



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

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## Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

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

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

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

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KOREAN PENINSULA 2021: MANAGING THE CRISIS AND ADAPTING  
TO THE NEW SITUATION

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*After the initial shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, during 2021 the two Koreas focused their efforts in managing the crisis and adapting to the changed situation. If, on the one hand, North Korea maintained its strategy of total isolation to protect the country from the spread of the new virus, South Korea, on the other, implemented a series of measures aimed at preserving an almost normal social and economic life, which culminated with the launch of the so-called «living with COVID» strategy towards the end of the year. The implementation of the plan, however, was immediately threatened by the arrival of the new and extremely contagious «Omicron» variant.*

*Despite the pandemic, political developments continued on the peninsula. In South Korea, Moon Jae-in's administration had to face a decline in its approval ratings. Meanwhile the fight for the presidential elections, scheduled for March 2022, started to dominate the political agenda with the emergence of the two main contenders: Lee Jae-myung for the progressive Democratic Party and former general prosecutor Yoon Suk-yeol for the conservatives. In North Korea, the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea – the main event of 2022 – saw a further consolidation of Kim Jong Un's position, elected also general secretary of the party, and a renewed attention to the problems of domestic economic development, with a strategy based on self-reliance.*

*Inter-Korean relations did not experience significant developments and continued to be characterized by Pyongyang's confrontational attitude towards Seoul, despite the continued efforts of the Moon administration to restart some form of dialogue. The massive resumption of missile launches during the year certainly contributed to maintaining relations difficult.*

*The election of a new US president represented a major development for the foreign policy of both Koreas. South Korea was able to resolve some pending issues and reinforce the alliance; but the prioritization in Washington of a strategy to counter China reduced the space for Seoul to remain neutral in the rivalry. North Korea, on its part, maintained a hostile position vis-à-vis Washington, thus making the resumption of any form of dialogue very complicated.*

KEYWORDS – South Korea; North Korea; Moon Jae-in; Yoon Suk-yeol; Lee Jae-myung; Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea; Kim Jong Un; Inter-Korean relations; North Korean missile program; Korea-US relations; Korea-China relations.

## 1. *Introduction*

After the initial shock caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020, during the following year the two Koreas embarked on the difficult process of managing the crisis and adapting to the new situation. While North Korea remained committed to its strategy of total isolation of the country from any contact with external actors, South Korea was able to maintain a fairly normal situation, with no extended lockdowns or extremely restrictive measures. Despite the arrival of the more contagious «Delta» variant and a vaccination campaign that started quite late and slowly, there were only a few limited spikes in the number of cases and, by the end of the year, the government launched a new strategy, labelled «living with COVID», for a gradual return to the pre-pandemic situation. The appearance of another variant, the «Omicron», however, led to a new sharp increase in the number of cases, raising questions and doubts about the possibility to continue with the new strategy as planned.

Despite the pandemic situation, domestic political developments continued in both countries. Moon Jae-in's government in South Korea, after the landslide success in the legislative elections in 2020 and the resulting very high approval rating, started to face a decline in his popularity and that of his progressive party. The mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan were a major success for the conservative party and an important signal towards the presidential elections scheduled for March 2022. When Moon entered his last year in office in May, the attention of the country turned toward the primary campaigns for the presidency. On the conservative side, the front runner was former general prosecutor Yoon Suk-yeol, who resigned from his position in March to focus on his new political career; as for the progressives, the contest was between former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon and the governor of the Gyeonggi province, Lee Jae-myung, who was able to increase his support within the Democratic Party over the summer. At the end of the primary elections, between October and November, Yoon and Lee Jae-myung were officially nominated by the two main parties and started to focus on their strategies for the following presidential campaign. Both candidates tried to present themselves as «outsiders» and as «new faces» in the political arena; nevertheless, the popularity of both was affected from the beginning by a series of scandals which involved them and their family members.

In North Korea, the main political event of the year was the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, the first in five years and the second under the leadership of Kim Jong Un. As expected, the meeting was a further coronation of the leader, who added to his other positions that of general secretary of the party. The focus of the Congress was on domestic issues and in particular on the new strategy to overcome the challenges to economic development – and food supply – caused by the pandemic, the growing international isolation and the adverse natural disaster that hit the



country in 2020. The results of the Congress, and the following meetings of high political institutions aimed at implementing the new strategy, did not bring significant changes in terms of economic reforms. The leadership remarked the importance of self-reliance in order to achieve the country's economic and military goals, excluding the possibility for meaningful openings and dialogue with other countries.

Inter-Korean relations did not experience significant changes in 2021; the general mood between the two Koreas remained cold and, in some cases, even hostile, with repeated harsh remarks against the South Korean government coming from high representatives of the regime, especially from the leader's sister Kim Yo Jong. Sporadic openings took place over the course of the year, such as in the case of the reconnection of the direct communication lines between the two Koreas. Nonetheless, it was the resumption of missile tests by North Korea that mostly affected the situation on the peninsula, leading to a concerning increase in tension.

As for international relations, the inauguration of a new president, Joe Biden, in the United States represented the main development for both Koreas. In Seoul, the election was welcomed by the Moon government that, despite the diplomatic breakthrough between Trump and Kim Jong Un, never had a particularly positive relation with the previous U.S. administration. The renewed attention to the allies and to multilateralism in Washington greatly helped to resolve the pending issues between the two countries. At the same time, Biden's priority to strengthen the U.S. position and network in East Asia to counter China's moves in the region put South Korea in a difficult situation. In fact, it reduced the possibilities for Seoul to keep a neutral position among the two great powers and maintain positive relations with both. As for North Korea, the inauguration of a new President in the United States meant more continuity than change: on the one hand the regime continued to publicly identify the United States as its main enemy and the major obstacle for its development; on the other the policy review on North Korea operated by the Biden's government resulted more in a critique of the modalities of the previous approaches rather than a change in their substance or the sketching out of a clear road map for future relations. What appeared clear was that North Korea was not particularly high in the foreign policy agenda of the new administration and that the rivalry with China, which Biden preidentified as the main challenge for the U.S., remained Washington's main preoccupation and reference point in moulding its foreign policy in the region.

## 2. *Domestic politics*

### 2.1. *Managing the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects*

The fight to contain the spread of COVID-19 and the efforts put in place by the South Korean government in order to achieve this goal remained the

major concern for the Moon Jae-in administration in the first part of 2021. During the previous year, South Korea proved to be a very successful model for the containment of the pandemic and the minimization of the negative consequences on the social and economic life of the country. In addition to a very limited number of cases and death over the course of 2020, the government never had to impose a nationwide lockdown – such in the case of several other countries around the world. Accordingly, the country was able to hold general elections for the National Assembly in April 2020,<sup>1</sup> while the economic performance was one of the least affected among the major economies at the global level, with a decrease of 1%.<sup>2</sup>

The last days of 2020 marked an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, which broke the threshold of 1000 daily cases on 13 December;<sup>3</sup> however, the situation remained largely manageable, especially compared to other similar countries in Europe and North America. In order to contain this limited surge in the spread of COVID-19, especially in Seoul and the surrounding area, at the end of the year and before the holiday season the government implemented a series of restrictions. They included the prohibition of gatherings of more than 5 people in the capital area, the temporary closure of a number of leisure and touristic activities and other restrictions for restaurants and public spaces.<sup>4</sup> The situation started to improve in the first week of 2021. Some of the restrictions to public places – such as cafés and gyms – were lifted by mid-January, while in February the government decided to reduce some of the restrictions in the capital area and allow the reopening of bars and restaurants until 22.00.

This second, limited, wave of COVID-19 infections did not substantially undermine the model that had been put in place by the South Korean government to deal with the first outbreak of the new virus, in the first part of 2020. This reconfirmed the idea that the so-called «Korean model» was very effective in managing the potential health risks without enforcing too strong restrictions to the social and economic life. At the same time, this policy reduced the urgency of the South Korean government to start the vaccination campaign within the country. The first anti-COVID 19 vaccines were approved in Europe and North America in the last months of 2020, and, in most of these countries, vaccination was already under way by the end of the year. In South Korea, on the contrary, the first doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were administered only starting from 26 February, and

1. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 79-81.

2. Choi Jae-hee, 'S. Korea ranks 3rd in 2020 economic growth after China, Norway: OECD', *The Korea Herald*, 23 February 2021.

3. Kim Eun-jung, 'Daily coronavirus cases break 1,000 mark for 1st time, toughest distancing under review', *Yonhap News Agency*, 13 December 2020.

4. 'S. Korea to impose nationwide ban on restaurant gatherings of 5 or more people', *Yonhap News Agency*, 22 December 2020.

the first doses of Pfizer-BioNTech the following day,<sup>5</sup> two months after most European countries and almost three months after the United States and Great Britain.

This delay in implementing an effective vaccination campaign early on put the country in a dangerous situation, especially with the emergence of more infective variants of the original virus, such as the so-called «Delta» variant. In April, South Korea had only around 3% of its population inoculated, with a very low daily rate of vaccination, compared to similar countries.<sup>6</sup> Despite the slow start and the delays in the first weeks, the vaccination campaign started to take off at a much more rapid pace in May and June, putting the country back on track to achieve the results of three quarters of the population vaccinated by the end of the summer.<sup>7</sup> Although slower than most European countries and the U.S., this result was certainly important in limiting the effects of a third wave of infections that started to spread in July and August. On 8, 9 and 10 July, the number of new cases were 1275, 1316 and 1378 respectively, marking the highest numbers since the beginning of the pandemic. Despite the worsening of the situation, it is relevant to notice that these numbers were still substantially lower than in most other countries at the global level: the United States had reached a maximum of more than 250.000 cases per day, India had surpassed 400.000 daily infections, while most European countries peaked between 30.000 and 60.000 cases.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the situation pushed the government first to postpone a relaxation of restrictions, which had been planned for the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, and then to impose new restrictions throughout the country, especially in the area around Seoul, where most of the cases were concentrated, starting from 12 July. In particular, the capital area was subjected to «Level 4» measures – the highest – with the prohibition of gatherings of more than 2 people after 18.00, the closure of entertainment establishments and the limitation of opening hours for restaurants at 22.00; in addition, the exemptions that had been granted to vaccinated people – such as the possibility of not wearing masks outdoor – were suspended.<sup>9</sup> Despite these measures the situation kept on deteriorating, albeit at a controlled pace: on 10 August the number of daily cases passed the threshold of 2000, and remained over 1500 for

5. Sangmi Cha, 'South Korea kicks off COVID-19 vaccination campaign', *Reuters*, 26 February 2021.

6. Motoko Rich, Livia Albeck-Ripka & Makiko Inoue, 'These Countries Did Well With Covid. So Why Are They Slow on Vaccines?', *The New York Times*, 17 April 2021.

7. Song Jung-a & Edward White, 'South Korea vaccination surge adds impetus to Asia push', *Financial Times*, 18 June 2021.

8. Data from: 'Coronavirus World Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak', *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-cases.html>).

9. 'S. Korea to impose toughest Level 4 distancing scheme in greater Seoul area amid virus resurgence', *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 July 2021.

the rest of the month. This situation prompted the government to extend «Level 4» restrictions to the second biggest city, Busan, and to the island of Jeju, a renowned touristic location, especially during summer.<sup>10</sup> The decision prompted a backlash for what concerned the approval rating of the government, falling at 36% in mid-September,<sup>11</sup> and also to street protests, especially by self-employed workers.<sup>12</sup>

After the spike in new cases registered between July and August, the situation remained under control in the following weeks: daily infections remained around 1500, with occasional growths that never spiralled out of control, reaching a maximum of some 2500 cases.<sup>13</sup> This development paved the way for a new plan, designed by the government, which was labelled as «living with COVID». The basic idea of this policy was that, with the high level of vaccination reached in the country (approximately around 70% of the population by the end of October),<sup>14</sup> it was possible to slowly return towards a «normal» life with a gradual lifting of the restrictions.<sup>15</sup> The 3-phase plan elaborated by the government aimed at eliminating all the limitations by 20 February 2022, with the exception of the use of face masks in specific situations. The first step of the plan, which entered into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> November, eliminated the working hours restrictions for almost all the public spaces – with the exclusion of night clubs. It also introduced the use of a vaccination certificate for high-risk venues, such as gyms, saunas and karaoke bars. In addition, gatherings of up to 10 people started to be allowed again, outdoor sports events were allowed to have up to 50% of attendance, while music events could have up to 100 people, regardless of their vaccination status.<sup>16</sup> Following a similar trend to that which had been taking place in other countries, the government, to assess, and if necessary, review the implementation of the plan, also started to focus on the death and hospitalization rate, rather than the number of daily cases.

Almost simultaneously with the new measures, however, the number of infections started to grow significantly: in the early days of November fig-

10. 'Toughest Level 4 distancing rules take effect on Jeju Island', *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 July 2021.

11. 'Moon's approval rating dives 5 pct, main opposition party's rating jumps 6 pct: Gallup', *Yonhap News Agency*, 17 September 2021.

12. 'Self-employed people to hold drive-through protests against COVID-19 restrictions', *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 September 2021.

13. 'New virus cases slow down, eased distancing rules to be applied for 2 weeks', *Yonhap News Agency*, 15 October 2021.

14. Lee Jae-ho & Kwon Ji-dam, 'S. Korea hits 70% vaccination mark, setting stage for return to normal', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 25 October 2021.

15. 'South Korea loosens restrictions in first step towards «living with Covid-19»', *Straits Times*, 29 October 2021.

16. Sangmi Cha, 'S.Korea eases curbs in first step toward «living with COVID-19»', *Reuters*, 29 October 2021.

ures returned around 2500; on 18 November a new record was set at 3292 cases per day and, on 24 November, the number surpassed the threshold of 4000, reaching 4115, with a particularly worrying situation in the area of Seoul.<sup>17</sup> Despite this increase, the government decided not to introduce new restrictions and to keep the first phase of its plan in place; however, the second phase, that was supposed to enter into effect by mid-December, was postponed.

The limitations that were imposed in several occasions since February 2020 had severely affected small businesses, especially in the hospitality and entertainment industries. For this reason, business owners started to protest, including with street demonstrations. Aware of this growing discontent, and with presidential elections scheduled for March 2022 fast approaching, the government tried to stick to its «living with COVID» plan. The situation, however, worsened very quickly, with daily cases reaching 7000 around 10 December and intensive care patients surpassing the daily rate of 1000 a few days later. This situation forced the government to go back to tighter restrictions and to temporarily renounce to the implementation of its plan. Starting 18 December, for at least the following two weeks, the limit to gatherings returned to 4 people, the opening hours was limited to 21.00 or 22.00, depending on the type of business, and the use of vaccination certificates was expanded.<sup>18</sup> Inevitably, this step back from the path towards a normalization of the situation led to new protests from business owners who were particularly affected by the restrictions, such as restaurants, cafés, bars and other public places.<sup>19</sup> To make matters worse, the emergence and rapid spread of the new «Omicron» variant, especially in Europe, which proved to be much more contagious than the previous one, anticipated an even more severe worsening of the situation for the near future.

The progress of the pandemic during 2021 has led to questioning the effectiveness of the response by the South Korean government, which, in the first phase, had seemed very successful and praised as a model to be followed at the global level, with positive results also for the country's soft power and «nation branding» efforts.<sup>20</sup> Compared to the situation in similar countries, however, the results achieved by South Korea remained generally positive, both in terms of health security and economic consequences. The number of deaths due to the new disease and the impact on the health sys-

17. Kim Tong-Hyung, 'South Korea sets pandemic high with 4,000 new virus cases', *Associated Press News*, 14 November 2021.

18. 'S. Korea reimposes tighter virus curbs, critical cases top 1,000 for 1st time', *Yonhap News Agency*, 18 December 2021.

19. Yeni Seo and Hyonhee Shin, 'S.Korean businesses protest against return of strict COVID rules', *Reuters*, 22 December 2021.

20. Seow Ting Lee & Hun Shik Kim, 'Nation branding in the COVID-19 era: South Korea's pandemic public diplomacy', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 17, 2021, pp. 382-396.

tem were generally milder than in most comparable countries. At the same time, South Korea never experienced a generalized lockdown and was able to reduce the negative consequences on the economic life: after a limited decline in 2020, the economy grew at a 4% rate in 2021.<sup>21</sup> The government, with the approval of the National Assembly, also intervened with an expansionary fiscal policy, in particular to support low earning households and small businesses affected by the restrictive measures. This goal was pursued through the use of extra budgets in 2021,<sup>22</sup> and with an expanded budget for 2022.<sup>23</sup>

The development of the pandemic situation inevitably influenced also the political debate within the country, as well as the public approval of President Moon Jae-in. The strong polarization between progressives and conservatives within the country, which had emerged during the previous year, was further consolidated and reinforced by the beginning of the long road to the presidential election of 2022.

## 2.2. *The return of political tensions in South Korea and the road to the 2022 presidential elections*

While COVID-19 certainly represented the key issue for South Korea's domestic developments during 2021, the temporary period of national unity and widespread support for Moon Jae-in that had characterized a large part of the previous year gave way to a return to strong – and in some cases bitter – political struggle between the two main parties. The tension that had emerged in the last months of 2020, regarding the scandals that involved important members of the Democratic Party and the controversies between the Ministry of Justice and state prosecution, remained unresolved and were further exacerbated by the beginning of a year-long presidential campaign for the elections, scheduled for March 2022.

In particular, the long-standing controversy between the government and the prosecution not only remained unresolved, but it also became a prominent feature of the country's political debate. After the resignation of the minister of Justice, Choo Mi-ae, in the last days of 2020, Moon Jae-in nominated Park Beom-kye as her successor. This was part of a broader reshuffle in January 2021, aimed at reinvigorating the government's action and boost Moon's popularity after a decline in the previous months. In addition to Park's appointment, the President tried to relaunch his efforts towards North Korea, with the nomination of the former director of the

21. 'S. Korea's economy grows 4 pct in 2021, highest in 11 years', *Yonhap News Agency*, 25 January 2022.

22. Sam Kim, 'South Korea Passes Extra Budget With Handouts to Most Households', *Bloomberg*, 24 July 2021.

23. Jinwoam Beom, '2021 in Review: South Korea's Economy and COVID-19', *The Peninsula – Korean Economic Institute*, 23 December 2021.

National Security Office, Chung Eui-yong, one of the key actors of the inter-Korean rapprochement of 2018,<sup>24</sup> as minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>25</sup>

While Moon was attempting to renew the image of his administration for the last year and half in office and regain popular approval, the other main contender of the feud between the executive and judicial was completing his transition from the prosecution to the political arena. In early March, Prosecutor General Yoon Suk-yeol resigned from his position, officially to protest against what he saw as a continued effort by the government to reduce the powers of the prosecution offices. The reform of the judiciary, which Moon's administration had proactively pursued over the years, the creation of a separate Corruption Investigation Office in 2020, with jurisdiction over high-ranking public officials, and, lastly, the plan presented by the Democratic Party in early 2021 to create a new agency, under the control of the Ministry of Justice, tasked with investigating «serious crimes», including corruption, were all considered by Yoon as attempts to undermine the powers and independence of state prosecution.<sup>26</sup> The battle between these two branches of the State has a long history in South Korea's post-democratization development: on the one hand, there is the need to protect the fundamental principle of the separation of powers and independence of the judiciary; on the other, however, the very ample powers granted to state prosecution on the investigation of crimes and on the law enforcement system have been considered by part of the political spectrum as a too strong concentration of power that needed to be reformed. This controversy, at the core of the feud between Moon and Yoon, had been politicized by the polarization between conservatives and progressives. It became a key factor in the political struggle in view of the 2022 presidential election.

In addition to the official motivation for Yoon's resignation, it became immediately clear that the former Prosecutor General was already planning a political career with an eye on the highest office in the country, which was about to change hands in one year, given the limit to one presidential mandate for South Korean presidents. Even before Yoon's decision to step down, several opinion polls had indicated that the Prosecutor General was favoured by the majority of conservative voters for the upcoming elections. For this reason, with the resignation of Yoon, on 4 March, the electoral campaign was «unofficially» launched. Only a few days later, on 9 March, Lee Nak-yon, a former prime minister under Moon Jae-in and one of the most prominent contenders from the progressive side, resigned as leader of the Democratic Party to launch his own campaign.

24. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2018: The calm after the storm', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, pp. 78-83.

25. Lee Ji-yoon, 'Moon replaces foreign minister as Biden takes office', *The Korea Herald*, 20 January 2021.

26. Bae Ji-hyun, 'Prosecutor general resigns in protest of plan for new investigative agency', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 4 March 2021.

However, before the presidential elections, another very important political appointment was scheduled for early April; it was the administrative by-elections for the mayoralty in the country's two biggest cities: Seoul and Busan. The previous year, the two mayors, both from the progressive party, were involved in scandals of sexual misconducts. Oh Keo-don, mayor of Busan, resigned in April 2020, and Park Won-soon, mayor of Seoul, killed himself in July, after being accused of sexual harassment by one of his assistants.<sup>27</sup> In January 2021, the independent National Human Rights Commission confirmed that the former mayor of the capital, no longer prosecutable after his suicide, had in fact committed sexual misconduct;<sup>28</sup> on his part, Oh was formally indicted on charges of sexual assault.<sup>29</sup>

In order to replace the two mayors, by-elections were organized for April 2021. In addition to the importance of leading the administration of the two most important cities of the country, the elections also represented the last test before the presidential contest. Considering the very negative and premature ending of both Park's and Oh's terms, the conservative party candidates were well positioned to win in both cities. On 7 April, the results of the elections confirmed the expectations: the People Power Party, the official name of the conservative party, won in Seoul, with Oh Se-hoon, and in Busan, with Park Heong-joon, in both cases with very wide margins.<sup>30</sup> The defeat of the progressives prompted the immediate resignation of the entire leadership of the Democratic Party.

Also the Moon Jae-in's government was affected by the defeat of his party. If, on the one hand, only two cities and a minority of the population were involved in the elections and the two conservative candidates were facilitated by the disgraceful exit of their predecessors, on the other the vote also marked a clear change in the attitude of the public opinion toward the President and the Democratic Party, after the landslide victory in the 2020 National Assembly elections. Distrust and disappointment started to taint the reputation of the government. In particular, one of the critical questions that emerged was related to the growth out of control of the housing price and the discovery of a large scandal of land speculation, which involved public officials of the Korea Land and Housing Corporation, a government corporation responsible for the development of land in urban areas. The two issues were rapidly associated: the problem of real estate prices and the impossibility for many South Koreans to find affordable houses had afflicted

27. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, p. 82.

28. Tiffany May & Youmi Kim, 'South Korean Mayor Sexually Harassed Secretary, Report Finds', *The New York Times*, 26 January 2021.

29. 'Prosecution indicts former Busan mayor for sexual assault', *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 January 2021.

30. Mitch Shin, 'Seoul and Busan Mayor By-Elections Spell Trouble for President Moon', *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2021.



the country for many years; not surprisingly, the news of illicit gains from land speculation by public officials immediately sparked outrage in the public opinion, negatively affecting the government.<sup>31</sup> Although not directly involved, Moon Jae-in apologized for the scandal and promised to take extraordinary measures to stop the growth of prices and resolve the problem of housing.<sup>32</sup> However, the public opinion did not seem convinced by the president's declarations, and the question remained opened well after the administrative elections of April, becoming one of the key issue for the upcoming presidential campaign.

With his approval rate in decline and the precarious position of his party, Moon in April promoted a new government reshuffle, appointing a new prime minister, Kim Boo-kyum – to replace Chung Sye-kyun who had aspiration for the presidential elections – and five new ministers.<sup>33</sup> The move did not seem to bring immediate results, as Moon's approval rating continued to stay around 35% in May. His popularity, however, rebounded in summer, due to foreign policy events;<sup>34</sup> in particular, Moon's visit to Washington in May and the reopening of the inter-Korean communication line in July. The performance of the government, however, was still judged very poorly by the public opinion for what concerned the management of economic issues and the real estate policy.<sup>35</sup>

Starting from the summer, all the attention turned to the beginning of the presidential campaign, with the official launch of the candidacies and the parties primaries. As for the Democratic Party, the two main contenders for the nomination, former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon and the governor of the Gyeonggi province, Lee Jae-myung, launched their campaign almost simultaneously in early July.<sup>36</sup> Despite the presence of other candidates the main contest was between them. On the one hand, Lee Nak-yeon was an experienced politician, well introduced within the establishment of the party and more in continuity with Moon Jae-in's administration, in which he served as Prime Minister from 2017 to 2020; on the other, Lee Jae-myung, representing the grassroots part of the progressive side, came from a poor family background and had made his political career starting from the bottom, then becoming first mayor of the city of Seongnam and then governor

31. Jenna Gibson, 'Land Speculation Scandal Grips South Korea', *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2021.

32. Seyoon Kim, 'South Korea President Apologizes for Land Scandal Shaking Support', *Bloomberg*, 16 March 2021.

33. Kim Jaewon, 'South Korea's Moon shuffles cabinet pack after heavy poll defeats', *Nikkei Asia*, 16 April 2021.

34. 'Moon's approval rating rebounds substantially on US summit deal: poll', *Yonhap News Agency*, 31 May 2021.

35. Jang Na-rye, 'Moon's approval rating rebounds to 40% for first time in 4 months', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 28 June 2021.

36. Jenna Gibson, 'South Korea's 2022 Presidential Race Is Taking Shape', *The Diplomat*, 8 July 2021.

of Gyeonggi. After unsuccessfully participating in the presidential primaries in 2017, he acquired nationwide fame during the pandemic, thanks to the response of his administration and his plan to provide economic support to the residents of the province.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Lee Nak-yon, Lee Jae-myung was thus a more «unorthodox» and «independent» candidate within the Democratic Party, more detached from the political establishment and from Moon's administration. This characteristic, instead of a liability, proved to be his main strength during the primary campaign. The sentiment of dissatisfaction towards the political élite, which was spreading in the public opinion, propelled his candidacy to victory in the primary election and, on 10 October, he was officially nominated as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, after obtaining 51,45% of the votes (compared to Lee Nak-yon's 36,5%).<sup>38</sup>

On the conservative side, Yoon Suk-yeol officially launched his candidacy at the end of June followed by former Prime Minister, and losing presidential candidate against Moon in 2017, Hong Joon-pyo. Similarly to what happened on the progressive side, also in this case the primary election saw a competition between a candidate with strong links with the party establishment and a long political career, Hong, and an «outsider», Yoon, who, in this case, was a newcomer with no political experience. The results were also similar, with the former prosecutor coming out from the primary as the official candidate on 5 November, with 47,8% of the votes.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the conservative party, the transformation that culminated with the nomination of Yoon was certainly more radical than that of the progressives. After the disgraceful end of Park Geun-hye's presidency in 2017,<sup>40</sup> the party had to be rebuilt from scratch. The opposition to Moon Jae-in and his government represented for years the main element of cohesion of the conservative side. With the approach of the presidential elections, and after the bitter defeat in the 2020 parliamentary elections, the party began to work to build a new image and a new identity. It tried to broaden its base of support and to include also part of the disappointed younger generation, in particular younger males that used to lean more toward the progressive side. The lack of economic opportunities and growing social inequality had led a significant portion of the younger males to increasingly identify as the scapegoat for their difficulties the feminist movements and the affirmative initiatives aimed at promoting opportunities for women, in

37. Ahn Sung-mi, 'Change or continuation: Presidential race heats up', *The Korea Herald*, 22 September 2021.

38. Jung Da-min, 'Lee Jae-myung becomes ruling party's presidential candidate', *The Korea Times*, 10 October 2021.

39. Hyung-jin Kim, 'Ex-prosecutor in S. Korea wins opposition presidential ticket', *AP News*, 5 November 2021.

40. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2017: Searching for new balances', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVIII/2017, pp. 32-34.

a male-dominated society. In this situation, the conservative party saw the possibility to shift the voting pattern of this segment of the population away from the progressives. The first signal in this direction came in June, with the election as leader of the People Power Party of the young and unexperienced, but nationwide famous political commentator and TV host Lee Jun-seok.<sup>41</sup> Campaigning on a platform formally based on meritocracy and equal opportunities, Lee appealed also to many young men that considered feminist movements as the main reason for their lack of opportunities. Although he did not directly attack women's rights, Lee consistently spoke of the need to restore «equality» by removing quotas and other affirmative action measures, and attacked what he defined as the «fixation on a pro-women agenda» of the Democratic Party and «radical feminism».<sup>42</sup> On his part, Yoon Suk-yeol, during his primary campaign, and even more after his nomination as the conservative candidate, followed Lee's same line both rhetorically and by making explicit electoral promises, such as that of reorganizing the Ministry of Gender Equality.<sup>43</sup>

With the nomination of the two main contenders, and the addition of two more candidates – the centrist Ahn Cheol-soo, from the People's Party, and the leftist Sim Sang-jeon, from the Justice Party – in early November the line-up for the presidential election was completed.<sup>44</sup> The last weeks of the year, from the domestic political perspective, were thus dedicated to the preparation of the electoral campaign. In particular, Lee and Yoon, as the candidates of the two main parties, dominated the scene, laying out their respective plans for the future of the country. Both contenders tried from the beginning to present themselves as «outsiders», often adding a certain degree of populism to their political discourse: Yoon by presenting himself as the incorruptible prosecutor who had gone after some of the most powerful personalities in the country and who would be able to clean up the political situation and restore public trust; Lee by emphasizing his humble origins, his background as a labour and human rights lawyer and his political career outside the mainstream of the Democratic Party.

Despite these efforts to presents themselves as the «clean» face of Korean politics, both candidates were involved in scandals. As soon as their position became official – and also even before that moment – accusations of misconducts quickly emerged. Lee Jae-myung was accused by the conservatives of being involved in a land development scandal that took place

41. Shin Ji-hye, '36-year-old Lee Jun-seok becomes new leader of People Power Party', *The Korea Herald*, 11 June 2021.

42. Kim Arin, '[Us and Them] Lee Jun-seok and the rise of anti-feminism', *The Korea Herald*, 27 September 2021.

43. Bahk Eun-ji, 'Gender equality ministry becomes lightning rod before election', *The Korea Times*, 26 October 2021.

44. Sarah Kim, 'Presidential election set to be a four-way race', *JongAng Daily*, 7 November 2021.

in Seongnam when he was mayor of the city, from 2014 to 2018. It was an accusation that Lee had repeatedly denied and that did not lead to any indictment of the candidate. In addition, in December, Lee publicly apologized after a conservative newspaper, the *Chosun Ilbo*, reported that his son was an «habitual gambler». On the other side, Yoon Suk-yeol's image was tarnished by accusations against his wife, Kim Kun-hee, that she had falsified qualifications regarding her career in applying for jobs in the past. Kim issued an apology on this issue, which Yoon supported.<sup>45</sup>

These scandals, which started to affect the political competition even before the official launch of the campaign, negatively influenced the public trust and the general attitude towards the two candidates.<sup>46</sup> The elections started to look like a competition between two «unlikeable» candidates, among whom voters had to choose the «least unpopular». Considering the vast powers that the president has in the South Korean institutional system, this situation certainly did not represent a good viaticum for the election of the successor of Moon Jae-in.

### 2.3. Domestic politics in North Korea: The 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea and the new economic guidelines

The key event in North Korea domestic politics in 2021, which took place at the beginning of the year, was the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, the first to be held in five years and the second after Kim Jong Un took power in 2011. The expectations for this crucial political event were very high, considering its significance for the regime and the Party, but also because of the very difficult situation in which the country was, due to the self-imposed isolation after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a situation of difficulty that had been publicly acknowledged by the Leader in his speech for the 75<sup>o</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Party in October 2020.<sup>47</sup> The same ideas were reaffirmed in the hand-written message that Kim delivered to the North Korean population on 1<sup>st</sup> January, instead of his usual New Year's speech. The leader reminded the difficulties of the previous year and thanked the people for their trust and support.<sup>48</sup>

The Congress began on 5 January and lasted for an entire week, until 12 January. In his opening speech, Kim acknowledged the failure to achieve the economic goals of the five-year plan, announced at the previous Congress, highlighting aspects related to economic development as the

45. Jung Da-min, 'Family scandals overshadow presidential election', *The Korea Times*, 16 December 2021.

46. Jo He-rim, '[Election 2022] Fatigue grows in the presidential election riddled with scandals', *The Korea Herald*, 23 January 2021.

47. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 85-86.

48. Lee Je-hun, 'Kim Jong-un publishes New Year's letter instead of giving speech', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 4 January 2021.

key theme of the event. After this initial self-criticism, the first two days of the Congress revolved around issues related to economic development and food production, with the presentation of the new five-year plan. In order to resolve the problems and put the country's progress towards development back on track, the Party reaffirmed the centrality of the state and the importance of a strong political and ideological cohesion for achieving economic goals. No specific economic reform was announced during the Congress, while the importance of restoring state control over all the economic activities was reaffirmed several times. This indication was a signal of the willingness of the regime to reduce or eliminate all those private economic activities, mostly in the commercial and service sectors, that had emerged and consolidated in the last years, originating a «grey area» between illegality and what the government decided to tolerate.<sup>49</sup> The small but increasingly relevant «middle-upper class» that accumulated capital with these businesses – using this capital also for corruption of officials and for supporting state activities in order to continue to operate – has become an important part of the economic life of the country and of its development. So, the tightening of these activities could have major consequences for the entire social and economic situation of North Korea.

Confirming the situation of isolation caused by the global pandemic, the focus of the policy announced during the Congress was on the importance of self-reliance – a key aspect of North Korea's *juche* ideology – and on domestic production, rather than on improving interactions with external partners. The main ways to achieve the desired results would be reinforcing heavy industries – such as metal, chemical, mining and machinery industries – and modernizing the agricultural system.<sup>50</sup>

After the first two days, dedicated entirely to domestic and economic issues, the Congress addressed also external and inter-Korean relations. Kim emphasized the need to reinforce the country's defence capabilities, including the nuclear deterrent, in light of a growing security threat from the United States, caused by its hostile nature towards North Korea. In a clear message towards the incoming Biden administration, which was about to be inaugurated a few weeks after, Kim pointed out that the U.S. nature did not change, regardless of who was in charge in Washington.<sup>51</sup>

During Kim's speech there was little mention of South Korea and inter-Korean relations. The tone was generally pessimistic, with references to the fact that the situation had worsened compared to the summits and agreements of 2018. In addition, Kim criticized, as usual, military cooperation between South Korea and the United States, while also negatively eval-

49. Rudiger Frank, 'Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 1 of 2)', *38 North*, 15 January 2021.

50. Gabriela Bernal, '5 Key Takeaways from North Korea's Party Congress', *The Diplomat*, 13 January 2021.

51. *Ibid.*

uating the offers of cooperation from Seoul in fields that were considered as inessential, such as health care and tourism.<sup>52</sup>

The Congress represented a crucial moment also in terms of political consolidation of the regime and for the appointment of key party officials. In the continuing effort of normalizing and institutionalizing the political life of the country, the party statute was changed to make the Congress a regular occurrence every five years (the one before the 2016 Congress was held in 1980). Kim was elected as general secretary of the party, after the Congress re-establish the secretariat system, which had been eliminated in 2012 when Kim Jong Un's father, Kim Jong Il, was posthumously nominated as «eternal general secretary». In terms of political positions, there were no major reshuffles, signalling the fact that Kim's consolidation of power within the regime had probably been fully successful, with key and trustworthy allies in all the most important positions. It is worth stressing, nonetheless, that two very important figures – Choi Sun Hui, first vice minister of Foreign Affairs with a key role in the negotiations with the United States and South Korea, and Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un's sister – were not reconfirmed as alternate members of the Politburo.<sup>53</sup> However, considering the broader context of the political reorganization after the Congress and her personal background, this decision did not represent a real demotion for Kim Yo Jong. She remained part of the Central Committee and Vice Department Director of the party and, even more important, she kept her crucial role close to the leader; in addition to being the leader's sister, Kim Yo Jong remained part of the Personal Secretariat, the institution in charge of coordinating the schedule, security and logistics of the leader and of channelling the leader's thinking in his comments and documents.<sup>54</sup> The key role of Kim Yo Jong was reconfirmed also during the year by the ample media coverage that she received throughout the year and the several statements that she personally directed towards the South Korean and U.S. governments, making her a sort of *de facto* spokesperson of the regime. The most important reconfirmation of Kim Yo Jong's role came in September, when she was appointed to the State Affairs Commission, the highest government organ in the country, within a broader reshuffle of this institution.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion of the leader's sister in this very important political body certifies her crucial position in the regime.

The Congress ended with a closing speech from Kim Jong Un, in which the leader reaffirmed the importance of the country's nuclear deter-

52. Rudiger Frank, 'Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 2 of 2)', *38 North*, 19 January 2021.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Michael Madden, 'Kim Yo Jong Stays in the Picture', *38 North*, 22 January 2021.

55. Lee Je-hun, 'Why Kim Yo-jong was appointed to N. Korea's top legislative body', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 1 October 2021.

rent, and with a military parade that included a ballistic missile designed for launch from submarines.<sup>56</sup> Immediately after the end of the Congress, a session of the Supreme People's Assembly – the main legislative body of the country, but with no real power – was convened to ratify the decisions and to immediately begin the implementation of the new strategic lines, and also to replace several members of the cabinet, in charge of economic affairs.<sup>57</sup>

In line with the institutional process of the North Korean regime, the following step was the convening of a plenum of the party's Central Committee. It took place in early February, with the main goal of starting to give a concrete follow up to the five-year economic plan presented at the Congress. In his speech at the meeting, Kim called for a more direct intervention of the party and state agencies in implementing the economic plan; he also accused some of these agencies for the failures of the previous years.<sup>58</sup> During the plenum, inter-Korean relations and North Korea's foreign relations were also discussed by the Leader and high officials. Following the lines of the strategy envisaged by the Congress, the emphasis was again on reinforcing the military deterrent, including the nuclear arsenal, to strengthen the country's position vis-à-vis the United States. As for South Korea, Kim called for a reshaping of the relations according to the changed situation and criticized Seoul's multiple offers to cooperate in areas that were assessed as unimportant, such as the fight against the pandemic or tourism.<sup>59</sup> This position reconfirmed North Korea's approach to inter-Korean relations, in which cooperation can be taken into consideration only if it involves aspects that are considered as crucial by the leadership. These aspects are, in particular, economic cooperation with the aim of improving the country's development, but also of distancing South Korea from the harsh sanctioning regime promoted by the United States.

The political process of the first months of 2021, which included the Congress and the following high-level meetings, reconfirmed the main strategic directions that had already emerged in the previous year, after the outbreak of the pandemic. Kim Jong Un's leadership still focused on domestic efforts to improve the country's economy and on an even stricter state control on every aspect of development, with self-reliance as the key concept. Indeed, self-reliance was reaffirmed as the key concept, in the Leader's speech at the conference of the lower levels party officials,<sup>60</sup>

56. Joshua Berlinger, 'North Korea unveils submarine-launched ballistic missile at military parade', *CNN*, 15 January 2021.

57. Yi Wonju, 'N. Korea convenes parliamentary meeting after party congress', *Yonhap News Agency*, 18 January 2021.

58. Sangmi Cha, 'N.Korea's Kim calls for increased party role in economic plans -KCNA', *Reuters*, 10 February 2021.

59. Sangmi Cha, 'N.Korea's Kim lays out paths to take with S.Korea, external affairs', *Reuters*, 10 February 2021.

60. Yi Wonju, 'N.K. leader calls on ruling party to wage tougher 'Arduous March' amid prolonged sanctions', *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 April 2021.

leaving little room for substantial economic reforms or cooperation with foreign actors.

The second half of the year continued to be problematic for North Korea, especially from the economic and food supply perspective. The isolation imposed on the country by the extremely rigid anti-COVID measures had dramatically reduced international trade and imports of basic supplies. The situation was further worsened when North Korea was hit by heavy rains in early August, which caused floods and damages in the eastern province of South Hamgyong; in addition to thousands of homes, hundreds of hectares of farmland were destroyed, making the food supply situation even more difficult in the country.<sup>61</sup> The relevance of the issue of food security was reaffirmed during several high-level meetings in which Kim Jong Un took part over the summer. They included a Politburo meeting and a Central Committee meeting in early June, during which the difficult situation in this field was explicitly pointed out by the Leader.<sup>62</sup>

The focus on economic development and on the efforts of the people to achieve it were emphasized also during the parade to celebrate the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the country, on 9 September. Unlike previous events of this kind, there was a very limited display of military power and no new weapons were showed, while most of the parade was dedicated to the work of civilian population and to the promotion of national unity, specifically tailored for a domestic audience.<sup>63</sup> Despite the fact that the importance of military capabilities and the references to the threat posed by the United States constantly remained a key part of the rhetoric of the regime, it seemed that the leadership was increasingly putting attention on the domestic perspective and the wellbeing of North Korean people. This was also demonstrated by Kim's repeated references to the hardships and difficulties of the population, which he made in his October 2020 speech for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the party foundation and have been repeated ever since in almost every public address of the Leader.

### 3. *Inter-Korean relations*

#### 3.1. *The hostile stalemate continues*

The new year opened without major changes for what concerned inter-Korean relations, after the general coldness between the two sides that had

61. 'North Korea: Kim Jong-un calls for relief in flood-hit areas', *BBC News*, 8 August 2021.

62. Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Is Facing a 'Tense' Food Shortage', *The New York Times*, 16 June 2021.

63. Mitch Shin, 'North Korea's Unusual Military Parade', *The Diplomat*, 10 September 2021.



dominated the last months of 2020. The South Korean government kept proposing cooperation initiatives on several issues – from the containment of the COVID pandemic to touristic projects – that could be implemented without violating the sanctions regime, in continuity with the previous two years, as reaffirmed by President Moon Jae-in in his New Year's address and by the Ministry of Unification in its Work Plan published in January 2021.<sup>64</sup> These initiatives, nonetheless, were not considered as useful steps by the North Korean regime, as clearly highlighted by the references to inter-Korean relations during the party Congress. The momentum for restarting substantial exchanges and dialogue on the peninsula seemed to be lost since 2019, with the following efforts from Seoul falling constantly on deaf ears on the other side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

In continuity with the previous year were also the rhetoric attacks that the North Korean regime addressed to the South Korean government and, in particular, to its president. These attacks came mostly from Kim Yo Jong, who continued to assert herself as the regime spokesperson towards South Korea and the U.S.: on 15 March, the leader's sister vocally criticized the joint military exercises between South Korea and the U.S., threatening to abolish the 2018 agreement between the two Koreas on military cooperation, despite the fact that the training was entirely based on computer simulations.<sup>65</sup> A second harsh comment against the leadership in Seoul from Kim Yo Jong came at the end of March. On the 21 and 25, North Korea launched two short-range missiles; while certainly not welcome in South Korea, the move did not represent any new or significant improvement in Pyongyang existing arsenal. In a following statement Moon Jae-in criticized the act as it could undermine dialogue between the two parts; Kim Yo Jong immediately responded pointing out the double standard applied to the two countries: when South Korea itself tested a new missile in 2020 there was no condemnation.<sup>66</sup> This specific comment aside, the exchange pointed towards a possible problem in the relations between the two countries: the development of more advanced conventional military capabilities by South Korea, for defensive purposes, could set in motion a dangerous «security dilemma» that could push North Korea towards the development of more and more advanced capabilities, both conventional and nuclear.

In the first half of the year, another controversial issue emerged, regarding inter-Korean relations. The previous year, the South Korean government had approved a law that forbade the launch of propaganda bal-

64. Republic of Korea, Ministry of Unification, 'Recovery, Inclusiveness and Resurgence, Republic of Korea 2021', in *2021 Ministry of Unification Work Plan*, 21 January 2021.

65. Ahn Sung-mi, 'Kim Jong-un's sister denounces S. Korea-US joint military exercises', *The Korea Herald*, 16 March 2021.

66. Koh Byung-joon, 'N.K. leader's sister slams Moon as «parrot» repeating Washington's «gangster-like logic»', *Yonhap News Agency*, 30 March 2021.

loons from the southern side of the border towards the North, attracting a lot of criticism – from inside the country and from abroad – regarding what was considered as a limitation of the freedom of expression only to favour the North Korean regime.<sup>67</sup> The new law was criticized by UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in North Korea, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and created immediate tension when it was violated by one of the most vocal defender of the balloon launch, the North Korean defector and leader of the organization Fighters for a Free North Korea, Park Sang-hak. In late April, the organization affirmed that it had violated the new law with a launch of propaganda balloons; a move that was immediately criticized by Kim Yo Jong, who accused the South Korean government for the inability to stop these acts from taking place in its territory.<sup>68</sup> The following days the police raided Park Sang-hak's house and called him in for questioning on the balloon launch, prompting even more criticism, this time from inside the country.<sup>69</sup> This controversial issue proved to be a «lose-lose» situation for the South Korea government, which got criticism from all sides, and should possibly revise or stop enforcing this problematic law.

### 3.2. *The resumption of missile tests and the increase in tensions*

Despite the situation did not look particularly promising in terms of inter-Korean relations, Moon Jae-in, in his last year in office, was still committed to obtain significant results in this regard. When he visited Washington and met with newly elected U.S. President Joe Biden in May, they both reaffirmed the importance of dialogue and the support for inter-Korean relations. Nevertheless, no practical step in that direction was proposed, with the exception of the appointment of Sung Kim as the new special U.S. envoy for North Korea.<sup>70</sup> During the same meeting, the two sides agreed also to eliminate the limits to the range of ballistic missiles that could be developed by South Korea.<sup>71</sup> It was a decision with potentially controversial consequences for inter-Korean relations.

Despite the continued activism and optimism of the administration in Seoul – in particular on the part of the minister of Unification, Lee In-young – there were no major breakthrough for inter-Korean relations in the following months. Positive signs came from the reactivation, on 27 July,

67. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2020: Overcoming the challenges of COVID-19', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 92-93.

68. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'The Sound of One Hand Giving', *Comparative Connections*, Vol 23, No. 1, May 2021, pp. 92-93.

69. 'Defector activist grilled by police over anti-N.K. leafleting', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 May 2021.

70. 'Moon leaves U.S. after visit for summit with Biden', *Yonhap News Agency*, 23 May 2021.

71. Timothy Wright, 'US and South Korea scrap ballistic-missile range limits', *IJSS Analysis*, 2 June 2021.

of the communication line that connects the two Koreas, and that had not been used since North Korea decided to demolish the liaison office in Panmunjom in June 2020; an event that had been announced by official statements in both Koreas.<sup>72</sup> The positive turn, however, was short lived: a few days later, Kim Yo Jong criticized the military exercises between U.S. and South Korea that were planned for early August. When the exercises took place, Kim Yo Jong intervened again to condemn the decision of Seoul and the communication line stopped working again, after only a couple of weeks of activity. This series of events repropounded the familiar «on and off» dynamic that has characterized inter-Korean relations since 2019, together with the role-play within the North Korean regime, in which Kim Yo Jong usually intervenes to criticize South Korea, while Kim Jong Un has a more open and conciliatory approach.

Despite this momentary and very limited rapprochement, the rest of the year was characterized by new tensions caused by issues related to North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes. At the end of August, a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) indicated that the regime had resumed operations at its main nuclear facility, in Yongbyon, at least since July 2021.<sup>73</sup> Although it was not clear what kind of activities were resumed and for what purpose, it certainly represented a problematic development, aimed at putting more pressure on the new U.S. administration.

Starting from September, North Korea also resumed missile tests. In only one month, it performed four different tests: a long range cruise missile, followed by two short range ballistic missiles launched from a train, then another short range missile and lastly, on 30 September, a new anti-aircraft missile.<sup>74</sup> Although, these tests did not represent relevant technological advancements for the country's military capabilities, they certainly raised tension on the peninsula in an effort aimed at getting international attention, and specifically that of the Biden administration. Following the usual «on and off» pattern of inter-Korean relations, towards the end of September a new opening for dialogue seemed to materialize after Moon Jae-in's address at the UN General Assembly in which, in addition to emphasising, as usual, the importance of inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea dialogue, he called for an «end of war declaration» in relation to the situation on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>75</sup> Such a declaration would be easier to achieve than a formal peace treaty – the Korean war ended in 1953 only with the Panmun-

72. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'Summer False Dawn: On/Off Communications', *Comparative Connections*, Vol 23, No. 2, September 2021, pp. 84-85.

73. Hyung-jin Kim, 'IAEA: North Korea Seems to Have Restarted Yongbyon Nuclear Reactor', *The Diplomat*, 30 August 2021.

74. Mitch Shin, 'Why Is North Korea Launching So Many Missiles?', *The Diplomat*, 19 October 2021.

75. 'South Korean leader repeats call for declaration to end Korean War', *Reuters*, 21 September 2021.

jom armistice – and, in Moon’s view, it could represent an improvement of the security situation on the peninsula. Looking at the proposal through the lens of South Korean domestic politics, it would also represent an achievable result reached by Moon before the end of his term in May 2022. The real binding power of a declaration of this kind and the practical steps attached to it – especially in terms of denuclearization – remained very uncertain, leading to a dubious reaction by the United States. China, one of the party of the Korean war, reacted positively, supporting the idea; more surprisingly, also North Korea showed some signs of a positive response with a statement from Kim Yo Jong, on 24 September, saying that the «end of war declaration» is an «interesting and admirable idea». She, however, also added that a prior improvement of relations between the parts was needed and that the South had to work to re-establish mutual trust.<sup>76</sup> In the end Moon’s proposal did not lead to any further development, reconfirming the difficulties of the South Korean administration to engage Pyongyang in dialogue apart from the sporadic openings by the North Korean regime, increasingly difficult to predict.

The last few months of the year did not bring any significant development in terms of inter-Korean relations. Obviously, the fact that Moon was rapidly approaching the end of his mandate and that a new president would be elected soon limited the action of the South Korean government and also the initiatives of the North Korean regime, not inclined to interact with an outgoing government. The new president will thus inherit a complicated situation in terms of inter-Korean relations, with a general stalemate in terms of dialogue and contacts, against a worrying backdrop represented by the resumption of missile tests. Both main South Korean presidential candidates did not pay too much attention to North Korea in the first weeks after their official appointment: Lee Jae-myung shared the conciliatory approach of Moon Jae-in in general terms, but focused much more on domestic and economic issues; Yoon Suk-yeol, with no experience in politics, in terms of foreign policy would very possibly stick to the traditional playbook of the conservative party, calling for a hard-line tough stance against North Korea and denuclearization before dialogue. While not high on the agenda of the candidates, the election was bound to be crucial in determining the direction of inter-Korean relations for the next five years.

#### 4. *International relations*

One of the most relevant developments for the Korean Peninsula in terms of international relations happened outside Korea, with the election of Joe

76. ‘Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK, Issues Press Statement’, *Uriminzokkiri*, 24 September 2021.

Biden as 46<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S. in November 2020 and the inauguration of his presidency on 20 January 2021. For different reasons this event represented an important turning point for both Koreas. During the previous years, with Donald Trump at the White House, relations between the United States and the Korean Peninsula went through different – and complicated – phases. After the first years of confrontational and dangerous attitude towards North Korea – which in the same period had resumed its nuclear and missile testing – Trump and Kim met in Singapore in 2018 and Hanoi in 2019, and, although the summits did not bring about long lasting changes regarding denuclearization, they certainly helped defusing tensions. The relation with South Korea was also complicated under Trump; the President was very critical of the U.S. trade deficit with Seoul, to the point that he requested a renegotiation of both the free trade agreement between the two countries and the cost-sharing agreement for the American troops stationed in Korea. The election of a new president in Washington with a very different approach and agenda compared to his predecessor was certainly a harbinger of foreign policy changes in both South and North Korea.

#### 4.1. *South Korea's foreign policy between U.S. and China*

With the election of a democratic president with a much more amicable approach towards U.S. allies, President Moon Jae-in sought to resolve the pending issues with the United States, while also trying to relaunch the dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington. On 4 February, Biden and Moon held a phone call, one of the first of the new American president after inauguration, that was described as very constructive. During it, the two leaders reaffirmed the importance of their alliance and agreed to elaborate a new joint strategy towards North Korea.<sup>77</sup> A month after this first contact, the two parts were also able to bridge their differences and reach an agreement on the sharing of the costs for the U.S. troops in Korea. The agreement was largely made possible by the changed attitude of the new administration that valued the overall importance of the alliance as more important than a substantial increase in Seoul's financial contribution. The resulting deal had a 6 years duration and saw a modest and incremental increase in South Korea's share of the costs over the following years.<sup>78</sup>

In mid-March the newly appointed secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and the new secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, arrived in Seoul for a summit within the 2+2 meeting framework with their South Korean counterparts. The meeting was successful in reaffirming the importance of

77. Sangmi Cha, 'S. Korea's Moon pledges to upgrade alliance with U.S. in call with Biden', *Reuters*, 4 February 2021.

78. Michelle Ye Hee Lee and Dan Lamothe, 'U.S., South Korea reach military cost-sharing agreement after deadlock under Trump', *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2021.

the alliance: the two parts signed the revised version of the cost-sharing agreement; the representatives of the U.S. government promised to consult with Seoul regarding North Korea policy; and the South Korean administration reassured about the future of trilateral cooperation including Japan,<sup>79</sup> a key aspect for the United States, committed to strengthening their network of alliances in the region to counterbalance China's growing role. A trilateral meeting of the respective National Security Advisors was held in early April in Annapolis, focussed on discussing North Korea policy ahead of the publication of the new U.S. policy review on the issue.<sup>80</sup> In early May, the three Ministers of Foreign Affairs met on the side-lines of the G-7 summit in London – to which South Korea had been invited as an observer – reaffirming their commitment to trilateral cooperation on important issues in East Asia.<sup>81</sup> Despite these positive developments, on some key aspects a distance between the two allies remained. For example, regarding the strategy towards China, South Korea tried to maintain a more neutral position; on the contrary, concerning North Korea, Seoul pushed for a swift return to dialogue, while Washington maintained a more cautious approach.

The main event regarding U.S.-South Korea relations was certainly the summit between Moon and Biden that took place on 21 May. In addition to the already mentioned announcements regarding North Korea, inter-Korean relations and the elimination of the missile limitation guidelines, there were several other issues on the agenda and on the final joint declaration, ranging from security to military cooperation, to economic, climate change and COVID-19 related issues. The announcements of several hundred thousand doses of vaccine to be sent to Korea certainly represented an important achievement for Moon Jae-in, while the deal on Korean investments in the U.S. high tech industry – especially in computer chip and electric vehicle batteries – had both practical and symbolic – or even strategic – meaning, in light of the American priority of countering China also on technology and supply-chain issues.

The strategy towards China was the other crucial point of the summit: the Biden administration from the very beginning had clearly prioritized the strategy to counterbalance China in the region and at the global level, and was trying to push its allies to take a clear stance on the issue. South Korea, however, was extremely reluctant to pick a side on this rivalry. Aware of the need not to antagonize Washington in this phase, Moon decided to endorse a final joint declaration that included a passage about «preserving

79. Mason Richey and Rob York, 'Hope Spring Eternals', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 1, May 2021, pp. 46-47.

80. Hwang Joon-bum, 'S. Korea, US, Japan agree on need for 'diplomatic solution' to resolve N. Korean nuclear issue', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 5 April 2021.

81. Rintaro Tobita, 'Japan and South Korea agree to coordinate with US on North Korea', *Nikkei Asia*, 6 May 2021.

peace and stability» in the Taiwan Strait,<sup>82</sup> gaining a rebuke from the Chinese government.<sup>83</sup>

Despite this minor controversy, relations between South Korea and China remained positive over the course of 2021, although it started to be increasingly clear that the growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington would have consequences for Seoul's foreign policy and for its delicate position between the two powers. In early April, while the national security advisors of South Korea, United States and Japan were meeting in Annapolis, South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong met with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Xiamen. They reaffirmed the importance of the relations between the two countries and agreed to cooperate in a number of different issues, from economic and cultural to anti-pandemic and technological aspects.<sup>84</sup> Wang Yi then arrived in Seoul in mid-September for a two-day visit during which he met again with Chung and briefly also with President Moon.<sup>85</sup>

The difficult balancing act between keeping a strong alliance with the United States and maintaining a good relationship with China was one of the main, and most difficult tasks, for South Korea, especially after it appeared clear that the Biden administration was hardening the U.S. position towards Beijing. Moon was able to resist the pressure from Washington, for example maintaining ambiguity regarding South Korea's possible entry into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – which includes the United States, Japan, India and Australia and has a more or less overt aim of countering China – or South Korea's cooperation with the Quad as a non-permanent member (the Quad Plus framework). But, in the long run, the requests from Washington to play a more active role in the regional order will probably grow. In this case, a negative response from South Korea would run the risk of undermining the bilateral alliance or of isolating Seoul in the American network of allies and partners in the region. The space for the South Korean government to avoid taking a clear side and keep a middle position is probably reducing fast. Despite the limited attention that the two main presidential candidates were giving to foreign policy, this problem is certainly bound to be a key challenge for the next president.

Despite the trilateral South Korea-U.S.-Japan meetings mentioned above and the efforts of the new U.S. administration to improve cooperation between its two main allies in the region, relations between South Korea

82. Mason Richey and Rob York, 'Stir not Murky Waters', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 2, September 2021, pp. 40-41.

83. Jung Mai, 'Don't 'play with fire', China tells US and South Korea over Taiwan concerns', *South China Morning Post*, 24 May 2021.

84. Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Outcome of Korea-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting', *Ministry News*, 5 April 2021.

85. Lee Ji-yoon, 'Chinese FM arrives in Seoul in latest effort to bolster regional ties', *The Korea Herald*, 14 September 2021.

and Japan remained difficult also in 2021. Apart from the trilateral summits involving high-level officials from Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, bilateral contacts remained very limited – with no relevant meeting between the leaders of the two countries. The traditional controversies related to historical issues and the territorial dispute over the Dokdo Islands continued to affect the relationship. On 8 January, the Seoul Central District Court decided that Japan had to compensate the victims of sexual slavery during the colonial period – the so-called «comfort women» – with 100 million won to each of the 12 plaintiffs.<sup>86</sup> Obviously, the Japanese government protested vehemently through its Foreign Minister, requesting the South Korean administration to intervene, because the ruling was considered in breach of the 2015 bilateral agreement on the issue.<sup>87</sup> On 21 April a different court in Seoul ruled on a similar case in the opposite direction, rejecting the request for compensation because of Japan's state immunity.<sup>88</sup> This discrepancy in the verdicts added confusion to an already complicate issues and left this unresolved situation as a source of tension between the two countries.

Controversies between South Korea and Japan also involved the announcement by the Japanese government regarding the discharge of wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant to the Pacific Ocean, which faced harsh criticism in Korea.<sup>89</sup> The territorial dispute over Dokdo resurfaced over the summer, with Seoul protesting against the decision to include the contested islands in a map of Japan on the website of the Tokyo Olympic Games.<sup>90</sup> To add fuel to the fire, in mid-June South Korea held military exercises in the waters surrounding Dokdo.<sup>91</sup> In this tense situation, on 19 July President Moon announced that he would not participate to the opening ceremony of the Olympics, thus eliminating the possibility for a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Suga.<sup>92</sup>

In the last part of the year relations between the two countries remained generally cold, with no breakthrough in resolving the outstanding issues. The election of a new prime minister in Japan in October, Kishida Fumio, did not bring about significant changes. Significantly, Vice Foreign

86. Shin Ji-hye, 'Seoul court orders Japan to compensate sex slavery victims', *The Korea Herald*, 8 January 2021.

87. Barbara Onnis & Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2015: One step forward and two steps back', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVI/2015, pp. 78-79.

88. 'South Korean court dismisses lawsuit by former «comfort women» against Japan', *The Japan Times*, 21 April 2021.

89. 'Protests against Japan's Fukushima decision spreading in S. Korea', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 April 2021.

90. Sarah Kim, 'Tokyo Olympics map showing Dokdo riles Korea up', *JoongAng Daily*, 2 June 2021.

91. Hyonhee Shin, 'S.Korea holds drills around disputed islets amid row over cancelled Japan talks', *Reuters*, 15 June 2021.

92. Mitch Shin, 'President Moon Decides Against Olympic Visit to Japan', *The Diplomat*, 20 July 2021.



Minister Mori, in November, did not to participate in a press conference with his American and South Korean counterparts, in Washington, to protest against the visit of Seoul's Police Chief to Dokdo.<sup>93</sup>

#### 4.2. *The new U.S. administration and North Korea's foreign policy*

The new administration in Washington represented an important change also for North Korea, to which its leadership had to adapt, after the years of «love and hate» of the Trump era. As already mentioned, during the Congress of the party, in early January, Kim Jong Un made very clear the fact that the regime still considered the United States as its main enemy and an obstacle for the country's development. For this reason – the Leader argued – it was absolutely vital both strengthening the military deterrent – including nuclear weapons – redoubling domestic efforts to achieve economic development despite the external hostile forces.

Starting from these premises it was very complicated to anticipate any positive developments in the relations between North Korea and the United States in the short term. This indication was further reinforced in March by the statements of Kim Yo Jong, regarding the joint military exercises between South Korea and the U.S. In the same days, the White House asserted that the new administration had tried to contact the North Korean regime for dialogue but with no response.<sup>94</sup> The resumption of missile tests in the second half of March certainly did not help in improving the situation.

The announcement in January by the Biden administration of a policy review regarding North Korea created some interest and expectations.<sup>95</sup> The process took several weeks and involved also consultations with South Korea, Japan and other allies, following the early indication of the administration that the new policy would be based on a multilateral approach. Between April and May, when the review was finished but not made public, some details started to emerge: the policy – presented as different from the previous approaches of Obama's strategic patience and Trump's personal diplomacy aimed at obtaining a grand bargain – was characterized as a «calibrated, practical approach», with complete denuclearization as its final goal.<sup>96</sup> Given the lack of precise information, it can be argued that the review was positioned somewhere in between the two previous approaches, using both diplomacy and deterrence, and with an emphasis on multilateralism and cooperation with the allies. If, however, this hypothesis is correct,

93. 'Japan diplomat pulls out of U.S. news conference over islet dispute with S. Korea', *Reuters*, 18 November 2021.

94. Byun Duk-kun, 'N. Korea unresponsive to U.S. calls for dialogue: White House', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 March 2021.

95. 'Blinken says U.S. plans full review of approach to North Korea', *Reuters*, 19 January 2021.

96. The White House, 'Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jen Psaki Aboard Air Force One En Route Philadelphia, PA', *Press Briefings*, 30 April 2021.

the new U.S. North Korean policy would be problematic in itself considering for example the differences between South Korea and Japan regarding North Korea. The lack of specifics and of proactive measures by the U.S. administration after the announcement of the end of the review also signalled that the North Korean issue was not a high priority on the foreign policy agenda of the Biden administration.

In this context, the following months went on without any particular event between North Korea and the United States, excluding the usual rhetorical attacks by senior members of the North Korean regime, and in some cases by the Leader himself. The resumption of missile tests in such a great number from September and the report of the IAEA containing information about the possible resumption of nuclear activities at Yongbyon were a reminder of the fact that a «wait-and-see» approach with North Korea can be very dangerous. It gives the North Korean regime time and opportunities to develop its nuclear and missile arsenals, increasing tensions in the region and strengthening its position for future negotiations.

If the relations with the United States remained generally negative in the first year of Biden's administration, the positive trend between North Korea and China continued also in 2021. Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping exchanged messages in March, when Kim reported the results of the Congress to the Chinese President who in turn reaffirmed his intention to reinforce cooperation between the two countries.<sup>97</sup> The two leaders exchanged messages again in July, for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the of the Chinese Communist Party and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between China and North Korea,<sup>98</sup> and several other times over the course of the year for important celebrations and commemorations.<sup>99</sup> In addition to this consolidation of the political relation between the two leaders and the two regimes, in 2021 also economic and trade exchanges seemed to be restarting after more than a year of total closure and isolation for North Korea. After a sharp increase in the total amount of official trade in March, followed by some fluctuations, it seemed that a recovery trend was consolidating during summer although a broader reopening of the border did not take place over the course of the year.<sup>100</sup>

97. 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Receives Verbal Message from President Xi Jinping', *Rodong Sinmun*, 23 March 2021.

98. 'Xi, Kim exchange congratulatory messages on treaty anniversary', *Global Times*, 11 July 2021.

99. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'Economic stabilization, end-of-war declaration and the ongoing "joint struggle"', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 110-111.

100. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China-Korea Relations: Alliance, Restoration and Summit Commemorations', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 23, No. 2, p. 98.

## 5. *Conclusions*

As easily predictable, the COVID-19 pandemic has remained one of the main factors affecting the economic, social and political life on the Korean Peninsula. After the initial emergency, the two countries had to find ways to manage the situation and adapt to the changes. As it happened in the first phase, South Korea proved to be much more flexible and resilient and was able to implement a series of measures to preserve an almost normal life within the country. On its part, North Korea's regime was forced to keep its borders completely closed, aware – although it was never explicitly recognized – of the deficiencies of its social and health care system in the case of a nationwide and uncontrolled spread of the new disease. In this situation, an explicit recognition of the need to accept help and assistance from abroad would have undermined the internal legitimacy of a regime that was trying to present itself as the defender and provider for the population in a difficult situation caused by external forces. This prioritization of the domestic sphere was reconfirmed once more with the emphasis on self-reliance that characterized the official speeches and documents from the Leader and from the party.

Despite the overall positive management of the COVID-19 crisis in South Korea, the return to a more «normal» situation led also to the resurgence of a strong political polarization within the country. The by-election in the two most important cities – Seoul and Busan – and a year-long presidential campaign inevitably contributed to this situation. While most of the year was characterized by the competition within the two main political sides, aimed to choose the official candidates, when the two contenders finally emerged the focus shifted towards the respective plans for the country after the pandemic. Considering how much both candidates were focusing their political messages on the domestic sphere, this would most likely be one of the main themes for the electoral campaign and the election.

The suspended situation of the previous year remained also a key feature of inter-Korean relations. While the South Korean government continued to look for new – and old – avenues to promote dialogue and cooperation, the North Korean regime seemed to be generally unresponsive. With a presidential election in the South looming on the horizon and a concrete chance for the opposition to obtain control of the government, Pyongyang's unresponsiveness was probably part of its «wait-and-see» approach while waiting to know with certainty which one the counterpart would be. A worrying development came from the resumption of missile tests and the unconfirmed signals of a possible reactivation of the nuclear program in North Korea, considering that these actions might be part of a strategy aimed at raising tension with both Seoul and Washington.

The inauguration of the Biden's presidency in the United States represented another important development that affected the Korean Penin-

sula in 2021. While the new administration certainly worked in order to reinforce the alliance between the United States and South Korea, it also introduced new uncertainties. Significantly, the policy review regarding North Korea did not bring substantial changes to the stalemate that followed the collapse of the Hanoi summit in 2019; no clear strategy was outlined – except for a critic of the previous approaches and a general statement regarding the need to use both deterrence and diplomacy – and the issue seemed to be not a priority for the agenda of the new administration. Another issue that could create tension in the region and on the peninsula concerned the increasing confrontation between China and the United States, with the risk of engulfing also the Korean issues in a great power rivalry and reducing the room for manoeuvre for the Korean governments.