

China's Role in Korean Security Issues

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Abstract

China's great power over North Korea eroded when COVID-19 control measures ended most trade with the Kim regime. Moreover, China's conflicts with various countries mean Beijing cannot afford to alienate any friend, and Kim Jong Un knows that. Beijing is still influential in Seoul, but it lost much of its clout when the conservative-leaning candidate prevailed in the March 2022 presidential election. China will also suffer a loss in standing because it is paying less attention to Korean affairs and is closing itself off to the world.

Keywords: China, North Korea, South Korea, United States, Japan, Russia, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, Moon Jae-in, Roh Moo-huyn, Yang Jiechi, Wang Yi, Lee Jae-myung, Yoon Seok-youll, Democratic Party of Korea, People Power Party, Three Nos, Korean War, Arduous March, THAAD, COVID-19, H.R. 3446

Introduction

China's once-considerable power over North Korea declined dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic as the Kim regime closed its borders for disease-control purposes. The border closure substantially cut trade with China, one of Beijing's primary forms of leverage over the North. Even though trade is resuming, North Korean resistance to Chinese influence means commerce will not return to pre-pandemic levels soon. Other factors also point to lesser Chinese influence in the years ahead.

In South Korea, Beijing's extraordinary hold over Seoul has come to an end. Moon Jae-in, , to further his unification goals, acknowledged China's dominate role in Korean affairs, but his successor as president, the People Power Party's Yoon Seok-youll, will not continue his policies. Yoon is in favor of distancing the South from Beijing and strengthening ties with America.

One other major factor will erode Chinese influence over the Koreans: China's historic inward turn.

China's Influence in North Korea

For centuries, China's rulers possessed great sway over Korea's, treating them as vassals. Koreans have resented Chinese arrogance but most of the time recognized the greater power of their large neighbor. The dominance of China is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that there are now many ethnic Koreans who reside inside the People's Republic of China, the net result of centuries of warfare and border changes.

Analysts have debated the extent of current-day Chinese influence in Pyongyang, but these disagreements largely receded when Beijing, late last decade, showed Pyongyang—and the rest of the world—who possessed the leverage in the relationship.

China's influence became painfully clear in 2018 and 2019 when Kim Jong Un, the current North Korean supremo, traveled to China four times without a return visit by Xi Jinping, the Chinese ruler. During the last of these trips, in January 2019, Kim spent his birthday in the Chinese capital.

Xi did not make a return trip until June 2019, the first—and so far only—time he stepped foot in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

After this series of visits, no one could credibly argue—as many in China and elsewhere had—that Beijing had only limited influence with the stubborn Kim family. Kim Jong Un's subordination to China clearly fit the label—and insult—of the term “tributary diplomacy.”¹ Kim will continue to brag about *juche*, self-reliance, and denigrate South Korea for being an American puppet, but he has made himself appear to be a marionette manipulated by Xi Jinping.

As many have pointed out, Korean animosity toward—even hatred of—China is real, but the Kim family nonetheless recognizes its dependence on Chinese leaders. “The alliance between China and North Korea is forged in blood and perpetuated by mutual strategic interests,” Sung-Yoon Lee of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy wrote in December 2021.²

Despite these bonds, the two regimes shut themselves off from each other at the beginning of this decade. It is ironic that it was a Chinese export, the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen, that drove them apart. COVID-19 severely undermined China's influence on the Korean peninsula because Kim, in response to the disease, closed his Chinese and Russian land borders at the end of January 2020. He enforced his draconian disease-control measure with shoot-to-kill orders,³ and his guards in fact killed those trying to escape to China.⁴ As David Maxwell of the Foundation for

the Defense of Democracies points out, “Kim used COVID to sever trade relations with China.”⁵

The closure ended most of North Korea’s official dealings with the outside world. Trade with China, which generally accounted for over 90% of the North’s international commerce,⁶ fell 80.7% in 2020 over the preceding year, according to Chinese Customs figures.⁷ Trade also dropped in 2021, down 41% from 2020.⁸

Those statistics almost certainly do not reflect commerce in violation of U.N. Security Council and American sanctions. That commerce is thought to be substantial. After all, China has long been a sanctions-buster, as Angelo State University’s Bruce Bechtol has documented,⁹ and China’s sanctions violations “have never been more flagrant,” as Joshua Stanton, a Washington, D.C. lawyer and sanctions expert blogging at OneFreeKorea, noted in December 2021.¹⁰

Consistent with Stanton’s assessment, there was a pickup in illicit ship-to-ship transfers in the fall of 2021. Canadian vessels on patrol witnessed 24 such transfers and more than a hundred “vessels of interest” off China’s eastern coast near the Shandong peninsula since mid-October 2021. The HMS Richmond, a British warship, observed “multiple ships of various nationalities” in the East China Sea then.¹¹ Despite the year-end uptick, it is unlikely that China’s surreptitious trade made up for the plunge in the above-board commerce.

The North Korean economy, therefore, took a hit from the border closures. Gross domestic product, according to the authoritative Bank of Korea, contracted 4.5% in 2020, the biggest drop in 23 years.¹² Other institutions point to a bigger decline. Fitch estimated an 8.5% fall,¹³ and the Hana Institute of Finance, in Seoul, believed it to be 10%.¹⁴ “Even by North Korean standards, the economic situation is dire,” writes Harry Clynch, in a *Spectator* piece aptly titled “North Korea Is On the Verge of a Humanitarian Collapse.”¹⁵

Perhaps more important, the closures aggravated severe food shortages as Kim stopped imports of Chinese food and fertilizer. The DPRK, as the regime calls itself, is heading into another horrible famine.¹⁶

The North’s people have been told to not expect relief until 2025, which some residents think is an effective death sentence.¹⁷ North Koreans have already starved to death.¹⁸ Moreover, there are reports that people had to sell their homes for food in the 2020-2021 winter and then died of exposure. The trend of home sales continued into the following winter. Then, some city dwellers were so desperate they even abandoned

residences to live in the countryside, where food is generally more available.¹⁹

The situation is severe. As Tara O of the East Asia Research Center and the Hudson Institute points out, the Kim regime has been telling people to eat less.²⁰ Moreover, in April 2021 authorities issued a warning that the situation could be worse than the “Arduous March,” the four-year famine of the mid-1990s.²¹ Then, perhaps 3.5 million people perished, more than 10% of the population. In June, Kim issued a special order, directing officials to feed people. In October, he said the people must conserve “every grain” of rice. Also that month, the Workers’ Party main newspaper told citizens to eat black swans. “Black swan meat,” said *Rodong Sinmun*, “is delicious and has medicinal value.”

Unfortunately, there are not enough black swans in the North. As the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported in November 2021, the DPRK was “facing acute food insecurity” and that the situation was “likely to deteriorate.”²²

The situation is likely to deteriorate because, among other factors, there is not enough trade with China.²³ As Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation notes, “Recent efforts to resume trade have been hindered by restrictions by both sides.”²⁴ COVID-control measures, for instance, have stopped cargo trains, which are now, more than ever, the lifeline keeping the North afloat. For instance, China in April 2021 sent a train carrying what was described as animal feed but really was 300 tons of corn, presumably to feed North Koreans.²⁵

Rail service resumed on the first day of November 2021 with trains traveling from China’s Dandong to North Korea’s Sinuiju, across the Yalu River, but the service ended eight days later due to another coronavirus outbreak in Dandong.²⁶ North Korean trains appear to have been trapped in that Chinese city, which was locked down with controls more stringent than what was formally announced.²⁷ Train service was halted again in April 2022.²⁸ North Korea has struggled to open the border many times, but trade cannot resume until Pyongyang effectively deals with COVID-19.²⁹ The regime, with only a rudimentary health-care system, has no way, apart from enforcing isolation, to stop the disease. The North is one of only two countries in the world—Eritrea is the other—that have not begun inoculations.³⁰

Without vaccines, the only thing Pyongyang can do is issue propaganda—the regime at the end of November 2021 talked about “thoroughly ensuring perfection”³¹ of COVID protections—and further

tighten, rather than loosen, COVID-19 border measures.³² It is clear, therefore, the border will remain closed for some time. North Korea's broadcaster, Korean Central Broadcasting Station, in the middle of November 2021 warned of a "catastrophic public health crisis" if coronavirus-control measures were eased.³³

The Kim family is serious about keeping the border sealed. In November 2021, a North Korean court sentenced two cadres to life imprisonment for "anti-socialist and non-socialist acts," in this case "violating the closed border." The officials, trying to alleviate a severe food shortage in North Hamgyong province, were buying rice from China.

Perhaps the imposition of extraordinary punishments and controls is what Kim meant when he said in early September 2021 that officials should implement "our style" epidemic control.³⁴ According to the regime, its "style" has been extraordinarily effective. Pyongyang so far has admitted only one COVID-19 case—in May 2022.³⁵ Nonetheless, reports indicate there have been more than 100,000 North Koreans quarantined with COVID-like symptoms.³⁶

Although a quick renewal of trade is unlikely, the Kim family regime undoubtedly realizes it must resume commerce with China and has been making preparations to do so. For example, it built a quarantine and disinfection facility at the air base near Uiju, close to the North's northwest border with China, for containers carried by train from Dandong.³⁷ In January 2022, trains from China began arriving at the facility. Truck traffic between China and North Korea has still not resumed.³⁸

Moreover, Pyongyang has, as Klingner notes, "made recent efforts to reenergize outreach to China."³⁹ For instance, the North sent a delegation to Dandong, crossing into China early November 2021, for what was likely working-level discussions following agreement between the two capitals on aid.⁴⁰ The holding of the talks, despite a coronavirus outbreak on the Chinese side of the border, showed what some think is the desperation of the Pyongyang regime.

Despite apparent desperation, the North Korean elite probably believes it does not need to accommodate Beijing. For one thing, the regime has so far managed without much Chinese help.

As Kim Yeoul-soo of the Security Strategy Office at the Korea Institute for Military Affairs told the *Korea Times*, "If trade between North Korea and China was flourishing, Beijing could have influence on Pyongyang, but currently, the North has nothing to lose from Beijing."⁴¹

The Kim regime's survival of the horrendous Arduous March taught the regime that hungry North Koreans are not much of a threat because they do not have the means to resist Kimist rule. If Kim Jong Un really felt threatened by the current situation—in other words, if he felt he needed substantially more Chinese assistance—he would have opened his border wide.

In any event, Pyongyang knows that China is locked into supporting Pyongyang. As the Fletcher School's Lee noted, "Beijing always overcomes its disappointment and even resentment toward North Korea in recognition of its vital security interests."⁴²

Consequently, the Kim family believes it does not have to reciprocate most of the time. Beijing, Kim rulers reason, provides all the support for its own benefit and has no choice but to keep the DPRK in business. The constant flow of Chinese aid, whatever the Kim regime does or doesn't do, is one indication that Pyongyang has correctly assessed the situation. It is only when Chinese leaders really want something does the North do what they demand.

At this particular moment, the North has more leverage than normal. Beijing is embroiled in what could be an existential struggle with America as well as fights with other countries. Xi Jinping's provocative external policies—sometimes called "Wolf Warrior diplomacy"—have alienated many capitals, some of them powerful.

Because Xi took on the world, the North became far more valuable to Chinese policymakers. As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center notes, "In light of the great power competition, China sees North Korea as leverage more than ever."⁴³

The North furthers various Chinese purposes, particularly serving as a geopolitical bargaining chip with Washington. "For China's part, it needs to embrace North Korea amid the intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry,"⁴⁴ Park Won-gon of Ewha Womans University told the *Korea Times*.

The net result is that, for various reasons, China has lost influence in Pyongyang during the pandemic and is unlikely to regain it in the near future, even as cross-border trade eventually recovers.

China's Influence in South Korea

Beijing had exercised extraordinary influence over the Republic of Korea during the tenure of President Moon Jae-in, whose five-year term began in May 2017. To understand Moon's policy, it helps to understand

the foreign policy approach of President Roh Moo-hyun, for whom Moon served as chief of staff.

For Roh, China had always been of great importance. For him, the United States was not so much an alliance partner and guarantor of security as it was a power to be manipulated to get a better deal from Beijing. Specifically, Roh thought South Korea should play a “balancing role,”⁴⁵ switching sides on an issue-by-issue basis between the “northern alliance” of Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang and the “southern alliance” of Washington and Tokyo. “The power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices we make,” Roh predicted.

For Moon, the balance always seemed to tip to the northern alliance. His government, for example, implicitly acknowledged Chinese dominance by issuing the Three Nos. In late October 2017, President Moon’s foreign ministry told China that there would be no additional batteries on South Korean soil of the American-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile-defense system,⁴⁶ there would be no South Korea participation in integrated missile defense, and there would be no trilateral alliance with the U.S. and Japan.⁴⁷ These assurances were given with no or virtually no consultation with the only country pledged to defend South Korea, the United States of America. By issuing the Three Nos—on alliance matters—Seoul was saying to Washington that China was more important to the South than America.

In Moon’s view, China was more important than America in accomplishing his overarching goal: the reunification of Korea. Since the division of Korea into two states in 1945, every Korean leader, both north and south of the Demilitarized Zone, has advocated unification. It’s no surprise then that in his summits with Kim Jong Un, Moon had emphasized the union of the two rival Koreas.

Both Seoul and Pyongyang over the course of decades put forward unification schemes, but even loose arrangements failed to gain necessary support. The two Korean states have proven so different and hostile that a “marriage of equals” has never been possible.

Moon in this regard has been persistent. He was arguably the first Korean leader to accept unification on the terms of the other state, and unlike his predecessors, he has been working hard to achieve union. In this grand task, he felt he needed the endorsement of Beijing, and so mostly sided with China against the United States.

Moon needed Beijing for his last initiative, which involved the Korean War. That conflict, known in China as the War to Resist U.S. Aggression

and Aid Korea, continues to this day. Fighting ended with an armistice in July 1953, and that agreement, despite numerous North Korean violations and verbal renunciations, has held to the present time. Since then, various parties have sought to turn that agreement—signed by the United Nations Command, China, and North Korea but not South Korea—into a peace treaty formally ending the war.

As an interim step to unification of the two Koreas, President Moon Jae-in had hoped to conclude such a treaty. As the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula of April 2018 states, both North and South “will actively cooperate to build a permanent and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula,” bringing an end to “the current unnatural state of armistice.”

Moon, before the end of his single term—he was constitutionally barred from running for re-election— was not able to replace the armistice with a treaty, and he also failed to implement an interim step to a formal end of the war, an “end-of-war declaration.”⁴⁸ He mentioned such a declaration in his U.N. General Assembly speech in September 2021.

The Kim family signaled in September 2021 that it was willing to consider such a step. Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un’s sister as well as political advisor and confidant, however, made no clear commitment to a permanent peace then.⁴⁹

There was a reason for the reluctance. A formal end to the war would undoubtedly require Kim’s Guerilla Dynasty—the name comes from the regime’s beginnings as a band of irregular fighters in World War II—to accept the legitimacy of the rival Republic of Korea.

Recognition of South Korea’s legitimacy would be difficult for Kim Jong Un, because his family has staked its legitimacy on its takeover of the other Korean state. That takeover has been the reason, the Kim rulers have argued, for the sacrifices they have demanded the North Korean people make.

To now acknowledge that South Korea is legitimate would mean, at least formally, an end of the reason for the struggle that the three Kim rulers have exalted from the founding of their regime in 1948. So to acknowledge South Korea’s right to exist would call into question the viability of Kim family rule.

Moreover, signing an end-of-war declaration would require a renunciation of the use of force to achieve unification. As Maxwell, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies scholar, has often pointed out, the Kim family has never abandoned its overarching goal of ruling the entire peninsula. Therefore, the North continually attempts to subvert, coerce, and extort South Korea.⁵⁰ “For seven decades,” he told me, “the Kim family regime has made preparations to use force to achieve unification.”⁵¹

Yet an end-of-war declaration still holds promise for Kim if he is not required to sign it. For one thing, many think such a statement would encourage leftists in South Korea and America to argue for an end to the South’s military alliance with the United States. The comments of senior advisors to Moon Jae-in, especially the influential Moon Chung-in,⁵² suggest that South Korea’s “progressives” want to end the pact “forged in blood.”

Ending the blood-forged pact—and removing American forces from the peninsula—is, as a practical matter, a precondition to the North’s taking over the South. As Maxwell says, “Kim Jong Un has sought to split the alliance and get U.S. forces off the peninsula” as a part of his family’s long-pursued “divide-to-conquer strategy.”⁵³ To that end, Maxwell, who served five tours with U.S. Forces Korea in the U.S. Army, argues that “Kim will exploit an end-of-war declaration and peace regime to support his strategy.”⁵⁴

Moon in November 2018 said that the alliance “should continue forever,” but, as a practical matter, he was working hard to undermine the pact. To get countries to agree to the end-of-war declaration, his diplomats at the end of 2021 were engaged in intensive discussion with both Washington and Beijing.

Moon found willing partners in both capitals. In Washington, Congress then, as now, is considering H.R. 3446, the “Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act.” The bill makes the finding that the “United States should pursue a sustained and credible diplomatic process to achieve an end to the Korean war.”

To that end, the bill, among other things, states that it is the sense of Congress that “the Secretary of State should pursue serious, urgent diplomatic engagement with North Korea and South Korea in pursuit of a binding peace agreement constituting a formal and final end to the state of war between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States.”⁵⁵

H.R. 3446 also requires the Secretary to report back to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Senate Committee on Foreign

Relations within 180 days with “a clear roadmap for achieving a permanent peace agreement on the Korean peninsula.”

China is on board with that portion of H.R. 3446. “Ending the war state on the Korean peninsula and replacing the armistice with a peace regime are an important part of the political settlement of the Korean peninsula issue and the shared aspiration of the international community,” said Foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian on September 22, 2021, in response to a question from Yonhap News Agency about Moon Jae-in’s call for a declaration to formally end the war. “China supports all parties’ efforts to this end. As an important party to the Korean peninsula issue and a signatory to the Korean War Armistice Agreement, China will continue to play its role in this regard.”⁵⁶

In early December 2021, South Korea’s embassy in China announced that Suh Hoon, Moon Jae-in’s national security advisor, met with Yang Jiechi, China’s top diplomat, and Yang said his country supported “the push for the end-of-war declaration and believes that the end-of-war declaration will contribute to promoting peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.”⁵⁷ A South Korean official at the time said China intends to play a “constructive role in discussions about the end-of-war declaration.”⁵⁸

Qin Guohong, Beijing’s ambassador to Seoul from 2014 to 2019, hinted in November 2021 at a peace forum in Seoul that China would sign such a declaration. “China supports the efforts of all the countries involved with regard to the end-of-war declaration,” he said.⁵⁹

China, by getting behind moves to end the Korean War, is supporting ally North Korea—and itself. Beijing has long argued there should be no U.S. troops in Asia, which it has called evidence of American “hegemonism.” “The Korean-U.S. alliance is a historical relic,” said Qin Gang in 2008, when he was a foreign ministry spokesperson. “The times have changed and Northeast Asian countries are going through many changes and transformations. We should not approach current security issues with military alliances left over from the past Cold War era.”⁶⁰

North Korea still believes it is in an active state of war with South Korea, so the war is more than “cold.” “Empty words won’t move the peninsula any closer to peace because the threat of war in Korea today is set by the North, as it always has been,” Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute noted in November 2021 in the *Wall Street Journal* in a piece titled “Seoul Wants to Declare Peace—Without Peace.” The title sums up the extreme optimism—folly?—of the South Korean

position. “Pyongyang is still committed to wiping South Korea off the map,” Eberstadt wrote. “That is what its nuclear arsenal, missile program, and million-man army are all about.”⁶¹

China understands that North Korea is the source of instability on the Korean peninsula, and Beijing knows no declaration, agreement, or treaty can change that reality. As Greg Scarlatoiu, executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, states, “For as long as the Kim family regime continues to be an unreformed and unrepentant human rights denier committing crimes against humanity while armed with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, true peace on the Korean peninsula will be impossible.”⁶²

Beijing nonetheless supported Moon’s initiatives. “We, together, have played active roles as guardians of peace, stability, and facilitators for development and prosperity,”⁶³ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in September 2021 as he visited Seoul.

There is no secret why Wang would say that. “Broadly speaking, Wang Yi’s visit to Seoul is aimed at breaking through the U.S.-led encirclement by working on what is presumed to be a weak link in the U.S. alliance in the region—South Korea,” said Lee Seong-hyon, once at the Sejong Institute, on the Chinese minister’s visit to Seoul.⁶⁴ China is continuing its efforts to end the alliance that has protected South Korea for seven decades and therefore ensured peace in troubled North Asia.

It is not only the end of the alliance Beijing wants. China’s commentators speak of “killing four ducks with one stone”: the withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea; the dissolution of the United Nations Command; the removal of THAAD; and the end of trilateral cooperation among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea.⁶⁵

There could be a limit to Beijing’s support for an end-of-war declaration, despite the public statements in support of a declaration. Lee Sang-soo of Stockholm’s Institute for Security and Development Policy told the *Financial Times* that China is “wary of any process that might lead to a rapprochement between Pyongyang and Washington.”⁶⁶

Why? “China’s priority has always been to unify the two Chinas before the two Koreas by holding hostage any resolution of the Korean conflict,” Robert Blohm, an American economist who worked in China for a decade and now writes political commentary, says. “Moon’s gambit goes against Beijing’s ‘central dogma’ of ‘no Korean unification before Chinese unification’ and, by extension, ‘no Korea peace treaty before a Chinese peace treaty.’”⁶⁷

Blohm's insight highlights Beijing's increased focus on Taiwan, which Chinese leaders believe is their 34th province. Xi Jinping has increasingly staked his rule on taking the island republic, which maintains its sovereignty as the Republic of China. In recent years, Taiwan has gone to the top of Xi's priority list, suggesting Blohm is right when he says Korea remains a sideshow for the aggressive Chinese ruler. Moreover, sideshow or not, some believe that Beijing has no real desire to change the general situation on the Korean peninsula because, as a practical matter, it maintains a two-Korea policy, in the hopes that two Koreas will fight each other instead of taking on China.

In any event, friction between Washington and Beijing immeasurably complicates any efforts to obtain consent, or at least acquiescence, to plans for an end-of-war declaration from both Beijing and Washington.

What will undoubtedly end efforts, at least for a half decade, is the People Power Party's Yoon Seok-young defeat of the candidate from Moon's Democratic Party of Korea, Lee Jae-myung, in the March 9, 2022 presidential election.

Yoon made China a campaign issue. As Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* put it, he had been "risking China's wrath" with his positions.⁶⁸ Yoon campaigned on upgrading relations with Washington—anathema for a Beijing that sees South Korea as a vassal—but perhaps nothing he said aggravated the Chinese establishment as his views on THAAD.⁶⁹

Beijing is accustomed to getting its way in Seoul. For example, Moon in June 2017, just one month after his inauguration, suspended the deployment on South Korean soil of the missile-defense system.⁷⁰ THAAD's emplacement angered Chinese officials because they maintained its radar could see into their country and degrade the ability of their missiles.

Then President Moon ignored American concerns—and compromised South Korea's security—when he bowed to Chinese demands and implicitly accepted China right to dictate to Seoul what it could do to defend itself. His agreement to the Three Nos. later in the year confirmed South Korea's subordinate status to China.

Candidate Yoon said it was up to Seoul to decide "how much we bolster missile defense systems including THAAD and how deeply we coordinate with the United States and Japan."⁷¹ The candidate also maintained decisions on the deployment of THAAD were a "sovereign matter,"⁷² in other words, not a matter for China to decide.

THAAD remains an important issue because China's overreaction to the first—and so far only—battery on South Korean soil seems to have been a turning point on popular opinion in the South about China. “It was when THAAD was deployed that many South Koreans began to question whether China could be a partner or a friend,” said Lee Jun-seok, the chief of the People Power Party, to Voice of America. “People still remember that.”⁷³

Yoon also rejected Moon Jae-in's “strategic ambiguity” policy, an update on Roh Moo-hyun's balancing act between China and the United States, in favor of “strategic clarity,” a definite tilt to Washington. “You have to lead the nation's business with strategic clarity,” Yoon said.⁷⁴

Of even greater concern to China's officials, the conservative candidate spoke of a “rules-based international order”⁷⁵ and “universal values.”⁷⁶ Moon, by contrast, did not often criticize Beijing and frequently bragged about his good relations with the Chinese capital.

Analysts say Yoon's campaign talk of a “new era of cooperation” meant he wanted to get along with Beijing. He now does, as does every national leader, but when he spoke of that new era he meant one of “mutual respect,”⁷⁷ something China did not extend to Seoul in the Moon years.

Even if Lee had won the presidential election, South Korea would probably have moved away from China. Beijing is forcing countries to choose their values over short-term economic interests. Even with Moon in the Blue House, South Korea participated in forums either excluding China, like the G7, or directed against China, like the Quad Plus. South Korea also participated in Washington's Summit of Democracies in December 2021, an event Beijing abhorred.

South Korea and China are “close neighbors that cannot relocate themselves and partners that can't part ways with each other,” said Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his September 2021 visit to Seoul.⁷⁸ That's true, but that indisputable fact does not mean that China will maintain its influence in the South Korean capital for long.

The Trajectory of Chinese Power

Various background factors are working against China's clout over the Koreans. For one thing, the Biden administration has put the “denuclearization” of North Korea on the back burner, which has had the effect of marginalizing China's power.

President George W. Bush persistently sought Beijing's help in disarming the Kim family, which gave China substantial leverage. His

successor, despite his “strategic patience” approach, also looked to Chinese officials for assistance. Trump broke the paradigm and went directly to Kim Jong Un, putting Beijing on the sidelines. Biden, despite a flurry of North Korean missile launches, has kept China there by not paying much attention to Kim.⁷⁹

More fundamentally, Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula ultimately depends on its national strength. China at the moment has substantial sway because it is, for instance, the largest trade partner of both Koreas.⁸⁰

Yet China itself appears to be at an inflection point. Xi Jinping is quickly repudiating the “reform and opening up” policies that accounted for the country’s success in the “reform era,” the period beginning at the end of 1978. He is implementing a wide range of policies bolstering state enterprises and therefore undermining foreign companies and private entrepreneurs. The multifaceted attack on tech businesses, now more than a year old, has destroyed as much as \$3 trillion in the value of Chinese stocks. Xi Jinping’s embrace of Maoist-like economic policies has resulted, despite reports of robust growth,⁸¹ in a stagnant or even contracting economy.

China needs growth because the country faces simultaneous crises. There is a debt crisis—total debt might exceed 400% of gross domestic product—severe environmental degradation, multiplying coronavirus outbreaks, and worsening food shortages. Perhaps most important, China stands on the edge of the steepest decline in population in history in the absence of war or disease. If all this were not bad enough, Beijing suffers from a case of “imperial overstretch” with insufficient resources to achieve its grand and expanding ambitions.

As the Communist Party of China grapples with problems for which there may be no solutions, Xi is closing China off from the rest of the world, enforcing an isolation that evokes disastrous policies from the earliest years of the People’s Republic and during and the two millennia of imperial rule. As Georgia Tech’s Fei-Ling Wang details in *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power*, isolationism is inherent in Chinese totalitarianism.⁸²

China’s turn inward is bound to result in a general loss of influence, on the Korean peninsula and everywhere else.

Notes:

¹ Isozaki Atsuhiko, “Why Kim Jong-un Has Turned to ‘Tributary Diplomacy,’ ” *Diplomat*, January 23, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/why-kim-jong-un-has-turned-to-tributary-diplomacy/>

² Sung-Yoon Lee, e-mail message to author, December 6, 2021.

³ Andrew Yeo, “North Korea Is Addressing the Pandemic in Its ‘Style.’ That Means Leaving a Lot of People Hungry,” *Brookings Institution*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/11/22/north-korea-is-addressing-the-pandemic-in-its-style-that-means-leaving-a-lot-of-people-hungry/>.

⁴ See, e.g., “3 People Shot Trying to Cross the Border into China, 1 Dead,” *Rimjin-Gang*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2021/12/military/shooting/>.

⁵ David Maxwell, e-mail message to author, January 23, 2022.

⁶ China, consistently North Korea’s biggest trade partner, accounting for 95.8% of the North’s external trade in 2018, up a full percentage point from the previous year. See Lee Jeong-ho, “North Korean Trade With Biggest Partner China Dives 48 Per Cent Amid Sanctions,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), July 19, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3019348/north-korean-trade-biggest-partner-china-dives-48-cent-amid>. The country in second place, Russia, accounted for only 1.2% of North Korea’s trade. In 2019, China accounted for 95.4% of the North’s trade. See Nina Jobst, “North Korea’s Trade With China as Share of Total Foreign Trade 1999-2019,” *Statista*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/745703/north-korea-share-of-trade-with-china/>.

⁷ Hyonhee Shin, “N. Korea’s Trade with China Plunges 80% as COVID-19 Lockdown Bites,” *Reuters*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/nkoreas-trade-with-china-plunges-80-covid-19-lockdown-bites-2021-01-19/>.

⁸ Kim Bo-eun, “China, North Korea Trade Recovering After Covid-Induced Border Closures, but Exports Still ‘Spell Trouble,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), April 10, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3173601/china-north-korea-trade-recovering-after-covid-induced>.

⁹ See, e.g., Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., “North Korean Illicit Activities and Sanctions: A National Security Dilemma,” *Cornell International Law Journal*, Winter 2018, Vol. 51 No. 1, <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1913&context=cilj>.

¹⁰ Joshua Stanton, e-mail message to author, December 1, 2021. Stanton wrote this to the author: “China’s violations of U.N. and U.S. sanctions have never been more flagrant. U.N. reports show that it hosts extensive North Korean proliferation, arms dealing, and money laundering networks that act as thinly disguised fronts for U.N.-sanctioned banks and trading companies. Beijing consistently refuses to respond to U.N. requests for information about these networks on its territory. It buys North Korean coal in violation of U.N. sanctions, and overfishes North Korean waters—paying Kim Jong Un cash for fishing rights while poor North Koreans go hungry. Its factories and canneries are bringing in more North Korean slave laborers, and North Korean missiles roll through the streets of Pyongyang on Chinese trucks. It’s also trying to weaken U.N. sanctions, including sanctions that prohibit dual-use trade and the transfer of proliferation-sensitive technology. Our government likes to say that China should do more to enforce sanctions.

But the evidence that China is undermining the sanctions willfully is simply too extensive to deny.”

¹¹ Michael Lee, “Canada Spots Ship-to-Ship Transfers, North Suspected,” *Korea JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), December 1, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/12/01/national/northKorea/North-Korea-sanctions-United Nations/20211201175104681.html>. The most recent interim report of the U.N. Panel of Experts, dated September 2021, can be found here: <https://undocs.org/S/2021/777>.

¹² Joori Roh, “N. Korea’s Economy Shrank Most in 23 Years Amid COVID-19, Sanctions—S.Korea C.Bank,” Reuters, July 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkoreas-economy-shrank-most-23-years-amid-covid-19-sanctions-skorea-cbank-2021-07-30/>.

¹³ Hyonhee Shin, “N.Korea’s Trade with China Plunges 80% as COVID-19 Lockdown Bites.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Harry Clynh, “North Korea Is On the Verge of a Humanitarian Collapse,” *Spectator*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/north-korea-is-on-the-verge-of-a-humanitarian-collapse>

¹⁶ There is never enough food in North Korea. The U.N. estimates that, even in the pre-epidemic 2019, 43% of the population was “food insecure.” When Pyongyang ordered World Food Program staff to leave in summer of 2020, the program estimated that 10.3 million North Koreans, more than 40% of the population, suffered from malnutrition. South Korea’s Korea Development Institute estimates the North’s harvest was 4.4 million tons that year, well short of the 5.7 million tons needed to feed the country. See Gordon G. Chang, “Food Aid to North Korea Leads to Starvation,” *Newsweek*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/food-aid-north-korea-leads-starvation-opinion-1653615>.

¹⁷ “North Korea Tells Hungry Citizens to ‘Tighten Belts’ Until 2025,” Radio Free Asia, October 26, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/shortage-10262021174250.html>. “Some of the residents are saying that the situation right now is so serious they don’t know if they can even survive the coming winter,” said a “source,” a resident in the border town of Sinuiju. “They say that telling us to endure hardship until 2025 is the same as telling us to starve to death.”

¹⁸ Some analysts blame starvation deaths more on the economic downturn and less on the lack of food. See Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “North Korea Heads into ‘Tense’ Winter: Closed Borders and Food Supplies in Question,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2021 (comments of Jiro Ishimaru of Asia Press *Rimjin-Gang*), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-food-winter-kim/2021/12/04/a89dc828-4248-11ec-9404-50a28a88b9cd_story.html.

¹⁹ Jieun Kim, “Desperate North Koreans Sell Homes to Raise Money for Food,” Radio Free Asia, November 29, 2021, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/homes-11292021203549.html?utm_source=pocket_mylist. Technically, North Koreans do not own their homes. They possess permits to reside in their premises.

²⁰ Tara O, e-mail message to author, November 18, 2021.

²¹ “I am very concerned that the suffering in North Korea could be worse than the Arduous March of the great famine,” David Maxwell told *Newsweek*. Gordon G. Chang, “Food Aid to North Korea Leads to Starvation.”

²² Bryan Betts, “UN Says North Korea Faces ‘Acute Food Insecurity’ but Excludes It From Aid Plans,” NK News, December 3, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/12/un-says-north-korea-faces-acute-food-insecurity-but-excludes-it-from-aid-plans/>.

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²⁵ “North Korea Sends Delegation to China for Emergency Supplies,” Radio Free Asia, November 12, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/by-jieun-kim-11122021202042.html>.

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²⁹ Troy Stangarone, “Why Has North Korea Struggled to Normalize Trade With China?” *Diplomat*, November 25, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/why-has-north-korea-struggled-to-normalize-trade-with-china/?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

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