

# *Seoul's up-and-down Romance with China amid US-China Rivalry: A Korean Perspective*

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*South Korea's quest to become a middle power, articulated through autonomy in foreign policy, has been challenged in the ambience of great power competition reality between the USA and China. This article delineates South Korean foreign policy's complex nature in the evolving East Asian regional context, focusing on Seoul's relationship with China in particular. Many observers noted that South Korea has in recent years been increasingly leaning towards China, despite the fact that it is a military-pact ally of the USA. It also comes as a bewilderment to outsiders to notice that South Korea has been 'cold-shouldering' Japan, the world's number three economy. It does not necessarily mean that Seoul maintains good relations with China either. The two nations have yet to overcome the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) dispute. This article also scrutinises how the USA plays an important role in South Korea's relations with its two neighbours. Seoul has been in search of diplomatic autonomy between the world's two most powerful nations. The process has been tumultuous. The future outlook seems uncertain.*

**Keywords:** South Korea, Korea–China relations, South Korean diplomacy, Korea–Japan relations, Korea–US relations, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)

## INTRODUCTION

To many observers, South Korea, situated at the crossroads between the USA and China in East Asian geopolitics, has been seen gradually leaning towards China in recent years; for instance, the former president Park Geun-hye (presidency: February 2013 to March 2017) participated in the 2015 grand military parade at Beijing's Tiananmen Square, hosted by Chinese leader Xi Jinping, incurring concerns from its primary ally, Washington. Park was the only president from US ally nations to attend the ceremony, sitting side by side with Xi. Indeed, South Korea's diplomatic footprints

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for the 5 years can be best told by gazing at its interactions with the USA and China. The former is its most important military-pact ally. The latter is its largest trading partner. Meanwhile, Japan has been largely missing from South Korea's diplomatic purview because South Korea has prioritised its diplomacy towards the world's two most powerful nations. South Korea's 'cold-shouldering' Japan, the world's third largest economy, often invites bewilderment. Meanwhile, North Korea has been the top diplomatic mandate for South Korea, especially seen as such under President Moon Jae-in (presidency: May 2017 to May 2022),<sup>1</sup> who succeeded Park. Moon, a son of a North Korean refugee family who fled to the South during the Korean War, is known to uncommonly eager to create a breakthrough in North Korea's nuclear crisis, often dubbed the Korean Peace Process. Moon initially played a mediator role in the nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang that culminated in the historic Singapore Summit in 2018 between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Yet, the talks fell into a stalemate after the collapse of the Hanoi summit (2019). The talks have since not found a new momentum, while Trump stepped down in January 2021, despite his disgraceful attempt to stay in power by mobilising a vote 'fraud' protest in Washington DC that turned violent. Moon's term is also waning as South Koreans will vote a new president in March 2022. Moon's term officially terminates 2 months afterwards.

Taken together, South Korea's diplomacy for the past several years could be summed up as the world's 12th largest economy (IMF 2020), struggling to find its niche in the intensifying rivalry between the USA and China, while its waning relationship with Japan was relegated to the back burner; the Moon Administration identified the improvement in inter-Korean relations as a leverage builder in dealing with the world's two superpowers and secure diplomatic autonomy. However, with the North Korean nuclear negotiations in a prolonged deadlock, followed by COVID-19, South Korea stands at a diplomatic low point, while its domestic economy was hit hard by the pandemic. This article covers major events in South Korea's contemporary foreign policy up to the present. It does not attempt to be comprehensive<sup>2</sup>; instead, it provides details

<sup>1</sup> South Korea's constitution stipulates a president's term to a one-time, five-year term. It is a reflection of the nation's checkered history in which military dictators used to rule the nation for years through a coup. For instance, former President Park Chung-hee's presidency lasted as many as 18 years until he was shot to death by his own spy chief in 1979. South Korea's transition to a democratic government began in 1987.

<sup>2</sup> There are a multitude of references to South Korea's contemporary foreign policy literature, each with pronounced strengths for its respective focus. Since English articles are easily searchable for this matter, a few Korean-language research texts may be introduced here as references to those who conduct research in Korean. For a comprehensive review of Korea–China relations up to early 2010s, see “중국의 부상과 한반도의 미래” [The rise of China and the future of the Korean Peninsula] by Chung (2011). For those who are interested in the complicated psychological undercurrent between Korea and China, refer to Duckgoo Chung's “한국을 보는 중국의 본심” [China's true sentiment toward South Korea] (2011). For the role of the USA in the Korea–Japan conflict, refer to “미국의 동맹 네트워크와 한일갈등: 미국은 방관자로 남을 수 있는가” [The American alliance network and Korea–Japan conflict] by Cheolhee Park (2020). For an earlier reference to Korea–China relations in the context of Northeast Asian

and nuances of a few select events to highlight Seoul's motivations and considerations. Looking ahead, South Korea feels uncertain about how the future unfolds from here.

### CHINA'S SOFT-POWER OUTREACH TO SOUTH KOREA UNDER PARK GEUN-HYE

Amid China's spectacular economic rise and resulting geopolitical shifts, especially vis-à-vis the USA, China increasingly sees South Korea as a 'swing state' that can be won over by Beijing. China sees South Korea as the 'weakest link' among the Washington–Seoul–Tokyo trilateral security structure.<sup>3</sup> China views the trilateral security structure<sup>4</sup> as Washington's primary tool to contain China in the region. China thinks it can work on Seoul to pull it away from Washington. China has a tool constituted for such a purpose: North Korea. China is widely seen as the country that wields more influence on North Korea than any other nation in the world. In 2013, China gained diplomatic currency from South Korea by staging more rigour in enforcing UN sanctions on Pyongyang. 'South Korea was pleased with China', a Chinese interlocutor, assessed.<sup>5</sup> At that time, South Korea was under the conservative Park Geun-hye Administration. In South Korea, a 'conservative' government is loosely characterised as pro-American, anti-North Korean, and anti-Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

Seoul–Tokyo ties, a crucial element of Washington's Asia-Pacific web of alliances, have been troubled by the neighbours' historical and territorial disputes. China, which has a similar problem with Japan, believes that Seoul is, after all, closer to China than to Japan. China also senses that the Korea–US alliance is facing challenges as Seoul tries to reposition itself in the global order in a manner commensurate with its status as a 'middle power', a term often used in South Korea to describe itself in the global pecking order of power metrics in its relations with Washington, which means Seoul's is trying to find its independent voice. The dispute over the ROK-US civilian nuclear agreement, or Seoul's desire to produce its own nuclear fuel, or Seoul's unfulfilled wish to increase its missile capability in terms of distance and weight are some of the examples. China also did not miss Seoul's debate about the credibility of USA's

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geopolitical order, refer to “동북아 질서와 한중관계의 미래” [The Northeastern order and the future of Korea–China relations] by Asan Institute for Policy Studies (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Washington and Seoul are allies. Washington and Tokyo are allies. However, Seoul and Tokyo are not allies. Hence, this article does not use the expression “trilateral alliance.”

<sup>4</sup> Note. Although both South Korea and Japan are allies of the USA, and although both South Korea and Japan are democracies, South Korea and Japan are not allies with each other. Hence, it is not a 'trilateral alliance' structure.

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview. Beijing, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, a liberal government in South Korea tends to favour engagement with North Korea and autonomy from the USA. Yet, this simplification is for those readers who are not familiar with South Korea's politics. The reality, of course, is more nuanced and complex.

deterrence against the threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea. It also noticed Seoul and Washington's differing expectations regarding the US threshold for entering the inter-Korean conflict.

In this vein, while US-ROK relations were described during the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye Administrations at a 'historic high', the alliance was evolving in a time of geostrategic and economic shifts in the region. Seoul feels that its alliance with Washington must overcome a 'fairness' issue. Washington allowed Japan to produce its own nuclear fuel, but Seoul has been barred from doing so. Washington shares intelligence with Australia on China, but it often does not do so with Seoul on North Korea. On several occasions, Washington even bypassed Seoul and struck a deal with North Korea, making Seoul nervous.

Seoul's pursuit of the so-called middle power strategy and assertion of more independence in its foreign policy sometimes strained the Washington-Seoul alliance. Meanwhile, China has been ramping up its charm offensive towards South Korea, one that was particularly conspicuous towards President Park Geun-hye.<sup>7</sup> China's state media had given her a very positive treatment, praising her ability to speak the Chinese language and her interest in the Chinese philosophical orientation. China's attention to details was impressive. When Chinese President Xi Jinping dispatched China's ranking female politician, Liu Yandong, to Park's inauguration ceremony, he made sure Liu visit Sogang University, Park's alma mater in Seoul. When Park wanted to talk with Xi to discuss North Korea, Xi readily honoured the request. (Hu Jintao never spoke with Lee Myung-bak, Park's immediate predecessor, on the phone throughout Lee's entire presidency.) A major publishing arm under the Chinese government printed Park's biography in Chinese with a lavish celebration. When B2 bombers flew from the USA to South Korea to participate in a joint drill with Seoul, the Chinese state-controlled media, which used to vociferously protest such actions in its vicinity, restrained from criticising Seoul. Beijing's charm offensive towards Park was meant to influence her early in presidency as she was in the process of fine-tuning her foreign policy.

South Korea was recalculating too. Seoul wanted to 'work on' China so that China would lean towards South Korea over North Korea and eventually support Seoul-led unification. The much-cited case of Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of the Central Party School's Study Times, suggested this effort might bear fruit. After North Korea's 3rd nuclear test in 2013, Deng argued China should 'abandon' North Korea in an op-ed piece in the Financial Times. He, however, was fired from his job for voicing a view that was apparently at odds with that of the Chinese Communist Party. Nonetheless, Seoul saw Deng's case as a sign of hope, reflecting an increasingly diversified debate in China over North Korea policy. Seoul was calculating that even if China would not immediately shift its North Korean policy, it could eventually. Hence, Seoul was willing to work on Beijing for the long term.

<sup>7</sup>Park is the daughter of former South Korean president Park Chung-hee.

**PARK GEUN-HYE AND XI JINPING**

In January 2016, in the wake of North Korea's 4th nuclear test,<sup>8</sup> President Park Geun-hye and her Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping did not speak to each other to discuss the matter that warrants close coordination. This came as a great contrast to the fact that Park held prompt phone consultations with US President Barack Obama and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe the very next day of the North's test. Nearly a month had passed by since Pyongyang's nuclear test, but Park and Xi still had not spoken to each other. It raised many eyebrows and generated a considerable hubbub among pundits.

Xi and Park first met in 2005 when Xi visited Seoul as the governor of the Zhejiang province. Xi requested a meeting with Park, who was at that time the head of a powerful conservative political party, which later became the ruling Saenuri Party.<sup>9</sup> The meeting was supposed to last for 30 min, but when they finished talking, two-and-a-half hours had passed. Thus, prior to the phone incident, they had known each other for over a decade. In fact, the bilateral ties under the two leaders were described to be 'intimate' (Jin 2016).

Since she took the presidential helm in 2013, Park had been pursuing a very robust policy that brought South Korea and China closer together. Even before she was sworn in, she sent her emissaries first to China to meet with Xi, breaking her predecessors' tradition of sending envoys first to the USA, Seoul's major military ally. As if to reciprocate Park's 'good-will gesture', Xi, after he was minted as the Communist Party chief in November 2012, also visited South Korea first in 2014. Xi's predecessors all visited first North Korea, China's ally from the Cold War era. Park and Xi held six summits by then, while Xi's first summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un materialised in March 2018. Pundits described the Seoul–Beijing relationship under Park and Xi as a diplomatic 'honeymoon'. On numerous occasions, the then Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se characterised the South Korea–China relationship as 'the best ever' (Tiezzi 2016).

Against the backdrop, news headlines questioned whether Park was 'tilting' towards China, reportedly making Washington suspicious and anxious. Park even conspicuously attended China's military parade in 2015, hosted by Xi. Park was the only leader of a US ally to attend. As if to reciprocate Park's extraordinary diplomatic gesture, according to Park, Xi insinuated Beijing would support for Seoul-led unification of the two Koreas. During a press briefing with reporters on board the presidential aircraft on the way back home from China, Park said that she and Xi had agreed to 'cooperate on the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula' (*Yonhap News* 2015). Importantly, Park went on to say, 'Various discussions with China would begin soon'. Many South Korean

<sup>8</sup>North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. As of December 2020, it had conducted a total of six nuclear tests, with the last one in 2017.

<sup>9</sup>Now it is the main opposition party, People Power Party (PPP).

media outlets portrayed it as a signal that the Chinese leadership under Xi was finally siding with South Korea over the North Korean issue. Against the backdrop, when North Korea conducted a nuclear test, it was all too natural for the public to expect that Park and Xi would immediately be on the phone to discuss a matter of mutual concern. That did not happen. Apparently, it was Xi's side that did not honour Park's desire to hold an emergency consultation on North Korea.

Park was not dejected. Perhaps thinking that her Chinese counterpart could use some nudge, she instead went public with her message to Xi. In a nationally televised news conference, Park pressed China to rein in North Korea. 'China has repeatedly said publicly that it would not tolerate North Korea's nuclear weapons. I think China is fully aware that if such a strong will is not matched by necessary measures, we cannot prevent fifth and sixth nuclear tests by the North or guarantee real peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula', she said (Choe 2016), concluding 'I trust China, as a permanent member of the Security Council, to play a necessary role'. To Park's plea, China responded with a tall silence.

Many South Koreans expressed dismay about China. Some argued that China's attitude amounted to a 'betrayal' of friendship. However, the perspective from the Chinese side on the matter was different. Professor Cai Jian, of the Center for Korean Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, for example, said that South Korea should distinguish personal friendship from national interest. 'Regardless of how good the personal friendship between the leaders is, at the end of the day the leader chooses to pursue the national interest', he said.<sup>10</sup> 'In fact', he argued, 'Park's decision to attend the Chinese military parade was also based on her consideration of South Korea's own national interest'.

Chinese experts on the Korean Peninsula argue that China's basic position in dealing with the North Korean issue had been clarified many times and had been consistent. According to China's Foreign Ministry website, the Chinese formula on North Korea is (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016):

- 1) Realising denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula;
- 2) safeguarding peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula; and
- 3) solving the nuclear issue through dialogue.

Even if Xi himself were personally on the phone with Park, they argue, Xi would not likely divert much from this stated principle. It would have been, therefore, inconvenient for Xi to pick up the phone.<sup>11</sup>

China's reserved attitude may also have to do with its diplomatic loss of face for China's leadership, as North Korea, an ostensible ally, conducted the nuclear test without the usual courtesy of notifying Beijing in advance. It was widely seen as a slap

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview. February 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview. February 2016.

in the face for China that is widely touted to have a special influence over North Korea. South Korea is also advised to understand China's 'two Koreas' policy. China's strategy is to strike a balance between the two Koreas. For China, South Korea is important, but North Korea is also important.<sup>12</sup> This challenges the popular view in South Korea that if China had to choose one from the two Koreas, it would automatically be South Korea. That may be the case economically, but not politically. China feels insecure about a unified Korea, led by South Korea that is allied with the USA with troops on its borders.

### EVOLUTION OF KOREA–CHINA RELATIONS

During the Cold War, Seoul and Beijing used to be ideological adversaries when South Korea was a staunch anti-Communist nation. After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, their relationship has developed mainly in terms of economic cooperation. Bilateral cooperation in the economic sector unfolded robustly until the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) dispute in 2016 began to cause a rift in relations. THAAD indicates the US THAAD interceptor missiles, deployed in South Korea by the USA. It is aimed against North Korea's missile and nuclear threats. However, it also angered China, the regional stakeholder.

Looking back, active management of the conflicting elements between the two sides was seen as not enough, for instance, Seoul and Beijing's coordination on North Korea. A former South Korean diplomat who had been involved in Korea–China relations from their early diplomatic inception observed: 'Except for the North Korean nuclear issue, there were virtually no problems in Korea–China relations'.<sup>13</sup> Such a comment may be a bit of simplification, but it underscores the overall stable development in bilateral ties. However, there have been also four major enduring problems with existing relations between Seoul and Beijing, and they are (a) North Korea, (b) the South Korea–US alliance, (c) growing asymmetric bilateral relations due to China's economic rise, and (d) the anti-China sentiment in South Korea and anti-South Korea sentiment in China, respectively. There have been times when the two have coordinated well on how to approach the North Korean nuclear issue, but there have also been many disagreements. Regarding Seoul's relationship with Washington, China has constantly taken issue with the Korea–US alliance, in particular the characterisation of whether the alliance is part of the US Asia-Pacific strategy (now, the Indo-Pacific Strategy) to curb the 'rise of China', rather than solely dealing with North Korea. Regarding this matter, Beijing constantly tried to confirm it whenever a new South Korean administration was elected.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Li Nan of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. February 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview. July 2019.



The 'asymmetrical relationship' and 'anti-China and anti-Korean sentiment' have only received sporadic media attention like a wound left to fester. There has not been enough recognition and response to the seriousness of the matter. The reason that the relationship between Korea and China has gradually changed to asymmetric relations with 'the playground tilting towards China' lies in the change in economic power disparity. At the time of diplomatic establishment in 1992, Korea's gross domestic product (GDP) was US\$329.9 billion, ranking 14th in the world, and China ranked 10th with US\$422.7 billion (*Yonhap News* 2012). In 2019, the size of China's economy was nine times that of Korea. Over the years, while China's trade dependence on Korea has been similar or diminished, Korea's trade dependence on China has deepened on the contrary. As seen in the THAAD retaliation, China has already begun to use Korea's dependence on trade as a means of political pressure on Seoul.

The anti-China sentiment among the South Korean public has been at a record-high level in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center, 75% of the South Korean public have unfavourable views towards China, and 83% of them have no confidence that Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping will do the right thing regarding world affairs (Silver et al. 2020). The sentiment got worse, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that started in China that exposed the Chinese government's attempt to silence early-warning whistleblowers and its draconian measures for quarantine, as well as media censorship. Even though China's extreme measures were successful in containing the virus, there has been a growing cynicism about the Chinese political system among the Korean public, who have witnessed China's socialist uniformity and totalitarian information control during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

Some Koreans also believed Beijing's retaliation against South Korea over THAAD would not have transpired if China had been a member of democratic countries. South Korea, the biggest victim of the Korean War, also felt gravely hurt by Xi Jinping's remarks on the Korean War that disregarded history of North Korean invasion to the South, as well as the Chinese netizens' unbridled nationalism, as seen in the South Korean boy band BTS fiasco. South Korean K-pop group BTS's facing a backlash in China over comments a member made about the Korean War. What initially seemed an innocuous remark from the wildly popular boy band provoked an online outcry from the Chinese social media. The leader of BTS, known by the initials RM, upset many people in China in a speech when the band received an award from a US-based organisation for their contribution to South Korea-US relations. RM invoked a 'history of pain' shared between South Korea and the USA and, referring to the 1950–1953 Korean War, spoke of 'sacrifices of countless men and women'. Chinese Internet users wasted no time registering their offense, accusing him for not recognising the sacrifices of the Chinese soldiers who fought on the side of North Korea. Alarmed, several multinational corporate sponsors, including Samsung, distanced themselves from the K-pop group amid the uproar, by removing any trace of their collaborations with the band on Chinese websites.



As of this writing, Seoul and Beijing have not had a chance to thaw the stalled bilateral relations since the THAAD crisis, as President Xi Jinping's expected visit to South Korea did not transpire in 2020 due to COVID-19. South Korean President Moon had been seen very eager to host Xi in Seoul. There is also a quip that Moon is prone to Chinese manipulation as he believes China's role is essential to resolving the North Korean issue and eventual unification of the two Koreas. The two Koreas have been divided essentially since World War II (WWII). Looking into the year 2021, while the global coronavirus pandemic still continues, the recovery of Korea–China relations may still be difficult due to the domestic political schedule in South Korea including the mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan, the first and second largest city in the nation, as well as the presidential election campaign that will ensue immediately afterwards.

#### **CHINA'S TERMINAL HIGH ALTITUDE AREA DEFENSE RETALIATION AND AMERICA AS A BYSTANDER**

Security experts have long regarded the Korean Peninsula as 'East Asia's Balkans' where powerful countries' interests converge and collide. Seoul has been careful not to offend its big neighbour, China, which has the appearance of a panda, but often acts like a dragon. Seoul–Beijing ties have been strained since Seoul announced in July 2016 that it would allow the USA to deploy a THAAD battery in South Korea. The dragon then gushed in spasms of outbursts of fury at Seoul with economic retaliations. Due to China's retaliation over THAAD, South Korea's economy suffered as much as an 8.5 trillion won (US\$7.5 billion) loss in 2017 (*Yonhap News* 2017), according to Hyundai Research Institute.

It is generally understood that THAAD is to deter North Korean aggression, but China vehemently opposed THAAD, arguing that the 'real' reason for America to try to install THAAD in South Korea was to snoop on China's sensitive military facilities with the THAAD's powerful radar. While THAAD's missile-hitting capabilities are open to question, at least its radar is viewed potent enough that it had drawn a vehement outcry from China, even including personal statement from China's top leader Xi Jinping and the Chinese government unleashed economic retaliations on South Korea.

Very conspicuously, America has largely been seen a listless bystander while all this is happening. Washington's failure to show solidarity with its ally and recognition of the latter's distress is quietly hurting USA's standing in the region. Countries in East Asia watched THAAD spat as a symbolic struggle of influence between the USA and China. By dispensing economic retaliation to South Korea, China is also warning those countries in the region about 'what would happen' when they disregard China's will. In Chinese expression, it is to 'kill the chicken to scare the monkey' (sha ji jing hou). Just like South Korea, many of these countries rely on the USA for security and China for economy. As China becomes more powerful and dominant in the region, it does

not want their traditional hedging attempt. ‘Economy and security matters are not separate. They are like two wheels of a chariot. They go together. South Korea should choose [between China and the U.S.]’, a retired senior Chinese diplomat warned at a meeting in Seoul where this author was also present.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the USA should be mindful about ‘the audience effect’ of the THAAD dispute between Seoul and Beijing. The THAAD deployment was a joint decision by the Seoul–Washington alliance, but while South Korea was suffering from the Chinese retaliation, the USA did not do much. South Korea was willing to take the heat from China, but the USA did not stand for South Korea. Yet, this has been hardly examined by Washington. It is not just about the USA, South Korea and China. The regional countries here see it as a narrative of an American ally who got retaliated by China for hosting an American military asset, and America is doing nothing. It is a curious thing to ask why the USA at that time did not stand up for its ally.<sup>15</sup> America did not seem to be aware of the audience cost involved.

This topic of Washington’s attitude in dealing with its allies became an issue for discussions later when Canada honoured Washington’s request to arrest the Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou at a Canadian airport. As it did with South Korea, China retaliated Canada by arresting Canadian citizens in China. The USA did not intervene to seek the Canadians’ release. The Canadian citizens are still in Chinese prison. Apparently, the American nonchalance has been eroding its standing in the region and credibility among its allies. It is weakening the American sphere of influence. Whether it is due to a lack of awareness at Capitol Hill or simply being a spectator who ‘watches a fire across the river’, as the old Korean saying goes, is open to debates, but the new US Biden Administration needs to come up with a very good idea of how to provide protection and reassurance for its allies which is willing to take heat for the USA.

### **SOUTH KOREA–JAPAN AGREEMENT ON JAPAN’S WARTIME SEX SLAVES**

While South Korea has been preoccupied with the USA and China, its another neighbour, Japan, has been largely left out from South Korea’s diplomatic purview. South Korea and Japan have a complex relationship. Although they both are military allies with the USA, they have been developing diverging strategic views on a rising China and have unresolved disputes over historical and territorial issues. However, in order to respond to their common security threat from nuclear-armed North Korea, South Korea and Japan continue to cooperate through their strong bilateral alliance with the USA.

<sup>14</sup> March 2017.

<sup>15</sup> In the USA, however, the deployment of THAAD was easily rationalized as America’s generous commitment to protecting South Korea, an ally. In this context, some civic protests in South Korea in opposition to the deployment of THAAD were seen by Washington as “ungrateful.”

Nevertheless, the strategic cooperation between South Korea and Japan is likely to remain fragmented due to two crucial factors—bilateral mistrust and their diverging views on how to deal with China. Containing China through the alliance with the USA is not in the best interests of South Korea as its economic and political ties with China are deepening. Japan, on the other hand, is increasing its military cooperation with the USA to respond to China's manifest and potential assertiveness. Japan's military developments give rise to South Korean misgivings due to the popular perception that Japan has failed to settle its historical and colonial wrongdoings, not to mention serving as a reminder of Japan's past military occupation of Korea. Koreans' mistrust of Japan may even intensify if Japan mounts a more serious challenge to South Korea's sovereignty over the Dokdo Islets (Takeshima), which are disputed by both countries.

On 28 December 2015, in what media broadly characterised as a 'landmark' accord, South Korea and Japan abruptly announced the 'final and irreversible' settlement of the comfort women issue. Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida flew to Seoul and fielded a joint press briefing with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se. In the announcement, Japan offered apology and a ¥ 1 billion (US\$8.3 million) payment to the then-46 surviving South Korean comfort women (As of January 2021, the number decreased to 12). Japan stopped short of describing the payment as official compensation, although the fund would come from the government coffer, thus leaving room for ambiguity over whether Japan was accepting formal legal responsibility or not. Apparently, it was a premediated ambiguity both governments painstakingly brainstormed to quell public opinion on both sides on the thorny issue. After the announcement, Abe made a symbolic telephone call to President Park to cement the accord. The White House welcomed the agreement. 'We support this agreement and its full implementation, and believe this comprehensive resolution is an important gesture of healing and reconciliation that should be welcomed by the international community', it said (The White House 2015).

The agreement generated hope that US–South Korea–Japan trilateral strategic cooperation would be strengthened, since the Tokyo–Seoul relationship was now apparently normalised. However, ensuing public reactions and opinion polls advise caution before optimism. A December 2015 public opinion poll in South Korea by Realmeter polling agency showed a sharply divided nation in which 51% of the respondents oppose the deal, while 43% support it (Realmeter 2015). The settlement included ample strategic ambiguity, engineered for political expediency. The issue became much more contentious in South Korea than in Japan when it became known only days after the agreement that the surviving comfort women themselves were furious because they themselves had not been consulted prior to the 'final' announcement.

Second, legal experts noted that there was no formal joint document produced in this 'important' agreement; rather, the two foreign ministers read out each country's positions, instead of producing a single joint statement. The current South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who was at that time the head of the main opposition party, declared the bilateral deal 'null' because it was reached without the consent of the

National Assembly, the nation's legislative body. Third, the South Korean public was angry at the abrupt shift in President Park's stance as well as the seemingly lower-level achievements in the accord. She underscored previously that she would handle the comfort women issue 'in a manner that the victims can accept and our citizens can understand' (*The Telegraph* 2015). Many South Koreans suspected that the USA under President Obama, which readily welcomed the deal, was behind the sudden agreement. Critics noted the USA 'pressured' its two Asian allies to resolve their differences without thinking deeply about the consequences of such a high-handed approach.

In January 2021, a court ruling in South Korea over the historical issue between Korea and Japan has emerged as yet another major impediment to the Seoul–Tokyo ties. The Seoul Central District Court made a ruling in favour of South Korean victims of Japan's wartime sex slavery, ordering the Japanese government to pay ₩100 million (US\$91,500) in compensation to each of 12 surviving victims. The sentence came about 5 years after the case was first filed. When the ruling came out, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga called the decision 'utterly unacceptable', and yet said he had no intention of appealing the ruling because the Japanese government could not accept submission to Korea's jurisdiction under the principle of national exemption (*Kyodo News* 2021). In a broader view, the Seoul–Tokyo entanglement was part of the larger contention between Korea and Japan in their differences on the 1965 normalisation treaty, which Japan has used as the basis to claim that all colonial-era settlements were completed when it provided grants and loans under the Korea–Japan Claims Settlement Agreement attached to the treaty. However, whether the 1965 agreement also covered the issue of forced Korean labour by the Japanese during the colonial period would also become a matter of controversy too.

In October 2018, South Korea's Supreme Court ruled that a major Japanese steelmaker should compensate four South Koreans for forced labour during Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula before the end of WWII. The court said Japan's Nippon Steel and Sumitomo Metal Corp. should provide compensation of ₩100 million (US\$88,512) to each of the four plaintiffs who were forced to work at Japanese steel mills from 1941 to 1943. Among them, only 94-year-old Lee Chun-sik has survived the legal battle, which extended nearly 14 years. The verdict opened a Pandora's Box, as it would have larger implications for similar lawsuits that were pending in South Korea, including Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

Together with the sex slave issue, the forced labour issue expectedly became a new diplomatic row between Seoul and Tokyo. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Tokyo will respond 'resolutely' to the ruling, which he described as 'impossible in light of international law' (*AP News* 2018). He said the ruling violated the 1965 treaty between Seoul and Tokyo that was accompanied by Japanese payments to restore diplomatic ties. Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono said Japan could potentially take the case to the International Court of Justice. In the past, both Japan and also South Korean governments stated that the issue of forced labour compensation had been settled by the treaty. A lawyer-turned president Moon in 2017, however, said

that the 1965 treaty cannot prevent individuals from exercising individual rights to claim damage compensation.

The dispute over wartime forced labour aggravated tensions between the two countries whose bilateral relations are already fragile over differences about the sex slave issue. In August 2019, Japan announced it was going to remove Seoul's 'favored trade partner' status and imposed export controls on its important electronics sector—vital for South Korean companies like Samsung. In a tit-for-tat, Seoul then announced it had decided to end the country's intelligence-sharing pact with Japan. Yet, in a major policy reversal, South Korea said it decided to continue, just 6 h before the agreement was to expire, apparently after a strong US push to save the pact, which has been a major symbol of the countries' three-way security cooperation in the face of North Korea's nuclear threat and China's growing influence. The chain of events that followed witnessed an unprecedented deterioration of bilateral relations into 2020 affecting economic and security ties and breaking past redlines.

#### **AMID INTENSIFYING RIVALRY WITH THE USA, XI JINPING REVISITS THE KOREAN WAR, BUT OMITTS SOUTH KOREA**

In October 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping joined the pack of historians and scholars who, over the years, have attempted to present a different interpretation of the Korean War. Xi gave a 38-min speech in a 1-h ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The length of the speech was nothing out of the ordinary in China.<sup>16</sup> However, it was worthwhile to notice that the last time such a speech was given by China's top leader was 20 years ago, by Jiang Zemin. After that, in 2010, Xi as vice president gave a similar speech, but both of them were not even close to this ceremonial scale and grandeur. Why the new rehabilitating of significance to the war that happened 70 years ago? The answer could be found in the context of the worsening US–China rivalry for future global leadership.

In the speech, Xi's major claim was that China 'won' the Korean War (*Global Times* 2020). Xi sees himself as a historic figure to bring about victory, again, in the current struggle against the USA. Xi is not exceptional in claiming that China 'won' the war, but his depiction of the USA as 'qin lue zhe' (invader) was clearly new and will remain loudly controversial, not just in international politics, but also in academia. The international historical scholarship already concluded, long time ago, that it was North Korea that invaded South Korea and that is how the war started. The UN troops, led by the USA, entered the war in response, to counter the aggression. The fact that the

<sup>16</sup> In 2017, Xi gave a marathon speech of three and a half hours during the 19th Communist Party congress with former top leaders Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin seated too. A picture by Reuters showed Jiang dozing during Xi's speech.

wording of ‘invader’ was used by China’s top leader, in an apparent attempt of historical revisionism, is bold and provocative. ‘China shattered the American military’s myth of invincibility’, Xi said, adding ‘The Chinese people shook the world by defeating the invaders!’ In summary of the war, Xi made the following conclusion: ‘The great war against the USA deterred the imperialist aggression, defended the security of New China, safeguarded the peaceful life of the Chinese people and stabilised the Korean Peninsula, and protected peace in Asia and the world’.

From an analytic perspective, the primary audience for Xi Jinping’s speech, in commemorating China’s entry to the Korean War 70 years ago, was neither Chinese nor North Koreans; it was Americans.<sup>17</sup> It was meant to send a signal that China, now formidable enough, can successfully confront the USA, by tapping into the national patriotic psyche conjuring up the war memory. The Korean War was the first and only war in which China directly fought against the USA, to date. The speech, given by China’s top leader, carries natural importance as such. Yet, the state media additionally attached the label, ‘important speech’ (*zhongyao jianghua*) to it. The speech text by the official Xinhua News Agency also carried the mark, ‘authorized release’ (Xinhua News Agency 2020). That means that this is surely an important speech, not to be missed.

The confrontational contents in Xi’s speech were bound to further deteriorate US–China relations that were already in tatters. However, from a propaganda perspective, it was well-timed. The speech accomplished its intended goal of consolidating a sense of national unity and drumming up patriotism, by taking advantage of the war anniversary, which also happened to fall only days before the US presidential election. It sent the message to Washington that whoever would become the next president of the USA, China would not be an easy party to deal with.

Yet, in Xi’s speech, something was missing. China officially calls the Korean War the ‘War to Resist the US Aggression and Aid Korea’. Here, the ‘Korea’ is North Korea; not South Korea. In his speech, Xi mentioned North Korea with whom China achieved the great victory ‘together’ (*yidao*), but in Xi’s speech, there was no single mention of South Korea. The fact that South Korea was ‘forgotten’ in Xi’s speech warrants soul searching. One month before Xi’s speech, South Korea repatriated 117 sets of remains of Chinese troops killed during the Korean War. It was the seventh such repatriation, as part of South Korea’s efforts for ‘the future-oriented development of bilateral relations’, according to South Korea’s foreign ministry (*Yonhap News* 2020). However, in his speech, Xi described the Chinese participation in the Korean War as a ‘just’ act, repeating his 2010 speech on the matter. It raises the question of whether China is ready to move forward with its relationship with South Korea into the future.

<sup>17</sup>A habitual interpretation on such a nationalistic and patriotic speech tends to view it as intended for domestic politics, but this time, it was primarily meant for America, according to multiple Chinese interlocutors.

**MOON JAE-IN'S APPEASEMENT POLICY TOWARDS CHINA**

Observers note that the current Moon Jae-in Administration of South Korea has been increasingly leaning towards Beijing (despite the THAAD dispute). When China was hit hard during the initial stage of the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, Moon said, 'China's difficulties are our own difficulties' (*Korea Herald* 2020a). Some were shocked to hear such an expression from the leader of a democracy. Furthermore, the 'very Asian' expression, pregnant with sympathy, could be easily misunderstood when translated into English. A modern leader, mindful of sovereign dignity and independence, cannot easily afford to use such a deferential expression. South Korea, up to that period, had been largely unaffected by the pandemic.

However, the virus began to have an impact on South Korea too. Media outlets blamed it for the Moon government's refusal to ban air travels from China early, going against repeated advice from the Korea Medical Association (*Korea Herald* 2020b). The Chinese government, through its ambassador in Seoul, also publicly appealed not to ban the air travel from China to South Korea. South Korea restricted Chinese travellers only from Wuhan, the city where the virus began. As the number of infections skyrocketed in South Korea, other nations began to restrict South Korean nationals. Then, things turned upside down. The COVID-19 situation in China showed signs of quick improvement, and China began to restrict South Korean travellers and put them in quarantine. One such Chinese city was Weihai. It was a Chinese city that earlier reached out for help to its Korean sister city of Incheon, asking for masks. The Korean side immediately dispatched masks, but now, it began to restrict South Korean travellers.

Soon, more and more Chinese cities began to restrict South Koreans. In one of the worst cases of the Chinese quarantine, the door of a South Korean resident's apartment was nailed shut with wooden boards by Chinese locals. South Koreans felt hurt by the Chinese measures when South Korea was among the first countries in the world who sent masks and medical supplies there. A South Korean journalist who previously served as a correspondent in Beijing, said: 'Through the THAAD retaliation, I came to see the naked face of China. Through the coronavirus epidemic, I confirmed my conviction. There are many people around me who feel the same way'. South Korean citizens were also enraged with the Moon Administration's attitude with China. Many South Koreans felt that his government has been far too accommodating of, if not self-deprecating to, Beijing. A former media executive Lee Jin-sook filed a legal suit to the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office in January 2021, accusing President Moon of 'neglect of duty' to protect the South Korean public (*JoongAng Ilbo Daily* 2021). According to Lee, Moon failed to take early measures to restrict the air travel from China because doing so would be an obstacle for Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Korea. Moon had been seen eager to host Xi. As the virus pandemic became more severe, Moon's 'pro-China tendency' has been assailed by his conservative critics. Soon afterwards, there were over 1.4 million South Korean citizens who petitioned for



President Moon's impeachment on the website of the official website of the presidential Cheong Wa Dae. They criticised Moon for working harder to please China rather than working hard to protect his own citizens first.

From a larger perspective, the Moon Jae-in Administration has been unsuccessfully pursuing a 'balancing strategy' between the USA and China, amid the two superpowers' deepening rivalry and competition for global leadership. As China's economic importance and political influence increases with South Korea, Seoul wants to moderate its dependence on Washington by inching closer towards the Chinese side. Moon also seems to believe that China will play an indispensable role in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, particularly at a time when US–North Korea negotiations are in a stalemate. Meanwhile, Washington has been increasingly raising eyebrows at Moon's appeasement policy towards China. The problem is that China is not reciprocating. Beijing has been taking its time to have President Xi Jinping visit South Korea delayed. Upon Moon's inauguration in 2017, he sent an invitation to Xi to visit Seoul. Xi has yet to make one. Worries are expressed to Moon's foreign policy that tries to accommodate China. That draws the outside impression that Moon is balancing between the USA and China. It also inevitably takes a toll in South Korea's traditionally most important alliance relationship with the USA.

For years, South Korea has walked on a tightrope between the USA and China, trying to seek autonomy from the USA to deal with China, its largest trade partner, and flexibility to engage North Korea. Moon's balancing strategy between the USA and China, the sitting power and the rising power, has been bumpy. So far, South Korea seems not have been noticeably successful in taking advantage of the US–China rivalry either. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yun Byung-se had stated that Korea is being 'wooded' by both the USA and China (May 30, 2015). Yun was referring to the importance of South Korea in East Asian geopolitics, amid intensifying US–China rivalry. If so, one could raise the question why Beijing launched a 'THAAD retaliation' against Seoul when it should have tried to court Korea. Would a 'wooing strategy', involving economic inducements and political concessions to tip the scales on its favour, be a more likely approach towards Korea on the THAAD issue? Instead, Beijing launched a variety of retaliatory measures against Seoul. It used the media and psychologic strategies to divide the opinion of the Korean public, launched boycotts on Korean firms, delayed customs and conducted sanitary inspections, banned tourists, cancelled conferences and exchange programmes, and shut down official communication channels. These are clearly not measures intended to 'woo' someone. In theory, Seoul should have been wooed by Beijing. That is not happening in practice, at least for now.

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