



# Survival

## Global Politics and Strategy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsur20>

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To cite this article: Robert S. Ross (2021) China Looks at the Korean Peninsula: The 'Two Transitions', *Survival*, 63:6, 129-158, DOI: [10.1080/00396338.2021.2006455](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.2006455)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.2006455>



Published online: 26 Nov 2021.



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# China Looks at the Korean Peninsula: The 'Two Transitions'

**Robert S. Ross**

China's understanding of strategic trends on the Korean Peninsula has fundamentally changed over the past five years. A consensus has emerged among Chinese scholars and foreign-policy analysts in government think tanks that there are two power transitions under way on the peninsula. The first is the US–China power transition, reflecting China's emerging military parity with the United States and influence over the South Korean economy. This power transition is challenging South Korea's ability to rely solely on the US for security and prosperity. The second power transition reflects South Korea's development of an increasingly capable military that can mount an independent defence against North Korea. Together, Chinese argue, these two trends are encouraging South Korea to develop a policy of equidistance between the United States and China, and an independent policy toward North Korea that supports both South Korean and Chinese policy preferences.

China's understanding of these power transitions is reflected in its policy toward South Korea, North Korea and denuclearisation. China no longer contributes to North Korea's diplomatic isolation or to economic sanctions against it. With greater South Korean autonomy and common Chinese–South Korean interests vis-à-vis North Korea, China can pursue leadership on peninsular issues, including denuclearisation, undermining US coercive diplomacy.

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Chinese scholars and foreign-policy analysts argue that these trends in peninsular affairs reflect more than the results of Donald Trump's presidency or the election of Moon Jae-in as South Korean president in May 2017. Rather, they believe that changes in both the US–China balance of power – a 'structural change' in regional affairs – and South Korea's security policy have been under way since the Obama administration.<sup>1</sup>

### **A changing balance of power on the Korean Peninsula**

China's rise as an economic and maritime power and the US–China power transition have influenced security affairs throughout Northeast Asia. As China has expanded its maritime capabilities, its presence in South Korean coastal waters has increased. Chinese scholars and think-tank analysts have paid close attention to the power transition and its contribution to China's interest in security cooperation with South Korea.

#### *The US–China power transition*

Shifts in the economic and military balance of power between the US and China have altered strategic trends on the Korean Peninsula. In economic affairs, China has been South Korea's most important partner since the turn of the century. In 2001, it became the leading recipient of South Korea's foreign direct investment. Between 2001 and 2003, South Korean investment in China increased by nearly 50%, and roughly 50% of all South Korean foreign direct investment was destined for China.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, China became South Korea's largest export market; exports to China increased by nearly 50% from 2001 to 2003. In contrast, between 2002 and 2003, South Korean exports to the United States stagnated. In 2003, more than 31% of South Korean exports went to China.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, 25% of South Korean exports went to China, while 14% went to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In military affairs, China has long possessed ground-force capabilities strong enough to influence politics on the Korean Peninsula and to contend with US forces.<sup>5</sup> The changing US–China naval balance in the Yellow Sea is a more recent development, however, and means that China now dominates South Korea's maritime periphery. Moreover, China's

modernisation of its air force, its deployment of ground-based anti-ship cruise missiles on the Shandong Peninsula and its bases in the Yellow Sea all add to China's growing superiority in South Korea's coastal waters.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2015, as South Korea considered deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, China's People's Liberation Army Navy has increased the frequency and sophistication of live-fire naval operations in the Yellow Sea near South Korea.<sup>7</sup> Between January 2016 and February 2019, Chinese warships entered South Korea's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) 465 times. As tensions increased between China and South Korea in 2016 over US deployment of THAAD in Korea, Chinese incursions doubled.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the US Navy, sensitive to Chinese capabilities, has reduced its operations in the Yellow Sea.<sup>9</sup>

In 2016, there was escalation in the China–South Korea maritime dispute over Socotra Reef in the Yellow Sea. In June, Chinese and South Korean fishing boats clashed, and South Korea detained two Chinese boats. In October, when approximately 40 Chinese fishing boats entered South Korean-claimed waters in the vicinity of Socotra Reef, a South Korean coastguard ship sank after colliding with a Chinese fishing boat.<sup>10</sup> Since then, Chinese observers have noted an increase in the attention paid by South Korea to Socotra Reef as a security issue in Chinese–South Korean relations.<sup>11</sup> The 'THAAD incident' made clear that becoming involved in US–China competition can bring harm to South Korea.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Chinese confidence in China–South Korea relations*

The implications of the US–China power transition for South Korean security policy have been carefully examined by Chinese observers. Some have argued that the Asia-Pacific's 'geopolitical structure has changed' and that the balance of power in East Asia now favours China rather than the US, with implications for South Korean decision-making. The rise of China as a maritime power is said to have 'smashed' the US military advantage on China's coastal periphery such that the decline in US power is now 'difficult to ignore'. China's role in peninsular stability has become 'indispensable', and China's 'each and every move in regional security affairs influences all aspects' of South Korean foreign policy.<sup>13</sup>

Many Chinese are thus confident in Beijing's ability to challenge American influence in South Korea. They argue that the increase in Seoul's strategic reliance on China already means that it would be difficult for South Korea to 'pull away from China'.<sup>14</sup> Cooperation with China is seen as especially important for South Korean management of the North Korean threat, including in the areas of crisis management, nuclear diplomacy and peaceful reunification. This trend is viewed as irreversible: as the US–China power gap continues to narrow, the pressure on South Korea to manage Chinese power will increase.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese analysts argue that China's economy has long been critical for South Korean economic growth, but the 2014 China–South Korea Free Trade Agreement has strengthened the countries' comprehensive economic cooperation. South Korean development is now seen as 'inseparable' from China–South Korea trade, there being 'no way to substitute' for China–South Korea cooperation.<sup>16</sup> Chinese observers have noted that in 2017, nearly 12% of South Korea's GDP came from exports to China.<sup>17</sup> The loss incurred by South Korea from Chinese economic retaliation against Seoul's deployment of THAAD underscored South Korean dependence on the Chinese economy. The reduction in Chinese tourism alone had a major impact on South Korea's GDP.<sup>18</sup>

Chinese analysts thus argue that China's rise has affected the costs to South Korea of US–South Korea alliance cooperation against Chinese interests. They contend that China can now impose significant costs on South Korea, while the United States' ability to offset Chinese policy is declining. This is compelling South Korea to reconsider its security posture.<sup>19</sup> Chinese writers understand that the US–South Korea alliance is critical for South Korean security, especially regarding North Korea, and that Seoul must avoid provoking Washington. But South Korea also must avoid provoking China – it must be 'prudent'. South Korean security is already reliant on Chinese policy, imposing an 'alliance dilemma' on Seoul in managing China's rise.<sup>20</sup>

South Korea now finds itself caught between the United States and China, obliging it to pursue the 'balanced development of great-power relations'.<sup>21</sup> It is thus moving toward equidistance; some Chinese observers have described South Korea as walking a 'kind of tightrope' between China and

the United States.<sup>22</sup> South Korea requires the alliance with the United States to deal with the North Korean threat, but if it follows the US too closely, China will 'not be happy', and 'misunderstandings' could result.<sup>23</sup>

China's confidence in these findings reflects its analysis of its retaliation against the decision of Park Geun-hye's government to deploy THAAD despite Chinese opposition. In that instance, South Korea placed security cooperation with the United States over its interest in security and economic cooperation with China, thereby disrupting its strategic balance between the US and China. This resulted in the deterioration of South Korea's 'strategic environment' and imposed 'security costs' on the country. To restore China–South Korea stability, Chinese maintain that the Moon government declared the 'three nos': no additional THAAD deployments in South Korea; no integration of South Korea's THAAD system into the US missile-defence system; and no South Korean participation in US–Japan alliance cooperation. Chinese–South Korean tension over THAAD also prompted Seoul to promote summitry and improved trade relations with Beijing.<sup>24</sup>

Some Chinese have commented on South Korea's 'prudence' in refraining from aligning with the United States on regional issues. South Korea has not taken a stand on the sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, despite US pressure.<sup>25</sup> It has been neutral in the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. And, against American objections, South Korea joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and has participated in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>26</sup>

### **South Korea's autonomous security policy**

Just as China is a rising power vis-à-vis the United States, South Korea is a rising power vis-à-vis North Korea. The growth and modernisation of South Korea's military has allowed it to develop superior conventional capabilities, and therefore to reduce its reliance on the United States to deter and defend against a North Korean attack. Meanwhile, North Korea's conventional military capabilities have been largely stagnant, causing the North–South balance to shift. Chinese analysts have argued that this North–South power transition has enabled South Korea to develop an autonomous security policy and to strengthen its cooperation with China.

*The North–South power transition*

From 2005 to 2017, South Korea's defence budget nearly doubled. The average annual increase in defence spending during the Lee Myung-bak and Park administrations (2009–16) was 5.1% in nominal terms, rising to 7.5% during the Moon administration, which has plans to maintain this growth rate through 2023. In 2019, South Korean defence spending ranked tenth in the world, only slightly behind Japanese spending.<sup>27</sup>

In 2015, South Korea tested a conventional missile that could reach political and military targets throughout North Korea, the first step toward an independent retaliatory capability. It is developing missiles and radar systems to target North Korea's artillery deployments north of the Demilitarized Zone and an anti-missile system to intercept North Korean artillery.<sup>28</sup> The South Korean aircraft industry is developing the '4.5 generation' KF-X fighter aircraft, a near-equivalent to the F-35. It is expected to make its first flight in 2022. The KF-X will be armed with supersonic anti-ship missiles developed in South Korea.<sup>29</sup> The South Korean defence industry is also developing ship-based helicopters armed with anti-ship and anti-submarine capabilities. After purchasing 16 German submarines, South Korea is now manufacturing next-generation diesel submarines, with the first ship expected to enter operation in 2022. It has tested a submarine-launched conventional ballistic missile as well. In February 2021, South Korea began construction of *Aegis* destroyers equipped with land-attack missiles, as well as missile-defence and anti-submarine capabilities. A light aircraft carrier is also in development that will carry up to 15 F-35Bs.<sup>30</sup> Seoul has purchased US *Global Hawk* uninhabited aerial vehicles, and is developing indigenous rocket and satellite capabilities for reconnaissance of North Korean military activities.<sup>31</sup>

The superiority of South Korea's conventional capabilities is enhanced by the stagnation of North Korean conventional capabilities. Approximately one-half of North Korea's conventional weapons were designed in the 1960s; the other half are even older. South Korea's missiles can penetrate North Korea's missile-defence system. North Korea has a quantitative advantage in tanks, but uses older models, including Russian tanks that did not perform well 30 years ago in the 1991 Gulf War and are demonstrably

inferior to South Korean tanks.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, North Korean soldiers are undernourished, which reduces their combat effectiveness and undermines North Korea's quantitative advantage in troop numbers.<sup>33</sup>

South Korea possesses an effective deterrent against a conventional attack from North Korea. It is also developing conventional capabilities, including missile-defence technologies, to deter a North Korean nuclear strike.<sup>34</sup> The United States' treaty commitment to South Korea and its troop presence there contribute to the deterrence of a North Korean nuclear strike against South Korea, so that the US–South Korean alliance remains important to South Korean security. Nonetheless, South Korea is developing an independent defence capability that contributes to its strategic autonomy.

#### *China's assessment of South Korean strategic autonomy*

Just as Chinese scholars and think-tank analysts have been assessing the US–China power transition and South Korea's 'alliance dilemma', they have also been paying close attention to the South Korea–North Korea power transition and the implications for South Korean security policy. They argue that this power transition has encouraged South Korea to pursue independent diplomatic initiatives and an 'autonomous' security policy regarding North Korea. As long as the North Korean threat exists, South Korea will require the support of the US–South Korea alliance, but it will seek greater authority within the alliance and a more balanced position between the United States and China.<sup>35</sup>

Chinese observers concur with American scholars that South Korea now possesses 'middle power' economic and military capabilities.<sup>36</sup> In East Asia, South Korea's economy and 'comprehensive national power' are ranked in third place, behind only China and Japan. South Korea's 'hard power' and 'soft power' alike are seen as having afforded it a greater role in regional diplomacy and a desire to exercise independent influence on peninsular affairs.<sup>37</sup> 'To give meaning to its middle power diplomacy', Chinese believe that South Korea will maintain 'friendly relations' with both the United States and China, rather than 'tilt toward one side or the other'. Cooperation with China is thus an 'important objective of South Korea's middle-power diplomacy'.<sup>38</sup>

Chinese observers are especially impressed by South Korea's improved defence capability. The country's military-modernisation programme is seen as an 'obvious' effort to develop an 'independent national defence' and 'to realise a balanced position within the alliance' while reducing its reliance on the United States.<sup>39</sup> This trend was first developed by the Park administration and extended by the Moon administration with its five-year defence-acquisitions plan and its Defense Reform 2.0 programme. What Chinese observers have called South Korea's 'indigenous defence revolution' is seen as contributing to a broad-based capability to deal with 'all kinds of threats', including the North Korean threat, and to take the lead for South Korean security within the US–South Korean alliance, all in support of 'balanced' diplomacy.<sup>40</sup> The Park administration's development of a South Korean missile-defence system contributed to its resistance to deployment of THAAD and underscored its preference for strategic autonomy.<sup>41</sup>

Chinese observers understand that South Korea's security has benefited from the stagnation of North Korean weaponry. This trend has led to a 'wide disparity' between North and South Korea in terms of national power and advanced military technologies, a gap that affords South Korea greater independence in planning and implementing its North Korea strategy.<sup>42</sup>

With improved military capabilities and its middle-power status, South Korea, according to Chinese observers, is refusing to be cast as a 'chess piece' in the power struggles of Northeast Asia. It does not wish to become a mere sacrificial object in any great-power 'trial of strength'.<sup>43</sup> As one Chinese scholar wrote, South Korea feels some pressure to choose sides, but is concerned that any 'transformation of the international structure' would damage South Korean security.<sup>44</sup> As a 'front-line state ... under the flag of US containment of China', it is at risk of suffering intolerable costs in any conflict.<sup>45</sup>

Chinese similarly argue that South Korea's 'four-power strategy' reflects its effort to maintain balanced relationships with regional powers and to reduce its reliance on the United States. It focuses on developing cooperation with China, Japan and Russia, as well as with the United States. South Korea's 'northern policy' likewise aims at expanded cooperation with China, Mongolia and Russia. It places special emphasis on regional

economic cooperation through expanded transportation infrastructure, including North–South rail links to connect South Korea with Russia. South Korea's participation in China's BRI reflects, in part, its focus on infrastructure development for economic diversity. These efforts also support South Korea's objective of easing North–South tension and expanding North–South economic cooperation. The United States has opposed such initiatives, but this has only increased South Korea's interest in autonomy.<sup>46</sup>

#### *US resistance to South Korean policy independence*

Chinese scholars and think-tank experts have focused on American resistance to South Korean strategic autonomy, arguing that the United States views South Korea as a critical asset for dealing with the rise of China and for encircling it militarily. As US–China competition has intensified, Chinese have argued that the US 'cannot accept defeat' and 'cannot tolerate' South Korea's balanced diplomacy, and is therefore seeking to disrupt China–South Korea cooperation.<sup>47</sup> Ongoing North–South tensions are seen as serving US interests.<sup>48</sup> American resistance to the transfer to South Korea of wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean military forces similarly reflects the United States' determination to maintain its troop presence in South Korea.<sup>49</sup>

Chinese observers believe the US has used a 'wedge strategy' to block closer China–South Korea cooperation and to maintain its presence in South Korea. US deployment of THAAD in South Korea is seen as a key element of this strategy. According to this logic, THAAD deployment was not for the defence of South Korea; rather, it was intended as a wedge to divide China and South Korea.<sup>50</sup> THAAD is ineffective against North Korean missiles, but it was useful to compel South Korea to 'make a choice' between China and the United States. Because of American pressure, South Korea had no other option but to agree to deploy THAAD.<sup>51</sup>

China also believes the United States has constrained South Korean development of independent policies toward North Korea, policies that align with Chinese preferences. Whereas the United States prioritises its geopolitical interest in US–China competition over North Korean denuclearisation and relies on sanctions to compel unconditional North

Korean concessions, South Korea, as well as China and North Korea, supports a negotiated and incremental strategy for denuclearisation, with reciprocal concessions by North Korea and the United States. China and South Korea also oppose reliance on sanctions to compel North Korean compromises. Instead, they advocate expanded economic cooperation with North Korea to promote stability. And whereas the United States has resisted improved North–South relations for fear that such an outcome would reduce the need for an American military presence in South Korea, China and South Korea promote North–South reconciliation.<sup>52</sup>

Chinese writers argue that when North–South tensions were beginning to ease, Trump announced sanctions that were heavier and of a greater scale than any that had gone before, revealing the ‘sharp differences’ between the United States and South Korea.<sup>53</sup> When South Korea considered easing sanctions on North Korea, the United States opposed this, contributing to South Korea’s decision to abandon the idea. Similarly, the United States compelled South Korea to abandon resumed cooperation with North Korea at the Kaesong Industrial Zone.<sup>54</sup> Chinese writers have especially focused on US efforts to constrain South Korean autonomy. They observed that when South Korean companies shipped coal to North Korea, Mike Pompeo, then US secretary of state, insisted that any advances in North–South relations must not get ahead of US policy. They also noted that Steven Mnuchin, then US secretary of the treasury, bypassed the Korean government to speak directly to South Korea’s seven commercial banks, warning that they needed to comply with sanctions against North Korea.<sup>55</sup> The United States established the US–South Korea working group to exercise control over South Korean policy, insisting that all South Korean policies toward North Korea be coordinated within the group.<sup>56</sup>

As the power differential between the United States and China continues to close and the competition between them intensifies, Chinese expect that the ‘strategic space’ occupied by South Korea between the two powers will contract, and that US efforts to constrain South Korea will become ‘clearer and clearer’. Washington will pressure Seoul to accept deployment of US intermediate-range ballistic missiles, to integrate the THAAD system with US missile-defence systems, to expand security cooperation with Japan

and to link its own regional foreign policy (known as the 'New Southern Strategy') with the US Indo-Pacific strategy. But China is confident that US resistance will only increase South Korea's commitment to autonomy.<sup>57</sup> The Moon administration's determination to assume OPCON from the United States demonstrates Seoul's resolve to reduce its reliance on Washington and to assume leadership in peninsular affairs.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Opportunities for China on the Korean Peninsula*

Chinese analysts have argued that the US–China and South Korea–North Korea power transitions are enhancing Chinese leadership in peninsular diplomacy.<sup>59</sup> South Korea's movement toward equidistance between the United States and China alleviates Chinese concerns that US–China differences over North Korean denuclearisation will lead to greater US–South Korea alliance cooperation. Moreover, China believes its own military expansion has balanced US military capabilities, so that any US effort to expand cooperation with South Korea to balance China's modernisation will fail. As one analyst told the author, 'China is winning'.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, South Korea's greater security vis-à-vis North Korea is allowing it to prioritise the implications of a rising China and to accommodate Chinese interests.<sup>61</sup> It is also allowing South Korea to pursue its own interests in North–South relations, contributing to Chinese leadership and to China–South Korea cooperation.

#### *Chinese expectations of peninsular leadership*

Chinese writers understand that, as a rising power, China has a responsibility to contribute to global order and to support nuclear non-proliferation. But Chinese analysts argue that these tasks are not China's most important objective. Rather, given that the United States is seen as working to contain China and to maintain its own 'forward deployments' in South Korea while downplaying non-proliferation, China cannot alter, much less abandon, its geopolitical considerations to itself pursue non-proliferation.<sup>62</sup>

It is in China's interest to weaken US alliances and to reduce the negative effects they have on China. Chinese writers have concluded that, just as the United States has pursued a wedge strategy to divide China and South

Korea, China can now drive a wedge between South Korea and the United States.<sup>63</sup> Beijing is seen as having sufficient leverage over South Korea to develop a 'counter-wedge' strategy: because security and economic cooperation with China are 'indispensable' for South Korea, China possesses 'dual levers' with which to 'exert leverage' on South Korea and to induce it to increasingly tilt toward China.<sup>64</sup>

Because China, South Korea and North Korea agree that nuclear stability requires incremental and reciprocal measures; because China and South Korea both stress the importance of scaling back economic sanctions and enhancing economic and cultural cooperation with North Korea; and because North Korea seeks expanded international economic cooperation, China believes it has an 'unshirkable responsibility' to be involved in peninsular diplomacy. Its proposals for peninsular easing 'should not be absent' from regional negotiations, and it can contribute to regional stability and improved North–South relations by serving as a 'go-between' in peninsular affairs.<sup>65</sup>

China's capacity for leadership, combined with increasing South Korean autonomy, is seen as enabling China and South Korea to play a 'mediating role' between North Korea and the United States. Chinese observers are encouraged by South Korean support for four-party talks on peninsular issues (involving China, North Korea, South Korea and the United States), rather than the US-supported three-party talks, which exclude China. China and South Korea can be conduits for back-channel signals, helping to bridge US–North Korea differences over nuclear diplomacy. They could even put forward joint proposals for easing peninsular tensions.<sup>66</sup>

### **The end of Chinese sanctions**

The dual power transition has led China to reduce its cooperation with US coercive diplomacy toward North Korea and its support for sanctions. Instead, it prefers to focus on engagement with North Korea to promote economic reform in that country.

North Korean economic reform has been a long-standing interest of China's. Former North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's first visit to China in 2000 included a tour of a computer factory, during which he reportedly expressed

amazement at the technologies on display. In later visits, Kim toured China's special economic zones.<sup>67</sup> Beginning in 2012, his son Kim Jong-un has introduced limited agricultural and industrial reforms that have created greater opportunity for Chinese engagement with North Korea's economy and society.<sup>68</sup> More recently, China–North Korea border trade has contributed to the development of local markets and independent economic enterprises in North Korea.<sup>69</sup> In the context of ongoing state control over North Korean society, China's export of consumer goods to North Korea has contributed to a more porous society open to influences beyond state propaganda.<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, until recently there has been a contradiction between China's support for North Korean reform and its opposition to North Korea's nuclear programme. Chinese engagement of North Korea was seen as promoting long-term reform, but also as undermining North Korea's incentive to curtail its nuclear programme and putting China at odds with the United States and South Korea. This contradiction led China to limit its cooperation with North Korea, lest it enable the United States to increase its strategic presence in South Korea and drive a wedge between China and South Korea.<sup>71</sup> Thus, China offered North Korea only enough economic assistance to maintain political stability.<sup>72</sup> As North Korea continued to develop its nuclear capability, China supported United Nations-led economic sanctions against the country.<sup>73</sup>

In 2018, however, China initiated a policy reversal. Beijing no longer wished to exercise restraint, but to develop China–North Korea diplomatic, economic and cultural cooperation. Now that China and South Korea agree on engagement, China has improved relations with North Korea with less fear of US retaliation or of undermining China–South Korea cooperation.

Between May 2018 and June 2019, China held five summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Kim's 2018 visit to Beijing was his first since taking power in 2011. In September 2018, Li Zhanshu, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, delivered a letter to Kim from Chinese leader Xi Jinping. In his letter, Xi pledged to strengthen China–North Korea cooperation.<sup>74</sup> Then, in June 2019, Xi carried out the first visit to Pyongyang by a Chinese leader since Hu Jintao's visit in January 2011. Xinhua reported that Xi had declared China–North Korea relations to

have entered a 'new historical era' and claimed that the two countries had developed a 'blueprint' for expanded cooperation. In September 2021, on the occasion of the 73rd anniversary of North Korea's Workers' Party, Xi wrote to Kim that he not only attached 'great importance' to Chinese–North Korean relations, but wanted to work with Kim 'to promote long-term friendly relations and lift it to new levels'.<sup>75</sup>

Xi's visit to Pyongyang was followed by a surge in Chinese diplomacy. The two sides exchanged multiple delegations to promote cooperation between their communist parties, their public-security organisations and their legal communities. In August 2019, China resumed military ties

with North Korea with a visit to Pyongyang by General Zhang Youxia, China's number-two military officer. Zhang declared that the Chinese military 'is willing to work with the [North Korean] side to ... promote cooperation and mutual support, so as to contribute to ... the development of bilateral relations'.<sup>76</sup> Renewed China–North Korea cooperation also included improved cultural ties.

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*Xi's visit was followed by a surge in diplomacy*

In 2018, China sent delegations to Pyongyang led by Minister of the General Administration of Sport Gou Zhongwen and Minister of Culture and Tourism Luo Shugang.<sup>77</sup> The flurry of China–North Korea summits in 2018 led to a 75% increase in Chinese tourism to North Korea in 2019, providing a financial windfall for the North Korean tourist industry, including its restaurants, hotels and retail businesses. Increased tourism encouraged Kim Jong-un to build a ski resort, and led Air China and Air Koryo to open routes between Pyongyang and multiple Chinese cities, including Beijing, Chengdu, Dalian, Jinan and Xian.<sup>78</sup>

The most consequential change in China's policy is reduced support for US coercive diplomacy. In 2017, following North Korea's fourth nuclear test, China voted for and implemented strengthened UN sanctions against North Korea.<sup>79</sup> Chinese imports from North Korea in December 2017 declined by 83% over the previous December; and in April 2018 Chinese imports were 89% less than the previous April.<sup>80</sup> But in 2019 China not only joined with Russia to block UN criticism of North Korean sanctions violations, but also called for lifting some sanctions.<sup>81</sup> China also helped North Korea evade

UN sanctions. A 2020 UN report concluded that China had assisted North Korea in evading sanctions on coal exports by transporting North Korean coal on Chinese ships. China also helped North Korea evade sanctions on fish exports by allowing Chinese ships to pay North Korea to fish in North Korean waters.<sup>82</sup> In the first five months of 2020, 89 North Korean petroleum ships had called on Chinese ports in violation of UN sanctions.<sup>83</sup>

China also increased its investment in infrastructure to expand border trade. In 2018, it agreed to spend nearly \$90 million for road construction in North Korea to connect the North Korean and Chinese markets. In 2019, after a six-year delay, China recommenced work on the nearly completed Yalu River bridge connecting the border cities of Dandong and Sinuiju. In June 2018, Chinese firms rushed to the annual Pyongyang Spring International Trade Fair in the expectation of expanded investment opportunities.<sup>84</sup> In the first half of 2019, China–North Korea trade had increased by 14.3% over the first half of 2018; North Korean exports had increased by 15.5%. In September 2021, when China and North Korea eased border restrictions imposed following the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, trade doubled over August 2019 and reached the highest level since December 2019.<sup>85</sup> As China–North Korea summitry developed and trade expanded, real-estate prices in Dandong surged.<sup>86</sup>

China's growing power and South Korea's increasing policy independence have allowed China to expand its cooperation with North Korea and South Korea simultaneously. South Korea's 2020 defence White Paper expressed its intent to 'steadily' develop bilateral ties with China 'to secure peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula'.<sup>87</sup> Shortly after Joe Biden's inauguration as US president, Xi spoke with Moon and expressed support for his North Korea initiatives. South Korea then called on the Biden administration to support sanctions relief on North Korea in exchange for a freeze on its nuclear programme, and to carry out the transfer of OPCON to South Korea. Soon afterwards, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke with South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong to express full support for South Korean policy.<sup>88</sup> In 2021, South Korea reopened diplomatic communication with North Korea and called on China to use its close relations with both North and South Korea to promote improved

North–South relations.<sup>89</sup> In October 2021, as the United States restricted Chinese access to advanced technologies and as China moved to develop an independent semiconductor industry, South Korea’s SK Hynix agreed to work with Wuxi, China, to develop 19 semiconductor-related projects at the China–Korea Integrated Circuit Industrial Park complex in that city.<sup>90</sup>

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Chinese observers have calculated that the dual power transition on the Korean Peninsula has created a new great-power strategic order. They are confident that China’s rise and improved South Korean defence capabilities have strengthened China’s role in peninsular diplomacy and allowed Beijing to challenge the American presence on the peninsula. China has significantly reduced its cooperation with US sanctions against North Korea, while taking advantage of South Korea’s interest in foreign-policy autonomy to improve its relations with Seoul at American expense.

Because of the two power transitions on the Korean Peninsula, the United States can no longer rely on China’s interest in stable US–China relations to encourage Chinese cooperation with US sanctions policy. Likewise, the United States can no longer count on South Korea to support its North Korea policy or to serve as a reliable asset in its competition with China. Whereas the post-Second World War strategic order on the Korean Peninsula reflected a division between a Chinese sphere of influence encompassing North Korea and a US sphere of influence encompassing South Korea, the latter is now tending toward equidistance between the two great powers.

Since the Korean War, US policy has aimed to isolate North Korea diplomatically and economically in a bid to coerce political change. Since 1992, the US has implemented increasingly restrictive unilateral and UN sanctions to compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear proliferation. But Pyongyang has continued to develop nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable missiles.<sup>91</sup> Even at the height of American power in the post-Cold War era, when China was cooperative with US policy and there was extensive US–South Korea political and defence cooperation against North Korea, the United States was not able to prevent North Korean nuclear proliferation.

Chinese views of the two power transitions are reflected in the changes in Chinese policy toward North Korea. As it develops, US sanctions policy will become increasingly ineffective. Chinese economic cooperation with North Korea continues to reduce the latter's isolation. South Korea can be expected to continue to advance its own economic and political cooperation with both North Korea and China, while North Korea will consolidate its nuclear capabilities. The United States lacks the leverage to coerce North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons, and any incentives Pyongyang may have had to do so will continue to weaken.<sup>92</sup>

Given that coercion has failed and North Korea is now a nuclear state, the United States' objective should be threat moderation. Cooperation with China and South Korea in four-party negotiations should be directed at an agreement for reciprocal and incremental steps for reduced sanctions in exchange for a freeze on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes.<sup>93</sup> There is no guarantee that engagement will be successful, but more than 65 years of US-led economic and political isolation have failed to moderate North Korean politics or its nuclear proliferation.

Engaging North Korea would have other advantages. As China and South Korea move ahead with bilateral engagement, the United States may find itself increasingly marginalised should it persist in its sanctions policy. Participation in four-party talks would give the United States a greater voice in peninsular diplomacy. By engaging with North Korea, the US might gain opportunities to participate in North Korea's economy and society, exposing the North Korean people to the benefits of capitalism and to American political values. Kim Jong-un will want to retain full political control over North Korean society, but he also wants sanctions relief and greater access to the international economy. Kim's interest in economic cooperation with other countries presents an opportunity for the US to make contact with North Korean society.

US engagement with North Korea would also give Pyongyang an alternative to total economic and political dependence on China. Given that China and North Korea share a border, US influence in North Korea will necessarily remain secondary to Chinese influence. Nonetheless, it is in the United States' interest that North Korea come out from under China's shadow.

The power transitions on the Korean Peninsula require the United States to negotiate with North Korea as a nuclear state. Once it begins to do so, Washington will be able to develop policies that can contribute to political and economic reform in North Korea with a view to reducing the risk of war. If it does not do so, the US may lose its voice in the region's security affairs.

## Notes

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- <sup>16</sup> Zhang, 'Zhong Mei Jingzheng Geju xia de Zhong Han, Mai Han Guanxi Zouxiang yu Hanguo Xuanze', p. 27.
- <sup>17</sup> See Zhao and Zheng, 'Quanli Bianqian Shijiao xia de Mei Han Tongmeng Kunjing', p. 54.
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