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Korea Focus

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The Institute of Korean Studies (IKS) at Freie Universität Berlin is an educational hub for Korean Studies, facilitating collaboration and exchange among Korean, European, and international researchers, policymakers, think tanks, journalists, and all those interested in Korean Studies. In its ongoing commitment to fostering political dialogue and engagement, the IKS actively seeks to increase connectivity between individuals from varied backgrounds. In this vein, the year 2023 brought along several opportunities for conferences and roundtables addressing the contemporary security landscape on the Korean Peninsula. Given the ongoing power dynamics between China and the US, the war in Ukraine, the Hamas attack on Israel, and the subsequent war in Gaza, the Korean Peninsula, albeit equally affected by these global shifts, has somewhat faded from international attention. The institute thus aims to stimulate renewed discussions and enhance political involvement of European and especially German stakeholders from educational and government institutions on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific. This briefing seeks to provide insight into ongoing discussions and the current situation on the Korean Peninsula.

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South Korea's Quandary: Great Power Dynamics, Electoral Uncertainties and Heightened Security Risks in a New Cold War-Scenario

The world is currently said to be experiencing a new Cold War scenario, primarily fuelled by the escalating competition between the United States and China. The 'socialisation of fear', coupled with emerging threats like cyber warfare, has blurred the lines between peacetime and wartime, intensifying a sense of vulnerability. In these uncertain times, leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping leverage these fears to their advantage, fostering narratives that emphasize the need for societal strength to withstand perceived threats. The dissemination of this narrative through social media serves as a potent tool to bridge the political and civilian spheres and reinforce the bond between the populace and the government. Remarkably, this connection persists even after the tenure of leaders, demonstrating its enduring impact.

The upcoming elections in the United States are causing significant apprehension among global leaders. In the event of a new electoral victory for Donald Trump, experts anticipate a shift in American foreign policy, bringing North Korea back to the table for negotiations. A second tenure could also lead to deteriorating US-ROK relations and heightened insecurity in case of a reduction or withdrawal of American forces, which Trump proposed during his first tenure and rattled the belief in the alliance in South Korea.

According to international and domestic polls, roughly 70% of South Koreans support nuclear armament.¹ There is rising scepticism in the extended deterrence commitment of the US, especially in times of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD), a reality in which both North Korea and the US possess nuclear weapons and in 2022, Kim Jong-un even introduced a new nuclear doctrine allowing for a pre-emptive strike and reducing the criteria for the use of nuclear weapons. The nuclear umbrella promises protection to South Korea and Japan in case of a North Korean attack. Effectively this would mean the willingness to endanger Los Angeles and Hawaii, however, this scenario is highly improbable. At the same time, Washington does not support a redeployment of American tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula because it could further destabilise the region and trigger hostile reactions from both Russia and China. As the perceived security of the extended deterrence promise from Washington is waning, some South Korean politicians and experts see the pursuit of an independent nuclear path as the only solution to their increased security risks. In case of a re-election of Trump, the contentious issue of nuclear weapons may prompt clandestine talks between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the US. In any case, nuclear proliferation in South Korea would severely damage its reputation among the international community and break with the rule-based international order (e.g., the Non-Proliferation Treaty). It would also open a window of danger for Seoul during the time it would take to develop nuclear weapons, giving North Korea a certain degree of freedom and leverage. However, the support for nuclear arms does

¹ See Dalton et al. 2022. "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons." *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*. <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>.

not only stem from the need to counterbalance threats from North Korea, but may also be due to concerns about the escalating military prowess of China. A China equipped with nuclear weapons is not only a detriment to South Korea, but also a double-edged sword for North Korea. While a strong China can serve as a protector, it also poses challenges to the Kim regime. The intricacies of these geopolitical dynamics underscore the complexities that may unfold depending on the outcome of the US elections.

In South Korea, depending on the political inclination of the government, the handling of the Japan issue and North Korea varies starkly regarding policies, treatment and diplomacy. In terms of China however, there is an almost sure consensus between the two political orientations: an assertive China is viewed suspiciously in South Korea because of its negative influence on the Korean Peninsula. Both liberals and conservatives need to tread lightly to avoid provocation and negative consequences from China. Politically, however, the liberal party tends to be more ambiguous towards China. Currently, the government's focus is to catapult South Korea in a global direction and become a 'global pivotal state' and an active player on the international stage. This is evident in a push for numerous collaborations between international organisations such as the UN and NATO. The ROK focuses on areas such as cyber and economic security and initiates collaboration with European countries in these fields, e.g. the pilot project of the 'Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia' (ESIWA)-program between the EU and South Korea. It also looks towards Germany for its foreign diplomacy since Germany and the ROK both find themselves in a similar situation – both depend heavily on Chinese trade but are traditionally closer to the US in terms of political engagement and values, which results in a predicament for both countries in times of an increasing power struggle. Similar to President Moon's New Southern Policy, Yoon's Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to reduce the economic dependency on China. South Korea is also looking for ways to mitigate economic coercion through de-risking and diversifying its trade partners and therefore looking towards the Indo-Pacific region and Europe with renewed vigour.

Navigating Uncertainty: The Shifting Dynamics of North Korea's Foreign Relations in a Post-COVID-19 World

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the elusive nature of North Korea, leading to a near-complete shutdown of communication and insight into the workings of the state. Consequently, understanding North Korea's foreign policy relies heavily on external observation and interpretation. As a state, North Korea benefits from the ongoing power struggles between the US and China as well as between China and Russia. China's stance on the war in Ukraine and North Korea's nuclear program remains ambiguous, as China is not entirely prepared to engage in direct competition with the US and the EU. Chinese and North Korean relations have been cooling down for years, and there appears to be a rift between the two leaders. While Russia sent a high-ranking politician, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, to Pyongyang for celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Korean War, China sent a lower-level party member. Internationally, experts interpret this as a signal of disapproval of the regime from the Chinese side. Despite this apparent rift, the collapse of North Korea would be detrimental to China's interests.

Currently, North Korea is grappling with challenges, including a food crisis and the impact of COVID-19. The country is slowly recovering, aided by the restoration of food transportation. Fortunately, a favourable climate and harvest have averted an urgent food crisis this year, to the extent that North Korea even declined Russian wheat donations. Between 2017 and 2019, Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping met five times in light of provocations and summits between Trump and Kim, but prior to these meetings there had been no engagement between the leaders for seven years. Observers cited Chinese dissatisfaction with North Korean nuclear development as the cause. The new and much more flexible nuclear doctrine currently in place in North Korea reduces the criteria for the deployment of nuclear weapons. Heightened security threats could potentially drive its neighbours Japan and South Korea to consider developing their own nuclear weapons.

Another point of contention is the existing railway between China and North Korea. Trade exchange is currently limited, focusing mainly on medications, food, and fertiliser, whereas North Korea expected an increase in comprehensive trade. Highway trade remains disrupted with no apparent signs of reinstatement, which could be an attempt to exert influence over Pyongyang from the Chinese side and may reflect hesitance on China's part to engage North Korea, given Western countries' scepticism towards the country. The fact that North Korea refrained from conducting nuclear tests for 1.5 years is attributed to Chinese political or economic pressure and influence. These dynamics have significant implications for regional stability and the broader geopolitical landscape. Moreover, ties with Russia reduce the reliance on China, even though the overall trade volume is much smaller. North Korea anticipates gaining technological advancements through closer engagement with its Russian neighbour. Russian support for North Korea remains strong. These evolving geopolitical dynamics could give rise to three potential future scenarios. First, while North Korea currently relies heavily on Russia for support,

it may need to seek alternative partners if the war in Ukraine ends negatively for Russia. The alternative partners would need to support North Korea's nuclear program and economy. China could be a potential option, but an overly strong Chinese influence might prompt Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table. Second, if China was willing to ease tensions with Washington, North Korea would find itself in a bind. Thus far, it has exploited the power struggle between the US and China to further its political agenda. If North Korea cannot leverage this geopolitical tension to its advantage, it might be compelled to re-engage in talks with the US. Third, a Trump re-election could open the door to renewed negotiations between North Korea and the US, possibly through a top-down approach involving the two nations' leaders.

Prospects for EU Engagement in the Korean Peninsula

Based on these findings and with the focus on engagement between the Korean Peninsula, Germany and other European states, the following points stand out. Current engagement with North Korea is close to zero. The pandemic has added to this situation, but ongoing hostility and reluctance of European states to step into dialogue with North Korean officials are also problematic. Depending on the new makeup of the White House, the direction of US-foreign policy might change drastically. While the current EU will not be able to take the role of mediator in case of renewed talks between the US, South Korea and North Korea, it might take the role of a messenger in peace talks between the US and North Korea. However, the EU can exert influence in other areas, such as arms control during times of *détente*. There is also an appetite for cooperation between European countries and South Korea, especially regarding military technology, cyber diplomacy and others. Regarding areas with common interests, EU countries could cooperate with South Korea in adopting multilateral frameworks. Both South Korea and Europe are looking to reduce their (economic) dependence on China and, in some respects, the US. It is to be expected that Trump will want to minimise influence and military expenses in the Indo-Pacific, which would open up space for the EU and South Korea to increase their engagement and gain tactical influence in that region, which is both in accordance with Yoon's new Indo-Pacific Strategy and European endeavours.

