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The Korean Peninsula: Between autonomy and dependency

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Antoine Bondaz

THE KOREAN PENINSULA: BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCY

The history of the Korean peninsula is inseparable from the ongoing attempts at influence by neighboring powers and the presence of a victimization discourse both in Seoul and in Pyongyang. These two factors are integrated perfectly in the Korean proverb that describes how, when whales fight, it is the shrimps that get their backs broken.

During our visit to Seoul last July, the discourse of the principal and students of the Hankyoreh school, responsible for the education of young North Korean refugees in South Korea, was much the same as that of the North Korean ambassador in London, Hyon Hak-bong, who told the *Guardian* in 2016: "Our nation has been victimised for centuries by one invader and then another." [1] They added that the major powers should now leave the two Koreas to determine their own destiny, so as to ultimately arrive at the reunification of the peninsula—thus avoiding any discussion of the profound disagreements between two political regimes unable to accept reunification on an equal footing.

Despite their antagonism and the fundamental differences between them, the two Koreas face the same challenge: the difficult search for a balance between dependency and autonomy in relation to regional powers. The rapprochement between the two Koreas that began in early 2018, following a historical low point between 2016 and 2017 in relations since the end of the Cold War due to the absence of inter-Korean

1. "North Korea's UK Ambassador: 'We Want Peace, But We've Been Victimised'," *TheGuardian.com*, January 13, 2016, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/13/north-korea-uk-ambassador-we-want-peace-victimised.

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trade, cooperation, and even dialogue, has allowed the two countries to espouse their common desire to reduce foreign influence. And yet, although they may emphasize their desire for autonomy, both are deeply dependent upon their respective allies and partners.

A struggle for influence among regional powers

Following the works of the American political scientist, Nicholas Spykman, the Korean peninsula, an eastern extremity of the Eurasian continent, may be seen as a contested space fought over by sea powers and land powers.[2] Indeed, the peninsula has been the object of intense competition between regional powers since the mid-nineteenth century, after having been dominated by the Chinese for many centuries. Its geographical position made it a strategically important region for ensuring the security of the Chinese Empire, to the point that it was historically spoken of as a "dagger in China's back," which therefore had to be both protected and controlled. And yet, successive ruling dynasties of the Chinese Empire repeatedly failed to protect their Korean vassal, leading in most cases to the weakening of the Empire and the accession of non-Han dynasties into power, and later to the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century (the Yuan dynasty) and then the Manchu invasions in the seventeenth century (the Qing dynasty). And yet, for all that, the Korean peninsula has never been in itself a threat to the survival of the Empire as a political entity.

The Chinese Empire may have succeeded in successfully repelling the Japanese invasions of the peninsula at the end of the sixteenth century during the Imjin War, but it did not manage to contain the growing influence of Japan after the modernization and industrialization that followed the Meiji restoration that began in 1868. The Empire of Japan forced the Korean kingdom of the Joseon dynasty to sign a number of inequitable treaties that opened up the country to international trade—the first being the 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa—, and subsequently obliged the Chinese Empire to withdraw its troops from the peninsula in 1885. In parallel, from the mid-eighteenth century onward, European colonial powers and their fleets, both commercial and military, took an interest in the peninsula, as much to officially protest against the persecutions

2. See in particular his famous work *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1942).

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of Catholic missionaries and to carry out punitive expeditions, particularly on the island of Ganghwa at the mouth of the Han river, as to open up the country to commerce. The influence of the Chinese Empire would therefore diminish progressively following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895, after which it was forced to recognize the independence of the Korean kingdom, then with the inauguration of the Japanese protectorate in 1905, and finally with the Empire of Japan's formal annexation of the peninsula on August 29, 1910.

After thirty-five years of occupation, the opposition between Washington and Moscow would come to replace Japanese domination, even before the capitulation of the Empire on September 2, 1945. In August of that year, General Order No. 1, approved by the US president, Harry Truman, forced Japanese troops in the part of the Korean peninsula north of the 38th parallel to hand over their weapons to the Soviet forces, and those in the southern part to hand over theirs to the US forces. After the failure of the transition toward a unified peninsula—something that had been proposed at the Moscow Conference of 1945, which prescribed a joint trusteeship of four powers (the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and the United Kingdom) for up to five years—, and faced with Moscow and Washington's inability to come to any agreement, the division of the peninsula became institutionalized. The Republic of Korea was declared on August 15, 1948, with Seoul as its capital, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was declared on September 9, 1948, with Pyongyang as its capital. For the first time in centuries, the Korean peninsula was divided.

Following North Korea's offensive against South Korea on June 15, 1950, the regional powers would once again directly intervene on the peninsula: under the aegis of the United Nations, a US-led force was deployed including troops from sixteen other countries in the first instance, then joined by Chinese troops when they reached the Yalu River, the natural border between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the new People's Republic of China. To this day, the Korean War remains the only direct conflict to have set Beijing against Washington; above all, it was to polarize regional attitudes up until the end of the Cold War into two fundamentally opposed triangles: A northern triangle (the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea—Pyongyang had signed two bilateral defense agreements with its neighbors in 1961) and a southern triangle (the United States, Japan, and South Korea—Seoul having signed the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953). While the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled Seoul to normalize its relations with Moscow

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(1991) and Beijing (1992), this was not the case for Pyongyang's relations with Washington and Tokyo. The loss of Soviet influence would be compensated for by a heightening of Chinese influence, to the point that Korean university students today frequently evoke the image of a peninsula caught between the American eagle and the Chinese dragon. The two Koreas must still deal with these numerous struggles for influence while they seek to become autonomous, particularly within the framework of inter-Korean relations.

A call for autonomy in inter-Korean relations

This change in regional power relations, the fear of losing the support of their allies, and the search for greater autonomy have often served to bring the two Koreas together, despite the enduring tensions between them, as on the occasion of the first joint statement of July 4, 1972. This statement was issued in the context of the partial change in the system of US alliances following the introduction of the Nixon doctrine (or the Guam doctrine) and the doctrine of regional balance, particularly after President Nixon's visit to China. For the first time, the two Koreas found themselves in agreement on the long-term objective of reunification, and called upon the regional powers to not intervene in inter-Korean relations. This statement defined three key principles, the first being the most fundamental: (1) Reunification must be achieved internally, without the help or interference of foreign powers; (2) Reunification must take place peacefully, without recourse to armed forces on either side; (3) The two parties must promote national unity in terms of a united people, beyond the differences in their ideological and political systems.

Since then, numerous inter-Korean agreements and joint statements have cited this notion of autonomy in relation to regional powers, formally attributed to the unity of the Korean people. The June 15 statement issuing from the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 mentions this in its first article: "The South and the North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country." The third inter-Korean summit, the Panmunjom summit of April 27, 2018, was equally significant. Not only was it the first inter-Korean summit held on South Korean territory, following the 2000 and 2007 summits in Pyongyang, but symbols of the unity of the Korean nation were also exhibited: from the Joseon royal guards escorting the Korean leaders to the handshake in front of a mural representing the Kumgang Mountains,

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which up until 2007 had received almost 350,000 South Korean tourists into North Korean territory. But more fundamental than this, of course, was the declaration that followed this summit. The two Koreas committed to "reconnect the blood relations of the nation and bring forward the future of co-prosperity and independent reunification led by Koreans by achieving comprehensive and epochal improvement and development in inter-Korean relations." They also reaffirmed the principle that "the destiny of our nation is determined on their own accord."

Both North and South Korea continue to make calls for autonomy. In Pyongyang, the ideology at the heart of the regime is based on this claim to national independence, as understood in the concept of *juche*. Developed at the end of the 1950s to legitimate Kim Il-sung and to silence all opposition, and subsequently included in the constitution in 1972, the doctrine of *juche* aims to promote political (*jaju*), economic (*jarip*), and military (*jawi*) autonomy by employing Korean nationalism as a tool for national mobilization. In this context, nuclear weapons represent a political tool that allows this ideology to be manifested materially, which means that abandonment of the nuclear option is impossible in the short term. Meanwhile in Seoul, national autonomy is promoted by way of the economic development that allowed the country to rebuild itself after the disastrous Korean War, to the point where, through the economic miracle on the Han River, it has become the eleventh largest global economic power. The rhetoric used in both the South and the North suggests that the division of the peninsula and the current situation are the result of the influence of foreign powers. This was clear in President Moon Jae-in's speech during commemorations for the 72nd anniversary of the liberation of the peninsula: "The division of the nation is the unfortunate legacy of the colonial era that made it impossible for us to determine our destiny on our own in the midst of Cold War rivalries [. . .] genuine liberation is to take the path to unite the people that were divided by foreign powers."

Today, this de facto agreement between the two Koreas for the purposes of limiting the influence of the major powers seems once again to be the order of the day. For example, although Seoul and Pyongyang still obviously disagree over their approach to the denuclearization of the peninsula, both wish to decrease tensions, to stabilize the peninsula, and to move toward the establishment of a peaceful regime. The surprise inter-Korean summit at Panmunjom on May 26, less than forty-eight hours after the American president had announced that he would not participate in a summit with the North Korean leader, can thus be

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interpreted as a de facto cooperation between the two Koreas. The aim was to demonstrate their unity and to convince Donald Trump of the potential success of a summit, which eventually took place on June 12, 2018 in Singapore. However, in spite of this remarkable event, the two Koreas remain profoundly dependent upon their respective allies.

The United States and China, indispensable allies

The United States and China remain indispensable allies, but also unavoidable partners. Although both North and South Korea are trying to reduce their dependency upon these countries, South Korea faces the risk of a twofold dependency: a security dependency on the United States, and an economic dependency on China. Meanwhile, North Korea, unable to do without the support of its neighbor, is nevertheless attempting to improve relations with President Trump's United States, with some limited short-term success.

The United States remains the primary guarantor of security for its South Korean ally in the face of an ongoing North Korean threat. However, relations between Seoul and Washington have been known to change very rapidly, like at the beginning of the 2000s, and the strength of the alliance has to be actively maintained by the respective governments. The 2002 presidential candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, who would take on Moon Jae-in as his chief of staff, used the fierce anti-American sentiment among South Korean youth to get himself elected. He then made more provocative declarations, in particular asking why it was a problem to be anti-American, and claiming that South Korea could declare itself neutral in a conflict between North Korea and the United States. Following a strengthening of bilateral relations over the course of the two conservative presidencies of Presidents Lee and Park, the progressive President Moon seemed to continue along this same path, even while playing the role of intermediary, rather than mediator, between his North Korean neighbor and his American ally. Thus it was South Korea which, with the participation of North Korea in the Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang and the subsequent organization of an inter-Korean summit, made it politically possible for President Trump to accept the North Korean leader's invitation for a meeting, an invitation that South Korean emissaries were responsible for delivering. The principal objective was to guarantee the stability of the Korean peninsula and to avoid a catastrophic scenario in which

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the United States decides to make preventive strikes against North Korea. Such a scenario would undoubtedly lead North Korea to make reprisals on its South Korean neighbor, a country that is home to more than 250,000 US nationals and whose capital is less than sixty kilometers from the demilitarized zone and therefore within range of North Korean conventional artillery. President Moon was quite clear about this in August 2018, addressing a direct message to his American ally: "War must not break out on the Korean peninsula again. Only the Republic of Korea can make the decision for military action on the Korean peninsula. Without the consent of the Republic of Korea, no country can determine to take military action."

But a second dependency has emerged for Seoul since normalization of its relations in 1992: an economic dependency on a China that, over the course of the 2000s, has become its primary trading partner. Although subsequent South Korean presidents have tried to balance relations between the two countries—the candidate Park Geun-hye indicating in 2012 that "the United States is our ally and China is our partner. The problem of having to choose between the two does not exist"—, we cannot help but observe that China has a great deal of leverage over its neighbor. One of the most striking recent episodes is obviously that of the Chinese reprisals that followed the deployment of a US missile defense system on South Korean territory in 2017, events that had a marked effect in particular on the South Korean tourism industry and on the export of Korean cosmetics products. China remains an unavoidable actor in any resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, particularly in terms of the strict implementation of international sanctions and, more broadly, the reunification of the peninsula. However, China remains opposed to any reunification of the peninsula via the absorption of the North by the South, a scenario that would lead to a unified and undoubtedly nationalist Korea allied with the United States, as it would potentially face territorial claims on its borders. Seoul, a city confronted with growing Sino-American regional competition, thus finds itself in a situation that is increasingly difficult to manage, a situation from which Pyongyang, inversely, seems to be profiting.

Since the beginning of 2018, North Korea has succeeded in its diplomatic offensive, the most notable event being the unprecedented summit between a North Korean leader and a sitting US president that took place in Singapore in June. This meeting, however, did not call into question the relation of mutual dependency between Pyongyang and Beijing, and no sudden reversal in allegiances can be expected,

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despite the enduring reciprocal mistrust between these two allies of convenience. China and North Korea are in effect mutual hostages. North Korea needs China in order to stay afloat, particularly given its importing of hydrocarbons and its neighbor's ability to attenuate the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council. This Chinese support was perfectly clear in 2010 during the process of succession in North Korea, when Beijing refused to condemn Pyongyang despite its being responsible for the torpedoing of a warship and then the shelling of a South Korean island, resulting in two civilian deaths. China also remains North Korea's principal trading partner, responsible for more than 90 percent of trade, and would be indispensable in any future economic development of the country were sanctions to be lifted, which is hardly likely, or if the country decided to partly open up. At the same time, China cannot afford to allow North Korea to go under if it is to ensure its primary interest: the stability of the peninsula. Not only are Kim Jong-un's three visits to China in the space of three months unprecedented in their frequency—the first in March 2018 also being the North Korean leader's first overseas visit since coming to power in late 2011—, but Beijing sees its interest in stability as coinciding in the short term with that of both Pyongyang and Seoul.

After a 2017 marked by antagonisms between North Korea and the United States of a level that had not been seen since the Korean War, 2018 seems to have been a year of appeasement. Although it has fallen short of making any clear commitment to denuclearization, this tactical shift on the part of North Korea has allowed for a reduction in tensions on the peninsula, while shoring up somewhat the internal legitimacy of a North Korean leader who now speaks as an equal with an American president. In this sense, North Korea has made the most of the politics of President Trump, who has used the North Korean issue above all for domestic political ends, in order to differentiate himself from his predecessors, presenting himself as being quite prepared to use force, before then accepting to meet with the young leader, but without obtaining any real concessions in return. North Korea thus finds itself in a position where, while having considerably developed its nuclear and ballistic programs over the past few years, it has broken through the united front of the US strategy of maximum pressure, and gained time to build up its deterrence capabilities. Although North Korea wants to limit its dependency on China, the main limitation of its strategy is that there is no prospect of a lifting of sanctions, either international or US, since there has been no concrete progress toward the denuclearization

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of the country. In the medium term, the scenario favored by all four main actors seems to be the status quo.

Japan and Russia, the useful neighbors

Japan and Russia are neighbors whose influence within the Korean peninsula is now limited. Japan allows the two Koreas to promote Korean nationalism for the purposes of domestic politics, while Russia allows them to diversify their economic partners and, where possible, to reinforce their energy security.

An enemy to Pyongyang and a difficult partner for Seoul, Tokyo serves in both cases as a useful neighbor that enables a heightening of nationalist discourse on the uniqueness of the Korean nation and an increased emphasis on inter-Korean understanding. For example, although the liberation of the peninsula from the Japanese occupation on August 15, 1945 is the only national holiday shared by the two states, the two Koreas staged a joint commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the March 1st Movement, a national liberation resistance movement against the Japanese occupier.

On the North Korean side, one of the foundation stones of the country's legitimacy, according to the regime's propaganda, is its alignment with the continued struggle for national independence, a movement of which the state's founder, Kim Il-sung, was one of the leaders. Pyongyang is prepared to change its rhetoric and to try to improve its relations with Tokyo, but on the condition that it is accorded major concessions by its neighbor, in particular financial reparations for the thirty-five years of occupation. This compensation, granted to Seoul in 1965 during the normalization of its relations with Tokyo, would allow the regime to receive funding to increase its chances of survival. But even beyond the current international sanctions that make this scenario unrealistic, to this day a bilateral problem prevents any normalization of relations: the issue of the Japanese nationals abducted by North Korean agents, mainly during the 1970s and 1980s. Although there was partial progress during Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Pyongyang in 2002, followed by short-term progress at the beginning of the mandate of Prime Minister Abe in 2014, today the problem is politically insoluble. Pyongyang refuses to step back on the partial recognition achieved at the beginning of the 2000s, and Tokyo, given the pressure of public opinion and above all the impossibility of knowing exactly how many of its nationals were abducted as opposed to simply going missing, cannot turn the page and move on.

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On the South Korean side, the inability of the two countries to cooperate on the issue of memory work and to make progress on historical differences—Korean demands to rename the Sea of Japan as the East Sea, Japanese territorial claims over the islands of Dokdo (in Korean)/Takeshima (in Japanese), the visits of some Japanese leaders to the Yasukuni Shrine, etc.—prevent any lasting, long-term improvement of relations. Japan has become a useful neighbor for the different South Korean political parties, who can play the nationalism card against it in order to drive forward their domestic political agendas—following the example of President Moon Jae-in, who decided to go back on the 2015 agreement signed between the two countries regarding comfort women, the sexual slaves forcibly enrolled in the military brothels of the Imperial Japanese Army. Despite the emphasis on cooperation, particularly on

military issues in the face of the common North Korean nuclear and ballistic threat, relations between the two democracies remain tense, and South Korean public opinion remains suspicious, or even antagonistic. A June 2018 poll carried out by the well-regarded Korean think tank, the Asian Institute for Policy Studies, indicates that South Koreans have a more favorable view of North Korea and Kim Jong-un than of Japan and of Abe Shinzō, or even—a first—of China and of Xi Jinping.

This de facto inter-Korean rapprochement is disquieting for Japan. Firstly, any long-term rapprochement could come at Tokyo's expense, with the two Koreas finding the former occupier to be an easy way to mobilize their people. Secondly, the country has seen its influence diminish considerably since the beginning of 2018 and fears a "Japan passing," an exclusion of Tokyo from ongoing negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue. Thirdly, Japan is also worried about the role played by China, which has every interest in fanning the flames of tension between the archipelago and the Korean peninsula so as to isolate the former, a process already underway at the beginning of Park Geun-hye's South Korean presidential mandate between 2012 and 2015.

Russia is the second useful neighbor for the peninsula, but far more for economic reasons than for political reasons. Unlike Beijing, since 1991 and the non-renewal of the Sino-North Korean Friendship Treaty, Moscow has no longer had a military alliance with Pyongyang. Its influence over North Korea has diminished considerably since the fall of the Soviet Union and the reversal of the country's policy to prioritize the North over the South—even though Russia was one of only two countries visited by Kim Jong-il between 1994 and 2011, the other being China. The renewal of cooperation came about in two stages: from 2000

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onward, in particular after President Putin's visit to Pyongyang, and then more recently with the visit of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in May 2018. This cooperation between the two countries, boosted in 2014 and 2015 by the signing of a number of agreements on agriculture and by the sending of North Korean laborers to Russia, was made more difficult by increasingly stringent sanctions which, from December 2017, stipulated a maximum period of two years for the return of these nationals, who constitute a significant source of foreign currency for the regime. Moscow's role was also limited in relation to the nuclear issue, since although Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, obviously opposes the nuclearization of North Korea, it seems to be lagging behind China in terms of diplomatic initiatives.

On the other hand, Russia sees North Korea as a conduit for eventually increasing trade with South Korea, its true partner on the peninsula, while South Korea sees Russia as a way to diversify its economic partnerships while ultimately bolstering its energy security. This potential Russian-South Korean cooperation via North Korea is fundamental, and was foregrounded during President Moon's September 2017 visit to the Eastern Economic Forum and in particular during his trip to Moscow in June 2018, the first such visit by a South Korean leader since 1999. The joint statement that concluded this visit was clear: "large-scale infrastructure projects will contribute to Northeast Asia's peace and prosperity," particularly in the transport sector—the aim being to link the Trans-Siberian and Trans-Korean railways—and the energy sector. Thus, South Korea presented its "three economic belts initiative," one of these belts being that of the "East Sea," allowing the country to import energy and natural resources from Russia via the peninsula's eastern seaboard.

The inability to overcome regional struggles for influence

Given all of the above, the Korean peninsula takes on the appearance of a political laboratory for any state seeking to limit the influence of regional powers. And yet, the two Koreas remain strongly dependent on their respective allies, and their Japanese and Russian neighbors cannot be seen as an alternative solution. Under these conditions, the two Koreas seek to diversify their partnerships, but with very limited success. North Korea has historical relations of cooperation with African,

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Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian states, but these will now be curtailed by UN sanctions. The country therefore seeks either to circumvent these sanctions or to approach non-state actors in order to pursue the kinds of illicit activities that the United Nations experts report recalls year upon year. For its part, South Korea is banking on its status as a middle power. Having been the first non-G8-member country to host a G20 summit in 2010, it is multiplying its initiatives across the MIKTA network (consisting of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia), as well as across the European Union, with which it signed a free trade agreement in 2010.

Despite the diplomatic activism of both countries, the balance between dependency and autonomy remains difficult to accomplish. The nuclear crisis, which continues despite the appeasement staged by North Korea and the American president, only reinforces the two countries' dependency on their allies. And although inter-Korean rapprochement may enable the stabilization of the peninsula by reducing tensions, it will not allow the two countries to increase their autonomy so long as there is mistrust between Pyongyang and Seoul. As for the progressive increase in regional competition between the United States and China, this too can only further increase the influence of both of these powers in the region, making it yet more difficult for the two Koreas to diversify their partnerships.

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A B S T R A C T

After a brief historical recap necessary to understand the influence of foreign powers on the peninsula, this article offers a non-exhaustive overview of the main issues linked to the search for autonomy by the two Koreas, even though they both remain deeply dependent on the respective foreign support they receive. We will see how the call for greater autonomy in inter-Korean relations is nothing new—neither in Seoul nor in Pyongyang—, then we will consider the role played by China and the United States, the indispensable allies, as well as by Japan and Russia, the useful neighbors.

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