

# Moon Jae-in: Putting North Korea at the Center

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While President Moon Jae-in has a calmer demeanor than his mentor and friend, former President Roh Moo-hyun, there can be no doubt that his vision for transforming Northeast Asia is as far-reaching. While Moon has been more careful to assuage the U.S. president, less abrasive in his language toward Japan, and more strategic in reaching out to leaders in China and Russia, his strategy of putting North Korea at the forefront of regional realignment has similar geopolitical ambition. The objective is the rejuvenation of a reintegrated peninsula with the capacity to steer actions by all of the great powers rather than falling prey again to their machinations that are not in Korea's interest.

During his presidential election campaign, candidate Moon remarked of his life-long friend, Roh Moo-hyun: "If I take the office, I'll tell him at his memorial service, 'Now you rest in peace. I'll realize your unachieved dreams.'"<sup>1</sup> Though Moon served as a top aide in the Roh administration, he saw himself as ultimately returning to a career in law. But Roh's tragic suicide galvanized Moon to enter electoral politics for the first time and win a seat in the National Assembly.<sup>2</sup> It was fitting, then, that when Moon gave his first speech on his vision for inter-Korean relations at the Körber Foundation on July 6, 2017 he characterized himself as "inheriting" the engagement policy of his progressive predecessors Roh and Kim Dae-jung.<sup>3</sup>

Moon's 2018 engagement efforts would have made Roh proud. In just a year, Moon held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and was instrumental in facilitating the historic meeting between President Donald Trump and Kim in Singapore, the first-ever meeting between sitting leaders from the United States and North Korea. However, Moon inherited a different North Korea than his predecessors. The North Korea Roh confronted had conducted just one nuclear test. By the time Moon took office, North Korea had conducted five tests and would conduct a sixth in the first year of his presidency. During Roh's presidential term from 2003 to 2008, United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea related only to the import and export of WMD-related weapons, financial resources, certain services, and some luxury goods.<sup>4</sup>

Now, UN sanctions make almost all inter-Korean economic projects, notably reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex, impossible. The sanctions regime not only includes far-reaching restrictions on WMD-related imports and exports, but covers roughly 90 percent of all North Korean commercial exports including oil, gas, and refined petroleum, as well as stringent measures on DPRK vessels and financial transactions and assets, and prohibits DPRK citizens from working abroad.<sup>5</sup> U.S. sanctions go even further, limiting what an ally can accomplish.

In South Korea's other relationships, too, Moon confronts a set of challenges quite different from those of Roh. Handling the United States and China requires Moon to balance two competing approaches to both South Korea and North Korea. In Trump, he has at once found a partner willing to engage with the North to an impressive degree and an unpredictable ally with a transactional view of the alliance. He also faces a China increasingly willing to use its economic leverage to influence matters on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, the United States' strong emphasis on U.S.-China strategic competition has led to unprecedented pressure for South Korea to make an impossible choice between its two largest trading partners and the countries with the largest impact on inter-Korean reconciliation. In the past year, Moon has presided also over the most volatile period in ROK-Japan relations

since their normalization in 1965. Apparent attempts early in his presidency to stabilize relations with Tokyo failed, as the boundaries between lingering disputes stemming from Japan's colonization of South Korea and security and economic relations broke down.

In pursuing inter-Korean détente in this context, Moon has sought geopolitical stability through balance, autonomy, and engagement. He has sought balance between the United States and China in order to avoid disrupting either relationship and to encourage constructive engagement with North Korea from all parties. He has sought autonomy in inter-Korean relations to avoid undue foreign influence on the process, a long-time goal of both North and South Korea. He has also attempted, to a varying degree, to orchestrate not only engagement with North Korea by South Korea, but also by the United States, while welcoming a stable security environment conducive to inter-Korean détente. In 2018 Moon appeared to succeed in a remarkable diplomatic balancing act, engaging all parties and gaining a leadership role in the process.

This strategy has had diminishing success, particularly in the past year. In attempting to strike a balance between China and the United States, Moon's middle of the road strategy did not placate China, and Beijing cut off high-level diplomatic ties with Seoul from the period the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Missile Defense System) deployment was approved early in 2016 until late 2017. Moreover, despite an agreement reached between South Korea and China in October 2017, wherein South Korea affirmed the "Three Noes" demanded by Xi, and to Chinese support for Moon's opening in 2018 to Kim, Chinese dissatisfaction mounted with the triangular ROK-U.S.-DPRK focus of the diplomacy, instead of more Sino-ROK coordination and ROK yielding by bypassing certain sanctions as China had hoped.

The Moon administration attempted to satisfy both the United States and China in its framing of the decision to deploy the system. On October 30, 2017, Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha announced three conditions of the deployment: 1) the ROK would not consider any additional THAAD deployments, 2) the ROK would not join an integrated missile defense network led by the United States, and 3) the ROK would not enter into a trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan.<sup>6</sup> To not deploy the system would cause a major rift in the U.S.-ROK alliance and contribute to an impression in Washington that South Korea was leaning away from the United States and towards China. However, to deploy the system would potentially invite even further retaliation from China, which had already proved costly for South Korean businesses. The so called "Three Noes" were not explicitly new policy – the ROK has held these principles for some time. However, in announcing them relative to the THAAD deployment decision it attempted to both assuage concerns about the system potentially being aimed at containing China and to prioritize the alliance and THAAD's utility for defending against the North Korean threat.

Moon also miscalculated how far the United States would go in pursuing confidence building measures with North Korea without clear signs of denuclearization; he got ahead of U.S. efforts in a way that led to moments of uncoordinated response and, ultimately, South Korea being sidelined by the negotiating strategies of both Pyongyang and Washington. Above all, Moon could not overcome the unmistakable strategy of Kim to get sanctions relief without taking serious steps toward denuclearization and to focus on Trump with little regard for Moon.

## The Moon Administration's Perception of Risk

Particularly after Moon began to implement the confidence building measures in the Panmunjom Declaration in 2018, he received criticism that his approach to North Korea ignored the strategic realities posed by its asymmetric threat. To classify Moon as one-dimensionally “dovish” would, however, be to forget his first year in office, when his actions demonstrated that he does indeed take the North Korean threat seriously. On July 4, 2017, after just two months in office, North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile that could theoretically reach the U.S. mainland, the first test of its kind.<sup>7</sup> Just three days after the test, Moon urged countries at the G20 summit to firmly respond to North Korea's provocations, stating that “to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, which has emerged as a global threat, the international community has to further intensify pressure against the North, including through a new UN Security Council resolution.” In the two days after North Korea's ICBM test, South Korea conducted live-fire missile drills off its east coast and conducted combined missile firing drills with the United States.<sup>8</sup> Though these drills were previously scheduled, they publicly displayed South Korea's military power in the face of an escalating North Korean threat. Moon's responses assuaged Trump's potential ire, given the skepticism the U.S. president had expressed about the alliance, and accompanied Xi's support at the UN for much tougher sanctions. Thus, in 2017, Moon paid little price for looking tough.

North Korea's ICBM test sparked escalation of Trump's rhetoric toward Kim, with his infamous statement that North Korean threats “will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen” made just a month later.<sup>9</sup> Amidst continuously intensifying rhetoric between Washington and Pyongyang in the summer of 2017, North Korea fired a ballistic missile directly over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido on August 28, an unprecedented provocation. Four days later, on September 2, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test. On September 15, it launched another ballistic missile over Hokkaido. Kim's actions united other nations in their opposition.

Although we may never know if he was bluffing or not, Trump's rhetoric made the threat of war seem quite real during this period. Again, Moon did not reward North Korea's bad behavior but acted in coordination with the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and the international community to respond to and condemn North Korea's actions. Immediately after the first missile launch over Japan, Moon ordered an “overwhelming show of force” in response.<sup>10</sup> South Korea, within hours of the launch, conducted a live-bombing drill in Gangwon province. In a rare move, the Agency for Defense Development made this footage public to showcase the ROK's ability to decisively strike targets in North Korea and even take out its leadership.<sup>11</sup> After an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong briefed the press that he had spoken twice with his U.S. counterpart and that South Korea would seek the “most powerful sanctions” against North Korea.<sup>12</sup> China agreed to such measures as well.

For Moon's conservative predecessors, provocations of this nature were cause for scaling down engagement with Pyongyang as a punishing measure. After the sinking of the Cheonan on March 26, 2010, former President Lee Myung-bak issued the “May 24 measures,” which effectively shut down most forms of inter-Korean exchange and economic cooperation.

After North Korea's fourth nuclear test, former President Park Geun-hye shuttered the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the last bastion of inter-Korean economic cooperation. Neither decision was made as a reaction to a single event, but after a long string of North Korean provocations during both presidencies. Behind these decisions one sees a defining assumption of conservative ideology in South Korea: continuing cooperative projects during periods of provocation rewards bad behavior. The only way to induce the Kim regime to change is by increasing the stakes of its provocations through a stronger defense posture, and by cutting it off from the international community economically and politically, thereby making denuclearization and political change the only path to sanctions relief and prosperity.

Even as Moon called for provocations to be met "with stern responses to prevent North Korea from making misjudgments," he maintained that the possibility of dialogue remained open.<sup>13</sup> Progressives have historically been far more open to engaging North Korea, even in periods of heightened tension. The Six-Party Talks and every inter-Korean summit (2000, 2007, and three in 2018) occurred under progressive presidents. As such, the political narrative in South Korea often casts them as unalarmed by the North Korea threat. However, arguments for engagement are far more complex than that. Rather than the difference in opinion stemming from a lack of concern, it stems from opposing assumptions in progressive and conservatives' calculation of risk in regard to North Korea. For conservatives, engagement (particularly in the economic realm) is often considered risky, as it can directly or indirectly provide political legitimacy or economic resources to prop-up the regime. Potential positive incentives are regarded as rewarding bad behavior, which disincentivizes the regime from change. In its most extreme form, this view results in zero-sum policies toward North Korea, in which any form of engagement can potentially be both a benefit to Pyongyang and a detriment to Seoul as it prolongs the longevity of the regime.

However, Moon calculates risk differently from his conservative counterparts. For Moon and other progressives, engagement with North Korea creates positive incentives for the reduction of tensions on the peninsula. If North Korea's incentive to develop and maintain a nuclear weapons capability is for regime survival, then North Korea will consider denuclearization only when the international community, and particularly the United States, can sufficiently demonstrate that it does not intend to exterminate the regime. Measures to accomplish this include providing security guarantees (though they are often poorly defined), limited sanctions relief for cooperative economic projects, and an end of war declaration or peace treaty to end the Korean War. Where many conservatives see a zero-sum game in which anything gained by the regime before serious denuclearization is a loss for South Korea, progressives see incremental incentives and gradual economic gains for North Korea as beneficial for building trust that will lead to denuclearization. They believe that pressure can be used initially to bring North Korea to the negotiating table, but ultimately engagement is the means of de-escalation. Not engaging risks degrading trust that is essential for denuclearization and peace, and in turn increases North Korea's incentive to maintain its nuclear program and its threatening defense posture. Thus far, neither progressive nor conservative presidents' approaches have deterred North Korea from continuing to advance its nuclear program. As Moon attempted to test an engagement-based policy once more, with new leaders in both Pyongyang and Washington, his first priority was to stabilize relations with the United States and China in order to create an environment conducive to engagement. 2018 presented a chance to do just that.

## Geopolitical Stability through Balance and Autonomy

Moon faced major obstacles to creating a stable security environment at the beginning of his term. He had two major foreign policy issues to confront immediately, both controversial and questionably legitimate as they were decided under the corrupt Park administration: China's response to THAAD, and maintenance of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan (with the "comfort women" agreement in the mix, although it was not seen as a security matter.) Further, skepticism in Washington about Moon's progressive intentions, compounded by Trump's new rhetoric about insufficient burden sharing put Moon in a corner as well, given his aspirations for inter-Korean engagement that required U.S. support.

With extremely serious and pervasive corruption revealed under the Park administration, and with the revelation that Park had taken and solicited advice from a longtime friend with no security clearance, many decisions made by Park had been called into question. Particularly, GSOMIA was signed on November 22, 2016, just weeks before Park was impeached by the National Assembly.<sup>14</sup> Although public support for THAAD deployment was strong in 2016 following North Korea's nuclear test, it declined when the U.S. military appeared to be expediting the installation of THAAD weeks before Moon's election in an attempt to deny him room to maneuver on the decision, which he had promised to review.<sup>15</sup> Also, the "comfort women" agreement with Tokyo, which Park declared a "final and irreversible" resolution of the issue, was never popular with the public – a joint South Korea-Japan opinion poll conducted from June to July in 2017 (two months into Moon's term) showed just 21.3 percent of South Korean respondents approved of the agreement.<sup>16</sup> No less urgent was the challenge of putting relations with China back on track given China's biting informal sanctions against the ROK for THAAD and the hold put on high-level diplomacy. None of Moon's plans could be achieved if he could not reboot this relationship, but China's demands seemed incompatible with U.S. ones.

### **Public Opinion and Domestic Legitimacy**

Moon faced a challenge in responding to these issues in a way that would support stability in the security and diplomatic environment to facilitate his inter-Korea agenda. First, he had to ensure his decisions were viewed as legitimate by the South Korean public in order to restore their faith in democratic institutions, which had declined in the wake of the Park Geun-hye scandal. He sought legitimacy through processes that allowed him the flexibility and time to make decisions that would both satisfy the public and address the geopolitical realities of the situation. At the THAAD deployment site in Seongju, residents were concerned about the environmental and health effects of radiation from THAAD's X-band radar system.<sup>17</sup> After the system was proved to be harmless through an environmental impact assessment, Moon decided to deploy the system in September 2017. The environmental assessment allowed him to placate some fears by reviewing impact and processes while still taking appropriate defensive measures in response to the North Korean threat.

On the "comfort women" agreement, Moon took a similar path, asking an independent commission of experts to review the process by which the agreement was formed. It concluded that the process was flawed, primarily in that it did not take a victim-centered

approach.<sup>18</sup> In response, the Moon administration criticized the agreement without seeking to renegotiate it and rejected the notion that the issue was “solved.” While the deal remained unpopular, Moon’s actions lent transparency to the process, and his declaration that the issue required long-term redress reflected public opinion. In response to the other issue with Japan, GSOMIA, Moon relied on a justification based on his “two-track” approach, to separate historical and security issues. Though this strategy would break down in 2019, it provided an explanation for his maintenance of the agreement at the time.<sup>19</sup>

On relations with China, Moon made concessions to secure a summit with Xi Jinping, promising no additional THAAD missiles, no participation in the U.S. missile defense network, and no trilateral military ties with Japan as well as the United States. Some accused him of sacrificing sovereign decisions, giving China a veto under pressure. Moreover, China continued to complain about THAAD and keep in place some of its informal sanctions. In 2018 Moon could proceed with his North Korean diplomacy without worrying that Chinese distrust would be an obstacle, but, much as Moon’s first moves with Japan did not alleviate deep distrust of him, so too did his diplomacy with China fail to suppress growing Chinese disquiet at Moon’s 2018 focus only on the DPRK and United States. With Trump riling bilateral relations with his remarks, Abe expecting the worst from Moon as a court verdict on forced labor compensation loomed, and Xi intent on applying more pressure on Moon for security cooperation, Moon wooed Kim with just fragile support.

Moon’s efforts to win trust from the public were necessary to establish the legitimacy of his government. He had a balance to strike between public opinion and geopolitical realities, but also needed to strike a balance in his relations with neighboring countries in order to stabilize the regional security environment enough to allow his inter-Korean agenda to proceed. After promoting domestic stability, Moon would prioritize regional stability in the security realm.

### **The Need for Balance and Autonomy**

Moon had to make difficult decisions on how to balance the competing strategic visions of his neighbors in order to secure their support for his inter-Korean agenda, even as he maintained that he would put South Korea in the “driver’s seat and lead Korean Peninsula-related issues based on cooperation with our neighbors.”<sup>20</sup> Roh also had a vision of a “balancing role,” in which the ROK would “lead in building a cooperative security structure in the region and working together closely with other neighboring countries based on the Korea-U.S. alliance.” When he articulated his view of South Korea as a balancer, he made a controversial proclamation that the “map of power in Northeast Asia could shift, depending on what choice we make.” The idea of the ROK as a balancer, and this sentiment in particular, drew the ire of conservative South Koreans and critics in the United States, who interpreted the concept as an intention to turn away from the U.S. toward China.

Moon’s intentions for regional geopolitics remain unclear, as he is sticking closely to a narrow emphasis on how the peninsula will gain through a North-South breakthrough. Reducing tensions and asserting South Korea’s role both create a stable environment for inter-Korean détente and allow Seoul to avoid ceding influence on foreign policy to an outside power. The desire to gain independence from foreign influence in South Korea’s foreign and defense policy is rooted in a centuries-long history of interference that impeded

Korea's self-determination. Hundreds of years of Chinese suzerainty, Japanese colonization from 1910 to 1945, and the division and subsequent occupation of Korea by the United States and Russia after World War II are always on people's minds. Yet, given the interests and maneuvers of other states, the prospects for autonomy remain distant.

The pursuit of autonomy is also a principle inherently relevant to inter-Korean relations. Every inter-Korean agreement since the 1972 Red Cross talks, the first formal inter-Korean meeting since the two countries' division, has included some statement declaring independence from foreign influence in the process of unification. Indeed, the Panmunjom Declaration resulting from the April 2018 summit declared that "The two sides will reconnect the blood relations of the nation and bring forward the future of co-prosperity and *independent reunification led by Koreans* [emphasis added] by achieving comprehensive and epochal improvement and development in inter-Korean relations."<sup>21</sup> In the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 as well, Kim and Moon "reaffirmed the principle of independence and self-determination of the Korean nation."<sup>22</sup> Naturally, as the division of Korea was imposed by foreign powers, the two Koreas are both adamant that the unification process be facilitated by themselves. The desire for a Korean-led diplomatic process is palpable in the Moon administration's rhetoric about South Korea's position in the "driver's seat" on Korean Peninsula issues.<sup>23</sup>

### **Between the United States and China**

The most challenging balance to strike is between the United States and China. Both are signatories of the Korean Armistice Agreement, and any formal peace treaty or end of war declaration would likely require the support of both. The Kim regime also sees the United States as an existential threat, seeking security guarantees from it as a prerequisite to denuclearization, should that be on its agenda. Both China and the United States are members of the UN Security Council, making their support critical to sanctions relief, which both South and North Korea see as a means of moving forward in inter-Korean cooperation and ultimately building trust. China and the United States are nuclear weapon states, and given the restrictions on non-nuclear states under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, they would be two of only five countries permitted to participate in the technical process of dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons program and infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, China is, of course, North Korea's largest trading partner and thus integral to the regime's survival, giving it more leverage over the North than the United States.<sup>25</sup> The practical realities of the United States' and China's influence constrains autonomy in inter-Korean relations.

Despite deeper strategic competition between the two, South Korea must pursue positive relations with both in order to maximize its potential on inter-Korean issues. Moon's treatment of the THAAD issue in 2017 illustrates his strategy for accomplishing this, though the opposing nature of the two countries' outlook on the peninsula resulted in only limited success.

China viewed the deployment of this defensive system as a means of denigrating China's own strategic capabilities. The system's radar, Beijing argued, could probe deeply into Chinese territory and detect the location of Chinese missile tests or launches.<sup>26</sup> The THAAD system raised China's anxieties about the potential for integrated trilateral missile defense

in the region, and China also made arguments that the system's deployment would spark an arms race in Northeast Asia. In short, China argued that the true target of THAAD is China rather than North Korea.

There is some question as to whether China's concerns are legitimately military-based or if the issue was an excuse to drive a wedge in the alliance, a popular view in both Seoul and Washington.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the reason, China pursued a strategy of intense diplomatic and economic pressure on South Korea while claiming that the cause was consumer displeasure with South Korean products. Sanctions heavily impacted Lotte, the company that owned the golf course in Seongju where THAAD would be deployed, as well as South Korean cultural exports such as television dramas and K-pop, the tourism industry, and car makers, along with many more exports.<sup>28</sup> The National Assembly's Budget Office estimated the economic cost at \$6.8 billion, though other outlets such as the Hyundai Research Institute put losses at over \$16 billion.<sup>29</sup>

This temporary settlement over THAAD did not resolve the challenge South Korea faces in its position between the United States and China. Moon may have overestimated the extent to which his "Three Noes" strategy would placate Beijing. Relations remained chilly, even after the two countries agreed during a December 2019 visit by Foreign Minister Wang Yi to South Korea, the first in four years, that they would "completely normalize" relations.<sup>30</sup>

Public opinion of China in South Korea took a decidedly negative turn. One poll found that in March 2017, the favorability of China dropped (on a ten-point scale with 10 being the most favorable) from 4.6 for progressives and 4.2 for conservatives to 3.2 for both. In the prior two years, it had never dipped below 4 and was often above 5. As of July 2019, opinions have still not recovered completely, consistently hovering between 4.2 and 3.6. An October 2019 study found that 78 percent of South Korean respondents believed that "South Korea should prioritize strengthening ties with the United States over those with China."<sup>31</sup> Just 14 percent believed the opposite.

Other actions by the Moon administration have made some policy makers in Washington concerned that South Korea would not "choose" the United States over China. Moon has thus far not formally endorsed the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, he has expressed interest in joining China's Belt and Road initiative.<sup>33</sup> In reality, choosing between the United States and China represents a false choice for South Korea. In economic terms, South Korea, as a democracy, cannot order corporations not to engage with China, nor would it want to – China is its largest trading partner. Moon is aware that China also has great influence over his most important policy goal of repairing relations with North Korea. As such, South Korea has little incentive to upset its relationship with China at the moment.

So far, though U.S. anxieties over South Korea's choice persist, direct pressure has been limited. If Moon remains intent on straddling, the immediate obstacle is intensifying Chinese pressure.<sup>34</sup> Chinese articles convey intensified demands on Moon, which were reflected in Wang Yi's visit to Seoul followed by Moon's meeting with Xi in Beijing, both in December 2019. The focus has turned to security, to security-linked economic ties, and to defiance of the U.S. on these and other matters, including North Korean policy. The pandemic in 2020 also has caused some in both countries to fault the other for travel restrictions.

## Geopolitical Obstacles to Regional Coordination on North Korea Policy

The Olympics presented the perfect opportunity for Moon's diplomatic image-making. He appeared to be the main facilitator in creating an unprecedented diplomatic opening and calming tensions when they seemed to be mounting. The United States, China, Russia, and Japan all seemed to be on the same page to deescalate tension if denuclearization was on the table. Kim expressed willingness to begin discussions with the United States over his nuclear program, which set talks in motion. Moon was delighted, but the process and speed of U.S. diplomatic engagement, though welcome, made inclusion of other regional stakeholders difficult. On March 9, 2018, Trump surprised observers by readily accepting Kim's invitation to meet after the latter reportedly expressed a willingness to refrain from nuclear testing and pursue denuclearization.<sup>35</sup> Trump surprised even the Pentagon and South Korea in his press briefing after the Singapore summit when he announced that the U.S. would suspend military exercises.<sup>36</sup> This unilateral pronouncement, in which he echoed North Korean rhetoric in characterizing the exercises as hostile "war games," would be an indicator of the uncoordinated way in which the United States would approach diplomacy with North Korea throughout 2018.<sup>37</sup>

With the United States leading the process, Moon had little room to bring other stakeholders in on his own. After the Singapore summit, it appeared the United States (and Trump in particular) was serious about pursuing engagement, but the nature of Trump's negotiations began to leave Moon behind. Moon had little incentive or opportunity to include other players, particularly as ROK relations with China, Japan, and Russia were all taking a turn for the worse in 2018.

### China

Relations with China had not recovered from the THAAD dispute, and diplomatic contact was stalled. As the U.S. process took off, China began to initiate expanded contacts with North Korea, influenced by geopolitical considerations and less mindful of Trump than in 2017, given tension building over trade. It is highly concerned about U.S. forces on the peninsula and the goals of the U.S.-ROK alliance in general. Maintaining economic and political leverage over North Korea serves multiple purposes, while keeping the U.S. threat further from China's borders. But as Trump made the unprecedented move to accept an invitation from Kim to meet, Beijing began to feel it would be excluded from the process. A U.S.-led process would be certain not to defend Chinese interests. Both Moon and Trump appeared enthusiastic about signing a peace treaty, a process in which Beijing feels strongly it should be included. China quickly began to change its tone on North Korea. The North Korean leader was invited to meet with Xi in China, making his first foreign visit since assuming power in 2011, to meet Xi from March 25-28, 2018. This would be the first of five meetings between the two leaders in 18 months, all timed around inter-Korean or U.S.-DPRK summits. Though Beijing continued to call for denuclearization, the timing suggests that it sought influence or insight into the process through the North rather than the South or the United States. After supporting increased sanctions and criticizing Pyongyang's escalation with Washington, Beijing appeared less ready to align its efforts with the two allies.

After the Hanoi summit ended in failure in February 2019, China's position became clearer, as it assumed that the impasse would endure. Xi visited Pyongyang but not Seoul. He called for the Security Council to relax sanctions without further demands on North Korea and at sharp variance with the U.S. stance. Lax enforcement of sanctions apparently eased the pressure on Kim. Furthermore, China shifted to applying pressure on Moon to work together even if the result would strain the ROK-U.S. alliance. Moon was faulted for bypassing China and being too deferential to the United States. Moon was in a bind, lessened only by the fact that Trump was eager to keep alive the illusion that his diplomacy with Kim had not failed, nor had Moon's.

## Japan

Relations with Japan began to worsen in 2018. Abe was the leader most in favor of maximum pressure, when Trump seemed to be wavering. Abe briefly appeared to be open to dialogue when he signaled his willingness to meet with Kim if the issue of Japanese citizens abducted from North Korea could be resolved, and subsequently offered to meet without preconditions. Abe's seemingly conciliatory shift was more a calculation to insert Japanese interests into a diplomatic process in which he has been sidelined rather than the product of a genuine move toward engagement.<sup>38</sup> These shifts were motivated by concern that Japan's interests were not being represented in U.S. negotiations with North Korea and that Abe was left the only regional leader without a summit with Kim. Moon sought to actively engage Abe at the beginning of his term. Indeed, he first met with Abe just two months after his election despite ongoing tension over historical issues, while his predecessor, Park, refrained from having a summit with the Japanese leader for three years.<sup>39</sup> Although Moon said he aspired to a "two-track" approach, he had little in common with Abe to make this a reality. Moon was not regarded as interested in Japan playing an active role in North Korean diplomacy in any case, compounding wariness that he is the heir to Roh's worldview that was antagonistic to the "pro-Japan faction" in postwar South Korea and to the way bilateral relations had unfolded from the time of normalization in 1965.

In 2019 ROK-Japan relations hit arguably their lowest point since normalizing relations in 1965. In the past, while disputes over historical issues over Japan's colonization ebbed and flowed in domestic political rhetoric, economic and security cooperation grew incrementally. But the lines between these issue areas were blurred in 2018 and 2019. The catalyst for their deterioration was arguably the South Korean Supreme Court's string of court decisions on behalf of South Koreans who were forced to labor in Japanese factories during colonization.<sup>40</sup> Notably, these decisions came from South Korea's court system and not from the executive branch. They became a catalyst for conflict between the Moon and Abe administrations on both security and economic issues.

The two states faced a security issue when Japan claimed that a South Korean naval vessel had locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese plane during an operation to rescue a North Korean fishing vessel on December 21, 2018.

In the context of simultaneous contention over both historical and security issues, in 2019, Japan imposed export controls on South Korea, which it defended on the basis of thinly veiled national security concerns over ROK exports of sensitive materials, ultimately removing South Korea from its trade white list. South Korea responded in kind,

and upped the ante by threatening to let the GSOMIA intelligence-sharing pact expire later in the year, although Moon announced South Korea would not withdraw just hours before the expiration deadline.

Moon is aware that the Japanese government lacks the freedom to negotiate with North Korea absent progress on the abductee issue, an issue of low importance to South Korea. Resolving lingering historical issues, however, is a top priority for Seoul. Also, South Korea is increasingly wary of Tokyo's military intentions, pointing to the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and subsequent efforts to entirely revise it. South Korean national identity is steeped in collective historical memory of suffering during colonization. Japan's contrasting narrative of the colonial period threatens this construction of national identity.

Moon's geopolitical outlook is informed by Japan's relation to South Korean national identity more so than by shared security interests. While Moon attempted early on to separate the issues, the concurrence of multiple historical and security disputes in a short period of time influenced both sides. The trade war from July 2019 led to public boycotts and a sharp drop in tourism, and the pandemic of 2020 saw each side quickly impose a travel ban on the other, straining ties too.

## **Russia**

The ROK views Russia as a potential economic partner and a security actor that could either placate North Korea or cause trouble for Seoul's policy goals. In principle, Moon's "New Northern Policy" and Russia's "Turn to the East" are compatible. Each aims to increase economic cooperation with the other through the complementary aspects of their economies.<sup>41</sup> Moon's hope is that economic cooperation will facilitate economic integration that disincentivizes destabilizing actions and reduces the potential for conflict on the peninsula. At a minimum, his talk of north-south corridors for energy and transportation would keep Russian President Vladimir Putin from being a spoiler.

However, there are three critical obstacles to realizing this vision. First, as Moon noted in his rollout of the New Northern Policy, cooperation with North Korea is an essential component of realizing broad economic cooperation with Russia. North Korea is a geographical barrier, whose closed borders prevent critical connecting infrastructure from being built. The ROK and Russia are aligned on the need for limited sanctions relief, but U.S. unwillingness makes this impossible, and Russia declines to put further economic pressure on the North. Second, closer coordination between the ROK and Russia might undermine U.S. trust in South Korea's priorities, given the negative Russo-U.S. relationship. Third, Russia's economic policies have limited the appeal of investment there, and its military policies, such as a joint flyover with China, in July 2019, of South Korea's airspace, caused shock about its intentions. These obstacles both block and disincentivize Seoul from prioritizing cooperation with Moscow on security issues, including those regarding North Korea.

## Conclusion

Moon's ultimate goal for inter-Korean engagement is to work toward the progressive vision of unification referred to as "peaceful coexistence," which refers to a number of initiatives to create an "inter-Korean community" that will lay the foundation for true political unification.<sup>42</sup> The Ministry of Unification identifies three goals to facilitate this: 1) peacefully resolving the nuclear issue, 2) enforcing previous inter-Korean agreements, and 3) developing a "single market" through economic integration of the Korean Peninsula. Moon sees this process as independent of the alliance, a sentiment he expressed repeatedly.<sup>43</sup> However, the peace regime he envisions inherently requires U.S. support. In his attempts to assert autonomy in the inter-Korea process, Moon developed a process that appeared to the United States to be a liability rather than a complement to its priorities. In fact, it is impossible to divorce the alliance and inter-Korean issues or to separate them from the overall context of international relations not only in Northeast Asia, but also in the global arena.

Moon has aspired to transform the geopolitical environment of Northeast Asia, starting rather cautiously in 2017, acting boldly in 2018, struggling with an impasse and new pressure in 2019, and battling with a pandemic ripping through the region and the world in early 2020. He was guided by an irrepressible strategy, derived from other progressive leaders of South Korea. None of his assumptions proved correct, leaving his country more beleaguered than it has been at any time in the post-cold war period. Yet, in the new era of COVID-19, Koreans are proving that they are resilient, while geo-economics are disrupted and geopolitics have been put on pause.

Moon banked above all on Kim's willingness to make a sharp turn to diplomacy and Trump becoming intrigued by the prospect of winning the Nobel Prize as the architect of peace on the peninsula. Seemingly successful, Moon soon found that Kim would discard him as just a catalyst unworthy of a lasting role. Trump was distrustful and dismissive of Moon's agenda, even as he shook the alliance with inconsistent and extreme demands. Moon had little leverage to steer diplomacy with either and between the two. His activism led him to be nearly powerless in a process most central to his agenda.

The wider regional context revealed similar illusions and unrelenting backlash. Instead of China taking satisfaction with Moon's push for diplomacy and capitulation on the "Three Noes," it grew more assertive in pressing Moon to accept its central role and strategy. If Moon only hinted at a balance between Beijing and Washington in Seoul's foreign policy, Xi demanded it by taking advantage of the diplomatic track Moon had opened. Moon sought to engage Abe at the beginning of his term, but historical issues overtook all other aspects of the relationship and roused Abe into a trade war and downturn in relations. Although South Korea repeatedly asked the United States to mediate between it and Japan, the U.S. did not intervene until Moon threatened to cancel GSOMIA, a move that caused

U.S. alarm at Moon's judgment.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, doubling down on images of a special ROK-Russian bond via the latest iteration of a northern strategy, Moon saw Putin tilt further toward North Korea, in the footsteps of Xi's reconciliation with Kim. South Korea was being blamed by all sides for its actions or lack thereof without any apparent recourse in line with Moon's ambitions.

Heading into 2020, obstacles to Moon's vision are magnified. The impasse in denuclearization negotiations after failed talks in Stockholm in October 2019 has not been resolved. North Korea continues to launch and test missiles, and conduct military exercises, and it gives no indication that it is willing to continue negotiations at this time. Meanwhile, as nations grapple with a global pandemic, other priorities have overtaken denuclearization. The spread of COVID-19 has overtaken all other priorities, particularly in the U.S.-China relationship as a proxy for their strategic competition. Meanwhile, the alliance is experiencing a low point as the United States and South Korea failed to reach a compromise on an appropriate level of South Korea's cost-burden for the stationing of U.S. forces, causing about half of the 9,000 South Korean workers to be furloughed without pay for the first time in the seven-decade history of the alliance.<sup>45</sup> Although Moon's Democratic Party achieved a comfortable majority in the April National Assembly election this year, Moon is moving into the last two years of his single-term, which will galvanize even members of his own party to criticize unpopular aspects of his policies in order to secure a nomination. For the remainder of his presidency, Moon will confront intractable obstacles that will almost certainly prevent him from achieving his vision of inter-Korean peace.

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