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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

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A large, intricate decorative floral emblem is positioned on the right side of the cover, extending from the middle to the bottom. It features complex, layered patterns with scalloped edges, characteristic of traditional Islamic or Middle Eastern art.

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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KOREAN PENINSULA 2020: OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic had disruptive effects on the Korean peninsula, as well as in the rest of the world. Deploying two very different strategies, both Koreas were able to spare their populations from the most tragic consequences in terms of public health. However, the pandemic had important effects on the social and economic systems of both Koreas and also on their mutual relationship and their relations with the rest of the world.

In South Korea, after an initial localized outbreak, the government was able to implement early on a very effective strategy based on extensive testing, tracing and social distancing that prevented the situation from escalating out of control. The positive management of the pandemic led to a landslide victory for the party of President Moon Jae-in at the legislative election in April. In the second half of the year, however, existing tensions in domestic politics started to re-emerge.

North Korea faced the challenge of the new pandemic with an almost immediate isolation of the country from the rest of the world and the imposition of severe quarantine measures. This strategy prevented the spreading of the virus within the country and preserved the fragile national health system; however, the costs of this isolation, combined with existing international sanctions and natural disasters, led to severe economic problems.

Inter-Korean and international relations remained limited during 2020, mostly because of the global consequences of the pandemic. Despite the efforts of President Moon to promote dialogue and cooperation on the peninsula, Pyongyang remained indifferent to these calls and displayed disappointment for the current management of inter-Korean relations through provocations and symbolic acts.

The combined effect of the pandemic restrictions and the wait for the US presidential elections dominated international relations for both Koreas. South Korea worked to maintain positive relations with Washington despite some unresolved issues, while North Korea refrained from provocations aimed at the United States.

KEYWORDS – South Korea; North Korea; COVID-19; Inter-Korean relations; South Korea's legislative elections; Kim Jong Un; Moon Jae-in; Korea-US relations.

1. *Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly represents the most relevant single event that influenced and shaped developments on the Korean peninsula – and also at the global level – of the last decades. The health crisis triggered by the emergence of the new coronavirus had widespread repercussions in both Koreas, putting the two countries in a state of permanent emergency for the entire year. Despite grave concerns in the first phase, caused mostly by the scarcity of information about the new disease, both Koreas were able to avoid the most severe consequences in terms of public health, although deploying very different strategies. After an initial outbreak that seemed unmanageable, the South Korean government was able to regain control of the situation reasonably quickly, especially compared to several other countries, and from that moment onward it was able to manage the increase of new cases and slowly return to an almost normal situation, by deploying social distancing and other measures very early on and through widespread testing and tracing of the infections. North Korea, on the other hand, immediately sealed its borders and avoided contacts and exchanges with foreign countries, in order to preserve its fragile national health system from collapsing. Despite these strategies prevented an out of control health crisis, the pandemic had serious effects on the social and economic situation of both Koreas.

In South Korea the first wave of infections arrived very early on, with the first case recorded on 20 January. The previous experiences with other similar diseases – such as the SARS epidemic in 2002-2003 and the MERS crisis of 2015 – gave the government important indications on how to act immediately to prevent the situation from escalating. The only cluster of infections that seemed out of control was registered in the second half of February, connected to a religious group whose practices of gatherings in close quarters for prolonged periods of time fuelled the spread of infections, in particular in the area around the city of Daegu. The health system deployed a strategy of aggressive testing and contact tracing that put the situation under control in a few weeks. After this initial outbreak, the government managed to maintain control on other localized clusters of infections that emerged over the course of the year. When the so-called «second wave» hit the country in November and December, the number of cases increased significantly, in particular in the Seoul area, but it never spiralled out of control and was managed through mild restrictions for social gatherings in public places and never required the implementation of a full lockdown. This effective strategy partly preserved the normal social and economic activities, although the country's economy suffered from the contraction of the global economy – especially in developed countries – and the decrease of international trade.

In terms of domestic politics, after a short hiatus of the rivalry between the two main parties in the first phase of the pandemic, the race for

the National Assembly elections in April revived the political polarization that had characterized the previous year. The elections resulted in a landslide victory for the Democratic Party of President Moon Jae-in, whose government was credited for a very effective management of the pandemic. In the second half of the year, however, the confrontational trends re-emerged, with the rivalry between progressives and conservatives, also in preparation for the presidential race of 2020, and a new tension between the government and the national prosecution.

The North Korean regime acted immediately upon the emergence of the new pandemic, closing the borders and imposing strict quarantine measures to all the suspect cases. This decision prevented the new disease from spreading in the country and engulfing the health system; however, it caused a collapse of trade and economic exchanges with China, North Korea's most important trading partner, that paired with international sanctions and natural disasters caused by extreme weather events led to severe economic problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic with the restrictions that it caused had consequences also on inter-Korean relations and on the international relations of both Koreas. The pre-eminence of domestic concerns and the limitations to international movements led to a sort of freezing of several open issues. As for inter-Korean relations, the negative trend that had begun during the previous year continued, especially in the first half of 2020. South Korean President Moon Jae-in renewed his calls for re-starting cooperation, pointing at health cooperation as a possible new avenue to improve inter-Korean relations; the response from the North, however, was generally negative: the proposals for health cooperation and assistance were never reciprocated by the North Korean regime, that in turn displayed its disappointment towards Seoul through low-level military provocations and very powerful and symbolic acts, such as the demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong.

As for international relations, the presidential elections in what can be considered as one of the most «significant other» for both Koreas, the United States, pushed them toward the adoption of a wait-and-see approach. Seoul focused on maintaining a positive relation with Washington, despite some unresolved issues, waiting for the elections results first, and for the complete transition to the new administration later. Relations between Seoul and Tokyo remained tense but did not escalate as had happened during 2019. North Korea adopted a similar wait-and-see strategy, refraining from provocative acts and inflammatory rhetoric against the United States for the entire year. The presidential elections in November certainly played a major role in this, but also the need of the leadership to focus on domestic problems, with the perspective of a new Congress of the Party scheduled for January 2021. The election of Biden and the power transition in the US will represent a crucial factor for the future of both Koreas, not only for the

strategy that the new administration will implement towards the two Koreas but also for its relationship with China and the consequences that it will have for the entire region.

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *The COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic consequences*

Like every other country around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the agenda of domestic politics in South Korea and influenced every aspects of its social, economic and political development. The last months of 2019 had been marked by a strong political rivalry between progressives and conservatives which had culminated with the resignation of one of the most controversial political figures in October, the Justice Minister Cho Kuk. In January 2020, there were signs that this strong polarization was to continue in the new year, in anticipation of the legislative elections scheduled for April 2020. However, when the first case of COVID-19 was officially recorded in South Korea on 20 January, the divisions between the two political fronts were temporarily put aside to concentrate all efforts on fighting the new virus and prevent an uncontrolled outbreak in the country.

When the first information about the emergence of a new coronavirus in Wuhan started to circulate, the South Korean government found itself in a very complicated situation: the country was one of the more connected to China, with hundreds of direct flights every week – including dozens to and from the city of Wuhan – and an economy that was deeply integrated with China, especially for trade and manufacturing. At the same time, South Korea had gathered a crucial knowledge in dealing with the risks of new airborne diseases due to the previous experiences with SARS in 2002-2003 and MERS in 2015.¹ The main lesson that had been learned from the actions – and even more from the mistakes – of these previous health crises was the importance to act as quickly as possible to prevent an uncontrolled spread of the new disease within the country, even with a small number of confirmed cases. Moving from these premises, the government acted fast to put in place a reliable system of testing, contact tracing and isolation. This strategy proved to be very effective and, despite several localized outbreaks over the course of the year, spared the country from the most destructive effects in terms of infections, mortality and also economic consequences.

The first officially detected case of COVID-19 in the country was a Chinese citizen, who recently returned from China, in the city of Incheon.²

1. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2015: One step forward and two steps back', *Asia Maior*, XXVI/2015, pp. 59-60.

2. 'S. Korea reports 1st confirmed case of China coronavirus', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 January 2020.

About a week later, on 28 January, after the fourth recorded case, the government decided to put in place the first restrictive measures and to organize charter flights to evacuate South Korean citizens from the city of Wuhan and the neighbouring region that in the meantime had been put under a strict lockdown by the Chinese authorities. By the end of January, the number of cases rose to eleven and the first human-to-human transmissions within the country were confirmed. In the following weeks the spread of the new disease was considered to be under control, with the number of cases around 30 by mid-February. In the meantime, the government imposed a ban on entering the country to all non-Korean citizens coming from, or transiting through, the Chinese province of Hubei³

In this very early phase, the measures adopted by the government followed two main lines: the first one, put in place by several countries around the world, was to restrict the arrival of persons from the most hit areas, the second one was to put in place a reliable system of testing, tracing and isolation of possible infected patients. One of the mistakes that led to the spread of MERS in 2015 – another respiratory disease caused by a coronavirus – was the lack of public information combined with the lack of test kits and unpreparedness of part of the health system. Carriers of the virus moved freely from one health facility to another, spreading the infection to other patients. In order to avoid this situation from happening again, the government had created emergency response systems, with trained personnel and immediate approval of diagnostic kits in case of a new emergency. In the days after the first confirmed case, government officials and pharmaceutical companies met to coordinate for the production and approval of test kits as soon as possible and in less than two weeks the first kits were approved and distributed, reaching 20,000 tests per day in a very short time. In addition, health officials also designed and implemented «drive-through» sites for testing, making the process faster and reducing the risk of infections in close proximity, the first of which was up and running by 23 February – one of the innovative ideas that will later be implemented also in many other countries. As for tracing, the government started in the early stages to use technological instruments, such as phone apps and geo-localization through the GPS system. A further measure that greatly helped in containing the spread of the new disease was the creation of designated sites for COVID-19, with specific medical facilities that were assigned only for the testing and treatment of COVID patients, clearly identified by the government and signalled outside the facility. This system effectively contributed to limit the spread of the virus among patients.⁴

3. Ahn Sung-mi, 'Korea to ban entry from China's Hubei province', *The Korea Herald*, 2 February 2020.

4. Victor Cha, 'South Korea Offers a Lesson in Best Practices', *Foreign Affairs*, 10 April 2020.

In order to keep the public informed and disseminate useful information about the new virus and the disease, public health authorities also created a call centre dedicated to it and started immediately to centrally collect data about the cases. Facemasks and other personal protective equipment were also supplied to health workers and medical facilities immediately. When the country started to suffer from shortages of masks the government implemented a centralized price-control and distribution system, that prevented hoarding and counterproductive competition that would have highly increased the prices.⁵ The proactive strategy adopted by the government in the very early stages and the efforts in keeping the public informed about the development of the health crisis also contributed to the improvement of public trust towards the government which in turn led to higher levels of compliance with norms and limitations implemented to contain the pandemic.⁶

Despite the efforts put in place by the government, an outbreak of the new coronavirus – which spread much faster than the SARS and MERS viruses, specifically also through asymptomatic subjects – emerged around the city of Daegu in late February. In mid-February a small number of infections that could not be traced back to travels to China or to other foreign countries emerged. Of particular concern for the authorities was what became known as «patient 31», a member of the Shincheonji religious group from Daegu, who continued to attend the religious gatherings of the group after showing the first symptoms of the infection.⁷ In a few days the number of new positive cases increased dramatically in the area around the city: on 20 February the confirmed cases reached 104, with 73 in only two days, on 21 February the new cases doubled to 204 and on 23 February they exceeded 600, in a dramatic demonstration of the ability of the infection to grow exponentially. In the same days, South Korea also recorded the first death due to COVID-19, a patient that had been treated for pneumonia in the southern city of Cheongdo.⁸

The cluster of infections that emerged was mostly located in the city of Daegu and the surrounding areas and involved people who had taken part in the religious activities of the Shincheonji group or who had been in contact with member of the same group. The government responded by raising the threat alert to the highest level and by asking citizens in those areas to stay home; a full lockdown, however, was never implemented. The government closed day care centres, banned outdoor large gatherings and

5. *Ibid.*

6. S. Nathan Park, 'Confucianism Isn't Helping Beat the Coronavirus', *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020.

7. Hyonhee Shin & Hyun Young Yi, 'Secretive church at center of South Korea's explosive coronavirus outbreak', *Reuters*, 27 February 2020.

8. 'S. Korea reports 1st death from virus, cases soar to 104', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 February 2020

postponed the reopening of schools that was scheduled for early March.⁹ At the same time, public health officials started to trace the contacts of all the new positive cases, an effort that was made more difficult by the secrecy that surrounded the religious organizations, whose members often hide their membership.

In late February and early March, South Korea became one of the new hotspots for the spreading of SARS-COV-2 around the world together with the new outbreaks in Iran and Northern Italy. The efforts to contain the cluster in Daegu however proved to be very effective, thanks also to the widespread testing that focused on the members of Shincheonji. Around 10 March the situation seemed to be again under control, with the total number of cases around 7500 and the new daily cases in substantial decrease.¹⁰ In contrast, the outbreak located in other parts of the world seemed to be increasingly out of control, with a very negative outlook for the following weeks in Europe and the first signs that the pandemic was going to hit hard also in the United States and other parts of the American continent. In this evolving situation, South Korea rapidly passed from being one of the most hit countries in the world to become one of the clearest examples of how to implement effective efforts to contain the pandemic.¹¹ Other countries in East Asia proved to be extremely effective in limiting the spread of the virus – such as in the cases of Taiwan and Vietnam – but South Korea showed how to regain control of the situation after a seemingly uncontrolled outbreak. Furthermore, the authorities in Seoul were able to achieve this result without imposing lockdowns or shutting down large parts of the economy, as had happened in China with Wuhan and the Hubei region and as it would happen shortly thereafter in many Western countries. The «South Korean model» on how to «flatten the curve» became known at the global level,¹² but for many countries the pandemic was already too widespread within their borders and following South Korea's examples was not feasible any longer. The new virus – and the disease that it caused – was seen and perceived for weeks as a problem that was affecting China and other East Asian countries, as something «other» that was detached from the rest of the world, and in particular from Western countries.¹³ In the same way, the effective strategies that several East Asian countries put in place at a very early stage in order to contain the pandemic were not properly taken into consideration by most

9. Choe Sang-hun, 'As Coronavirus Cases Spiral, South Korea Raises Threat Alert Level', *The New York Times*, 23 February 2020.

10. Thomas Maresca, 'South Korea says coronavirus is «coming under control», *UPI*, 9 March 2020.

11. Jongeun Yo, 'Lessons From South Korea's Covid-19 Policy Response', *The American Review of Public Administration*, Vol. 50, No. 6-7, 2020, pp. 801-808.

12. Max Fisher & Choe Sang-hun, 'How South Korea Flattened the Curve', *The New York Times*, 23 March 2020.

13. Marius Meinhof, 'Othering the virus', *Discover Society*, 21 March 2020.

Western countries, that considered them as inapplicable to their specific contexts; once several of these governments realized the efficacy of these approaches and the fact that many of these measures were applicable also to their situations, in most cases it was already too late and the spread of the new virus was already uncontrolled.

Around the end of March the number of daily cases was well under 100 and the country was slowly returning to a more normal situation. The legislative elections for example were regularly held on 15 April, with early voting operations starting a few days in advance and an effective system of social distancing in place. Despite these successes, the pandemic had important consequences on the economic and productive life of the country. The restrictions and social distancing measures negatively impacted all the activities that provided services to the public in closed spaces – bar, restaurants, gyms, etc... – but, considering the global dimension of the crisis, also South Korean exports, which represent an important part of the economy, were strongly affected. The president met with the opposition leaders in late February to discuss new measures and secure their support in the National Assembly.¹⁴ In mid-March the Bank of Korea cut the interest rate of half a point, reaching the record low level of 0.75%.¹⁵ On 19 March the first plan to counter the economic effects of the virus was launched by the government, for a total of almost US\$ 40 billion, specifically tailored to support small and medium enterprises.¹⁶ Over the course of the year, the National Assembly would pass fourth extra-budget bills aimed at supporting the national economy from the effects of the pandemic.

From the perspective of the health crisis, in April the situation was under control, on 30 April the country recorded zero cases for the first time in 72 days. In 20 May, schools started to reopen, with students in the last year of high school after more than two months of postponement.¹⁷ In early May a new cluster of infections in Itaewon, an area of Seoul with several bars and nightclubs, prompted new temporary restrictions in the capital area; this trend of limited restrictions in specific areas of the country would continue throughout the summer, to rapidly contain the emergence of new clusters.

A second wave of infection with substantial numbers of new cases became a concern at the end of the summer. In August, the number of daily cases temporarily reached several hundreds, most of them connected

14. Choi He-suk, 'Moon requests parties' support for budget for COVID-19 outbreak', *The Korea Herald*, 28 February 2020.

15. Sam Kim & Hooyeon Kim, 'Bank of Korea Slashes Rate in Emergency Move After Fed Cut', *Bloomberg*, 16 March 2020.

16. Hyonhee Shin & Cynthia Kim, 'South Korea pledges \$39 billion emergency funding for small businesses', *Reuters*, 19 March 2020.

17. 'Delight and worry as South Korean schools reopen', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 May 2020.

to the religious organization Sarang Jeil, whose leader Jun Kwang-hoon was a staunch opponent of Moon Jae-in's government and had organized a rally in downtown Seoul on 15 August with more than 20,000 participants and no respect for social distancing measures.¹⁸ In order to contain this new outbreak, restrictions were applied to the area around Seoul until mid-September when the situation was again under control. After weeks of calm and restrictions at the lowest level, the second wave arrived at the end of November with cases that rapidly climbed above 500 a day mostly in the area around the capital. The level of restrictions was quickly elevated to Level 2.5 – on a scale to 3 – in Seoul and to Level 2 in the rest of the country.¹⁹ These measures stabilized the number of new infections at a level that was higher than during summer but still manageable. It is worth noticing that in South Korea a lockdown was never implemented and no restrictions to the movement of people were enforced, in some cases the authorities strongly encouraged people not to move around without a specific reason. The measures were mostly related to early closures of public places, such as cafés, bars, restaurants and gyms, and to avoid gatherings of large numbers of people. For this reason, the country was able to limit the economic and social effects of the pandemic – the advance estimate of the Bank of Korea reports a contraction of the economy of only -1.0%²⁰ – and was considered as a virtuous model at the global level.

2.2. National Assembly elections and political tension during the pandemic

The national crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary moment of national unity among South Korea's political forces. However, with the cases declining rapidly and legislative elections scheduled for mid-April, the usual confrontational dynamic between conservatives and progressives rapidly re-emerged.

The political movements in preparation for the elections started before the pandemic hit. Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon, one of the leaders of the Democratic Party, had already resigned in 2019, to run for a seat in the National Assembly and to prepare for a possible presidential nomination in 2022. To replace him, another prominent member of the same party, Chung Sye-kyun was confirmed as new prime minister on 13 January.²¹ On the conservative front, on 13 February the main opposition party, the Liberty Korea Party, merged with two smaller groups to form the new

18. 'South Korea's epidemic «in full swing» after protest outbreak linked to church members', *The Strait Times*, 21 August 2020.

19. 'S. Korea to raise social distancing to Level 2.5 in capital area', *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 December 2020.

20. 'Real Gross Domestic Product: Fourth Quarter and Annual 2020 (Advance Estimate)', *Bank of Korea Press Release*, 26 January 2021.

21. 'Assembly approves prime minister nominee', *Yonhap News Agency*, 13 January 2020.

United Future Party.²² A few weeks later, three centrist parties, Bareunmirae, Party for Democracy and Peace e New Alternative Party, decided to merge, in order to have more chances to win parliamentary seats.²³ A new feature of these elections was also represented by the more active role of North Korean defectors in the political life of South Korea: the prominent former North Korean diplomat Thae Yong-ho was a candidate for the conservative party, while a new party formed by defectors, the Inter-Korean Unification Party, ran for the first time on a platform based on improving life conditions for defectors in the South and the more ambitious goal of liberating North Korea from the authoritarian regime.²⁴

Given the limitations for the pandemic, the electoral campaign was obviously more restricted than in the past. The Democratic Party of President Moon Jae-in strongly emphasized the efficient management of the pandemic by the government and also the need for the president to count on a strong parliamentary majority to continue the fight against the virus and to plan the social and economic recovery after the phase of emergency. On the other side, the conservative opposition focused on issues that had lowered the approval rate for the government before the pandemic, such as the scandal that involved former Justice Minister Cho Kuk and the stalemate in inter-Korean relations.

The results that came in on 15 April reported a landslide victory for the Democratic Party and a great success for Moon Jae-in. Despite the social distancing measures and the risks associated to the pandemic the turnout was the highest for National Assembly elections since 1992, at 66.2%. The two main parties won almost all the seats, thanks to the creation of smaller satellite parties to contend the proportional representation seats. The final results gave the Democratic Party 180 seats, the largest majority ever since democratization in 1987, the conservative United Future Party won 103 seats, while 5 seats were won by independent candidates, 6 seats were allocated to the left Justice Party and 3 each to the centrist People Party, led by Ahn Cheol-soo, and the liberal Open Democratic Party.²⁵ The electoral defeat of the conservatives had important consequences: the leader and possible presidential candidate Hwang Kyo-ahn was defeated by Lee Nak-yon for the race in the district of Jongno in central Seoul and

22. Ser Myo-ja, 'United Future Party launches after merger', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 17 February 2020.

23. '3 minor opposition parties to merge for April 15 general elections', *Yonhap News Agency*, 14 February 2020.

24. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'Testing Times', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 1, May 2020, pp. 87-88.

25. Data retrieved from: Republic of Korea National Election Commission, *21st National Assembly Elected Candidate Statistics (Proportional Representation Members)* and *21st National Assembly Elected Candidate Statistics (Constituency Members)*, 16 April 2020 (<https://www.nec.go.kr/site/eng/ex/bbs/List.do?cbIdx=1273>).

resigned,²⁶ kicking off a new race for the leadership of the party and the future candidacy for the presidential elections of 2022.

The results also gave a fundamental boost to Moon Jae-in's presidency for his last two years in office. The positive management of the pandemic certainly played a key role in this, but the large majority gave the president new momentum to put forward other key points of his political platform. For example, in his first speech at the newly elected National Assembly, on 16 July, Moon asked the parliament to ratify the inter-Korean agreements signed in 2018, with the aim of reinforcing their status and making them more permanent.²⁷ The government priorities were reaffirmed in Moon's October speech about the budget, in which the president stated that the priority for 2021 would be a revival of the economic, as well as new laws for reducing social inequalities and a new push for inter-Korean cooperation.²⁸ In December, the president held a televised speech during which he presented the strategy to reach carbon neutrality before 2050.²⁹

The results of the elections did not put an end to the strong political polarization between progressives and conservatives. In early June, The main opposition party decided to boycott the first parliamentary session for a lack of an inter-party agreement on the formation of the commissions and returned to the Assembly only weeks later, in early July. During the summer, both parties started to reorganize for the long race for the presidential elections: Lee Nak-yeon was nominated as leader of the Democratic Party on 28 August,³⁰ while the conservative party, in an effort to refound itself after the clear defeat of April changed its name to People Power Party.³¹

The second half of the year proved to be a troubling period for the domestic situation in South Korea. In addition to the second wave of infections in autumn, the country was severely hit by a series of typhoons in August and September, provoking considerable damages and victims. The heavy rains of early August caused more than 20 victims and displaced thousands of people; the country was again hit by typhoons Maysak and Haishen in September with more damages and victims.³²

26. 'Main opposition chief steps down over parliamentary election defeat', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 April 2020.

27. 'Moon asks lawmakers to «institutionalize» inter-Korean summit accords', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 July 2020.

28. 'Address by President Moon Jae-in at National Assembly to Propose Government Budget for 2021', *Cheong Wa Dae*, 28 October 2020.

29. Sangmi Cha, 'S.Korea's Moon urges citizens to support ambitious carbon neutrality goal', *Reuters*, 10 December 2020.

30. 'Former PM Lee Nak-yeon elected ruling party's new leader', *The Korea Times*, 29 August 2020.

31. Kyle Pope & Simon Voget, 'South Korean Conservatives Rebrand Again in Attempted Makeover', *The Diplomat*, 3 September 2020.

32. Simon Denyer & Min Joo Kim, 'Typhoon Haishen hits South Korea after lashing Japan, leaving four missing', *The Washington Post*, 7 September 2020.

The Democratic Party in the meantime was shaken by scandals involving accusations of sexual harassment by high-level members. In April the mayor of Busan, the second largest city, Oh Keo-don resigned after admitting to sexual misconduct against a public servant;³³ a few months later, on 9 July, the mayor of Seoul killed himself before the accusation of sexual harassment by one of his assistant became public.³⁴ These two events shed new light on a widespread problem in the male-dominated South Korean society in which men in positions of power take advantage of the power imbalance to sexually harass women. Despite the efforts of the #metoo movement, that started to be very active in South Korea from 2018, this pattern is still widespread in the country's patriarchal and hierarchical power system and involves not only politicians but also famous directors and performers as well as prominent athletes and coaches.³⁵

A further controversial issue in terms of domestic politics emerged in the last months of the year, when the confrontation between the Ministry of Justice and State prosecution reignited. The long-term government design to reform the prosecution and limit its powers especially over the law enforcement system had already caused tension under previous ministers, in particular with the case of Cho Kuk.³⁶ The first moves of the new Minister Choo Mi-ae had already created tension in the first days of the year, when she decided to relocate 32 members of the prosecutors, including some considered as very close to the Prosecutor General Yoon Seok-youl. The controversy re-emerged in October, when the minister decided to remove Yoon from the investigation over a corruption case that involved a hedge fund, after allegations from a suspect that the general prosecutor was not properly investigating other prosecutors and politicians from the opposition party who were involved in the scandal. The decision was thus motivated by the need to ensure neutrality in the investigation. After an internal audit found a number of irregularities in Yoon's conduct, Choo decided to suspend the prosecutor and convene a disciplinary commission to decide on possible sanctions against him.³⁷ This measure sparked a harsh controversy between the prosecution and the Ministry, but also between the two political fronts, with the progressives supporting the Minister's decision and the conservatives accusing it of political interference in the judiciary and supporting Yoon. The decision

33. Choe Sang-hun, 'Mayor of South Korean City Resigns in #MeToo Case', *The New York Times*, 23 April 2020.

34. Choe Sang-hun, 'I'm Sorry to Everyone': In Death, South Korean Mayor Is Tainted by Scandal', *The New York Times*, 10 July 2020.

35. Eung-Young Jeong, 'South Korea's Male-Dominated Workplaces in Spotlight After Sexual Harassment Accusations', *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 2020.

36. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2019: The year of missed opportunities', *Asia Major*, XXX/2019, pp. 100-102.

37. Choi He-suk, 'Justice minister, top prosecutor continue battle in court', *The Korea Herald*, 30 November 2020.

of the disciplinary panel on 16 December decided to suspend Yoon for two months; however, one week later, the Seoul Administrative Court accepted Yoon's request against the suspension and reinstated the general prosecutor.³⁸ The decision marked a victory for Yoon and a defeat not only for Choo Mi-ae but for Moon Jae-in as well, as the president stood behind the minister throughout the process. After the verdict Choo decided to resign after only one year in office, while Yoon came out in several opinion polls as one of the most popular possible candidate for the conservative party for the upcoming 2022 presidential elections, paving the way for a switch to a new political career.

The year of the pandemic ended with mixed results for Moon Jae-in and his government. The president's popularity had in fact been in decline for some time at the beginning of the year; but the very effective management of the health crisis gave Moon a second «honeymoon» with the public opinion that translated into the landslide victory at the legislative elections in April. In the second half of the year, however, the problems of the country started to re-emerge and in particular the strong political polarization and the increase of existing social inequalities that the pandemic had emphasized. Although the economic consequences of the health crisis were generally less damaging than in other countries, the first and foremost challenge of Moon's government in his last year and a half in office will be that of reviving the economy with the goal of reducing inequalities and mend the social and political fabric of the country.

2.3. *The COVID-19 pandemic and domestic troubles in North Korea*

Despite its international isolation, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic severely hit North Korea. The country promptly sealed its borders as the health situation worsened in China and the human-to-human transmission of the virus was confirmed. The very restrictive measures, combined with the capillary control of the regime on the population and on the movement across the borders protected the country from a widespread infection: throughout the entire year the regime did not report any case of COVID-19. Despite the difficulties in confirming this information, no major health crisis has been observed within the country. However, the border closure certainly had economic effects on North Korea, reducing trade with its most important trade partner, China, of around 80% in the entire year. These effects, combined with extreme weather events during the summer, led to severe economic problems and food shortages in the country.

Unlike previous years, Kim Jong Un did not start the year with the traditional New Year's address; instead the policy indications for 2020 and for the following years were provided by the leader during a meeting

38. Mitch Shin, 'South Korea's Prosecutor General Wins Another Court Battle Against the Government', *The Diplomat*, 29 December 2020.

of the Central Committee of the Party from 28 to 31 December 2019. The main emphasis of the leader was on maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent against possible attacks from the outside but even more on the importance to focus on building the country's economy; in this perspective Kim called on the population to resist against international sanctions through a self-reliant economic development.³⁹ With the outbreak of the global pandemic the call on self-reliance would become an even more stringent necessity.

In order to avoid an uncontrollable spread of the new coronavirus, the regime declared a national emergency on 28 January, isolated the country from every contact with the outside and imposed a stringent 30 days quarantine system for all foreigners and suspect cases.⁴⁰ On 24 February the regime announced that 380 foreigners were under quarantine measures and that new controls for people recently returned from abroad had been implemented.⁴¹ The first reported high-level meeting about the pandemic was held on 29 February, when Kim presided over a Politburo meeting to discuss measures to prevent the spread of the new disease.⁴² During these weeks, when the infection was fast growing in parts of China and South Korea, Pyongyang reported no confirmed cases of the new disease, a sign that the early measures of isolation had prevented a health crisis that might have led to the collapse of the fragile national health system.

In April the international attention started to focus on the rumour that Kim Jong Un might be severely ill or even dead that quickly spread among observers and analysts, following a report from *DailyNK* that he underwent heart surgery, later corrected into a cardiovascular procedure.⁴³ The fact that Kim did not participate at the 15 April celebrations – that commemorate the birth of his grandfather and founder of the nation Kim Il Sung – and that he was not seen in public for several days fuelled speculations about his conditions, leading to an endless number of articles and analyses about the possible succession to his sister Kim Yo Jong or other scenarios for a post-Kim Jong Un North Korea. The South Korean government and intelligence agency tried to limit the spread of unconfirmed information stating that the North Korean leader was alive and that no unusual sign was reported in the country. The speculations ended only on

39. Lee Je-hun, Noh Ji-won and Hwang Joon-bum, 'Kim Jong-un message of self-reliance and «foiling» sanctions during last party meeting of 2019', *The Hankyoreh English Edition*, 2 January 2020.

40. Tae-jun Kang, 'North Korea Beefs Up Measures to Prevent Coronavirus Outbreak', *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2020.

41. 'North Korea quarantines about 380 foreigners to avert new virus spread', *Kyodo News*, 24 February 2020.

42. Koh Byung-joon, 'N.K. leader oversees politburo meeting on coronavirus response', *Yonhap News Agency*, 29 February 2020.

43. Ha Yoon Ah, 'Source: Kim Jong Un recently underwent a cardiovascular procedure', *Daily NK*, 21 April 2020.

1st May when Kim reappeared in public for the inauguration of a fertilizer plant in Suncheon.⁴⁴

After his supposed «mysterious disappearance», Kim Jong Un presided over a series of important political meetings both of the Politburo and of the Party's Central Military Commission during which the leadership discussed both matters related to the anti-pandemic measures and to the country's military defence and deterrence. Two meetings held in August were particularly important. During a Politburo session on 13 August, Kim stated that, despite the economic crisis caused by the pandemic and the damage caused by extreme weather events, the country should not accept aid and assistance from abroad because of the risk of letting the infection inside the country, stressing again the importance of self-reliance.⁴⁵ A few days later, during a meeting of the Central Committee, Kim in a somehow unexpected move explicitly acknowledged the partial failure of the leadership in achieving the economic goals that had been set. In addition, he announced that the party would hold its eighth Congress in January 2021, the first in five years.⁴⁶

The typhoons that hit the Korean peninsula during summer caused severe damages also to the North. In particular the province of North Hwanghae was hit by heavy rains and floods in early August and a few weeks later the typhoon Bavi hit the South Hwanghae province. The typhoons Maysak and Haishen provoked floods and damages in the area around Wonsan and in the Kangwon province in early September. Kim Jong Un personally visited several areas hit by these events. Despite the extensive damages, the North Korean leadership kept on refusing to accept help from the outside, specifically from South Korea, and continued to stress the importance of self-reliance in reconstructing the affected areas.⁴⁷

After the announcement of the organization of the Party Congress in January the attention turned towards this crucial event for the political and social life of the country. Nonetheless, another important event was scheduled for 2020: the 75^o anniversary of the foundation of the Workers' Party of Korea. On 10 October a massive military parade was held in Pyongyang, during which the regime displayed what appeared to be a new but untested Intercontinental ballistic missiles in addition to other weapon systems. During the celebrations Kim also delivered a speech in which he emphasized again the importance of the nuclear deterrent to defend the country; an

44. Kim Tong-hyung, 'Kim reappears in public, ending absence amid health rumors', *AP News*, 1 May 2020.

45. 'N.K. leader warns against accepting outside flood aid due to virus risk', *Yonhap News Agency*, 14 August 2020.

46. Sangmi Cha & Josh Smith, 'North Korea to set new five-year plan in January as economy struggles', *Reuters*, 20 August 2020.

47. Heekyong Yang, 'North Korea leader tours typhoon-hit area, directs recovery effort', *Reuters*, 15 September 2020.

important part of the speech, however, was dedicated to messages directed to the citizens and the hardship that they had to endure during the year, in a clear effort to empathize with the people. As mentioned in the speech, the country had to endure «three hardships»: the international sanctions, the pandemic and natural disasters; the leader expressed his gratitude to the people and said that he was sorry for not being able to improve the life conditions of the citizens, in a very emotional part of the speech during which Kim almost cried.⁴⁸ The speech represents an important example of the communication style of the leader: while in August he acknowledged the partial failure of the leadership, this time he again explicitly recognized his failure but with a more direct connection between himself and the people in a display of humanity and compassion for the difficulties that North Korean citizens had to endure. The eighth Congress scheduled for January will be a crucial event to understand how the leadership is planning to overcome these difficulties and also the regime's strategy in a post-pandemic world.

3. *Inter-Korean relations*

3.1. *The (non)development of inter-Korean relations during the pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact also on inter-Korean relations: the very limited exchanges still in place were curtailed even further, especially after North Korea decided to seal the borders of the country to prevent the spread of the new virus; in addition, the pandemic obviously affected domestic politics in both countries and inevitably shifted the attention of the governments away from initiatives on inter-Korean relations.

The previous year had ended with a negative perspective on the future of relations between North and South Korea. The positive momentum for dialogue and cooperation created during 2018 and the first months of 2019 seemed to be lost, while a revival of confrontational rhetoric combined with a provocative attitude had re-emerged.⁴⁹ In spite of this situation, President Moon Jae-in remained committed to his cooperative approach and in his New Year's Press Conference remarked again the importance of putting inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation back on track, identifying tourism as a possible sector in which the two Koreas could re-start to work together.⁵⁰ The emphasis that the South Korean government kept putting on cooperation with Pyongyang also created tension with the United States, when

48. Do Je-hae, 'Kim Jong-un cries during commemorative speech', *The Korea Times*, 11 October 2020.

49. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2019: The year of missed opportunities', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 110-112.

50. Saeme Kim, 'Moon Jae-in Is Serious About Inter-Korean Cooperation', *The Diplomat*, 17 January 2020.

the American ambassador in Seoul, Harry Harris, stated that South Korea should consult with Washington before proposing new forms of cooperation with the North. This public statement was harshly criticized in South Korea, especially from the progressive part, as an improper interference in domestic affairs.⁵¹ The episode, however, demonstrated once more the difficult position of the government in Seoul, caught between the adherence to the sanctions-based policy supported by the United States and the strategic goal of improving inter-Korean relations of the Moon administration.

When the new coronavirus became a security priority in the entire region the two Koreas jointly decided to temporarily close the liaison office in Kaesong and on 30 January the 58 South Korean members of the staff returned to the South.⁵² The closure was meant to be temporary, but the event of the following months led to a negative and permanent outcome for that example of inter-Korean cooperation. Apart from this joint decision, cooperation between the two Koreas on the health crisis remained non-existent for the rest of the year, despite several public call of the South Korean government which considered it as a possible new avenue to promote inter-Korean exchanges.

If the first weeks of the year were characterized by stalling relations, in March the situation worsened. North Korea resumed short-range missile testing and military drills close to the border in four different occasions in March and once more on 14 April.⁵³ In order not to heighten confrontation, the South Korean government tried to maintain a rather low profile in condemning the tests, mainly expressing concern and asking to stop all the military provocations. Nevertheless, the North Korean regime reacted vehemently to these remarks, with Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, issuing a very harsh statement, that included also derogatory terms, saying that Seoul had no right to condemn Pyongyang's actions.⁵⁴ The fact that the statement was issued directly by Kim Yo Jong signalled the fact that the leader's sister was assuming a prominent role in managing inter-Korean relations. A few days later, however, Kim Jong Un himself sent a letter to Moon Jae-in expressing his support for South Korea's fight against the virus – in early March the country was in the midst of the first wave of infections – and offering his thoughts on the situation on the peninsula (the

51. 'S. Korea says U.S. ambassador's remarks on inter-Korean ties «very inappropriate», *Yonhap News Agency*, 17 January 2020.

52. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'Testing Times', p. 85.

53. Missile Defense Project, 'North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present', *Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 20 April 2017, last modified 30 July 2020 (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present>).

54. 'Kim Jong-un sister condemns «frightened dog» South Korea in first public statement', *The Guardian*, 3 March 2020.

content was not disclosed by the government).⁵⁵ This dynamic resembled the same approach that the North Korean regime had also kept with the US administration in the previous months, with high officials publicly criticizing Washington, while at the same time the leader maintained a cordial relation with his direct counterpart.

The strong victory of Moon Jae-in's party at the National Assembly elections on 15 April, strengthened the president's position in his last two years in office, including for his inter-Korean policy. On the second anniversary of his first meeting with Kim Jong Un and of the Panmunjom declaration, on 27 April, Moon reaffirmed his willingness to pursue inter-Korean cooperation despite existing international limitations.⁵⁶ The South Korean president reiterated this position in his official speech marking the third anniversary of his presidency on 10 May, proposing cooperation on health measures to fight the pandemic as a possible way forward that would not breach the sanctions in place.⁵⁷ As had already happened with previous efforts, North Korea remained silent about this offer.

Unfortunately for the South Korean administration, the situation quickly worsened again in early June, when Kim Yo Jong issued a new statement in which the regime affirmed its resolution to adopt a series of measures, which included closing down the liaison office in Kaesong, in protest against the initiatives of non-governmental organizations which launched leaflets and other propaganda materials into the North from the South Korean border using balloons. Kim Yo Jong explicitly referred to the inability of the government to stop these initiatives, which was considered as connivance.⁵⁸ This new negative development not only triggered a new crisis in inter-Korean relations, but it also led to a fierce debate within South Korea about the possibility to prohibit such initiatives. The orientation of the South Korean government appeared immediately clear when, one day after KCNA reported Kim Yo Jong statement, the Minister of Unification affirmed that a law to ban these activities was required in order to eliminate actions that could create tension and represent a problem for people living nearby the border.⁵⁹ Despite Seoul's efforts to reduce confrontation, the situation quickly escalated: over the course of the following days several North Korean news outlet reported public denunciations and threats against the actions carried out by these organizations

55. Hyung-jin Kim, 'N. Korea's Kim expresses condolences over virus in S. Korea', *AP News*, 5 March 2020.

56. Choi He-suk, 'Moon vows to expand inter-Korean cooperation on summit anniversary', *The Korea Herald*, 27 April 2020.

57. 'Special Address by President Moon Jae-in to Mark Three Years in Office', Cheong Wa Dae, 10 May 2020.

58. 'Kim Yo Jong Rebukes S. Korean Authorities for Conniving at Anti-DPRK Hostile Act of «Defectors from North»', KCNA, 4 June 2020.

59. Koh Byung-joon, 'S. Korea to legislate ban on anti-Pyongyang leaflet campaign after N.K. threats', *Yonhap News Agency*, 4 June 2020.

in the South, on 9 June Pyongyang announced the interruption of all communication lines between the two Koreas, including the direct military hotline,⁶⁰ and on 13 June Kim Yo Jong issued another inflammatory statement with a very specific reference to the destruction of the liaison office in Kaesong.⁶¹ Three days later the office was in fact demolished with a very theatrical explosion.

This time the reaction of the government in Seoul was much stronger and the responsibility clearly put on the behaviour of the North Korean regime.⁶² The Minister of Unification Kim Yeon-chul immediately presented his resignation which President Moon accepted a few days later.⁶³ The moment of tension did not end with the demolition of the liaison office. In the following days, the North Korean regime reinstalled loudspeakers along the border, which had been used in the past to broadcast propaganda messages towards the South, and circulated pictures of balloons full with images of Moon Jae-in covered in cigarettes butts, ash and other dirt, threatening to send millions of them across the border.⁶⁴ Despite this menacing rhetoric and actions, the campaign aimed against the South Korean government was suddenly called off by Kim Jong Un himself after a meeting of the Central Military Commission on 24 June, after which the loudspeaker were removed and the articles against Seoul eliminated from the news outlets.⁶⁵ This dynamic of sudden harsh attacks against the South related to a specific issue – that could be considered as a minor issue – is not new in the development of inter-Korean relations; in this specific case, the issue of the leaflets was used as a pretext to signal in a very direct way the disappointment of the North Korea regime towards the managing of inter-Korean relations by the South Korean government.

The events of June 2020 had political repercussions in the South. After the resignation of the Minister of Unification, Moon Jae-in seized the opportunity for a reshuffle of his entire team in charge of relations with Pyongyang: Kim Yeon-chul was replaced with Lee In-young, the parliamentary leader of the Democratic Party and a strong advocate of reconciliation with the North, Suh Hoon was moved from head of the National Intelligence Service to National Security Adviser, and Park Jie-won replaced

60. Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Cuts Off All Communications Lines to South Korea', *The New York Times*, 8 June 2020.

61. Yosuke Onchi, 'Kim Jong Un's sister hints at military action against South Korea', *Nikkei Asia*, 14 June 2020.

62. Laura Bicker, 'North Korea blows up joint liaison office with South in Kaesong', *BBC World News*, 16 June 2020.

63. Colm Quinn, 'South Korean Minister Resigns Amid Worsening Ties With North', *Foreign Policy*, 19 June 2020.

64. 'KCNA Report on Planned Distribution of Leaflets against Enemy', *Uriminzokkiri*, 22 June 2020.

65. Oh Seok-min, 'N. Korea seen removing loudspeakers from border areas: sources', *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 June 2020.

Suh at the helm of the secret service. All these high-level officials strongly supported dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang and had an extensive network of contacts across the 38° parallel.⁶⁶ This reshuffle clearly signalled Moon Jae-in intention to revive inter-Korean relations and make it a top priority of his last two years in office.

3.2. *Border incidents and propaganda balloons*

After this months of tension and confrontation, in the second half of the year, inter-Korean relations remained in a sort of stalemate, with most of the attention of the governments focused again on the problems caused by the resurgence of the pandemic. The new team in charge of relations with North Korea, and in particular the new Minister of Unification Lee, remained very active in his efforts to engage Pyongyang, proposing various initiatives and looking for international support; the North Korean leadership, however, remained mostly silent about the proposals for cooperation coming from the South. The only occasions that put inter-Korean relations under the spotlight again were two incidents at the border.

In late July, Kim Jong Un chaired a meeting of the party Politburo to address an emergency situation regarding the virus: according to the report, a North Korean citizen who had defected to the South three years earlier had come back to the North and he might be infected with the new coronavirus. The city of Kaesong and the surrounding areas were immediately isolated from the rest of the country and a state of emergency declared.⁶⁷ North Korea was still maintaining its position that there were no recorded infections in the country, so this situation was considered as extremely dangerous, even if the controls of the authority on the man were inconclusive and did not confirm the infection. After this initial concern, it turned out that the returned defector did not represent a threat to the country's health security and during a following Politburo meeting on 13 August the restrictive measures in the Kaesong area were lifted.⁶⁸ This event, and in particular how it was described and reported by the regime and the official news outlet, certainly fit very well in a broader propaganda narrative according to which South Korea was ravaged by the virus and represented a clear and present danger for the North.

The return of the defector to North Korea through the inter-Korean border had repercussions also in the South. The government in Seoul confirmed the facts on 27 July: around 18 July a 24-year-old surnamed Kim,

66. Ahn Sung-mi, 'With new team, Moon set to push for inter-Korean breakthrough', *The Korea Herald*, 5 July 2020.

67. Sangmi Cha & Josh Smith, 'North Korea declares emergency in border town over first suspected COVID-19 case', *Reuters*, 25 July 2020.

68. Kim Tong-hyun, 'North Korea Lifts Kaesong Lockdown, Rejects Foreign Aid', *The Diplomat*, 15 August 2020.

who was facing charges of raping, returned to the North swimming across the border through a drainpipe in the island of Ganghwa, using the exact same way that he had used three years earlier when he first defected from the North to the South. This obviously raised concerns about the security of the border which is a matter of utmost importance for South Korean national security. After the North Korean authorities announced the return of the defector, an investigation found that the man had appeared in surveillance cameras and other observation devices for seven times but went unnoticed, and also that drainpipes and ditches along that part of the border were unmonitored. As a consequence for this breach in the security system a general of the South Korean army was relieved of his command.⁶⁹

A second incident, which caused much bigger concerns for inter-Korean relations, took place a few weeks later. On 23 September the South Korean Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries announced that a naval official, had gone missing two days earlier in the waters around the island of Yeonpyeong, close to the Northern Limit Line that marks the sea border between the two Koreas. According to the first reports, the search that was launched after the man disappeared did not bear results. The official found himself in North Korean waters and was killed by the North Korean forces which also burned his body. The Ministry of Defence intervened the following day with a very detailed report that was based on intelligence information, most likely including tapping radio communications of the North Korean forces. According to the new report, the official voluntarily left his boat on a floating device with the intent to defect to the North – he had financial and family problems – after having entered North Korean waters, a patrol boat found him, questioned him and left him in the water waiting for further instructions and for fear of possible infection from SARS-CoV-2. After several hours, the man was shot aboard the North Korean boat and his body burned.⁷⁰

The act was immediately condemned by the South Korean government, which defined it as inhumane, shocking and intolerable. Despite the goodwill of the Moon administration towards Pyongyang, this time the reaction from Seoul was very strong.⁷¹ The response to South Korea's indignation came just one day after the report, with a letter from the United Front Department of the Workers' Party of Korea – which manages relations with the South – that included apologies for the incident. The letter also presented a different reconstruction of the event: the man was shot from a considerable distance when he was still at sea, because he did not give clear

69. Kim Jeongmin, 'South Korean military admits to several failures after high-profile redefection', *NK News*, 31 July 2020.

70. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'Fire on the Sea, No Balloons in the Sky', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 3, January 2021, p. 91.

71. 'Moon calls N. Korea's killing of S. Korean official «shocking», not tolerable for any reason', *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 September 2020.

answers to the questions of the North Korean forces; his body could not be found and the soldiers burned in the water floating materials according to the regulation against the pandemic.⁷² The two versions obviously diverged, with some parts of the North Korean reconstruction that were hard to believe. The family of the deceased official protested with the South Korean government and Moon Jae-in expressed his condolences and promised a transparent investigation. Nevertheless, a sort of compromise seemed to have been reached between the two Koreas on this event and the story gradually disappeared from public attention.

Towards the end of the year an important issue in inter-Korean relations re-emerged; this time, however, it had consequences mostly on South Korea's domestic politics and also on its international image. After the crisis that erupted in June and Moon's government pledge to ban the launch of balloons with propaganda materials from the border, in December the National Assembly passed a law to prohibit such actions. During summer the police started to investigate organizations and activist groups – mostly of North Korean defectors – involved in the organization of the launches and to question their leaders.⁷³ On 14 December the law to ban the balloons was officially passed in the National Assembly, despite the strong opposition of the conservative party that tried filibustering tactics to stop the approval, with North Korean defector and member of Parliament Thae Yong-ho speaking for 10 hours. According to the new legislation, South Koreans violating the law risked up to three years in jail and a fine up to 30 million won. The decision sparked a strong domestic debate centred on the accusation that the new law was a limitation to freedom of speech and freedom of expression, as well as a favour to the North Korean regime after the retaliatory measures adopted in June against the launch of leaflets. The issue crossed national borders with critics of the new law found also in other countries, including the United States, and voiced through the US ambassador in Korea, the State Department spokesperson and also the former chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea, Judge Michael Kirby of Australia.⁷⁴ The issue remains highly debated within South Korea: progressives in general supported the government decision to prohibit the balloons while conservatives and other parts of the civil society supported the right to launch balloons as a freedom of expression matter; however, not all the activist groups and organizations were in favour of the use of balloons, considering the absence of evidence

72. 'Full text: North Korea explains why it shot and killed a South Korean official', *NK News*, 25 September, 2020.

73. Kim Jeongmin, 'They saw us as lowlives': Defectors condemn police for investigation tactics', *NK News*, 18 August 2020.

74. Robert R. King, 'South Korea Bans Balloons Carrying Leaflets to the North. Foreign Policy Problems Will Follow', *Center for Strategic and International Studies Commentary*, 22 December 2020.

that this kind of propaganda has any effect in North Korea; local citizens are against these activities because they discourage tourism, create litter and might represent a danger for the civilian population in case of retaliation from the North. An even more complicated problem might arise for the government if these organizations will decide to continue their actions despite the new law with the consequence of possible tensions and clashes with the police and judicial battles in the courts.

Apart from a few moments of tension and confrontation, inter-Korean relations did not develop in any specific direction over the course of 2020. The repeated offers from the South Korean government to cooperate during the health crisis were met with silence in Pyongyang; this represents a missed opportunity for reviving inter-Korean relations in a field that was not affected by the international sanctions. North Korea's general attitude of total isolation towards the pandemic certainly represents one of the reasons for this negative response. However, it might also signal that the leadership in Pyongyang is still maintaining its previous stance that if Seoul wants to progress on the way towards more inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation it has to distance itself from the US and from the international sanctions and propose projects and initiatives for substantial economic cooperation.

4. *International relations*

4.1. *South Korea's international relations during the pandemic*

Another effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was to severely reduce all the activities in terms of foreign policy and international relations, especially for countries rapidly rising in the global arena such as South Korea. The successful management of the first wave of the pandemic and the subsequent ability to maintain the infection under control gave Seoul a new instrument to promote its image around the world and its role as a responsible middle power ready to share its experience and expertise with other countries. In part this effort of «health diplomacy» was successful: the image of the country certainly benefited, especially in the eyes of the Western public opinion where the virtuous example of South Korea was widely praised, and Seoul was able to supply medical equipment and other materials to many countries, including test kits to the United States in the very early phase of the pandemic.⁷⁵ In several international summits, the South Korean government described his country's model as one of the most effective worldwide, especially after it was able to hold national elections without major repercussions in terms of public health.

75. Young-in Lee, 'South Korea's Corona-Diplomacy in the Soft Power Race', *KF-VUB Korea Chair Policy Brief*, Issue 2020/06, May 2020.

The positive management of the pandemic certainly boosted the image and international prestige of the country but it did not have a significant impact on the more pressing issues of its foreign policy. The problems that had emerged in the second half of 2019 remained open with the new year. In particular, the relationship with the United States continued to be characterized by tensions within the alliance. The issue of the cost-sharing agreement for the US troops stationed in South Korea was still open, because the two countries had failed to find an agreement in the previous year and had postponed it to 2020. The Trump administration, and the president himself in particular, had made very clear that the American allies, especially if rich and developed countries, should bear a much higher share of the costs of stationing troops on their territory than the one that was actually paid. This position was certainly applicable to South Korea, but also to several other countries in East Asia and elsewhere. The transactional logic behind this demand considered military alliances and military troops more as a commodity from which the United States should get an economic profit, than a geopolitical and strategic positioning of Washington in several crucial areas of the world to protect its national interests.

The declarations of Ambassador Harry Harris at the beginning of 2020 did not represent a very promising start for US-South Korea relations, with his remarks about the need for consulting with Washington before proposing new inter-Korean projects and that time to find an agreement on the cost-sharing issue was running out.⁷⁶ Negotiations went on in the first months of the year, with Minister of Defense Jong Kyeong-doo flying to Washington at the end of February to meet with his counterpart Mark Esper and discuss the issue. Unfortunately, despite several announcements of a possible agreement within reach, the parties were not able to close the existing gap between the two positions.⁷⁷ At the end of March, the seventh meeting to discuss the issue ended without an agreement and starting from 1st April thousands of South Korean workers employed in the US bases and military facilities across the country were put on unpaid leave, because the previous arrangement had expired at the end of December 2019.⁷⁸ The move was seen as an attempt to force South Korea into accepting the requests of the United States that also rejected the request to settle the issue of South Korean workers through a separate deal, insisting on a comprehensive agreement. The situation was affected by the worsening global situation with the pandemic and by the presidential campaign in the United States. Trump did not want to give in on one of his campaign

76. Kim Gamel & Yoo Kyong Chang, 'US ambassador warns time is running out for defense cost-sharing deal with South Korea', *Stars and Stripes*, 16 January 2020.

77. Lee haye-ah, 'Esper says he called S. Korean counterpart to discuss defense cost deal', *Yonhap News Agency*, 7 April 2020.

78. Josh Smith, 'Thousands go on unpaid leave as US, South Korea fail to agree on military cost', *Reuters*, 31 March 2021.

pledges – that allies should pay more for their defence – months before the election and if he could not score a win he was willing to continue with the existing stalemate. On the other hand, the South Korean administration was aware that if Biden won the election in November most likely he would come back to a more «traditional» approach towards the American system of alliances and be more conciliatory also in the cost-sharing issue. In line with this premises the issue disappeared from the agenda and remained unresolved.

The effects of the pandemic and the presidential campaign in the United States had a sort of anesthetizing effect on South Korea-US relations. The relationship was certainly not in particular good shape, due to the existing difference between the two administrations on several issues, ranging from the cost-sharing, to the respective priorities towards North Korea, and to the general disregard by President Trump of Moon Jae-in and South Korea. In spite of this, the pandemic shifted the priorities of both administration – and the one in Washington in particular – towards different issues; in addition, the government in Seoul was inclined to maintain the situation as it was and wait to see the results of the presidential elections. The pandemic also forced the two countries to modify and scale down the joint military exercises, with the one scheduled for spring cancelled and the one during summer substantially reduced.⁷⁹

The election of Biden in November was generally welcomed by the South Korean administration.⁸⁰ President Moon sent a first congratulatory message to the new president-elect on 8 November using Twitter,⁸¹ and a formal letter on 15 December.⁸² The domestic situation in the United States after the election, however, prevented the South Korean administration – as well as many other countries around the world – from beginning a normal transition with the new US government. Most of the open issues remained on the table, also because the Korean peninsula most likely would not be one of the first priority of the Biden administration in a time of pandemic. However, during the campaign the new president has repeatedly made clear that the American system of alliances would be again at the centre of the country's foreign policy, and thus Seoul can optimistically expect a much easier resolution of issues such as that of the cost-sharing agreement. If a more traditional and predictable approach represents an important improvement for the alliance, it remains to be seen what

79. 'South Korea, U.S. delay military drills over COVID-19 concerns', *Reuters*, 16 August 2020.

80. S. Nathan Park, 'Seoul Breathes a Sigh of Relief as Trump Loss in Sight', *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2020.

81. Lee Wan, 'Moon sends congratulatory message to Biden, closes with «Katchi Kapshida»', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 9 November 2020.

82. Moon sends congratulatory letter to Biden, expresses hope for cooperation on Korean peace', *Yonhap News Agency*, 15 December 2020.

results it can achieve in the relations with North Korea, which in many respects benefited from the «unorthodox» methods of President Trump.

Another key issue for South Korea's foreign policy was represented by the complicated relation with Japan. After the *annus horribilis* of 2019, the situation seemed to improve at the beginning of the new year. The decision to suspend the withdrawal from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the South Korean government had led to a series of more conciliatory moves by both parts that led to a positive bilateral summit between Moon and Prime Minister Abe in Chengdu in December 2019. On 14 January the foreign ministers of the two countries, Kang Kyung-wha and Motegi Toshimitsu, met for a trilateral summit with Mike Pompeo: on the sidelines of the summit, Kang and Motegi held a bilateral meeting to discuss recent controversies and possible solutions.⁸³ The same happened on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on 15 February, the last occasion before the pandemic hit.⁸⁴ In both meetings the tone was positive and constructive but they did not produce a clear path forward from the previous positions regarding export restrictions, the issue of forced labour and the GSOMIA. A new source of tension emerged after South Korea was hit by the first wave of the pandemic in mid-February and several countries around the world had introduced travel restrictions for South Korean citizens. On 5 March, Japan too decided to introduce strong restrictions for travellers from South Korea, specifically suspending the visa-waiver program and imposing a two-week quarantine period upon arrival. The government in Seoul vehemently protested against this decision and in turn imposed the same restrictions against Japanese citizens on 9 March.⁸⁵ While the tone of the debate between the two countries had improved compared to the previous year, a general sentiment of distrust remained between the two countries and resurfaced in situation like that of travel restrictions. In addition, the two governments did not fully address the issues that led to the escalation of tension of the previous year – in this case the forced labour during the colonial period issue and the export restrictions imposed by Japan – with the risk of a return of tension, such as in June when a court in Daegu imposed to seize and liquidate the local assets of Nippon Steel in order to compensate the victims of forced labour, or when the South Korean government filed a formal complaint against Japan for the export restrictions at the WTO.⁸⁶

83. Sarah Kim, 'Kang talks tough issues with U.S., Japan', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 15 January 2020.

84. Song Sang-ho, 'S. Korea, U.S., Japan hold trilateral foreign ministers' talks in Munich', *Yonhap News Agency*, 15 February 2020.

85. 'WHO slams Japan and South Korea's tit-for-tat travel curbs', *Nikkei Asia*, 7 March 2020.

86. Ji-young Lee, 'Defined by distrust', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 2, September 2020, p. 123,

The inauguration of Suga Yoshihide as prime minister represented a chance to revive the stalled relation between the two countries and solve the pending issues. Suga was certainly in continuity with his predecessor Abe, of which he had been Chief cabinet secretary for almost eight years, but he was also considered as a pragmatic prime minister. The two leaders started in a positive way, with a letter from President Moon and a phone call between the two leaders, followed by several meetings of high-level officials from the two countries in the last weeks of the year. These initiatives certainly improved the overall spirit of the relationship, but fell short of indicating a clear solution for the unresolved issues.

An important achievement in terms of foreign policy, and in particular regional trade and economic integration, came towards the end of the year when, on 15 November, fifteen countries signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), the largest free trade agreement in the world. The pact included all the relevant actors in the Asia-Pacific region – South Korea, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the ten ASEAN countries – with the notable exception of the United States. During the Obama administration, with his emphasis on the «re-balancing towards Asia» strategy, this agreement was seen as in contrast with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), promoted by Washington, which excluded China. After Trump's decision to withdraw from the TPP, RCEP remained as the main instrument to promote regional economic integration, and the participation of China signalled Beijing's inclination to play a more active role in this field, possibly at the expenses of US's regional influence.⁸⁷

In late November, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi travelled to South Korea – and Japan – in an effort to consolidate China's position with the two traditional US allies in the region ahead of Biden's inauguration, in a moment characterized by domestic turmoil in the United States, in contrast with Chinese political stability and effective management of the health crisis. During his visit Wang met also with President Moon, in addition to many high-level officials, and conveyed a message of friendship and mutual trust from President Xi⁸⁸. The emphasis of Wang's visit was on regional cohesion – as opposed to outside pressure – and on promoting the constructive regional role of China. Despite the positive tone of the visit, it did not fundamentally change South Korea's regional position *vis-à-vis* the rivalry between the United States and China: Seoul still needs flexibility in its diplomatic approach and balancing between Beijing and Washington. The future American strategy towards China under the new administration will represent a fundamental factor for South Korea's international relations in the next year.

87. Joshua Kurlantzick, 'The RCEP Signing and Its Implications', *Asia Unbound, Council on Foreign Relations*, 16 November 2020.

88. Do Je-hae, 'Wang Yi's visit highlights differences in Korea, China's priorities', *The Korea Times*, 30 November 2020.

4.2. North Korea's growing isolation amidst the pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disruptive effect for North Korea's foreign relations and it had plunged the country in an even deeper international isolation. On 21 January, several tourist agencies reported that the regime had decided to stop foreign tourists from entering the country to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus.⁸⁹ This very early measure demonstrated the resolution of the leadership in preventing the new infection from spreading in the country, well aware of the fact that precarious national health system could not bear the weight of the new disease. In early March, after more restrictive measures were taken, the regime organized a flight to evacuate foreigners from the country through Vladivostok in Russia.⁹⁰

Apart from isolating the country even more the region, the pandemic did not bring any substantial change to North Korea's foreign relations. After the country sealed its borders, trade with China, which represented the vast majority of the country's international exchange, immediately dropped: in the first two months, official trade decreased of 24% compared to the previous year.⁹¹ The same trend was confirmed also for the period from January to June, with a drop of 64% on total exchanges between the two countries,⁹² and a prospect of a more than 80% decline in the entire year.⁹³ The pandemic limited diplomatic activities between North Korea and China to the exchange of messages. In this limited context, however, relations seemed to proceed in a very positive way: Kim Jong Un sent a congratulatory message to Xi Jinping in early May to celebrate China's success in containing the spread of the virus and the regime repeatedly supported Beijing position in the controversial issue of the new National Security Law in Hong Kong.⁹⁴ The 70th anniversary of China's intervention in the Korean War represented another occasion to reinforce the relationship between the two countries: Kim Jong Un visited a cemetery for Chinese victims of the war and the grave of Mao's son, to commemorate the efforts of the Chinese soldiers during the war and to emphasize the common efforts against the United States.⁹⁵

89. Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Bans Foreign Tourists Over Coronavirus, Tour Operator Says', *The New York Times*, 21 January 2020.

90. Kim Tong-hyung & Hyung-jin Kim, 'North Korea flies out foreign diplomats amid virus fight', *AP News*, 9 March 2020.

91. William Brown, 'North Korea's China Trade Suffers Coronavirus Shock', *38 North*, 8 April 2020.

92. 'N. Korea's trade with China down 67 pct amid pandemic', *Yonhap News Agency*, 20 August 2020.

93. 'N. Korea-China trade hits all-time low in Oct. amid pandemic', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 December 2020.

94. Scott Snyder & Se-won Byun, 'US-China rivalry divides the two Koreas', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 2, September 2020, p. 96.

95. 'Kim Jong Un Visits Cemetery of CPV Martyrs', *Rodong Simmun*, 22 October 2020.

The deteriorating trend of relations with the United States partially continued; however, just like many other leaders around the world, also the North Korean leadership maintained a wait-and-see approach before the presidential elections in November. Trump reportedly sent a letter to Kim Jong Un in March, offering help to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, that was positively received in Pyongyang with Kim Yo Jong publicly thanking the US president. Despite the continuing positive personal relation between the two leaders, the broader relationship between the two countries was still in a downward path, continuing the trend of the previous year. The several short-range missile tests performed by North Korea in March did not particularly concern the American administration, which was focusing more on North Korea's alleged cyberattack activities, with a report on this topic released on 15 April, and money-laundering activities to fund the country's nuclear and missile programs, with the Department of Justice indicting 33 North Koreans on 28 May.⁹⁶ The same pattern continued over the course of the year and after Biden's election. The North Korean leadership is most likely still in waiting mode to see what the approach of the new president will look like: Biden has not ruled out the possibility to meet with Kim Jong Un, if the meeting can lead to real progress in the denuclearization issue, but he also emphasized a «principled diplomacy» that will surely include more coordination with the allies and also more attention to problematic issues that were overlooked by Trump such as that of human rights violations.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated once more the strengths and weaknesses of the two Koreas, and even more the stark differences between the two countries which reverberated in their strategies to tackle the serious challenge of the new virus. South Korea responded implementing an early strategy of aggressive testing and tracing – using also technological instruments widespread in the country – and with a positive collaboration between state institutions and private companies, which allowed the health authorities to deploy important medical tools on a massive scale. This strategy, together with the collaboration of a large part of the population, led to an effective management of the pandemic that, after an initial outbreak, remained under control without the need for the implementation of large-scale lockdowns. North Korea, on the other hand, well aware of the deficiencies of its health system, decided to adopt a very different strategies, isolating itself from the outside world immedi-

96. Mason Richey & Bob York, 'Shadows still remain, and waiting for a cold November rain', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 2, September 2020, p. 42.

ately after the first outbreak in China. This strategy proved to be effective in preventing the new virus from spreading inside the country. However, both strategies had social and economic repercussions. South Korea avoided the harshest measures of isolation and containment but it still suffered economic damages, especially for small and medium enterprises operating in public spaces and for the decrease of exports due to the fall of international trade. In North Korea, the strict measures of isolation hit domestic economic development in particular for the strong reduction of exchanges with China.

The recovery from the social and economic consequences of the pandemic will certainly represent the key issue that the two governments will have to address in 2021. South Korea's President Moon Jae-in, in his last year in office, will focus both on stimulating the economy and on consolidating his political legacy, relying on the support of the strong majority of his party in the National Assembly. Kim Jong Un and the North Korean leadership, on the other hand, will have to design and implement a different strategy for achieving a more solid economic growth, after admitting the failures of the previous planning, navigating through a very complicated situation with multiple obstacles such as international sanctions and the increased isolation caused by the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis had repercussions also on the inter-Korean and international agendas, with several open issues temporarily put on hold. Isolation and containment measures in the region and at the global level strongly limited the interactions among states; at the same time, the pandemic focused most of the attention of the governments towards limiting the spread of the new disease. The management of inter-Korean relations continued, at a reduced speed, on the same track of the previous year, with North Korea ignoring South Korea's attempts to cooperate in non-essential issues – for example health cooperation, humanitarian assistance, natural disaster relief – and very loudly showing its frustration for the lack of development in economic cooperation. Given the relevance that Moon Jae-in has been putting on inter-Korean reconciliation as one of the main goals of his presidency, South Korea will most likely try to revive the status of relations between the two Koreas in Moon's last year in office. In doing so, a crucial variable will be represented by the decisions of the new US administration concerning Korea and East Asia more in general.

The election of President Biden, in November 2020, certainly represents the other key development for the mutual relations of the two Koreas and their foreign policy strategies. The influence of the United States on inter-Korean relations, and on the peninsula in general, has increased during the Trump administration due mostly to his personal diplomacy with the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the transactional approach to the alliance with Seoul. Both Koreas have adopted a wait-and-see strategy, in order to adjust their respective foreign policies to the results of the election

in Washington. For this reason, several issues have been left unresolved during 2020. Biden's administration approach to key issues such as the North Korean nuclear program and the defence alliance with South Korea will in many ways shape the future development of inter-Korean relations and international relations of the two Koreas.