

# Republic of Korea Foreign Policy Decision-Making

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South Korean foreign policy decision-making is increasingly independent from its long-time benefactor: the United States. Surrounded on all sides by powers that have controlled its strategically valuable position, the young power has been backed by the US for the last seventy years. South Korean leadership during the first half of that period was autocratic and repressive. Post-war leaders focused on growing international trade and strength of industry locally. Despite nearly four decades of horrific treatment by the Japanese, modern South Korea has emerged as a democratic and economic powerhouse. Yet it is still a border flashpoint for Cold War competition. Today still it is one of the most precarious places on the planet and the center of a disputes: between it and Japan over legacy, between the US and the DPRK over nuclear nonproliferation, and between China and the US over trade and global influence. As South Korea matures its *chaebol* powered global industry, it must contend with the fissures of a populace whose new wealth and nationalism may push the leadership in directions that complicate its role as balancer of east and west.

## Legacy Issues and Actors

From a geopolitical perspective South Korea is surrounded by greater powers. Both China, Japan and the Soviet Union have pressed their weight upon this strategic peninsula. Korea was ruled by its own kings in 1910. Part of the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5) was the loss by China of Korea, Taiwan, and the Pescadores. Korea was no longer a tribute state to China but would suffer a bitter and cruel Japanese rule whose legacy remains ingrained in Korean memory and informs social and political relations between the two states.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

Korean society was thoroughly Confucian for centuries and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so thirty-five years of Japanese occupation created enormous hardship for its strictly hierarchical, deferential, but prideful citizens. The Japanese attempted to erase the Korean culture by requiring people to take Japanese names, and appeal to the Shinto religion.<sup>2</sup> Most egregious, and this remains a major issue in South Korea-Japan relations today, was the horrific sexual abuse of women in Korea, China and the Philippines by the Japanese army. Referred to in English translation as “comfort women,” the abuse of roughly 200,000 women and girls of all ages remains a key source of bitterness between the two. Korea believes that Japan has still not adequately atoned for the crimes. When relations sour, as they have in the last few years, old scars, such as the memory of comfort women, and the memory of forced labor are re-opened.<sup>3</sup>

Forced labor drove the growth of major corporations such as Mitsubishi that Japan brought to the region in the early years of occupation. While the introduction of industry ultimately modernized South Korea, it has come at a steep cost. Japan remained in full control of the peninsula and much of the region until its expansion butted up against the United States during World War II. The US victory over Japan left Korea as a territory whose control, no different than Europe, would be contested between the two new superpowers: the US and the USSR.

### Two Koreas

Allied powers in World War II agreed that Korea would be restored to its autonomy after hostilities ended, but Korea would be no exception to the division of spoils that resulted. Both the Western powers and the Soviet Union declared their intentions separately in 1943 and 1945 respectively. After the total surrender of the Japanese the USSR and US agreed to a joint occupation divided at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Soviet forces set up headquarters in Pyongyang, and the US set up its occupation government in Seoul. Both would spend the next three years managing internal political struggles among deeply nationalist factions. In the South at least, this frustrated the Americans who wanted little more than to go home, who had little interest in nation building.<sup>4</sup> Two years of failed efforts to re-unite the nation ended in a United Nations (UN) resolution requiring the country to hold elections. The Soviets rejected the notion, and the peninsula has remained divided ever since. Stalin installed a

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<sup>2</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>3</sup> (Shoji 2018)

<sup>4</sup> (Buzo 2017)

dynasty's first leader, Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang, and the United States made Syngman Rhee South Korea's first President. Rhee had spent most of the thirty-five years of Japanese occupation in the United States as the elected head of the Korean Provisional Government. Rhee advocated aggressively for Korean independence while studying at Harvard and earning a PhD in Political Science from Princeton. He admired American CEOs and would rule South Korea with a dictatorial efficiency reflective of both American corporate culture of the time, and if indirectly, ancient Confucian obedience to hierarchical order. Rhee's installation in Seoul in 1948 was intended to allow the American forces to withdraw from the peninsula. During that period internal political struggles and harassment from communist North Korea made the establishment of order difficult.<sup>5</sup>

The Americans left in June of 1949. A year later, on June 25<sup>th</sup> of 1950, the North Korean military crossed into the south determined to unite the country under Kim Il Sung and drive Western influence out to sea.<sup>6</sup> The US fought with North Korean forces and massive waves of Chinese soldiers brandishing Soviet armaments for three years; taking and losing ground until a stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel brought fighting to a tense pause. The demilitarized zone (DMZ) between Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North is actually one of the most militarized strips of land in the world. Bill Clinton, in a 1993 visit to the DMZ called it "the scariest place on earth".<sup>7</sup>

### Decades of autocracy and growth

With the cessation of hostilities, South Korean began its transformation from a rural backwater into an industrialized, educated, internationalist export-driven powerhouse earnestly in 1945. Rhee's leadership, and the leadership of the next three or four decades was harsh but created organization, opportunity and change for Korea. It also created corruption, repression and frustration. Ostensibly a democracy, an opening which took over 30 years, the South Korean polity began to find its feet. Still deeply Confucian, adherence to order was punitive and beneficial in turns.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that the US saw both Japan and Korea as projects for democracy, particularly at the edges of the Communist map in Asia. In 1953 there were 175 US military installations in South Korea, and in 2018, that number has halved. Camp Humphreys is the "largest American

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<sup>5</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>6</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>7</sup> (Maresca, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

military base overseas” at 3500 acres and cost the South Korean government \$11 billion.<sup>9</sup> US presence there oversaw three regimes of autocracy lasting officially until 1987 when South Korean people accepted a new constitution and elected a president from the opposition party for the first time in their history.<sup>10</sup>

Economically South Korean transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century has, like that of Estonia, been called a “miracle,” because for nearly two decades they sustained over 9% real annual GNP.<sup>11</sup> Per capita Gross National Income (GNI) rose from \$76 in 1961 to just over 20,000 by 2007. In 2010, a formerly war-ravaged area the size of a US state had the world’s 13<sup>th</sup> largest GDP and twelfth largest in terms of trade volume. Most of that success began to pay off in the 90s even through the 1997 financial crisis.<sup>12</sup> South Korea’s unique mix of Confucian hierarchical order, protectionism, and a society united by nationalism, liberalized slowly but remained focused on advancing their manufacturing capability, exports and geopolitical international outreach. While the 1997 crisis severely damaged the economy, the steps towards liberalization aggravated the situation internally, but also created transparency and new financial regulation of foreign debt that the country has benefited from.<sup>13</sup>

One feature of South Korean business structure, *chaebol*, has been both a boon and a burden for the country. A *chaebol* is a “family-owned business conglomerate.” Some of the largest are companies well known internationally.<sup>14</sup> Samsung, LG, Hyundai and Daewoo were four of the largest *chaebol* in Korea until Daewoo’s “near-collapse” in 1999.<sup>15</sup> In 2017 a massive bribery scandal with Samsung resulted in President Park Geun-hye receiving a 24-year jail sentence. Jay Lee, a top executive at Samsung received 5 years. In 2018, forty-five South Korean conglomerates are considered *chaebol*; the top 10 of those own 27% of all business assets in the small country and the five biggest (Samsung, Hyundai, Lotte, LG, and SK) make up half of the Korean Stock Index.<sup>16</sup>

Two other major changes that have affected both economic and political relations for South Korea are the “Nordpolitik” policy of the 1980s and the Sunshine Policy of the 1990s.

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<sup>9</sup> (Kim 2018)

<sup>10</sup> (Heo & Roehrig, 2010)

<sup>11</sup> (Lee and Yoo 1987)

<sup>12</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>13</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>14</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>15</sup> (Pae 2015)

<sup>16</sup> (Pae 2015)

“Nordpolitik” describes South Korea opening up relations with the Soviet Union, China and “other socialist countries.” Wonjae Hwang argues that this was consistent with their long-standing desire to “diversify” and reduced “economic dependence on the US economy.” He notes that it wasn’t until after the Cold War, 2004 specifically, that China fully eclipsed the US as a primary trading partner. The major advantage, Hwang asserts, is that two thirds of what China buys from South Korea are unfinished goods, on which the ROK can obtain higher tariff benefits. Only 33% of what is exported to the US is similar. Undoubtedly the geographic proximity, market opportunity and political advantage to trade with a soaring Chinese economy are attractive.<sup>17</sup>

### Current Issues & Actors

#### *Domestic constituencies*

The government of South Korea is similar in design to the United States. It is a presidential democracy that holds regular elections for its legislature, (the National Assembly), and whose judiciary is considered independent and fair. President Moon Jae-in replaced deposed Park Geun-hye via an early election in 2017. He is a member of the Democratic Party (DP); one of roughly 10 political parties that enjoy representation in the unicameral legislature. Fortunately for the President, as of August 2018, the DP held the majority of seats in the National Assembly, which should make foreign and domestic policy-making easier through 2022.<sup>18</sup>

The foreign and security policy-making institution in the executive are also similar in design to the United States and but bear some variation that reflects their history as part of a divided country at war with its neighbor. Re-unification of the Koreas is important enough to their national strategy to warrant a special ministry. The Ministry of Unification (MOU) represents the diplomatic, engagement-focused effort to improve South Korean relations with the DPRK. The Ministry of National Defense (MND) represents the more defensive and hawkish posture. In league with the MND is the National Information Service (NIS), and together these two branches of the ROK government have advocated for “defeat, change, or even collapse the North Korean regime.”<sup>19</sup> The Ministry of Unification and the security-

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<sup>17</sup> (Hwang 2017)

<sup>18</sup> (Central Intelligence Agency 2018)

<sup>19</sup> (Snyder, Lee, and Kim 2018)

focused organs have differed bitterly and openly on how South Korea should respond to the dilemma presented by the sometimes starving, sometimes aggressive, northern state.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) acts as representative and consultative fashion for the Executive branch. South Korea's Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-hwa also serves largely the same capacity as the U.S. Secretary of State. She came into the role in June of 2017. She recently spoke with the Washington Post about South Korea's position on the North Korean nuclear talks and was positive about the prospects for a long but fruitful process and interpreted the steps that Kim Jong-Un has taken to close nuclear weapons tests sites as good faith acts. According to Minister Kyung-hwa negotiations at this time were focused less on full transparency and verification of concrete steps than on trust-building measures on both sides.<sup>20</sup> She has no easy task ahead of her—not only is the history of deal-making with the DPRK over nuclear disarmament a long series of losses, stalls and deceptions, but she must work with a US administration that has been at times terrifyingly mercurial, and other times pollyannaish towards Kim Jong-Un. The MFA must triangulate the US-ROK alliance, the ROK-DPRK puzzle, and a National Assembly that could turn against Moon Jae-in if South Koreans lose faith in their “new approach.”<sup>21</sup> Not only could the Assembly block or delay any kind of treaty ratification or legislation instrumental to the President's goals, it could appeal to the populace and has been known to do so on issues particular to the US-ROK alliance, or ROK-Japan issues.<sup>22</sup>

The interaction of South Koreans with the internet has resulted in a diversification of political identities in the polity that have an effect on foreign policy. For much of the post war past, Koreans were subject to military, dictatorial and somewhat repressive authoritarian rule, but as the country has prospered and developed democratically, it has experienced a diversification of the political voices. Hwang notes that prior to the explosion of the internet in people's lives, news of aggression from North Korea against the south tended to have a nationalistic rally-around the flag effect and impact presidential popularity. A 2015 study shows that this effect tends to disappear in populations that have greater than 25% internet usage rates.<sup>23</sup> Given that the population is most dense in lowland urban areas, this means that foreign policy making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is far less one-directional and uniform than it used to be. Hwang also notes a number of recent examples of this phenomenon including protests aimed at the government response to the death of two

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<sup>20</sup> (Hudson 2018)

<sup>21</sup> (Hudson 2018)

<sup>22</sup> (Snyder, Lee, and Kim 2018)

<sup>23</sup> (Hwang 2017)

fourteen-year-old girls in a highway accident with a US military vehicle, and protests surrounding 2008 US-ROK trade policy on beef imports. The internet proved to be both a source and outlet for discussion that “revealed divergent opinions from the government’s policy positions.”<sup>24</sup> On sensitive historical issues such as US-ROK relations, DPRK aggression, and particularly Japan, the populace shows an increased willingness to speak out and avenues to do so. This is a notable departure for South Korean society given their Confucian past. South Koreans are understandably nationalistic, but increasingly they cannot be counted on to accept the voice of authority, instead seeing themselves as members of one of the world’s most successful democracies. Their political participation, whether nationalistic or progressive, is growing and having an impact on the accountability of the elites.

### *Relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*

The topography of the Korean peninsula resembles the landscape of inter-Korean relations. Its undulating hills and mountainous regions mimic the waves of engagement and withdrawal brokered between leaders over the past three decades. The peninsula’s seas, three of them, representative of three great powers whose contest for regional influence has played out for a century. This contest split the state acquired under Japanese surrender in 1945. The Korean War was the North’s attempt to reunify the two by force. Communist and US forces were ultimately stalemated, and the unfinished business continues to be defining issue for the Republic of Korea.

South Korean relations with the DPRK isn’t simply a matter of its own policy preference of reunification—it is a matter of the type of regime and the type of society that would rule the people. The political philosophies of *Juche* and Democracy are at deep odds with one another. Despite this, Moon Jae-in outlined a peace proposal in summer of 2017, referred to by many as containing three (or four) “No’s.” President Moon said, “We do not wish for North Korea’s collapse, we will not pursue unification by absorption in any form, nor will we pursue artificial unification.” He added that neither South Korea nor Washington do not “hold hostile policies against North Korea.”<sup>25</sup>

Remarkably, there have been three inter-Korean summits this year; the first in ten years. The product of the first one in late April of 2018 is the “Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula,” which outlines the denuclearization of

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<sup>24</sup> (ibid.)

<sup>25</sup> (In-hwan 2017)

North Korea, and contains a host of broad openings toward improved relations at the social, economic and political levels.<sup>26</sup> Many pundits doubt that Kim Jong Un will denuclearize at any point, but for South Korea the issue is existential. They are keen to pursue any opportunity for diplomacy with their estranged kin. North Korea for them is quite literally family, and through that lens, the nuclear issue, famines, repatriation, economic prosperity, security, culture and history are linked to every other foreign policy issue that they encounter. Unfortunately, as it stands, the North's traumatic isolation and recalcitrance, as well as its *value* to the foreign policy goals of China, the United States, Russia and regional players make it a nexus of ongoing and complex policy dilemma for South Korea.

### *Current relations with Japan*

Relations with Japan are a two-track phenomenon. Scott Snyder, a pre-eminent South Korea policy scholar, noted that National Assembly members often conduct direct diplomacy with their Japanese counter-parts, typically on issues affecting trade.<sup>27</sup> Wonjae Hwang also studied how South Korea and some of its neighbors vote in the UN and found that, due to economic interdependence, the ROK and Japanese tend to show high "vote congruence," but that this is highly dependent on the US-ROK alliance. When the US and Japan vote together, South Korea can be counted on to support the two as a bloc.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Japan's historical mistreatment of the South Korean people has scarred the national consciousness. When relations sour, South Korean public is prone to voicing their outrage over what they see as Japan's unwillingness to properly atone. This makes resolutions of disputes much trickier for any administration.

The dispute over the Dokdo/Takeshima/Liancourt rocks (island) is indicative. Both parties claim the territory currently administered by South Korea. Unlike China's land disputes, this one seems relatively low level and is less likely to truly endanger anyone. South Korea has much bigger issues than those typically posed by Japan, however, given the legacy, it is not uncommon for their issues to upset the public. In 2014 Shinzo Abe's "favorability" rating with South Koreans was lower than that of Kim Jong-un.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> (Inter-Korean Summit Press Corps 2018)

<sup>27</sup> (Snyder, Lee, and Kim 2018)

<sup>28</sup> (Hwang 2017)

<sup>29</sup> (Snyder, Lee, and Kim 2018)



While the public tends to show unwavering support for the US, its relations with Japan on trade and security are “indispensable,” but the public remains unaware of this truth.<sup>30</sup> Korean leadership might find any bold attempt to repair the public perception of Japan an act of political suicide. This will mean that Japan-Korea relations are strained under an unhealed scar, and perhaps constrain a possibly stronger alliance of two middle powers who would benefit as they face growing pressure from China.

### *US-ROK relations*

The US relationship with South Korea is for many a core precept of the modern Korean identity, but even that is changing. Modern South Korea has grown out of the US template but is a global actor in its own right now. The number of US military installations has halved, and as of 2010 the US is no longer the dominant source of trade to the export-centric state. The US is often keen to leverage the relationship in the interests of countering North Korea, and proximately China. The decision to deploy the THAAD missile system on the peninsula has been a highly contentious one for the ROK. The Korean people are often divided about this. Many are nationalistic and believe that modern South Korea is sufficiently a middle power and should continue to pursue greater independence. Many older Koreans see the US-ROK relationship as indispensable to that prosperity and latitude in other areas of global interaction.

Successes have outnumbered breakdowns by far in US-ROK relations, and the current administrations are favorable to one another. US President Trump signed a massive free-trade agreement with South Korea earlier this year. The agreement puts a 25% tariff on Korean trucks and doubled the ceiling on the number of US vehicles South Korea can import. While this may look like a one-sided win for the US, the ceiling didn't need to be raised at all, and the tariffs are unlikely to have a serious impact on the South Korean economy. The commitment to a free-trade agreement, however, is good for the longevity of the relationship and that can impact stock markets.<sup>31</sup>

One notable source of division in the past, and perhaps going forward under Moon Jae-In is the style of approach to DPRK relations. The US has most often been firm if not hostile towards the Kim Dynasty. Even in the 1990s during the famine, aid from the US was tightly tied to US policy on nuclear weapons development in the North. For South Korea, the relationship has tended to be more concessionary after Nixon's opening to China in the early

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<sup>30</sup> (ibid. 2018)

<sup>31</sup> (Tankersley 2018)

1970s.<sup>32</sup> The current era of negotiations appeared hopeful to the US administration but appear to be fizzling under misunderstandings of what the accord between Trump and Kim Jong-un truly requires. Full discussion of those negotiations is beyond the scope of this paper, but their impact on the seemingly separate track of talks happening between the ROK and DPRK, as well of US-ROK alliance illustrate the difficult complexity South Korea must navigate in all of its foreign policy decision making. In matters of national security particularly, the interests of South Korea can be quickly overshadowed by those of much more powerful parties. Currently South Korea appears to largely benefit from having the US as a big brother, but the test of that relationship is the swelling influence of its former suzerain: China.

### *Relations with China*

China is another in the long list of dilemmas for the Republic of Korea's foreign policy makers. The relationship is centuries old. Even the name of the country is derived from the name of a territory that was part of the early history of Korea and is now inside China. Koguryo was one of the "Three Kingdoms" of original Korean history. South Korean nationalism flared up when China appeared to try and erase this history from their foreign ministry website during the administration of Roh Moo-hyun in 2004.<sup>33</sup>

Sino-ROK relations began to improve as early as the 1980s and have risen along with China's fortunes. Trade between the two was a modest \$41 million then, but by 1991 stood at \$4.4 billion.<sup>34</sup> Kyle Ferrier of the Korea Economic Institute of America writes,

Of the nearly \$500 billion goods exported to the world last year, around \$125 billion were sent to China, or a quarter of all exports, placing China at the top of Korea's list of export destinations.<sup>35</sup>

What is difficult to predict is how the influence of Sino-ROK trade will impact South Korea's foreign policy goals with both the US and the DPRK. The US-ROK relationship has been taken for granted for length of South Korea's history, but China is seen by most as the key to the DPRK. South Korean foreign policy is increasingly driven by the populace, most of whom remain skeptical of China. China has confounded or at least seem disinterested in

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<sup>32</sup> (Snyder, Lee, and Kim 2018)

<sup>33</sup> (Heo and Roehrig 2010)

<sup>34</sup> (ibid.)

<sup>35</sup> (Ferrier 2017)

reunification. On the other hand, South Korea disavowed Taiwan as part of *Nordpolitik*, and the establishment of official diplomatic relations with China.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

As it is clear that the future of South Korean foreign policy depends on the foreign policy choices of its more powerful neighbors, it is difficult to predict what their policy preferences will be. There is no shortage of room for speculation on whether presidential leadership style, public preference, or the outsized influence of the US, whose interests in South Korea are largely proxy, or China, whose interests are commercial and at odds with South Korea's sacred reunification goals, will win out. In many ways South Korea as middle power, or balancer, as some have called them, has never been more important. As the US-China competition becomes conflictual, South Korea must again concern itself with its legacy as a flashpoint for greater world powers. It has profited under the same global order that China has, and its future success will likely depend on how the leadership is able to read the tea leaves and predict or accommodate the policy preferences of those players staking claim at the edge of the new and old world.

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<sup>36</sup> (Park, Shin, and Keyser 2013)

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