



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIV / 2023

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## Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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Articles meant for publication should be sent to Michelguglielmo Torri (mg.torri@gmail.com), Filippo Boni (filippo.boni@open.ac.uk), Diego Maiorano (dmaiorano@unior.it); book reviews should be sent to Elena Valdameri (elena.valdameri@gess.ethz.ch).



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I-00198 ROMA

tel. 06 84 17 758

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KOREAN PENINSULA 2023: A YEAR OF RISING TENSIONS AND POLITICAL  
POLARIZATION\* \*\*

Marco Milani

and

Antonio Fiori

University of Bologna  
marco.milani6@unibo.it

University of Bologna  
antonio.fiori@unibo.it

*After the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2023 both Koreas started a process of domestic and external consolidation and restructuring. This process however had the main effect of increasing tensions and political polarization on the peninsula.*

*After a very close presidential election in South Korea, in 2023 the new president, Yoon Suk-yeol, tried to implement the reforms that had promised during his electoral campaign. However, the domestic political polarization and the control of the National Assembly by the opposition party created obstacles to this process. The result was a strong increase in political polarization between progressives and conservatives and a personalization of the political debate around the two main leaders, Yoon and Lee Jae-myung, within the parties.*

*North Korea, in the meantime, continued to strengthen its partnership and cooperation with Russia and China, with the goal not only of improving its domestic economic and military situation, but also reinforcing its position at the international level. The simultaneous rapprochement between South Korea and Japan, that took place in the first half of the year, and the consolidation of the trilateral relation with the United States, celebrated with the summit in Camp David, contributed to create two separate fronts on the peninsula and in the region, increasing tension.*

*In this situation, inter-Korean relations continued to suffer, with both Koreas contributing to this deterioration: North Korea through its continuing missile tests and military provocations, South Korea by responding with harsh rhetoric, hard line positions by the government, and military actions of its own.*

**KEYWORDS** – South Korea; North Korea; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; political polarization; Kim Jong Un; Russia-North Korea relations; North Korea missile tests; satellite launch; inter-Korean relations; Japan-South Korea relations; U.S.-Japan-South Korea.

\* This article is the outcome of a joint research effort of the two authors. More specifically, however, Marco Milani wrote sections 1; 2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 3.1 and 3.2, Antonio Fiori wrote sections 2.4; 4.1; 4.2 and 5.

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## 1. *Introduction*

After almost three years with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic influencing almost every political, social and economic aspect on the Korean peninsula, in 2023 both Koreas were able to restart a process of restructuring and consolidation, both at the domestic and at the international level. This processes, however, led to an increase of tension on the peninsula and in the region, with possible dangerous consequences in the future.

In South Korea, the newly elected president, Yoon Suk-yeol, had his first full year in office, with the goal of realizing a series of important reforms that he had promised during the campaign. The situation proved to be more complicated than expected. The split between the government, controlled by the conservative party, and the National Assembly, where the progressive party held majority, led to a political stalemate in several key sectors and also to an increase in the polarization between the two parties. The rhetoric and personal attacks continued to escalate during the year, reaching very high levels of tension. In addition, within the main parties, frictions started to emerge, in particular related to the strong leaderships of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung, which led to an increase in the personalization of the political debate and the marginalization of dissenting voices in both parties, as demonstrated by several high-profile defections.

North Korea attempted to revive its domestic situation, after being hit hard by the pandemic in 2022, and the main strategy that Kim Jong Un's regime devised was to strengthen its partnership with long-time friends, such as China and even more Russia. The partnership with Russia, in particular, became one of the key goals of the country, with exchanges of high-level visits and, more importantly, Kim's trip to Russia in September, where he met with President Vladimir Putin. The core of the new collaboration was based on military issues: with North Korea helping Russia with ammunitions and projectiles, and Moscow supporting Pyongyang for advanced missile and satellite technology. It was not a coincidence that in November North Korea was finally able to put a working reconnaissance satellite into orbit, after several attempts.

If on the one hand the partnership between North Korea, Russia and China continued to grow, on the other South Korea launched an important rapprochement with Japan, under the benevolent gaze of the United States. Since his first weeks in office, Yoon announced that it was crucial to pursue good and future-oriented relations with Japan, despite the existing historical controversies. The reason was that Seoul and Tokyo had many things in common, including shared values and principles and also security interests in the region. This rapprochement took place in March and April, when the two leaders exchanged visits and promoted a reinforcement of their cooperation in many sectors. In August, with the summit in Camp David, hosted by U.S. President Biden, the new trilateral partnership was formalized. Be-



fore that meeting, Yoon was invited to Washington for an official state visit, in April, and was able to obtain a series of important guarantees for the country's security and for the reinforcement of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in Korea, such as the creation of the Nuclear Consultative Group. This dynamic had the consequence of consolidating two separate blocs in the region, replicating the informal alliances of the Cold War years.

Inevitably, this situation strongly affected inter-Korean relations, which, during 2023, went through one of the worst phases of recent years. The harsh rhetoric and military provocations of North Korea, which had started in the previous years, were met by the hard-line approach promoted by President Yoon and epitomized by the change at the head of the Ministry of Unification and within the ministry itself. The emphasis on the idea of unification based on liberal democratic value represented a serious blow to the rapprochement between the two Koreas. This situation escalated over the course of the year and peaked at the end of December, when Kim Jong Un announced that South Korea was no longer considered as a partner for unification and reconciliation but only as a separate and hostile state, questioning the entire process of inter-Korean relations of the past five decades.

## 2. *Domestic politics*

### 2.1. *A complicated first year in office for Yoon Suk-yeol*

The 2022 presidential elections in South Korea portrayed a country that was strongly polarized between the two main political parties, and more in general between the conservative and progressive fronts. Yoon Suk-yeol was elected with the narrowest margin in the democratic history of the country [Milani & Fiori 2023: 49] and this polarization continued to increase during Yoon's first full year in office, despite his promise, on the night of elections, of working to reduce this division and reunify the country [Lee 2022, 10 March]. This development not only negatively influenced relations between the two major parties, but it turned out to be also a major obstacle for the implementation of a series of reforms and policy initiatives that the President had announced during the electoral campaign and in his first weeks in office. The situation was further worsened by the split between a conservative presidency and a progressive majority in the National Assembly, as a result of the 2020 legislative vote, and by the prospect of the crucial elections for the renewal of the Parliament, scheduled for April 2024.

The importance of domestic reforms for relaunching economic growth was made clear by President Yoon in his New Year Address to the Nation, in which he emphasized the challenges from the volatile international situation – that had led to higher prices, high interest rates and supply chain disruptions – and the need to boost the country's exports in order to overcome the situation. In addition, Yoon specifically mentioned

the need to push forward the reforms of three key sectors: labour, education and pension. In particular, related to the first one, Yoon criticized the role of workers' organizations and labour unions, calling for more flexibility, support for the companies that created jobs, and prevention of labour disputes and controversies [Lee 2023, 10 May]. As expected, these statements raised tension within the country, both on the part of the opposition Democratic Party, which had a majority of seats in the National Assembly, and labour organizations.

The split between the legislative and executive powers remained a key feature of the country's domestic politics also in the first months of 2023. In February, the National Assembly passed an impeachment bill against Interior Minister Lee Sang-min, for his possible responsibility in failing to prevent and in managing the tragic events that had happened in the neighbourhood of Itaewon in October 2022 [Lee 2023, 8 February]. The decision was later overturned by the Constitutional Court in July [Park 2023, 25 July]. However, it was a clear sign of the existing difficulties in working together by the two main parties.

Yoon Suk-yeol had also to face challenges within his own party, the People Power Party (PPP), which was deeply divided between supporters and opponents of the President. After the ouster of the controversial leader of the party, Lee Jun-seok, in 2022, in March 2023 the election of a new chairperson by party members was held. The competition turned out to be not only for the leadership of the party but also to determine the President's influence over his own party. The final result gave a significant boost to Yoon's position, with the large victory in the first ballot for Kim Gi-hyeon (53%), the candidate closest to the President [Kim 2023, 9 March].

Despite this temporary success, the position of Yoon Suk-yeol remained difficult, with low approval ratings, between 30 and 40%, and problems in implementing domestic political reforms [Kim 2023, 9 May]. While in international politics, the new administration was able to push forward some important initiatives, at the domestic level economic growth remained slow and tension with the political and social opposition remained very high.

During the summer, the internal situation became even more complicated for the President, with a series of crisis and controversies that partly took the administration off guard. The first of these issues emerged between June and July, when the Japanese government announced its plan to start discharging the water from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean. This decision put the South Korean government in a dilemma: on the one hand, Yoon Suk-yeol did not oppose the decision, mainly in order to maintain a positive momentum for the recently newfound harmony between Seoul and Tokyo [see section 4.2]; on the other hand, a large portion of the South Korean population protested vehemently against the decision, and also against their own government, which was accused of not taking into

proper consideration the health of the population for the sake of maintaining good relations with Japan. The Yoon administration repeatedly tried to reassure the public opinion about the safety of the operation, citing the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In early July, IAEA had stated that all the standards were respected and that the environmental impact was negligible. Also, a South Korean scientific team, which had been sent to Fukushima, reiterated that the water release did not pose threats to human health or to the environment [Kim 2023, 8 July]. Nevertheless, a majority of the population remained very hostile to this decision, demonstrating once again how complicated relations between South Korea and Japan were, despite the initiatives of the President.

Soon after the Fukushima waters issue, the South Korean government had to face a further problem in the form of the extreme weather events that hit the country. First, a series of heavy rains in different areas, in mid-July, caused massive damages and the death of 49 persons [Yoon & Young 2023, 17 July]; a few weeks later, in early August, a serious heat wave caused several deaths in the country and severe problems for the World Scout gathering, which was taking place in the Saemangeum area, with tens of thousands of participants from all over the world [Yim & Park 2023, 7 August]. In both cases, the government was accused of poorly managing the situation; in addition, the international dimension of the Scout event represented a further blow in terms of image for South Korea.

A third issue that emerged in the summer contributed to undermining the consensus towards the government in the country. Between July and August, a series of random violent attacks – labelled by the media as «don't-ask-why» crimes, because they were committed without a clear motive or a relation between the attacker and the victims – took place in Seoul and the surrounding area. On 21 July, a man stabbed several people, killing one and wounding three, and on 3 August another man hit pedestrians with his car and then attacked people with a knife, killing two and injuring twelve. These events contributed to the decrease of the sense of safety in the population and required a response by the government [Yoon 2023, 3 September]. These issues, although not all directly attributable to the government action, contributed to the decrease of the President's popularity [Kim 2023, 6 September]. Yoon's response materialized with an increasingly stronger rhetoric against his political adversaries, repeatedly labelled as «communists» and «anti-state forces», contributing to the escalation of the political polarization within the country [Yim 2023, 22 September].

## 2.2. *A dangerous increase in the country's political polarization*

The extremely tense situation in South Korea between the two main political fronts remained as a constant feature also in 2023. One of the key aspects of this polarization concerned the investigations for corruption into the leader of the Democratic Party and former presidential candidate, Lee

Jae-myung. In January, Lee was interrogated twice by prosecutors for corruption charges related to the period when he was mayor of Seongnam [Alexander 2023, 1 February]. In addition, on 31 January, the former president of the Ssangbangwool industrial group, Kim Song-tae, claimed to have paid US\$ 8 million to North Korea for economic projects and to facilitate a possible travel to the country by Lee Jae-myung [Hwang 2023, 3 February]. These investigations were immediately considered by supporters of Lee and of the Democratic Party as political retribution against the former opponent of Yoon Suk-yeol, brought forward through the prosecution, of which Yoon had been a leading member for many years. On 4 February, the party organized a demonstration in Seoul, to protest against these actions that were seen as politically motivated [Shim 2023, 6 February].

The situation escalated quickly when, in mid-February, Lee was interrogated for the third time and, soon afterwards, an arrest warrant against him was issued. The request was approved by the President and by the Ministry of Justice and submitted to the vote of the National Assembly, in consideration of the fact that Lee was a member of Parliament. On 27 February, the Assembly voted against the arrest of Lee Jae-myung, but only for one vote, despite the fact that the Democratic Party had a large majority in the Parliament (169 seats out of 299) [Shin 2023, 27 February]. This outcome opened a fierce debate in the progressive front, since it made clear that within the party there was a significant opposition against Lee's leadership.

The investigation of the prosecution on Lee Jae-myung and other members of the Democratic Party continued in the following months. There was a new indictment for corruption against Lee in March [Shin 2023, 22 March], a new investigation related to corruption practices within the party for the election of Song Young-gil as leader back in 2021 [Yun & Shin 2023, 25 April], and allegations against another important member of the Party, Kim Nam-kuk, regarding his ownership of and dealings with cryptocurrency [Lee 2023, 14 May]. These new developments further increased the tension between the political parties and between the Democratic Party and the judiciary.

In the meantime, the progressives continued to harshly criticize the government, not only for the alleged politicization of the judiciary power, but also for the poor results in terms of managing the crises that emerged during the summer. The tension continued to escalate, as shown by a new 13-hours interrogation against Lee Jae-myung in mid-August, and reached its highest point of the year, when, on 31 August, Lee announced that he was starting a sit-in and a hunger strike in front of the National Assembly to protest against Yoon Suk-yeol's government [Kim 2023, 31 August]. This initiative by the leader of the opposition, and the deterioration of his health condition as a consequence, did not stop the prosecution from interrogating Lee on different charges again on 9 and 12 September, and from issuing a new arrest warrant on 18 September, the same day in which he was hospi-

talized for his failing health conditions. Unexpectedly, this time the National Assembly voted in favour of the arrest of Lee Jae-myung [Yim 2023, 21 September]. Lee, nonetheless, was not arrested because the court rejected the request of arrest on the basis that there was no significant risk of destruction of evidence by Lee, which made his right to non-detention during the investigation prevalent [Ji 2023, 27 September]. The decision temporarily froze this potentially explosive issue and was obviously welcomed by the progressives, while criticized by the conservatives. Both parties started a process of internal consolidation and restructuring in order to prepare for the campaign for the crucial legislative elections scheduled for 2024.

### *2.3. Political restructuring toward the elections for the National Assembly*

In the last months of the year, the two main political parties started to focus on the preparation for the upcoming electoral campaign for the National Assembly. With the 2020 elections, that were held during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Democratic Party was able to obtain a significant majority in the Parliament [Milani 2021: 79-81]. This meant that, after the election of Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022, the two main political institutions of the country were split between the two main parties. For the progressives, the National Assembly, despite having limited political powers compared to the presidency in the South Korean political system, became the last stronghold against the President and his political agenda; for the conservatives, it was the main obstacle for the implementation of their policies and reforms. In addition, the election was seen also as a sort of referendum on Yoon Suk-yeol's government in the middle of his term. The stakes were thus particularly high.

A first glimpse of the approaching electoral competition took place on 11 October, with the by-elections for the National Assembly in the important district of Gangseo in Seoul. Here, the candidate of the Democratic Party, Jin Kyo-hoon, won the seat with a margin of more than 17 points over the candidate of the People Power Party [Song 2023, 12 October]. This resounding defeat for the conservatives, albeit limited to only one seat, had immediate consequences for the leadership of the party, that decided to establish an innovation committee, led by Ihn Yo-han, a medical school professor of US descent (born John Alderman Linton), and the first non-ethnic Korean citizen to achieve such an important role within a political party [Shin 2023, 24 October]. The decision to create the committee, and to appoint Ihn in the leading role, was a sign of the recognition by the PPP of the need to change and restructure the party in order to improve its consensus within the public opinion. One of the first decisions of the new committee was to revoke the suspension of the former party leader Lee Jun-seok, of the mayor of Daegu Hong Joon-pyo, and other suspended party members, with the aim to consolidate and unify the conservative front before the elections [Kim 2023, 2 November]. Despite the full autonomy that was granted to the

new committee, tension quickly emerged between Ihn Yo-han and the party leader, Kim Gi-hyeon, especially on the rules for nominating the candidates for the National Assembly elections. With the goal of pursuing renovation of the party's politicians, the committee proposed that party leaders and lawmakers with long experience or closely associated with the President would refrain from running for the election. The proposal was not met with enthusiasm by the party leadership [Shin & Seo 2023, 30 November]. The rejection of the main proposals for innovation from the committee led to the decision to end its activities on 7 December, three weeks before what had been scheduled [Lee 2023, 7 December]. The internal split between the committee and the leadership – that reflected a broader division between a faction that called for bold change and renovation and another one that wanted a more gradual process – continued to have consequences, and led to the resignation of the party leader, Kim Gi-hyeon, on 13 December, after only 9 months in office [Jo & Lee 2023, 13 December]. The last weeks of the year were thus characterized by a difficult transition and confusion within the conservative party. President Yoon Suk-yeol promoted a significant government reshuffle that included eight ministers – some of them particularly important such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs – and several Vice-Ministers, with the twofold goal of revamping the action of the government but also of leaving a free hand to high-profile politicians within the party to run for the legislative elections [Nam 2023, 18 December]. On 21 December, the Minister of Justice Han Dong-hoon left his position and was appointed as new leader of the People Power Party, with the mandate of bringing the situation under control and prepare for the election campaign [Kobara 2023, 22 December].

If the situation was particularly chaotic within the conservative camp in the last part of the year, the same was also true for the progressive side. The vote in favour of the arrest of the leader Lee Jae-myung left deep scars within the Democratic Party and was interpreted as a strong signal of dissatisfaction with the leadership in a significant portion of the party. The electoral success of the by-elections only partially healed the situation; however, with an important electoral campaign looming on the horizon, a consolidation was necessary also for the progressives. Immediately after the vote for Lee's arrest, the Democratic Party appointed a new leader in the National Assembly, Hong Ihk-pyo, after the resignation of the previous one Park Kwang-on [Kang 2023, 26 September]. In the following weeks, Lee Jae-myung tried to consolidate his position as party leader, side lining those who had criticized him and vigorously opposing the government initiatives in the Parliament [Lee 2023, 10 October]. The contrast within the Democratic Party between supporters and opponents of Lee's leadership started to have practical results in December, when former Prime Minister and former party leader Lee Nak-yeon announced that he was planning to leave the party and form a new one before the legislative elections, with the goal of at-

tracting politicians and voters not aligned with either of the two major parties [Kang 2023, 13 December]. The announcement represented a serious threat to the unity of the progressive camp, considering that it came from one of its most prominent political figures. Lee Nak-yon's decision elicited criticism among party members, who did not consider positively the idea of splitting the party, and thus strengthened the support for Lee Jae-myung. At the same time, the party leader seemed to be open to the possibility of a meeting with his opponent to try to mend the situation [Kang 2023, 18 December]. The meeting, which took place on 30 December, did not resolve the issue, since the two adversaries were not able to find an agreement. This result was mostly the consequence of Lee Nak-yon's request that Lee Jae-myung step down from the party leadership and agree to establish a joint leadership committee before the election; a request that was rejected by Lee Jae-myung himself [Kim 2023, 31 December].

In the meantime, also a former leader of the conservative party, Lee Jun-seok, announced his plan to form a new party before the April elections [Kim 2023, 27 December]. The similarities in the messy process of consolidation within both main parties highlighted how the polarization between the two sides and the personalization within the two parties around the personalities of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung were affecting the political debate. The strong emphasis on the role of the two political leaders resulted in the marginalization of dissenting voices within the parties and also in an increase of personal attacks against both Yoon and Lee. This development represented a particularly menacing prospect in view of the elections for the National Assembly.

#### *2.4. Kim Jong Un meets old friends and strengthens the country's defence system*

On 1<sup>st</sup> January, North Korean media published a brief report on the works of the Sixth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party – held at the end of December 2022 – which contained excerpts of Kim Jong Un remarks. The fact that marginal space was reserved in the report to the analysis of economic results suggested that Pyongyang had failed to achieve noteworthy growth over the course of the previous year, also due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic. On the other hand, the report's strong focus on the security situation and defence plans reflected the regime's intention to continue to take a hard line against the «hostile» attitude of the United States and South Korea. In his report to the Plenum, Kim shared his vision regarding the current global order, noting how it had clearly transformed into a «new cold war» and stressing again «multipolarization» as a key development, as he had already done in his report to the Supreme People's Assembly in September 2022 [KINU 2023]. His worldview was encapsulated by what appeared to be a fundamental shift in North Korea's foreign policy, evidenced by a decided tilt towards China and Russia

and probably also by a recalibration of the United States' strategic value for the security of the regime.

This renewed intimacy between North Korea and Beijing and Moscow was clearly demonstrated in spring, when trade exchanges were restored after the restrictions imposed because of the pandemic [Yoon 2023, 17 February]. In addition, the Chinese and Russian delegations participated in the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Korean War armistice, held in North Korea on 27 July. The main representatives of both countries – Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and China's Politburo member Li Hongzhong – had the opportunity to participate in high-profile institutional and celebratory events and engage in discussions with the North Korean leadership. Shoigu promised to «strengthen cooperation» between the countries' armies [KCNA 2023b] and discussed «strategic and tactical collaboration» in a meeting with North Korean Leader Kim, although state media did not provide more details [KCNA 2023c]. Both emissaries delivered a letter sent to the North Korean leader by their respective heads of state, Putin and Xi [KCNA 2023c; KCNA 2023f]. Kim Jong Un personally led Shoigu to visit the Weaponry Exhibition held in Pyongyang, during which the North Korean leader showed his guests a part of the North Korean arsenal, revealing, for the first time, brand-new weapons [KCNA 2023d]. The exhibition aimed to demonstrate how the North Korean weapons industry had overcome material shortages and economic contractions to meet the full militarization of the country, as auspicated by Kim Jong Un. North Korea has managed to test almost all nuclear-capable assets listed by Kim at the Eighth Party Congress and, in all likelihood, will continue to develop these and other weapons devices. Successively, Shoigu and Li joined Kim Jong Un during the military parade [KCNA 2023g], symbolically supporting North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development, which both Beijing and Moscow had previously consistently condemned, at least formally, at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Only few weeks later, the three allies reconvened again in Pyongyang, to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country's founding; the Chinese delegation was led by Vice Premier Liu Guozhong, while a military song-and-dance ensemble along with some diplomats arrived from Russia. Both Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin sent congratulatory letters, expressing their willingness to strengthen strategic communication and expanding bilateral ties [KCNA 2023i; KCNA 2023j]. The parade that took place in Kim Il Sung Square featured «paramilitary forces» and did not appear to showcase North Korea's banned weaponry, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, just two days before, Pyongyang had unveiled its first «tactical nuclear attack submarine», which was catalogued by Kim Jong Un as part of a «push toward the nuclear weaponization of the Navy» [KCNA 2023h].

The emphasis on promoting the relationship with Russia continued also in the following weeks. Immediately after his visit to Russia, in Septem-



ber, Kim Jong Un briefed the party central committee's Politburo, stressing the need to «strengthen close contacts and cooperation» and placing bilateral ties «on a new strategic level in response to the demand of the new era» [KCNA 2023n]. At the end of September, the Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, had a two-day meeting, at the end of which a constitutional amendment, stating that the country «develops highly nuclear weapons to ensure» its «right to existence» and to «deter war», was unanimously adopted [KCNA 2023o]. Kim Jong Un stressed the need to accelerate production of nuclear weapons to deter what he defined as U.S. provocations, such as military drills and deployment of strategic assets in the region. The amendment came a year after North Korea officially enshrined in law the right to use pre-emptive nuclear strikes to protect itself, making its nuclear status «irreversible». In his speech, however, Kim highlighted that a major revamp of his country's economy was «the most pressing task for the government» and urged the agriculture sector to work harder to promote the people's conditions, implicitly admitting the worsening in living conditions of the population.

At the end of November, North Koreans went to the polls to vote for deputies to local assemblies: unprecedentedly, it was reported that the 0.09% of the votes were against candidates for deputies to provincial people's assemblies and the 0.13% against selected candidates to city and county people's assemblies [KCNA 2023r]. This rare revelation of opposing votes in the local elections may be intended to show that the country held the election following the August revision of the election law, that introduced a seemingly multi-candidate system at the provincial and municipal level [Kim 2023, 9 November].

Before the end of the year, as usual, Kim Jong Un kicked off the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, setting the stage for unveiling policy decisions for the new year. Apart from listing the «remarkable success made in the overall national economy» and lauding the agricultural, construction, and industrial sectors for their noteworthy achievements, Kim set forth unspecified tasks for the military and the munitions industry to «further accelerate the war preparations» in the face of «(anti-North Korea) confrontation moves by the U.S. and its vassal forces unprecedented in history» [KCNA 2023s]. Kim harshly blamed South Korea and the United States for raising tensions in the region, by referring to their expanded joint military exercises, deployments of U.S. strategic military assets, and trilateral security cooperation with Japan, as turning the Korean peninsula into a dangerous war-risk zone. Against this backdrop, Kim called for rewriting his own country's constitution to eradicate the idea of a peaceful unification between the war-divided countries and to cement the South as an «invariable principal enemy» [KCNA 2023s]. In eliminating the idea of a shared sense of statehood between the Koreas, Kim could be reinforcing North Korea's older approach of ignoring Seoul and attempting direct dealings with Wash-

ington. On the other hand, declaring the South as a permanent adversary, rather than a potential partner for reconciliation, could also be aimed at improving the credibility of Kim's escalatory nuclear doctrine, which authorizes the military to use nuclear weapons pre-emptively against adversaries, if North Korean leadership is considered under threat.

### 3. *Inter-Korean relations*

#### 3.1. *Increasingly harsh positions and escalation of tension on the peninsula*

Relations between North and South Korea continued to be particularly problematic over the course of 2023, with a significant escalation of tension and rhetoric from both sides. The new year was opened by a series of short-range missile launches by Pyongyang, between 31 December 2022 and 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023 [Lee 2023, 1 January], which was met by the South Korean president with an increasingly hard-line position. On 11 January, Yoon Suk-yeol declared that, in the event of a further increase of North Korean nuclear threats, South Korea could decide to develop nuclear weapons or to ask the United States to redeploy nuclear weapons on the peninsula [Choe 2023, 12 January]. Along the same line, when U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and U.S. Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, visited Seoul between January and February, the two countries reaffirmed the strength of their alliance, the U.S. commitment to defend the peninsula, and agreed to expand their joint military exercises [Choi, Si-young, 2023, 5 February]. This commitment was reinforced by the joint aerial exercises that took place on 2 and 3 February [Choi, David, 2023, 2 February]. North Korea responded condemning the exercises and declaring that the country was ready to take unprecedented countermeasures. A promise that was fleshed out by the launch of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in mid-February, the first since November, and also two additional short-range missiles [Shin 2023, 21 February].

This escalation of rhetoric and military tension reached its highest point, as usual, in March, when South Korea and the U.S. held the biggest military exercise of the year, Freedom Shield. The exercise started on 13 March and lasted for 11 days [Song 2023, 13 March]. On its part, North Korea responded, in addition to strong verbal condemnation by Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong, by a massive series of missile launches and tests. They included the launch of 6 short range missiles on 9 March, 2 cruise missiles from a submarine on 12 March, 2 more short range missiles two days later, one more ICBM on 16 March, a short-range missile equipped with a mock nuclear warhead on 19, more cruise and short range missiles on 22 and 27, and a 59-hours test of a submarine drone with nuclear capabilities during the same days [Foster-Carter 2023a]. The number and diversification of these tests demonstrated the advancement of North Korea's

arms technology, and the absence of any major reaction by the international actors to these tests also signalled the fact that they had been accepted as representing a sort of «normal» behaviour on the part of North Korea.

In April, North Korea continued with its tests, especially of submarine technology and of a new ICBM, the Hwasong-18, that, according to the regime, was propelled through solid fuel instead of liquid one, a very important advancement because it allows a faster, easier and safer deployment [Choi & Park 2023, 14 April]. South Korea, on its part, continued to reinforce regional defence, strengthening its military relationship with both Japan and the United States. Not surprisingly, after the release of the Washington Declaration by Yoon and Biden, which included a reinforcement of the American nuclear deterrent on the peninsula, the North Korean regime condemned this new initiative and pledged to strengthen its nuclear armament even more [Shin 2023, 1 May].

The paths of the two Koreas seemed to be increasingly distant; while South Korea was relying more and more on the alliance with the US, and on the possibility to extend the partnership to other regional countries such as Japan, North Korea continued to strengthen its military system, relying also on the support of Russia and China. Inter-Korean relations were, yet again, embedded within broader strategic rivalries and confrontation, with the possibility of very dangerous results for the peninsula.

On 31 May, North Korea attempted to launch a military spy satellite into orbit, the Mallygyong-1, through the rocket Chollima-1. However, the launch was not successful, with the rocket falling into the sea shortly after taking off, due to a malfunction [Kim & Kim 2023, 31 May]. The initiative was in line with the idea expressed by Kim Jong Un of modernizing the military system. The launch was tried again, on 24 August, with another failure, but also with the indication that a third attempt would be tried in October [Kim 2023, 24 August], signalling the importance of this program for the North Korean regime. The debris from the first launch were then recovered by the South Korean military in the waters near the country, and the analysis revealed that the satellite was very rudimentary and practically unusable for military purposes.

What North Korea lacked in terms of knowledge and know-how for satellites and rockets, it certainly had for missiles. On 12 July, Pyongyang tested again the Hwasong-18 ICBM, with a potential range of around 15.000 kilometres [Kosuke 2023, 13 July]. The test, that took place during the NATO Summit in Lithuania, in which also Yoon Suk-yeol and Japan Prime Minister Fumio Kishida participated, was strongly condemned at the international level. A meeting of the UNSC was also convened but without the approval of any new measure, because of the opposition of Russia and China. More short-range missiles were then launched in July and August, in particular after the U.S. and South Korea launched a second very important joint exercise, the Ulchi Freedom Shield in late August, which was met, as

usual, with the launch of missiles and other military operations, this time under the supervision of Kim Jong Un himself [Kim 2023, 3 September].

### 3.2. *Towards the end of inter-Korean relations?*

The situation between the two Koreas seemed to follow the usual playbook of the previous year and a half, with important increase of tension and military pressure from both sides, which was met with more military pressure from the other. This dynamic was clearly very dangerous and extremely detrimental for inter-Korean relations. In the second half of 2023, the situation continued to worsen, and not only because of military provocations, but also because of practical steps taken by both sides, aimed at relegating inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation to history.

The first step in this direction was taken by the South Korean government, with a general redefinition of the Ministry of Unification. On 28 June, Yoon Suk-yeol replaced Kwon Young-se, officially because the latter wanted to focus on his parliamentary career before the following elections, with Kim Yung-ho, a very hard-line figure with extremely critical positions against North Korea. This decision was paired with a clear indication by President Yoon that the Ministry had to change: from being a «support department for North Korea» to focus on unification «based on liberal democratic order» [Foster-Carter 2023b: 108]. This redefinition of the role of the Ministry and the appointment of such a controversial figure in the leading position caused concerns not only in the opposition, but also in parts of the conservative party. However, this was perfectly in line with what Yoon had promised in the campaign and it was perfectly coherent with Yoon's more general foreign policy, stressing the importance of democracy and democratic values and of creating coalitions with other like-minded countries.

The hard-line position towards North Korea was furthered reiterated by Yoon's speech on Liberation Day, 15 August, in which he stated that peace on the peninsula could be achieved only through strength [Jung 2023, 15 August].

This hardening of positions predictably could only have the result of generating a very similar reaction from North Korea, with multiple signals pointing in the direction of more confrontation. Missiles launches continued in September, while Kim Jong Un was consolidating his country's partnership with Russia, with an eye on military and satellite technology. The real breakthrough came on 21 November, when North Korea was able, with its third attempt, to put its reconnaissance satellite into orbit. Soon after the regime declared that the satellite was working properly [Choe 2023, 21 November]. Few hours after the launch, both South Korea and Japan confirmed that the satellite had really made into orbit, although they stated it was impossible to understand if it was properly working. In any case, South Korea insisted this was a clear violation of UNSC resolutions that prohibit North Korea from using ballistic missile technology; on its part, Pyongyang

maintained it was a «legal right» of the country «to strengthen its right to self-defence» [KCNA 2023q]. In any case, if the spacecraft works, it could significantly improve North Korea's capabilities, including enabling it to more accurately target opponent's forces.

The significance of the event went beyond the fact that North Korea had been able to put a satellite into orbit. The day after, South Korea suspended the no-fly zone on the border, part of the Pyongyang agreement of 2018 reached between Kim Jong Un and the former South Korean President Moon Jae-in in order to reduce tensions and risk of conflict along the border. North Korea responded terminating the entire agreement, restoring guard posts and rearming soldiers on the border [Foster-Carter 2023c: 114-115]. This development was particularly concerning because the agreement was designed to reduce the possibility of a military escalation in the dangerous area of the border. But the climate between the two Koreas was of strong confrontation from both sides, characterized by increasing military pressure and escalating rhetoric. On 18 December, North Korea launched again an ICBM, the fifth of the year, marking the highest number of this kind of tests in a single year [Van Diepen 2023, 21 December].

The final blow to inter-Korean relations came in late December, when Kim Jong Un, in the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Party, announced that reunification had become impossible and that South Korea was no longer a partner for reconciliation and reunification, as part of the same nation. Hence, in Kim's analysis, relations between the two Koreas should be treated as relations between two separate, hostile and belligerent states, and North Korea, while not seeking war, had to be ready to respond and to subjugate South Korea in case of an attack [Kim 2024, 1 January].

The practical effects of this new policy will be evaluated in the future, but it certainly represents a departure from a key principle of inter-Korean relations, dating back to the first Joint Declaration of 1972, in which the two Koreas recognized to be part of the same nation and that unification was the main goal to pursue.

#### 4. *International relations*

##### 4.1. *Kim goes to Russia. A new and dangerous partnership with Moscow*

The rumours that had been circulating for a few days, fuelled by unidentified White House officials [Wong and Barnes 2023, 4 September], were finally confirmed when, on 10 September, Kim Jong Un left Pyongyang to visit the Russian Federation [KCNA 2023k]. The visit had been likely planned since late August, when a large delegation of North Korean officials, including those overseeing the leadership protocol, travelled from Pyongyang to Vladivostok and then to Moscow [Wong and Barnes 2023, 4 September]. After crossing the narrow border that divides North Korea

from the Russian Federation and, following a brief stop in Khasan [KCNA 2023l], where the North Korean leader was received with full honours by the military picket and a band, as well as by the governor of the region, Kim, aboard his armoured train equipped with all comforts, reached Vostochny, in Siberia, home to an important spaceport [KCNA 2023m]. There, the North Korean leader was joined by Putin, who led Kim in a careful inspection of the launch facility of the Soyuz-2 space rocket.

The most relevant question, however, is why Kim Jong Un, who, like his father, is somewhat reluctant to travel outside his country, decided to leave Pyongyang for Russia. The answer presumably has to do with the mutual needs of North Korea and Russia. The latter would like to guarantee the influx of ammunition – which North Korea certainly does not lack – which Putin desperately needs to carry out military operations against Ukraine. The North Korean regime, for its part, sees the possibility of replenishing its coffers with foreign currency and obtaining basic supplies absolutely necessary to try to improve the situation of an isolated country prostrated by international sanctions and by the self-imposed isolation during the pandemic. Possibly more important is the possibility of receiving support in the technological sector that would allow Pyongyang to take a significant step forward in the military field. The fact that the meeting between the two leaders was held at the Vostochny spaceport was particularly indicative of the intentions of the North Koreans, who had tried twice – and failed both times – to send a spy satellite into orbit. This was an objective described by Kim himself as indispensable to bolster up defence capabilities against the military threat posed by the U.S. and South Korea and to make possible the deployment of «preemptive military power according to the situation» [KCNA 2023a].

Against this backdrop, just before the talks started, Putin reportedly declared that Moscow would offer assistance to North Korea in building satellites [Sokolin 2023, 13 September]. The fact that military technological development would be one of the main topics of discussion between Kim and Putin was easy to imagine. From inside the luxurious and hyper-armoured train that took Kim to Russia, in fact, some important military officers emerged. They included Ri Pyong Chol, vice chairman of the Workers' Party's powerful Central Military Commission and marshal of the army; Jo Chun Ryong, director of the Munitions Industry Department; and, above all, Pak Thae Song, who presides over the space technology sector [Kim *et al* 2023, 12 September]. North Korea's extreme interest in Russian technology – useful for perfecting spy satellites but also for equipping submarines with nuclear technology – was supposedly confirmed by the presence of these and some other prominent figures from Pyongyang's leadership.

The provision of weapons from North Korea to Russia, which had presumably taken place in September, was confirmed in mid-October by the White House, which revealed that satellite images showed cargos leav-

ing from an ammunition depot in North Korea to reach a depot near Russia's southwestern border [Mason 2023, 13 October]. The same day, pictures showing images of containers in the North Korean port city of Najin, ready to be shipped to Russia, were released by the White House, which also claimed that the containers had reached Russia the day before the meeting between Kim and Putin [DeYoung 2023, 13 October].

In a further demonstration of growing bilateral ties, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pyongyang, where, on 18 October, during a reception, he expressed «solidarity» with North Korea and thanked the regime for its «principled support» of the «special military operation» in Ukraine [Choi, Soo-hyang, 2023, 19 October]. Another delegation, led by Russia's Natural Resources Minister Alexander Kozlov, arrived in Pyongyang in mid-November, to discuss «cooperation in the fields of trade, economy, science and technology» [KCNA 2023p].

According to South Korea's Defence Minister Shin Won-sik, it was thanks to Russian help that, in November, Pyongyang was able to put its first spy satellite into orbit, resolving North Korea's rocket engine issues that were responsible for the two failed attempts in May and August 2023 [Jo & Park 2023, 23 November]. However, some commentators expressed their scepticism on the possibility that North Korea received Russian assistance for this specific launch shortly before it; the timeline would suggest previous technical assistance [Van Diepen 2023, 28 November].

#### 4.2. *Yoon mends fences with Japan and strengthen his «diplomatic offensive»*

Since taking office, President Yoon Suk-yeol has been pushing to mend the historical grievance with Tokyo and strengthen a security cooperation, which would doubtlessly include Washington, to better cope with the increasing North Korean nuclear threats. This attitude became clear on 1<sup>st</sup> March, a very important date for Koreans, since it marks the 1919 uprising against the Japanese colonizers. Yoon, in a televised speech, paid homage to the «patriotic martyrs» who sacrificed themselves for their country's freedom and independence but avoided mentioning any specific colonial wrongdoing on the part of the Japanese colonizers. Moreover, he explained why Japan, due to the sharing of universal values and the importance of cooperation in different fields, had to be seen as a partner [Lee 2023, 3 March]. Only few days later, Seoul announced a plan consisting of two aspects. The first was the dropping of the Supreme Court's 2018 order that imposed to Japanese companies to compensate Korean victims of forced labour during the occupation of the peninsula. The second was that an existing South Korean public foundation, funded by private-sector companies, would unilaterally offer reparation to survivors, removing the demand for an apology and payments on the part of Japan [Kwon 2023, 6 March].

Seoul's decision was hailed by the Biden administration as «ground-breaking» [The White House 2023a], given that the American administra-

tion had pressed its two allies to reconcile. The response from South Korean civil society, however, was not equally positive.

Anyway, the rapprochement paved the way to respective visits of Yoon to Tokyo in March 2023 – the first in a dozen years by a South Korean leader to Japan – and Kishida to Seoul two months later. Previously, the two leaders had only briefly met on the side lines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, in September 2022. The 2023 summits brought about positive outcomes, since the two countries agreed to drop an almost four-year trade dispute on some high-tech materials used for chips and to normalize the intelligence-sharing pact known as GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement), which had been left in limbo by the previous administration, after Japan imposed export restrictions on Seoul [Kim 2023, 21 March].

These decisions were met with intense criticism from the South Korean opposition and activists, who talked of «humiliating diplomacy» [Shin 2023, 16 March] and chastised Yoon for ending his meeting with Kishida without receiving an apology. Yoon's efforts to mend ties with Japan were undoubtedly aimed at enhancing Biden's appreciation for his administration and to elevate international perceptions of South Korea as a global player.

At the end of April, in order to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Yoon held a summit with the U.S. President. The outcome was the Washington Declaration, in which the U.S. vowed to strengthen extended deterrence consultations, while South Korea restated its non-proliferation obligations under the Non-proliferation Treaty framework. Yet, again, many in South Korea felt disappointed; on the one hand because this decisive turn towards the US would contribute to further escalate tensions with China and North Korea, and, on the other, because this was seen as a design aimed to silence calls for South Korea's own nuclear force or the redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons in the South, a request that had gained momentum in recent months.

Yoon administration's diplomatic efforts were largely rewarded in mid-May, when the South Korean President attended the G7 summit in Hiroshima. He held bilateral meetings with several leaders, highlighting both Seoul's expanding international reach and the growing demand from partners to see South Korea playing a larger role abroad. Also, Yoon reinforced Seoul's efforts to align itself alongside the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and, most importantly, participated in a meeting with Biden and Kishida to enhance trilateral cooperation in addressing North Korea's threats, economic security, and regional strategic coordination [The White House 2023b]. In addition, Yoon met with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, to confirm South Korean provision of non-lethal and humanitarian aid to the attacked country. This unconditional support was reconfirmed when, in mid-July, Yoon made a surprise visit to Kyiv – after his trip to Lithuania, for a NATO summit, and to Poland – and promised an increase in South



Korea's humanitarian aid, but without referring to weapons supplies [Lee 2023, 15 July].

In August, upon Biden's invitation, both Yoon and Kishida participated in a trilateral summit in Camp David, the first of this kind that was not held on the side lines of an international gathering. The meeting represented a very important step in the process of reviving and institutionalizing security cooperation between the three nations. The summit, as stipulated in the final Statement of Principles and Joint Statement, produced a new «commitment to consult», which implied a coordinated response to common security challenges and represented the first time that the leaders of Japan and South Korea acknowledged that their security was intertwined. In line with this new approach, there was the establishment of a three-way hotline, the commitment to conduct annual military exercises and share intelligence, and the decision to hold a new annual trilateral summit [The White House 2023c; The White House 2023d]. In the end, in the face of persistent threats from China and North Korea, Yoon and Kishida buried the hatchet and put aside their differences, cementing an even stronger relationship with Washington to respond in a coordinated way.

In the second part of the year, Yoon continued his diplomatic offensive. In September, after attending summits related to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta, he flew to India to take part in the G20 summit, where he discussed climate change, the environment and energy transition and stressed South Korea's commitment to contribute to a free, peaceful, and prosperous future, by safeguarding the international order [Office of the President, Republic of Korea 2023]. It goes without saying that even in that occasion Yoon reiterated the key aspects of his country's cooperation with the U.S. and Japan and their respective commitment to regional peace and prosperity. Yoon also held talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on bilateral cooperation in areas such as the defence industry and supply chains.

In mid-November, after having participated in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco, President Yoon embarked in a trip to Europe, with stops in the United Kingdom and France, as part of a diplomatic push before the 2030 World Expo bid. In London, the South Korean President and the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, signed the Downing Street Accord, that upgraded their relations to a «global strategic partnership», emphasizing mutual cooperation in different areas, including joint responses to global issues, and revising the South Korea-Britain free trade agreement [Prime Minister's Office UK 2023]. The Accord – which aligned with the Yoon administration's global pivotal strategy – was particularly relevant in relation to technology, defence and security, in line with the agreements that the UK had already signed with Japan and Singapore. After the trip to London, Yoon visited France, where he met with President Emmanuel Macron and agreed to strengthen technology cooper-

ation [Lee 2023, 24 November]. The summit also served as an opportunity to fortify global security cooperation with France, a permanent member of the UNSC, ahead of South Korea's start of its term as a non-permanent member, in January 2024.

Despite the setback of failing to obtain the 2030 World Expo for Busan, the second half of the year served for President Yoon to consolidate his position and that of his country on the global stage, in particular reinforcing relations with Europe and other countries, with which South Korea shared values and practices based on democratic principles, a key goal of Yoon's administration from the beginning.

## 5. Conclusions

The process of restructuring and consolidation of several aspects of the political and economic situation in Korea, after the COVID-19 pandemic, did not lead to positive results in 2023; on the contrary, it led to a general increase in tension and polarization. In South Korea, the first year in office of Yoon Suk-yeol was characterized by growing difficulties with the opposition and by the impossibility to implement the main reforms that he had planned. Polarization and personalization of the political debate affected the two main parties from within and in their mutual relations. Considering the upcoming elections for the National Assembly in 2024, for which the role of the two main parties will be crucial, this dynamic will surely influence the performances of both.

In foreign policy, President Yoon Suk-yeol had promised to enhance relations with Japan early in his presidency. In fact, in 2023 there was a surge in diplomatic engagement between the two countries, which have also restored themselves as full trading partners, normalized the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), and begun sharing real-time intelligence on North Korean missiles with the United States. Despite the relevance for the two countries in terms of security cooperation, this push for reconciliation by Yoon was not fully welcomed by Korea's civil society, whose resentment against the neighbour, stemming from historical grievances, has never disappeared. Washington, in any case, took note of Seoul and Tokyo's improving relations. U.S. President Joe Biden promptly took advantage of the two allies' detente to launch a «new era» of trilateral collaboration, inviting South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to a meeting at Camp David, which enabled the three countries to form a *de facto* alliance, much to the anger of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang.

On the other hand, Russia made a comeback to prominence in North Korea in 2023. Sergei Shoigu, the Russian minister of defence, surprised everyone by traveling to North Korea at the end of July. Following this, in Sep-

tember, Kim travelled to the Russian Far East, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Additionally, Pyongyang hosted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in October. Kim's trip to Russia raised the prospect of further North Korea-Russia military cooperation, in an effort also to put pressure on South Korea and the U.S.

North Korea gave up on its brief experimentation with reforming policies and remained self-isolated, although some exchanges were restarted with neighbouring countries. China and, to a lesser extent, Russia were now its allies, and, in times of turmoil, the political power of the Kim family remained remarkably stable, for better or worse.

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