



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Role of the US and China in Changing Dynamics of Bilateral Relations of the Two Koreas during Kim Jong Un Era

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ABSTRACT

South Korea, long reliant on U.S. security guarantees, faces growing insecurity due to North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile programs. Polls indicate rising domestic support for indigenous nuclear capabilities, fueled by skepticism over U.S. commitments mirrored in lessons from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Meanwhile, global distractions (e.g., Ukraine, Middle East shifts) and North Korea's alignment with Russia present opportunities for U.S.-led engagement. Easing sanctions and fostering inter-Korean exchanges could promote bilateralism and eventual reunification, reducing dependence on external powers. China, viewing the Korean Peninsula as vital to its strategic interests, balances ties with both Koreas while countering U.S. influence. Despite occasional North Korean defiance (e.g., nuclear tests, U.S. outreach), China reinforces economic and security leverage to maintain dominance. The U.S. could exploit current geopolitical flux to reshape regional dynamics, but success hinges on prioritizing inter-Korean cooperation over containment aligning stability with long-term reunification prospects.

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Peninsula comprises approximately 85,000 square miles and is located in the northeastern part of the Asian mainland. It is surrounded by seas on its eastern, western, and southern sides, while the Yalu and Tumen rivers form its natural northern boundary. According to archaeologists, the peninsula has been inhabited for approximately 20,000 years. The ancient Korean state, known as Choson, emerged in the 4th century BC near what is now the Chinese border (present-day North Korea). By 300 AD, Koreans had overthrown Chinese rule and established three kingdoms in the peninsula: one in the north, one in the southeast, and one in the southwest (Korean Cultural Center New York). In 668 AD, the Silla Kingdom, with Chinese assistance, conquered the other two kingdoms and established unified rule over the peninsula. From ancient times until the mid-20th century, the peninsula remained unified under a single administration, with a distinct language and strong cultural traditions. Throughout its recorded history, the Korean Peninsula has experienced nearly 900 invasions, both large and small, due to its strategic geographical location. Situated between major powers such as China, Russia, and Japan, Korea has faced occupation by the Chinese, Mongols, Japanese, and, after World War II, the US and the USSR. Among these powers, China has historically exerted the greatest influence and has been more readily accepted by Koreans compared to others. In response to Japanese invasions, Korea adopted a policy of isolation, earning the nickname "Hermit Kingdom." The country implemented strict rules to protect its sovereignty. However, due to threats from neighboring powers and pressure from Western nations, the United States, and Japan, Korea opened its borders in the mid-19th century (Seth, 2011).

During this period, Korea established friendly relations with major powers, particularly the United States. In 1882, Korea signed the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce" with the US, which offered good offices to help Korea address external threats. Koreans viewed this relationship positively, as evidenced by reports that the Korean King danced in celebration upon the arrival of Americans in the peninsula. However, by 1902, Japan sought to establish its hegemony over Korea. To achieve this, Japan formed an alliance with Britain, recognizing British interests in China in exchange for

legitimizing its own influence in Korea. As tensions rose, Russia sensed an opportunity and engaged in a war with Japan over control of Korea. Japan proposed dividing Korea along the 38th parallel, but Russia rejected the proposal, leading to the Russo-Japanese War, which lasted until 1905. Surprisingly, Japan emerged victorious, gaining control over the peninsula. This victory marked a turning point for Koreans, who felt betrayed by the US due to a secret agreement between the US and Japan. The agreement ensured that the US would not interfere with Japanese rule in Korea, while Japan agreed not to challenge US dominance in the Philippines. At the end of the war, the US President played the role of peacemaker and mediator between Russia and Japan, earning him the Nobel Peace Prize. Despite this, Japan continued its harsh rule over Korea until its defeat in World War II (Oberdorfer, 2001).

Japan left a legacy of hatred on the Korean Peninsula due to its rule from 1905 until after World War II. During this period, Japan showed no public sympathy or soft corner for the Korean population. Through the division of the peninsula, Japan pursued policies that favored a divided Korea. This was because Japan viewed a united Korea as a potential threat in the global economic market. A unified Korea, with its nuclear program and the influence of South Korea's economic policies, could outpace Japanese products in the global market. For these reasons, Japan has historically not supported the idea of a united Korea (Yim, 1986).

The recent development in South Korea-Japan relations occurred in March 2023, when the Prime Ministers of both countries met in New York after a long hiatus to address the disputed legacy of Japanese colonial rule. This effort aims to strengthen bilateral and trilateral relations among these states under the leadership of the United States. The US seeks to secure and enhance its influence in the Indo-Pacific region to counter the growing China-North Korea alliance. South Korea and Japan have attempted to resolve historical tensions through various treaties and agreements, such as the 1965 Normalization Treaty and Claims Agreement and the 2015 Comfort Women Agreement. However, these agreements paid insufficient attention to the core issues, ultimately failing to resolve long-standing disputes. Recent developments between the two states mark a significant shift in addressing these challenges, but external threats, such as Chinese involvement and North Korea's belligerence, continue to impact progress. In a notable move, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol visited Tokyo to enhance bilateral relations, resuming security intelligence sharing, diplomatic visits, and security dialogues. The colonial legacy has long been a source of tension between South Korea and Japan, but recently, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and President Yoon have prioritized cooperation over historical grievances. They have shifted their focus toward shared national goals rather than dwelling on the past. The relationship between South Korea and Japan is now characterized by cooperation under the umbrella of the US government, with the US occasionally mediating tensions to ensure stability (Aum & Galic, 2023).

After the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia emerged as a more supportive ally of North Korea due to historical ties and the geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the Korean Peninsula. As a neighboring state, Russia has a keen interest in the peninsula and has shown strong support for its reunification. Recent developments indicate that Russia has adopted a more balanced approach, shifting toward equidistant policies. This is evident in the signing of the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' between Russia and North Korea, which highlights the growing partnership between Pyongyang and Moscow, alongside a slight decline in Moscow-Seoul relations (Rinna, 2024).

The Korean Peninsula has long been influenced by the politics of global powers. Since the establishment of the two Korean states in 1948, both sides fought a devastating war from 1950 to 1953 to legitimize their positions domestically and internationally. However, the claims of Seoul and Pyongyang intensified after the war rather than being resolved. Inter-Korean relations saw some progress toward mutual recognition after the 1970s, particularly in the 1990s, when efforts accelerated, largely driven by South Korea. This issue is a product of the Cold War and great power politics. After the Cold War, significant developments shifted the focus of Inter-Korean relations toward the peninsula itself. However, these efforts were limited due to the nuclear confrontation between the United States and North Korea. Inter-Korean relations can be categorized into different phases. The first phase began in 1972, when the two halves initiated official contact. A major

breakthrough occurred with the dramatic changes in Cold War dynamics, as China and the US, the key allies of North Korea and South Korea respectively, adjusted their strategies. The next phase saw various agreements between the two Koreas, including non-aggression pacts, cooperation programs, and exchange initiatives. In 1992, both states joined the United Nations (UN), marking a significant shift in the post-Cold War era. Following the severe economic crisis in North Korea during the 1990s, the US and North Korea reached an agreement on nuclear shutdown, shifting the focus toward external economic and political dialogue. In 2000, South and North Korean leaders held a historic summit, during which South Korean President Kim Dae-jung encouraged North Korea to open up to Western capitalist countries. Gradually, Inter-Korean relations moved toward economic linkages, fostering broader regional dialogue. This culminated in the Six-Party Talks in Beijing in 2003, involving Russia, the US, Japan, China, and the two Koreas. While the Six-Party Talks were inclusive, progress was slow, largely due to the security dilemma between the US and North Korea, which further intensified and complicated the issues between the two Koreas (Armstrong, 2005).

Before and after the Korean War, both North and South Korea viewed each other as threats. Each side believed the other was weak due to their opposing ideological systems—communism in the North and capitalism in the South, backed by their respective great power allies. After June 1950, South Korea made no significant attempts to challenge the North, assured of American defense support. On the other hand, North Korea relied on the backing of the USSR and China. The Korean Peninsula has been characterized by the equation of 'Big Four Plus Two,' where four major powers play significant roles in the region. The US and Japan support South Korea, while Russia and China back North Korea. Since coming to power in 2011, Kim Jong Un has repeatedly threatened South Korea, including threats to attack the presidential Blue House, firing on border areas, and conducting missile tests. These actions have drawn widespread condemnation and sanctions from the United Nations (Pak, 2020).

Both the US and China are trying to maintain their status quo on the peninsula and are unwilling to weaken their influence in Korean politics. The competition between the US and China has further complicated Inter-Korean relations. The Korean Peninsula has been deeply affected by global power politics since the establishment of the two Korean states in 1948. The two Koreas fought a devastating war from 1950 to 1953 to legitimize their positions domestically and internationally. However, rather than resolving their differences, the claims of both Seoul and Pyongyang intensified after the war. Inter-Korean relations saw some progress toward mutual recognition after the 1970s, particularly in the 1990s, when efforts accelerated, largely driven by South Korea. This issue is a legacy of the Cold War and great power politics. After the Cold War, significant developments shifted the focus of Inter-Korean relations toward the peninsula itself. However, these efforts were limited due to the nuclear confrontation between the United States and North Korea. There is an urgent need to enhance Inter-Korean bilateral relations. The US and China must cease their backup politics to prevent further escalation and safeguard the region from greater danger. The involvement of superpowers in the Korean Peninsula has disrupted the bilateral relations between the two Koreas. The region must strive to develop Inter-Korean relations without the interference or backing of external powers (Lew, 2000).

South Korea has consistently faced pressure from US policies amid the US-China strategic rivalry, often being compelled to take sides on major issues between the two powers. South Korea should be able to make clear judgments about its policies without external pressure, while North Korea needs to demonstrate greater flexibility in its diplomatic actions. Only then can both states ensure lasting peace on the peninsula. Both the US and China must allow the Korean Peninsula to move toward bilateralism, enabling the two Koreas to engage independently without external interference. They should also ensure that no instability or war is provoked in the region. The Koreas need to shift their focus from external factors to internal factors to bring about meaningful change on the peninsula. South Korea, in particular, should take the lead in identifying and promoting internal factors or variables that could guide both Koreas toward peace, prosperity, and eventual reunification. External powers will continue to exploit the peninsula for their strategic rivalry, using both Koreas as pawns in their geopolitical games. To achieve this, South Korea must play a proactive role in securing its national interests and asserting its sovereignty. On the other hand, North Korea should revise its policies to promote bilateralism rather than taking hostile steps. For instance, during the November

2024 Olympics, two North Korean athletes, Kim Kim-yong and Ri Jong-sik, faced investigation and punishment by Kim Jong Un simply for taking a picture with South Korean athletes (The Times of India, 2024). Such actions reflect Kim Jong Un's deep-seated hostility toward South Korea and its ideology, further complicating efforts toward reconciliation. In conclusion, both Koreas must prioritize internal cooperation over external influences to pave the way for a peaceful and unified future.

Relations between South Korea and North Korea further deteriorated after North Korea's satellite launch in May 2024, prompting South Korea to declare the cancellation of a key military agreement. In retaliation, North Korea withdrew from the agreement and deployed forces into the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Following the termination of the agreement, North Korea's Central Military Commission announced that it would restore all military measures previously halted under the agreement. North Korea blamed South Korea for escalating regional tensions, with its officials stating that South Korea would bear full responsibility for any conflict or tension between the two Koreas. Kim Jong Un declared that reunification is no longer an option, citing ideological differences, as North Korea does not adopt democratic principles. With Kim Jong Un's aggressive policies, the peninsula has once again reached a high level of tension (Davenport, 2024).

The Korean Peninsula is located in East Asia, bordered by the Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea. It is shared by North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK). The peninsula has been divided along the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) since the 1953 armistice agreement. To the west and north, the peninsula is bordered by China, while Russia lies to the far northeast. The Yalu and Tumen Rivers form the natural borders between North Korea and China, while Japan lies to the east across the Korean Strait. Approximately 70 percent of the peninsula is mountainous, rich in minerals and hydroelectric resources. The total area of the peninsula is roughly equivalent to the size of the US state of Kentucky. Physically, North Korea is slightly larger than South Korea. Historically, the unified peninsula was frequently invaded by external powers. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty (also known as the Manchu Dynasty), the peninsula came under Japanese rule from 1910 until the end of World War II in 1945. The modern division of the peninsula stems from the aftermath of World War II, when the colonial regime ended and the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel into North and South Korea, backed by Soviet and American ideologies, respectively. In the 1950s, the involvement of China and the Soviet Union escalated tensions, leading to the Korean War, which lasted until the 1953 armistice agreement. The peninsula remains divided along the 38th parallel, with heavily guarded US troops stationed along the ceasefire line, known as the Demilitarized Zone (Dastrup, 2020).

Statement of Problem

US and China strategic and hegemonic competition in East Asia have affected the bilateral relations of Two Koreas and the North Korean nuclear program, aggressive behavior of Kim Jong Un is a threat for the region. Both countries are dependent on major powers, that's why facing issues of bilateralism.

Research Question

- How has the role of US and China evolved in Inter-Korean relations during Kim Jong Un era and what are the key factors for their involvement?

Objectives of the Study

- To point out how the role of US and China disturbs the bilateral relations of Two Koreas.
- To highlight the basic hurdles in reunification or in Bilateral relations of Peninsula.
- To develop strong recommendations for increasing bilateral relations of the Two Koreas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to the study, the two variables analyzed the deteriorating relations between the two Koreas. While the individual level briefly examined, the primary focus on the system-level approach to determine their relationship. The extreme and decisive role of major powers in shaping the destinies of both states cannot be overlooked. Changing dynamics in global and regional politics, along with ideological differences, have divided the two nations despite their shared history, culture, and traditions. Given this historical context, the relations between these states are treated as dependent variables. The policies and efforts of various governments to improve bilateral relations discussed and analyzed, but the primary emphasis on the role of the US. A qualitative method used to analyze the discourse, as it is the most suitable approach for answering the research questions and achieving the study's objectives. In terms of resources, this research relies on a comprehensive review of scholarly publications, policy papers, press releases, and to a limited extent individual accounts of specific events and issues to support the arguments. Together, these sources constitute the primary and secondary materials used for qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis served as a powerful methodological tool to systematically examine the complex dynamics shaping Inter-Korean relations and the influence of major powers (e.g., U.S and China). By analyzing qualitative data such as diplomatic statements, policy documents, summit transcripts, media reports, and scholarly commentaries, researchers identified recurring themes that reveal underlying patterns in bilateral engagements and external interventions. For instance, coding and categorizing data from North and South Korean leadership speeches could uncover themes like "conditional cooperation," "security threats," or "reunification rhetoric," highlighting how domestic priorities intersect with external pressures. Similarly, examining major powers' official discourses (e.g., U.S. National Security Strategies, Chinese Foreign Ministry releases) might reveal themes such as "strategic containment," "economic leverage," or "proxy conflict avoidance," elucidating their strategic stakes in the peninsula. Thematic analysis also allows for comparative exploration contrasting themes emerging during periods of détente (e.g., 2018–2019 summits) with those during escalation (e.g., nuclear tests) to assess how major power roles fluctuate with geopolitical shifts. By iteratively refining themes through a six-step process (familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting), this approach disentangles the interplay of agency and structure in inter-Korean relations, offering nuanced insights into how bilateral actions are constrained or enabled by systemic power rivalries. Thematic findings could ultimately inform policy recommendations, such as identifying leverage points for conflict resolution or predicting how U.S.-China competition might shape future Korean engagements. This method's flexibility accommodates both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-guided) analysis, making it ideal for capturing the multifaceted narratives that define this geopolitical arena.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Inter-Korean Relations in Historical Perspective" is written by Charles K. Armstrong and published by International Journal of Korean Unification Studies in 2005. The articles elucidate the rivalry of both states from there in 1948 and they have fought war and the area is always remaining a dangerous zone at the parallel line. The Inter-Korean relations started its official contact from 1970s when leaders start its meetings to find out peace in this region. The research divides these relations into different phases that from its inception to post Korean war and then after official contact, after cold war and towards denuclearization efforts. It also highlights the internal politics of the peninsula and the role of external powers into different phases that is basically the hurdle into reunification of the peninsula. The six party talks how take all this issue as into an inclusive manner and rather to keep the basic focus on the inert Korean relations and their reunification. This research highlights the historical perspective from the inception of the Korean states and keep more focus on the American role into the Inter-Korean relations, the researcher has elucidated the Inter-Korean relations till 2005 and did not focus on the current efforts (Armstrong, 2005).

"South Korea: Background and US Relations" is written by Mark E. Manyin and Liana Wong published by Congressional Research Service in 2024. The report highlighted the US-ROK relations with the special focused on the historical background and the current economic engagement in the world politics. The report elucidates the shifted focus of the both states from bilateral to trilateral

agreements. After Korean war both states signed treaty on the mutual defense inn 1953 and after this treaty, the currently 28,500 US troops giving their services for security of ROK. Japan also increased its cooperation on the North Korea politics and included himself into trilateral agreements. In 2023 three states maximize its cooperation under the leadership of Joe Biden while these agreements curtailed by Trump era. After this consultation US introduced and proposed to United Nations new sanctions on the North Korea but Russia and China vetoed these sanctions. The report is totally focused on the US-South Korean relations and its changing strategy towards the North Korea, it Plight on the new ties with US and Japan and take them go with them into trilateral agreement, these policies seem to counter DPRK rather to do something for bilateral relations of Two Koreas (Manyin & Wong, 2024).

“US-China Relations and Peace on the Korean Peninsula” is written by Byung Kwang Park and published by East Asia Institute in 2022. The report has make especial focus on the strategic competition US and China in East Asia and their effects on the Korean peninsula. After the cold war the peninsula under the influence of us and china, the both Koreas have weak bilateral relations because of these external powers hegemony. US always pressurize South Korea to take their side on the major issues with Chinese and did not have clear or independent stance on international politics. The report highlighted the south Korean importance for the promotion of bilateralism and their position to become the game changer into the Korean politics to secure its sovereignty and national interests. The report elucidates a little focus on US and China role in Korean politics and highlight how to promote bilateral relations of both states without the role of external powers but did not focus on the North Korea policies and Kim Jong Un authoritarian rule (Park, 2022).

“The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History” is written by Don Oberdorfer which is published by Basic Books in 2001. The book comprises on the detailed history of the Korean peninsula which is originated from the Greek times to medieval times to till 2001. The Korean peninsula have the great history and rich culture; the region had experienced almost 900 invasions by the external powers according to the recorded history. After the detailed history, the book highlighted the role of all major powers in the peninsula after and before the division of Koreas. The both Koreas divided by the great powers on the behalf of two different ideologies as communism and capitalism. After the super powers rivalry or the end of the cold war the peninsula has backed by the same powers but the role of china has increased into the Korean politics. The ROK under the democratization and under the shelter of US security which become the big economy and the DPRK under backed by the Russia and China under communist ideology become nuclear power. The book describe the detailed history of both Koreas ups and downs and their joint history in detail till 2001 but the researcher need to focus on the Kim Jong Un era which is start after the 2011 (Oberdorfer, 2001).

“Beyond the Surveys: Unpacking South Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions Amid Political and Domestic Realities” is write up by Daeyeon Lee Published in The Diplomat (2024). In this report author highlighted the concerns of experts for the emerging aspirations for the nuclear in South Korea, the poll results of the last 2 years show the majority of people as well as politicians shows the demand of nuclear for the country and they have concerns about the North Korean upgrading military capabilities. South Korea is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation treaty in 19175 and if they will try to develop nuclear weapon as Yoon Suk Yeol advocacy on 11 January 2023 for nuclear power on the public demand then ROK definitely face the serious sanctions on its economic and other affairs (Lee, 2024).

Role of China in Korean Peninsula

China has shared a close bond with Korea through cultural heritage, as well as military and political ties. The Korean Peninsula has always been a significant security concern for China, much like Vietnam, due to both regions' strategic and ideological importance. China could not tolerate external influence, particularly in North Korea, which has historically been backed by both Russia and China. Chinese engagement in the Korean Peninsula has grown since 2018, as the Trump administration's policies weakened U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. Seizing the opportunity, Beijing strengthened its relations with both North and South Korea. China has often been seen as an obstacle in U.S.-DPRK nuclear negotiations, attempting to disrupt these developments.

Relations between Pyongyang and Beijing deepened, particularly from 2018 to 2019. During this period, Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un met five times to enhance economic cooperation and strategic ties. Notably, President Xi's visit to North Korea marked the first by a Chinese leader since 2005.

The Chinese president signed various agreements with North Korea, ensuring mutual trust in economic and security assistance. In return, Kim Jong-un warmly welcomed China and expressed a desire to adopt China as an economic role model for his country. China has consistently sought to strengthen its relationship with Kim. However, in 2017, North Korea tested China's tolerance by engaging in actions that were perceived as insults, such as enhancing cooperation with the U.S. and South Korea, as well as conducting a nuclear device explosion during the BRICS annual summit, which was hosted by China. Under Kim's leadership, North Korea held several meetings with the U.S. during the Trump administration. These developments posed a threat to China, as Trump's "fire and fury" approach created distrust. In response, China sought to reinforce its relationship with North Korea to counterbalance these shifts (Pak, 2020).

China already had strong economic ties with South Korea, it also viewed South Korea as a potentially destabilizing partner in the region. In 2016, South Korea deployed THAAD, a U.S. defensive missile system, to counter North Korea's nuclear threats. However, China opposed the deployment of THAAD, perceiving it as a security threat to its own interests. Following the THAAD deployment, China retaliated against South Korea with an unofficial economic boycott, resulting in significant financial losses for both countries. South Korea suffered approximately 7.5 billion in losses, while China itself incurred around 880 million in losses.

Role of US in Korean Peninsula

The United States has always played a crucial role in Asian politics, serving as both a strategic and economic partner to numerous countries. South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), remains structurally dependent on the US, particularly due to its need for military support against North Korea. The US has deliberately maintained this dependency, limiting South Korea's ability to fully modernize its defense capabilities (Zagoria, 1993).

Approximately 28,500 American troops are stationed in South Korea, and economic ties have been bolstered through the US-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), implemented in 2012. This agreement has significantly enhanced trade relations, making South Korea the US's second-largest trading partner in recent years. President Joseph Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol have forged a close partnership on North Korea policy, with both nations engaging in bilateral and trilateral cooperation, including collaboration with Japan in the Indo-Pacific region. The US, ROK, and Japan have recently conducted joint military exercises, focusing on technological advancements and promoting economic relations in the region. US-South Korea relations have been strategically and economically significant since the Korean War, solidified by the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. South Korea remains one of the United States' most important partners, with both nations committed to each other through various agreements.

In 2023, US-South Korea relations were further strengthened with the inclusion of Japan, as the three nations enhanced their cooperation through trilateral agreements on North Korea policy. The US issued the Washington Declaration, addressing security concerns such as consultations on the potential deployment of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. In August 2023, President Biden hosted the leaders of South Korea and Japan at Camp David to advance trilateral consultations. While these efforts were curtailed during the Trump administration, President Biden has revitalized and expanded such initiatives. As part of these agreements, the US introduced new sanctions on North Korea aimed at denuclearization and proposed them to the United Nations. However, Russia and China vetoed these measures while providing unconditional humanitarian assistance to North Korea. In response, Kim Jong Un has escalated missile tests, including Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Kim has pledged to further enhance North Korea's capabilities and has declared that he will never agree to denuclearize. Meanwhile, South Korea

contributes approximately \$800 million annually for military assistance to the US (Manyin & Wong, 2024).

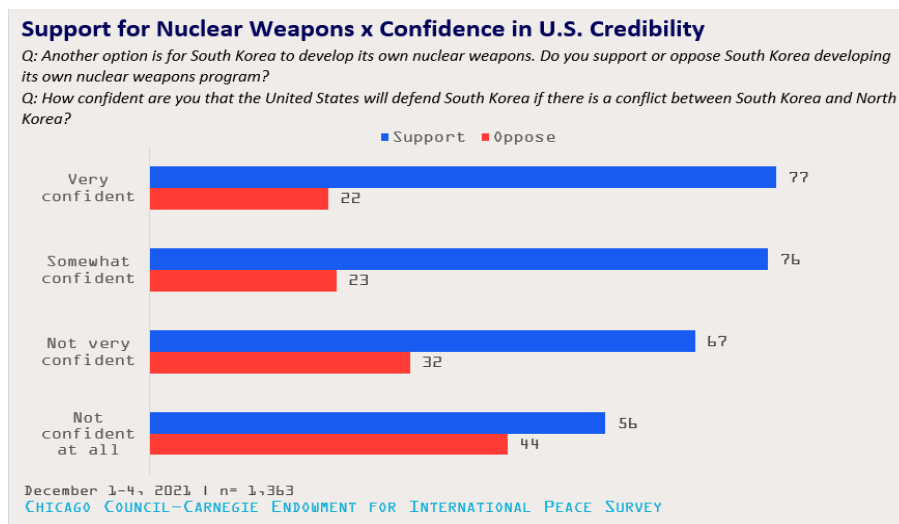
The Korean Peninsula is situated at the intersection of great power rivalries, particularly between the US and China, which are engaged in a confrontation over the Western Pacific. For the US, South Korea serves as a strategic base to counter China's influence. While the US-Soviet Union competition historically shaped the peninsula, the post-Cold War era has seen the US and China emerge as the dominant players in the region. The strategic rivalry between the US and China has pressured South Korea to align with US policies and participate in major initiatives targeting China, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy. South Korea has consistently faced pressure to support US policies in this great power rivalry (Park, 2022).

In 2016, South Korea deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), a US missile defense system, to counter North Korea's nuclear threats. However, China opposed the deployment, viewing it as a security threat to its own interests. In retaliation, China imposed an unofficial economic boycott on South Korea, resulting in significant financial losses for both countries approximately 7.5 billion for South Korea and \$7.5 billion for South Korea and \$880 million for China. During the 2024 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, the United States, South Korea, and Japan jointly denounced the growing military cooperation between North Korea and Russia. US President Joe Biden highlighted the shifting dynamics of global politics and expressed serious concerns over the military agreements between North Korea and Russia. Biden praised the trilateral cooperation among the US, South Korea, and Japan, calling it a legacy of his administration and a cornerstone for future efforts to counter destabilizing agreements between North Korea and Russia.

However, with Biden's term ending in January 2025, a new phase of political dynamics is expected. The previous Trump administration pursued a markedly different approach, with then-President Donald Trump seeking to build ties with North Korea and becoming the first sitting US president to visit the country. Meanwhile, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol echoed concerns over North Korea's military engagements both within and outside the region, emphasizing the importance of trilateral cooperation for regional stability. The leaders of the US, South Korea, and Japan strongly condemned North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's joint military agreements with Russia and Russia's ongoing aggression in the Ukraine war (Aljazeera Staff, 2024).

South Korea Dependency on US

South Korea and the United States share a long history of friendship, underpinned by mutual defense treaties that address external threats. These treaties provide significant military support for South Korea (ROK) against North Korean aggression. However, this reliance has also led to South Korea's foreign policy being heavily influenced by US dependence. The growing nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities of North Korea have raised serious security concerns among South Koreans. Many citizens are now advocating for the country to strengthen its own military capabilities rather than relying solely on treaties with the United States. According to a poll conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations in South Korea, 71 percent of respondents support the development of nuclear weapons (Dalton, Friedhoff, & Kim, 2022). This majority favor either establishing a domestic nuclear program or exploring alternative options. Currently, there are two main debates in South Korea regarding this issue. The first option is the deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea, while the second option is for South Korea to develop its own independent nuclear program. Both options reflect the growing desire for greater self-reliance in addressing national security threats.



(Dalton, Friedhoff, & Kim, 2022)

The survey clearly shows that the majority of South Koreans favor developing their own nuclear weapons. On the other hand, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons against South Korea. According to some experts, Kim uses these threats as a tactic to ease US sanctions, while others argue it is a strategy to weaken the US-South Korean alliance. Another poll conducted by Gallup Korea in South Korea revealed that 76 percent of respondents support the deployment of nuclear weapons. The people of South Korea feel threatened not only by North Korea but also by China (Lee, 2024).

North Korea Relations with US

The government of North Korea was established under the leadership of Kim Il Sung, a communist leader who shaped his policies based on a mix of Soviet and Chinese models of governance. During his regime, personal freedoms were severely restricted, and under the perceived threat of US military intervention, Kim Il Sung strengthened North Korea's military, increasing the number of soldiers to one million. Strict rules were imposed on citizens, including severe restrictions on travel outside the country. North Korea remained largely unnoticed by the world until the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a loss of funding for the DPRK. This resulted in severe food shortages, starvation, and widespread social and economic hardships (Dastrup, 2020).

After Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, his son, Kim Jong Il, became the new leader of North Korea. He imposed even stricter controls on the population than his father. Under Kim Jong Il's leadership, North Korea acquired nuclear capabilities and consistently demonized the US, spreading propaganda to instill fear among its citizens. Following Kim Jong Il's death in 2011, his son, Kim Jong Un, took control of the state and became the current dictator of the DPRK. North Korea is predominantly mountainous, with only 2 percent of its land suitable for cultivating crops. This arable land, located near Pyongyang, is allocated to the most loyal supporters of the government. The people of North Korea survive largely due to extensive foreign aid, as the government prioritizes militarization over the welfare of its citizens. Due to these dire conditions, many citizens resort to smuggling goods from South Korea or other regions, while others attempt to cross the border into China as refugees (Korea Peace Now, 2019).

The 1953 Korean War armistice agreement was a temporary arrangement, and Kim Jong Un has repeatedly declared it invalid. North Korea does not recognize the agreement as binding, and decades after its signing, the US and North Korea still lack direct diplomatic relations. Geographically, the Korean Peninsula presents complementary strengths. North Korea is predominantly mountainous and rich in minerals such as coal, iron, nitrates, and other fertilizers, which are highly valuable for South Korea's industries. On the other hand, South Korea has fertile farmland capable of producing food, along with the capital and industrial capacity to develop North Korea. If reunified, the two Koreas could form a powerful economic unit. Although reunification is currently seen as a distant or

'cold' concept, it remains a natural and desirable outcome for both nations, driven by geographical and historical ties. Major powers, particularly the US, can play a significant role in facilitating the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Reunification is ultimately the destiny of the region, though it has been delayed due to the authoritarian rule of the Kim family in North Korea. This legacy may one day be challenged by a revolution of the people, who have long suffered under a regime that exploits communist ideology in name only, distorting Marxist principles to perpetuate its family rule. The US has an opportunity to leverage the current geopolitical scenario to counter North Korea through strong diplomacy and support reunification efforts. Meanwhile, South Korea must continue its efforts to promote reunification, ensuring that the peninsula moves toward a unified and prosperous future (Mackenzie, 2024).

CONCLUSION

South Korea is a welfare state that has long relied on security guarantees from the United States. However, with North Korea's advancements in military technology, including its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, South Koreans now feel increasingly threatened. According to various polls, many South Koreans now aspire to develop their own military and nuclear defense systems, as they no longer feel secure relying solely on US assurances. There is growing concern that if North Korea or another state were to attack South Korea with such technology, the US might not use nuclear weapons in defense of its ally. The people of South Korea often cite the example of the Russia-Ukraine war, where Ukraine returned its nuclear warheads to Russia in exchange for US guarantees of support and economic aid. While the US has backed Ukraine, this support has not been sufficient to counter Russian aggression. This serves as a cautionary tale for South Korea, highlighting the need to develop its own domestic nuclear capabilities to counter future threats from North Korea and China.

The current geopolitical situation further complicates matters. Major powers are deeply engaged in the Russia-Ukraine war and the shifting dynamics in the Middle East, creating a volatile global environment. North Korea's involvement in supporting Russia in the Ukraine war has strained its resources, while Russia's declining influence in the Middle East has reduced its ability to fund or ideologically support North Korea. The US could leverage this situation to improve Inter-Korean relations by engaging both Korean leaders and promoting bilateralism at the individual level.

The US should consider easing sanctions on North Korea and fostering grassroots engagement between the two Koreas. Encouraging trade, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people connections could help break down social taboos in North Korea and pave the way for reunification. Former President Trump's visit to North Korea was a positive step toward fostering bilateralism between the ROK and DPRK. However, the Biden administration's focus on trilateralism to counter North Korea has undermined these efforts. The US should re-engage North Korea and work to shape its relationship with South Korea in a way that fosters dependence on the South. This approach could not only promote bilateralism but also lead both nations toward reunification. As North Korea experiences prosperity and democratic engagement, ideological differences may gradually heal. In this scenario, China is unlikely to create disturbances, as it prioritizes economic engagement over ideological clashes and seeks to avoid involvement in global conflicts.

China views the Korean Peninsula as a critical zone of strategic and ideological importance, closely tied to its own security interests. Historically, China has maintained strong cultural, military, and political ties with Korea, particularly with North Korea (DPRK), which it has supported alongside Russia. The weakening of U.S. influence in Northeast Asia under the Trump administration (post-2018) allowed China to expand its engagement with both North and South Korea, reinforcing its regional dominance.

However, China has also acted as a complicating factor in U.S.-DPRK nuclear negotiations, often undermining progress to maintain its leverage over the peninsula. This suggests that while China seeks stability on its borders, it also aims to prevent excessive U.S. or Western influence in the region. Ultimately, China's actions reflect its broader strategy of asserting control over Northeast Asia while

balancing relations with both Koreas to ensure its geopolitical and security interests remain protected.

China's relationship with North Korea is characterized by a mix of strategic cooperation, economic influence, and geopolitical maneuvering. While China has consistently worked to strengthen ties with Pyongyang—offering economic and security assistance to ensure mutual trust—North Korea has occasionally tested China's patience by engaging in provocative actions, such as nuclear tests during sensitive diplomatic moments (e.g., the 2017 BRICS summit) and warming relations with the U.S. and South Korea.

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea's diplomatic outreach to the Trump administration (including high-profile summits) introduced uncertainty for Beijing, which views a U.S.-aligned DPRK as a potential threat. China's response has been to reassert its influence over North Korea, ensuring Pyongyang remains within its orbit rather than drifting toward Washington. This dynamic underscores China's broader strategy of maintaining dominance in Northeast Asia while preventing U.S. encroachment.

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