance. In the year 2000 Kim Dae-Jung invested \$500 million in cash to stage a summit. However, North Korea advanced its development of nuclear weapons and missiles, conducting its first nuclear test in 2006.<sup>232</sup>

Currently, the Sunshine Policy is being performed by President Moon and improving the relations with North Korea is one of his main goals. The premise to do so is based on the fact that “the Korean Peninsula is the place where the Korean people live and will continue doing so. It must be kept safe and peaceful, and making sure this happens is a responsibility vested in the President by the Constitution”.<sup>233</sup> The four principles he wants to enforce are: establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula, denuclearization of North Korea, resolving the inter-Korean issue, a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and a stern response to any North Korean provocation.<sup>234</sup>

Despite of the efforts from this administration, so far, an improvement in the relations between South Korea and North Korea has not occurred as expected. Looking at the advancements of the Sunshine Policy, North Korea does not seem to be currently trying

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<sup>231</sup> John Delury, Chung-in Moon and Sue Mi Terry, “A reunified theory: Should We welcome the Collapse of North Korea?”, November-December 2014: 179-183, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483934>

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Jaewoo Choo, “South Korean Politics and Foreign Policy in 2017 and 2018”

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

to change the balance of power through nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile tests, and South Korea was leaning in to engage it on a wider range of activities.<sup>235</sup>

First of all, President Moon wanted the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics to succeed with the participation of North Korea. That would have meant a breakthrough for inter-Korean relations which had remained in a stalemate since 2010 and it would signify to the world North Korea's will to come in contact with the international community<sup>236</sup> as well as raising hopes for a change in its attitude to dialogue over its nuclear issue. Moon therefore proactively promoted the postponement of the scheduled joint military exercises in February to post-Olympics dates. Moon used the Winter Olympics to induce North Korea to answer to his call for dialogue as he appeased the United States and China to prevent their possible intervention.<sup>237</sup>

Despite of the distance taken by Seoul from the U.S., the fact that in 2019 Trump rejected North Korean demands for a relief in the sanctions was considered as a betrayal in North Korea and in June 2020 they destructed a joint liaison office that had been established with the South, causing alarm around the world.<sup>238</sup> The establishment of the office was part of a flurry of reconciliatory moves in 2018 after leaders of the Koreas met to try to improve relations. Adding up that North Korea's economy is under strain from the combination of restricted trade with China due to COVID-19 and the escalating US campaign of maximum sanctions pressure is increasing the imperative for sanctions relief<sup>239</sup>. The reason for targeting South Korea is strategic: North Korea risks conflict escalation if it attacks the United States directly, so has taken aim at the South as a perceived vulnerable target less likely to trigger a war.<sup>240</sup>

The latest news received regarding North Korea's attitude was the testing of some missiles off its west coast over the third weekend of March 2021, in its first publicly known weapons test since Joe Biden took office as president in January.<sup>241</sup> Even though what they fired were cruise missiles, not ballistic missiles, the U.S. President Joe Biden told

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<sup>235</sup> Jung H. Pak, "North Korea's long shadow on South Korea's democracy".

<sup>236</sup> BBC, "Winter Olympics 2018: Who is winning the propaganda battle?," February 9, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43001537>

<sup>237</sup> Jaewoo Choo, "South Korean Politics and Foreign Policy in 2017 and 2018"

<sup>238</sup> BBC, "North Korea: What's behind the liaison office demolition?," BBC, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061613>

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> N.a., "North Korea tested missiles over the weekend: US, South Korea", Aljazeera, March 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/24/n-korea-test-fired-missiles-over-the-weekend-reports>

reporters during a visit in Ohio referring to the North Korean government: “We have learned that nothing much has changed”.<sup>242</sup>

The consistent volley of anti-South rhetoric from the Kim regime, its refusal to accept Seoul’s humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office all strongly suggest that Moon’s conciliatory approach is not working.<sup>243</sup> Therefore, considering the strong efforts made by South Korea during this administration and the little positive feedback received, it is not likely that Inter-Korean diplomacy it put again as a main target for the rest of the Moon’s administration.

While many countries hesitated to close down their borders and cancel flights in the early stages of the pandemic, fearing a negative impact on their economics and thus on the approval ratings of governments, North Korea was not one to think about how to handle the pandemic while causing the least public damage.<sup>244</sup> Pyongyang’s quick decision to shut the border with China may have prevented a full-fledged COVID-19 disaster, but it has come at a steep cost. South Korean news outlets reported last year that trade between North Korea and China, its major trading partner, fell 76 percent year-on-year.<sup>245</sup> A possibility in which Inter-Korean Diplomacy was resumed, could happen as a consequence of the economic struggle North Korea is facing, in which the North seek aid from the South.

However, if this was to happen, South Korea should show a greater distancing from the U.S. than the one the Moon administration has. International politics between South Korea, the U.S. and North Korea influence all three countries. When relations between North Korea and South Korea improve, there is tension with the U.S. and on the contrary, when South Korea and the U.S. cooperate, tensions arise with North Korea. Since South Korea has already distanced itself from the U.S. to try to approach to North Korea and it has not work, South Korea should stop worsening the relations with the U.S. in this failed attempt.

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Jung H. Pak, “North Korea’s long shadow on South Korea’s democracy”.

<sup>244</sup> Mitch Shin, “What Is the Truth About COVID-19 in North Korea?”, The Diplomat, January 6, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/what-is-the-truth-about-covid-19-in-north-korea/>

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Biden’s administration would like to calm tensions down with North Korea, as his national security team has repeatedly stated,<sup>246</sup> but what they are really interested in is South Korea standing up as a truly globalized, model G20 country ally. In fact, Moon Jae-in visited Washington from May 21 to 22 for a crucial summit with U.S. President Joe Biden. While aware of Biden’s full foreign policy that calls for a calibrated approach that is open to explore diplomacy with North Korea and make practical progress to increase the security of the U.S. and its allies and deployed forces,<sup>247</sup> Moon still wants to convince him that re-engaging with North Korea should be at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy priorities.<sup>248</sup>

***Four possible future scenarios of the Korean Peninsula***

Taking all of the above into account, we have elaborated the following scenarios based on the Inter-Korean relationships which have been developed over a five-year period; with them we will try to show the complexity of current situation in relation to this issue.

Drivers of Change	Scenarios			
	1: Pacific reunification between the two Koreas	2: Another war between the two Koreas	3: Collapse of North Korea	4: Current trends: tension and dialogue (Most likely)
Signing of a denuclearization and peace treaty of the Peninsula.	++	--	-	--
US commitment to reduce US troops in South Korea.	++	-	--	++
Increase North Korea’s economic openness.	++	--	-	+
Military interventions by US in North Korea.	--	++	++	--
Increase in South Korean Young people’s rejection to get a reunification due to the loss of interest in North Korea.	-	-	-	-
Reduction in China’s interest on giving financial aid to North Korea.	--	++	++	++
Improvement in the relationships between South Korea and Japan.	-	-	+	++

<sup>246</sup> Alana Wise, “White House says it is open to diplomacy with north korea”, The NPR Politics, April 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/30/992507517/white-house-says-it-is-open-to-diplomatic-talks-with-north-korea?t=1621811330454&t=1621850120448>

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Chung Min Lee, “Moon and Biden must revamp the U.S.-South Korea Alliance”, Carnegie endowment for international peace”, May 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/21/moon-and-biden-must-revamp-u.s.-south-korea-alliance-pub-84590>.

Legend:

- ++ → Very positive impact on the plausibility of the scenario
- + → Positive impact on the plausibility of the scenario
- → Negative impact on the plausibility of the scenario
- → Very negative impact on the plausibility of the scenario

**Scenario 1: Pacific reunification between the two Koreas.**

Currently, many of the countries involved in the peninsula are betting on policies for such reunification to take place, but each of them has different interests.

In February 2021, Moon Jae-In and Joe Biden agreed to work together on the shared goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and achieving lasting peace in the region.<sup>249</sup> Therefore, one of the most important drivers for a peaceful unification would be the signing of a peace treaty and denuclearization of the peninsula, because currently there is only armistice, which does not ensure the end of the war. However, North Korea would not accept taking measures for denuclearization without the U.S. and its allies taking others, such as committing to reduce troops or even, once reunification has taken place, remove them all, since U.S. would no longer has a reason to be there for the security of South Korea. In addition, a possible economic opening of North Korea would help demonstrate a greater rapprochement with the international community, thus giving a more cooperative and transparent image that could increase the security in the rest of the countries that North Korea would be willing to reunify peacefully.

However, a reunification would have internal consequences for the peninsula, its foreign policy, and furthermore repercussions on the interests of other countries. Among them, South Korea, with its technology and potential trade, could help the North economically, while the North could provide with its natural resources to the South. That is something positive, but there would also be challenges, such as, for example, integrating the North Korean population, who have lived in isolation for decades, with the South Korean population.

Likewise, there would be consequences for the countries involved in this issue. For example, in the case of the U.S., the negative impact would be the weakening of the rationale and necessity for the U.S. – Korea alliance and the possibility for China to take a leader position in its relationship with Korea.<sup>250</sup> On the other hand, although for Japan it could mean an expansion of the free world (democracy and market economy), it would also mean a removal of Japan's rationale for militarization. In addition, for China,

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<sup>249</sup> Yonhap News Agency, “Moon y Biden elaborarán juntos una estrategia ‘exhaustiva’ sobre Corea del Norte”, Yonhap News Agency, February 4th, 2021, <https://sp.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20210204014500883>.

<sup>250</sup> Han Sung-Joo, “The Diplomacy of Korean Unification: positive and negative reasons, policies”, The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, December 3, 2019, <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/division-management-and-unification-korea-vs-germany/>.

although it would see the burden relieved of providing economic aid and military assistance, as well as being freed from possible confrontations, it would suffer the consequence of receiving possible refugees, which would suppose an economic and financial effort as well as a possible threat to national security.<sup>251</sup>

In conclusion, because of all the interests involved in the region and the possible damaging consequences that would currently collide between the different countries, it would be an unlikely scenario within 5 years.

### **Scenario 2: Another war between the two Koreas.**

Over the last few years there have been several threats by North Korea to use its nuclear weapons, as the last nuclear test carried out on March 25 from its eastern coast<sup>252</sup>. Therefore, there could be a situation in which the United States feels so nuclear-threatened that it decides to intervene militarily in North Korea. So, this intervention could lead to a war between the two Koreas. Moreover, the United States has implemented a series of economic sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear activity. Therefore, this bad relationship between both countries could lead to a decision by the United States to act militarily in the North. Another reason that could lead to a new war could be the reduction in China's interest in giving financial aid to North Korea. China may begin to prefer to move closer to the West, something which could provoke enormous anger on the part of the North, and the North may want to retaliate by attacking the South. A rapprochement between China and the U.S. could mean a big change in the relationship between the two Koreas.

### **Scenario 3: Collapse of North Korea**

The third scenario that could happen would be the collapse of North Korea. Again, one of the reasons for this scenario to happen could be that a possible military intervention by the U.S. would impact in the country in a very negative way. North Korea would not be prepared for such a severe impact from such a powerful country. Again, a reduction in China's interest in offering financial aid could become another serious problem for the country, and this could lead to the collapse of the country, without the important financial

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> BBC News, "Corea del Norte lanza dos misiles balísticos al Mar de Japón", BBC News, March 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-56520037>.

aid it receives from China. Finally, another situation that could bring a collapse of the North would be a possible improvement in relations between South Korea and Japan. Historically, relations between both countries have had many tense moments, but little by little these have been improved, since both have the U.S. as an ally and both perceive North Korea as a threat. In the event that these relations improve further, this could be a serious threat to the North Korea's stability.

**Scenario 4: Current trends: tension and dialogue (most likely)**

The last scenario is the most probable within the 5-year period, and it means that everything continues as it has been until now, with periods of rapprochement and dialogue, and others of tension, depending on the actions or policies carried out by the actors involved. On the one hand, a U.S. commitment to reduce U.S. troops in South Korea could lead to dialogue and meetings like those between Kim Jong-un and Moon in March 2018 and May 2018, and between Kim and Trump in 2018 and 2019, but now under Biden's mandate. Another reason for rapprochement and cooperation could be that of greater economic openness of North Korea. However, a driver that could lead to a period of tension would be if China reduces its economic and military aid to North Korea, since it is its greatest ally and could be considered as a rapprochement towards the West and a threat to North Korea. Similarly, a greater understanding between South Korea and Japan, both U.S. allies, would also pose a threat to North Korea because the U.S. would gain even more power in the region and all 3 have similar ideas towards the Korean peninsula. In periods of tensions, to achieve its objectives, North Korea could continue to carry out tests, such as those carried out in March 2021. This situation of approaches and distance is the most typical and what is most likely to continue to occur.

## CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing South Korea's economy, society, politics and foreign relations, we can arrive to the conclusion that it is a country marked by its resilience.

Regarding the economy, South Korea filled the world with awe when it went from being an underdeveloped country in the 1900s to becoming an Asian Tiger in the 2000s. This time, it did it again in 2021 because after the economic consequences brought by the pandemic, South Korea's economy has managed to remain as one of the most stable ones in comparison to many other countries. The GDP only decreased -1% in 2020 and is expected to increase 3.6% in 2021 and 2.8% in 2022. The fact that South Korea owns some of world's greatest companies that contribute in a high percentage to the national GDP and that they do not rely so much in other vulnerable sectors such as tourism, was a plus. Thus, this takes it closer to achieving all the goals it has settled in technology, 5G, Artificial Intelligence, and their ambition to be sustained with renewable energies by 2050.

One of the main issues South Korea's society will be facing is the top-heavy pyramid due to the low birth-rate. However, the co-existence shown by the different religious groups, as well as a higher connection to the West where immigration is rather a common phenomenon, will hopefully sensitize the population to welcome future immigrants in order to contribute to their economy and specially to help solve the demographic issue.

In regard to politics, the chaebols system and its inter-connectedness to the political class may not be sustainable in the long term, as the population will start expecting a higher level of transparency after all the cases of corruption. Besides, the lack of competitiveness they bring to the small and medium enterprises is another reason for the population to ask for reforms, even if chaebols bring economic stability to the country as a whole.

In foreign relations, it may be now the right time to start looking for a new perspective other than the Sunshine Policy, at least in the upcoming years. Even if South Korea wants to find its own identity, away from the U.S. and Japan, the effects and lessons shown by Globalization may show that unity makes strength.

Whatever comes, South Korea will find its way, as it remains stable after the pandemic, giving the world an example of resilience.

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