

GUEST EDITORIAL

Framing Sustainable Security on the Korean Peninsula

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On 27 July 2023, both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) commemorated the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement, albeit in significantly divergent ways. While in the South, people gathered to remember the sacrifices of the soldiers—both domestic and foreign—that fought in the conflict, the North took a more triumphant tone. The DPRK regime held a major military parade to celebrate what it calls 'Victory Day'.¹ The signing of the armistice agreement turned both the civil-and-proxy war on the Korean Peninsula into a protracted frozen conflict. For seventy years now, a sense of insecurity has continued to cast a shadow over the Korean Peninsula, which to this day represents a potential flashpoint not only for more limited local skirmishes but for potentially larger regional and even global conflicts. This is partly a consequence of the persistent presence of military manpower and resources for deterrence purposes in a geographically limited space, which exponentially increases the risk of escalation triggered both by technical errors and misinterpretations of the other party's intentions. But more than that, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula has long been acutely sensitive to larger-scale contestations between great powers, currently the United States and China.

The anniversary of the armistice comes at a time of critical juncture for the two Koreas in relation to traditional and non-traditional security challenges. While North Korea steadfastly commits to holding on to—and even growing—its nuclear arsenal, there recently has been an increasing amount of external support flowing from Moscow to Pyongyang in the wake of the former's war on Ukraine. As speculation grows as to whether this rapprochement could last, so far this convergence of interests appears mutually beneficial with Pyongyang apparently providing arms and ammunition to Moscow, in exchange perhaps for technical assistance on missile and satellite technology.²

South of the Demilitarised Zone, the ROK has found itself in the middle of intense global technological competition which not only has yielded economic but also demographic reverberations as well. Faced with a shrinking population due to collapsing birth rates, Seoul has turned to newly emerging technological solutions. This high dependence on information technology, however, comes with a cost in terms of increasing vulnerability to cyber crime or other malicious

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activity that both has the potential to imperil users and undermine economic development as well as defense infrastructure.³ In order to buttress the potential threats posed by North Korea and other malignant actors in the cyber domain, South Korea has successfully sought to deepen its ties with the United States, European Union, and NATO to that security arena as well.

Despite the growing importance of non-conventional security issues, conventional security has once again come to dominate global headlines in the wake of recent events such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the renewal of violent conflict between Israel and Hamas. Recent events, however, are also deeply intertwined with longer-term developments such as strategic competition between the United States and China and the widening cracks in the liberal international order seemingly underline the 'revenge' of hard power in international politics.⁴ The Korean Peninsula is anything but immune to these developments, on the contrary, it is acutely sensitive to changes in the global conflict barometer. Scholarship, policymaking, and commentary on the fragile status quo on the Korean Peninsula has thus historically been and continues to be dominated by the issue of the imbalance in conventional and nuclear arms between the two Koreas as well as the security guarantees afforded by their allies.⁵ These issues certainly carry weight but the security environment on the peninsula comprises a more complex set of challenges and honing in on conventional security risks creating a myopic view of the region and consequently translates to a narrower band of policy approaches.

In this issue entitled "Framing Sustainable Security on the Korean Peninsula", we seek to broaden this focus and bring non-traditional security considerations into the conversation regarding traditional ones, which remain salient to the region. The issue brings together an exciting selection of scholars and practitioners who have generated timely and critical insights into the complex security environment of not just the peninsula itself but East Asia more broadly.

Taken together, these contributions represent a holistic approach to regional and global security issues that goes beyond the traditional focus on hard power to encompass economic, environmental, political, technological, and human factors in their investigations. The two original articles and one policy insight comprising the special issue are tied together by two overarching research questions. First, how have domestic, regional, and global players understood the political, economic, and military (in)stabilities of the Korean Peninsula? And second, in what ways have they sought to build sustainable and lasting security in a variety of arenas? In exploring these questions, we seek to contribute not only to the academic literature on security on the Korean Peninsula but provide policymakers with the knowledge and tools to hone their approaches in the region and beyond it.

Edward Howell's contribution sheds light on how recent developments have (re)shaped the Korean Peninsula's security environment through the lens of securitisation theory. In particular, he investigates the contrasting ways in which Seoul and Pyongyang have reacted to two ongoing emergencies with global implications, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine War, and what this can tell us about how both states conceptualise security in relation to both public health and conventional conflict. Howell draws on an extensive array of primary and secondary sources to demonstrate how their respective responses have not been entirely reactive but rather have been shaped by historical contingencies in the longer-term. This provides a much-needed intervention into the discourse by reminding scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that tackling

security considerations—not just in the Korean Peninsula but beyond it as well—requires addressing longstanding issues alongside immediate ones.

Tackling the question of security in the broader East Asian region, David Hundt, Baobang He, and Dominic Simonelli explore how policymakers in Seoul and their counterparts in the private sector have sought to deal with the issue of economic coercion from China through three case studies. They examine the varying fates of Lotte Group, the *Hallyu* industry, and the semiconductor sector, all with significant exposure to the Chinese market following the unofficial boycott in response to Seoul's installation of THAAD anti-ballistic missile systems. Their study holds important lessons as to how middle and small powers can successfully respond to the deployment of coercive statecraft by great powers. More specifically, the authors highlight how the example of South Korea demonstrates that less powerful actors can exercise agency in asymmetric economic relationships short of decoupling through strategies of de-risking and diversification.

Former European Union Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, Michael Reiterer, provides the special issue with a vital policy insight that draws from his extensive diplomatic experience to provide recommendations on how South Korea and the European Union can enhance cooperation on the issue of cyber security. Reiterer cogently elucidates the centrality of digital technologies for operating critical infrastructures, conducting commerce, maintaining people-to-people and state-to-state communications amongst myriad other functions highlights the importance of security within cyberspace. His calls for the European Union and South Korea to go beyond identifying areas of cooperation and to take tangible steps towards building their cyber resilience through a range of measures such as regulation of emerging technologies, intelligence and cyber defence cooperation, and cyber governance are particularly applicable to the Korean Peninsula given South Korea's status as a technology hub and North Korea's turn to cyber-crime to circumvent international sanctions and fund its operations and cyber-warfare as a new tool in its military arsenal.

The action-reaction cycle that has long dominated the Korean Peninsula highlights the difficulties of moving beyond a particular model of security thinking that emphasises hard power politics. Achieving security on the peninsula and East Asia more broadly requires thinking and acting beyond these confines. As our special issue hopes to bring to light, attention must be paid to issues of not just traditional security but non-traditional security as well. Given their deeply intertwined nature, the way forward for sustainable security on the Korean Peninsula requires complex, holistic, and multifaceted approaches.

To round out this introduction to the issue, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the authors whose dedication and professionalism made this important contribution to the literature possible. I am also particularly grateful to the Korea Europe Review editorial team and especially to Dr. Christoph Michael for his skilled guidance and support.

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