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Northeast Asia

The geopolitics of crisis

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Ballistic missile launches by North Korea (which is developing a programme to miniaturize nuclear weapons), the resumption of major joint military manoeuvres between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo... Northeast Asia is once again a hotbed of tension in a region where all the major powers confront each other.

International attention is focused on Ukraine and Taiwan, but the Korean peninsula is also a hotbed of nuclear tension that periodically escalates. This is the case today. The alternation between moments of relaxation or tension often relates to factors “internal” to the peninsula and not, or not much, to the geopolitics of the great powers [1] This is also the case today.

The current crisis goes back a long time in terms of the military programme developed by North Korea, but the narrowly won election (by 48.56% against 47.83% for his opponent) of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol last May contributes to it. [2] This conservative, with a hawkish profile and without experience, immediately broke with the cautious diplomacy towards Pyongyang advocated by his predecessor, Moon Jae-in. In Moon’s time, an agreement was reached between Pyongyang and Seoul to avoid any military provocation and the risk of “accidental” war. It included the establishment of buffer zones at sea and no-fly zones over the demilitarized zone separating the two states. Yoon has closed the door to any form of dialogue and wants South Korea to have the military means for a pre-emptive strike against its northern neighbour, displaying a harder line than previous conservative presidents.

Yoon Suk-yeol embodies a real political-ideological reaction with his virulent antifeminism, surfing on a wave of masculinism among young men, in response to the #MeToo movement. He sings the praises of President Chun Doo-hwan, who bloodily crushed the popular uprising in the southern city of Gwangju in 1980. His regime is weak and unstable and that is perhaps why he has immediately called for the resumption of the major annual military manoeuvres conducted jointly in the region by the United States, South Korea and Japan. The policy of *détente* between Seoul and Pyongyang was certainly at a standstill, but Moon had obtained their suspension in 2018. They were therefore held again this year, at the beginning of November, under the name of “Vigilant Storm”, mobilizing particularly significant resources – hundreds of aircraft, including B-1B heavy bombers.

In 2017, *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (CPK), commented extensively on the election of Moon Jae-in. This time, it simply reported in one sentence that of Yoon Seok-yeol, thus expressing its disapproval. [3]

Ballistic missile launches

The state of crisis manifested itself this year in an unprecedented number of ballistic missile launches by North Korea, particularly in October-November. Thus, at least twenty-three ballistic missiles were fired by Pyongyang on 2 November alone, more than in all of 2017, when Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump insulted each other copiously with tweets. One of these missiles fell near South Korea’s territorial waters, beyond the maritime line serving as the border between the two states, which the South Korean president denounced as a “de facto territorial invasion”. On 9 November, a new launch was made on a politically chosen date: during the counting of votes in the US Congress and two days before the meeting of a summit of leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The ensuing bursts of fire were a response to the resumption of major naval air manoeuvres by the United States,

South Korea and Japan, which Pyongyang described as “aggressive and provocative.” The 18 November launch was particularly provocative – it is believed to be an intercontinental ballistic missile (analyses are underway to verify this) that hit Japan's Special Economic Zone (prompting a vigorous protest from Tokyo). This last test looks very much like a response to Xi Jinping who tried to appease Joe Biden at the G20 summit that ended on November 16 in Bali. In addition, Xi held talks with Yoon Suk-yeol, with the two presidents also showing their understanding and agreeing to establish regular high-level contacts.

In the wake of the G20, Xi Jinping travelled to Bangkok to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum where he met Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Representing Asia's two largest economies, they proclaimed their desire to develop a “stable relationship” even as Tokyo was politically targeted by North Korean missile launches. Basically, Xi Jinping has not given up, concerning Taiwan in particular, but this diplomatic ballet must have truly antagonized Kim Jong-un!

Time for escalation

The date on which many of the firings were carried out this year therefore often had cyclical objectives, but their exceptional intensification is also part of an overall agenda running over several years and which was reported, once again, by the 8th Party-State Congress held last January. [4] This agenda includes an internal component to which we will return later. In military matters, the roadmap aims to make North Korea's nuclear arsenal operational by strengthening the quality of its launchers and miniaturizing atomic weapons. Pyongyang also hints that the regime could soon conduct a new nuclear test (the last one dates back to 2017).

The program announced at the congress was particularly ambitious, including the rapid development of so-called “tactical” nuclear weapons, missiles capable of carrying multiple warheads, military reconnaissance satellites and “hypersonic glide warheads”. This program requires many tests, extending those already carried out such as the sending of cruise missiles in March 2021.

Last year's September program was particularly busy with KN-23 short-range ballistic missiles launched from a train (an innovation), firing long-range cruise missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, the first so-called hypersonic Hwasong-8 missile. In October, a mini-ballistic missile was launched from a submarine and Pyongyang held its first “Self-Defence 2021” exhibition, showcasing weapons that had already been tested or were to be tested later. Finally, to start 2022 off, two tests of manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles (MaRV), presented by Pyongyang as hypersonic missiles, were carried out in January.

This latest test, in particular, relates to the North Korean regime's desire for several years to develop what it calls “tactical weapons”. Manoeuvrable and able to fly at low altitudes, they are designed to evade the region's ballistic missile defence systems. Pyongyang has demonstrated its ability to produce them through a series of tests, including: a “tactical guided weapon” in April 2019; new solid-fuel short-range ballistic missiles resembling the Russian Iskander in May 2019; an improved variant of KN-23 Iskander short-range ballistic missiles in March 2020.

As always, concerning “opaque” regimes, official press releases and articles are decrypted to analyse the evolution of the vocabulary used, the appearance of an adjective, the disappearance of a formula, silences, euphemisms or superlatives.

In a sign of escalation, North Korea's nuclear ambitions have been made public. For a long time, the official purpose of the launches was the “development of satellites” (a linguistic camouflage that fooled no one but could have its diplomatic utility). A change of tone came on 25 March. The daily *Rodong Sinmun* commented bluntly on the

“test-launch of the new type of Hwasongpho-17 ICBM” carried out the day before “in preparation for war against the United States”, citing Kim Jong Un's desire to “continue to qualitatively and quantitatively strengthen the powerful nuclear war deterrent in order to ensure the country's security and deal with all kinds of potential crises in the future.” [5] On 28 March, it hit the nail on the head: “We will continue to achieve the goal of strengthening national defence capabilities, to develop more powerful strike means to equip our people's army”. [6] For Karen Yamanata, the use in this context of the formula “strike means” instead of “defence means” shows the desire to display an “aggressive” posture. On April 5, it was the turn of Kim Yo-jong, a high-ranking official and influential sister of Kim Jong Un, to issue two statements claiming that Pyongyang would retaliate with nuclear strikes if South Korea launched a pre-emptive strike – thus taking the initiative to use nuclear weapons. [7]

The constant acceleration of the implementation of this vast military program is aimed in particular at strengthening Pyongyang's hand in view of negotiations with Washington. One of the objectives of these negotiations would be to obtain the official status of nuclear power, but none of the states currently recognized as such wants it, and this would also constitute a very dangerous precedent. The five powers now recognized sit on the UN Security Council: China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia. Welcoming North Korea into this very firm club would obviously open a Pandora's box. India, Pakistan and Israel have the weapon, and other countries would be encouraged to adopt them (Japan for example) giving a new boost to proliferation.

It seems doubtful that Pyongyang will be able to successfully modernize and operationalize an intercontinental military arsenal within the officially envisaged timeframe – this type of program takes a long time, assuming that the state concerned has the scientific and technological means. However, the mere possession of rudimentary ballistic or hypersonic missiles with nuclear warheads – not even very reliable – would have regional political significance, threatening South Korea, Japan and the inhabitants of that part of the world.

So now is the time for escalation. The prospect of negotiations on the freezing of North Korea's nuclear program is at a standstill, with Seoul having nothing to offer in this area (Yoon Suk-yeol only considering "massive economic aid" in the event of the dismantling of North Korea's arsenal) and Kim Jong Un having reiterated last May that henceforth “nuclear weapons [were] not negotiable.” Preventive use is also officially envisaged.

A 2013 law allowed North Korea to use “nuclear weapons to repel an invasion or attack by a hostile nuclear state and carry out retaliatory strikes.” In September 2022, a new law was passed giving the regime "the right to 'automatically' use pre-emptive nuclear strikes to protect itself and prohibiting any talks regarding the denuclearization" of the country. This would be to respond preventively if Pyongyang believes it detects a risk of imminent attack by weapons of mass destruction or against “strategic targets” (including the country's leaders).

Yoon Suk-yeol, for his part, wants to be able to pre-emptively strike North Korea's nuclear infrastructure and command system if an imminent North Korean attack is suspected by South Korean services. [8]

The domestic situation in North Korea

The North Korean regime is facing a much-deteriorated socio-economic situation due to international sanctions imposed in response to previous nuclear episodes, floods and the consequences of a virulent Covid-19 epidemic.

Faced with the danger posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the country closed itself off in January 2020, blocking cross-border trade and expelling humanitarian workers and foreign diplomats. Kim Jong Un has more than ever invoked the regime's official ideology of self-sufficiency, *Juche*, when North Korea has in fact long depended on Chinese and international aid. To implement autarky in the countryside, state control over the peasantry was brutally

tightened, after a more tolerant period. All this has exacerbated food shortages and economic stagnation with the drastic reduction of legal trade, the collapse of informal markets, a curb to smuggling and the comings and goings of undeclared cross-border day laborers into China.

The closure of the country probably delayed the arrival of the pandemic. However, as early as March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that a Covid-19 epidemic was developing in North Korea, despite the regime's denials. It was only in May 2022 that Pyongyang reported the first confirmed cases of infection. It seems very difficult to assess the level of the epidemic in a country of 26 million inhabitants where, outside Pyongyang, the health system is particularly deficient and singularly helpless in the face of Sars-Cov-2. Everything was missing (including testing), while the regime refused offers of supplies of Sinovac vaccines from China and AstraZeneca from the Covax program (informal contacts are reportedly underway to consider importing vaccines, preferably RNA).

Faced with this situation, the government ordered a nationwide lockdown, with the army responsible for distributing medicines and supplies. The health hazards are considerable. Admittedly, foreign contacts remain very limited (with little travel), and the rate of obesity (a risk factor) is low in North Korea, but a significant part of the population is malnourished or undernourished (state of severe chronic malnutrition), elderly, and with little immunity. The threat of a humanitarian crisis looms.

Kim Jong Un is trying to protect the elite that constitutes his social base by guaranteeing them privileged access to healthcare, providing them with masks, enjoining them to respect physical distancing. This social base has benefited from the evolution of the regime, which has broken with the austere canons of yesteryear, allowing a "Westernization" of its lifestyle and the strengthening of its privileges. The stability of the state could be undermined if the pact between Kim Jong-un's dictatorial, dynastic, ethno-nationalist power and this elite disintegrates. Reviving international tensions may, in part, be aimed at stifling the expression of internal contradictions in North Korean society.

International positioning

The Korean peninsula lives in a permanent situation of latent crisis, no peace treaty having been signed since the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953 [\[9\]](#) As we have seen, the transition from a latent crisis to an open crisis seems to be due, today, above all to essentially endogenous factors.

Joe Biden has many other priorities than Korea, so much so that the editorial staff of the *Guardian* was concerned the situation could get out of hand. "The prospects for addressing the issue have rarely looked dimmer. Kim Jong-un is usually expert at grabbing attention. But Joe Biden's lies elsewhere. True, the trip to Seoul last month by the US vice-president, Kamala Harris, was his administration's third major visit this year. Recent trilateral exercises by the US, Japan and South Korea sparked the latest missile launches; the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, which took part in those drills, recently returned to waters near the peninsula. But the US is focused on war in Ukraine and the related energy and cost of living crisis, along with strategic rivalry with China and its myriad domestic problems. Pyongyang is way down the agenda". [\[10\]](#)

In November, Russia called on Pyongyang to show calm and moderation (pretty rich coming from Putin!). As for Beijing, we can think that Xi Jinping does not like the nuclear threat being brandished or Kim Jong Un interfering in this way as he seeks to strengthen economic ties with Seoul at a time when Washington is trying to close access to high-end semiconductors (South Korea is the main producer, after Taiwan).

That said, whatever the primary origin of the present crisis, all the major powers are directly concerned by this part of

the world. China, Russia and Japan share land or sea borders with the peninsula, while the United States has established its largest network of overseas military bases there.

Beijing and Moscow need a buffer state between their borders and South Korea (where the shadow of the US Empire hangs), to prevent US forces from camping again on their borders (a nightmare!). However, a crisis of collapse in North Korea would benefit Seoul and Washington.

Kim Jong-un is also considering the international situation, drawing lessons from the war in Ukraine or tensions between Washington and Beijing. The current geostrategic situation is indeed very different from that which prevailed in 2017, when Beijing and Moscow voted in favour of strengthening economic sanctions against North Korea following an (officially) intercontinental ballistic missile, Hwasongpho-15. Today, Kim feels untouchable, deeming it unthinkable that the United States, China and Russia would combine against him.

As soon as Ukraine was invaded, Kim Jong Un made it known that he was choosing sides. On 28th February the spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry of North Korea declared that “The root cause of the Ukraine crisis totally lies in the hegemonic policy of the U.S. and the West.” [\[11\]](#) [On 2 March, only five countries voted against the UN General Assembly resolution calling for an immediate halt to Russian intervention in Ukraine: Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Russia and Syria. Today, Pyongyang supplies Moscow with a large quantity of military equipment such as shells, which the Russian army consumes heavily.

This type of positioning illustrates how much the North Korean regime has changed since the days of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un's grandfather. This is particularly evident on international issues. For Karen Yamanaka, “the basic political position of North Korea from the Kim Il-sung regime is “Non-aligned”. Based on the principle of “Non-aligned” and as a member of the “Third World”, North Korea has emphasized close relationship with national liberation movements especially related to African countries... When the former Soviet Union confronted Romania and former Yugoslavia, North Korea supported Romania and former Yugoslavia. In the Sino-Vietnamese War which occurred in 1979, North Korea criticized China for invading Vietnam and did not support the former Soviet Union and China. Also, North Korea supported Cambodia when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978... If North Korea follows the principles of the Kim Il-sung era, they should criticize Russia's invasion against Ukraine and support Ukraine. But Pyongyang didn't support Ukraine because of their gradual political changes from “Non-aligned” to “actual profit” after the Kim Jong-il regime. And Pyongyang supported Russia externally in the current invasion against Ukraine. The “actual profit” gained by building a joint front with the countries against the US was prioritized over “Non-aligned”. But the population in North Korea still support “Non-aligned” of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, which has been educated in their ideological education. Explaining North Korea's support for Russia to the population is not easy. Therefore, only the external media such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website have expressed their political position. In pursuit of “actual profit”, Kim Jong-un was forced to make a political compromise.” [\[12\]](#).

The complexities of regional geopolitics

Relations between North Korea, China and Russia are more complex than some might think, but so are the relations between the United States, Japan and South Korea. The ancient or recent past has left traces that are difficult to erase.

Tokyo's Asian neighbours do not welcome the completion of its rearmament. The international ranking of military powers is not simple, but Japan usually comes in fourth or fifth place, behind the United States, Russia (will it be able to keep this rank?), China and India – with South Korea coming in just after. Its military forces lack combat experience and its constitution, adopted after World War II, prohibits the reconstitution of an army (which is why it is

officially called the self-defence force). Pacifism remains very present in the population, but successive right-wing governments have circumvented this constitutional clause. Will the current crisis allow the regime to strengthen the influence of the aggressive nationalism that characterizes it, to impose a revisionist rereading of history, to legitimize its militarist policies and ambitions?

Moreover, the election of Joe Biden has probably not completely erased the damage caused by Donald Trump's very personal (and volatile) diplomatic game in the region, his turning points and reversals of posture towards Pyongyang. Even the states that are supposedly the closest allies of the United States have learned the hard way that the host of the White House does not care about their interests enough to consult them on major issues. While there have been many recent high-ranking visits by US officials to Seoul, including that of Vice President Kamala Harris in October and Washington is giving pledges of goodwill, Joe Biden's priorities still lie elsewhere.

Military cooperation agreements under US hegemony have recently multiplied in the Indo-Pacific region, but only marginally (or not at all) concern Northeast Asia. Moreover, the specific interests of each state which is party to these agreements do not necessarily coincide, on important issues, with Washington's policy. India has a long history of cooperation with Russia, Japan is directly involved in the geopolitics of the Korean crisis.

The rather complicated history of military treaties under US patronage specifically concerning North-East Asia shows how difficult their implementation was made by colonial litigation and the depth of Japanese-Korean tensions. [13]. These are the Treaty of San Francisco (1951) and the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea (1965). Initially aimed against the USSR, then Russia, they should now contribute to "blocking China" and the constitution of an "Asian NATO". In 2010, the South Korean government began secret negotiations with Tokyo, which culminated in November 2016 with the signing of an unprecedented bilateral cooperation agreement: the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Once again, its implementation has been difficult: in 2019, President Moon Jae-in even decided to end it in retaliation for Japan's restrictions on the export of high-tech materials (he reversed this decision shortly after). An attempt at normalization was announced on June 13 at a joint press conference. [14]

The historical dispute between South Korea (former colony) and Japan (imperial power) is particularly deep. It raises the question of Tokyo's political recognition of the crimes committed under the occupation – which the Japanese nationalist leaders have always refused to do – and compensation for the "comfort women" (i.e., the victims of the system of forced prostitution organized by the Japanese army) and the families of South Koreans who were forced to work for Japanese companies during the Second World War under very harsh conditions. [15]. A vibrant citizen movement remains mobilized on these issues. Relations between the two states also became strained in late 2018 after South Korea's Supreme Court and other courts issued rulings ordering various Japanese companies to pay compensation to bereaved families.

Japan sticks to its official narrative (a compromise with Washington enshrined in the 1951 San Francisco Treaty to which the South Koreans were not invited) that there was no occupation in Korea, as in the rest of Asia, but a "legal annexation", followed later by a "separation" leading to independence. The South Korean governments have avoided raising this and Yoon Seok-yeol probably aims today to complete the normalization of relations between Seoul and Tokyo, against a public opinion that continues to demand that the colonial fact be recognized.

Militarization and anti-war solidarity

The Korean crisis contributes to the general dynamic of militarization underway on the Eurasian continent and in the Indo-Pacific, with its attendant humanitarian disasters, from Ukraine to Burma, as it contributes to the acceleration of

global warming that has spiralled out of control.

On 29th June last Fumio Kishida and Yoon Seok-yeol took part for the first time in a NATO summit in Madrid, which formalised a new strategic concept, targeting China for the first time. [16]. NATO has invited Japan and South Korea as “Asia-Pacific partner countries”, an unprecedented move.

The popular solidarity between Japanese and South Korean movements has suffered in the past from the historical dispute between the two countries. It is possible, in the present context, that the anti-war movement in the region will take on a new dimension, including in addition to Japan and South Korea, the United States and the question of Taiwan. A perspective to support!

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[1] On the tensions between Washington and Seoul during the 2018 North-South initiatives, see for example Tim Shorrock, *The Nation*, 19 October 2018 [“Washington’s Ire Shifts From Kim Jong-un to Moon Jae-in”](#).

[2] Karen Yamanaka, 27 April 2022, [“Candle Light to Be Rekindled in South Korea with the Oppressed People’s Power”](#).

[3] All references to *Rodong Sinmun* are taken from the articles by Karen Yamanaka.

[4] Duyeon Kim, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 13 January 2022 [“North Korea’s goals in 2022: internal stability and nuclear development”](#).

[5] *Rodong Sinmun*, 25 March 2022, “Striking Demonstration of Great Military Muscle of Juche Korea: Successful Test-Launch of New-Type ICBM”.

[6] *Rodong Sinmun*, 28 March 2022, “Respected Comrade Kim Jong-un Has Photo Session with Those Who Contributed to Successful Test-Fire of Hwasongpho-17 Type”

[7] *Rodong Sinmun*, 5 April 2022, “Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong.”

[8] *The Guardian*, 9 September 2022 [“Kim Jong-un says new law guarantees North Korea will never give up nuclear weapons”](#).

[9] Pierre Rousset, 1 May 2017, [“A state of crisis in North-East Asia”](#), an article written at a time of great tension which briefly reviews the background of the Korean War (1950-1953), the components of the Korean communist movement and the origin of Kim Il-sung’s regime.

[10] *The Guardian*, 12 October 2022 [“The Guardian view on North Korea’s missile tests: growing risks. reduced response”](#).

[11] KCNA, 28 February 2022, “Answer of Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK”.

[12] Karen Yamanaka [“North Korea’s ICBM Strategy under the Current Situation of Ukraine”](#).

[13] Karen Yamanaka [“Military Alliances Aiming for Another “NATO” in East Asia”](#).

[14] U.S. Department of State, June 13, 2022, [“Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Republic of Korea Foreign Minister Park Jin At a Joint Press](#)

[Availability](#)”.

[15] In fact, the Emperor of Japan expressed remorse and apologized, but this is not the case with Japanese governments under pressure from a right-wing with denialist statements. Prime ministers have added fuel to the fire, with Shinzo Abe visiting Yasukuni Shrine, where the dead, including war criminals, are honoured.

[16] Jaime Pastor [“Towards a new permanent global war? NATO's “new strategic concept”](#)”.