

South Korea's International Relations with its Neighbors

Jimmy Parc, EunSook Yang, Stephen Ranger (eds.)

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Prologue

Critical Issues Facing Inter-Korean Relations

Jimryn Parc, EunSook Yang, Stephen Ranger

Throughout 2018 there was a flurry of diplomatic activity on the Korean Peninsula as the leaders of the two Koreas met several times while the leaders of the United States (US) and North Korea formally held a joint summit for the first time in their history. Not since the first inter-Korean summit in June 2000 was there such a high-level optimism about the future. However, the period between 2019 and 2020 has witnessed limited progress as no summits were held and North Korea began to revive its nuclear activities with a series of missile tests. At the same time, the US and China became locked in a trade war which has had a number of spillover effects on the two Koreas. Now with a new US administration in place, the challenges they face are immense given that the prospects for the future are uncertain while the current impending issues remain as complex as ever.

At the forefront of inter-Korean relations is North Korea's nuclear program which remains a sticking point for any progress. This is evident in the way that the Moon Jae-in administration has been keen to push ahead with dialogue in various forms, but as yet has been unable to find a solution that could sufficiently address the nuclear issue. Similarly, the Trump administration reached an agreement in principal with North Korea on denuclearization during the Singapore Summit but disputes over the exact interpretation of the wording have slowed efforts toward any progress.

Since North Korea began its pursuit of nuclear weapons in 2002, its development of missiles and warheads has progressed to the extent that it now possesses a credible nuclear deterrence. In the years following its revelation of an illicit nuclear program in late 2002, North Korea appeared to be willing to negotiate on the issue and the Six-Party Talks emerged as a multilateral forum to address the issue. However, many opportunities were missed which led to North Korea conducting its first nuclear test in 2006. Despite various agreements reached during the Six Party Talks process and

a brief moratorium, North Korea ramped up its program from 2009 which would result in the detonation of a hydrogen bomb and the testing of the Hwasong 15 intercontinental ballistic missile in 2017, which is capable of reaching all of the continental US. While Washington seeks for unilateral disarmament, Pyongyang is rather looking to be recognized as a nuclear power. This is where the current stalemate is at and one which hangs over engagement efforts by South Korea.

The other key issue facing inter-Korean relations is the dynamic of US-China relations. China's growing power in the region puts pressure on the future direction of the strategies pursued by the two Koreas. For South Korea it is a delicate balance as China is its largest trading partner while the United States remains its key allied partner. So far it has been able to balance these contradictory ties, but many questions about whether it can continue to do so in the future. While China's growing power in the region may seem to be an advantage for North Korea, it actually presents Kim Jong-un with a dilemma. Since the mid-2000s, his country has expanded and deepened economic linkages with China to the extent that it has become overdependent on its larger neighbor. While this helps to evade sanctions and keep North Korea indirectly connected to the global economy, it has implications for autonomy in its political decision-making. Despite efforts to balance its economic linkages with China such as reaching deals with the Egyptian telecoms company Orascom, North Korea remains limited in its choices due to the international sanctions regime placed against it over the nuclear program.

While the nuclear program and China are usually at the forefront, Japan remains a key country for the two Koreas despite the country's two decades of low economic growth and regional concerns over its military modernization efforts. For South Korea, unresolved issues on historical wrongdoings have long been an impediment toward normalizing relations between the two countries despite common strategic interests. Tensions over historical issues have become more fraught since the election of President Moon Jae-in to the extent that they even flared up during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. North Korea's ties with Japan have never progressed beyond the brief summit held between Junichiro Koizumi and Kim Jong-il in 2002. This is down to the fact that the abductee issue has never been fully resolved

despite North Korea's admission of kidnapping Japanese citizens during the 1970s. Japan is thus left in a precarious state where it is finding it difficult to play any meaningful role in the future of the Korean Peninsula.

Amidst these complex interactions, this book seeks to address the key challenges faced by the countries involved in the future of the Korean Peninsula. The first chapter deals with relations between the US and the two Koreas. Antonio Marquina traces the history of the policies pursued by different US administrations and highlights some of the failings that have allowed North Korea to build up its nuclear program. Specifically, he analyses the interactions that took place during the past US-North Korea summits throughout 2018 and the mixed results that emerged.

Regarding the ambiguous relationships between the two Koreas and China, particularly within a trilateral setting, EunSook Yang carefully examines each of the intricate dynamics. Based upon this she reveals the importance of historical and cultural factors in explaining the process of these diplomatic relationships. Furthermore, she emphasizes the role of the changing international political and economic situation upon North Korea's nuclear program.

Taking on the issue of Korea's role in US-China relations to a historical setting, Jimmyn Parc explores the key moment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the Joseon Dynasty faced immense choices on how to manage its relations with China, Japan, and Russia. He reveals an interesting parallel between the choices undertaken by King Kojong and the current government under President Moon Jae-in. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past that led to Korea being occupied by Japan, he suggests that policy makers should be more prudent in pursuing their grand strategy and avoid playing to their own personal legacy or ambitions.

Japan's role in the future of the Korean Peninsula is fraught between historical controversies and contemporary issues over the future course of East Asia, seeking a comparative example with Britain in Europe during the past, Young-Hwan Shin considers the possibility for Japan to take on the role of a balancer. While this may seem an effective approach, Japan's current response to the changing nature of inter-Korean ties has been to express great

skepticism. Shin believes that this is mainly due to the limited strategic options available for Japan in the region. Providing important domestic context for the difficulties in South Korea-Japan relations, Jaejun Sung provides an overview of the current diplomatic conflict between the Moon administration and Japan which has resulted in bilateral relations reaching their lowest point in decades. In this respect, Sung shows how domestic politics, specifically the “Candlelight Movement,” which helped Moon Jae-in to come to power, has had a powerful influence on his interactions with Japan. To this extent, disputes with Japan have been used by the Moon administration to its own advantage.

Often overlooked when discussing the major players involved in the Korean Peninsula is the EU and ASEAN. Given the stalemate in direct bilateral approaches among the countries involved in the Korean Peninsula, Sangmin Bae and Martyn de Bruyn look at how multilateral organizations could help negotiate a peace agreement that would suit all involved countries. It shows that the past roles of the EU and ASEAN as mediators would be a benefit toward supporting improved ties on the Korean Peninsula.

Expanding upon this, the example of the EU’s approach to recent developments on the Korean Peninsula is the focus for Sunhee Park. When looking at the Moon administration’s approach to North Korea in 2018 and the various joint declarations that emerged, the EU’s response had been noticeably muted. Park considers that the EU’s insistence on multilateral approaches has been the cause for its limited support toward the bilateral diplomatic activities initiated by the Moon administration. Despite this division, Park believes that the EU can still play an active role on the Korean Peninsula.

Economic exchanges between the two Koreas has been one of the few areas of positive cooperation, particularly during the process of engagement known as the Sunshine Policy in the early 2000s. A symbol of this period was the Kaesong Industrial Complex which was closed by South Korea in 2016 following North Korea’s nuclear activities. Hwy-Chang Moon and Wenyan Yin contemplate possible future approaches for reopening the complex by introducing the business framework known as global value chains. This approach can create a more sustainable model and would even

be able to bring in the participation of foreign companies.

Finally, the historical example of inter-Korean engagement during the 1980s provides important context on how the two Koreas could pursue dialogue for the future amidst great power rivalry. This relatively overlooked moment of engagement on the Korean Peninsula is re-examined by Stephen Ranger who shows the motivations for the two Koreas to begin talks against the backdrop of regional tension among the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

All of these chapters reflect different views on the complex issues that are derived from a range of academic fields. They all deliver important implications to the countries that are closely linked with inter-Korea relations and provide a new forum that will draw in interest among scholars, academics, policy makers, and even politicians. The three coordinators, EunSook Yang, Stephen Ranger, and Jimmyn Parc wish to thank all the candidates and contributors to this special issue. In particular, the coordinators are grateful to the editor-in-chief of UNISCI, Professor Antonio Marquina for his great support and assistance toward making this special issue happen. The online version of the chapters in this special issue have already been published on the website of UNISCI while the print version will be published with the generous funds offered by the Japan Foundation, which the editors are very grateful for their support.