

CHINA'S EMERGING ROLE IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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INTRODUCTION

The basic geography and geo-political positioning of the Korean peninsula are quite relevant and significant for Chinese interests and form the broad basis for this paper. Traditionally, the Korean peninsula has often been viewed as both a “menace” and an “opportunity” by all the regional powers in the Southeast Asian region. Chinese thinking has always regarded this peninsula as a “mountain rigged natural buffer protecting its northeastern hinterland from possible invasions of various maritime powers.” Chinese versions of its relations with the two peninsular nations have often been described as proximate enough to be on the lines of “lips and teeth.”¹ At the same time, a hostile Korean peninsula can become troublesome for Chinese policy-makers. In this context lies the salience of this study. At the same time, for the peninsular nations, i.e. North and South Korea, the relationship with China was pivotal throughout Korean history. China has served as a source of

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1. Lips and teeth means very close and proximate relations. This term is often used for describing China-North Korea relations. Yu Hua Chen, “China and North Korea: Still ‘Lips and Teeth’”, *The Diplomat*, July 21, 2018; <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/china-and-north-korea-still-lips-and-teeth/>. Accessed on November 10, 2019.

China has served as a source of political legitimacy, military protection and economic assistance, as well as a partner for the success of their development model.

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The historical antecedents related to China-Korea relations were visible in the close political, military and economic relations, along with the shared cultural background. The peninsula has been crucial in terms of Chinese security, and this relationship has always been considered significant as compared to China's relations with other neighbouring countries such as Vietnam. Its

importance for China lies in the fact that in case any adversary force tries to control the peninsula, China would be deprived of an indispensable security buffer for both its capital and industrial region. In this context, it becomes imperative to analyse Chinese influence in the Korean peninsula in terms of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plans. It will also be interesting to evaluate whether China's BRI plans will have an impact on its contemporary relations with both North and South Korea. At the same time, while discussing these relations, it is necessary to keep in mind that North Korea is a staunch Chinese ally and South Korea that of the United States. In the context of the ongoing China-US rivalry and trade war, this paper will try to emphasize the relevance of the Korean peninsula in the contemporary Chinese foreign policy.

Chinese interests in the Korean peninsula are based on three important factors, namely: (i) the regional power equilibrium; (ii) China's shifting ideology based on geo-politics under President Xi Jinping; and (iii) the growing economic interests of China in the region.² All these factors combined have been responsible for China's emerging contemporary policy related to North and South Korea. Besides this, China's quest to keep the Korean peninsula in its sphere of influence can have multiple reasons. This paper will

2. Jia Hao and Zhuang Qubing, "China's Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula", *Asian Survey*, vol. 32, no. 12, December 1992, pp. 1137-1156.

try to analyse these reasons in detail in order to understand China's quest for increasing its BRI influence in the Korean peninsula region.

Since the 1980s, the geo-political shifts and the changing international politics of this region have changed the course for China, North Korea and South Korea. These have also altered the traditional and rigid pattern of relationships among the three nations. The shifting power balances and the emerging multipolar structure of the region have

eventually led the major powers to play a significant role in the region. In this context, the ideological antagonisms and the power play had been prominent in the region. These can be characterised by Soviet/Russian and Chinese support to North Korea, whereas South Korea derived its support from the United States. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the somewhat relaxation of tensions between Moscow and Washington, and the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing and Moscow and Tokyo had also dominated international power games in the region to a certain extent.

In contemporary times, China's BRI has been more focussed on investment and infrastructure building in Central and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. The Chinese government's Vision and Action Plan also envisages the economic opportunities in its neighbouring regions. Chinese territories adjacent to the Korean peninsula also figure in the Chinese BRI plans, thereby providing an opportunity for the two Korean peninsular nations to foray into China's grand plans. However, given the increased tensions in the peninsula after the North Korean nuclear tests and deepened American sanctions, the room for cooperation among China, South Korea, and North Korea has shrunk even further. At the same time, China's desire to extend its BRI plans to the Korean peninsula can affect these relations. In this context, this paper will try to analyse the

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relations between the Korean peninsular nations and major powers, and understand the power play among these three players.

HISTORICAL CONTEMPLATION OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS: SECURITY EXTERNALITIES OR ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Traditionally, the orientation of the Korean peninsula has been related to the historical rivalries among the Asian powers. In this, the strategic choices of both North and South Korea can be considered as important indicators of how East Asian relations may reorder themselves in the context of China's current economic and political rise, as also depending on the role of other external players in this region. Prior to the 19th century, the Korean peninsula was firmly tied to Beijing as part of a political order in which China's leadership exercised tremendous influence on the conduct of security and foreign affairs related to Korea, in return for Korean obeisance to the Chinese leadership. This state of affairs was reflected in the regular tribute missions that the Korean king sent to the Chinese emperor, a form of obeisance that reflected China's dominant political, cultural, and socio-economic role vis-à-vis the Korean kingdom.³ By the late 19th century, this traditional China-centric order began to break down in the context of the weakening of Qing China, the slow decline of the Korean Joseon dynasty, and the rise of Japanese influence in the Korean peninsula in the context of the Meiji Restoration.⁴ And, the arrival of the Western imperial powers and the domination of the Chinese dominated system in the East Asian region in the late 19th century,

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3. Kirk W. Larsen, "Comforting Fictions: The Tribute System, the Westphalian Order, and Sino-Korean Relations", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, Special Issue: International Relations and East Asian History: Impact, Meaning, and Conceptualization, May–August 2013, pp. 233-257; https://www.jstor.org/stable/23418776?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Ad5522ddc9e6cc632ecf603c8613dd752&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. Accessed on December 18, 2019.
 4. Meiji Restoration: In Japanese history it means the political revolution in 1868 that brought about the final demise of the military government of the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Meiji Restoration, 1868, came to be identified with the subsequent era of major political, economic, and social change—the Meiji period (1868–1912)—that brought about the modernisation and Westernisation of the country.

led to a number of battles and wars between various East Asian powers such as Japan, China, Korea, etc.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese influence on Korea was minimal. However, China's role in Korea's domestic politics was not nullified as it assisted the Korean provisional government.⁵ In 1945, the Allies' victory over Japan in World War II made the Sino-Korean relationship become entangled with the two superpowers, i.e. the US and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War period.⁶ After the brief recess period in China-Korea relations following the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937), it again gained momentum during the Korean War (1950). China assisted the North Korean regime during the war. China's age-old influence and sense of ownership of Korea were also seen when Mao Zedong stated in 1951 that "the Chinese comrades must consider Korea's cause as their own ... just the way we feel about our own country and treat our own people."⁷ However, with the partition of Korea, China was not able to wield unrestrained influence over the peninsula. Also, in the following decades, China has been able to exert its influence in Korea due to the insecurity prevailing in North Korea for which China has been a significant lifeline. North Korea's tremendous dependence on China eventually made it an indispensable player in the Korean peninsula for a long time.⁸ In fact, it should be noted here that China has had negligible diplomatic relations with South Korea; these were normalised only in 1992. At the end of the 20th century, China, Japan, and Russia, all sought a foothold in the Korean peninsula as the vehicle for pursuing their broader regional security interests.

In the 2000s, various international relations theories such as the realist theory of balance of power and power rivalry, liberal theory of interdependence and peace, democratic peace theory, and even certain constructivist theories concerned with regional integration and a security community provide partial insights into the relationship between economic

5. Bae Ho Han, "The Current Korean Political Relations and China-Korea Relations", *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2002.

6. "China's Rise and the Two Koreas", *CFR*, Excerpt from Scott A. Snyder's Book of the same title, <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-chinas-rise-and-two-koreas>. Accessed on November 24, 2019.

7. Titli Basu, ed., *Major Powers and the Korean Peninsula* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2019).

8. Srikanth Kondapalli, *China and its Neighbours* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2010).

For a substantial time, China had maintained the position that the nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula was a bilateral one between North Korea and the US. But the rise of China and its quest to establish itself as a major player in international affairs provided an opportunity to China in terms of denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

interdependence and political influence in China's relations with both North Korea and South Korea. An in-depth examination, however, reveals that such theories are inadequate to fully explain the nuances of these relations.

The beginning of the North Korean nuclear programme and its testing of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), gave an impression of the waning of Chinese influence on North Korea, possibly due to China's inability to rein in North Korea's development and testing of its WMDs. At the same time, China is still apprehensive of the presence of nuclear weapons in its

backyard.⁹ It has also been observed that the undue pressure (of sanctions) on North Korea did not lead to the desired results. In fact, it gave further momentum to North Korea's WMD programme. But, at the same time, North Korea's nuclear conundrum is also an opportunity for China to showcase its prowess and influence in the peninsular politics. For a substantial time, China had maintained the position that the nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula was a bilateral one between North Korea and the US. But the rise of China and its quest to establish itself as a major player in international affairs provided an opportunity to China in terms of denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. China's approach towards North Korea and frequent (friendly) meetings between President Xi and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Jong-un indicate that there are slim prospects of China abandoning North Korea in spite of its nuclear issues. The several meetings between President Xi Jinping and leader Kim Jong-un before the

9. Jane Perlez, "North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal Threatens China's Path to Power", *The New York Times*, September 5, 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-china.html>. Accessed on December 27, 2019.

DPRK leader's meeting with President Trump are also an indication that North Korea is in no position to engage with the US without Chinese support. However, anxieties still prevail in Beijing regarding denuclearisation and the peace process in the Korean peninsula due to the geographical proximity to China.

Going by the recent Trump-Kim summits and inter-Korean summits—which are widely believed to be the result of America's maximum pressure tactics—an impression of unease in the Chinese leadership could have been created that the American engagement with North Korea (with South Korea also being on board) may be the future order in the peninsula. Here, it is important to mention that there are approximately 28,500 American troops in South Korea.¹⁰ In the current scenario, leaving behind China is definitely going to be a setback for China that does not want to weaken its grip on North Korea.¹¹

In China, North Korea was considered as the buffer corridor; if it had fallen into American hands, it would have proved to be detrimental to the security of China's northeast frontier.

CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

China and North Korea share an inimitable relationship. The diplomatic relations between the two nations were established in October 1949. In fact, the common thread in the China-North Korea relations, since then, remains the mutual antagonism towards the US. However, in 1950, the primary reason behind China's entry into the Korean War was the presence, and crossing of, the 38th parallel by the US and its allied forces. In China, North Korea was considered as the buffer corridor; if it had fallen into

10. Huileng Tan, "As Trump and Kim Meet, One of Beijing's Chief Concerns is the US-South Korea Alliance", CNBC, February 27, 2019; <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/27/trump-kim-summit-china-concerned-about-us-south-korea-alliance.html>; Tom Vanden Brook, "Pentagon Bases About 28,000 US Troops in South Korea", *USA Today*, June 5, 2018; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/06/05/u-s-bases-28-000-troops-south-korea-summit-june-12/671126002/>. Accessed on December 27, 2019.

11. Basu, n. 7.

American hands, it would have proved to be detrimental to the security of China's northeast frontier. North Korea also served as an opportunity for the Chinese leadership to embolden its position within China, with the Chinese leader Mao Zedong being concerned about the US-led reactionaries gaining strength at that time.¹² An American victory would have meant a major setback for China in the region, both politically and psychologically. The extensive reactionary forces then would step up their offensive against what Mao termed the world "revolutionary front" and Communist China might very well be the next target. This proved to be the strongest reason for Chinese support to North Korea in the Korean War. It will be correct to say that since then China has been North Korea's closest ally.

The year 1961 witnessed the conclusion of the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and North Korea. This was extended twice, in 1981 and 2001, and is valid till 2021. This led China to become North Korea's security guarantor, along with the Soviet Union at that time. On the economic front also, China has been the largest trading partner of North Korea. Until the 1980s, North Korea was the recipient of a large amount of Chinese economic aid that served China's political and ideological purposes. However, with the structural changes and reforms in the Chinese economy, this relationship also witnessed a few changes and alterations.

Along with that, it was the North Korean nuclear programme that became burdensome for China. But in spite of the strained relations due to North Korea's testing of ballistic missiles and fission devices, China has made sure that the regime in North Korea does not collapse. China's strategy has been to pull the strings on the North Korean economy as well as engage the North Korean leadership to maintain the status quo in the region. This can be seen in China endorsing the sanctions by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). There were strains in the relationship which surfaced when Pyongyang tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006 and Beijing

12. Daniel Wertz, "China-North Korea Relations", *Issue Brief-The National Committee on North Korea*, November 2019; https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/issue-briefs/Issue_Brief_China_NK_Nov2019.pdf. Accessed on December 15, 2019.

backed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions on Pyongyang.¹³

In spite of having China as a sole messiah, North Korea's nuclear programme has put China in a security dilemma where it finds the US military build-up unacceptable in the region. In October 2006, North Korea tested its first nuclear device, inviting widespread condemnation from the international community. The tests came after China froze North Korean accounts in Macau over money laundering, in agreement with the US.¹⁴ As mentioned above, China too condemned the act by supporting the UNSC economic and commercial sanctions on North Korea. During the six-party talks in 2008, Pyongyang had also refused to accept China's draft verification plan that would allow inspectors to remove samples from North Korean nuclear sites for outside analysis.¹⁵ In 2009, North Korea tested another device, attracting the new set of sanctions from the UNSC. China's endorsement of the sanctions was a clear hint that it was concerned about another nuclear power on its eastern border that may result in the intensification of tensions in the Korean peninsula. The shift in China's earlier passive strategy towards North Korea was visible in its response to the sinking of the South Korean ship by North Korea and bombardment of the South's Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. China's response to this, with calls for stability, was a hint that China did not want any further dispute in the Korean peninsula that could act as a pretext for the US military build-up in the region. However, North Korea's constant testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles had unsettled Beijing at that time, which began considering North Korea more as a menace than a strategic asset.¹⁶

13. Eleanor Albert, "The China-North Korea Relationship", *CFR*, June 25, 2019; <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/china-north-korea-relationship>. Accessed on December 28, 2019.

14. David Lague, "Bank Freeze Stalls North Korea Talks", *The New York Times*, March 22, 2007; <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/22/world/asia/22cnd-korea.html>. Accessed on December 26, 2019.

15. Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, "China-Korea Relations: Sweet and Sour Aftertaste", *Comparative Connections*, Asia Foundation, January 2009; <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/SnyderByunSweetSourTasteCSISJan09.pdf>. Accessed on December 15, 2019.

16. Isaac Stone Fish and Robert Kelly, "North Korea is Ultimately China's Problem", *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2018; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-06-08/north-korea-ultimately-chinas-problem>. Accessed on December 16, 2019.

A relatively harsher reaction in this regard came when Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi registered a protest with North Korea's ambassador after North Korea tested another device in 2013. This was succeeded by unanimous sanctions from the UNSC. UNSC sanctions—albeit much harsher this time—were imposed yet again, after North Korea tested a device in January 2016, followed by another nuclear test in September 2016.

Ever since North Korea started its WMD programme, all the coercion techniques of the Western powers have failed to rein in the country. In fact, these pressuring techniques have given the North Korean regime an excuse for further strengthening its WMD programme. Pyongyang's actions have presented an obvious pretext for the US for stationing its troops in the Korean peninsula which China considers its backyard. It undermines China's influence in the region as well as curtails its endeavours to attain great power status. This was evident after North Korea's nuclear tests in 2013 that enraged China; however, China found itself incapable of stopping North Korea's WMD programme. Since then, especially after Xi assumed power, China's long-time strategy of sustaining the status quo—to avoid any confrontation in the Korean peninsula—has seen quite a shift.

President Xi Jinping's unease regarding North Korea's actions has led China to embrace a new approach towards North Korea. Under President Xi's leadership, the relations with North Korea were transformed into routine bilateral relations between the nations, leading to a change in China's earlier approach of dealing with North Korea with ideological ideals. On the economic front, Chinese imports from North Korea dropped 88 per cent in 2018 year on year, while China's exports dropped by almost 33 per cent. This was a steep decline as compared to the trade figures between the two nations which were at the peak in 2014.¹⁷ Going by the numbers, it can be seen that the relations between North Korea and China have been on the downswing after the new leadership assumed power in both countries. With this, China opened a window of intensifying its ties with South Korea, which have been constrained by the strong American-

17. Basu, n. 7.

South Korean security relationship and a potential South Korea-US-Japan security apparatus. However, there is a limit to China's relations with South Korea at the cost of North Korea. This was evident in China's continuance of an earlier approach of maintaining stability in the region after North Korea tested its nuclear weapons in 2016. President Xi's much discussed and analysed China Dream also includes the unification of Korea, though it has not gained much traction.¹⁸ Another reason behind China's dampening its open support to North Korea can be the BRI which may not need the participation of the sluggish economy of North Korea that will add little or no value to the BRI.¹⁹

At a time when both President Xi and DPRK leader Kim Jong-un are not on the same page on a number of issues, including the nuclear one, it becomes imperative for China to avoid escalation of tensions in the Korean peninsula. In spite of its open condemnation of North Korea's actions, doubts are often cast over China's intentions. China wants to maintain an edge when it comes to negotiations between the US and North Korea on WMD. This puts China in a unique position. North Korea negotiating with the US independently will reduce China's clout in North Korea and in the region. Mediating through China will make China an indispensable factor in the negotiations. Through this, China can continue maintaining its economic and diplomatic influence on North Korea. China's attempt to keep itself relevant in the region was evident with Kim Jong-un's meetings with President Xi in the past two-three years. Till now the North Korean leader has visited China four times, while President Xi visited North Korea once, in June 2019. These visits have conveyed a message to the international community that China remains relevant to the Korean issue and maintains considerable clout in North Korea.

18. Jonathan D. Pollack, "Is President Xi Jinping Rethinking Korean Unification?" Brookings, January 20, 2015; <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/is-xi-jinping-rethinking-korean-unification/>. Accessed on December 23, 2019.

19. Heung-kyu Kim, "China and the U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Promoting a Trilateral Dialogue", CFR, November 7, 2017; <https://www.cfr.org/report/china-and-us-rok-alliance-promoting-trilateral-dialogue>. Accessed on December 16, 2019.

China's entry into the Korean War on the side of North Korea was one of the major reasons for the antagonistic relations between China and South Korea. This policy of enmity with South Korea and ideological proximity with North Korea remained at the forefront in the bilateral relationship between China and the two Koreas throughout the Cold War period.

CHINA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

Throughout the Cold War period, China and South Korea belonged to different blocs. The antagonism started soon after the Korean War broke out in the Korean peninsula in 1950. China's entry into the Korean War on the side of North Korea was one of the major reasons for the antagonistic relations between China and South Korea. This policy of enmity with South Korea and ideological proximity with North Korea remained at the forefront in the bilateral relationship between China and the two Koreas throughout the Cold War period. It was only after the end of the Cold War in

1992 that China and South Korea established formal diplomatic relations.²⁰ The Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was the one who took the initiative to normalise relations with South Korea. This normalisation did not come all of a sudden, but was the result of a series of events. In 1983, when a Chinese plane was hijacked and forced to land in Seoul, negotiations started between China and South Korea. This was followed by several sports exchanges between China and South Korea. All these factors eventually helped in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Also, one of the important reasons for normalisation was the 'Northern Policy or *Nordpolitik*'²¹ by South Korean President Roh Tae Woo in 1988. According to this policy, South Korea extended its foreign relations and engaged with the

20. Hong Liu, "The Sino-South Korean Normalisation: A Triangular Explanation, *Asian Survey* vol. 33, no. 11, November 1993, pp. 1083-1094; https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645001?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. Accessed on December 18, 2019.

21. The *Nordpolitik* or Northern Policy of South Korea, which was the idea of former South Korean President Rho Tae Woo, was an ambitious attempt to normalise South Korea's foreign relations with the two neighbouring northern giants i.e. Russia and China. This policy is often cited as the 'new détente' in the politics of the Korean peninsula. It is often contemplated that this policy measure was adopted following the emerging international order in the post-Cold War world.

two Communist nations.²² At the same time, the normalisation process was deliberately kept slow in order not to antagonise North Korea. Although this was the decade that saw China establishing and normalising relations with a lot of other nations, the South Korean case was different; it was theoretically a bilateral affair but in reality it was a trilateral one. China's decision (to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea) was met with heavy criticism from North Korea, but due to the newly emerging international scenario following the demise of the USSR, North Korea did not have any other strong ally except China.²³ The

transformation of the ideology-oriented alliances of the Cold War in both North and South Korea was the need of the hour as the end of the Cold War had led to significant structural change in the international system. This period also coincided with the opening up of the Chinese economy and its integration into the international financial institutions. Unlike North Korea, which was the recipient of huge economic aid from China, South Korea enjoyed a stronger economic status and support from the US. In such a scenario, opening up of the Chinese economy provided both China and South Korea an opportunity to engage in a stabilised trading relationship. The progress of this economic relationship made China the leading trade partner of South Korea, with approximately \$40 billion trade surplus every year. China gets 26.8 per cent of the total South Korean exports worth \$162.2

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22. Sung Hack Kang, *Korea's Foreign Policy Dilemmas: Defining State Security and the Goal of National Unification* (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2011).

23. Yang Xiu, "China-Korea Relations", Audio File, *The Korea Society*, October 9, 2019; <https://www.koreasociety.org/policy-and-corporate-programs/item/1320-china-korea-relations>. Accessed on December 21, 2019.

billion.²⁴ The trade volume increased from \$6.4 billion in 1990 to \$221 billion in 2011.²⁵ Participation of the leaders of both China and South Korea in various multilateral economic forums such as the G20, Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) led to further enhancement of the ties which were elevated to 'Strategic Cooperative Partnership' in 2008.²⁶ The diplomatic and economic relations got a boost with the opening of the South Korean consulate in Wuhan, China.

Historically, ever since the breakout of the Korean War in 1950, the persisting tensions in the Korean peninsula, and the imminent threat from North Korea, pushed South Korea to forge a strong security alliance with the US. At the same time, South Korea's close security cooperation with the US and its robust economic partnership with China have often put Seoul in a dilemma on several occasions; the trade war between the US and China in recent times is just one such example. It has become increasingly difficult for South Korea to balance its security and economic ties between the US and China. At the same time, there have been times when Seoul has been compelled to take sides. For instance, the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea by the US, joining the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and China's stance on the shelling of the South Korean islands by North Korea in 2010 have all fuelled the tensions between China and South Korea. China's retaliation to South Korea deploying the THAAD took a heavy toll on the South Korean economy. This eventually led South Korea to look for new avenues to diversify its economic portfolio. The situation for South Korea is complex as its policy-making is often burdened due to its security alliance with the US and its trading partner, China. In all of this, President Trump's urgings to American allies to take care of their own security has also emerged as a concern for South Korea.²⁷

24. Daniel Workman, "South Korea's Top Trading Partners", updated January 27, 2020; <http://www.worldstopexports.com/south-koreas-top-import-partners/>. Accessed on February 5, 2020.

25. Ibid.

26. Tan, n. 10.

27. Mark Landler, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Consider Reducing U.S. Forces in South Korea", *The New York Times*, May 3, 2018; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/world/asia/trump-troops-south-korea.html?>. Accessed on January 23, 2020.

Following these statements, a general dilemma has been emerging in South Korea: with the diminishing American security and nuclear support, should South Korea develop its own nuclear weapons capability? However, the idea is unsettling for China as it certainly will not want to see another nuclear state in its backyard.²⁸ This step-back from the US is ultimately providing a chance to China to step in as a security guarantor to South Korea. The denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula favours both China and South Korea. If North Korea dismantles its nuclear infrastructure, China can make a case for the US withdrawal from the region. At the same time, with the US having a reduced or no role in South Korean security, South Korea would not opt for THAAD—something that has greatly antagonised China.²⁹ The favourable statements of the South Korean leaders related to BRI definitely indicate that Seoul is intending to expand into other markets to reduce its economic dependence—and, therefore, its political vulnerability—vis-à-vis Beijing.

EXTERNAL PLAYERS IN THE KOREAN PENINSULA: THE US AND RUSSIA

The US

Apart from China, the US and Russia are the other major external players in the Korean peninsula. The direct American involvement in Korean affairs began after the war broke out in the peninsula in 1950. Since then, the US has had a considerable presence in the Korean peninsula. As mentioned earlier, there are close to 28,000 US troops stationed in South Korea, which

28. Se Young Jang, "The Limited Roles of U.S. Nuclear Deterrence in Northeast", *Carnegie-Asia Policy*, January 30, 2018; <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/limited-roles-of-u.s.-nuclear-deterrence-in-northeast-asia-pub-75374>; Byeong Chul Lee, "Don't be Surprised When South Korea Wants Nuclear Weapons", *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, October 23, 2019; <https://thebulletin.org/2019/10/dont-be-surprised-when-south-korea-wants-nuclear-weapons/>. Accessed on January 20, 2020.

29. Uri Friedman, "How to Choose Between the U.S. and China? It's Not That Easy", *The Atlantic*, July 26, 2019; <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/south-korea-china-united-states-dilemma/594850/>. Accessed on January 20, 2020.

is under the security of the US nuclear umbrella.³⁰ Referred to as the United States Force Korea (USFK), it aims at defending South Korea from any North Korean aggression.³¹ The active presence of US troops in the Korean peninsula is in response to the conventional threat to South Korea from North Korea; especially the possession and continuous development of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons by North Korea.³² Precisely because of this issue, the recent Trump-Kim summits in Singapore in 2018 and Vietnam in 2019 became crucial. However, both have resulted in failure. Though the summits have not yielded any results, they certainly were a slight departure from the policy of maximum pressure. If the US' active involvement can achieve the denuclearisation of the peninsula, it will be a most significant achievement for President Trump in his tenure, apart from relief for both South Korea and China. For China, the denuclearisation of the peninsula can be a breather since it has consistently expressed its displeasure with the US military presence in the region.³³

Another important aim behind the American role in the peninsula is to restrain the rising Chinese influence not only on North Korea but also on South Korea. China has traditionally maintained its strong influence on North Korea ever since the war broke out in the peninsula. Despite the stringent sanctions against North Korea, China has consistently assisted the North Korean regime. However, the relationship has been strained for quite some time owing to North Korea's WMD programme which has irked China and has given the US an excuse to maintain its presence in the region. For instance, the deployment of THAAD is credited to the reckless behaviour of North Korea towards South Korea. Washington is most interested in

30. Diana Stancey Correll; <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-pushing-south-korea-to-pay-more-to-host-troops-2019-11?IR=T>

31. Oliver Holmes, "What is the US Military's Presence Near North Korea?" *The Guardian*, August 9, 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/09/what-is-the-us-militarys-presence-in-south-east-asia>. Accessed on December 28, 2019.

32. Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?", *International Security*, November 7, 2018; https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/isec_a_00330. Accessed on January 24, 2020.

33. Basu, n. 7.

containing the increasing Chinese influence on the South Korean economy. It is being argued that to counter China in the region, diplomatic engagement between the US and North Korea is crucial as therein lies a possibility of a constructive US-North Korea relationship which can further reduce the diplomatic dependence of the US on China.³⁴ This is perhaps the reason behind the shift in the US' stance from antagonism to sharing the table with DPRK leader Kim. The US' involvement in the Korean peninsula also comes with the involvement of other states such as Japan, India and Australia to contain the Chinese influence. Although the North Korean regime is perceived to be a serious threat to the US, the situation in the Korean peninsula provides an effective opportunity for the US to maintain its primacy in the region by engaging with, and strengthening, its allies in the region.

Russia

Russia's role, like that of China and the US, in the Korean peninsula goes back to the time of Korean War (1950) when the Soviet Union provided significant assistance to North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. To a large extent, Russia's interests in the Korean peninsula coincide with US interests. Like the US, Russia too is wary of the North Korean nuclear and missile programme that can pave the way for an arms race in the region, which will be detrimental to Russian security. Russia is also wary about the consequences of the North Korean regime's collapse. After the Cold War, with the US emerging as the sole superpower, Russia tried to regain and maintain its hold and influence as a great power; the opportunity came in the form of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Consequently, in 1994, Russia put forward a suggestion for the Six-Party Conference comprising Russia, China, America, South Korea, North Korea and Japan, and also including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations (UN). This was aimed at resolving the North Korean crisis; however, the suggestion was eventually disregarded. When

34. David Jonathan Wolff and William R. McKinney, "Imagine This: North Korea and America Becoming Allies Against China", *The National Interest*, October 2, 2019; <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/imagine-north-korea-and-america-becoming-allies-against-china-85086>. Accessed on January 25, 2020.

The Putin-Kim summit highlighted that Russia could play a stabilising role and help promote détente on the Korean peninsula. Russia, like the US, lays emphasis on the non-proliferation agenda and is interested in the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

the 2+2 mechanism broke down, and with the second nuclear crisis, the prospects of adding Russia to the multi-party talks gained traction.³⁵ Therefore, one of the primary interests of Russia in the Korean peninsula is to retain its relevance as a major power.

As mentioned above, sharing the concerns of China and the US, Russia is also wary of the North Korean nuclear conundrum which might prove to be fatal for the Korean peninsula's security. In the backdrop of North Korea's WMD programme, Russia has consistently endorsed the UN sanctions. At the same time, Russia has maintained that extreme sanctions could prove to be counter-productive and make North Korea go rogue. For instance, in November 2017, North Korea fired an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) travelling a distance of 960 km and landing in the Sea of Japan.³⁶ Following this line of not completely isolating North Korea, Russia has assisted the DPRK regime on several occasions such as against the oil embargo on North Korea by the US. The over-reliance of North Korea on China has also provided Russia with an opportunity to enhance its clout in North Korea and play out its niche diplomacy. North Korea has also realised the significance of its northern neighbour in balancing its relations with other major powers. The Kim-Putin summit in April 2019 can be seen in this context, wherein Russia can play a major role. This was evident in the Russian president's speech in which he stated that Russia seeks North Korea's involvement in bringing about the settlement.³⁷ While the Kim-Putin summit may not have resulted in any

35. Georgy Toloraya, "The Six Party Talks: A Russian Perspective", *Asian Perspective*, vol. 32, no. 4, Special issue on North Korea and Regional Security, 2008, pp. 45-69; https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704653?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. Accessed on December 24, 2019.

36. "North Korea Launches 'Highest Ever' Ballistic Missiles", BBC, November 29, 2017; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42160227>. Accessed on December 28, 2019.

37. Yacqub Ismail, "Russia's New Role in the Korean Peninsula", *International Policy Digest*, April 27, 2019; <https://intpolicydigest.org/2019/04/27/russia-s-new-role-in-the-korean-peninsula/>. Accessed on December 28, 2019.

tangible outcome, it has certainly sent a message that Russia is ready to play a greater and definitive role in North Korea. Overall, the Putin-Kim summit highlighted that Russia could play a stabilising role and help promote détente on the Korean peninsula. Russia, like the US, lays emphasis on the non-proliferation agenda and is interested in the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. Russia, with its expertise as an official nuclear power with advanced technologies, could contribute to formulating a realistic, phased approach more akin to arms reduction, and verifying its implementation. However, the prospects of such a plan depend on both Russia's diplomatic efforts and the desire of the other powers to bring Russia to the negotiation table.

In the year 2017, the North Korean regime regarded the progress of its nuclear and missile programme as being able to act as a powerful and reliable deterrent against any foreign intervention in its territory.

KOREAN PENINSULA: SITUATION AT PRESENT

The diplomatic situation in the Korean peninsula is changing at an enormous pace due to the conjunction of three factors: (1) the rapid development of the North Korean nuclear programme; (2) the policies of the US under the leadership of President Trump; and (3) the election of Moon Jae-in as the president of South Korea. North Korea spectacularly developed its nuclear capacity in a very short span of time, acknowledging the *Byungjin* doctrine,³⁸ which emphasizes the parallel development of the national economy and the nuclear programme. This type of developmental programme raised the apprehensions of the international community—especially the US—about North Korea. American President Donald Trump's exchange of heated rhetorics with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and his coercive diplomacy considerably increased the risk

38. The Byungjin Doctrine is a political term in North Korea that refers to Kim Il Sung's (the first ruler of North Korea from 1948-1994) policies in the 1960s to simultaneously develop the military and economy. Under the current leadership in North Korea, it refers to the simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and the economy..

of a military conflict on the Korean peninsula, and war seemed likely by the end of 2017.³⁹

In the year 2017, the North Korean regime regarded the progress of its nuclear and missile programme as being able to act as a powerful and reliable deterrent against any foreign intervention in its territory. In his New Year's speech in 2017, this was further proclaimed by Kim Jong-un himself as the success of the North Korean nuclear programme; he highlighted the fact that North Korea had completed its deterrence mechanism in order to counter any threats emanating from the US. In turn, this would prevent North Korea from entering into an adventurous war with the US.⁴⁰

This position of strength has allowed the North Korean regime to suspend its missile and nuclear tests, thus, fulfilling a key prerequisite to enable the South Koreans and Americans to engage in public negotiations with Pyongyang.

Another factor pertains to the three leaders. All three statesmen, i.e. of the US, North Korea and South Korea, had strong incentives related to their internal political objectives to take part in the negotiation process at that time. These efforts further softened the perception against the North Korean leader a bit, in turn, solidifying his (Kim Jong-un's) position within his own country. Furthermore, this rapprochement at that time, created by following the diplomatic route, improved North Korea's security situation while avoiding the threat of new sanctions. In the case of President Trump—who had been associated with abandoning a number of international treaties (including the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Intermediate-Range

39. Mario Esteban, "The EU's Role in Stabilising the Korean Peninsula", *Working Paper*, Real Instituto Elcano, January 2019; <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/49ffc71b-569c-4c88-bcab-b9bffc485716/WP1-2018-Esteban-EU-role-stabilising-Korean-Peninsula.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=49ffc71b-569c-4c88-bcab-b9bffc485716>. Accessed on January 20, 2020.

40. "Full Text of North Korean President Kim Jong-un's New Year Speech 2017", The National Committee on North Korea, January 2, 2018; https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/KJU_2017_New_Years_Address.pdf; Ankit Panda, "3 Takeaways From Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Address", *The Diplomat*, January 1, 2018; <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/3-takeaways-from-kim-jong-uns-2018-new-years-address/>. Accessed on December 23, 2019.

Nuclear Forces Treaty)—this provided him an opportunity to consolidate his dwindling image. For South Korea, it meant more popularity for President Moon at that time, both at home and abroad. There has been huge scepticism about the possible outcome of the negotiations between the leaders of the US and North Korea. Still, there is an international consensus related to the expediency of promoting a dialogue to reduce the threat of war in the Korean peninsula region.

For Beijing, the scenario after the abrupt ending of the second Hanoi summit is almost like the worst-case scenario. For a very long time, China's policy toward the peninsula has swung between anxieties over two extreme possibilities: a war anxiety where China is dragged into a second Korean War between the US and DPRK, and an exclusion anxiety where China is excluded from the solution of the North Korea issue and future arrangements on the peninsula.⁴¹ The escalation of tensions between the US and North Korea also raised the apprehensions in Beijing. However, after the Hanoi summit in 2019, it was clear that North Korea still considers China as the net security provider in the region as the prospects of peace and reconciliation with the US remained uncertain. Also, for China, North Korea has always been the anchor of China's role in the future of the Korean peninsula, rather than South Korea or the US.⁴²

Another area where China is engaged in competition with the US is over South Korea. Although China's relationship with South Korea suffered critical damage during the THAAD deployment episode, it increasingly puts the South in the crossfire between Washington and Beijing, forcing it to choose between the two. Heightened great power competition will delay and hinder any compromises necessary for a future solution between Beijing and Washington regarding the Korean peninsula. In the process, the choice before South Korea will inevitably antagonise one or both sides, deepening their distrust and contest on the peninsula.⁴³

41. Yun Sun, "China and Korean Peninsula after Hanoi Summit", *The Asian Forum*, July 1, 2019; <http://www.theasianforum.org/china-and-the-korean-peninsula-after-the-hanoi-summit/>. Accessed on December 24, 2019.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

The 2018 inter-Korean summits between the leaders of North and South Korea seem like a big step for the nations, and provide China hope to expand the BRI plans into the Korean peninsula. Beijing appears to regard the rapprochement of the two Koreas as a strategic opportunity to exert its influence on the divided peninsula. Definitely, President Xi's BRI may be the start of a new policy aimed not only at containing American influence but also at expanding the Chinese leverage in the whole of Korea by exerting its economic leverage. From the Chinese perspective, its BRI plans in the Korean peninsula can serve four major purposes. First, cooperation with Seoul can boost the potential of China's three northeastern provinces. Second, through the BRI projects, it will be considerably easy to push North Korea's reform by providing economic incentives and transportation and energy infrastructure, thereby creating a peaceful environment conducive for the BRI's successful implementation. Third, the connectivity linkages with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—which is one of Putin's key policies to develop its isolated Far East region—would help in alleviating Russia's concerns over the BRI. Fourthly, cooperation with Seoul can reduce the risk of exacerbating security tensions on the Korean peninsula, thereby altering the regional structure from a hostile balance of power to one of peace and order, where cooperation and non-competition become the norm. From the South Korean perspective, a trilateral framework with China and Russia towards North Korea's opening and reform can be realised. Also, it is a general belief that in international politics economic engagement and connectivity are the factors favourable for peace. Creating momentum for such a spill-over effect to take place in the Korean peninsula is what China aims to achieve through its BRI. Furthermore, from the Chinese perspective, although it seems a little far-fetched, the BRI has multiple modes of cooperation that can contribute to the regional development of the Korean peninsula.