

# Tense Triangle in Asia: The South Korea Factor

South Korea and its triangular relationship with the US and North Korea are critical for security and stability in Asia. Understanding South Korea's shifting domestic and international outlook is important for European states, looking for new cooperation opportunities and partners in Asia.

By Linda Maduz

South Korea's 2022 election of a new president is reshaping the country's relations with the US and North Korea. In office since May, South Korea's 13th president, Yoon Suk-yeol, is a representative of the conservative political camp. He beat his main competitor in the March 9 elections by a historically small margin of less than one percentage point and thereby set an end to a five-year period of progressive rule. The political orientation of presidents has in the past had an impact on how the country positioned itself *vis-à-vis* its neighbors, China, Japan, and North Korea, as well as *vis-à-vis* its alliance partner, the US. In the conservatives' tradition, Yoon announced his intention to seek closer ties with Washington and to take a hardline policy toward Pyongyang. Normalizing Seoul's relationship with Tokyo and taking a more critical stance on Beijing are further elements in Yoon's plan to align the country's interests and policies more closely with those of Washington.

As Asia gains importance in European strategic thinking, countries such as Germany and France refer in their strategy papers on the region to South Korea as a partner country.<sup>1</sup> Seoul has, over the past decades, gained in economic and political strength, making it today the world's tenth-largest economy and Asia's best-rated democracy.<sup>2</sup> Seoul is a key US military ally, a provider of crucial

technologies, such as batteries and computer chips, and has recently become the world's eighth-largest arms exporter. South Korea's strategic role is likely to grow even further as the geopolitical context in Asia is becoming increasingly conflictual, which is also, but not only, a consequence of the deepening US-China competition. Under the new president, South Korea has reverted to political and military positions that bear the risk of increasing, rather than decreasing, conflict in the region. Understanding the opportunities, but also the potential risks of engaging with re-

## Key Points

- The 2022 South Korean presidential elections, mainly decided by domestic political issues, will have repercussions for the wider region, affecting the dynamics of the Korean conflict as well as the US-China rivalry.
- Current US and South Korean approaches toward North Korea, more aligned again under the new South Korean president, struggle to meet new realities with a North Korea that has multiplied its nuclear weapon arsenal in the recent past and is strengthening ties with China and Russia.
- A strong US-South Korean deterrence posture should not preclude diplomatic engagement with North Korea, either bilaterally or multilaterally.

gional partners and their positions will be important for European states seeking to strengthen ties with Asia in their own and their partners' interests.

This Policy Perspective aims at analyzing the domestic and international parameters of South Korea's foreign and security policy. At the same time, it seeks to evaluate how the country's international repositioning under its new president affects geopolitical trends in a highly dynamic region. Northeast Asia is a security flashpoint of global relevance where international norms in the fields of non-proliferation and human rights are negotiated – hence its relevance from a European perspective. Europe's role in Asia's post-World War II order has been marginal, though, and its involvement in recent Northeast Asian security politics very limited. Still, with regard to North Korea the EU has, for example, pursued its own policy (known as the strategy of “Critical Engagement”) and adopted individual autonomous sanctions in addition to sanctions by the UN Security Council. Like the US and South Korea, Europe faces today the challenge of keeping up with fast-evolving geopolitical trends in the region, marked by the continuous threat of an isolated, nuclear-armed North Korea and new bloc politics.

### Seoul's Geopolitical and Domestic Constraints

South Korea faces an increasingly militarized and insecure regional environment, including deepening North Korea-China-Russia relations. The US-China strategic competition, having started in its current all-encompassing form in late 2017, fuels tensions in a region that is conflict-prone and suffers from structural insecurity. There are indications that cooperation currently is not only intensifying among the US and its allies, such as Japan and South Korea, but also among countries such as China, Russia, and North Korea. A recent example is the exchange of letters between North Korea and Russia's heads of state, Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin, announcing their intention to expand their countries' ties. Such emerging bloc politics and an accelerating arms race have become defining features of Northeast Asia's geopolitical landscape, where the interests of some of the world's largest economies and militaries meet and collide. Both Koreas are investing in their military build-up due to mutual threat perceptions, but also in reaction to the wider, fundamental geopolitical shifts occurring in Asia.

South Korea's room for maneuver in foreign policy is shrinking as a result of the US-China rivalry. Given its strong economic ties with Beijing, Seoul has for a long time reacted cautiously when invited to participate in US-led or -promoted initiatives against China, including security initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or techno-nationalist initiatives, aiming at curbing US and

partner countries' dependence on China. The “Chip 4” semiconductor partnership is a recent example. For Seoul, the shrinking strategic space additionally concerns a political sidelining in US policy toward North Korea. Former US president Donald Trump's (2017–2021) unilateral approach accentuated this trend. However, US President Joe Biden's administration, by pursuing a traditional, pre-Trump approach that is cautious in its outreach to North Korea and opposed to economic sanctions relief for a nuclear-armed North Korea, has also severely limited Seoul's capacity to formulate independent policies toward the North. The US position placed tight constraints on South Korean initiatives for stronger engagement with Pyongyang under previous president Moon Jae-in (2017–2022).

Despite the influential role that South Korean presidents have in foreign policymaking, there are domestic constraints for far-reaching foreign policy changes. First, President Yoon and his conservative People Power Party face strong political opposition in the parliament, namely by the majority progressive Democratic Party, at least until the next legislative elections in spring 2024. Second, South Korean big businesses, such as Samsung, have been important drivers behind the deepening ties with China over the past decades and will oppose policies that hurt South Korea's economy in a disproportionate way. Third, the public expects the president to focus on pressing domestic issues, such as increased socio-economic inequality, youth unemployment, and exploding housing costs, which have dominated the political debate in the recent past. This limits the political capital and resources he can spend on foreign affairs.

### South Korea-US Ties and the China Challenge

In its strategic competition with China, the US under Biden seeks to strengthen its alliances and partnerships in Asia and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> While the US and South Korea continue to share a common threat perception in Asia, interests among the alliance partners of almost 70 years do not align to the same extent as they used to: China has emerged as the focus of US foreign and security policy, whereas Seoul, for which Pyongyang remains the top military threat, did

#### Further Reading

U.S. Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-South Korea Relations (R41481)*, 24.02.2022.

The report provides an overview of past and current issues in US-South Korean relations.

Eric J. Ballbach, *Richtungswechsel in Südkorea* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022).

The analysis discusses the domestic and foreign policy implications of the 2022 South Korean presidential elections (in German).

not see Beijing as a major security challenge for a long time. Conflicts with other countries, including Japan, dominated South Korean foreign policy in recent years. However, perceptions of China started turning more negative among South Korean policymakers and the public. A first critical event was the Chinese economic boycott campaign in 2016/2017 in reaction to Seoul's announcement of its intention to deploy a US missile defense system on its territory (the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, THAAD), resulting in economic losses of a minimum of 7.5 billion USD and military concessions<sup>4</sup> that the new South Korean president now wants to reverse.

South Korean President Yoon is pushing for a clearer positioning for South Korea within the US-China strategic competition. He had criticized his progressive predecessor's foreign policy initiatives for being too narrowly focused on North Korea and too China-leaning. In Yoon's view it is not by taking a balanced, "strategically ambivalent" position toward the great powers, but rather by a clear positioning, meaning a siding with the US, that South Korea will gain more strategic room for maneuver and re-strengthen its international and regional role. South Korea under Yoon is, thus, expected to engage in closer political and military cooperation with the US and its allies, including Japan, and move toward a more independent and critical position toward China. Concrete electoral promises included the purchase of another US missile defense system and stronger engagement in Indo-Pacific initiatives, from which the previous government abstained, including steps toward a membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of Australia, India, Japan, and the US.

### South Korea-US Ties and the North Korea Challenge

The current Yoon administration is following a hardline position toward Pyongyang in line with its conservative predecessors. The North Korea policy pursued by the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013) serves as a main point of reference: President Lee and his successor, led by the US government under Barack Obama, followed a coordinated, joint approach toward North Korea, commonly referred to as "Strategic Patience" (2009–2016). In essence, it defined the denuclearization of North Korea as a pre-condition for further talks. The period from 2012 onward was characterized by the absence of engagement and intense North Korean nuclear and missile testing. The conflict with Pyongyang then escalated in 2017 following nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests, triggering strong US reactions.

Today's North Korea approach under Yoon, while containing economic and cooperative elements as laid out



US President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol during a joint news conference at the Presidential office in Seoul, 21.05.2022. Jeon Heon-Kyun / REUTERS

in Seoul's recent "Audacious Initiative," is once more dominated by pressure tactics – and designed in a way to ensure US support. This also responds to the preceding North Korea policy under Yoon's progressive predecessor, which, while being temporarily successful in promoting de-escalation and rapprochement in 2018 and 2019 through means of diplomacy and engagement, often suffered from a lack of consistency with the US approach. Another expression of the allies' realigned, more hardline position *vis-à-vis* Pyongyang is the recent joint US-South Korean military exercise – the biggest in five years. The maneuvers had previously been scaled back as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and diplomatic efforts under Trump, who twice met with Kim Jong-un.

### North Korea: Ticking Bomb and No One's Priority

After the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February 2019 failed to reach a deal, Pyongyang's behavior and rhetoric toward Washington and Seoul turned more hostile again, accusing the former of acting in "bad faith." South Korean president Yoon's slogan of "no talks for the sake of talks" is also reflective of North Korea's stance today. Examples of a return to more disruptive actions include the partial blow-up of the inter-Korean liaison office in 2020, previously vacant because of the pandemic and left defunct ever since, as well as frequent missile tests, including the testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles, in 2022.

Whereas the Trump administration elevated North Korea to a top security concern and engaged in direct talks, the Biden administration shifted the US focus back to other priorities, including China and Russia, and pressing concerns related to events in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Under Biden, US policy returned to previous patterns of (non-)engagement with North Korea, focusing on strong and credible deterrence. Similarly, South Korea under the

current conservative government will devote fewer political resources toward stabilizing its ties with North Korea.

Current US and South Korean approaches toward Pyongyang do not reflect today's changed geopolitical realities: Both North Korea itself and the larger geopolitical context can be said to be more "explosive" today than they were ten years ago. Under Kim Jong-un, leading the country since 2011, North Korea has rapidly expanded and modernized its nuclear and missile arsenal. While North Korea rejected recent offers for talks by the Biden and Yoon administrations, and previously by the Moon administration, it shows interest in strengthening ties with China, its most important ally, and Russia. North Korea has supported these two countries' positions on Taiwan and Ukraine, respectively. In turn, China and Russia support North Korea's request for the partial lifting of sanctions and are blocking further UN sanctions, as requested by the US in reaction to the 2022 missile tests.

As North Korea is becoming more isolated, mechanisms for control and leverage over it are diminishing, and the risk of miscommunication and miscalculation in interactions with Pyongyang is growing. The country's strongly isolated position today is a consequence of the strict sanctions regime put in place in reaction to its nuclear and missile programs,<sup>5</sup> but also of its self-isolation that took extreme forms during the pandemic years 2020/2021 when the country completely shut its borders.

### No Good in Neglecting North Korea

As the Korean conflict evolves, the US and South Korea – but also other Asian as well as European states – need to adjust their strategies. The US and South Korea should actively work against a scenario, in which the US-China strategic competition is being linked up with the Korea conflict. Aspects of their current efforts to strengthen their cooperation in response to China's rise, such as the installation of additional US missile defense systems and increased security cooperation between South Korea and Japan, could be particularly consequential in this regard. Such decisions that critically affect the two countries' relations with China or North Korea and risk triggering strong reactions from them should be clearly communicated and taken with a long-term vision, meaning policies should be designed as

sustainably as possible so that they will not be subject to changes in US or South Korean domestic politics, as seen in the past. Otherwise, they risk being unnecessarily disruptive and, as a result, could even weaken the US and South Korea's individual and joint positions in the region.

A strong US-South Korean deterrence posture does not have to preclude diplomatic engagement with North Korea, either bilaterally or multilaterally, including through the UN system. Further nuclear tests by North Korea have been expected for some time and a rise in conflict seems likely. It is ill-advised to ignore North Korea and hope that it will keep calm, which essentially is an element of the sort of "Strategic Patience" approach to which current US and South Korean policies are reverting. As US-China relations as well as inter-Korean relations are becoming more confrontational, the need for mediation and multilateral diplomacy in the region grows. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, channels of communication with North Korea, including those initiated, facilitated, or maintained by European actors, have been cut to an all-time low. Investing in reviving and further developing them would be an important first step that would also strengthen European actors' profile as potential mediators. European states should, once conditions allow, be ready to contribute to negotiations through workable proposals in policy fields such as arms control, which will be essential in further stabilizing the region.

### Selected sources

1. See Federal Foreign Office, *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, 01.09.2020; and Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, February 2022.
2. The World Bank, "World Development Indicators 2021," [databank.worldbank.org](http://databank.worldbank.org); The Economist Intelligence Unit, "EIU Democracy Index 2021," [eiu.com](http://eiu.com).
3. The White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 11.02.2022
4. To appease Beijing, Seoul ruled out any additional THAAD deployment, any participation in a US-led regional missile defense network, and any trilateral military alliance involving Tokyo.
5. The UN imposed a first round of sanctions in reaction to North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006.

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