

Inter-Korean Relations: The Yoon Administration in Historical Context

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As South Korea pursues national objectives of security and prosperity, it must also contend with a third strategic imperative – the desire for unification – which complicates its domestic and foreign policymaking. This article illustrates and analyzes change and continuity in the relationship between the two Koreas, placing developments during the administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol in broader historical context. It demonstrates that over the course of South Korea's modern democratic history, each ROK president has offered his or her own approach to North Korea, based on what the president believes are to be the right priorities, sequencing, and processes for inter-Korean relations and on what s/he believes has and has not worked under previous administrations. These approaches, in turn, have combined with domestic political and military developments in North Korea and changing regional and international context to shape the ebb and flow of inter-Korean relations.

Key Words: North Korea, South Korea, Asia, Nuclear, Unification, Security

This article illustrates and analyzes change and continuity in the relationship between the two Koreas, with an emphasis on developments in inter-Korean relations during the administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol.¹ As Scott Snyder (2020, 237) notes, national unification distinguishes Korean politics and foreign policy, as it adds a third, relatively unique strategic objective – one that has been pursued by every Korean government since 1948 – to the national security and economic prosperity objectives

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pursued by national leaders around the world. This article begins with a review of inter-Korean relations and South Korea's policy toward North Korea prior to the Yoon administration. It then reviews developments in North Korean politics and security behavior during Yoon's tenure, as well as changes to unification and inter-Korean policy in South Korea.

I. Inter-Korean Relations: Historical Context

Ramon Pacheco-Pardo (2023, 69) describes the importance of inter-Korean relations in South Korea's foreign policy by calling inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification part of the "triangular core" and a key end of South Korean grand strategy. He notes that over the years, South Korea, bowing to necessity, moved away from a maximalist, Cold War pursuit of reunification by force, and toward a strategy that saw reconciliation as a step toward eventual reunification, and that this has been a consistent approach by South Korean presidents since 1972. In parallel, the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) has strengthened its own defense capabilities, maintained a strong alliance with the United States, and pursued good relations with its regional neighbors in an effort to deter threats from North Korea and maintain peace, stability, and security on the peninsula.

At the same time, however, the approach to and domestic politics of inter-Korean relations have fluctuated, particularly with party alternation in the presidency. As Jacob Reidhead (2018, 31-60) notes, the North Korean human rights movement played a central role in the emergence of this alternation, as the famine in North Korea in the early 1990s led to a humanitarian focus on economic and social rights, while a conservative focus on civil and political rights emerged to parallel that emphasis in the late 1990s. (As he noted, some groups advocated for both.) Over time, progressive and conservative camps came to stake out different positions on "what" -- which rights to emphasize -- with progressives emphasizing economic rights pursued through aid and economic engagement and conservatives focusing on the need for expansion of civil and political rights. The two camps also disagreed on "when," or the order and timing of human rights advocacy, with some arguing that human rights needed to be addressed simultaneous to the nuclear issue, while others countered that progress on the nuclear issue would lead to greater opening for human rights advocacy. A third area of disagreement was over "who": should the government be the main actor in

1 The author thanks Michael Donmoyer, Alyssa Green, and Youngho Shin for research assistance.

inter-Korean relations, or could civil society organizations and NGOs play a role – for example, in providing information to the people of North Korea outside official government channels? Given these shifting approaches, progressive presidents from Kim Dae Jung onward have been criticized both domestically and externally for what critics charge is lack of advocacy for human rights and prioritization of inter-Korean engagement via government-to-government interaction over the rights of the North Korean people (Chubb 2014, 153-96).

As South Korea emerged from military-authoritarian government, President Roh Tae-Woo (1988-1993) launched *Nordpolitik*. Inspired by the *Ostpolitik* of West Germany, *Nordpolitik* focused on building ties with North Korea in trade, human exchanges, and diplomacy, as well as embedding rapprochement between the two Koreas in a web of improved regional ties.² In 1991, the two Koreas signed the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North, which laid out cross-recognition, dialogue, pursuit of peace, and economic and human exchange as key principles of a "special interim relationship" aimed at reconciliation and eventual unification.³ This was followed by the withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from the peninsula and the January 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.⁴ The emergence of the first nuclear crisis in 1993-1994, however, arrested further progress (Wit et al 2005).

Under Kim Young Sam (1993-1998), the emphasis on reunification was tempered somewhat by "cooperative coexistence," a strategy of reassurance that South Korea would not seek absorption of North Korea involuntarily at a time when observers openly speculated about whether North Korea would, like many of its communist counterparts, collapse (Kim Y.S. 1994). Once the 1993-94 nuclear crisis emerged, however, emphasis shifted to the dynamic between Washington and Pyongyang, even following Kim Il Sung's death in July 1994. As events unfolded during the period that led to the October 1994 Agreed Framework (1994), Seoul was briefed and consulted regularly about the negotiations, but was not itself a formal party to them. South Korea (and Japan) did participate in the Korea Economic Development Organization, formed in 1995 and

2 Roh's original speech was in July 1988. For his proposal outlining a Korean commonwealth as a step toward unification, the Korean National Community Unification Formula, see Kim 1989.

3 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North, 13 December 1991, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/rls/or/2004/31012.htm>

4 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, 20 January 1992, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5476/view.do?seq=305870&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=6&titleNm=

responsible for providing light-water reactors to North Korea under the terms of the Agreed Framework; Seoul also pursued efforts to construct a multilateral regional security framework, including Four-Party Talks in 1997. In 1996, however, Pyongyang announced it would cut off inter-Korean communications, and the aftermath of Kim Il Sung's death combined with security challenges on the peninsula created stasis in inter-Korean relations for much of Kim's presidency (Kihl 1997; Pacheco-Pardo 2023, 101-04).

The election of Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003) marked a turning point in inter-Korean relations, as his "Sunshine Policy," known more formally as the North Korea Reconciliation and Cooperation Policy, sought to reduce tensions on the peninsula and incentivize North Korea to open (Kim 1998; Levin and Han 2002). Pacheco-Pardo notes the continuities between Kim Dae Jung's policies and those of his predecessors, even as far back as the North-South Communiqué of July 4, 1972⁵: a Korean-led approach to inter-Korean engagement, peaceful co-existence, the promotion of economic exchange and people-to-people ties, and a gradual process in pursuit of unification. Both people-to-people exchanges and economic projects developed during Kim's presidency: a number of family reunions took place; in December 1998 Mt. Kumgang opened as a tourist site; and in June 2000, Kim Dae Jung visited Pyongyang for the first inter-Korean summit. Kim also toned down the rhetorical criticism of North Korea in official policy documents. These changes, combined with an influx during Kim's presidency of North Koreans who had suffered and escaped during the famine, led to criticism of the Sunshine Policy for "propping up a corrupt and repressive regime" through engagement and aid (Chubb 2014, 17). Such criticisms were exacerbated by revelations that Hyundai had paid \$500 million to North Korea in advance of the summit to facilitate the meeting and to acquire the future right to develop businesses there.⁶

Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), whose election maintained the presidency in liberal hands for another five years, continued in a similar vein, hoping to expand the scope of the Sunshine Policy and accelerate inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. In particular, Roh provided assurances and assistance to Pyongyang that he hoped would make them more integrated with South Korea and more dependent on the international community for survival, which he hoped would in turn moderate some of the DPRK's more threatening behavior (Kim 2005). The Kaesong Industrial Complex opened in 2004, and aid from South Korea to North Korea increased from ~\$263million annually

5 "The July 4 North-South Declaration," 4 July 1972, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/kr20kp720704the20july20420south-north20joint20communiqu3a9.pdf>

6 "Hyundai sorry for paying North Korea," *New York Times*, 17 February 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/17/world/hyundai-sorry-for-paying-north-korea.html>

to ~\$358million annually over the course of Roh's presidency.⁷ Roh also launched a Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative for Peace and Prosperity, intended to embed North Korea in regional multilateral diplomacy, building on a previous effort by Kim Young Sam (the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue); this overlapped in substance with the Six Party Talks that began in August 2003 and were last held in 2007 (Pacheco-Pardo 2023, 116).⁸ Roh also followed Kim Dae Jung in travelling to Pyongyang for an inter-Korean summit in October 2007,⁹ and during his presidency, the ROK Ministry of National Defense stopped their past practice of labelling North Korean an "enemy" in defense white papers (Ibid, 115).

Roh's time in office was followed by a return to a conservative presidency under Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013). Although Lee was more critical of his predecessors' approach to inter-Korean engagement, he did not suspend it entirely, pursuing instead what he termed a "Policy of Mutual Benefit and Common Prosperity" (MOU 2008; see also Suh 2009). Lee's framework emphasized a grand bargain, in which North Korea would denuclearize and, in exchange, South Korea would help it achieve a GDP per capita of \$3,000. The policy was intended not only to reassure North Korea against efforts at coercive absorption, but also, increasingly, to try to bring up North Korea's standard of living and economic circumstances to reduce the massive costs of eventual reunification. Lee also maintained the Roh administration's practice of not calling North Korea an "enemy" in the 2008 Defense White Paper. Under Lee, however, South Korea did emphasize human rights in international fora, joining a UN resolution in 2008 that criticized the DPRK's human rights record.

As inter-Korean tensions escalated – with the killing of a South Korean tourist at Mt. Kumgang in 2008; a 2009 nuclear test and series of missile tests; cyberattacks; the 2010 sinking of the ROK Navy corvette *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island; and Pyongyang again cutting off lines of inter-Korean communication – Lee's government responded by enhancing its defense and cybersecurity deterrence measures and restricting economic exchange. While private talks continued and communication was restored in 2011, North Korea's behavior shifted the Lee government toward an increasingly militarized response, both in terms of its own capabilities and measures pursued under the US-ROK alliance: a new defense plan in 2011, exploration of missile defense, establishment of a cyber command, and a renegotiation that raised South Korea's

7 Ministry of Unification, "Humanitarian Assistance."

8 For background on the Six-Party Talks, see <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/six-party-talks-glance>

9 Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace, and Prosperity, 4 October 2007, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/2007_north-south_-declaration.pdf/file_view

Ballistic Missile Guidelines in an effort to strengthen deterrence (Snyder 2020; Fackler and MacDonald 2010). In December 2011, DPRK leader Kim Jong Il died and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Un.

Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) labelled her approach to North Korea "Trustpolitik," which sought to combine strong deterrence and pressure on Pyongyang with trust-building measures both at the inter-Korean and regional level (Park 2011; see also MOU 2013; Yoo 2013; Noland 2012). At the regional level, Park promoted the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and emphasized aligning peninsular and international policies in pursuit of Korean unification. In a 2014 speech in Dresden, she offered her own formulation of a three-stage process involving humanitarian, economic, and then social-political cooperation. Park both recognized the need to prepare South Korea for unification through the establishment of a Presidential Committee on Unification Preparation and encountered challenges in this, as her framing of unification as a "bonanza" or "jackpot" met with pushback among a public increasingly skeptical of the costs of unification (Yonhap 2014). Moreover, after a series of North Korean nuclear and missile tests, however – including a nuclear test in 2013 (just before Park's inauguration), and two more in 2016 – Park shifted back to emphasizing deterrence. She shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex following the January 2016 test, and encouraged lawmakers to pass the North Korean Human Rights Act (ROK 2016), which had been first proposed in 2005 but not adopted until 2016. (This move inside the ROK followed a the finding by the UN Commission of Inquiry in 2014 that North Korea's systematic and persistent human rights violations met the threshold to be considered crimes against humanity.) In mid-2016, the ROK and the US agreed to deploy Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, and in November South Korea signed an enhanced information-sharing agreement with Japan, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), as part of a broader exploration of enhanced trilateral relations.¹⁰

Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) came into office intending to reverse what he saw as the failures of the two previous conservative presidencies. His "Korean Peninsula of Peace and Prosperity" policy sought both to build on and restart inter-Korean summits, proposed an end-of-war declaration, and pursued a diplomatic approach to North Korea through the Pyeongchang Olympics that culminated in an April 2018 meeting between

¹⁰ *Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Republic of Korea on the Protection of Classified Military Information*, 23 November 2016; see also *Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement Concerning the Nuclear and Missile Threats Posed by North Korea* (ROK Ministry of Defense, Japanese Ministry of Defence, and U.S. Department of State), December 2014.

Moon and Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom (Moon 2021; Panmunjom Declaration 2018). Despite criticism from the newly-inaugurated Trump administration (including of the burden-sharing features of the US-ROK alliance), the Moon administration supported the United States' effort to engage in "leader-level diplomacy" at the Trump-Kim summits in Singapore and Hanoi (in 2018 and 2019). When that approach was unsuccessful, Moon worked with the Trump administration to abolish the Ballistic Missile Guidelines, thereby removing the South Korean missile program's previous limits on range and payload. With North Korean nuclear and missile tests and cyberattacks continuing, Moon continued to augment South Korea's deterrent capabilities, maintaining both sanctions on North Korea and the implementation of THAAD.

Moon was strongly criticized, however, for downgrading human rights in order to try to achieve progress with Pyongyang. While the 2018 defense white paper continued to label North Korea an enemy, the 2020 version dropped that label, generating domestic criticism. Moreover, the Moon government launched what Victor Cha (2023, 253-60) refers to as an internal "rollback" policy, which sought to suppress funding and activities by human rights NGOs, including organizations led by North Korean defector-activists. After Kim Yo Jong complained in May 2020, the Moon government criminalized balloon launches, arguing that these threatened fellow citizens by risking retaliation from the North (Rogin 2020). The Moon government also curtailed or cut funding for human rights groups focused on North Korea, and took access to Hanawon away from the NGO Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), which was the largest source of publicly-available information and testimony from North Korean defectors. The Moon government also returned two North Korean defectors who had sought asylum to North Korea, denying them the normal aspects of due process – access to legal counsel, a hearing, and a chance to appeal – that are afforded to ROK citizens (which North Koreans are under ROK law). This decision sparked widespread criticism and a joint letter of objection from 67 human rights groups (Human Rights Watch et al 2019). Despite domestic and international opprobrium, the government justified such measures on the grounds that they "seriously hindered" official efforts to promote unification (Shim 2020).

II. Inter-Korean Relations under Yoon Suk-yeol

Yoon Suk-yeol, a former prosecutor turned conservative politician, was elected on 9 March 2022, by a relatively narrow margin: 0.73% of the vote, receiving 47.83%

total (Kim 2022; Yonhap 2022). He was inaugurated as the 20th President of the Republic of Korea on 10 May (Office of the President 2024a). During his campaign, Yoon had published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that outlined his foreign policy vision for South Korea, describing his proposed North Korea policy as follows: "Securing deterrence against the North Korean threat is a matter of sovereignty, and Seoul should remain open to additional deployments of THAAD in proportion to North Korea's growing missile threat. A deeper alliance with Washington should be the central axis of Seoul's foreign policy" (Yoon 2022a). He also outlined a vision for incremental negotiations with North Korea, premised on Pyongyang's willingness to achieve complete denuclearization and open opportunities for economic engagement, joint development projects, humanitarian support, and people-to-people exchanges and cross-cultural communication.

A. Yoon's Inter-Korean & Unification Policy: An Overview

Yoon announced his approach to North Korea, which he called the "Audacious Initiative," on Liberation Day, 15 August 2022 (Office of the President 2022; MOFA n.d.; MOU 2024). It outlined a sequence that began with North Korea's return to denuclearization talks, then moved to negotiations, and then pursued eventual complete denuclearization, steps that Pyongyang could take in return for large-scale food aid, support for power and infrastructure (including port and airport modernization), modernization initiatives in the agriculture and health sectors, and assistance with attracting international investment (Seliger 2022; Han et al 2023; Jun 2024; Hong 2024; Baek and Yun 2022).

Yoon made liberal democracy the centerpiece of his approach to inter-Korean relations, similar to his framing of South Korean foreign policy more generally. In March 2024, the Ministry of Unification (MOU 2024a) released a policy agenda that outlined the task of preparing for "unification grounded in liberal democracy," such that the pursuit of unification and pursuit of human rights were not in tension with each other, but rather portrayed the latter as a precondition for the former. To lay "the foundation for a united Korean peninsula that is free and at peace," Yoon's MOU de-emphasized inter-governmental relations and dialogue between North and South Korea, including through a reorganization of the Ministry's cross-border exchange and cultural cooperation activities that also downsized Ministry staff by 81, out of a starting total of ~617 (Fujita 2023).

In a sign of the shift to increased advocacy for human rights, Yoon appointed

conservative scholar Kim Young Ho as the new Minister of Unification, and appointed another professor, Lee Shin-hwa, to the ambassadorial position for international cooperation on North Korean human rights that the Moon government had left vacant (Reuters 2023; Ji 2023a).¹¹ He declared July 14th a new holiday -- North Korean Defectors' Day -- to commemorate the twenty-seventh anniversary of the North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act (Office of the President 2024d).¹² Overall, these measures emphasized educating domestic and international audiences about the reality of conditions inside North Korea, attempting to foster better human rights conditions inside North Korea itself, and successfully integrating North Koreans into South Korean society, including measures to address some of the newer challenges facing North Korean refugees and resettlers in the South (Chestnut Greitens 2024b). Efforts to build international support for North Korean human rights advocacy included co-sponsoring a UN Resolution on North Korean human rights, holding the Korea Global Forum for Peace in 2022, and proposing an International Dialogue on Unification Cooperation (Ministry of Unification 2022; Yeo and Lee 2024).

At a ceremony to mark the 79th anniversary of Korea's Liberation Day, in mid-August 2024, President Yoon announced his administration's official "unification doctrine" (Ministry of Unification 2024b, 2024c; S. Yoon 2024). This doctrine included a three-part vision for a "Unified Republic of Korea": "(1) a country full of happiness where people's freedom and safety are guaranteed; (2) a strong and prosperous country soaring through creativity and innovation; (3) and a country that contributes to global peace and prosperity" (Jun 2024). The doctrine included seven lines of action to achieve this vision:

1. Advancing unification education
2. Improving North Korean human rights
3. Providing humanitarian support for the North Korean people
4. Increasing access to information for the North Korean people
5. Empowering North Korean defectors in the unification process
6. Establishing an inter-Korean working group
7. Securing international support through the Global Korea Forum

11 "Ambassador for North Korea's human rights likely to be reappointed," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 6 July 2023, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/07/06/national/northKorea/korea-north-korea-human-rights/20230706185759469.html>;

12 For full text of the North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act, see Korea Legislation Research Institute, *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act*, 13 January 1997 [amended 26 March 2010], https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=20154&type=part&key=1.

Yoon also promised at the holiday's inaugural ceremony to protect North Korean escapees abroad from forcible and involuntary repatriation to North Korea. These promises arrived amid difficult circumstances: during COVID, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea had dropped precipitously due to border and mobility controls along the migration and escape routes; although numbers have since increased again, they remain far from pre-COVID levels (King 2024). Moreover, in late September 2023, after Pyongyang reopened the border with China, Chinese authorities had reportedly repatriated over 500 North Koreans (Yoon 2023). In 2024, Foreign Minister Cho emphasized the ROK's opposition to repatriation in calls and talks with his Chinese counterpart (A. Park 2024; L. Park 2024).

Under Yoon, some of the policies that had constrained defector-led activism were also reversed: for example, in 2023, South Korea's Constitutional Court struck down the 2020 law that had criminalized sending anti-Pyongyang propaganda leaflets to North Korea, ruling it unconstitutional as an excessive restriction of free speech (Kim 2023; *NKPro* 2020). Minister of Unification Kwon Yong-se had also announced in 2022 that it would lift prohibitions on access to North Korean media contained in the ROK National Security Law, although no action has followed (Weiser 2023).

In other areas, however, rhetoric grew more confrontational: the ROK Ministry of National Defense's White Paper described North Korea as an enemy for the first time in six years, returning to pre-2000 (and 2010-2016) rhetoric (Shin 2023; MND 2022). In 2023, the Ministry of Unification condemned North Korea's unauthorized use of around 30 South Korean facilities in the Kaesong Industrial Complex and requesting these activities stop; MOU subsequently filed a lawsuit with the Seoul Central District Court to seek 44.7 billion KRW (USD 34.2 million) from the DPRK for North Korea's demolition of the inter-Korean joint liaison office at Kaesong in 2020 (S. Kim 2023; Park 2023; Jung and Lee 2023).

B. A Changing North Korean Approach

Like Korean presidents before him, Yoon's search for a formula and pathway to Korean unification were confounded by security developments on the Korean peninsula – as well as by North Korea's own changing policies on unification. Shortly after Yoon announced his "Audacious Initiative," Kim Yo Jong denounced it, criticizing it as a replica of former President Lee Myung-bak's "Denuclearization, Opening and 3000" plan (Shin 2022). Building on past efforts to enhance ideological control and guard against "foreign" cultural subversion, including from South Korea (Chestnut Greitens

and Katzeff Silberstein 2022), Pyongyang passed a "Cultural Protection Language Act" that cracked down on consumption and distribution of South Korean media and on speaking/writing in a "South Korean style," with penalties ranging from two years correctional labor to execution (U.S. Department of State 2024; Mun 2023). In June, Pyongyang rejected a request from the chairwoman of the Hyundai group to visit Mt. Kumgang to hold a memorial (Sokolin 2023).

Efforts to manage the military aspects of inter-Korean competition deteriorated as well, and confrontational rhetoric escalated. In early April 2023, following MOU's complaints about North Korean operation of South Korean facilities in Kaesong, the Korean People's Army (KPA) began refusing to answer regularly scheduled calls through the inter-Korean military hotline (Ji 2023b). South Korean Minister of Defense Shin Won-sik claimed that North Korea had violated the 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement nearly 3,600 times since its signing (E. Kim 2023), and in November, after North Korea launched a military satellite for reconnaissance purposes along the DMZ, South Korea announced partial suspension of the agreement, which North Korea countered by announcing that it would abandon the agreement completely (Ji 2023c; Davenport 2024; Choi 2023).

In December 2023, during North Korea's party plenum (see next paragraph), Kim Jong Un promised steps to enhance range of nuclear and military capabilities, and asserted that North Korea's military forces should "thoroughly annihilate" the United States and South Korea if provoked (H. Kim 2024). In response to DPRK statements promising complete occupation of South Korea if war occurred, Yoon stated, "The current Republic of Korea government is different from any previous government. Our military has an overwhelming response capability... Should North Korea provoke us, we will punish them multiple times as hard" (H. Lee 2024). In early January 2024, both North and South Korea conducted live-fire drills along the inter-Korean border, reflecting the breakdown of the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement (Associated Press 2024).

North Korea took significant steps to revise its own inter-Korean policies beginning in late 2023 (Yeo 2024). In December, during the 9th Enlarged Plenum of the 8th Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Committee, Kim Jong Un declared a "new stand on north-south relations and the reunification policy."¹³ Subsequently, on 15 January 2024, Kim said that he no longer considered South Korea a "partner of reconciliation and reunification" and ordered constitutional revisions to remove references to reunification,

13 *Rodong Sinmun*, "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee," <http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?MTVAMjAyMy0xMi0zMS1IMDEzQA==>; see also Frank 2024.

instead defining South Korea as North Korea's "primary foe and invariable principal enemy" (Syed 2024)¹⁴ Throughout 2024, North Korea took steps to demonstrate its intent to abandon pursuit of unification, including demolition of the Arch of Reunification in Pyongyang (Reuters 2024b; Chung and Reddy 2024). North Korean state media reported in fall 2024 that the Supreme People's Assembly had amended the constitution, but did not disclose details (S.Y. Kim 2024). In reports the same month on the destruction of inter-Korean infrastructure, DPRK state media noted that Pyongyang's actions were consistent with redefining South Korea as a "hostile state" (KCNA 2024).

In response to the resumption of anti-Pyongyang leafleting in 2024 (following the Constitutional Court's ruling in 2023), North Korea began to launch balloons carrying trash towards South Korea in May. Several waves of balloon flights occurred over the course of the summer, with South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff reporting a total of 5,500 trash balloons on 22 occasions (Brennan 2024; Kiyada et al 2024). In response to these launches, South Korea resumed loudspeaker broadcasts across the DMZ, which had been suspended as part of the 2018 Comprehensive Military Agreement; North Korea then installed its own loudspeakers (T.H. Kim 2024b; S.J. Lee 2024).

C. North Korean Security Buildup and Behavior

Inter-Korean relations throughout Yoon's presidency were also affected by ongoing North Korean efforts to develop and advance their defense capabilities and by a number of provocations that negatively affected the security environment on the Korean peninsula.

Efforts to develop North Korea's nuclear forces and doctrine continued throughout Yoon's tenure. At a September 2022 session of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), Kim Jong Un announced an update to the "Law on the DPRK's Nuclear Forces," which passed by unanimous vote (Hwang 2022; Nikitin 2023). The law explicitly permitted first use of nuclear weapons during conventional warfare if the regime's survival was threatened, and outlined five specific conditions for a pre-emptive nuclear strike (E. Kim 2022; Watanabe 2024; Davenport 2022). The SPA also unanimously adopted an amendment in September 2023 that enshrined the country's first-use nuclear policy into the constitution: a symbolic move given the law that had been passed the year before, but which signaled North Korea's intention to permanently remain a nuclear weapons state (Choi and Shin 2023). These developments were, in turn, countered by efforts

¹⁴ Rodong Sinmun, "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 101th Session of 14th SPA," <http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?MTVAMjAyNC0wMS0xNi1IMDAxQA==>. See also Syed 2024.

by the US-ROK alliance to strengthen extended deterrence and collaboration on nuclear issues (detailed in the next subsection).

Other developments sought to enhance North Korea's missile, satellite, and drone capabilities. In December 2022, North Korea fired two medium-range ballistic missiles from Sohae, North Pyongan, on North Korea's east coast (Yang and Fujita 2022). The test, which was overseen and observed by Kim Jong Un, was described by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) as "an important final-stage test for the development of reconnaissance satellites" (Shin 2022b; Liu et al 2022). These tests capped an unprecedented year of missile testing by the DPRK, which fired more than 90 cruise and ballistic missiles in 2022 (~25% of the total 270 such tests that had been conducted since the 1980s). Analysts tracking these tests assessed that they communicated Kim's intent to use nuclear capabilities "early in a conflict" if necessary (Dotto et al 2022).

Missile launches occurred alongside other provocations that heightened tension on and around the Korean peninsula. In October 2022, most likely in response to the redeployment of the aircraft carrier *USS Ronald Reagan* – itself a response to North Korean missile tests – eight North Korean jets and four bombers crossed the special reconnaissance line near the inter-Korean border and conducted air-to-surface drills, leading South Korea to scramble 30 jets in response (Cha and Kim 2022; Choi 2022). In early November, amid a record-breaking pace for missile launches and artillery firing, and in response to a combined aerial exercise by the U.S and South Korea that also included Australia, North Korea conducted a reported 180 flights north of the Military Demarcation Line; South Korea scrambled 80 aircraft in response (Choi and Smith 2022; USFK 2022). In December, North Korea flew multiple drones over Seoul, Incheon, and Gimpo for several hours, the first known incident in the past five years in which North Korean drones had entered South Korean airspace. The failure of 20 planes deployed to intercept these drones led to an apology by the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff and an acknowledgment that the South Korean armed forces had limited capability to detect and strike small spy drones, as well as a statement by President Yoon that military readiness was "greatly lacking" (Lee 2022; Armstrong 2022).

Testing and launches continued in 2023. The DPRK conducted a total of five ICBM tests: a Hwasong-15 launch in February, a Hwasong-17 launch in March, and Hwasong-18 launches in April, July, and December (Cha and Kim 2023b). A series of missile launches in March 2023 following the annual joint US-ROK Freedom Shield Exercise sought to demonstrate North Korea's ability to target Seoul with nuclear weapons (J. Kim 2023). In September 2023, North Korea also fired two long-range strategic cruise missiles for a "tactical nuclear attack virtual launch exercise," ostensibly in response to

the U.S.-ROK Ulchi-Freedom Shield exercise (Reddy 2023; Lee 2023; U.S. Department of Defense 2023).

Over the course of 2023, North Korea also conducted three launches intended to field its first military reconnaissance satellite, the "Malligyong-1." The first, in late May, failed at the second stage and fell into the West Sea, where it was salvaged by the ROK military (KCNA 2023; Kuhn 2023; H. Shin 2023b). A second attempt followed in late August (KCNA 2023b; Associated Press 2023); the third attempt, in November, succeeded (KCNA 2023c; M. Lee 2023b). In December, South Korea's defense ministry announced a successful military-reconnaissance satellite launch from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, using a SpaceX Falcon-9 rocket (KoreaPro 2023; Ministry of National Defense 2023; H. Kim 2023). In May 2024, an attempt to launch the Malligyong-1-1 spy satellite into orbit from Sohae using a "new-type" rocket failed in the first stage (Xu 2024).

North Korea also pursued advances in drone technology. In addition to the drone flight into South Korean airspace in late December 2022, KCNA reported in March 2023 that North Korea's Academy of Defense Science conducted a test of an underwater nuclear attack drone (the Haeil-1) in Wonsan Bay off North Korea's east coast; while the test employed a non-nuclear payload, the drone itself is reportedly designed to use radioactive waves to destroy naval strike groups and port facilities (KCNA 2023d; Choi and Park 2023). Kim Jong Un supervised additional tests of unmanned attack drones in August 2024 (Al-Jazeera 2024). While ROK analysts previously assessed that Pyongyang's claims about North Korean drone capabilities were exaggerated, Kim Jong Un's November 2024 order to mass produce unmanned attack drones, and reported co-production of drones with Russia in the context of enhanced defense cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, have heightened concern (Choe 2024).

D. The US-ROK Alliance & Trilateral Coordination

Part of Yoon's approach to deterrence on the Korean peninsula was to strengthen both the US-ROK alliance and trilateral coordination with the United States and Japan. Yoon met with U.S. President Joseph Biden during Biden's May 2022 trip to South Korea – less than two weeks into Yoon's time in office – and conducted a state visit to the United States in April 2023 to mark the 70th anniversary of the US-ROK alliance (White House 2022, 2023). Military exercises expanded in scope and scale: for example, the May-June 2023 joint live-fire drills (called "combined annihilation firepower drills") were the largest of the eleven held since 1977, including 2500 troops and 610 weapons

systems (Tamkin 2023; H. Kim 2023b).

During Yoon's state visit to Washington, the two presidents announced, in the "Washington Declaration," the establishment of Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) "to strengthen extended deterrence, discuss nuclear and strategic planning, and manage the threat to the nonproliferation regime" posed by North Korea (White House 2023b). The U.S. and the ROK subsequently held an Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) meeting in Washington in September 2023 (Department of State 2023). In response to North Korea's changed nuclear doctrine in 2022-23, the United States and South Korea also announced in late 2023 that they would incorporate nuclear operation scenario training in Ulchi Freedom Guardian 2024 – the first simulation of North Korea's use of nuclear weapons in this context (J. Kim et al 2023).

Coordination on nuclear issues accelerated in 2024. In June, the two countries held the third NCG meeting (U.S. Department of Defense 2024), and in July, Presidents Biden and Yoon announced that the two countries had signed the "ROK-U.S. Guidelines for Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Operations on the Korean Peninsula" as a major milestone in ongoing efforts to strengthen cooperation on extended deterrence (U.S. Embassy 2024; H. Kim 2024b). Additional activities continued at the working level: an NCG inter-agency table-top simulation in September to enhance "cooperative decision-making about nuclear deterrence and planning for potential nuclear contingencies on the Korean Peninsula," and the 56th Security Consultative Meeting in Washington in October (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2024). Additionally in October, the U.S. and ROK reached agreement on a new Special Measures Agreement on cost-sharing for 2026-2030, which was approved by the ROK National Assembly in late November (U.S. Embassy 2024b). In other areas, Yoon continued to pursue defense autonomy for South Korea – for example, maintaining the goal of OPCON transfer held consistently by South Korean presidents.

During Yoon's presidency, the Korean government also took steps to significantly alter the landscape of trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan.¹⁵ In August 2023, President Biden hosted President Yoon and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida for a summit at Camp David, where the three leaders agreed to increase cooperation on security and economic issues (White House 2023c; Klingner 2023). In June 2024, the three countries' defense ministers met to review progress since the Camp David summit; they also announced a new, multi-domain trilateral exercise (Freedom Edge) to be held later that summer. In late July, the parties

15 This paragraph draws on Chestnut Greitens 2025.

signed a Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework (TCSF), which outlined plans for institutionalized policy consultation, information-sharing, exercises, and other cooperation (U.S. Department of Defense 2024b). In November, they released a joint statement announcing the creation of a Trilateral Secretariat to implement the TCSF's activities, including (among other activities) efforts to "promote interoperability by sharing real-time data on North Korea's ballistic missile launches" and to strengthen ballistic missile defense capabilities (U.S. Embassy 2024c).

E. The Russia Factor

Tightening cooperation between Russia and North Korea during this period, especially after Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, strengthened the connection between inter-Korean relations and the global dimensions of South Korea's security policies. In September 2023, Kim Jong Un met with Putin, who stated that Russia would be willing to provide North Korea with satellite technology in exchange for weapons and munitions (Cha and Kim 2023; Regan et al 2024). There was some subsequent debate among analysts about whether Russian technical assistance contributed to Pyongyang's successful military-satellite launch in November (Lee and Chae 2024; Van Diepen 2023), leading the National Assembly to adopt a resolution (138-1, 13 abstentions) calling for the immediate cessation of arms trade between North Korea and Russia – a rare moment of consensus in South Korea's polarized political environment. After the signing of the Russia-DPRK Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, President Yoon condemned the arrangement as a "blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions," and officials suggested that South Korea would consider supplying arms to Ukraine (S. Kim 2024; T.H. Kim 2024). Yoon subsequently agreed to pursue a coordinated response with NATO (Office of the President 2024c). When the South Korean National Intelligence Service reported in fall 2024 that North Korea had in fact sent around 11,000 troops to Russia to fight in its war with Ukraine, President Yoon and Polish President Andrzej Duda jointly condemned the deployment (Kim and Lee 2024).

These developments in South Korean foreign and defense policy occurred in the context of a broader regional and global security trend. In July 2024, South Korea was one of the "Indo-Pacific 4" (alongside Australia, New Zealand, and Japan) that participated in this group's third NATO summit as well as attending the group's first NATO Defense Ministerial Meeting in October 2024. Overall, developments that tightened the coupling between inter-Korean relations and the global dimensions of South Korean foreign policy paralleled and contributed to a broader trend of deepening

inter-relationship between security issues in Europe and Asia (Chestnut Greitens 2025).

F. Yoon's Impeachment & Inter-Korean Relations

Yoon Suk-yeol's December 2024 declaration of martial law, and his subsequent impeachment, altered the landscape of Korean politics and foreign policy, as well as inter-Korean relations. Yoon's declaration of martial law justified his action by citing "the threats of the North Korean communist forces" and vowed "to eradicate the shameless pro-North anti-state forces that plunder the freedom and happiness of our people and to safeguard the free constitutional order" ("Full Text" 2024). The second and successful impeachment motion against Yoon accused him of antagonizing/provoking North Korea, amid reports that his government had ordered drones into North Korean airspace in October 2024 and had also considered other measures that might induce North Korean belligerence in order to justify martial law.¹⁶ At the time of writing, in early 2025, his impeachment awaited a decision from the Constitutional Court, and investigations into the actions leading up to and surrounding the declaration of martial law were ongoing.

While Yoon's move appeared motivated by his frustration with divided government and domestic opposition, especially following his party's losses in the April 2024 legislative elections, the declaration sent shock waves through the international system, particularly in the United States, which had taken seriously Yoon's assertion of liberal democratic values as a guiding principle of South Korean foreign policy and the US-ROK alliance (Chestnut Greitens 2024a; Lee 2024). In South Korea, it brought back memories of rhetoric during the ROK's period of military-authoritarian rule that linked pro-democracy activism to North Korean subversion.

As martial law and its political consequences unfolded, Pyongyang appeared to act and speak with relative caution. A November 2024 paper released by KCNA had accused Yoon of raising the risk of nuclear war on the peninsula, citing the breakdown of the Comprehensive Military Agreement, measures to strengthen nuclear cooperation with the U.S., and strengthening ties with Japan and NATO (Smith 2024), and North Korean media had reported relatively frequently on anti-Yoon protests. As events unfolded, however, Pyongyang initially waited to comment. Eventually, on December 11, *KCNA* and *Rodong Shinmun* referred to Yoon's declaration as an "insane act" of "fascist

¹⁶ Special forces units that were deployed to the National Assembly in the wake of Yoon's declaration were also allegedly told they were activating to deal with a threat from North Korea. Investigations into these issues are ongoing at the time of writing this article. See Park and Reddy 2024; L. Kim 2024; Davenport 2025.

dictatorship" (Shim 2024) and five days later, they referred to his televised December 12 remarks as "spliced with lies and obstinacy" (Reuters 2024). In early January 2025, KCNA reported that President Yoon's impeachment plunged South Korea into an "abyss of political upheaval" (J. Park 2025).

At the same time, the ROK Ministry of Unification appeared to be focused on stability. In 2024, MOU had reported to President Yoon that it would seek to induce change in North Korea and increase the North Korean people's access to outside information. In January 2025, the Ministry told acting President Choi Sang-mok that it would prioritize stable management of inter-Korean relations in 2025, given what it said were "fluid and uncertain external and internal conditions" (B. Park 2025). At the time of writing, the future of inter-Korean relations awaits the outcome of the Constitutional Court's decision and a potential change in South Korea's leadership.

III Conclusion

As South Korea pursues security and prosperity, it must contend with a third strategic imperative – the desire for unification – which complicates its domestic and foreign policymaking. This article has demonstrated that over the course of South Korea's modern democratic history, each ROK president has offered his or her own approach to North Korea, based on what the president believes are to be the right objectives, sequencing, and process for inter-Korean relations and on what he or she believes has worked and not worked in the approaches adopted by previous administrations. These approaches, in turn, have combined with domestic political and military developments inside North Korea and changing regional and international context to shape the specific ebb and flow of inter-Korean relations.

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