

KOREAN PENINSULA 2022: STUCK BETWEEN NEW LEADERSHIP AND OLD PRACTICES\*\*\*

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*The most consequential political event that took place on the peninsula in 2022 was the election of a new president in South Korea. The very narrow victory of the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol marked a clear break with his predecessor Moon Jae-in and returned the image of a very divided country. The division continued throughout the year and contributed to a rapid and sharp decrease in the approval rating of the new president, together with a series of disasters and incidents that hit the country. The election of Yoon also influenced inter-Korean relations, with a return to a tougher position in Seoul. The resurgence of missile tests by North Korea, combined with this new attitude in the South, inevitably led to an exacerbation of tension that took the form of repeated military provocations and reactions, especially in the second half of the year.*

*The spread of COVID-19 continued to be a relevant factor influencing social and political developments on the Korean peninsula. On one side, South Korea was able to adapt its strategy to the spread of the new and much more contagious «Omicron» variant; on the other side, North Korea experienced its first, officially recognized, wave of infections, that did not lead to the collapse of the country's healthcare system and was managed with a relatively low number of deaths, according to government data. In terms of international relations, the attitude of both Koreas was a return towards traditional alliances and practices. North Korea openly supported Russia, and its invasion of Ukraine, and China, in order to weaken the position of the United States and to benefit from the split among the great powers within the UN Security Council. South Korea's new president restored the pre-eminence of the alliance with the U.S. and of the country's role within the liberal international order.*

**KEYWORDS** – South Korea; North Korea; presidential election; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; Itaewon crowd crush; Kim Jong Un; State Policy on the Nuclear Forces; North Korea missile tests; Inter-Korean relations; U.S.-Korea relations; China-Korea relations; Russia-North Korea relations.

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## 1. *Introduction*

The main political event that dominated the year and had important consequences on the entire peninsula was the presidential election in South Korea. After a very harsh campaign, the final result registered the victory of the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol against the progressive opponent Lee Jae-myung, with a very thin margin. The election mirrored the situation within the country, with a very strong polarization between the two political fronts; a polarization that continued throughout the year, with multiple attacks against members of the opposition and an attempt by the new government to overthrow most of the policies of its predecessor. This situation, together with a series of natural disasters and incidents that hit the country, led to a rapid decrease in the popularity of the new President that remained in very low numbers until the end of the year.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be an important factor that characterized the political, social, and economic development on the Korean peninsula in 2022. However, compared to the previous two years, the situation was very different: South Korea was hit by the wave of the much more contagious «Omicron» variant, but thanks to the high level of vaccination in the country, the reduced aggressiveness of the new variant and the government's ability to change and adapt its strategy, the consequences in terms of deaths and hospitalization were greatly reduced. On the contrary, in North Korea the first officially acknowledged wave of infection was registered between April and May, after two years of strict anti-virus controls at its borders. The number of cases grew exponentially in April and May; however, according to the official numbers, the wave of infections was put under control during summer and the emergency was declared over in August, with a very low rate of mortality.

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea had important consequences also for inter-Korean relations. During the campaign he had made abundantly clear that dialogue and cooperation with North Korea was not his priority. This return to a tougher position, typical of conservative administrations, was matched by a resumption of missile tests by Pyongyang, that exceeded any other previous year, and by new military provocations, that significantly increased the level of tension on the peninsula. The new South Korean administration decided to resume joint military exercises with the United States, after a four-year hiatus, and to respond to North Korea's provocation through military actions; this new dynamic created a vicious cycle that led to a series of actions and responses that strongly aggravated the situation on the peninsula. Undoubtedly, the decision of the North Korean leadership to approve a new law on the use of nuclear forces that made its use possible also as a pre-emptive instrument contributed to this tension.

Inevitably, also South Korea's foreign policy was influenced by the election of a new president. Yoon's approach strongly favoured the al-

liance with the United States and a possible rapprochement with Japan, compared to the more balanced position of his predecessor. In addition, Yoon tried also to pursue a more active role for the country on the global stage, through a diplomacy aimed at supporting the norms and values of the liberal international order. This posture created frictions with China; however, the South Korean government has been able to keep the tension under control with Beijing so far. On the other side of the Korean peninsula, Pyongyang fully aligned with its traditional allies: China and Russia. North Korea was one of the few countries to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine and one of the first to recognize the independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and later the referendum organized by Moscow for the annexation of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia to the Russian Federation. The alignment with Russia and China against the United States and other Western countries not only gave North Korea the opportunity to reinforce its traditional accusations against Washington and the post-Cold War liberal order, but it turned out to be a very advantageous situation: the split between these powers within the UN Security Council protected Pyongyang from additional international sanctions in response to its missile tests.

## 2. Domestic politics

### 2.1. *A turbulent start: between the spread of the new COVID-19 variant and the presidential elections*

The presidential elections, scheduled for 9 March, and the electoral campaign dominated domestic politics in South Korea in the first months of 2022. The emphasis on this crucial event relegated in a secondary position in the domestic debate not only the last months in office of President Moon Jae-in, but also the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, caused by the spread of the new «Omicron» variant.

The COVID-19 pandemic had dominated the previous two years in the South Korean domestic debate, with a very positive control of the spread of the infection in 2020 and a more complicated management of the situation in 2021 [Milani 2020, pp. 74-79; Milani 2021, pp. 98-102]. The fairly effective strategy deployed by the government was not devoid of controversial aspects, in particular for what concerned the gathering and use of personal data in order to maintain a high level of surveillance over the spread of the pandemic; however, the public's attitude about monitoring has remained largely favourable throughout the pandemic, due to the ability of the authority to rapidly flatten the curve of infections and keep the numbers under control.

When the country seemed to be ready for a transition toward a «normal» life, through the «living with COVID» government plan, the emergence

of the much more contagious «Omicron» variant put the normalization of the situation into question. The second stage of the government plan, that aimed at easing restrictions to public gatherings and lifting social distancing measures, was suspended in December 2021 and again in January and early February 2022, with the goal of slowing the spread of the new variant [Smith 2022a, 4 February]. Despite these efforts, the number of cases significantly increased during January, followed by an exponential growth starting from February [*Yonhap* 2022b, 19 February].

This drastic transformation of the expected scenario, however, did not completely deter the South Korean administration's efforts to return to a normalization of the country's social and economic life. Despite the rapid rise of cases, that exceeded 100.000 in mid-February, the government decided not to respond through a tightening of restrictive measures, but with the implementation of a new strategy that focused specifically on the most vulnerable patients and on the most severe cases. Drawing on the knowledge and examples of other countries that had experienced the wave of the «Omicron» variant before South Korea, and supported by the high rate of vaccination within the country, patients who tested positive but did not experience severe symptoms could quarantine at home and look after themselves, while treatment was reserved to the patients in difficult medical conditions [Kim 2022a, 4 February]. At the same time, the government continued to consider the possibility of lifting restrictions to achieve some sort of normalcy for the population. As the situation progressed in February, this new model proved to be effective: the new variant, while extremely contagious, led to fewer cases of severe symptoms and hospitalization. The number of new cases continued to grow but the number of critically ill patients and deaths remained under control. Based on this situation, the government decided to start lifting restrictions again by late February [Shim 2022, 18 February].

The new approach put in place by the South Korean government to address the changing conditions caused by the new variant, with the sudden ending of the previous «test, trace and treat» policy that had been consistently pursued in the previous two years, was not received positively by the population, which in many cases considered it as an abandonment by the State of its responsibility [Choe 2022a, 17 February]. Nevertheless, the ability to adapt the anti-COVID strategy to the changed situation turned out to be a pragmatic and effective path for South Korea, that paved the way for a rapid return to an almost normal situation without causing an uncontrolled increase in hospitalizations and deaths.

Despite the exponential growth in the number of COVID-19 cases, in the first months of 2022, the domestic political debate was dominated by the electoral campaign for the presidential elections, scheduled for 9 March. The main parties had picked their candidates in the last months of the previous year: on the conservative side, the People Power Party had selected the former general prosecutor with no previous political experience

Yoon Suk-yeol; the progressive Democratic Party, chose the governor of the Gyeonggi province Lee Jae-myung; the leftist Justice Party nominated Sim Sang-jung; and the centrist People Party nominated Ahn Cheol-soo.

As usual in the South Korean political system, which is dominated by the two main political parties, from the beginning the electoral race focused on the two main candidates, Yoon and Lee, who both tried to present themselves as «new» and «clean» faces in South Korean politics [Milani 2021, pp. 107-108]. The narrative that the candidates pursued throughout their campaign was characterized by a certain degree of anti-politics and even populism. On one side, Yoon put emphasis on his novelty in the political competition, not having held elective or government positions before, and on his career as a prosecutor during which he investigated high level political and business figures, including former Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. In this way, Yoon Suk-yeol and his electoral team tried to turn a possible weakness of his candidacy – the lack of political experience – into a positive one, framing his image as an outsider not tainted by the corruption and untrustworthiness of the political élite. On the other side, Lee Jae-myung drew attention to his humble origins, his political career from grassroot and without the support of the party establishment and on a reputation of being an effective and practical politician, built on his previous experiences as mayor and governor [Davies 2022, 3 March].

This emphasis of both candidates on their previous accomplishments and on their personal characteristics shifted the focus of the electoral campaign from their political programs towards a personalization of the political confrontation, with the result of being dominated by negative messages sent by one contender against the other and by personal attacks and accusations from both sides. Throughout the months that led to the election several scandals that involved people very close to the candidates emerged. For this reason, the competition morphed into a sort of «unlikeable election», with voters forced to choose more according to their antipathy rather than their political inclination [Shin 2022, 3 February].

In this controversial context, the political part that experienced more internal tension during the campaign was that of the conservatives. While progressives were able to consolidate the support behind their «outsider» candidate after he won the primary elections, for conservatives this process proved to be much more complicated. The strong personalization on the figure of Yoon Suk-yeol clashed not only with part of the establishment, but also with the leader of the People Power Party, Lee Jun-seok, who had been nominated a few months before, in June 2021, and was himself a young political outsider. The clash between these two key figures emerged towards the end of 2021 and was temporarily resolved through a mediation in the first days of January, when Yoon also decided to completely reshuffle his electoral committee in the hope of giving a fresh start of his campaign after a not very positive beginning [Kim 2022a, 9 January].

The first television debate, held on 3 February, largely reflected the generally negative attitude of the entire campaign, more than a clear exposition of the different political programs. What the two main candidates, Lee and Yoon, presented in this occasion and throughout the campaign was a combination of their previous experiences and of the traditional guidelines of their respective parties. Lee Jae-myung continued along the same lines of his tenure as mayor and governor, proposing solutions to social and economic problems that focused on the active intervention of the government, in particular through the creation of a universal basic income for all individuals. As for the housing prices problem, one of the key issues during the campaign, Lee proposed the construction of 3 million new houses in five years, with the direct intervention of the government, and also tougher regulations on speculative home buyers [Kim 2022, 6 March]. On the other side, Yoon Suk-yeol, in addition to vowing to eradicate corruption based on his experience as prosecutor, proposed a series of market-oriented solutions to the country's problems such as the deregulation of the real estate market and the elimination of government obstacles for small and medium businesses [Kim 2022, 6 March]; in terms of social issues, Yoon continued to support the idea of abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and made several remarks against the feminist movement, in order to appeal to the growing anti-feminist front composed mostly of young males [Draudt 2022, 8 February]. Regarding foreign policy, both candidates lacked experience and expertise, resulting in both of them relying on the foreign policy traditions of their respective parties [Milani & Fiori, 2019]. Lee Jae-myung proposed a «practical approach» to North Korea, that included dialogue and negotiations, and a balanced position in the region, especially between China and the United States [Lee 2022, 23 February]; Yoon Suk-yeol, instead, put the most emphasis on the alliance with Washington, both on the peninsula and in the region, and thus on a tougher position not only towards North Korea but also towards China [Yoon 2022, 8 February].

Two days before the beginning of the official campaign, that started on 15 February, one key event seemed to steer the election in one direction. During the previous weeks, the two main candidates had remained almost at the same level around 35% each in the polls, with neither looking likely to gain a decisive advantage [Kim 2022, 11 February]. On 13 February, the third candidate Ahn Cheol-soo, with a projected consensus of around 9%, proposed to merge his candidacy with that of Yoon Suk-yeol of the conservative People Power Party, in a joint effort to defeat the candidate of the Democratic Party [Yonhap 2022a, 13 February]. Ahn proposed to hold a sort of primary election, through a public opinion poll, in order to decide who was going to be the candidate between the two. The offer was not accepted by Yoon who was nominated as the frontrunner of the conservative party months in advance and did not want to risk losing his candidacy, also considering the huge gap in terms of popular consensus in Yoon's favour. However, while disagreeing

on the methods, Yoon's electoral team showed interest in the idea of having a unified candidacy against Lee Jae-myung [Jang 2022, 14 February]. One week after the proposal, Ahn decided to withdraw it, citing the fact that he had not received any response from Yoon [Lee 2022a, 20 February]. Despite the fact that the two centre-right candidates were not able to find a common ground for a unified candidacy, the move was a warning sign for Lee Jae-myung, pondering how close in the polls the two front runners were and how Ahn's support for Yoon might affect the final outcome. Over the following weeks, while election day was fast approaching, the team of the two centre-right candidates continued to negotiate to find a viable solution that could lead to a unified candidacy [Kim 2022b, 27 February]. This solution was ultimately found on 3 March, just 6 days before the election, when Ahn Cheol-soo publicly announced his withdrawal from the competition and his support to the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol [Kim 2022, 3 March].

The electoral process began with early voting on 4 and 5 March with a very high turnout for the early stage, at 36,93% [Lee & Joo 2022, 5 March]. When the polls closed on 9 March, a little over 77% of the eligible voters had cast their ballot, in line with the previous election. The final result reflected the uncertainty that had dominated the entire campaign: despite the last-minute withdrawal of Ahn, the two main candidates remained extremely close, with the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol obtaining a slight majority of just 0,73%, or around 247.000 votes out of over 34 million valid votes. The picture painted by these results, and by the general tone of the electoral campaign, was that of a strong polarization between conservatives and progressives and a that of a country deeply divided along ideological and party-political lines.

	Yoon Suk-yeol	Lee Jae-myung	Sim Sang-jung
Votes	16.394.815	16.147.738	803.358
Percentage	48,56%	47,83%	2,38%

[Source: National Election Commission, Republic of Korea, <http://info.nec.go.kr> (Data have been elaborated by the authors)].

## 2.2. *Yoon Suk-yeol's first months in office and the rise of political tensions*

Unlike what had happened after the previous election in 2017, that came after Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal from office, this time there was a proper transition period between the election and the official inauguration of the new presidency, scheduled for 10 May. The new president-elect Yoon Suk-yeol nominated a transition committee, that was headed by Yoon's last-minute electoral ally Ahn Cheol-soo [Kang 2022, 13 March]. The new president and his committee had then to interact with the outgoing Moon Jae-in's government.

The first weeks of cohabitation between Yoon and Moon were not without frictions. The new president-elect, a few days after his victory, announced his commitment to move the presidential offices from the *Cheong Wa Dae* – the traditional residence of South Korean presidents, in a secluded area of the capital – to the building of the Ministry of Defence, located in a much more central area of Seoul. The decision, aimed at making it, symbolically and practically, more accessible to the people, created tensions with the outgoing administration which considered it impractical from a logistic and security point of view and also expensive. On his side, Moon Jae-in decided to appoint a new governor of the Bank of Korea, Rhee Chang-yon, on 23 March, a few weeks before the end of his mandate. On 28 March, 19 days after the election, Yoon and Moon finally met for the first time and agreed to cooperate for a smooth transition of power [Shin 2022, 27 March]; however, tensions and disagreements remained between the two.

Despite these initial problems, Yoon and his transition team seemed to advance quickly to take over the main positions of the government, while also benefiting from the general positive atmosphere in the country thanks to the sharp decrease of COVID-19 cases, after the peak of the «Omicron» wave, and the government announcement of a plan to end most restrictions [Choi 2022a, 15 April]. The new president also started to present the most important members of the new cabinet, with a mix of experienced politicians – such as Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Park Jin and the Minister of Economy and Finance Choo Kyung-ho – and professionals – such as the Minister of Defence Lee Jong-sup, and the Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Lee Chang-yang. The sensitive position of Minister of Justice, in charge also of the relationship with the judicial power, was given to the former prosecutor Han Dong-hoon.

On 10 May, Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency was officially inaugurated, with the new president giving a speech that emphasized the need of healing domestic political and economic divisions, fighting to defend international norms and values, and also proposing an economic plan for North Korea in exchange for denuclearization [*Yonhap* 2022c, 10 May]. Yoon's honeymoon, however, proved to be very short lived. The opposition of the Democratic Party immediately started to vocally criticize the cabinet appointments, citing a very limited role for women and the fact that some members of the new government were involved in scandals. Despite this tension, Han Duck-soo was confirmed as prime minister by the National Assembly, in which the Democratic Party held a majority, and the new executive started to be fully operative [Joo 2022, 20 May]. As its first move, the new administration approved an extra budget of 59,4 trillion won (US\$46 billion) to support small businesses hit by the pandemic restrictions [Kim 2022, 12 May].

Political polarization between the two parties remained dangerously high in the following months. Lee Jae-myung, who lost the presidential



elections by a razor-thin margin, entered the National Assembly winning a seat in the by-election on 1<sup>st</sup> June [Lee 2022, 2 June]. The poor performance of the Democratic Party in the administrative elections that were held on the same day paved the way for Lee also to become leader of the party, after the resignation of the previous leadership and a landslide victory in internal election in August [Shim 2022, 29 August]. From his new position, Lee started to harshly criticize Yoon's government. A further factor creating political tension was represented by a series of investigations, both from the prosecution and the new government, involving members of the previous administrations and other high officials of the Democratic Party. The opposition immediately presented them as politically motivated, both because of the direct role of the new government, but also for the alleged connections between Yoon and his former colleagues in the prosecution. Two of the cases concerned inter-Korean relations. In July, the prosecution indicted former chiefs of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), Park Jie-won and Suh Hoon, for the repatriation of two North Koreans fishermen in 2019 that was decided in a matter of days apparently without abiding by the due procedure; Yoon's administration also pledged to open a government investigation to determine the circumstances of the event [Choe 2022c, 22 July]. The second case involved the death of a naval official that was killed by North Korean forces in 2020 in the waters close to the inter-Korean maritime border [Milani 2020, p. 91]; the government at the time released a report according to which the official was trying to defect to the North. The new administration decided to launch an inquiry also on this incident, disputing the previous reconstruction and asserting that no meaningful attempts to save the official's life were made and that evidence were withheld to support the government version. In both cases, Moon administration was accused of mishandling the situation to reach an outcome that would not endanger relations with North Korea [Alexandre 2022, 23 December]. The government investigations were soon followed by the actions of the prosecution: in October the former ministry of Defence, Suh Wook, was arrested for abuse of power and falsification of documents, but released soon after [Park 2022a, 8 November]; on 3 December the former head of NIS, Suh Hoon, was arrested for covering up the initial investigation on the naval official death [Bremer 2022a, 5 December].

The main controversy between the government and the opposition erupted when the investigation started to involve Lee Jae-myung, leader of the Democratic Party, in connection with several cases concerning development projects and corruption when he was mayor of Seongnam and governor of Gyeonggi. In early September the general prosecutor summoned Lee for interrogation regarding the accusation of violation of the electoral law for having spread false information about his involvement in a real estate scandal when he was presidential candidate. Soon after he was indicted for the same charges [Lee 2022, 12 September]. Tension

rose again when one former close collaborator of Lee, Kim Yong, was arrested in late October for allegedly having received illegal funds from a real estate developer, and then having used the funds for Lee Jae-myung's electoral campaign [Kim 2022c, 23 October]. A few days later, for the same investigation, the police raided the headquarter of the Democratic Party [Kim 2022, 24 October]. These moves were immediately denounced by the opposition as politically motivated and as a revenge of the new government against the former presidential candidate Lee. It became increasingly clear that Lee was one of the key figures for the investigation and also that an eventual indictment or even arrest of the leader of the opposition would represent a new disrupting factor in an already problematic and polarized political situation.

### 2.3. *Disasters, social unrest, and the free fall of Yoon's popularity*

Political tension and confrontation with the opposition were not the only concerns of the new President in his first months in office. After a very short honeymoon with the public opinion, Yoon's approval rating started to decrease fast. After peaking at around 53% in early June, it started to drop substantially in the following weeks: by mid-July it was around 30%, then it decreased further to 25% in August, and remained around 30% until the last weeks of the year [Cha 2022, 16 December]. This prolonged low level of popularity was motivated by different factors. On one side, external reasons contributed to this negative trend, such as the economic situation affected by the rising inflation rate and energy prices; on the other side, a series of controversial issues emerged among nominees for his cabinet, such as misappropriation of political funds and abuse of power [Choi 2022b, 6 July], as well as internal strife within the conservative party. More than the issues themselves, it was the way in which the new President did not properly and resolutely managed these problems that disconcerted the public opinion, that saw it as a signal of his lack of experience.

This situation even worsened when South Korea was hit by massive rains in August, that caused floods and landslide in different areas of the country, including Seoul, with 9 deaths and 6 missing persons [Choe 2022d, 8 August]. The extraordinary amount of rain certainly took the entire country by surprise; however, the government, and the President in particular, showed a lack of efficiency and decisiveness in facing the crisis. In particular, Yoon was criticized for his decision to stay at his private home during the crisis instead of coordinating the response from his presidential office or visiting the damaged areas [Kim 2022b, 9 August].

A second issue that the new government had to face concerned the turmoil in workers' organizations and labour unions. The strong neoliberal approach that Yoon presented during his campaign as his economic agenda had created concerns in these organizations. Soon these concerns were put into practice through strikes and demonstrations. In early June, unionized

truck drivers went on strike, demanding the extension of a minimum pay scheme and fuel subsidies to cope with the increase in fuel prices; the strike disrupted the export supply chain of the country, with significant economic damages and was called off after 8 days, when the government decided to accept the requests [Kim & Yang 2022, 15 June]. In early July, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions organized a demonstration in central Seoul that attracted more than 50,000 people, to ask for better working conditions [Yonhap 2022d, 2 July]. Later the same month, the workers of the Daewoo shipyards ended a 51-days strike after finding an agreement with the management [Yonhap 2022e, 22 July]. Unionized truck drivers went on strike again in late November asking for a permanent minimum pay system – that was extended until the end of 2022 after the previous strike – but the government refused to accept and issued back-to-work orders that basically made the strike illegal. The mobilization ended after two weeks, when the National Assembly passed a law to extend the minimum pay for three more years [Park 2022b, 9 December]. In all these circumstances, the government and the President himself strongly opposed and criticized workers' strikes and demonstrations, increasing tension between the parties involved and also at the social level.

The biggest – and most tragic – crisis that the country had to face took place on 29 October, when a crowd of young people was crushed in a small alley in the neighbourhood of Itaewon, in Seoul, during the Halloween celebrations, causing 159 deaths and almost 200 injured. It became immediately clear that the main reason behind this tragic incident was the total lack of a crowd control system by the public authorities, even though the huge number of people in the area could have been largely anticipated [Rashid 2022, 30 October]. The presence of the police was very limited, and no measures were taken in advance to prevent such a massive crowd to gather in a very small area [Lee & Kim, 2022, 1 November]. Two days after the event the Mayor of Seoul, the Chief of police and the Minister of the Interior presented official apologies; however, none of them resigned [Kim 2022d, 1 November]. Also, the investigation that was launched immediately after the tragedy started to focus mostly on the local police and first responders and their lack of preparedness, rather than those responsible in the Ministry or at the national level. The «Itaewon tragedy» concurred to the low level of popularity of the President and the government; criticisms, not only from the political opposition but also from large portions of the public opinion, pointed at the incompetence of parts of the institutions and also at their indifference, demonstrated by the inability to accept to take the political responsibility of what had happened. While the trend of low approval rating seemed to slightly recover towards the end of the year, Yoon Suk-yeol's first months as president were thus mostly characterized by difficulties, partially for external reasons but also for his lack of experience in managing State affairs and in politics more in general.

#### 2.4. *North Korea fell prey to the COVID-19*

In early 2020, when the COVID-19 epidemic started to manifest itself worldwide, North Korea provided an immediate and aggressive response, by sealing its borders [Milani 2020, pp. 83-84]. This self-containment policy clearly meant inflicting more damage on an economy already injured by chronic mismanagement and UN sanctions enforced in response to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests. Towards the end of January 2022, North Korean freight trains to China resumed operations, unloading cargo at an airfield in the border town of Uiju – which might have been converted into a disinfection site – upon their return [Williams & Makowsky 2022; *Global Times* 2022, 17 January]. Chinese exports to North Korea consistently grew until April, reaching the highest amount – US\$98 million – from the outbreak of the pandemic, including pharmaceutical products [Brown 2022, 24 May].

As soon as the threat of the COVID-19 decreased, Pyongyang started to progressively ease restrictions and hold large political events, as it was the case, in April 2022, with the celebrations for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong Un's rule, the 110-year anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung or the Army Day, during which hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the capital city. As a result, the virus resurfaced and spread throughout the country, also due to the elevate infectiveness of the «Omicron» variant. After authorities had publicly admitted the first case of COVID-19, on May 12, the situation rapidly deteriorated: during an emergency meeting, Kim Jong Un blamed the institutions of the Workers' Party for «incompetence and a lack of responsibility» in tackling the virus outbreak [KCNA 2022c, 12 May]. The next day, state media acknowledged that a «fever whose cause could not be identified» had spread since late April [KCNA 2022d, 13 May]; in addition, Kim admitted that his country was experiencing «the biggest upheaval» ever since its establishment [KCNA 2022e, 14 May] and that a maximum emergency epidemic prevention system had to be put in place in the nation [KCNA 2022e, 14 May]. On 15 May, the number of reported cases peaked to almost 400.000 [KCNA 2022f, 16 May]. However, towards the end of the month a steady decline was registered. It is to be highlighted, however, that it remains unclear what methodology for data collection has been adopted by North Korean authorities and, of course, verification of data is substantially impossible.

After having denied for years any virus outbreak, to the point that the country was proudly defined «a uniquely clean land on the planet» and «a place free of infection from the virus» [DPRK Today 2020, 16 October], the admission that North Korea had eventually succumbed to COVID-19 was ostensibly due to different reasons. The first was to boost Kim's legitimacy and increase domestic control over the population at a juncture when economic hardships and border closures could have ignited some degree of public discontent. When it became evident that the outbreak of the pan-

demic could not be camouflaged any more, the national propaganda decided to portray Kim Jong Un as a generous father figure to the nation, who blamed officials for failing to stop the spread that was whipping the country. At the same time, it is not difficult to suppose that the decision to limit any internal movement, justified with the need to protect public health, was aimed at intensifying the crackdown on so-called «anti-socialist and non-socialist behaviour» [Lee 2022, 30 May]. Another reason had to do with North Korea's *juche* (self-reliance) ideology: specifically, the regime wanted to prove the international community that, despite widespread reserves, it could fight the virus and prevail without relying on external support. This became evident after North Korea refused several offers of vaccines and medical supplies and blamed South Korea for the spread of the virus without any evidence: accepting humanitarian aid, in fact, would send a message, especially to Seoul, that Pyongyang's behaviour could be influenced by others' economic superiority.

The dramatic situation was worsened not only by the inadequate and poorly resourced healthcare system or by the limited testing capacity, but also by the presumably low levels of vaccination. Although many speculated that shipments containing medical supplies, presumably vaccines, had been imported from China [Betts 2022, 4 June], nobody can confirm the exact proportion of North Koreans who have been vaccinated. The regime has constantly shunned offers of vaccines from the World Health Organization's COVAX scheme, supposedly both because administering the jabs would have required outside monitoring and to avoid drawing attention to the dramatic conditions within the country [Jang 2022, 3 May].

The virus surge and consequent protracted lockdowns, in addition to a coronavirus outbreak in the border city of Dandong, forced Pyongyang to cut again, at the end of April, bilateral trade with China [MFA PRC 2022b, 29 April]: Beijing's exports to Pyongyang sharply decreased to US\$14,5 million in May and remained nearly unchanged in June [Bremer 2022b, 20 December]. Since then, corn and rice prices soared in North Korea, disproportionately affecting low-income households, and raising speculations that the country could face a worse famine than that of mid-1990s [Kobara 2022, 7 August].

Between May and June 2022, the number of reported new cases of fever dropped, especially in Pyongyang where the lockdown was immediately lifted, even though this improvement did not convince the World Health Organization [Reuters 2022, 1 June]. At the very beginning of July, an investigation report released by the state-run news agency KCNA implicitly explained that Seoul had to be held responsible for COVID-19 outbreak in North Korea [KCNA 2022g, 1 July]. According to the document, in fact, the virus had started to spread after an 18-year-old soldier and a 5-year-old child had come into contact with «alien items» on a hill near the border in the Ipho-ri area of Kumgang county, in early April. Without providing

further specifications, the report stressed the need «to vigilantly deal with unusual items coming by wind and other climate phenomena and balloons» [KCNA 2022g, 1 July] along North Korea's southern border, blaming the practice recurrently adopted by various organizations of activists and defectors based in South Korea.

On 11 August, few days after state media had communicated that the spread of fever was in its «terminal stage» [KCNA 2022h, 3 August], Kim Jong Un – during a meeting with medical and health officials and scientists, whose contribution he praised for «defusing the serious epidemic spread crisis» and defending the «best social system in the world» [KCNA 2022k, 11 August] – declared victory in the national battle against COVID-19, ordering the lifting of maximum anti-epidemic measures imposed in May in all areas, except for border regions, and the resumption of normal public activities. In the end, according to the Commander of State Emergency Ri Chung Gil, North Korea had reported an «unprecedented miracle in the history of the world health community» [KCNA 2022l, 11 August], since out of 4,77 million infections only 74 citizens died, which represented a fatality rate of 0,0016%, the lowest in the world. During the same meeting, the sister of the North Korean leader, Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Party, addressed the gathering and revealed that Kim Jong Un himself had suffered from high fever during the pandemic emergency, but he could not lie down due to the concerns about caring for his fellow citizens [Shin & Smith 2022, 11 August]. She also took the opportunity to blame South Korea again for causing the coronavirus outbreak by sending «rubbish», balloons and counter-propaganda materials, and urged strong retaliatory measures against the neighbour [KCNA 2022m, 11 August].

In September, after five months of suspension, a freight train service between Dandong and Sinuiju was resumed, presumably upon Pyongyang's request. The value of trade with China between January and August 2022 amounted to US\$ 503,24 million, 70 percent less than the same period in 2019 [Kyodo News 2022, 26 September].

### *2.5. A more aggressive nuclear posture: the introduction of the State Policy on the Nuclear Forces*

The new law on the State Policy on the Nuclear Forces, promulgated by the Supreme People's Assembly on September 8, on the eve of the celebration of the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, closed the circle in North Korea's nuclear strategy that had been initiated in 2013, when the regime declared the country's permanent status as a nuclear weapons state and enacted the law on «consolidating position of nuclear weapons state» for self-defence [KCNA 2013, 1 April]. This posture had been clearly reaffirmed in 2017, when, after firing an inter-continental ballistic missile, North Korea claimed it had mastered nuclear-

strike capability and became a full-fledged nuclear state [KCNA 2017, 29 November]. Therefore, rather than marking a sudden change, the newly passed law should be considered as a reaffirmation of an already existing nuclear doctrine.

It must be highlighted, though, that before the introduction of the recent law, the regime had constantly suggested that the primary mission of its nuclear weapons program was to deter war and secure regime stability; accordingly, its attitude had always been seen as solely defensive. This was evident in the article 1 of the 2013 law, that clearly stated that nuclear weapons were a means for defence necessary to cope with the «ever-escalating policy of the U.S. and nuclear threats» [KCNA 2013, 1 April]. Subsequent statements, however, had challenged this claim, explicitly referring to the possibility that North Korea reserved the right to employ a tactical use of nuclear weapons, if provoked. This change in posture was probably also motivated by the fact that, during his electoral campaign, Yoon Suk-yeol had pledged to revive the so-called «Kill Chain» strategy, originally conceived by President Park Geun-hye [Ahn 2013, 1 October], by stating that there would be «no recourse, but a pre-emptive strike» if signs of an «imminent» attack from Pyongyang emerge [Kim & Kwon 2022, 12 January].

On 25 April, in a speech celebrating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Revolutionary Army, Kim Jong Un, despite insisting on the defensive nature of his country's nuclear arsenal, stretched the boundary of self-defence and the circumstances for using nuclear weapons, by clarifying that «if any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission» [KCNA 2022b, 26 April], conceivably implying that their use would not be limited to the prevention of war. Against this backdrop, one of the main peculiarities of the new law is represented by the fact that, beyond providing a detailed description of the missions, role, and conditions for use of nuclear weapons, it includes a declaration of intent to initiate pre-emptive nuclear attacks and it describes in greater detail the scenarios that could trigger such contingency [Klingner 2022]. More specifically, pre-emptive nuclear strikes are possible if an enemy attack, nuclear or non-nuclear, is deemed imminent or if an attack against «strategic objectives» of the country, including its leadership, is identified [KCNA 2022n, 9 September].

Another important feature introduced by the new law regards the delegation of authority with respect to commanding the use of nuclear weapons. This, of course, does not question the fact that Kim Jong Un, in his position as President of the State Affairs Commission, retains «all decisive powers» with regards to the use of nuclear weapons, but elucidates that in case the safety of the leader as well as the «nuclear command and control system» is in danger from hostile forces, «automatic and immediate nuclear strikes» shall be launched [KCNA 2022o, 9 September]. This might indicate

that Kim Jong Un, while retaining the final decisive power, could, in specific circumstances, delegate certain authorities to key officials, so to avoid that an eventual decapitation of the regime could automatically enable the enemies to neutralize North Korean nuclear forces. According to some analysis, the new “decentralized” system – based on the employment of tactical nuclear weapons – heightens the credibility of a «first-use strategy» (threatening to launch nuclear weapons before one’s adversaries to deter aggression, as it is the case of present-day Pakistan) by increasing the chances of successfully recurring to nuclear weapons [Panda 2021]; however, it also risks that giving authority to domestic rivals could result in them using it to challenge the leadership of current leader Kim Jong Un. The update of the nuclear command and control system could also reflect the leader’s growing confidence as a ruler and the fact that he is not concerned with potential internal threats.

In his speech addressed to the Assembly enacting the new law, Kim Jong Un underlined the «impossibility of denuclearization» and «irreversibility of advancement of nuclear forces» [KCNA 2022o, 9 September], a message that clearly conveyed the idea that the regime is not only determined to continue building its nuclear arsenal, but also that Pyongyang will never accept to engage again in any talks premised on its denuclearization. This statement wiped out three decades of dialogue and negotiations on denuclearisation, intensifying the risk of a nuclear confrontation.

As might be expected, North Korea’s nuclear doctrine, inscribed in the new law, combined with the ever-expanding nuclear arsenal, has fostered indignation and extreme preoccupation in the South, reigniting a never dormant political debate on how Seoul should respond. A growing chorus of voices argues that the only way to guarantee South Korea’s security is to develop a homegrown nuclear program [Shin & Jung 2022]; a position that has been recently taken into consideration even by President Yoon Suk-yeol [Chosun Ilbo 2023, 13 January].

### 3. *Inter-Korean relations*

#### 3.1. *North Korean missile launches mark the end of Moon Jae-in’s era of inter-Korean dialogue*

Presidential elections in South Korea represented a key moment also for what concerned inter-Korean relations. After five years characterized by a conciliatory approach under Moon Jae-in – with significant achievements especially during 2018 [Milani 2018, pp. 78-88] – a new government could indicate a new course for relations between North and South Korea. Certainly, Moon’s last months in office could not bring about any new breakthrough between the two Koreas and Pyongyang appeared to be well aware of this moment of transition. In the first weeks of 2022, the North Korean



regime continued performing missile tests, that were resumed in the second half of the previous year; however, the quantity and diversification of the launches foreshadowed a complicated year on the peninsula.

In January alone North Korea performed 6 missile tests for a total of 9 launches, that included hypersonic missiles, short-range missiles launched from a train, and an intermediate ballistic missile, the Hwasong-12, the most powerful since November 2017 [Wright 2022, 17 February]. This series of tests demonstrated the highly diversified military arsenal of the country and also the resolve of the regime to improve its defence capabilities and show them to the rest of the world. This intention was also officially declared by the leadership, after a meeting of the party's Politburo, when it stated that the regime would consider the resumption of all the military activities, including intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests [Zwirko 2022a, 20 January].

After a short hiatus in February – that not surprisingly coincided with the Beijing Winter Olympics – launches resumed by the end of the month, this time pointing directly toward more powerful missiles. On 27 February and 5 March, North Korea tested what Seoul's intelligence described as powerful ballistic missiles, while according to the regime they were aimed at developing the capability to put a satellite into orbit [Smith 2022b, 5 March]. The launches continued in March, with a failed test of the same kind on 16 March, and on 24 March a confirmed launch of an ICBM, with Kim Jong Un himself attending [Shin 2022a, 25 March]. It was the first time since November 2017 that North Korea tested this kind of weapon and soon after the regime had declared the self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests. Symbolically it could thus be considered as the end of the era of rapprochement and dialogue that had begun with that declaration.

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol pointed towards a major restructuring of Seoul's inter-Korean policy, certainly not in the direction of more dialogue and cooperation. The final weeks of Moon's presidency, in April, brought also interesting developments. In particular, the outgoing president sent a goodbye letter to Kim Jong Un and he reciprocated with a letter characterized by a respectful tone that included a mention of the fact that inter-Korean relations could improve through sincere efforts from both sides [Choe 2022b, 22 April]. These promising words, however, were not matched by actions: North Korea continued to launch missiles and restarted demolishing facilities at the tourist site of Mount Kumgang that had been built as an inter-Korean cooperation project during the «Sunshine policy» years [Zwirko 2022b, 11 April]. In this tense but fluid situation, Yoon Suk-yeol was preparing to officially inaugurate his presidency and to start being responsible also of the relations with Pyongyang.

### 3.2. *More missile launches to greet the beginning of Yoon's presidency*

Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency was officially inaugurated on 10 May and North Korea performed missile tests on 4, 7, 12 and 25 May, for a total of 8 missiles, including one launched from a submarine and one alleged ICBM. The new president, who unlike Moon Jae-in came from the conservative party, marked a significant difference with his predecessor, with a return toward the traditional hardline approach to North Korea focused on the idea of denuclearization before cooperation. The reference to the conservative playbook was clear from the very beginning: in his inaugural speech, Yoon refrained from directly attacking Pyongyang, but he referred to the nuclear threat and vaguely proposed an «audacious plan» [담대한 구상] to improve North Korea's economy and the quality of life of its people [*Yonhap* 2022c, 10 May]. An idea that sounded very similar to other initiatives proposed by his conservative predecessors, like Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. At the same time, Yoon declared that the «age of appeasing North Korea is over» and put new emphasis on the military response against North Korea's provocations [Foster-Carter 2022a]. When Pyongyang performed the largest missile test in one single day, firing 8 missiles in the East Sea from 4 different locations, on 5 June, South Korea and the U.S. responded the following day firing 8 missiles of their own [Ko 2022, 6 June]. This move marked a clear difference between the new administration and the previous one, that used to condemn the tests but refrained from responding with military actions in order to not increase tension. These numerous tests, together with the declaration of the resumption of all military activities at the beginning of the year, seemed to point towards the direction that the seventh North Korean nuclear test was imminent. Over the course of the summer, and in the following months, the attention was drawn to this possible move; however, despite all the expectations, the nuclear test did not materialize.

Yoon Suk-yeol's ambitious plan was officially presented during his speech for Liberation Day, on 15 August. A few days before, Kim Jong Un, in a speech marking another historical event, the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Panmunjom armistice, made his first direct reference to the new South Korean president. Referring to Yoon by name, Kim attacked Seoul's government actions and warned of military actions as a response to possible future threats from the South [Ji 2022, 15 August]. Yoon's speech regarding his administration «audacious plan» sounded certainly more conciliatory than Kim's declaration: the basic idea was that South Korea was ready to implement a comprehensive plan of economic aid and assistance to the North, in case Pyongyang decided to stop developing nuclear weapons and «embarks on a genuine and substantive process for denuclearization»; then the President listed a series of practical interventions to support North Korea's economy [*Yonhap* 2022f, 15 August]. While the plan was pointing in the positive direction of cooperation, it did not represent something new from what other conservative presidents had proposed in the past and, more importantly, it

had no chances to be positively accepted by Pyongyang [Stent 2022, 24 August]. The plan went against two of the core tenets of contemporary North Korean ideology, which also underpin the stability and legitimacy of the regime: the fact that the status of nuclear state is non-negotiable and the emphasis on self-reliance; giving up the nuclear program in exchange for economic assistance from South Korea would have been a betrayal of both these principles. Unsurprisingly, the response of the regime, which came through a statement of Kim Yo Jong, clearly rejected the initiative with also disparaging terms [Lee 2022, 19 August].

The last part of the year was characterized by a new resurgence of tension between the two Koreas. Yoon's more muscular position took the form of a resumption of joint military exercises between South Korea and the United States, with the launch of the massive *Ulchi Freedom Shield* exercises at the end of August, after a four-year hiatus [*Yonhap* 2022g, 22 August]. North Korea's response followed its traditional principle of meeting «pressure with more pressure» and restarted its missile tests in September, with a pace never seen before. In just one week, from 25 September to 1<sup>st</sup> October, Pyongyang launched 7 short-range ballistic missiles and on 4 October it launched and intermediate ballistic missile that flew over Japan, for the first time since 2017 [Mackenzie & Mao 2022, 6 October]. In addition to the strong condemnation of Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, South Korea retaliated with the launch of 4 missiles in a joint exercise with the United States, confirming the new approach of Yoon's government of responding to this provocation with military actions.

Over the following weeks missile tests and military actions continued. In addition to the launches, North Korea also fired rockets and artillery shells in areas located very close to the inter-Korean border and one of its ships crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) – the de facto maritime border between the two Korea. South Korea responded flying some of its F-35A fighters close to the border and firing warning shots to the intruder ship [Kwon 2022b, 20 October]. The most tense situation was reached in early November: in just one day, 2 November, North Korea launched 23 missiles and rockets of different kind from different locations, both in the East and West Sea, one of which flew over the NLL and landed close to the island of Ulleung, South Korea's territory; in addition, the same week Pyongyang launched 9 ballistic missiles in 4 different events. According to the regime, the launches were defensive measures taken against the massive aerial joint exercises *Vigilant Storm*, between South Korea and the U.S. [Foster-Carter 2022b, p. 103]. This trend of provocation, military exercises and retaliations continued in the following weeks, with more launches, that included a successful test of an ICBM on 18 November the most powerful ever tested by North Korea, in November and December. On 26 December, the level of tension reached a new peak when 5 North Korean drones flew over South Korea for several hours and then came back untouched, with Seoul's aerial

defences unable to shoot them down [Kim 2022, 26 December]. This last provocation certainly represented a major step, but still perfectly in line with the trend of escalating tension consolidated over the previous months by the reckless actions of Pyongyang, but also by the posture of Yoon's administration and its emphasis on military response. A trend that will most likely continue also in the following months.

#### 4. *International relations*

##### 4.1. *Reinforcing old alliances: North Korea's relations with China and Russia*

North Korea's foreign relations mostly focused on strengthening relations with its two most important partners during 2022. China certainly represents the key country. Kim Jong Un, in the attempt to improve relations between the two countries, while plagued by the outbreak of the pandemic, did not miss the opportunity to convey congratulatory messages to Xi Jinping for the hosting of Winter Olympics in Beijing. Although Pyongyang did not send athletes to Beijing – after the International Olympic Committee suspended the North from the games in response to its refusal to participate to the Summer Olympics in Tokyo in July – Kim stated that China had «left an indelible trace in the history of the Olympics with their indefatigable efforts» despite «an unprecedentedly severe health crisis and the hostile forces' manoeuvres» [KCNA 2022a, 22 February], possibly referring to U.S.-led diplomatic boycotts of the Winter Games over China's poor human rights record.

In recent years, despite China's economic and political influence on North Korea largely overshadowed that of Russia, Moscow and Pyongyang have boosted ties, as it was pledged in the meeting that took place between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok, in April 2019, shortly after denuclearization talks between Washington and Pyongyang collapsed in Hanoi. It was a symbolically relevant summit for Kim, who had the possibility to show how, even at a difficult juncture, his country was not internationally isolated. The relationship was revamped by the support offered by Pyongyang, months before Moscow launched its «special military operation» in Ukraine, when it accused the U.S. hegemonic attitude and denounced NATO for pursuing eastward expansion that posed a grave threat to Russia's security [MFA DPRK 2022a, 1 February]. The Ukrainian crisis has ushered in a new geopolitical scenario in which the Kremlin and the DPRK may become increasingly intimate, perhaps to the point of resuscitating the alliance that had existed during the Cold War [Lukin 2022, 27 September].

After having continued to blame the U.S. for being the real cause of the war in Ukraine and the West for applying double standards, emphasising the earlier «devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya» [MFA

DPRK 2022b, 28 February], on 2 March, soon after the outbreak of the conflict, North Korea unequivocally aligned with Belarus, Eritrea, and Syria in voting against the UN resolution condemning Russia for the invasion of Ukraine. After all, this merely replicated what Pyongyang had done – along with other 10 countries – in 2014, when it voted against UN resolution 68/262 that condemned Russia’s annexation of Crimea, by attributing the crisis to the interference of the United States and other Western countries [UN 2014, 27 March].

The sense of a shared vision was further exhibited by the meeting between Kim Jong Gyu, Director General of European Affairs Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK, and Alexander Matsegora, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the DPRK; even though the war in Ukraine was not explicitly mentioned, the two talked about the necessity to strengthen strategic cooperation on «regional and international situations which are raised as urgent and concern both sides» [MFA DPRK 2022c, 4 March]. Shortly after, on 22 March, this meeting was reciprocated, as Russia’s deputy foreign minister Igor Morgulov met with the North Korean ambassador to Russia, Sin Hong Chul to discuss the «development of bilateral relations in the context of changes taking place in the international arena» [Jewell 2022, 23 March]. Although at lower levels, these meetings were particularly noteworthy, since the Russian embassy was one of the few to be kept open in North Korea following Pyongyang’s decision to close its borders in response to the pandemic, while, on the other side, North Korean diplomats symbolically multiplied contacts with Russian counterparts at a time when many foreign countries were reducing their presence in Russia.

The renewed alignment among China, Russia and North Korea became crystal-clear when, on 26 May, the U.S.-led UNSC resolution – in response to Pyongyang’s repeated ballistic missile launches – that would have imposed additional restrictions on the amount of petroleum North Korea is allowed to import, was frustrated by the unprecedented veto opposed by China and Russia [Nichols 2022a, 26 May]. Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia highlighted the «ineffectiveness and inhumanity» of further sanctions, while China’s UN Ambassador Zhang Jun not only declared that the imposition of additional sanctions against North Korea would have a detrimental effect and possibly escalate tensions, but also implied that the situation on the peninsula had developed in that way «thanks primarily to the flip flop U.S. policies» [UN 2022, 26 May]. The unprecedented move from two permanent members of the UNSC, who had condemned North Korea’s activities in the past, signals a renewed effort to counter the global influence of the U.S. and its allies and may result in a more aggressive behaviour of North Korea that is protected by the two great powers from external pressure.

Pyongyang’s most significant gesture of support for Moscow took place on 13 July, when North Korea became the third country, after Russia and Syria, to recognize the independence of the Donetsk People’s Republic

(DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). The information was officially conveyed to the two breakaway regions by Choe Son Hui, North Korea foreign minister, who also expressed Pyongyang's aspiration to develop state-to-state relations [MFA DPRK 2022d, 14 July]. Soon after, Donetsk embassy in Moscow also announced the news in a Telegram post accompanied by a photo of North Korean ambassador to Russia giving in the hands of the Donetsk's representative, Olga Makeeva, a document stating Pyongyang's recognition of the separatist region [*European Pravda* 2022, 13 July]. In addition, Matsegora announced that North Korea could send workers – who were identified as being «highly qualified» and «capable of working in the most difficult conditions» – to Donetsk and Luhansk to rebuild the war-shattered infrastructures [McCurry 2022a, 19 July]; this would be a clear break from Russia's position in December 2017, when Moscow backed the UNSC sanctions requiring member states to expel all North Korean workers from their territories within two years.

The decision taken by the North Korean government not only spurred global indignation, given that according to the rest of the international community the two breakaway regions still represented an integral part of Ukraine, but also prompted Kyiv to instantly cut diplomatic ties with Pyongyang, which were established in 1992, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union; this decision, however, was not particularly problematic for Pyongyang, given the minimal level of contacts with Kyiv. In the meantime, Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin exchanged letters wishing the two countries form closer ties to frustrate threats and provocations from «hostile military forces» [Smith 2022c, 15 August].

After having enjoyed China's support at the UNSC, Pyongyang showed its gratitude by harshly protesting the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan at the beginning of August. In reaffirming that Taiwan is «an inseparable part of China» and expressing full support for the «One China» principle, North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson declared they «vehemently denounce» any external force's interference in the issue of Taiwan [KCNA 2022i, 3 August]. Few days later, the Workers' Party sent a «solidarity letter» to the Communist Party of China, denouncing Pelosi's visit to Taiwan as a «shameless provocation» and cataloguing it a «serious infringement» of Beijing's sovereignty [Yi 2022, 10 August]. Pyongyang's rhetoric became even more bellicose after Pelosi travelled to Seoul, and, while in South Korea, decided to visit the border area and discuss with her South Korean counterpart, Kim Jin-pyo, about anti-North Korean deterrence [Lee & Kim 2022, 4 August]. Without any ambiguity, Jo Yong Sam, director general at the North Korean Foreign Ministry's press and information affairs department, accused Pelosi – identified as the «worst destroyer of international peace and stability» – of stirring up the atmosphere of confrontation in the region and to clearly show the Biden administration's hostile policy toward North Korea [KCNA 2022j, 6 August].

In September, U.S. government officials confirmed the suspects reported by *The New York Times* [Barnes 2022, 5 September] asserting that Moscow was seeking to purchase millions of rockets and artillery shells from North Korea [U.S. Department of Defense 2022, 6 September] – an activity which would be a violation of UN resolutions that banned Pyongyang from exporting or importing weapons from other countries – in order to overcome international sanctions that were presumably causing supply shortages. Without any hesitation, Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia dismissed media reports about his country buying ammunitions from North Korea, labelling the U.S. intelligence findings «another fake thing that’s been circulated» [Madhani 2022, 7 September]. On its side, despite affirming that it would be an uncriticizable right of any sovereign state to import and export military equipment, North Korea indignantly denied any arms deal with Russia [KCNA 2022p, 22 September].

At the beginning of October, North Korea also became the only UN member state to recognize the Moscow-backed late-September referendums (condemned by the international community as illegitimate) in Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, stating that Pyongyang respected the will of the majority of the people who «supported the integration into Russia» [KCNA 2022q, 4 October]. On October 5, few hours after North Korea had fired a missile over Japan, the UNSC convened for an emergency meeting; the session, however, ended with no agreement, despite warnings from the U.S. and its allies that the Council’s inability to reach consensus would have undermined the authority of the body. Russia and China, once again, insisted that it was the «irresponsibility» of U.S.-led military exercises that prompted Pyongyang’s action [Knickmeyer 2022, 6 October].

On 5 October, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, appealed to the UNSC to unanimously condemn North Korea multiple missile launches, including a long-range rocket that flew over Japan. However, as it had happened in May, China and Russia defended Pyongyang, asserting that the launches were to be seen as a response to U.S.-South Korea military drills and that the UNSC needed to play a constructive role instead of relying on pressure [Nichols 2022b, 6 October]. In sum, it appears clear that the UNSC has been paralyzed due to major powers – U.S. on one side and Russia and China on the other – confrontation and North Korea is benefitting from this rivalry.

#### 4.2. *South Korea’s foreign policy under the new administration*

The election of Yoon Suk-yeol as the new president of South Korea strongly influenced the country’s foreign policy, marking a sharp departure from his predecessor. In April, a diplomatic delegation headed by the foreign minister *in pectore*, Park Jin, was dispatched to Washington to upgrade the relationship to the higher level of a «comprehensive strategic alliance» [Lee 2022, April 6]. The discussion focused on a variety of issues, ranging from

North Korea threatening posture to trade, to the COVID-19 pandemic, without disregarding the war in Ukraine and, most likely, how to deal with China. Meanwhile, at home, Yoon envisioned his country's role as a «global pivotal state», assuming that it was the moment for South Korea to take on more responsibilities, including, for example, providing more developmental aid overseas, as in the case of Ukraine, or addressing global challenges, including supply chain management, climate change and vaccine production [Kim 2022, 14 April]. Implicitly, this was a veiled attack on his predecessor's feebleness in the realm of foreign policy and to his focus on the improvement of relations with Pyongyang. In addition, after a long hesitation, Yoon also announced that he would «positively review» South Korea's joining of QUAD, if invited [Peri 2022, 26 April].

On 10 May, when Yoon Suk-yeol assumed office, it appeared immediately evident that South Korea's foreign policy would undergo major modifications, as it had been pledged during the electoral campaign, when he mentioned the necessity to restore a «comprehensive strategic alliance» with the U.S. and to establish relations with China based on «mutual respect» [Yoon 2022, February 8]. This approach emphasised the need to build a constructive connection with Beijing, but simultaneously clarified the determination to align strategically with the U.S. In addition, to China's disappointment, Yoon detailed the differences with the Moon administration, criticizing the outgoing president's tenure for his alleged weakness, and called for a more hardline approach in foreign policy; for this reason, Yoon not only favoured the existing deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, but also called for additional units to be placed around Seoul [Kwon 2022a, 4 February]. This would mean a clear break from the «3-Noes» – no additional deployment of THAAD batteries; no South Korean participation in a U.S.-led regional anti-missile system; and no trilateral alliance with the U.S. and Japan – announced by Moon Jae-in in late 2017 and seen by China as a prerequisite to maintain positive relations. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping made a congratulatory call to Yoon upon his election [MFA PRC 2022a, 25 March].

On 21 May, only eleven days after taking office, President Yoon held the first meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden in Seoul, ahead of the QUAD summit to be held in Tokyo. During the meeting, the two leaders confirmed their willingness to develop the comprehensive alliance and to boost cooperation extending «from security to economy and technology» [White House 2022a, 21 May], as clearly illustrated in the joint statement. Given the Biden administration's active promotion of the «reshoring» of production to contain China and alleviate supply chain vulnerabilities, the cooperation with South Korea was deemed pivotal. Against this backdrop, Washington was very satisfied when Yoon announced to the American president his willingness to join as a founding member the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an initiative launched by the Biden administration in October 2021



as a regional instrument encompassing major Indo-Pacific countries for trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonization and clean energy, infrastructure, and worker standards. The IPEF was launched on 24 May in Japan and President Yoon, to the displeasure of Beijing, joined virtually. In addition, the Yoon-Biden summit paved the way to the restart of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) – deferred under Moon Jae-in – and the return to suspended U.S.-South Korea military exercises, seen as increasingly necessary by both administrations given the growing threat represented by North Korea’s missile launches. The massive *Ulchi Freedom Shield* joint exercises were held from mid-August to early September.

At the end of June, Yoon Suk-yeol participated in the NATO Summit in Madrid: it was the first time a South Korean president had been invited to the Summit, and it showed that Seoul and other Asian democracies had been driven closer to European democracies due to mutual fears of Russian and Chinese power. On the sidelines of the Summit Yoon took part in a short trilateral meeting – the first of its kind since September 2017 – with Biden and the Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, in which the three leaders agreed to respond to North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats through trilateral cooperation [Lee 2022b, 30 June]. Yoon also declared he was «delighted» to meet with the Japanese Prime Minister for the first time [White House 2022b, 29 June]. After all, Yoon had already started courting Tokyo during the electoral campaign, when he had consistently called for the improvement of bilateral relations [Onchi 2021, 23 September], that had sunk to historic lows over the previous four years. After assuming office, Yoon continued to make extremely positive comments about Japan, and his intention to mend ties was reciprocated by Kishida.

At the beginning of August, in an apparent move to not harm his country’s relations with China, Yoon decided not to meet with Nancy Pelosi during her visit to South Korea, opting for phone talks instead [McCurry 2022b, 4 August], claiming he was on vacation. Yoon was harshly criticized both at home and abroad and many suspected that, despite his appeals aimed at strengthening his country’s alliance with the U.S., this move was meant at not irritating Beijing [Shin 2022b, 4 August]. Few days later, however, the South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that Seoul had decided to join the «Chip 4», the semiconductor supply chain network which included U.S., Japan, and Taiwan [Kim 2022, 9 August]. Although it was professed that this was not an attempt aimed at isolating China, it remains to be seen to what extent Beijing believes this is genuine. Finally, on 24 August, the two governments commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral diplomatic ties, with events in the two capital cities; prior to the ceremony, the two foreign ministers attended a virtual event – due to COVID-19 – on the submission of a joint report on the development of Seoul-Beijing relations [Kim 2022, 24 August].

In September, South Korea-U.S. discord on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), enacted by the Biden administration and aimed at reducing American domestic inflation, started to emerge. One of the main components of the IRA, in fact, are tax credits to support the adoption of electric vehicles made in the U.S., which are considered by Seoul as both a violation of trade rules and, above all, contrary to the deep economic partnership between the two countries, to the point that the legislation was seen by South Koreans as a «betrayal» [Lee & Kim 2022, September 2].

Yoon and Kishida met again in New York in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly and in Phnom Penh in November on the sidelines of the ASEAN-East Asia Summit. In both occasions, the two leaders touched on few points of mutual interest: the first was North Korea's missiles and nuclear threat against which they would cooperate bilaterally and in conjunction with the U.S.; the second was a discussion on each other's vision for the Indo-Pacific region, that spurred the possibility of an alignment in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific based on «inclusiveness, resilience, and security» [MOFA Japan 2022, 13 November]; while the third – sensitive – issue concerned wartime forced laborers. Doubtlessly, the last point is also the most problematic: even though the two governments wished to give a definitive solution to this issue by the end of 2022, there were no noteworthy achievements, also due to the fact that Tokyo insisted that the issue had been settled in past bilateral agreements. At the beginning of 2023, the South Korean government unveiled a plan based on a «creative approach» according to which the compensation of Koreans who were forced to work for Japanese firms during World War II could be granted using funding from a domestic foundation rather than funds from the companies involved in forced labour [Chang 2023, 12 January]. Obviously, the victims and civic groups rejected the plan, categorised as «humiliating», asserting that the issue was not about money but about addressing past human rights violation by Japan.

In mid-November, Yoon had a short bilateral summit with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Bali, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. Despite pledges on trust building and common interests, the meeting exhibited marked differences with regards to the approach to North Korea, with Yoon asking for a more assertive response by China to Pyongyang's provocations and Xi avoiding giving a direct answer and suggesting engaging in dialogue with the North.

Towards the end of the year, the Yoon administration released the «Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region» [The Government of the ROK 2022]. The previous administration of Moon Jae-in had maintained a lukewarm attitude towards this policy paradigm, that was strongly sponsored by the United States in the region, with the goal of keeping a balanced position between Washington and Beijing. Unlike his predecessor, Yoon immediately showed interest towards this approach

and for a more active role for South Korea within this paradigm. The government document outlined a broad range of areas for collaboration, encompassing both traditional and non-traditional security issues, including economic security, maritime security, counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, climate change, energy security, cyber security, and new technologies. Its emphasis on future-oriented diplomacy, particularly the importance of «collective» alliances with Indo-Pacific countries to create a durable and resilient regional order, was one of its most significant elements. As a cornerstone of Yoon's approach, the strategy saw the development of South Korea as a «global pivotal state» as its ultimate objective. Yet, Seoul also tried to maintain a more prudent positioning, compared to other regional actors such as Japan, between its two indispensable partners – Washington and Beijing – while aiming at expanding the country's trade, investment, and security relations beyond the two major powers.

As it has been demonstrated, since the inception of his presidential mandate, Yoon Suk-yeol has showed a firm determination in rejecting his predecessor's attempts to balance Seoul's relationship with Beijing and Washington, reaffirming that a strong alliance with the United States would be the foundation for South Korea's foreign relations with Beijing and Pyongyang. Against this backdrop, Yoon has embraced a more active and outward-looking diplomatic posture, by making his country assume a position as a pivotal player in maintaining the international order. This strategy is to be implemented through the strengthening of trilateral relations with U.S. and Japan, the active cooperation in areas such as climate, technology, and global health, and a possible increase in collaboration with regional groupings, such as the QUAD. At the same time, the Yoon administration has renounced to consider China as a «strategic challenge», in the same vein as U.S. and Japan; on the contrary, it has been named «a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region» [The Government of the ROK 2022], possibly not to undermine the crucial economic relation between China and South Korea or to lose China's assistance in pressuring North Korea back to the negotiating table. What remains to be seen is whether Yoon will be able to keep some distance from his predecessor's balance between the U.S. and China and at what cost.

## 5. Conclusions

As had been the case in the previous year, also in 2022 the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic has engaged the leaderships of both Koreas. In the South, the spread of the «Omicron» variant surprised the Moon Jae-in government, marking a rapid increase in infections, and jeopardizing the accurate «test, trace, and treat» policy that had been globally lauded as a virtuous «model» to take inspiration from. Luckily, the new variant proved to be less

malicious than the «original» one and Seoul was rapidly able to control it without putting under stress its healthcare system. In the North, the government had to admit – after a long period of continuous denial – that the virus had permeated national borders and that meant the country had to be tightly sealed, with all the difficulties that it would imply, above all from the economic point of view, given that relations with traditional allies, China and Russia, were immediately shut down. In addition, to demonstrate its flawless conduct and obtain legitimation, the regime tried to convince the population that South Korea was to blame for the spread of the pandemic.

Despite the pandemic, South Korea elected its 13<sup>th</sup> president, after a very heated campaign. The success of the conservative candidate, Yoon Suk-yeol, condemned progressives to the opposition, even though the narrow margin between the two candidates reflected the deep division and polarization existent in the nation's society. One of the factors that granted Yoon the final victory was his firm intention to correct the various supposed mistakes of the previous administration, widely criticized for his sputtering economic policies, the adoption of a dangerous balance between the United States and China, and its North Korea policy, which was often seen as «appeasement». Despite the prompt announcement of his administration's plans for major reforms in labour, pension and education, as well as in the healthcare sector, already in the first months of his mandate, Yoon's approval rating dropped below the 30%, amid criticism over controversial personnel appointments, internal feuding within the conservative party and concerns over his lack of experience. This, to a certain extent, has also undermined his foreign policy approach, which revolved around the necessity to strengthen the alliance with the United States – although constantly trying not to anger China – improve relations with Tokyo and bolster Seoul's role on the global stage, while adopting a more rigid stance towards Pyongyang. Even though Yoon marked few symbolic successes, such as being the first Korean president to attend the NATO summit, it remains to be seen whether he has carefully considered the dire situation South Korea is in or he is just following a course of action in foreign policy that is completely opposed to that of his predecessor.

The pandemic did not weaken Pyongyang's aggressiveness, given that North Korea fired more missiles in 2022 than in any other year on record. On top of that, North Korea has issued a new nuclear law in September that not only made clear that the regime would never give up nuclear weapons, but also implies that nuclear deterrence may be used pre-emptively. The assertive posture adopted by the North Korean regime may have also been a consequence of the unprecedented shielding offered by Beijing and Moscow, who have prevented the UNSC to adopt further sanctions on Pyongyang, making it gain confidence and feel secure, beyond benefitting from the economic assistance from the two allies. In particular, the relationship with Russia seems to have recently regained strength, also given

Pyongyang's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk's independence and the supposed offer for both workers and weapons to Moscow. Although the triangulation among Russia, China, and North Korea is developing primarily due to the difficulties and conflicts experienced by all the three states in the international system, it remains to be seen how this relationship can develop in the future.

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