



# The Missing Link in Understanding South Korea's Foreign Policy: Panmunjom Declaration and Beyond

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>FOREIGN POLICY AND DOMESTIC POLITICS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PARK GEUN-HYE'S FOREIGN POLICY AND DOMESTIC POLITICS... </b>	<b>7</b>
<b>MOON JAE-IN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND DOMESTIC POLITICS..... </b>	<b>13</b>
<b>KOREA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE .</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....</b>	<b>23</b>

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## ABSTRACT

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The Republic of Korea has chosen its alignment strategies and policy actions based on international dynamics and domestic constraints. South Korea's domestic politics have had different effects on the recent administrations. Park Geun-hye had to accept the discontinuity of her foreign policy when she faced impeachment. Moon Jae-in, however, has pursued his dreams for inter-Korean relations despite systemic and domestic obstacles. In the spirit of neoclassical realism, this study identifies state-society relations and domestic institutions as key interventions in the calculus of foreign policy behavior amidst the critical influence of systemic variables. Whereas the Park administration disregarded the dynamics of domestic politics by putting state security above all else, the Moon administration has pursued a *détente* policy with a deep awareness of domestic politics. In a restrictive strategic environment, South Korea's policy options are limited and the optimal choices are not necessarily the ideal ones. Foreign policy actions based on the dynamics of systemic structures and domestic politics have significant implications for Northeast Asia. State-society relations and domestic institutions have implications for the US-South Korea-Japan strategic triangle. Different strategic interests in the region place the triangle at risk in dealing with the North Korean security problem.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Panmunjom Declaration between the two Koreas opened new prospects for South Korea. While marking the end to the Park Geun-hye administration's Northeast Asia Cooperation and Peace Initiative,<sup>1</sup> it opened new economic and social opportunities through inter-Korean détente. This article seeks to explain how domestic politics have irrevocable influences on South Korea's foreign policy. Specifically, it will explore the interventions of domestic institutions and state-society relations that swiftly ended the Park administration and led to Moon Jae-in's efforts to counterbalance the great powers and shift South Korea's strategic partnerships resulting in diplomatic complications. Beyond the layer of abstract theoretical explanation, an understanding of domestic politics can shed light on changes in South Korea's foreign policies through the lens of neoclassical realism.<sup>2</sup>

Neoclassical realist theory is a relatively 'new' attempt at strengthening the explanatory power of international relations by systematizing the scope of realism and identifying the intervening variables. Realists often dismiss the influence of unit-level variables that can explain the role of domestic politics in foreign policy. The marginalization of classical realism is the result of its unwillingness to understand that policy is developed through a dynamic, complex, and interactive political system.<sup>3</sup> Neoclassical realism seeks to understand the mediating role of unit-level factors as intervening variables.

This article makes three contributions. First, it provides an in-depth investigation of South Korea's critical decisions on North Korea to explain how state-society relations and domestic institutions as domestic constraints influenced the policy responses and outcomes that were outside the explanatory boundaries of classical realism and neoliberalism.<sup>4</sup> Former President Park Geun-hye's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative was established as an integrated endeavor for foreign, defense, and economic policies of South Korea's regional approach to Northeast Asian peace and security. Though the NAPCI's outcomes were unconfirmed due to its discontinuity, the expected outcome of the current administration's inter-Korean détente policy slowly wavers and affects the approval rating of the president. Recent public opinion on the foreign and security policy preferences are unchanged from recent administrations. In spite of this, the National Assembly impeached Park Geun-hye for her mismanagement of domestic affairs. With the Moon administration's heavy focus on self-reliance and lack of interest in cooperating with its partners as seen in its decoupling of security and economy, when necessary, the future approval rating of the Moon administration is likely

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<sup>1</sup> Sei-joong Kwon, "Explaining the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI)," *JPI Research Series* 31 (2014): 64-68.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Snyder, *Domestic Constraints on South Korean Foreign Policy* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Peter John, *Analyzing Public Policy* (Rutledge: New York, 2012), 1. Ibid, 179.

<sup>4</sup> Chung Min Lee, "President Moon Jae-in and the Politics of Inter-Korean Détente," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/16/president-moon-jae-in-and-politics-of-inter-korean-d-tente-pub-77730>; Gideon Rose, "Review Article: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51 (1998), 144-172; Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies* 5 (1996); Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, The State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009).

to decrease. This article argues that South Korea's public opinion on foreign affairs is consistent due to its freedom of information. Nevertheless, the volatility of public opinion regarding the president and his administration remains.

Second, the article integrates a literature review of the domestic politics of foreign policy, illustrating how unit-level determinants influence decision-makers in their strategic choices.<sup>5</sup> There is plenty of research on the theoretical approaches to explaining foreign policy behavior of a state.<sup>6</sup> However, only a few support the dynamics of domestic politics and foreign policy behavior that fully entail the incorporation of domestic politics as unit-level variables within the systemic structure.<sup>7</sup> To expand the explanatory power of realist theory, this article employs the concept of domestic politics from neoclassical realist theory to demonstrate that systemic and domestic push-pull dynamics shape foreign policy behaviors of state.<sup>8</sup> The political, economic, and social impediments stimulate the dynamics of domestic forces that influence the state's policy actions, and vice versa.

Third, this article explains how domestic politics have influenced critical strategic decision-making and how neglecting domestic politics as a variable of decision-making can result in decreased public approval of the political leadership. It shows that the failure to follow up on the domestic politics resulted in the discontinuity of the foreign policy. The understanding of South Korean domestic politics leads to a fundamental change in explaining foreign policy at the unit-level. Based on this explanation, the article explores the regional implications. In conclusion, it argues that understanding domestic politics can explain foreign policy behavior and close the gap of misunderstanding regarding the domestic political environment of the Republic of Korea.

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<sup>5</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Mathias Albert and Barry Buzan, "On the subject matter of international relations," *Review of International Studies* 43 (2017), 898-917; Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *The American Political Science Review* 63 (1969), 689-718; Alden Chris, *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches* (London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017); Kai He, *Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in the Asia Pacific: Rational Leaders and Risky Behavior* (New York: Routledge, 2013); M. G. Hermann, "Assessing Leadership Style: Trait Analysis," in *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders*, ed. J. M. Post (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 178-212; Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classical and Contemporary Theory* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publications, 2014); D. W. Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jeffrey Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint during World War II* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); Jean-Frederic Morin and Jonathan Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Toolbox* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Ole Holsti, "The 'Operational Code' Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: John Foster Dulles' Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 3 (1970), 123-157;

<sup>7</sup> Sung Deuk Hahm and Uk Heo, "History and Territorial Disputes, Domestic Politics, and International Relations: An Analysis of the Relationship among South Korea, China, and Japan," *Korea Observer* 50 (2019), 53-80; Juliet Kaarbo, "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory," *International Studies Review* 17 (2015), 189-216; Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (1988), 653-673; Helen V. Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2002).

## Foreign policy and domestic politics

Significant research in international relations has advanced the argument that domestic politics is essential to explaining a states' foreign policy behaviors. Fearon has claimed the importance of domestic politics in enriching foreign policy research.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent research has recognized the interdependence of domestic politics and the international system in providing explanations for the complexities of incorporating domestic politics into the international structure.<sup>10</sup> Structural realists, in an attempt to avoid logical errors, have assigned all other determinants that are unexplainable by the distribution of power, beside the theoretical characteristics in the state interactions within the anarchic structure of the international system, to the unit-level.<sup>11</sup> Putnam's *two-level games* and Snyder's theory on imperial expansion and domestic politics acknowledged the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy behavior.<sup>12</sup> Rosenau's *linkage politics* defined the processes in which the interactions among the actors within domestic politics influence the international level, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the studies on domestic-international relations are insufficient to account for the interaction of domestic politics in foreign policy behavior.

Rose's call for a renewed realist theory left clues on how to overcome the limits of the realist and neoliberal theories and hinted at ways to include the intervention of domestic politics.<sup>14</sup> Walt has subsequently argued that the unit-level variables were selected in an ad-hoc manner and can only account for the strategic decisions of specific cases.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have claimed that the new theory undermines the predictive power of state capability and diminishes the understanding of power as capability. A few remarked that neoclassical realist theory was a threat to realist thought.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, other scholars have emphasized the significance of incorporating domestic politics into the systemic structure.<sup>17</sup> By integrating both systemic and

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<sup>9</sup> James D. Fearon, "Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998), 289-313.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, 881-912; Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, Jeffrey S. Lantis and Michael T. Snarr, *Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective: Domestic and International Influences on State Behavior* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2012); David Lazer, "Global and Domestic Governance of Interdependence in Regulatory Policymaking," *European Law Journal* 12 (2006), 455-68.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Princeton University, 2012); Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Review: Power and Interdependence Revisited," *International Organization* 41, no. 4 (1987).

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42 (1988): 427-460; Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> James N. Rosenau, *Linkage Politics: Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems* (The Free Press: New York, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro and Adrews Moravcsik, "Is anybody still a realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of Realist Tradition" in *Political Science: State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (American Political Science Association, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro and Adrews Moravcsik, "Is anybody still a realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>17</sup> Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 159-201.; Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual*

domestic variables in the calculus, neoclassical realism can reshape the structural realist theories with the mediation of unit-level variables as interventions to the process of systemic stimuli and policy response.<sup>18</sup> In both policy studies and the structural realist model, policy responses are unchangingly dependent on the systemic stimuli.

The intervention of domestic variables can explain policy discontinuity and national strategy decoupling in South Korea. The balance of domestic powers among the branches of government and party politics, whether the executive party is a majority or minority, is an important consideration in explaining foreign policy behavior.<sup>19</sup> In South Korea's case, on one hand, public approval and disapproval of the executive branch can measure the state-society relations. On the other hand, the legislative behavior of political parties can explain the intervention of domestic institutions. These variables, state-society relations and domestic institutions, interact in state affairs and can force an administration to change its policies.

### *Domestic institutions*

The debate regarding legislative influences on foreign policy centers on whether the president should set the policy agenda. It also hinges on the matter of legislative activism on either supporting or opposing the executive's foreign policy direction.<sup>20</sup> At one extreme, proponents of legislative activism in foreign policy argue that the legislative body must either support or constrain the executive by exercising its budgetary power, oversight authority to hold hearings through committee meetings, and inform constituents on foreign policy activity to steer public opinion. Those who oppose legislative involvement in foreign policy argue that legislators should invest more time in domestic affairs since they lack the appropriate understanding of international relations and security.

During the Cold War, the United States Congress faced several issues that swayed public interest and instigated the argument on the role of the legislative body. In the post-Cold War period, Congress could steer policies in both foreign and domestic affairs. In a sense, the United States and South Korea share similar experiences in developing their political institutions. South Korea's National Assembly steered through the issue of focusing on domestic affairs, while also having to influence the executive on foreign affairs, but at a slower pace.

It is worth noting, however, that the National Assembly differs from its US counterpart. Unlike the US Congress, the National Assembly has voiced an opinion on certain issues that directly affected Korea's economic and social developments. The legislators in Congress are reluctant to act out of nationalism, and instead prefer rational choice, as the bicameral nature of the legislative body and individual maneuverability within party politics enhances legislative freedom to a greater degree than the National Assembly. This is certainly not the case in South Korea. In recent years, Cheong Wa Dae's foreign policy actions stimulated the political parties

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*Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton University Press, 1998); William Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Ilai Z. Saltzman, "Growing Pains: Neoclassical Realism and Japan's Security Policy Emancipation," *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 3: 498-527.

<sup>19</sup> James D. Fearon, "Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy and Theories of International Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (1998): 307.

<sup>20</sup> James M. Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).



for legislative behaviors in response to public sentiments and provoked public opinion either for or against the executive.<sup>21</sup> When the executive had unilaterally handled or mismanaged issues according to the public opinion, the National Assembly engaged the public and attempted to intervene for acceptable political outcomes. At certain times, the executive would have no choice but to bargain with the opposition parties over policy.<sup>22</sup>

Having undergone a series of constitutional reforms, South Korea's system of government has transformed from a presidential to semi-presidential system and enlarged the number of seats in the legislature. The unicameral nature of the legislative branch remains limited in capacity when compared to that of a bicameral parliament. There were, however, legal measures to empower its right to enact and amend bills, deliberate over the budget, oversee state affairs, and conduct parliamentary diplomacy. The judiciary branch is somewhat unbalanced with the disintegrated hierarchical system where the Constitutional Court only endures with its power to review the constitutionality of legislation and judicial cases and the Supreme Court as the highest court to review judicial cases.

The government remains intensely concentrated around the executive due to presidential and party leadership. In the event the executive is ineffective, the political party can choose to abandon its leader for the sake of party image as shown in Park Geun-hye's case. Public opinion of the executive can alter the course of foreign policy formulation and the National Assembly can constrain Cheong Wa Dae advisors in their efforts to implement national priorities.

#### *State-society relations*

Modern democracy requires the opinion of citizens to play some role in shaping the policy outcomes, even including the elite-centric foreign and security policies.<sup>23</sup> Some research suggests that civic engagement and public opinion has influenced US policies toward certain states.<sup>24</sup> Doeser argues that Finland refrained from military intervention in Libya due to public opinion and election timing.<sup>25</sup> Earlier studies on US public opinion, which eventually contributed to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus, show that inadequacy and incoherence of public opinion leads to its volatility.<sup>26</sup> Though the Almond-Lippmann Consensus was weakened following the public protests of the Vietnam War in the United States, the realists largely disregard public opinion as a part of domestic politics.

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<sup>21</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "Grand Strategy and Peaceful Change: Avoiding the Vulnerability of Empire," in *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1994), 493-494.

<sup>22</sup> Michael N. Barnett, *Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State and Society in Egypt and Israel* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008); Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986), 1151-69; Bruce M. Russett & John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Louis Klarevas, "The "Essential Domino" of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives* 3 (2002), 417-37; Eric V. Larson & Bogdan Savych, "American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad," *RAND* (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Fredrik Doeser, "Strategic Culture, Domestic Politics, and Foreign Policy: Finland's Decision to Refrain from Operation Unified Protector," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13 (2017), 741-59.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Lippmann & Charles Merz, *A Test of the News* (The New Republic, 1920); Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1960);

Unlike the liberal tradition, the realist view is that the public's contribution to foreign policy is an unimportant factor in the calculus.<sup>27</sup> Realists express concern for how public opinion on foreign policy would jeopardize effective diplomacy by hindering secrecy and flexibility in conducting diplomacy. Despite the argument on the coherence and relevance of public opinion on foreign policy, political elites are concerned about public preferences on foreign policy. They perceive the voter's electoral decision as either punishment for any foreign policy failure or reward for the success of foreign policy through a retrospective evaluation of voter performances. Hence, foreign policy makers acknowledge this significance and anticipate the public will behave in either reward or punishment mode for the policy outcomes. Thus constrained by state-society relations, the executive branch cautiously examines public opinion on foreign policy as an indicator for the approval and disapproval of the president as the foreign policy decision maker.

The Almond-Lippmann Consensus is farther from explaining the phenomenon of public opinion in modern democracy, as it does not capture the emergence of the information age and the rising educational competency of citizens in modern society.<sup>28</sup> Some argue that the public shares a less informative network and is less educated than the political elites.<sup>29</sup> Others argue that the poorly informed and undereducated public can be motivated to structurally and coherently engage the administration for a newer foreign policy direction.<sup>30</sup> As previously argued, national sentiments in South Korea hinder foreign policy actors from committing to strategic and coherent policy responses. Due to the significance of public opinion, recent trends in modern democracy show a correspondence between policy outcomes and public preferences. South Korea's foreign policy community shares the opportunities and risks associated with public opinion as an instrument for achieving the goals of the political elite, party or individual. The political elites can exploit the policy failures of the opposition by swaying the public opinion through propaganda, whereas the public can punish the political elites who made the failed policy decisions for disregarding the public preferences.

South Korea's public opinion and its level of trust for the government and political parties show volatility.<sup>31</sup> The public tends to follow the positions of key political elites when the issue is divisive. An individual is likely to support the president's position and decision on a specific issue out of loyalty. At the height of public support, the executive can push forward an initiative based on political ideology and positions. The executive is, however, sometimes forced to clarify decisions to other political elites and the public when popularity is low. The executive

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<sup>27</sup> Ole R. Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus," *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (1992): 439-440.

<sup>28</sup> D. C. Foyle, "Leading the public to war? The influence of American public opinion on the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 16 (2004), 269-294.

<sup>29</sup> J. N. Druckman, E. Peterson and R. Slothus, "How elite partisan polarization affects public opinion formation," *American Political Science Review* 107 (2013), 57-79.

<sup>30</sup> B. I. Page and R. Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); P. J. Powlick and A. Z. Katz, "Defining the American public opinion/foreign policy nexus," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42 (1998), 29-61.

<sup>31</sup> Jiyeon Kim, "Public Opinion and Presidential Power in South Korea," in *Domestic Constraints on South Korean Foreign Policy*, ed. Scott A. Snyder, Geun Lee, Young Ho Kim and Jiyeon Kim (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).

can aggressively pursue an issue in the policy making processes when popular, but an unpopular executive must act with caution. Voters in the presidential election do not necessarily correlate with the executive during the term. Changes in public opinion, for whatever reason, pose an obstacle to policy continuity from one president to another and from the presidential candidate to the incumbent in the office.

In part, the discontinuity between foreign and security policies in South Korea can be attributed to the historical learning of foreign influences and the need to adapt to a fluent security environment. The discontinuity followed the executive's (mis)perceptions and fluctuating public opinion on foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Unlike what Gabriel Almond and Thomas Risse-Kappen had expressed about the public's indifference and unawareness of foreign policy, the elitist approach to understanding foreign policy decision-making process is questionable, especially considering the lessons learned from the Park Geun-hye administration.<sup>33</sup> In Korea's case, the recent trend in public interest in foreign policy shows the relationship between the national sentiments and relevant policy actors. The domestic institutions knowingly use public opinion against certain policies that are seen as undesirable. The legislative history of modern democracy shows that domestic institutions are committed to exploring the means of public opinion as a political instrument for party politics. In this sense, South Korea's domestic institutions are similar to any modern democratic system. The unique historical experiences and ideological influences, however, helped to develop the current system of government.

### **Park Geun-hye's foreign policy and domestic politics**

Following her visit to the United States after the presidential inauguration, Park Geun-hye visited China to observe a military parade in June 2013. As Korea's first president to participate in such an event in China, this led to speculation about her intent given the rising concern for the US-China competition. Proponents defended Park for engaging China as an opportunity to safely introduce Korea's corporations into the Chinese markets; opponents reasoned that Park's move could lead to grave consequences with Washington. Her bold diplomatic maneuver proved a failure when the Xi Jinping-Park relationship deteriorated over the North Korean nuclear threat. As a result, Park abandoned her balancing strategy and decided to deploy a US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery on the Korean Peninsula in July 2016. Significantly, the presidential decision was made without any consultation, which led to political turmoil. Her failure to persuade her opposition parties, especially the legislators from the Democratic Party of Korea, resulted in their dismay and dissatisfaction and eventually contributed to losing public support.

In response to public demands for protecting comfort women and publicizing the atrocities committed against them, President Park established a task force consisting of government officials to find a solution with the Japanese government. In December 2015, Park and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo reached an agreement on comfort women after 24 years of Koreans calling

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition*, (Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>33</sup> Gabriel Almond, "Public Opinion and National Security Policy," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1956); Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies," *World Politics* 43, no. 4 (1991).

for official apologies from the Japanese state.<sup>34</sup> Although the agreement was characterized as the final and irreversible resolution on the issue and opened prospects for advancing Japan-ROK relations, South Korea's public expressed its discontent against its executive's unilateral decision on the agreement; criticism focused on not sharing the details of the settlement with the victims before the agreement was finalized.<sup>35</sup>

As responsible representatives of their respective electoral districts, 117 members of the National Assembly, who were also members of Democratic Party of Korea, introduced a bill to nullify the executive's agreement with Japan.<sup>36</sup> After several attempts by the majority party at maneuvering around the opposition, the bill expired on the National Assembly floor in May 2016. In response, the opposition parties appealed through mass media to rouse public dissatisfaction with the executive's conduct.<sup>37</sup>

A third decision by the Park administration, the introduction of a counter-terrorism act in response to an increasing concern for transnational terrorism, again was met with dissatisfaction in the National Assembly. The excessive use of executive power over the matters of national security and the disregard of legislative body's intent served as a reminder that the presidential-centric government had always lacked transparency and underestimated the power given to the legislators by their constituents.<sup>38</sup>

The National Assembly responded by strongly opposed establishing and institutionalizing a government agency for anti-terrorism. In fact, the National Assembly portrayed the proposed bill as a document that would destroy democracy by allowing "the state's surveillance of citizens" and resisted the bill's passage.<sup>39</sup> Twenty-four legislators from the Liberty Party of Korea introduced the Act on Anti-terrorism for the Protection of Citizens and Public Security and 156 members of the same party voted for the bill on the floor. The filibustering over nine days during the National Assembly's 340<sup>th</sup> session in February 2016 showed the intensity of party politics in Korea. Park's proposed bill eventually passed with over two-thirds of the National Assembly. Though the filibuster failed to stop passage of the bill, the efforts had an impact on the public and set a global record on filibuster with 192 hours.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, Diplomatic White Paper 2016.

<sup>35</sup> For the final and irreversible resolution, see "Japan-ROK Summit Telephone Call," Japan-Republic of Korea Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, last modified December 15, 2015, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page4e\\_000366.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000366.html).; For the government transparency on the South Korea's agreement with its counterpart on the comfort women issue in 2015, see "Han-t'ps-il wi-an-pu hap-üi-nün oe-kyo-chök haeng-wi-t'ss kuk-ka, pae-sang-ch'aek-im öps-ta," Law Times, last modified 18 June 2018, <https://www.lawtimes.co.kr/Case-Curation/view?serial=144027>.

<sup>36</sup> "Tae-han-min-kuk chöng-pu-wa il-pon-chöng-pu kan-üi il-pon-kun 'wi-an-pu' p'i-hae-cha mun-che hap-üi mu-hyo hwak-in mich chae-hyöp-sang ch'ok-ku kyöl-üi-an," Bill Information, National Assembly of the Republic of Korea.

<sup>37</sup> The Democratic Party of Korea, People's Party and Justice Party used media manipulation to appeal to the public sentiments in response to Park's deal on the comfort women.

<sup>38</sup> Jack S. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *International Organizations* 48 (1994), 279-312.

<sup>39</sup> Hwan-bo Jeong and Mi-deop Jo, "[National Assembly Passes Terrorism Prevention Act] Saenuri Party Rams the Terrorism Prevention Act, 15 Years after NIS Proposes Bill," The Kyunghyang Shinmun, March 3, 2016, [http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?code=710100&artid=201603031824037](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?code=710100&artid=201603031824037).

<sup>40</sup> "South Korean MPs 'set world filibuster record'," last modified 2 March 2016, Asia, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35704123>.

Following the decision to deploy the THAAD battery, President Park restarted negotiations with Japan on the General Security of Military Information Agreement, which had been halted in the last year of President Lee Myung-bak's tenure. By this time, Cheong Wa Dae had already isolated itself from the other branches of government. The National Assembly and even the executive's ministries felt Park had conducted state affairs without consulting anyone but few individuals.<sup>41</sup> Although Park's bold move to strike a military information sharing deal was expected to balance against the regional challenges and close the widened gap in the US-ROK-Japan security relationship, it created further anxieties over losing national sovereignty in the view of the Democratic Party of Korea. Whoever the beneficiaries, Korea's public did not see the deal as a diplomatic success. Park's advisors, however, had not foreseen the grave domestic consequences.

Historically, the legislative branch has been able to check the immense power of the executive on only a few occasions in Korea. Yet, the 20<sup>th</sup> National Assembly not only criticized the executive's foreign policy initiatives, but finally clashed with the presidency. The *coupe porté* arrived with the opposition's call for the president to answer for the crimes. The opposition legislators accumulated a list of the president's crimes including the domestic mismanagement of the *Sevoul* ferry that had sunk in 2014 and the Choi Soon-sil scandal, in which the president shared confidential and secret documents with an unauthorized civilian. In November 2016, the National Assembly passed the impeachment bill, which was introduced by 171 legislators from the Democratic Party of Korea and People's Party of Korea, for neglecting the presidential responsibility to "safeguard the independence, territorial integrity and continuity of the State and the Constitution" and failure to promote the "freedom and welfare of the people." In response to the president's mismanagement of state affairs, the National Assembly exercised its full powers to ensure the sovereignty of the people was undistorted and rightfully restored. Owing to the *tour de force* of the National Assembly, Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, as the acting president, could only maintain Korea's status-quo in foreign policy to ensure no politically unacceptable maneuvers were made. With the president and former leader of the Liberty Party of Korea ousted and imprisoned for her crimes, the acting president had an important role in managing domestic affairs and taming unreasoned opposition.

Regardless of the party politics in voting for or against the bills introduced during the legislative session, the National Assembly has other powers that allow for its interaction with foreign governments. The power of legislative diplomacy allows the National Assembly to invite foreign legislative delegations, visit foreign legislatures, and form legislative networks among foreign legislative bodies. The influence of the National Assembly on foreign policy can only endure by steering through the constitutional limits as it only has the right of consent to treaties, war declarations, and foreign troop deployments.

The National Assembly also holds the power to propose and decide on amendments to the constitution, enact and amend the law, deliberate on budget bills and funds, and inspect and investigate state affairs. The oversight functions of the standing committees empower the

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<sup>41</sup> Sang-hun Choe. "South Korean President's Leadership Style Is Seen as Factor in Scandal," *New York Times*. Nov. 11, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/12/world/asia/south-korea-park-geun-hye.html> (accessed May 19, 2019).

legislative body to have extensive influence over the formulation and implementation of the national strategy and foreign policy set by the executive.

Whether or not the incumbent of Cheong Wa Dae leads the majority party of the National Assembly, party politics can develop into the “potent engines” that subvert the power of the people and divert the executive’s foreign policy from implementation by means of public opposition. The National Assembly influences the executive’s ability to act on its foreign policy, especially when there is disagreement between the executive and legislative branches.

#### *South Korea’s public opinion and Cheong Wa Dae*

Park Geun-hye, as the leader of the Liberty Party of Korea, entered Cheong Wa Dae with 51.55% of the popular votes in the 2012 presidential election.<sup>42</sup> When she entered the office, she had an approval/disapproval rating of 42/23%.<sup>43</sup> The ratings, nonetheless, indicated a decent beginning of a presidential term as her predecessor had a 52/29% rating. Park’s ratings showed the least fluctuations until the *Sewol* ferry tragedy. Initially, the ship’s sinking was seen as an unfortunate incident, particularly capturing the heroic individuals operating in the seas to save the passengers and recover the dead. Later, information regarding the government’s lack of early response and inadequate maritime regulation began to emerge. Regardless of how the government’s measures for privatization and deregulation contributed to the tragedy, the public viewed the incident as the executive mismanaging the incident since the initial response.<sup>44</sup>

Following the ship’s sinking in early April 2014, the public shared a common reason for disapproving of the president.<sup>45</sup> Her approval rating into the fifth week of April 2014 dropped by 10 points to 48%. This showed that Park’s overall activities as president were largely approved of despite the *Sewol* tragedy. In the same survey, public support for the Liberty Party of Korea dropped from 45% to 39% whereas the independent or no political alignment increased to 34% from 26%. These sudden shifts in public opinion over two weeks present a case for proving the public’s volatility, but it also shows how the public is well informed with access to updated information.

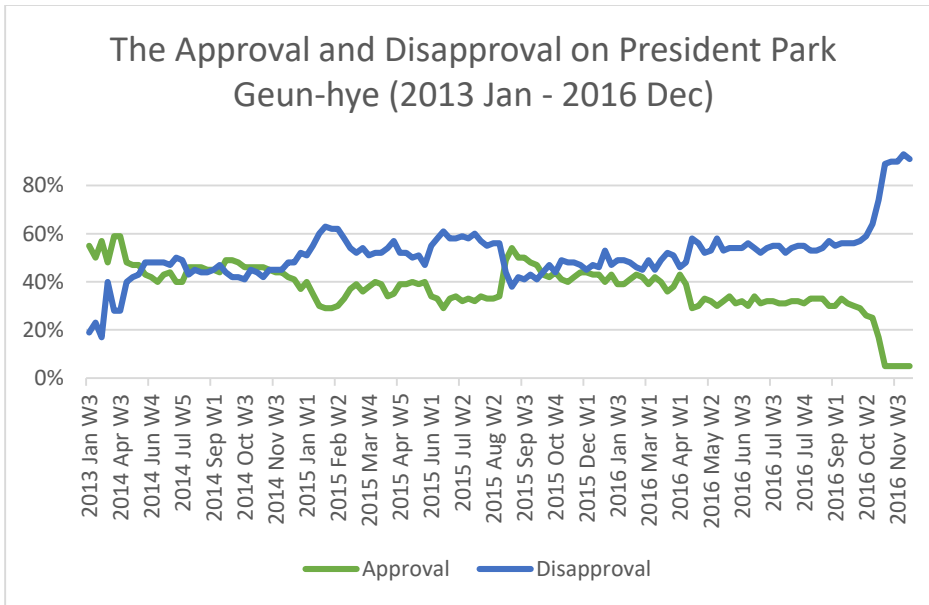
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<sup>42</sup> The Presidential Election Results, National Election Commission, Republic of Korea.

<sup>43</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 352 (May 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Jae-jung Suh. “The Failure of the South Korean National Security State: The Sewol Tragedy in the Age of Neoliberalism,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 40 (2014).

<sup>45</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 113 (April 2014).



The closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex angered the South Korean public, especially the entrepreneurs with businesses in the area. When Cheong Wa Dae publicized its decision to close the area as a result of maximum pressure against the missile tests in North Korea, the public approval for the president rested steadily at 46%. Public opinion pointed in an unexpected direction when the public felt that the government should proceed with removing its assets from Kaesong following the continued provocations from North Korea. Moreover, the public desired the guarantee of no closure from the North Korean regime for the operation of the South Korean businesses in the area. The public also saw the need to cut all support to North Korea if it resulted in provocations despite the international and South Korean efforts for humanitarian assistance.

A series of missile tests has accompanied nuclear weapon development in North Korea. The United States and South Korea released a joint statement on the decision to deploy the THAAD as a “defensive measure to ensure the security of ROK and its people, and to protect military forces from North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile threats” in July 2016.<sup>46</sup> Initially offered by the Obama administration, the first and only THAAD battery was to be located in Seongju County and operationalized in May 2017. Following the joint statement, North Korea responded that the decision to deploy THAAD was an act of provocation and aggression.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, domestic disapproval was partly from the subregion where the battery was to be deployed. Yet, more than half of South Korea’s public supported the deployment of THAAD in the country.<sup>48</sup> Further analysis of the US-ROK relationship points to the fact that the South Korea’s public believed that the United States was the leading security partner and that THAAD provided optimal defense in deterring the missile threats from North Korea.

<sup>46</sup> Joint Statement on the deployment of THAAD

<sup>47</sup> Rodongsinmun, Korea Central News Agency, 10 May 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion, No. (July 2016, August 2016, January 2017)

<b>Park's Foreign Policy Actions</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Agreement on Comfort Women	December 2015
Shut down of Kaesong Industrial Complex	February 2016
Enactment of Counter-Terrorism Act	March 2016
Decision on deployment of THAAD battery	July 2016
General Security of Military Information Agreement	November 2016

The public would not have disapproved of Park for a single foreign policy action, but continuous policy actions following the *Sewol* tragedy led to a consistent decline in her ratings. Using the public rating as a political instrument, the opposition party waged a full-scale legislative initiative against Park's foreign policy. First, the Democratic Party of Korea stirred public sentiment against the "final and irreversible" agreement on comfort women by introducing a nullification bill in the National Assembly. Then, the opposition parties strongly criticized the Park administration for the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. The decision to deploy THAAD and strike a deal on the GSOMIA with Japan did not fully affect Park until the *Choi Soon-sil* scandal. Following the disclosure of the scandal, her ratings dropped to a historic low of 5%.<sup>49</sup> Three-fourths of the public felt that the Constitutional Court should uphold the impeachment legislated by the National Assembly. This is an exemplary case where the disregard for public sentiment can lead to catastrophic political outcomes for the officeholders.

The downfall of the Park administration can be attributed to the executive's failure to examine the public approval on its policy action and an unwillingness to negotiate with the opposition party on certain issues that can stimulate the national sentiments and, therefore, yield a series of grave political consequences. Various views on the constitutional reform were discussed across South Korea's generations as a measure to further stabilize the dynamics among the branches of government and, thereby, support national development. Prominent scholars with in-depth understanding of Korea's strategic environment have hinted at the possibility of constitutional reform in restoring the balanced political contribution to the foreign policy decision-making processes by all branches of government. The reenactment of the Constitution is manageable in the long-term, but the short-term accommodation for ensuring policy continuity and effectiveness is an apparently unrecognized quest for South Korea's political elites.

Upon her conciliation with China, Park Geun-hye had chosen to return to the traditional conservative approach to the persistent security threat that arose between the United States and China due to the North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs. This change in policy direction resulted in economic retaliation against Korean conglomerates in China. Along with the domestic mismanagement of regulatory measures and delayed response to the *Sewol* ferry incident, the political opposition appealed for public contestation toward the executive with the onset of the corruption scandal. In the dynamics of the domestic politics, the Park administration faced enormous pressure to respond with urgency and was tempted to dodge the bullets of political opposition, but the government's failure to commit to its original political

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<sup>49</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 352 (May 2019).



agenda in both foreign and domestic affairs transformed the public from informally contesting to openly demonstrating.

### **Moon Jae-in's foreign policy and domestic politics**

Upon entering Cheong Wa Dae, President Moon Jae-in faced tremendous pressures for both national security strategy and domestic policies to steer the country toward national development. The public's candlelight demonstrations, a peaceful movement for anti-corruption, widely supported his political ideology in the aftermath of the Park scandals. The presidential campaign for cleaner and transparent politics had won the minds of the younger generations that mostly made up his nationwide support.

During his first year in office, Moon Jae-in was tormented with political opposition from the Liberty Party of Korea, minor political parties that had divergent interests, and the public for which he had promised better welfare and economic prosperity. He was also challenged with a restrictive strategic environment and differing advice on how to manage the North Korean security dilemma along with other urgent issues regarding US-China strategic competition and the economic and security partnership with Japan. In his personal pursuit of inter-Korean détente policy, he had to ensure that there would be public support for the reconciliation with North Korea along with all the intertwined issues.

President Moon and other progressives continue to believe in the idea of the Sunshine Policy even though North Korea is now armed with nuclear warheads and a variety of missile systems. Unlike the Liberty Party of Korea, the Democratic Party of Korea is consolidated and unified under President Moon as the former party leader. The dissident party members of the Liberty Party of Korea left the party to establish Bareunmiraedang, a newer party under the initial leadership of Ahn Chul-soo. In a fragile democracy such as Korea, public opinion matters greatly for a political party to the extent of abandoning its party leader. Despite the recent deviations from mediating the peaceful negotiations on the North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, Moon and his party will maintain close coordination in managing domestic politics to ensure the public is supportive of the party positions on policy areas including the North Korean policy and regional security strategy.

President Moon foreshadowed his preparation for the Panmunjom Declaration in his address at the Korber Foundation on July 6, 2017 during his visit to Germany for the G20 Summit.<sup>50</sup> In a return to the inter-Korean declarations on June 15, 2000 and Oct. 4, 2007, the Moon administration signed the Panmunjom Declaration at the first inter-Korean summit.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> "President Moon Jae-in's Speech at the Korber Foundation in Berlin," Notice, About the Mission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, last modified July 10, 2017, [http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/au-en/brd/m\\_3304/view.do?seq=755031&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi\\_itm\\_seq=0&itm\\_seq\\_1=0&itm\\_seq\\_2=0&company\\_cd=&company\\_nm=&page=6](http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/au-en/brd/m_3304/view.do?seq=755031&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=6).

<sup>51</sup> "Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity," Peace Agreements, United Nations Peacemaker, last modified October 4, 2007, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%20KR\\_071004\\_Declaration%20on%20Advancement%20of%20South-North%20Korean%20Relations.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%20KR_071004_Declaration%20on%20Advancement%20of%20South-North%20Korean%20Relations.pdf); "South-North Joint Declaration," Peace Agreements, United Nations Peacemaker, last modified June 15, 2000,

newer declaration renewed the past declarations and addressed inter-Korean security tensions involving the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea and Demilitarized Zone.<sup>52</sup>

<b>Major Events</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Presidential Address at Korber Foundation	July 6, 2017
Panmunjom Declaration	April 27, 2018
Singapore Summit	June 12, 2018
Pyongyang Joint Declaration	September 19, 2018
Hanoi Summit	February 27, 2019

*Popular president's foreign policy and public opinion*

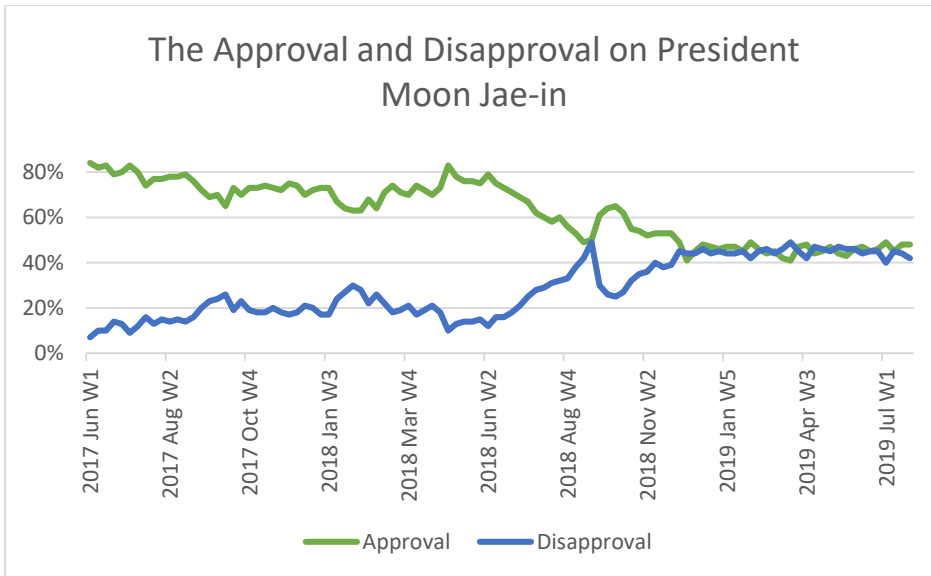
President Moon adamantly holds his stance on inter-Korean relations and détente policy whether or not Kim Jong Un is willing to give up the nuclear weapons and focus on economic growth. As a national strategic objective, Moon seeks to improve inter-Korean relations based on the assessment that Kim is on the verge of shifting his strategic priorities and likely to pursue denuclearization. Ultimately, Moon's strategic success hinges on his ability to convince both Trump and Kim to make concessions in dismantling the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Having enjoyed one of the highest public approval since inauguration, Moon continues to perceive the North Korean nuclear threat from a different perspective than his predecessor and the United States. Moon's misperception on the Korean Peninsula and restrictive strategic environment set a limit to a number of available strategic choices for his national security strategy.<sup>53</sup>

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[https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%20KR\\_000615\\_SouthNorth%20Joint%20Declaration.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KP%20KR_000615_SouthNorth%20Joint%20Declaration.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula," Documents, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, last modified September 11, 2018, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi\\_itm\\_seq=0&itm\\_seq\\_1=0&itm\\_seq\\_2=0&company\\_cd=&company\\_nm=&page=1&titleNm=](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1&titleNm=).

<sup>53</sup> Robert Jervis and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Perceptions and Misperception on the Korean Peninsula: How Unwanted Wars Begin," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018, 103-117; Khang Vu, "North Korea's emerging blackmail strategy," *The Interpreter*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/north-korea-emerging-blackmail-strategy>.



In spite of his foreign policy agenda, President Moon Jae-in entered Cheong Wa Dae with one of the highest public approval at 84% in South Korean history.<sup>54</sup> In response to his foreign policy actions, public approval has shown minimal change. No matter the popularity of the presidency, the public instead showed discontent over the Moon administration’s persistence on the inter-Korean détente. However, the unwavering public approval of the Moon administration neither provides the basis for public’s volatility nor disinterest in the policy area. The additional survey of the public’s approval and disapproval of the administration based on major policy areas elaborate the need to focus on the primary economic obstacles instead of foreign policy.<sup>55</sup> Surprisingly, the public showed significant support for stopping humanitarian assistance to North Korea if it remains provocative. In fact, the public’s interest in halting support for the North Korean regime heightened in the Moon administration at 72%, whereas it remained between 40-50% during the Park administration. This particularizes the finding that the current administration has swayed the public interest away from North Korea toward other domestic affairs including increasing job opportunities and welfare for the working generations.

Policy Areas		2017 Nov W1	2018 May W1	2018 Nov W5	2019 May W1
Foreign Affairs	Approval	62%	74%	58%	45%
	Disapproval	19%	7%	24%	38%
Welfare	Approval	62%	55%	56%	51%
	Disapproval	19%	18%	31%	33%
Economy	Approval	52%	47%	23%	62%
	Disapproval	21%	27%	59%	23%
DPRK	Approval	45%	83%	58%	45%
	Disapproval	32%	7%	32%	43%
Approval		44%	48%	28%	50%

<sup>54</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion 261.

<sup>55</sup> “Two Years of J-nomics,” *KBS World Radio*, May 13, 2019, [http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents\\_view.htm?lang=e&board\\_seq=363374](http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&board_seq=363374).

Personnel Management	Disapproval	32%	24%	43%	26%
Education	Approval	35%	30%	30%	35%
	Disapproval	21%	23%	39%	33%

Assistance for the DPRK	for	2013	2016	2016	2017	2017	2019	2019	2019	2019
		Feb W2	Feb W3	Sep W4	Aug W1	Sep W1	May W3	Jun W3	Jul W1	Aug W1
Discontinue all assistance if provocative	all if	46%	55%	55%	57%	65%	54%	53%	57%	72%
Keep humanitarian assistance even if provocative		47%	35%	40%	39%	32%	38%	32%	27%	14%
No response		7%	10%	5%	4%	3%	8%	15%	15%	14%

The major North Korea-related events, whether bilateral or multilateral, had the least impact on the public approval for the executive during the Moon administration. President Moon presented a new vision for peace on the Korean Peninsula that would overhaul NAPCI. To denuclearize North Korea, the speech proposed the formation of a peace regime that can fundamentally transform the hostile relationship among the relevant states and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Initially, the transformative process would involve economic cooperation and normalized non-political exchanges between the two Koreas to build mutual trust. By gradually building trust, the two Koreas would take a systematic and comprehensive approach toward the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. While the NAPCI focused on regional development and cooperation, the Berlin initiative called for a Korea-centric approach to denuclearization and economic cooperation. After years of tensions, South Korea's public embraced the presidential address at the Korber Foundation with Moon's approval rating increased by a 3% in July 2017.<sup>56</sup>

The Panmunjom Declaration reinforced the Berlin initiative in three major areas. First, it intended to promote common prosperity and prepare for unification by dramatically improving inter-Korean relations. The proposed joint activities involved the establishment of liaison office in Kaseong between the North and South Korea, continued reunions of the separated families through the Red Cross, and modernizing the modes of transportation. Second, it aimed at de-escalating the security risk between the two Koreas. Third, the declaration called for a peace treaty and complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. After signing the declaration, Moon's approval was marked at 73% in third week of April 2018.

Following the Singapore summit between the United States and North Korea on June 12, 2018, the executive's public approval increased to 79% in the second week of June 2018. After the unsuccessful negotiations at the Hanoi Summit, the approval was down to 49%. Since the

<sup>56</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion 266.

Panmunjom Declaration, the public was attentive and responsive to the North Korean security issues until the Hanoi Summit ended without an agreement.

	2017 Jun W1	2017 Jun W5	2017 Jul W1	2018 Apr W3	2018 Apr W4	2018 May W5	2018 Jun W2	2018 Sep W1	2018 Sep W2	2019 Feb W3	2019 Feb W4
Approval	84%	80%	83%	70%	73%	75%	79%	49%	50%	45%	49%
Disapproval	7%	13%	9%	21%	18%	15%	12%	42%	49%	45%	42%

In spite of President Moon’s promises of domestic development and inter-Korean détente, the public’s initially high approval for the executive has gradually declined over the past three years. This may indicate the public disappointment over the foreign policy failures. It explains, however, the persistence on inter-Korean détente has resulted in diplomatic segregation among the security and economic partners, the United States and Japan. The impact of the South Korea’s foreign policy further complicates its relations with other partners since the North Korean security dilemma remains unsolved.

### **Korea’s domestic politics and the strategic triangle**

Despite the unintegrated national strategy and its decoupling of security and economic policies, South Korea sees a range of policy options in pursuit of both security and economic interests. Considering the policy behavior of the executive branch, South Korea will continue to seek economic development as an urgent choice over security interests. The outcomes of the North Korea détente policy and peace mediation for the North Korea’s nuclear threat can determine policy redirection for South Korea.

Centered on reviving relations with Pyongyang, Seoul’s policy preferences are also set on a close partnership with China, a stronger alliance with the United States and *status quo* with Japan.<sup>57</sup> Seoul’s foreign policy direction has had a clear impact on trilateral security cooperation. Its unilateral decision to demine the demilitarized zone and demolish the guard posts with North Korea without the consultation with its partners, Japan and United States, began the course of rising tensions with the United States and Japan.<sup>58</sup> In spite of the well-established and repeated pattern of the North Korean crisis, the trilateral security cooperation and policy coordination is yet to be strengthened in response to the Pyongyang’s belligerence.<sup>59</sup> Instead of choosing trilateral coordination efforts to deter the threat of war, Seoul chose to de-escalate the threat through its détente policy.<sup>60</sup> Despite Moon’s mediation efforts, the United Nations

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Rozman, “South Korea’s Diplomatic Options under Moon Jae-in: Introduction,” in *2018 Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* (United States: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2018): 2-15.

<sup>58</sup> “S. Korea demolishes DMZ guard post with explosive,” Yonhap News Agency, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20181115009600315>.

<sup>59</sup> Sheila A. Smith, “The U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral: Better at Deterrence than Diplomacy?” in *2018 Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* (United States, Korea Economic Institute of America, 2018): 93-106.

<sup>60</sup> Katharine H.S. Moon, “Olympic dialogue: What’s realistic for the two Koreas?” Order From Chaos, Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/09/olympic-dialogue-whats-realistic-for-the-two-koreas/>; Helene Cooper, “Pentagon Again Suspends Large-Scale Military Exercises With South Korea,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/world/asia/us-military->

sanctions continue to bottleneck the trade activities of North Korea. Nonetheless, Kim Jong Un continues to advance its development of long- and short-range missile and artillery.<sup>61</sup> The security threats persist despite the positive signals of the United States and South Korea on peace and denuclearization negotiations. In the process, South Korea has isolated itself from its economic and security partners.

The US-China competition has revived the post-Cold War triangles in the Northeast Asia. Recent bilateral ministerial meetings among the China, Russia, and North Korea indicate the revival of the former communist triangle.<sup>62</sup> The triangle of the modern democracies, however, recently reversed its position from what was well structured cooperation and collaboration into dysfunctional bilateral relationships that endanger the trilateral security cooperation. South Korea's unilateral decision to engage in economic cooperation and provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea remains as an obstacle to the global pressure for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In spite of United States Forces, Korea and its security guarantee for South Korea, public sentiment against Japan, South Korea's security partner, can spill over to the US-ROK alliance in a contingency when the détente policy falters.

The domestic politics of South Korea and Japan as a result of the clash of national identities resulted in deviation from the strategic objectives of the trilateral security cooperation against the North Korean threats and failed to impede the reforming of the communist triangle. Regardless of the minimal progress on the negotiations for North Korea's denuclearization, President Moon increased the tension between South Korea and Japan by supporting the South Korea's court ruling against forced labor during the World War II. The opportunities for reconciling and realigning the national interests since the previous South Korean administrations ended in the wake of the domestic politics.<sup>63</sup> Both the executive and legislative branches in South Korea do not recognize the impact of the bilateral tension on deterrence against the North Korean security threat and denuclearization negotiations. Tokyo has shown its frustrations over Seoul's foreign policy actions and sought to maintain a balance in the trilateral security effort by seeking to meet with Kim Jong Un.<sup>64</sup> South Korea's domestic politics can be viewed, however, as a mixture of public opinion and strategic mistrust. The diverging regional strategic perspectives trouble both Seoul and Tokyo as Moon and Abe view each other's North Korea strategies with mistrust and fail to realign their strategic priorities. Tokyo fears that Seoul's concessions to Pyongyang could sidetrack its security interests, while Seoul worries over Tokyo's hard line toward Pyongyang by using the UN sanctions as an instrument could hinder its détente policy.

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exercises-south-korea.html; Leif-Eric Easley, "Doubling Down on the U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Olympics Diplomacy Did Not Breach Trust, but Trump-Moon Confidence Is in Jeopardy" in *2018 Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* (United States, Korea Economic Institute of America, 2018): 33-47.

<sup>61</sup> Missiles of North Korea, Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/dprk/>.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Sutter, "Sino-Russian Relations, South Korea, and North Korea," in *2019 Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies* (United States: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2019): 18-35.

<sup>63</sup> Scott A. Snyder and Brad Glosserman, "A Missed Opportunity to Commemorate a Positive Moment in Korea-Japan Relations," Council for Foreign Relation, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/missed-opportunity-commemorate-positive-moment-korea-japan-relations>.

<sup>64</sup> "Trump backs Abe in seeking meeting with Kim Jong Un," *The Asahi Shimbun*, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201905270051.html>.

The economic interdependence between South Korea and Japan had also influenced the strategic and domestic views of the bilateral relationship. South Korea's economic dependence on Japan largely decreased from export and import at 20% and 33% in 1988 to 4.8% and 12% in 2016.<sup>65</sup> Following the international criticism on the export intensive economy, South Korea set its policies on boosting the international competitiveness of domestic industries and diversifying its trade with various actors in Central and South Asia. As a consequence of the recent changes economic dependencies, the public no longer sees the need to improve trade relations with Japan and regards national sentiments as paramount. In 1992, the public labeled Japan as "a country to like and dislike" and recognized the significance in improving the relations.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, South Korea's domestic view on Japan has drastically changed over the past two decades. For instance, the public felt that the South Korea-Japan relations is the least significant in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>67</sup> In alignment with Cheong Wa Dae's foreign and economic policies, the National Assembly positively responds to the public's sentiment and supports the legislative initiatives that necessarily do not favor Japan. The dynamics between the legislative branch and public opinion has had a tremendous impact on relations with Japan. Though the political elites and public once recognized Japan as a vital economic partner, the positive domestic view no longer endures.

With South Korea-Japan relations under distress, Pyongyang seeks to maneuver through the sanctions by drawing out negotiations and narrowing its once widened diplomatic gap with China and Russia. It will explore the opportunities of South Korea's foreign and defense policies that center on détente to maximize its benefits by exploiting the divisions among the political elites in South Korea and foreign policy elites among the United States, Japan and South Korea. As Pyongyang consumes most of Seoul's foreign affairs capacity, South Korea has the least available resources for diplomatic affairs in maintaining its relations with the Washington, Tokyo and Beijing. In spite of Moon's attempts to assuage Beijing and improve ties with Tokyo, Seoul shows a great deal of strategic interest in détente and appears apathetic toward aligning its strategic objectives with Washington.

The South Korean public had firmly supported Moon's détente and self-reliant defense policies as he had also promised to prioritize economic growth and welfare. Moon's approval ratings have remained high in spite of his failures to deliver the economic growth.<sup>68</sup> His promise to address unemployment and income gap also remains unfulfilled. His pursuit of détente at the expense of South Korea's national security and relations with Washington and Japan may constrict his strategic perceptions. Seoul's détente policy had a decent reception in Washington as the denuclearization dialogues were perceived as an effort to de-escalate. In spite of Washington's support for Seoul's détente policy, the incongruent view of regional security and foreign policy direction could be ineffective in achieving shared security goals in the region. Though the strategic alliance with the United States remains strong, South Korea must reinforce its partnerships in the face of Russia and China's revived relations with North Korea. In a time for strategic maneuvers, now may not be the best time to pursue the transfer of wartime operational control transfer to South Korea. Defense force modernization as long as

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<sup>65</sup> South Korea, The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor/>.

<sup>66</sup> The Gallup Report No. 3, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> Gallup Korea Daily Opinion No. 176.

<sup>68</sup> "South Korea suffers surprise negative growth in Q1," Asia Times, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/04/article/south-korea-suffers-surprise-negative-growth-in-q1/>.

military strategies such as the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation and 4D Operational Concept (Detection, Disruption, Destruction and Defense) are incomplete.<sup>69</sup> The termination of joint military exercises not only sends mixed signals to the Washington and Tokyo but also reduces the opportunities to test the new military strategies formulated by the ROK military. In pursuit of the inter-Korean détente policy, Seoul does not see the need to align its national security strategies with the regional security strategy of Washington and Japan.

### *Closing the gap*

The domestic politics of South Korea influence Seoul's relations with Japan and Washington. Seoul's foreign and defense policies that center on the inter-Korean détente gradually create a diplomatic gap among the partners. With firm control over the branches of government, the progressives adamantly support President Moon Jae-in and his policies. Cheong Wa Dae will face several backlashes that could destabilize its authority in pursuing policy goals without public approval and support from strategic partners, the United States and Japan. Though any government exchanges with Japan can be presently a limited policy option, the efforts of the United States to engage South Korea's government can ease the divisions in the political elites. An examination of Korea's legislative branch suggests electoral reforms, the expansion of the legislative oversight on the Cabinet ministries, and an increase in legislative and policy research capacity are essential to domestic institutional modernization. The gap between the executive and legislative on the capacity for legislative and policy research remains a domestic issue that must be addressed in South Korea's congressional development. The United States could develop a periodic program of people-to-people exchanges, which would help avoid the discrepancies and divergences of interests. Moreover, this ensures that the new generation of staff and future legislators share democratic values and national security interests with the United States when pursuing the economic and security policies of the government and supporting the coupling of national strategy and foreign policy.

The uncertainties rising from US-China competition and the North Korean security issue will restrict South Korea's strategic environment. In cases where *Pax Concerto* is unconceivable, South Korea's legislative branch will have no choice but to rely on its public policy network and think tanks for policy consultation in strengthening its oversight to influence the executive's foreign policy actions. Considering the current lack of policy research capability, the National Assembly can take the opportunity to conduct legislative diplomacy to gain access to required information. Resuming regional studies and especially focusing on the relations with the National Assembly, the US Congress can ensure the continuity of diplomacy and support the capacity building of legislative and policy research network in Korea.

The United States State Department can also utilize its public diplomacy to overcome media manipulation by political elites that agitate anti-US sentiments among South Korean youth. Winning the "hearts and minds of people" may have proven a failure in the cases from the Middle East, but public diplomacy for enhancing the understanding of the US-ROK alliance and presence of the United States Forces Korea is an essential complement to hard policy actions that highlight the White House's national strategic initiatives. The expansion of art,

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<sup>69</sup> 2018 Defense White Paper, Republic of Korea, [http://mnd.go.kr/cop/pblicitn/selectPublicationUser.do?siteId=mndEN&componentId=51&categoryId=0&publicationSeq=846&pageIndex=1&id=mndEN\\_03130000000](http://mnd.go.kr/cop/pblicitn/selectPublicationUser.do?siteId=mndEN&componentId=51&categoryId=0&publicationSeq=846&pageIndex=1&id=mndEN_03130000000)



cultural, and sport exchanges as policy instruments of public diplomacy is suggested. The provision of Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program for the emerging leaders from South Korea can also shift the national image of the United States from “America First” to maintaining its leadership in the international order. Though public diplomacy seems feeble in the face of US-China strategic competition, the renewed national image can positively affect the relations of the United States in the Indo-Pacific and balance against China’s efforts to portray itself as a rising leader of the post-US international order.

The restructuring of the United States Pacific Command into the Indo-Pacific Command shows the strategic interest of the political elites in the United States to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. The economic, social, and political developments in India and multilateral cooperation in Western Asia show the shift in the strategic interests of China and its supporters. In shielding and deterring *Pax Sinica*, the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia share national strategic objectives of one another and conform to a security cooperation that persists among the United States, Republic of Korea and Japan. South Korea’s relationship with the United States is essentially different from its relationship with Japan as the recognition of the United States as an economic and security partner does not apply for Japan. In this regard, the guarantee of security cooperation among the security partners would require stronger commitments from the states. Regardless of the security ties, the trade tensions remain a challenge for the security partners.

## **Conclusion**

The neoclassical realist view of the foreign policies of recent administrations in South Korea indicates that a state-centric approach was prominent. The analysis of foreign policy behaviors within the anarchical system of international politics contributed to identifying the parallel domestic constraints of South Korean foreign policy. Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in governments exhibited certain irrational state behaviors unlike the realist theories suggest that resulted in unacceptable outcomes, especially as a liability in the US-China strategic competition in the Northeast Asia. The domestic constraints, especially the influence of the public opinion and political parties on the foreign policy behavior, limit Cheong Wa Dae from pursuing its national strategic objectives. At the same time, foreign policy can be utilized for domestic political action in the party politics if the executive and legislative either belong to the same political party or share a common political background.

In an attempt to preserve the strategic triangle, South Korea can reallocate its diplomatic assets to improve relations with the United States and Japan. The strategic triangle must be recognized as a deterrent force, whereas security and economic relations cannot be decoupled due to the complex regional dynamics in Northeast Asia. South Korea’s reluctance to understand the complexities of regional security transmits mixed messages to the public. The state-society relations play an important role in shaping and balancing the branches of a modern democracy. The use of domestic politics can be a political instrument, but the mismanagement of domestic politics can have grave consequences for the political elites and foreign policy behavior.

The Park and Moon cases showed that domestic politics influence foreign policy behavior if the administration disregards domestic affairs. Park’s apparent failure to respond to the *Seoul* tragedy and the *Choi Soon-sil* scandal ended her foreign policy initiatives. Moon, however, has an instrumental advantage over Park since he has a strong public support. Though popular, his

failure to deliver domestic reform for economic growth, unemployment, income gaps, and welfare could result in public disapproval of his détente policies. As much as Moon had advantages coming in, domestic politics can also backfire if the promises of domestic reform are unfulfilled. The failure of the denuclearization and peace negotiations with North Korea could also have a detrimental impact on the strategic triangle. The prioritization of the inter-Korea détente has already strained South Korea's relationships with its partners and could create a diplomatic vacuum where South Korea will have fewer options if the North Korean negotiations bear no outcome. These serious implications of the détente policy without considering the strategic environment result from the difference in strategic interests and, therefore, perceptions.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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