

U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA:

***FROM CONFRONTATION
TO PEACEBUILDING***

Women Cross DMZ | October 2022

U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi held a press conference with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen during Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. The visit reflected deepening tensions between the United States and China. Photo by Chien Chih-Hung / Office of the President



U.S.-China Competition and the Korean Peninsula: From Confrontation to Peacebuilding

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Women Cross DMZ, a leading organization in the global movement for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, produced the present report to explore how rising U.S.-China tensions threaten the prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula and, conversely, how peacebuilding in Korea offers an opportunity for cooperation between the U.S. and China.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasing tensions between the United States and China threaten to undermine peace and stability in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. While the United States has recruited South Korea and Japan in an alliance against China, North Korea has aligned itself more closely with China and Russia, thus exacerbating the division between the two Koreas. If they don't change course, the United States and China appear to be on a dangerous trajectory.

Women Cross DMZ produced this report to show how the so-called great-power competition is impacting the prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula and to explore how peacebuilding offers a crucial opportunity for cooperation between the United States and China.

Among the key findings:

- » The Korean Peninsula has become a major fault line for rising U.S.–China tensions. The U.S. military presence in South Korea, ostensibly aimed at deterring North Korean provocations, also plays a key role in encircling China. Meanwhile, Beijing supports Pyongyang as a bulwark against U.S. encroachment. As such, U.S.–China tensions have had a chilling effect on relations between North and South Korea.
- » Beginning with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," the United States has increased its military presence in Northeast Asia and has focused on strengthening its alliances to counter China's growing rise. China has perceived this as a direct threat and, accordingly, has taken more aggressive actions in the region.
- » A zero-sum U.S. strategy toward China limits the space for cooperation and has led to a cycle of provocations that could easily escalate into a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. The hard-line U.S. approach has also translated into bloated military budgets across the region while neglecting human security priorities, including in South Korea, where military spending has seen a sharp increase and weapons development has intensified. Japan is also becoming more militarized as a result of the U.S.–China rivalry.
- » The deepening crisis surrounding North Korea's weapons program has made the country increasingly economically dependent on China. Additionally, stringent sanctions imposed on North Korea coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the North Korean economic crisis. Continued U.S.–China tensions are likely to keep North Korea economically reliant on China. Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further entrenched North Korea's isolation and alignment with Russia and China and has deepened geopolitical fault lines.
- » The United States and China must establish a more cooperative relationship: the resolution of the Korean War is an obvious area in which the two countries could work together. Cooperation toward peace in Korea would also remove a key point of contention between them and lay the foundation for addressing urgent global crises such as climate change and pandemics.
- » The United States must pivot away from its current zero-sum approach toward a human security framework that improves the living conditions and well-being of all people, prioritizes the resolution of conflict through diplomatic means, and avoids war at all costs.
- » U.S. foreign policy geared toward military and economic confrontation with China does not address legitimate concerns about the repression and human rights violations of the Chinese government and may only serve to create a "rally-round-the-flag" effect in China.
- » It is urgent for the Korean War to be resolved by replacing the armistice with a peace agreement. Without a peace agreement, renewed conflict could break out at any time, and such a conflict would most likely involve the United States and China, with a catastrophic death toll that would claim millions of lives.
- » With its close relationship to North Korea, China plays a crucial role in establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula and in broader regional peace and security. China's diplomatic leadership on this conflict could help improve its image as a peacemaker.
- » Overcoming the ever-deepening structures of militarism in East Asia requires moving beyond state-to-state diplomacy and involving the participation of civil society, especially women's peace groups. A broader regional response is also required to achieve peace and denuclearization in Northeast Asia.

Introduction

In recent years, competition between the United States and China has increased significantly, not only in the military-security sphere but also with regard to global governance, trade and investment, national economic and industrial policy, developmental assistance, and diplomatic relations. In response to China's expanding influence, the United States is seeking to build an anti-China alliance in East Asia. While the reaction to such efforts among countries in the region—most of which have strong economic relations with China—has been ambivalent, the majority has nonetheless deepened their military ties with the United States. This relentless militarization in the context of growing U.S.-China competition has heightened the risk of war and thus poses a significant risk to peace and prosperity in the region.

This has been especially true for the Korean Peninsula. Both the United States and China are signatories to the 1953 Armistice Agreement, which halted active fighting but did not permanently end the Korean War. This ongoing state of war has instead fueled an arms race for the past seven decades. As U.S.-China tensions have increased, so, too, has the division of the Korean Peninsula: North Korea has aligned itself even more closely with China and Russia, while South Korea has become increasingly integrated into a trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan aimed at countering China's rise. While it may be too early to say that the era of a "new Cold War" has arrived, this possibility is real and would be disastrous for human rights, democracy, and peaceful development in Korea and in the region.

As we argue in this report, the Biden administration must invest energy and resources in peacebuilding in the region rather than in a seemingly limitless arms race in order to avert a devastating war. While U.S.-China tensions have dangerous implications for the Korean Peninsula, peacebuilding can conversely serve as an opportunity for cooperation between the United States and China. In particular, working together to end the 70-year Korean War by replacing the armistice with a peace agreement would be a major step toward reducing tensions not only on the Korean Peninsula but also between the United States and China. This requires redefining security away from zero-sum competition toward a human security framework, taking a broader regional approach to peacebuilding, and including civil society and women in the peacebuilding process. Now, more than ever, it's time to prioritize diplomatic solutions to conflict and reduce military spending to meet the most urgent crises facing humanity.

Korea as the Fault Line of East Asian Geopolitics

The Korean Peninsula has long played a pivotal role in East Asian geopolitics. In the late 16th century, Japanese military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea as part of a broader effort to overturn the hierarchical regional order centered on Ming China. In the early 20th century, the peninsula formed the corridor through which imperial Japan facilitated its military expansion into China. Of greatest consequence to the current situation, the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 divided East Asia into two mutually antagonistic blocs. In addition to the decision by the United States to defend the newly established South Korean regime, the war also led to the U.S. commitment to defend the island of Taiwan and to the onset of Japan's post-World War II economic recovery. These countries were connected through the so-called hub and spokes diplomatic alliance system and became deeply penetrated by U.S. military structures, including through operational control of South Korean armed forces, the Seventh Fleet patrolling the Taiwan Straits, and the placing of military bases on their territories.

Mirroring this U.S.-centered alliance system was the looser grouping of communist countries, namely China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union. While these regimes were all one-party states, with similar institutions and ideologies, their alignment was limited by the deepening Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s and North Korea's efforts to maintain a degree of independence within this dispute. Although nearly seven decades have passed since the signing of the Korean War armistice, these broader structures of geopolitical competition have prevented a peaceful resolution of the unended war.



While the rapprochement between Washington and Beijing in the 1970s and the latter's subsequent policy of "reform and opening up" provided a partial respite from this inter-bloc competition, the interests of outside powers in the Korean Peninsula have remained largely unaltered. For the United States, the presence of its military in South Korea ostensibly aims to deter North Korean provocations but also plays a key role in the encirclement of China. The Camp Humphreys military base in Pyeongtaek, south of Seoul, is not only the world's largest overseas U.S. military base but also the one situated closest to the Chinese mainland. While trade between China and South Korea saw a sharp increase following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, Beijing's support for Pyongyang as a bulwark against U.S. encroachment has remained a consistent objective. China came to North Korea's aid during the Korean War because of the threat posed by U.S. forces at its borders; a consistent concern since then has been that Korean reunification in the form of the South's absorption of the North may lead to U.S. military presence on China's doorstep.

China's rapid development and the narrowing power gap between the United States and China has had a chilling effect on relations between North and South Korea.¹ Yet the two Koreas are by no means passive bystanders to this ongoing conflict. The emergence of two regimes locked in competition with each other has given way to a self-reproducing logic, referred to as the "division system," in which those power elites benefiting from the division perpetuate the status quo under the pretext of state secu-

urity.² Due to such structural constraints, peace and solidarity in East Asia are closely linked to dismantling the Korean division system.³

U.S.-China Relations: Toward a "New Cold War"?

Recent tensions between the United States and China represent a marked shift from the situation at the onset of China's reform and opening up in the early 1980s when the United States sought to integrate China into the liberal international order. At that time, the United States believed that this would have a transformative impact on the country and encourage its evolution toward becoming a "responsible stakeholder." At the same time, however, the United States hedged against the possibility that China might challenge U.S. hegemony by strengthening America's alliances and maintaining an ever-larger military presence in Asia.⁴ This strategy of engagement coupled with hedging continued under the George W. Bush administration, the most tangible outcome of which was China's accession into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This led to a rapid deepening of the country's integration into the global economy.

However, the Obama administration made a partial departure from this strategy through its so-called "pivot to Asia", as it sought to shift U.S. attention away from the Middle East toward a closer focus on Asia. The pivot reflected the fact that the Obama administration had increasingly come to view China as a potential geopolitical



Chinese Volunteer Army troops crossed the Amrok/Yalu River to aid North Korean forces during the Korean War. China came to North Korea's aid because of the threat posed by U.S. forces at its borders.

contender. From the turn of the century, Beijing pursued its “going out” strategy, whereby domestic state-owned enterprises were encouraged to invest abroad to secure cheaper labor and resources and achieve geographical or institutional proximity to markets.⁵ This growing outward orientation also led China to establish itself as an “emerging donor.” The Belt and Road Initiative adopted in 2013 sought to further establish China’s role in global development through aiding the development of infrastructure in nearly 70 countries. China has also sought to increase its influence in existing institutions of global governance while establishing its own alternatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China also engaged in land reclamation efforts and made broad claims of sovereignty over large swaths of the South China Sea and its rich resources while taking an increasingly aggressive posture over Taiwan.

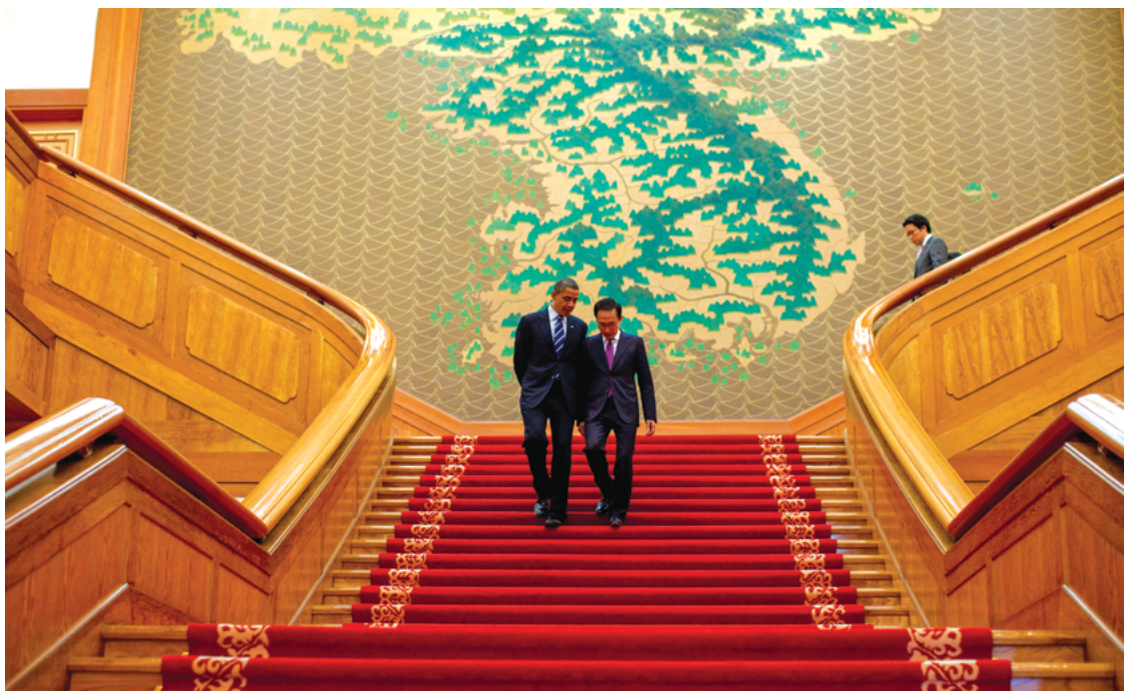
The “pivot to Asia” had economic as well as security dimensions. The main economic pillar was the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was a proposed trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States. In terms of the military dimensions of the pivot, there was an overall decline in annual U.S. military spending, from \$752 billion in 2011 to \$634 billion in 2015. However, this was more of a reflection of the scaling down of the large land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, obfuscating the fact that the Obama administration modernized the U.S. nuclear arsenal and invested in new

bombers, ballistic missile submarines, and cruise missiles.⁶ The Obama administration made the decision to base 60 percent of nuclear and high-tech naval vessels, including aircraft carriers, in the Pacific. In addition to consolidating Camp Humphreys in South Korea, the United States opened a new base in Darwin, Australia, and negotiated the use of bases in the Philippines. The United States also engaged in military exercises with regional partners, with China as the explicit target.⁷

However, 2016 saw a return to an upward trend in U.S. military spending, which continued under Donald Trump and reached \$800 billion in 2021. While at much lower levels, Chinese military spending also saw sustained growth, from \$96 billion in 2009 to \$293 billion in 2021. While the Chinese military is still far behind the United States in terms of its spending and military capabilities—particularly in the area of aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons, combat aircraft, and nuclear submarines—competition between the two countries is driving an arms race, particularly in the area of strategic nuclear missiles, hypersonic weapons technologies, and warships. Missile defense has been a particularly potent driver of U.S.–China competition and has exacerbated the security dilemma between the two countries as well as implicated U.S. allies in the region. The deployment of Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, for example, has heightened Chinese suspicions regarding the nature and purpose of the U.S. alliance system. Beijing sees the United States as exaggerating the threat posed by North



President Barack Obama and President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea walked together following a bilateral meeting at the Blue House in Seoul, South Korea, November 11, 2010. As part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” the United States expanded its military presence in the region to counter China’s growing rise. Credit: Official White House photo by Pete Souza





Both the United States and China have increased their military spending in recent years, although the U.S. far out-spends China. Competition between the two countries is driving an arms race.

Korea for the purpose of achieving “full spectrum dominance” and undermining China’s own nuclear deterrent.⁸

The U.S.–China rivalry is also driving the further militarization of Japan.⁹ Conservative legislators in Japan have argued for more defense spending and strengthened military capabilities. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party has called on the government to acquire attack capability, double the defense budget to 2 percent or more of GDP, and consider the possibility of Japan sending lethal weapons to countries in combat.¹⁰

The “pivot to Asia,” did little more, however, than increase China’s own threat perceptions and encourage Beijing to take more aggressive actions in its neighborhood. As a result, growing voices within the United States have been calling for a “delinking” from the Chinese economy as a means of containing both China’s rise and its negative impacts on the U.S. economy. The Trump administration represented the ascendancy of such voices and sought to challenge the terms of U.S.–China economic integration through the imposition of punitive trade tariffs alongside efforts to restrict the flow of U.S. technology to China.

The Biden administration represents a partial continuation of this approach. While Biden has maintained many of the Trump-era tariffs and sanctions, he has departed from Trump in the realm of alliance politics. While Trump had taken the view that America’s allies were “free riders,” the Biden administration has made the alliance system the cornerstone of its strategy to confront China. This has first and foremost centered on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (popularly known as “the Quad”), the AUKUS trilateral security pact, and the invitation to Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea to attend the NATO Summit in June 2022 in Madrid. Not surprisingly, these developments have set alarm bells ringing in Beijing.¹¹

Alongside these initiatives, the Biden administration has sought to introduce legislation to strengthen the capacity of the United States to compete with China. In the 116th Congress (2019–2021), nearly 300 bills concerning China were introduced; there is a similar level in the current 117th Congress, with many of the bills focused on confronting rather than cooperating with China. For example, the United States Innovation and Competition Act, which eventually became the CHIPS and Science Act, was a bill intended to improve U.S. manufacturing but contained several provisions that would have endangered a peaceful Asia Pacific and undermined diplomacy even beyond the region. Indeed, both political parties in the United States are trying to project an image of being “tough” on China instead of working through solutions to improve dialogue with the country. Also, the Biden administration has not reversed its predecessor’s decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The United States is also excluded from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a regional free-trade partnership likely to build strong ties between China and Southeast Asia.¹² The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework launched in May 2022 contains no provisions for greater access for Asian allies to the U.S. market.¹³ As such, the emphasis on economic openness has become increasingly muted, with U.S.–China relations focusing on security-military dynamics.

This suspicion of hyper-globalization is increasingly shared by China. This is particularly so given China’s own recent emphasis on self-reliance through its somewhat vague “dual circulation” strategy aimed at making the economy less reliant on global supply chains.¹⁴ However, the extent to which Washington and Beijing are withdrawing from the global economy should not be overstated. While economic blocs may emerge, they are

unlikely to be as rigid and isolated from each other as, for example, NATO and the Warsaw Pact were during the height of the Cold War. Even those countries seeking to counterbalance China militarily, economically, and ideologically recognize that they cannot decouple from the Chinese economy.¹⁵ Indeed, the term “new Cold War” is something of a misnomer if it is to imply a parallel with U.S.–U.S.S.R. competition in the latter half of the 20th century, particularly when considering China’s level of integration into the global economy and its participation in global institutions.¹⁶

Nonetheless, deepening tensions between the United States and China are concerning and have highly negative implications for peace on the Korean Peninsula and the region more broadly. The United States has responded to the rise of China by strengthening its narrative of “us” versus “them,” which focuses on enlisting the “free world” to confront “authoritarian” nations. As China’s influence continues to expand and Washington attempts to assemble a coalition of allies to confront Beijing, the two countries are on a dangerous trajectory. A zero-sum U.S. strategy toward China limits space for cooperation and engenders a cycle of provocations that could easily escalate into a conflagration engulfing the Korean Peninsula and beyond. This hard-line approach has translated into bloated military budgets across the region while neglecting human security priorities.

South Korea and U.S.–China tensions

As tensions between the United States and China have increased, South Korea has sharply increased its military spending alongside the development and upgrading of its military capabilities. In 1991, South Korea’s military budget was 7,452 KRW billion (\$5.39 billion). By 2019, however, it had grown to 46,697 KRW billion (\$42.5 billion).¹⁷ The ostensible justification for this increase has been the threat posed by North Korea. Yet, the latter’s entire GDP in 2019 was just \$33.504 billion,¹⁸ less than South Korea’s military budget that same year. More important drivers of South Korean military spending are a broader set of regional challenges and threats that include China’s growing regional might but also the remilitarization of Japan and the fears of potential US abandonment resulting from the Trump administration’s more hostile relationship with its allies.¹⁹ As a result, South Korea has continued to increase its military capabilities and is now ranked the sixth-largest military power and tenth-biggest military spender in the world. At the same time, South Korea’s efforts to establish itself as a key global arms exporter have further contributed to its defense spending.²⁰

In addition, U.S. troops have been stationed in South Korea since the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, with 28,500 U.S. soldiers currently in the country. In addition to the deployment of THAAD batteries, the U.S. military announced that it had begun the process of permanently stationing a MQ-1C Gray Eagle combat drones company at Kunsan Airbase in 2017. General Robert Abrams, commander of US Forces Korea from 2018 to 2021, argued that the United States and South Korea should develop new operational war plans to counter China’s military influence in the region in addition to ongoing threats from North Korea.

President Yoon Suk Yeol, who took office in May 2022, has committed to strengthening the U.S.–South Korean alliance, advancing a denuclearization-first approach to North Korea and increasing military cooperation with Japan. In addition to South Korea’s participation in the June 2022 NATO Summit, the United States and South Korea conducted air force drills involving 20 warplanes, including F-35A stealth fighters in the Yellow Sea between China and the Korean peninsula, and naval drills with a U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in international waters off Okinawa. Massive South Korea–U.S. “Ulchi Freedom Shield” military exercises on the peninsula have further increased military tensions in the region. Furthermore, the United States still has wartime operational control of South Korea’s substantial military forces, although peacetime command was transferred to South Korea in 1994.

This relentless militarization and the unresolved status of the Korean War have had a highly negative impact on people’s lives in Korea. Not least, the deepening division makes the prospects of reuniting separated families increasingly remote during their lifetimes. While the Biden administration has announced that the United States would align with the humanitarian aims of the Ottawa Convention prohibiting the use, stockpiling, production, and transfer of anti-personnel landmines, an exception was made for the Korean Peninsula. As of 2021, there have been 1,171 civilians injured or killed by landmines and 5,257 civilians injured or killed by unexploded bombs in South Korea during the 70 years since the armistice agreement.²¹ Japan’s remilitarization amid efforts to establish a trilateral alliance with South Korea and the United States have undermined efforts to resolve the issue of wartime sexual slavery.

Despite South Korea’s integration into the U.S. security architecture, however, Seoul is reluctant to be fully drawn into an anti-China bloc. Since the 1990s, South Korea has become increasingly dependent on its economic relations with China. Competition between the United States and China has thus placed Seoul in an awkward position as pressure grows for it to pick sides.²² South Korea has thereby sought to maximize its national inter-



ests by maintaining good relations with both the United States and China, and specifically by forming a coalition of middle powers that have a stake in maintaining good relations with both powers. As a warning from the Moon Jae-In administration against being forced to choose sides, in 2020 the South Korean Ambassador to the United States, Lee Soo-hyuck, agreed that “Just because South Korea chose the U.S. 70 years ago doesn’t mean it must choose the U.S. for the next 70 years.”²³ This approach has essentially been taken by all South Korean administrations, whether conservative or liberal, as seen in the Yoon administration’s lukewarm reception of Nancy Pelosi following her controversial trip to Taiwan in August 2022.

North Korea and U.S.–China Competition

In North Korea, the tensions between security and economic development have been even greater than in South Korea. Following the economic crisis of the 1990s, the task of reconstruction and development has been an explicit priority for the North Korean regime, as can be seen in the introduction of new agricultural and industrial management systems and the establishment of numerous special economic zones aimed at attracting foreign investment. However, for Pyongyang, development can ultimately only take place in the context of geopolitical security. While in theory these two goals should not be contradictory, the specificities of North Korea’s geopolitical environment and Pyongyang’s pursuit of security through nuclear weapons have in practice meant that the two goals have worked at cross purposes.

Before 2017, the international sanctions regime was not so stringent as to completely thwart North Korea’s growth. From the early 2000s, the country was able to increase its external trade with its immediate neighbors of Japan, South Korea, and China, which in 2003 accounted for 9 percent, 23 percent, and 32 percent respectively of North Korea’s external trade.²⁴ However, the deepening crisis surrounding the country’s weapons program led to a virtual standstill in trade with Japan and South Korea, as they imposed their own unilateral sanctions on the country. The sharp drop in trade was more than offset by North Korea’s growing trade with China. Whereas in 2014, South Korea and China accounted for 24 percent and 69 percent of North Korea’s external trade, by 2018, China accounted for 95 percent.²⁵ As such, the impact of sanctions was to turn the country into an economic dependency of China.

Paralleling the onset of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” strategy, however, UN sanctions were expanded to include bans on North Korean exports of minerals, seafood and textiles, limits on exports to the country of crude oil and petroleum, and a ban on the dispatch of North Korean labor overseas. Despite efforts to improve the design and implementation of targeted UN sanctions to monitor their effects with standardized humanitarian exemptions, these ostensibly “targeted sanctions” covered such a wide range of sectors that they amounted to a near total economic blockade.²⁶

Furthermore, in contrast to the sanctions of the past, these new and more stringent sanctions were proactively enforced by China as a result of both Beijing’s increasing impatience with North Korea’s nuclear program and U.S.



The USS Ronald Reagan and other U.S. vessels participated in large-scale joint naval exercises with South Korea. Such military exercises on the peninsula have further increased military tensions in the region. Credit: US Navy

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 Women farmers in Seongju County, South Korea, protest the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Defense (THAAD) Missile Defense System, which they say is placing their communities directly in the crossfire of a U.S.-China conflict.



secondary sanctions aimed at Chinese enterprises and financial institutions suspected of evading sanctions. As a result, from 2017, sanctions have exerted a sizeable macro-economic shock on the North Korean economy, with exports to China dropping by 88.2 percent in 2018 and imports declining by 29.9 percent.²⁷ Hundreds of Chinese joint ventures were forced to close their businesses by the end of 2017, and even those remaining could not operate without the ability to import the necessary materials.

While the country's economy was already under significant pressure from these intensified sanctions, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a strict self-imposed border closure and lockdown that has the potential to deepen the already significant stress on the country's economy. While this extreme remedy may appear to be worse than the disease itself, the response should be understood in the context of the limited resilience of the country's healthcare sector and a malnourished population's vulnerability to the virus. This response has also arguably been shaped by the country's engrained political culture and its traditional emphasis on self-reliance amid external threats.

Since the breakdown of talks between the United States and North Korea in Hanoi in 2019, the peace process has largely ground to a halt. For Pyongyang, normalization of relations with the United States and the repeal of sanctions is a prerequisite for the (re)establishment of relations with the rest of the world. If U.S.-China tensions continue to deepen, the most likely scenario, however, is a continued process of muddling through via economic reliance on China. This is unlikely to take the form of a return to the pre-2017 status quo, as the scope of the sanctions

regime and the threat of secondary sanctions will place considerable constraints on the extent to which Chinese enterprises will engage with North Korea. Growing U.S.-China tensions are also likely to deepen the inter-Korean and broader regional arms race, drawing resources away from development and people's livelihoods, and instead lead to continued growth in the means of destruction.

Furthermore, the geopolitical situation has continued to take a turn for the worse. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further entrenched North Korea's isolation. North Korea was one of only five countries to vote against a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's invasion (even China abstained). Though perhaps inconsequential in terms of the direction of the Ukraine war itself, North Korea's vote nonetheless stands as a sign of North Korea's deepening alignment with Russia. North Korea also joined Russia and Syria to become one of the very few countries that recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

In addition, North Korea brought to an end a self-imposed moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile testing in May 2022. Both China and Russia opposed efforts by the United States to get the United Nations Security Council to impose further sanctions on North Korea. This was a departure from the pattern of the past 16 years where, as permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia were instrumental in the tightening of sanctions against North Korea. China stated that it did not regard sanctions as an effective means of dealing with North Korea and instead preferred "resolving issues through dialogue and consultation," while Russia referred

to sanctions as “inhumane.”²⁸ The failure of China and Russia to approve a new round of sanctions can be seen as a reflection of the deepening geopolitical fault lines.

Meanwhile, the United States has maintained its hard-line policy against North Korea. Although the Biden administration committed to honoring the Singapore Agreement, in which President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un agreed to work together to “build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula,” its policies in practice do not match this commitment. The continuation of a policy of crippling sanctions on North Korea and ramped-up military exercises has exacerbated tensions and increased the possibility of another war on the Korean Peninsula.

Redefining Security and the Need to Engage with China

The deepening tensions between the United States and China are leading to increasingly dangerous levels of militarization in East Asia that could have disastrous consequences for the Korean Peninsula and the region as a whole. It is imperative for the United States and China to establish a more cooperative relationship while laying the basis for the peaceful settlement of the 70-year unended Korean War. The resolution of the Korean War is a clear area of potential cooperation between the United States and China, and genuine peace in Korea would remove a key point of contention between the two countries. Overcoming the ever-deepening structures of militarism in East Asia requires moving beyond state-to-state diplomacy to involve the participation of civil society. Furthermore, this should be pursued on a regional basis to encompass all countries and societies in the region with vested interests in preventing the outbreak of war. Establishing a cooperative approach over the Korean Peninsula could also set a precedent for tackling other transnational crises, such as climate change and pandemics, a stated goal of the Biden administration.

However, for the United States to play a proactive role in East Asian peacebuilding, it must first pivot away from its current zero-sum approach toward a human security framework, one that puts those most impacted at the center of its policies. A human security framework would cease tit-for-tat military provocations and prioritize the resolution of conflict through diplomatic means. This human-centered framework would focus on impacted communities that would ultimately bear the brunt of a great-power military escalation, improve dialogue with China to avoid any such military escalation, and prioritize cooperation with China on transnational issues. Indeed, the existing U.S. hard-line policy treats those caught in

the middle of this confrontation as pawns in its competition with China. Like South Korea, most countries in the region do not wish to be forced to choose between China and the United States. Furthermore, basing U.S. foreign policy around a goal of military and economic confrontation with China is not the way to address legitimate concerns about the repression and human rights violations of the Chinese government and may only serve to fuel nationalism domestically in China through creating a “rally-round-the-flag” effect.

Indeed, the U.S. government has treated cooperation with countries like China and North Korea as weakness or a reward for bad behavior. The “great-power competition” has engendered mistrust and treated cooperative actions in terms of winning and losing. However, genuine human security means working together to overcome global challenges that threaten the existence of all. As we have seen with the failures of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries must work together to address issues that permeate borders. A top priority of such a human-centered policy should be the avoidance of war. A war, which could involve the use of nuclear weapons, would inflict devastating human costs on China, the United States, and other countries embroiled in this great power competition. While neither the United States nor China is likely to actively seek a nuclear confrontation, both continue their tit-for-tat military escalation while failing to prioritize the communication needed to avoid an accident or miscalculation.

A collective approach involving Washington and Beijing along with Seoul and Pyongyang would help to disrupt the logic of the arms race and relentless militarization of East Asia. Within this process, China could play a pivotal role. There is indeed a precedent for this with the Six-Party Talks that took place between 2003 and 2009. While these talks ultimately failed, not least due to North Korea’s withdrawal from them in 2009, they remain suggestive of a more cooperative multilateral approach to the Korean Peninsula and also the potential of a multilateral security framework in Northeast Asia. Indeed, in July 2007, the heads of delegations to the Six-Party Talks agreed to set up a “working group on a peace and security mechanism in Northeast Asia” as one of the five working groups of the Six-Party Talks.²⁹ High up on the agenda of any cooperative process should be a peace agreement to bring a formal end to the Korean War. Without a peace agreement, renewed conflict could break out at any time, and the United States and China would most likely be involved due to their key defense treaties and alliances with South and North Korea, respectively. Hundreds of thousands could be killed within days, even without the use of nuclear weapons.



The Panmunjom Declaration signed between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in in April 2018 explicitly cites China as a possible participant in peace talks. Photo courtesy Cheongwadae / Blue House



While China has already normalized relations with its former adversaries, South Korea and the United States, it clearly has an interest in peace on the Korean Peninsula. The Panmunjom Declaration signed between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in in April 2018 explicitly cites China as a possible participant in peace talks. China's proximity to the Korean Peninsula, along with its military power and its alliance with North Korea, makes it a highly relevant actor to any potential peace agreement and to broader regional peace and security.³⁰ Furthermore, China has in recent years emerged as a significant trade and investment partner with North Korea. Such relations are likely to be crucial in terms of facilitating North Korea's economic recovery and development following any peace agreement. As China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China's participation will also be central to any relaxation or repeal of existing sanctions against North Korea.

Furthermore, now is a particularly opportune moment to pursue such an approach. While Xi Jinping is unlikely to risk any foreign policy setbacks or failures prior to the October 2022 Party Congress, where he is widely expected to be re-elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, a window of opportunity is likely to emerge after the Congress. With Xi having consolidated power and secured his third term, China is likely to seek to improve its image abroad. Furthermore, 2023

marks the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice Agreement and could be a symbolic moment for the United States and China to end the Korean War. Helping bring about peace on the Korean Peninsula can help improve China's image, which has been seriously damaged in recent years, particularly in the West. In 2023, the key parties to the Korean War -- North Korea, South Korea, China and the United States -- should set the table for peace talks and establish the mechanisms to include the active participation of civil society peace organizations.

Regional Peacebuilding and the Role of Civil Society

At the same time, there is a heightened need to move beyond state-to-state interaction and to facilitate the participation of civil society in the peacebuilding process. Peacebuilding is often portrayed as building "bridges between ordinary people," compared with peacekeeping, which is about "building barriers between warriors."³¹ South Korea's democratization in the late 1980s, for example, led to various high-level peacebuilding initiatives, including a series of inter-Korean summits, which increased expectations of the expansion of people-to-people interaction between the two Koreas. However, the Korean peace process fluctuated as U.S.-North Korean tensions escalated and the geopolitical rivalry between United States and China intensified. South Korean policy toward North Korea has oscillated between engagement and confrontation in line with domestic politics, while the priority of the North Korean government appears to be regime security.

Nevertheless, there have been persistent efforts by diverse civil society groups, particularly women's peace movements, to build peace on the Korean Peninsula by dismantling the structures of the Korean conflict and the division system. Top-down peacebuilding initiatives tend to focus on high-level peace agreements and the establishment of political institutions. This typically involves the imposition of universal formulas, such as Western-style liberal state building, thereby dismissing local contexts, especially the ontological anxiety of local populations who have been constantly manipulated and exploited by those who benefit from protracted conflicts, such as former and current superpowers and local regimes. Instead, there needs to be support for and empowerment of local people's initiatives to increase interactions beyond identity lines and establish the conditions for genuine peace.

In the United States, Women Cross DMZ has been leading the Korea Peace Now! Grassroots Network (KPNGN), a multigenerational grassroots movement of Korean Americans—many from divided families—and others who recognize the importance of ending the

Korean War. With 10 KPNGN regional chapters and caucuses for Korean-speaking, Christian, and Generation Z members, the grassroots members organize meetings, write letters to the editor and op-eds, attend town halls, and meet with their elected representatives to share how the unresolved Korean War impacts them. Thanks to their dedication, there are now almost 50 co-sponsors of a Congressional bill, H.R.3446, the Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act, which calls for serious, urgent diplomacy in pursuit of a binding peace agreement to formally end the Korean War. In this respect, the various countries with a direct stake in resolving the Korean conflict should facilitate people-to-people interactions and open channels for civil society participation in the peace process. The United States, however, has banned its citizens from traveling to North Korea since 2017, which has undermined civic and humanitarian exchange with the country, thereby further isolating the regime and deepening the structures of division and conflict. Such measures urgently need to be repealed.

There are also numerous opportunities for bringing state and civil society actors together through Track 1.5 diplomacy. In 1998, the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation (KCRC) was formed as a consultative body between civil society and political sectors, supported by the South Korean government. All major political parties and approximately 200 civil society groups across the political spectrum joined KCRC. KCRC discusses the issue of peace and unification and attempts to address the division about North Korea in South Korean society. KCRC organizes dialogues among government officials, politicians, and civil society activists and advocates a consistent and coherent North Korea policy based on social consensus. In 2005, the South Korean Committee for Implementation of the June 15 Joint Declaration (the June 15 South Committee) was established by civil society leaders of diverse sectors, such as human rights, gender, labor, religion, peace, and unification. The key objective of the June 15 South Committee was to monitor the implementation of the inter-Korean agreements. Since the breakdown of the peace process in the late 2000s, the Committee has advocated the need for the governments to honor the joint declarations between North and South and to resume inter-Korean exchange and cooperation.³²

In addition, given the complex and interconnected nature of the Korean division and U.S.–China competition, a broader regional response is required to achieve peace and denuclearization in the region. The unended Korean War is, of course, not the only driver of U.S.–China competition. The latter should be understood as predicated upon a broader range of regional tensions, hostilities, and unresolved conflicts. While many issues are ostensibly

bilateral, their complex and interconnected nature means that a regional approach is essential. Yet, Northeast Asia is one of the few regions in the world without any intergovernmental regional organization. The lack of such forums impedes dialogue on an institutional level and means that civil society organizations have fewer opportunities for effective access to their governments and international organizations. The need for such mechanisms has long been identified by civil society; this was indeed the founding principle of the Northeast Asia network of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) in 2005, with the “vision to create a regional mechanism for peace through concrete actions of disarmament, demilitarization, and attaining justice, democracy, non-violence and sustainability in Northeast Asia.”³³ Prominent figures such as former Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio have advocated for an “East Asian Community,”³⁴ and various grassroots cooperative activities in fields such as education, environmental protection, and cultural activities are ongoing.

The resolution of the Korean War is a clear area of potential cooperation between the United States and China, and genuine peace in Korea would remove a key point of contention between the two countries.

A further example of regional peacebuilding on the basis of civil society participation is the Ulaanbaatar Process, a unique civil society dialogue for peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Founded in 2015 by GPPAC, it is perhaps the only standing platform that regularly brings social organization representatives from both Koreas to meet and engage with each other in peace talks, even during periods without active inter-Korean dialogue. This was made possible through a regional approach to creating a space for engagement, as direct contact between the two countries was prohibited.³⁵ Maintaining participation and ownership of the process by participants from both Koreas, as well as from all former Six-Party Talks member states, ensures that a space for communication and dialogue is kept open even when this is not possible on the official level.

Again, one of the earliest civil society movements that created a space for non-governmental peacebuilding on a regional basis was the women’s peace movement. For example, before and after the 1991 Basic Agreement be-



At the 2018 Northeast Asia Women, Peace, and Security Roundtable in Beijing, women from North and South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Canada met and discussed women's inclusion in peace processes. It's one example of how civil society can participate in the peacebuilding process. Photo by Niana Liu



tween the South and North Korean governments, women's groups from South and North Korea and Japan met in Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang to discuss the role of women for peace in Asia (1991–1993). Following the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 and the announcement of the June 15 Joint Declaration by the South and North Korean governments, an inter-Korean women's conference was organized to promote women's perspectives in the peace process. Observing the fluctuations and fragility of the high-level peace process, the women's peace movements recognized the need for transnational peacebuilding cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. During the Six-Party Talks and even after their collapse, the Northeast Asian Women's Peace Conferences (2008–2012) provided a platform for women in the Six-Party Talks countries to express their voices on the issues of women, peace, and security in the East Asian region and in the world.³⁶ The women's peace movements culminated in the 2018 Northeast Asia Women, Peace, and Security Roundtable in Beijing, where women from North and South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and Canada were able to meet and discuss women's inclusion in peace processes.³⁷

Thus, unlike the mainstream understanding of the international peacebuilding architecture, which focuses on high-level negotiations and institutionalizing a state system, civil society peacebuilding on a regional basis aims to create a space for building relationships between people beyond conflict lines. This civil society effort is influenced by progress and regress in high-level peace processes but is not necessarily bound by those processes and is often

able to make an impact by mobilizing public opinion and expanding the space for people's interactions that challenge the structures of conflict. Although the current impasse in the high-level Korean peace process, and the ongoing reproduction of the division system, have significantly restricted civic spaces for peace movements, transnational civil society initiatives to revitalize peacebuilding continue. As long as there is unwavering effort by civil society to bring the Korean conflict to an end by building relationships across the DMZ and throughout the broader region, there is still hope for genuine peace that can reverse the growing militarization of East Asia.

Many significant barriers to peacebuilding at the regional level exist; these have been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and stringent travel restrictions. Further, many of these regional initiatives take place on a relatively small scale, without yet succeeding in having a broader social or political impact. The challenge of how to not only maintain but also scale up such regional spaces for dialogue, and expand them to have a deeper impact, is a key question for civil society in the region and beyond. This is particularly urgent as the overall mood both regionally and internationally shifts dangerously toward tensions instead of talks, and further division instead of dialogue. Deeper and more regular communication and exchange, together with creative approaches to regional challenges, will be imperative not only for supporting peacebuilding on the Korean Peninsula but also for addressing the continued cycle of militarization and creating a peaceful, sustainable, and nuclear-free Northeast Asia.

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