



ASIA MAIOR

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US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by
Giulio Pugliese
Andrea Fischetti
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features a central circular motif with multiple layers of repeating patterns, including scalloped edges, concentric circles, and radiating lines, all rendered in a dark red color against the lighter red background.

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THE ROLE OF SOUTH KOREA AMID US-CHINA COMPETITION*

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Due to its crucial strategic position, over the course of history Korea has several times found itself subject to the consequences of great power rivalry, with very negative results. The cases of the conflict between the Chinese Empire and Japan at the end of the 19th century and between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War are two clear examples that led to tragic effects in Korea. This complicated historical legacy resonates in the current competition between the U.S. and China and the role that South Korea has been increasingly playing in this dynamic in recent years. Although significant differences exist compared to the previous examples, this new rivalry risks becoming a matter of major concern in the country's foreign policy. For South Korea, maintaining positive relations with both great powers is crucial for its stability, economic development and security. For this reason, in recent years different South Korean governments have tried and managed to pursue a «flexible» approach avoiding taking sides between the two great powers. While the rapidly growing tension between the U.S. and China poses challenges to this approach, it still represents a suitable solution to ensure that Seoul does not get caught in the middle of a new great power rivalry that would be detrimental for its strategic interests.

Starting by introducing the dilemmas of Korea amid great power rivalry from a historical perspective, this paper argues that in the current competition South Korea has demonstrated a higher level of agency than in previous cases, thanks also to its greater autonomy and capabilities in the international system, and that its «flexible» approach has been successful in maintaining a middle ground between the U.S. and China. Considering the current increase in rivalry, this role has been more difficult to manage, especially with the recent push by the United States for its regional allies and partners to take a tougher stance against Beijing. However, adapting its foreign policy approach to the challenges that have emerged in recent years and avoiding taking a stance that might deteriorate relations with China, while reassuring Washington that the alliance is the main pillar in Seoul's security policy, can be considered as a possible and positive way forward for South Korea's role amid U.S.-China competition.

KEYWORDS: South Korea; US-China rivalry; US-South Korea alliance; China-Korea relations; Park Geun-hye; Moon Jae-in.

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1. *Introduction*

The increase in tension in the rivalry between the United States and China is having important consequences for all the states in East Asia and also at the global level. With the polarization of competition, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many actors to avoid taking sides, with the risk of alienating relations with the other major power. This situation is particularly problematic for actors such as South Korea, which has a strong security alliance with the United States, a cornerstone of its foreign policy, but at the same time maintains very good relations with China, especially in terms of commercial and economic exchanges. Over recent years South Korea has been able to balance these two foreign policy priorities, but with the recent intensification of competition the space for this «flexible» position seems to be closing fast.¹

From a historical perspective, the need to deal with and bear the consequences of great power competition is not new for Korea. The rivalry between China and Japan in the second half of the 19th century saw Korea as one of the main targets of the conflict between the great powers and led to the loss of independence and to 35 years of brutal colonization under the Japanese Empire. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, another great power rivalry invested the Korean peninsula, this time between the United States and the Soviet Union. The outcome was again nefarious for Korea with the division of the peninsula into two separate states, which has lasted for over 75 years, and the tragedy of the Korean war. The effects of the bipolar competition outlasted the Cold War, with the division of the peninsula still in place today.

Compared with the previous great power rivalries that have influenced socio-political developments on the Korean peninsula, the current competition between the U.S. and China presents significant differences for South Korea. First, unlike the previous examples, Seoul has managed to maintain positive relations with both great powers so far, although this privileged position could turn into a disadvantage as relations between the great powers deteriorate. Second, post-Cold War South Korea is a much more autonomous actor with the ability to pursue its own national interests and aims, while achieving a much more proactive and central role in the region and at the global level. Therefore, the agency of South Korean governments cannot be underestimated in analysing the role of the country in the competition between the U.S. and China. In this perspective, domestic variables such as the political divide between progressives and conservatives must be taken into proper consideration. At the same time, the ability to adapt traditional foreign policy approaches in order to face emerging

1. Lee Chung-min, 'South Korea Is Caught Between China and the United States', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 October 2020.

dilemmas, as in the case of the new great power rivalry, has led to positive outcomes for South Korea in recent years. For this reason, continuing this process of adaption to the current challenges and pursuing a balanced position – avoiding taking a stance that might deteriorate relations with China, while reassuring Washington that the alliance is the main pillar in Seoul's security policy – can be considered as a possible and positive way forward for South Korea's role amid U.S.-China competition.

This policy brief starts with a historical reconstruction of the influence of great power rivalries on Korea in order to better appreciate differences in the current situation and also to situate relations between South Korea and the two great powers in their historical context. The second part analyses the emergence of U.S.-China competition and how Seoul responded to this new challenge by keeping a «flexible» and balanced position. In the last part, the paper focuses on the most recent developments and on the current and future implications for South Korea of the competition between Washington and Beijing.

2. (South) Korea and the great powers in historical perspective

From a historical perspective, political and social developments on the Korean peninsula have been strongly influenced by the presence of powerful actors in its regional environment. A relatively smaller power located in an important geopolitical position, Korea has found itself repeatedly caught in competition, rivalry and open enmity between conflicting great powers, and also subject to the strategies and actions of the same great powers. This situation has led to the emergence of a so-called «shrimp among whales complex», as South Korea is a small power surrounded by big powerful actors with competing interests harbouring potential conflicts. This situation could potentially have multiple negative consequences for the «shrimp». First, the major powers can try to exert influence on the smaller one in order to convince it – or force it – towards their interests. Second, if an open conflict between the major powers erupts, the smaller one runs the risk of getting harmed. Over the centuries, the Korean peninsula has found itself involved in this kind of problematic situation several times, with different major powers trying to assert their interests in the region.

The first of these rivalries emerged in the second half of the 19th century between the established great power, the Chinese Empire, and an emerging one, Japan. For centuries, China and Korea had been closely connected, not only because of their geographical proximity but also through a political and cultural bond that was consolidated over the course of centuries. The Joseon kingdom – which ruled the peninsula from 1392 until the annexation by Japan in 1910 – had regularly sent tribute missions to China and supported Ming dynasty orthodoxy, which they highly respected

both militarily, for the help given to Korea during the Japanese invasion of the late 15th century, and culturally, because they considered it as the truly Confucian state.² The rise of the Qing dynasty, in the 16th century, had a negative impact on the legitimacy of the Chinese Empire in Korean perceptions; nevertheless, following a policy of *sadae* ('accommodating' or 'serving' the great power), Joseon Korea decided to maintain the same relationship with the new rulers in China, sending tribute missions and recognizing its central position in the system.³ It is therefore not surprising that China has for centuries represented the main point of reference for the Korean peninsula, in political, economic and cultural terms. Despite the obvious power asymmetry and the strong influence exerted by China over the peninsula, Korea also played an important role for the Chinese Empire. The peninsula had a strategic position that was fundamental for China's defence, especially in consideration of the role of Japan and its aspirations regarding the continental part of East Asia, with several sources dating back to the Ming dynasty attesting the importance of defending Korea to protect Chinese territory.⁴ This role emerged very clearly with the Imjin war of 1592-1598, with the Japanese invasion of Korea and the intervention of Ming China to defend it, in order to protect its borders and to preserve the existing regional order.⁵

This situation lasted until the end of the 19th century, when the combined effects of the domestic and international decline of China and of the process of modernization and industrialization in Japan led to a power shift from the former to the latter. Imperial Japan became the main regional power as was certified by the defeat of Chinese forces in the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895). This crucial event also reconfirmed the central role of Korea for major regional powers, as it was one of the main causes of the conflict and one of the main battlefields.⁶ After this victory and the following defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war, Japan made its move on Korea with the creation of a protectorate in 1905 and annexation in 1910, until Japan's defeat at the end of World War II in 1945. With Imperial Japan out of the picture, at the end of the war, a new rivalry among great powers emerged in the region, and again Korea found itself caught in a confronta-

2. Peter C. Perdue, 'The Tenacious Tributary System', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 96, 2015, pp. 1002-1014.

3. David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 25-53.

4. Jae Ho Chung & Myung-hae Choi, 'Uncertain allies or uncomfortable neighbors? Making sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2010', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2013, p. 245.

5. Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592-1598*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009; JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Great East Asian War and the Birth of the Korean Nation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

6. Adrian Buzo, *The Making of Modern Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, pp. 30-35.

tional dynamic. The Cold War bipolar balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union directed Korea's post-war development towards another nefarious outcome: the division of the peninsula and the following war (1950-1953). The Cold War system kept the Korean peninsula in this situation until the end of the bipolar confrontation between the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In all these power competitions, Korea was always in the position of suffering the consequences of rivalry between bigger powers, leading to the emergence of the idea that Korea has been, throughout the years, a victim of expansionist dynamics and of the balance of power between great powers. This idea, that finds important confirmation in historical analysis, also runs the risk of depriving Korea of its agency in the regional and international system.

Given this historical legacy, the recent rise of a new competition between two great powers with conflicting interests in the region has certainly started to be a concern for South Korea's policymakers. The possibility of being caught again in a rivalry between bigger actors with potential consequences for the country's domestic and international development and with little to no say in it could be seen as a new manifestation of the old trend that seems to haunt the Korean peninsula. However, post-Cold War developments on the peninsula, in particular the new possibility and ability of South Korea to act in the international environment and the specific characteristics of the triangular relationship between Seoul, Beijing and Washington point towards a different direction that distances itself from the mostly passive role that Korea had in past experiences.

3. South Korea and the emergence of U.S.-China competition

The conditions that led to an increasingly complicated position for South Korea in this triangular relationship emerged after the mid-2000s. In this period, economic relations between South Korea and China continued to flourish, with economic and trade exchanges growing exponentially.⁷ At the same time, the competition between the two great powers grew more confrontational, especially after the launch of the U.S. «Rebalancing towards Asia» strategy and the rise to power in China of President Xi Jinping. The combined effect of these dynamics led to an increasingly difficult position for South Korea *vis-à-vis* the growing rivalry between the two great powers, in which the country found itself more and more entangled.

7. Kim Min-hyun, 'South Korea's China Policy, Evolving Sino-ROK Relations, and Their Implications for East Asian Security', *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 31, No. 1, April 2016, pp. 56-78.

In order to understand how South Korean governments have dealt with foreign policy issues in recent years, it is important to analyse the role, often underestimated, of domestic political traditions and how they have shaped foreign policy strategies. Conservative and progressive foreign policy traditions are strongly rooted in South Korea and have very different characteristics. For instance, South Korean conservatives generally tend to be more aligned with the United States and to privilege deterrence and a hard-line position on North Korea, while progressives favour a more independent foreign policy, more regional cooperation and promotion of dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang.⁸ When applied to the role of South Korea between the United States and China, this means that conservatives usually tend to favour alignment with Washington at the expense of relations with China, while progressives are keener to promote regional cooperation and autonomy in the alliance.⁹ This domestic political divide in foreign policy has been particularly relevant during the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013). Both presidents, despite coming from opposite political sides, put into practice very different approaches that were substantially in line with the priorities of the political traditions to which they referred. For example, the more autonomous position in the region for South Korea, advocated and pursued by the progressive Roh Moo-hyun during his first years in office, created frictions within the alliance with the United States;¹⁰ while the full realignment with Washington operated by the conservative Lee Myung-bak and his hard-line approach towards North Korea ended up deteriorating relations between Seoul and Beijing.¹¹ These approaches, however, are not fixed but they are subject to change and transformation to address dilemmas that require adaptation of the traditions.

The rising rivalry between the United States and China, that started to become an unavoidable factor for all the regional actors in the 2010s, certainly represented one of those dilemmas that pushed South Korean presidents towards adapting their traditional foreign policy strategies. After the election of Park Geun-hye in December 2012, the new president immediately showed a willingness to reconnect with Beijing after years of relative cold relations under Lee Myung-bak (2007-2012). In June 2013, the South

8. Lee Sangsoo, 'The dynamics of democratized South Korean foreign policy in the post-Cold War era', in Milani M., Fiori A. and Dian M (eds), *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 16-29.

9. Marco Milani, Matteo Dian & Antonio Fiori, 'Interpreting South Korea's foreign and security policy under the «Asian paradox»', in Milani M., Fiori A. & Dian M (eds.), *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, pp. 1-15.

10. Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the crossroads: autonomy and alliance in an era of rival powers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. 135-140.

11. Suk-hee Han, 'South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States', *Council on Foreign Relations Report*, 9 November 2012.

Korean president made an official visit to Beijing, her second trip abroad since the inauguration after the traditional first one to Washington. The meeting confirmed a renewed understanding between the two neighbours and also an excellent personal relationship between the two presidents.¹² On this occasion, in addition to discussing the North Korean nuclear issue, economic relations were the most important topic at the summit, as was evidenced by the presence of a large delegation of South Korean businessmen and by progress in negotiations on signing a free trade treaty between the two countries.¹³ This collaborative mood remained in the following two years, with Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea in July 2014 being a tangible example. Despite the very cordial atmosphere and the excellent personal relationship between the two leaders, substantial differences continued to emerge in matters concerning security and the regional situation. However, to maintain and promote positive relations these issues were left off the agenda. While the two countries seemed to have common goals in promoting positive economic relations, they did not appear to share the same strategic interests.¹⁴

These limits in the development of a real strategic partnership between South Korea and China became increasingly visible in 2015. During this year, paramount importance was given to participation by President Park Geun-hye at the military parade in Beijing to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The image of President Park – the only leader of a U.S. ally at the commemoration – standing on the podium with Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin was certainly a very powerful image, and it led some observers to question whether Seoul was «tilting towards China» in its strategic positioning.¹⁵ In addition to Park's visit, South Korea's decision in the same year to participate in the China-led initiative of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)* seemed to reinforce U.S. concerns about the position of its ally.¹⁶ In both cases, the idea of South Korea distancing itself from the alliance with the United States and moving towards China was an overstretch of the motivations that led to these decisions: Park Geun-hye's government was certainly interested in nurturing positive relations with China. At the same time, participation in the AIIB cannot be equated to a move against the U.S. Instead it was a de-

12. Jane Perlez, 'China to Welcome South Korean Leader, «an Old Friend»', *The New York Times*, 26 June 2013.

13. Scott Snyder & Byun See-won, 'China-Korea Relations: How Does China Solve a Problem Like North Korea?', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 15, No. 2, September 2013, pp. 97-108.

14. Scott Snyder, 'Can Beijing and Seoul Become Strategic Partners?', *The Diplomat*, 6 July 2014.

15. Lee Seong-hyon, 'Seoul's up-and-down Romance with China amid US-China Rivalry: A Korean Perspective', *China Report*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2021, pp. 313-314.

16. Alastair Gale & Rob Taylor, 'Decision to Join China-Led Bank Tests South Korea's Ties to U.S.', *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 2015.

cision to not be left out of a regional financial initiative of great relevance. Similarly, Park's attendance at the commemoration in Beijing was related to similar visions that South Korea and China share about the Pacific War; their role and the role of Japan and the consequences of the war for the two countries.¹⁷

Events in the following year confirmed the idea that South Korea was not shifting from its alliance with the U.S. towards China. In the early months of 2016, renewed nuclear activities by North Korea reinforced the security relationship between Seoul and Washington. This position was reaffirmed by South Korea's decision in July to install a U.S. THAAD anti-missile system on the peninsula to defend its territory from possible North Korean missile attacks.¹⁸ This action had negative effects on China-South Korean relations. Beijing had repeatedly expressed its total opposition to the deployment, which it considered a substantial modification of the regional strategic balance and therefore a threat to its national security.¹⁹ For its part, Seoul affirmed that its objective was only to strengthen its defence against Pyongyang. In addition to the very vocal protests, in the second half of 2016 China began a series of asymmetrical retaliations against South Korea, mostly directed at economic and cultural factors.²⁰ When confronted with a security threat such as that of the North Korean nuclear programme Park Geun-hye's government decided to reconfirm the centrality of the alliance with the U.S., even at the expense of relations with China.

The events that took place in 2015 and 2016, and more in general the development of South Korea-China relations under Park Geun-hye, suggest that South Korea remains firmly tied to the alliance with the United States but also that it does not share the same scepticism – and distrust – of China that the U.S. and Japan have, for historical reasons and also because of elements in Korea's strategic culture, such as the view of China as a major power to be dealt with but not as the main threat, that have profound historical roots but still holds today.²¹ Therefore, South Korea feels less threatened by Beijing's actions in the region than the other two actors and acts according to this perception and interpretation.

17. David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 90-92.

18. Jonathan D. Pollack, 'South Korea's THAAD decision: Neither a surprise nor a provocation', *Brookings*, 8 July 2016.

19. Ankit Panda, 'Why China and Russia Continue to Oppose THAAD', *The Diplomat*, 4 June 2017.

20. Seema Mody, 'China lashes out as South Korea puts an American anti-missile system in place', *CNBC News*, 17 March 2017.

21. David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 82-85.

4. *The triangular relationship facing new challenges and tension*

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016, competition between China and the U.S. significantly escalated. The trade dispute that affected relations between Washington and Beijing for most of Trump's years in office was one part of a broader rivalry that involved not only economic and commercial issues but also security interests and even different visions that the two powers have of the international order in East Asia and at the global level. This increase in the level of tension between the two great powers had – and is still having – effects also on South Korea, with the «flexible» approach implemented in 2013 becoming more and more difficult to sustain.

The election of Moon Jae-in in May 2017 marked a shift from a decade of conservative governments to a progressive one. The transition certainly also marked a change in the conduct of the country's foreign policy, with starting to steer the country's foreign policy direction towards aims and strategies more in line with those in the progressive political tradition. However, similarly to what had happened during Park Geun-hye's presidency, the new administration also tried a partial adaptation of this tradition, in particular concerning reassuring the U.S. On the one hand, Moon was able to achieve a compromise to improve relations with China based on a so-called «three no's» policy: no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in US-led strategic missile defence and no creation of a US-South Korea-Japan alliance.²² This solution redirected relations between Seoul and Beijing onto a positive track without undermining the alliance with the United States. At the same time, Moon's government – mindful of the tension that had been created during the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration in the mid-2000s – maintained an accommodating stance towards the Trump administration, for example by remaining committed to the 'maximum pressure' policy of international sanctions against North Korea and by accepting a revision of the KORUS Free Trade Agreement between the two countries.

This balancing act that Moon was able to realize brought important results in the country's foreign policy – resuming dialogue and cooperation with North Korea, maintaining a strong alliance with the U.S. and returning to good relations with China – in the first phase. However, in 2019 the situation started to deteriorate when the U.S. and North Korea failed to reach a meaningful agreement on the nuclear issue. Relations between Washington and Seoul suffered from the intransigence of the Trump administration and the rivalry between China and the United States further increased, in particular in the last year of Trump's administration. In this situation, South

22. Park Byung-su, 'South Korea's «three nos» announcement key to restoring relations with China', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 2 November 2017.

Korea was again caught up in rivalries between other powers, running a real risk of suffering the consequences.

In the broader framework of U.S.-China competition, Seoul increasingly needs to adapt its strategy to the changing – and worsening – regional environment. As one of the countries that had most benefited in the last two decades from the «era of engagement» between the U.S. and China, now that competition and rivalry are the new paradigm it needs to be able to adapt accordingly.²³ The change in the White House from Trump to Biden – a change that was welcomed in Seoul – while not bringing changes in terms of defusing tension between Beijing and Washington, certainly improved relations between South Korea and the U.S. However, significant differences remain between the two administrations, especially regarding China and how to manage its growing role in the region and the world. At the same time, the Biden administration has been increasingly active in trying to promote a stronger position for its allies and partners in the region towards Beijing.

With its renewed emphasis on the importance of its allies and multilateralism, the Biden administration has started a significant effort aimed at consolidating and reinforcing its alliances amid the increase in tension in its relationship with Beijing. South Korea has been more reluctant than other regional actors in this direction, as was demonstrated, for example, by Seoul's tepid reaction to the possibility of joining in some form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – «Quad» – which includes the U.S., Japan, India and Australia, or a «Quad-Plus» framework open to other countries – selected – countries, such as South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand.²⁴ Moon's administration, while in general terms supporting enhanced forms of cooperation in the region, has been hesitant to join initiatives of this kind, emphasizing the importance of the bilateral alliance with the U.S. and of the inclusiveness of regional partnerships, so as not to target any specific country, i.e. China.²⁵ Maintaining a positive relationship with China, which considers these security frameworks to be intended to contain or counter its actions in the region, is still a crucial part of South Korea's foreign policy. This priority is not only related to the central role that Beijing still has in the country's economic development but also for South Korea's foreign policy priorities: North Korea is one of the core interests for Seoul, especially under the presidency of Moon Jae-in, who has put inter-Korean relations at the centre of his strategy, and cooperation with China on this issue is crucial.

23. Peter Martin, 'Biden's Asia Czar Says Era of Engagement With China Is Over', *Bloomberg*, 26 May 2021.

24. Chung Kuyoun, 'Why South Korea is balking at the Quad', *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2021.

25. Jason Li, 'South Korea's Formal Membership in the Quad Plus: A Bridge Too Far?', *38 North Commentary*, 30 September 2021.

A further troubling factor in the possibility that South Korea joins initiatives aimed at multilateralizing the U.S.-centred system of alliances in Asia, such as the «Quad» and «Quad-Plus», is represented by the problematic relation with Japan. Tokyo is not only a cornerstone of this new system, but the very concept of a «Free and Open Indo-Pacific», which represents a key part of the U.S. regional strategy, was originally initiated by Japan. Considering the controversial relationship between Seoul and Tokyo – burdened by issues related to the legacy of the colonial period on the Korean peninsula and by the territorial dispute over the Dokdo islands – it would be difficult for the South Korean government to openly and actively endorse this concept.

The U.S. drive to create a stronger multilateral regional partnership is certainly further polarizing the situation, thus reducing the space for flexibility and neutrality. In this perspective, South Korea has partially changed its tone towards China in order to reassure Washington of its reliability. This is demonstrated by the inclusion for the first time in the joint statement released after the summit between Moon and Biden in May 2021 of a reference to opposition to «all activities that undermine, destabilize, or threaten the rules-based international order» and an explicit reference to maintaining peace and stability and defending international rules in the Taiwan Strait.²⁶ Although this was a much softer approach compared to that of the joint statement between the U.S. and Japan released a month previously, which made explicit references to China's behaviour, Beijing noticed and criticized the change in tone.²⁷ A further signal of the willingness of South Korea to expand the scope of the bilateral alliance to a broader regional level is the prospect of better coordinating one of Moon's signature policies, the so-called *New Southern Policy*,²⁸ aimed at engaging the southern part of the Asian continent, with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, although South Korea has not taken practical steps in this direction.²⁹ Against this backdrop, for Washington, it would be beneficial to recognize that its allies and partners in the region are not all the same and do not all share the same national interests, goals and threat perceptions; accordingly, taking a more nuanced approach might actually result in a more effective policy for the U.S. and for regional actors.³⁰

26. Tobias Harris & Haneul Lee, 'A New Chapter in U.S.-South Korea Relations: Seoul Embraces a Broader Role in Asia', *Center for American Progress*, 25 July 2021.

27. Jung In-hwan, 'China says S. Korea-US joint statement interferes in its domestic affairs', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 25 May 2021.

28. Sea Young Kim, 'How the «Plus» Factor in South Korea's New Southern Policy Plus Can Ensure Sustainability', *Korean Economic Institute*, 9 September 2021.

29. Andrew Yeo, 'South Korea's New Southern Policy and the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy: Implications for the U.S.-ROK Alliance', *Mansfield Foundation*, 22 July 2021.

30. Kuyoun Chung, 'Why South Korea is balking at the Quad', *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2021.

In this dynamic situation, the domestic dimension of South Korean politics should also be taken into consideration. The last two presidents have tried to adapt their respective foreign policy traditions to the changed regional and international situation; however, the basic beliefs of the progressives were not abandoned by Moon Jae-in, for example with his emphasis on inter-Korean relations and rapprochement. A change in the country's leadership with the return of the conservatives could lead to the abandonment of the middle-ground position, with a renewed attention towards the alliance with the U.S., an approach of closer alignment with Washington – possibly including the participation in multilateral security initiatives – and the resulting increase in tension with China.

5. Conclusions

The dilemma of being caught in a rivalry, or even a conflict, between great powers and having to deal with the negative consequences of it is not a new situation for Korea. From a historical perspective, this has happened several times, as in the case of the power transition from the Chinese Empire to Japan at the end of the 19th century and the rivalry between the U.S. and the USSR during the Cold War. In both cases, the consequences that Korea had to suffer were extremely severe and tragic. The current situation of competition between the U.S. and China certainly presents very different characteristics, as do the international role and weight that South Korea today has in the regional and global scenarios. However, while the Sino-American competition is becoming increasingly tense, Seoul needs to move carefully in order to maintain positive relations with both powers. While in the first years of the current administration it appeared that this «flexible» approach was possible, more recently the rising tension between the two great powers and the pressure from Washington on its allies and partners to form a more solid front *vis-à-vis* China's actions in the region are making this middle-ground position more difficult to sustain.

If, on one hand, the alliance with the United States is still a cornerstone in South Korea's foreign policy and a real «tilt» towards Beijing has never materialized, on the other hand, there are still important differences in how the two allies see China and in their respective foreign policy goals and interests. For this reason, maintaining a balanced position between the two sides still represents the most suitable approach for South Korea to pursue its own goals, reassuring the United States of its reliability within the bilateral alliance, but at the same time avoiding initiatives that could antagonize China. Considering the strategic importance of the country, for Washington, pushing Seoul too hard to take a clear stance against China could turn out to be counterproductive, while endorsing and supporting a more active role for South Korea in the region could better serve the interests of both countries.