

## KOREAN PENINSULA 2018: THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

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*The year 2018 represented a real turning point for the Korean peninsula. After years of increasing tension related to the North Korean nuclear and missile programme, the diplomatic process begun after Kim Jong Un's New Year address marked a clear change from the previous decade, with consequences for both domestic and international politics of the two Koreas. The newly elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in invested much of his political capital in the rapprochement with North Korea, with successful results in terms of popularity in the first part of the year. When dialogue with Pyongyang started to stagnate, the disappointing economic results became a factor of major concern for the government and affected Moon's approval rating. In North Korea, Kim Jong Un's opening towards South Korea and the United States marked also the beginning of a new approach of the regime to economic development, in line with the second pillar of Kim's byungjin policy line. The new emphasis on economic growth led the North Korean regime to pursue both cooperation with the South and a relaxation of international sanctions.*

*The North Korean «diplomatic offensive» represented a new-start for inter-Korean dialogue. After the participation of North Korea in the Pyeongchang Olympic Games, the two leaders met for the third inter-Korean summit in history, in April, for a meeting full of symbolism and hopes for future cooperation. The joint declaration signed by Moon and Kim in Panmunjom represented a key step for inter-Korean reconciliation. The two leaders met again in May and for a third summit in September, when Moon travelled to Pyongyang. This new series of inter-Korean summits made possible new rounds of inter-Korean cooperation projects in culture and sport, as well as military confidence-building measures. However, the economic sanctions still in place hindered opportunities for substantial advancements in economic cooperation.*

*The opening of North Korea towards the international community dominated also the foreign policy agenda of the two countries. For the first time in history, a North Korean leader met with a sitting American president, when Kim Jong Un met Trump in Singapore on 12 June, thanks mainly to the diplomatic mediation of South Korean President Moon Jae-in. After the summit, however, the diplomatic process stalled again over the practical steps towards denuclearisation and the corresponding measures from the US.*

*The «diplomatic offensive» of North Korea was not limited to South Korea and the United States. In fact, Kim met with Chinese president Xi three times over the course of the year, in a successful attempt to revive the crucial alliance between Pyongyang and Beijing.*

## 1. Introduction

The resumption of diplomacy and dialogue on the Korean peninsula during 2018 certainly represented a major change both in terms of foreign and domestic politics. The conservative decade that started with the election of Lee Myung-bak in South Korea, in 2007, and continued with Park Geun-hye in 2012 had gradually but inexorably led to the freezing of every kind of inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. At the same time, Kim Jong Un invested most of North Korea's resources in developing nuclear weapons and long range missiles, as a deterrent against external attacks or interferences, and also as a means to reinforce its legitimacy at home. The combination of these two trends, together with the election of Donald Trump in the United States, led to the security crisis of 2017, during which the peninsula seemed to be on the brink of a military conflict.

For this reason, the unexpected opening proposed by the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during his New Year's speech (1 January 2018) came as a surprise, compared to the escalation of threats that had been taking place a few weeks earlier. In reality, a shift in this direction by the leadership in Pyongyang was not that surprising. In November 2017, the regime had declared the completion of its nuclear and missile programme. Moreover, since 2013 the policy line launched by Kim, called *byungjin*, focused on the parallel development of nuclear weapons and the country's economy. After having declared its success regarding the first pillar of the strategy, the regime predictably started to direct its attention towards the second one. Kim's speech on 1 January followed exactly this path.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who had invested political capital on a rapprochement with Pyongyang since his election in May 2017, welcomed the «olive branch» extended by Kim towards the South, and in just one month the two sides agreed on the North's participation to the Pyeongchang Olympic Games and on marching together at the opening and closing ceremony. Pyongyang also dispatched a high-level delegation to the South that met with President Moon and proposed a summit between the two leaders. These rapid and unexpected developments gave Moon an important boost in terms of domestic popularity. His approval rating reached 80% between April and May, leading the way for a landslide victory of the Democratic Party at the local elections and parliamentary by-elections in June. The political bet of the South Korean president, however, began to prove counterproductive in the second half of the year. Moon's popularity, closely linked to progress in reconciliation with the North and in the negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang on the denuclearisation, declined sharply in the second half of the year, following the stalemate of diplomacy with North Korea and the consequent limitation of inter-Korean cooperation. In this second phase the problems related to the country's

economic growth and unemployment sank Moon's popularity, creating an important challenge for his future agenda.

In North Korea, the opening towards the international community present in Kim Jong Un's New Year speech corresponded to a new emphasis on the country's economic growth. This policy shift was made official by the leader in April, during a meeting of the central committee of the Party. In order to pursue this goal, Kim pushed for restarting economic cooperation with the South both at the first summit with Moon in Panmunjom and at the third in Pyongyang. The South Korean president was eager to implement new inter-Korean economic projects; however, the strong sanctions regime imposed against North Korea impeded cooperation in this field. For this reason the relaxation of sanctions became the priority for Kim in his negotiations with the United States and quickly turned into the main point of contention. The Singapore summit between Kim and Trump (12 June 2018) – the first time in history that an American sitting president met with a North Korean leader – represented a historic diplomatic breakthrough between the two countries. The short joint declaration stated a few principles upon which relations should be based in the future, and included the commitment of the two leaders «to cooperate for the development of new U.S.–DPRK relations and for the promotion of peace, prosperity, and security of the Korean Peninsula and of the world»<sup>1</sup>. When the lights of the summit went out, however, the implementation of the principles agreed upon by the two leaders proved to be more complicated than expected.

The three summits between Kim and Moon completely changed the landscape of inter-Korean relations. Starting from the first one, held on 27 April at the border village of Panmunjom, the two leaders clearly demonstrated their willingness to pursue dialogue and cooperation, for a process of national reconciliation. For the first time, a clear commitment towards the creation of a peace regime on the peninsula – i.e. the signing of a peace treaty – was included in the joint declaration and practical steps towards easing military tension along the border were implemented. After the third meeting in Pyongyang, from 18 to 20 September, the two Koreas jointly began to remove landmines from the De-militarized zone, dismantle guard posts and conduct a joint survey for the reconnection of rail and road lines. Despite this enthusiasm, the efforts to upgrade cooperation to more substantial levels were hindered by the sanctions still in place.

North Korea's «diplomatic offensive» involved not only South Korea and the United States. In 2018, Kim Jong Un met Chinese President Xi Jinping three times, in order to reinforce the strategic alliance between the two partners and to strengthen North Korea's negotiating position with the United States. For the same reason, Pyongyang reached out to Russia

1. White House, *Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit*, 12 June 2018.

several times over the course of the year. For South Korea, foreign policy proved to be complicated in 2018. Aside from the agreement regarding North Korea, relations between Seoul and Washington were affected by the American insistence on reviewing the Free Trade Agreement between the two countries and on sustaining a higher share of the costs of US military in the country. While an agreement concerning free trade was signed by the two presidents in September, the division of the US military costs remained a disputed point. As for regional relations, South Korea continued the process of rapprochement with China that began in the second half of 2017, after the controversies over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system. Relations with Japan, on the other hand, turned sour after several disagreements between the two countries on controversial points related to the colonial period.

## *2. Domestic politics*

### *2.1. The two faces of South Korean domestic politics in 2018*

After his landslide victory in the May 2017 presidential elections, Moon Jae-in focused on a more active role for civil society and on a progressive economic agenda that emphasised the importance of state action to create new jobs and protect low-wage workers. During Moon's first months in office, this approach contributed to his incredibly high rates of public approval. Under the auspices of this popularity, a new and very confident South Korean government began 2018 with a crucial event, not only for domestic politics, but also for the country's international image and prestige: the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games.

When the International Olympic Committee elected Pyeongchang as the host city for the 2018 Winter Olympics, in July 2011, it was a compelling moment for South Korea. After having twice lost the bid for holding the Winter Olympics (2010 and 2014), the 2018 success represented a sort of coronation for Seoul's «Global Korea» strategy, aimed at having South Korea recognised as a global middle power. The «Global Korea» strategy - launched by President Lee Myung-bak in 2008 - specifically aimed at re-branding the country's international image as a thriving, developed and technological-advanced country.<sup>2</sup> One of the main goals of the policy was to distance South Korea from the shadow of North Korea's nuclear threats and to establish its own identity in the eyes of the international community. From this perspective, Pyeongchang Olympic Games were considered as the ideal continuation of the process that began with the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games: in 1988 Korea

2. Jojin V. John, 'Globalization, National Identity and Foreign Policy: Understanding «Global Korea»', *The Copenhagen Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2015, pp. 38-57.

opened up to the world; in 2018 it would show the extraordinary results achieved in the economic, technological and cultural fields.

The sudden advances towards South Korea made by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during his New Year's Speech completely changed the narrative. Since his election, Moon had made clear that one of the key points of his political agenda was to restart inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation after a decade characterised by crises and growing mutual distrust. The «olive branch» extended by Kim at the beginning of 2018 represented a window of opportunity for Moon to put forward his strategy of rapprochement, after months of escalating tension due to the nuclear and missile tests. In this context, the Olympic Games seemed to represent a perfect opportunity to renew inter-Korean cooperation through sport diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

Boosted by the success of the Pyeongchang Olympic Games and of the renewed dialogue with North Korea, Moon's popularity remained at very high levels for the first months of 2018.<sup>4</sup> The political achievements and positive media exposure of the Panmunjom summit and mediation for the Singapore summit contributed to fuel the «honeymoon» between the South Korean government and public opinion. Moon consciously decided to invest most of his political capital in his new strategy of inter-Korean relations. However, this exposed the president to the risks and external variables outside his control; for example the behaviour of Kim Jong Un or that of Donald Trump, or the developments in relations between North Korea and the United States.

The popularity enjoyed by President Moon translated into political success in the local and parliamentary by-elections held on 13 June. Moon's Democratic Party won control of 14 out of 17 metropolitan cities and provinces, and 11 out of 12 seats in the National Assembly, including in the traditionally conservative south-east.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these achievements, South Korea's domestic political life remained afflicted by the traditional divide between progressives and conservatives and by the relatively weak position of Moon's party in the National Assembly. Moon's plan to revise the country's presidential system, which included replacing the existing single term of five years with two four-year terms, was blocked by the opposition within the National Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

3. Udo Merkel, 'The Politics of Sport Diplomacy and Reunification in Divided Korea', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2008, pp. 289-311.

4. 'Moon's approval rating rises to 74 percent thanks to improved ties with N. Korea', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 March 2018.

5. 'South Korea's ruling party wins a landslide victory in local elections', *The Economist*, 14 June 2018.

6. U-Jean Jung, 'Moon Jae-in's first year as South Korea's president', *Al Jazeera*, 10 May 2018.

A further element that reinforced Moon's domestic position in the first half of 2018 was represented by the arrest, prosecution and conviction of two former conservative presidents. Former President Park Geun-hye, impeached and arrested in 2017, was sentenced to 24 years in prison in early April, on several charges that included corruption, abuse of power and leaking of government secrets.<sup>7</sup> In a separate case in July, Park was sentenced to eight more years for the loss of government funds, while in August a court of appeal extended the first sentence to 25 years.<sup>8</sup> The verdicts on Park's case put an end to the scandal that began in November 2016, when millions of demonstrators took to the streets, and continued with her impeachment which led to the election of Moon. In addition to Park Geun-hye, in 2018 another former conservative president, Lee Myung-bak, was arrested and convicted on charges of corruption, embezzlement and tax evasion. After his arrest in March, Lee was then sentenced to 15 years in jail.<sup>9</sup> The discrediting of his predecessors helped to improve Moon Jae-in's public image. After his election, Moon distanced himself from the style of previous conservative presidents, becoming more accessible, open to policy input from the public and promoting a more accountable style of government.

The contrast between Moon and his conservative predecessors was most apparent with regard to economic policies. Starting from his speech at the National Assembly on 12 June, Moon affirmed his preference for an «income-led growth», which focused on the creation of new jobs and raising workers' income, reversing the conservative assumption that jobs are created as a result of growth.<sup>10</sup> While the conservative approach emphasised the importance of creating a favourable environment for business – through a simplification of the legislation and tax cuts for example – the former aimed at boosting domestic consumption through an increase in purchasing power. This shift in strategy was also directed towards the progressive goal of improving «economic democratisation» in the country. In turn this implied the reduction of economic inequalities as well as the power and influence of big conglomerates, which often led to corruption. It also aimed at the improvement of the living standards of those on low-income and the enhancement of small and mid-sized enterprises.<sup>11</sup>

7. Jo He-rim, 'Park Geun-hye sentenced to 24 years in prison', *The Korea Herald*, 6 April 2018.

8. Joyce Lee, 'South Korean court raises ex-president Park's jail term to 25 years', *Reuters*, 24 August 2018.

9. Choe Sang-hun, 'Former South Korean President Gets 15 Years in Prison for Corruption', *The New York Times*, 5 October 2018.

10. Kyle Ferrier, 'Moon Jae-in's Economic Agenda Three Months In', *Korea Economic Institute of America*, undated document.

11. Cheong Wa Dae (Office of President of South Korea), 'Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Fair Economy Strategy Meeting', 9 November 2018 (<https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Speeches/92>).

The three main pillars of this new approach were: the creation of jobs, especially in the public sector; the expansion of social security and income for the disadvantaged sectors of society, and the reform of large industrial conglomerates. In order to achieve the first two goals, Moon substantially increased public spending. One of his key economic initiatives was raising the minimum wage, with the twofold goal of improving living conditions of low-earners and boosting businesses and investments through consumption.

Turning these policies into practical economic results proved to be harder than expected. During the second half of 2018, the shortcomings of this approach were evident. In particular, the increase in the minimum wage reduced the creation of new jobs and the growth rate started to decrease. In July and August the number of jobs created was only 5,000 and 3,000 respectively, and the unemployment rate reached its highest level since the aftermath of the 1999 financial crisis.<sup>12</sup> The hourly minimum wage was raised by 16.4% (US\$ 6.64) in 2018 and was set to increase by 10.9% in 2019 (US\$ 7.37), with an estimated number of beneficiaries varying from 2.9 to 5 million workers.<sup>13</sup> Concurrently, the government reduced the maximum working hours from 68 to 52 per week. Both these measures were intended to improve the living conditions of the low earners, but the unintended effects were a reduction of employment, especially for mid and small-sized enterprises, with fewer margins to absorb the rising costs.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically a policy intended to «democratise» the economy, was spawning economic disparity.

The negative trend in economic development continued after the summer and Moon's approval rating consequently declined. After the Singapore summit and the last inter-Korean summit of the year, in September, the diplomatic activism of South Korea lost momentum and public opinion began to focus on the government's poor economic results. President Moon's decision to invest most of his political capital on inter-Korean relations started to backfire leading to a much more difficult second half of the year for the government. In an effort to revive his approval rating, on 9 November the president decided to replace the finance minister and the presidential chief of staff for economic policy, Jang Hae-sung, the architect of the «income-led growth» strategy. Despite the new appointments, Moon reiterated his commitment to build a fairer economy along the lines of «economic democratisation».<sup>15</sup>

12. Evan Ramstad, 'South Korea's Stalling Job Market and Moon's Economic Push', *CSIS*, 18 September 2018.

13. Ministry of Employment and Labour, '2019 minimum wage set at 8,350 won per hour, 820 won (10.9%) increase from 2018', 14 July 2018 ([http://www.moel.go.kr/english/poli/poliNewsnews\\_view.jsp?idx=1497](http://www.moel.go.kr/english/poli/poliNewsnews_view.jsp?idx=1497)).

14. Sang-young Rhyu, 'Korea's Moon is waning in the face of vested interests', *East Asia Forum*, 28 November 2018.

15. Bryan Harris, 'South Korea's president replaces top economic officials', *Financial Times*, 9 November 2018.

The economic problems of South Korea, together with the inertia of negotiations between the United States and North Korea on the nuclear issue, caused Moon's approval rating to further plummet towards the end of 2018. In December the number dropped to 45%, having reached 80% in the immediate aftermath of the first summit with Kim Jong Un.<sup>16</sup> The conservative opposition took advantage of this downturn of the country's economic performance and approval rating, accusing the president of focusing too much on inter-Korean relations and neglecting the domestic economic difficulties. This trend reconfirmed the high volatility of political consensus in South Korea. In particular, it resembled the political dynamics of previous progressive administrations, under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, which suffered a sharp decrease in popularity when progress on their inter-Korean policy stalled. Moon's decreasing popularity, the economic slowdown and the problems that emerged towards the end of 2018 in the diplomatic rapprochement between United States and North Korea, indispensable for the advancement of inter-Korean cooperation, represented crucial challenges for the South Korean government.

## *2.2. The new emphasis on economic development in North Korean domestic politics*

After several years in which the development of nuclear weapons and military tension with the United States and South Korea dominated North Korean domestic politics, economic development in 2018 became the main priority for the regime. After having announced the complete development of North Korea's nuclear deterrent in his New Year address, Kim Jong Un emphasised the importance of raising the living standards of North Korean people. The «diplomatic offensive» initiated in 2018 was aimed at relieving the country from international sanctions and pursuing economic cooperation, starting with inter-Korean projects.

One day before the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, North Korea staged a military parade for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its armed forces, the Korean People's Army. Compared to the previous year, this parade was considered smaller in scale. Moreover, contrary to what happened on previous occasions, video footage of the event was not available live and foreign journalists were not invited. These decisions might have signalled that the regime did not want to create tension with the international community at a very sensitive diplomatic moment such as the opening ceremony of the Olympics, with the two Koreas marching together and the participation of a high-level delegation from the North.<sup>17</sup>

16. Sotaro Suzuki, 'Moon's approval rating underwater on slowing economy', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 22 December 2017.

17. 'North Korea stages military parade on eve of Olympics', *Al Jazeera*, 8 February 2018.



The parade was probably intended for a domestic audience, to celebrate the military prowess of the country and reinforce the leader's position in the eyes of the population.

During a meeting of the Party's Politburo in April, Kim Jong Un for the first time mentioned the dialogue with South Korea and the United States, giving formal ratification of the negotiating process through domestic political institutions. The regime scheduled a plenary meeting of the central committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, in order to «discuss and decide the policy issues of a new stage in line with the demand of the important historic period of the developing Korean revolution».<sup>18</sup> Kim Jong Un declared that the country's nuclear development was complete and that the regime no longer needed to perform nuclear or missile tests and also that it was ready to close the nuclear site of Punggye-ri, where previous nuclear tests had taken place. The statements about the nuclear strategy of the country attracted international attention, as they were considered part of a new approach to build trust before the upcoming summits with Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump. This development was welcomed both by South Korea and the United States, and it certainly helped in creating a favourable environment. However, Kim emphasised the completion of the nuclear forces as part of the *byungjin* two-track policy, launched by the leader in 2013. The speech did not make any direct reference to complete denuclearisation or to giving up existing nuclear weapons.<sup>19</sup>

The crucial point of Kim's address to the central committee was a shift in the country's strategy towards economic development, the second pillar of the *byungjin* policy, stating that «the party's [new] strategic course is to focus all of its energy on building a socialist economy».<sup>20</sup> The main obstacle to economic development was represented by international sanctions against the nuclear programme. Despite the fact that North Korea had demonstrated in the past its capacity to survive – and in some cases slightly grow – under strong sanctions, these limitations hindered economic development. The North Korean economy data released in July by the Bank of Korea seemed to confirm this, highlighting a contraction of the economy in 2017 of 3.5%, the sharpest in 20 years.<sup>21</sup>

The focus of the regime's efforts towards economic development was reflected also in the dialogue with South Korea and the United States. With regards the summits with Moon Jae-in, North Korea pushed

18. 'N. Korea's ruling party set for meeting on key policy decisions', *Yonhap News Agency*, 19 April 2018.

19. Lee Je-hun, 'Economic development becomes a priority for North Korea', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 23 April 2018.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Cynthia Kim & Hayoung Choi, 'N.Korea economy declines at sharpest rate in 20 yrs in 2017', *Reuters*, 20 July 2018.

for a resumption of inter-Korean cooperation projects, in particular the Kaesong industrial complex and Kungang tourism. As for the United States, Kim's main priority was to obtain a relaxation of the sanctions regime. The intention of the North Korean regime was not exclusively to seek humanitarian aid and assistance. To expand economic development, North Korea needed to trade with neighbouring countries and to attract investments and technology, under the strict control of the government, to reinforce its industrial production. China and South Korea demonstrated a strong interest in this strategy, but the international sanctions still in place created insuperable barriers for this kind of engagement. For this reason, the theme of sanctions relaxation and economic cooperation represented a crucial aspect of inter-Korean relations during 2018 and also of the process of rapprochement between North Korea and the United States.

### *3. Inter-Korean relations*

#### *3.1. Inter-Korean relations and the Pyeongchang Olympic Games*

The participation of North Korea in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang represented a crucial turning point for inter-Korean relations. This possibility was first proposed by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in his New Year address in which he explicitly referred to the Olympic Games as a very important event for South Korea, also signalling his willingness to dispatch a delegation and adopt all the necessary measures, in close coordination with South Korean authorities.<sup>22</sup>

This unexpected move from the North Korean regime was warmly welcomed by the South Korean government, which had been striving to achieve this goal through secret diplomacy in the previous months. Kim Jong Un's announcement was preceded by a series of meetings between officials of the two Koreas in which the South clearly demonstrated its willingness to host a North Korean delegation at the Olympics. For instance, the governor of the Gangwon province, where the Olympic venue was located, met North Korean officials during an international junior sport event in China, in December 2017.<sup>23</sup> This move had the twofold goal of putting inter-Korean dialogue back on track and also of securing peaceful conduct of the event, without threats from North Korea that could destabilise the situation. For this reason, it was not surprising that the day after the New Year speech, the South Korea government proposed working-level meetings to discuss the participation of a North Korean delegation to the Winter Games. In addition, following a phone

22. 'Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year Address', *The National Committee on North Korea*, 1 January 2018.

23. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2017: Searching for new balances', p. 47.

call between President Moon and President Trump, South Korea and the US agreed to postpone their joint military exercises until after the conclusion of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.<sup>24</sup>

In the first week of January, dialogue between the two Koreas proceeded swiftly. On 9 January, two high-level delegations met in Panmunjom to discuss the possibility of North Korea's participation in the Olympics. The high profile meeting was reinforced by the presence of South Korea's Unification Minister Cho Myung-gyon and his North Korean counterpart Ri Son Gwon. The joint declaration that came out of the meeting focused on the issue of Olympic participation stating that: «In this regard the north side agreed to send a delegation of the National Olympic Committee, sports team, a cheer group, an art troupe, a Taekwondo demonstration group and a press corps along with a high-level delegation to the Olympic, and the south side agreed to provide conveniences needed for them.»<sup>25</sup> The remaining part of the declaration addressed the issues of reducing military tension, creating a peaceful environment on the peninsula and promoting national reconciliation, signalling a continuation of dialogue and cooperation beyond the Olympic event.<sup>26</sup> In the following weeks the two Koreas also agreed on further steps to consolidate the process of rapprochement related to the Olympic games with the decision to march together during the opening ceremony, to hold joint ski training sessions in North Korea and to field a joint Korean women's ice hockey team. Although none of these were first-time events – for example the two Koreas marched together for the Olympic opening ceremony in Sidney (2000), Athens (2004) and Turin (2006) and had a joint team for the table-tennis world championship in 1991 – the symbolic value of holding them in the Korean peninsula, after two years of open hostility and military confrontation, made the decision particularly important.

The weeks preceding the Olympic Games were characterised by a positive atmosphere for inter-Korean relations. On 21 and 22 January, North Korea sent a high-level delegation to the South which also included the leader of the Moranbong band – an all-female music group, whose members are reportedly personally selected by Kim Jong Un and whose key singer had been the member of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea Hyon Song Wol. During the visit, Hyon was pursued by the South Korean media and treated as a celebrity.<sup>27</sup>

24. Den Lamothe & Simon Denyer, 'Trump agrees to delay military exercise with South Korea until after Winter Olympics', *The Washington Post*, 4 January 2018.

25. Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, 'The two Koreas released the following joint press statement at the end of the high-level talks held on Tuesday, January 9', 9 January 2018 ([https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/news/news/?boardId=bbs\\_0000000000000033&mode=view&cntId=54348](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/news/?boardId=bbs_0000000000000033&mode=view&cntId=54348)).

26. *Ibid.*

27. Tara Francis Chan, 'One of North Korea's most-influential women is attracting a lot of attention – which is exactly what Kim Jong Un wants', *Business Insider*, 22 January 2018.

The Olympic diplomacy between the two Koreas followed two equally important tracks. One was represented by the cultural-symbolic aspect. The opening ceremony on 9 February saw athletes of the two Koreas marching together under the so-called Korean Reunification flag, with two standard-bearers, one from the North and one from the South. Among the South Korean public, the sense of shared identity with the North and awareness of belonging to the same cultural community that constitutes a fundamental part of inter-Korean relations was very much in evidence. Despite the presence of some limited and sporadic protests by conservative groups, the participation of the North Korean delegation was hailed a great success. Even the controversy at the announcement of the joint women's ice-hockey team disappeared when the athletes began to play, and the enthusiasm in the audience remained very high despite the disappointing results on a sporting level.

The second important track was represented by the political dimension of the rapprochement between the two Koreas. As already stated in the joint statement of 9 January, the Olympic diplomacy was considered a first step towards a general improvement in inter-Korean relations. The two Koreas used the occasion to restart high-level dialogue. The presence of Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, was interpreted as a clear signal of the importance that the leader was attaching to this event. In addition to being alternate member of the Politburo of the Party's Central Committee, Kim Yo Jong was regarded as one of the closest aids of the leader. She was part of a delegation formally headed by the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly – and official head of state – Kim Yong Nam, but the most important member of the delegation. After attending the ceremony, Kim Yo Jong met with President Moon for three hours, during which she extended an invitation from her brother for him to visit Pyongyang. The South Korea president's response was positive, but cautious.<sup>28</sup> In this first phase, in fact, North Korea diplomatic efforts were aimed mostly toward South Korea, while relations with the US remained tense, as clearly demonstrated by Vice President Pence's attitude towards the North Korean delegation during the opening ceremony.<sup>29</sup> President Moon, well aware of the importance of restoring dialogue but also of the crucial role of the US in this context was cautious, stating that the times were not ripe yet for an inter-Korean summit.

At the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games, the North Korean delegation was headed by the powerful former director of the intelligence service Kim Yong Chol, who reportedly affirmed his government's willingness to open a dialogue with the United States. The weeks that

28. Benjamin Haas, 'Kim Jong-un's sister invites South Korean president to Pyongyang', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2018.

29. Motoko Rich & Choe Sang-Hun, 'Kim Jong-un's Sister Turns On the Charm, Taking Pence's Spotlight', *The New York Times*, 11 February 2018.

followed saw an incredible series of events that led to unprecedented developments in inter-Korean relations. During the first week of March, South Korea sent a delegation to the North headed by the director of the National Security Office, Chung Eui-yong, and the director of the National Intelligence Service, Suh Hoon. The two officials met with Kim Jong Un just a few hours after their arrival at Pyongyang airport for a four-hour long meeting followed by a banquet. The visit proved to be a ground-breaking event. The South Korean envoys reported that the two parties had agreed to hold the third inter-Korean summit in late April, on the southern side of the border village of Panmunjom – the first time a North Korean leader had set foot in the South after the Korean war. A direct telephone line between the two leaders was installed. In addition, Chung and Suh reported that the North Korean leader stated his willingness to open a dialogue including also the issue of denuclearisation – usually considered taboo – and to suspend all missile and nuclear tests for the duration of the talks.<sup>30</sup> After returning from North Korea the two South Korean delegates flew to Washington to brief President Trump about the meeting with the North Korean leader and to forward the proposal for a summit from Kim Jong Un. The American president immediately accepted the proposal and stated the summit should be held before the end of May.<sup>31</sup>

The diplomatic activity after Kim's speech had completely changed the situation on the peninsula in just two months, demonstrating the Olympic participation was just a first step in a broader strategy. The South Korean government's promptness to proactively work towards dialogue and negotiation also played a crucial role. Moon Jae-in's electoral pledge that South Korea would take back its position in the driver's seat of inter-Korean relations was becoming reality.

### *3.2. The third inter-Korean summit and the «Panmunjom declaration»*

After the sudden and unexpected developments of the Olympic diplomacy the expectation and preparations for the third inter-Korean summit, 12 years after the second, dominated the agenda between North and South Korea. During a working-level meeting in late March at the border village of Panmunjom the date for the summit was set for 27 April. In early April the two Koreas again played the card of cultural diplomacy, to improve their relations and prepare the terrain for the upcoming event. From 1 to 3 April a troupe of South Korean artists travelled to North Korea, to reciprocate the artistic performances which took place in South Korea during the Olympics. The South Korean delegation, which included

30. Joshua Berlinger & Sophie Jeong, 'Kim Jong Un wants to «write new history» on South Korea reunification', *CNN*, 7 March 2018.

31. 'Trump, Kim agree to meet by May: Seoul envoy', *Yonhap News Agency*, 9 March 2018.

celebrity K-pop bands, performed two concerts in Pyongyang; Kim Jong Un attended the first one, posing for a picture with South Korean artists at the end of the performance.<sup>32</sup> These cultural exchanges reconnected the two Koreas at the cultural and social level, emphasising the common cultural traits that are shared by the population of the entire peninsula, despite more than 70 years of division. These exchanges had positive repercussions at the political level. The image of North Korea – and also of its leader – improved considerably according to South Korean public opinion, as demonstrated by surveys taken immediately after the summit;<sup>33</sup> at the same time, the North Korea official propaganda began to portray South Korea more positively.

The third inter-Korean summit that took place in Panmunjom on 27 April can certainly be regarded as a turning point for the two Koreas. For the first time after the Korean war a North Korean leader set foot in South Korea; the powerful image of Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in crossing the boundary line together twice, hand in hand, represented a historical event of enormous symbolic value. Moon and Kim were then welcomed to the Peace House by a military guard in traditional uniform of the Chosŏn period, another important symbol of the unity of the Korean nation before the Japanese colonisation and the subsequent division. Inside the building, the two leaders then paused before a painting of Mount Kungang, an important symbol for both Koreas, and the site of one of the main inter-Korean cooperation projects (the Mount Kungang Tourism Project). In the afternoon the two leaders attended a ceremony in which a tree, originally planted within the de-militarised zone in 1953, was replanted with water and earth from symbolic places of both the South and the North.<sup>34</sup> This elaborate ceremony, full of the symbolism of unity and reconciliation played a fundamental role in celebrating the historical significance of the event, but also in underlining the importance of the historical-cultural aspects that the two Koreas still share today, after more than 70 years of division and confrontation.

This summit was relevant not only from a symbolic perspective. As in 2000 and 2007, at the end of the summit the two leaders presented a joint declaration, aimed at reiterating the basic principles of the inter-Korean reconciliation process and the themes discussed in the summit agenda: inter-Korean cooperation, peace, and the denuclearisation of the peninsula. The first two points occupied most of the «Panmunjom declaration», as the document was named, including also practical guidelines on short and

32. Choe Sang-hun, 'Onstage, South Korean K-Pop Stars. In the Balcony, Kim Jong-un, Clapping', *The New York Times*, 1 April 2018.

33. Hyonhee Shin & Haejin Choi, 'South Korean trust in North jumps after feel-good summit', *Reuters*, 30 April 2018.

34. Khang Vu, 'Deciphering symbols at the inter-Korean summit', *The Interpreter*, 28 April 2018.

medium-term developments in these areas.<sup>35</sup> As for inter-Korean relations, the two leaders agreed to set up a liaison office in Kaesong, another place of great symbolic significance both from the historical point of view and for inter-Korean cooperation, to restart family reunions on 15 August, the day commemorating the liberation of the peninsula from Japanese colonial rule, and adopting practical steps for the connection and modernisation of the railways and roads between the two Koreas. The two leaders agreed to work to eliminate military tensions along the de-militarised zone, by ceasing all hostile acts against each other and undertaking practical military confidence-building measures, and to create a «maritime peace zone» in the disputed waters in the Western sea. In addition, the two Koreas agreed to work to reach a new definitive solution to the precarious 1953 armistice agreement, collaborating with the United States and China, the other actors involved in the conflict. As largely expected, the last point concerning denuclearisation of the peninsula remained rather vague.<sup>36</sup> For North Korea it was considered a final step in a much broader effort to improve security relations on the peninsula and in the region. Also, Pyongyang has consistently affirmed that negotiations regarding the nuclear programme must be between North Korea and the United States. For this reason, it was not surprising that the declaration focused more on inter-Korean relations. Nevertheless, the fact that denuclearisation was included in the declaration represented an important confirmation of Kim Jong Un's willingness to discuss the issue. It also confirmed the role that South Korea was playing as facilitator between the US and North Korea on the nuclear programme issue, as previously demonstrated by the successful «shuttle diplomacy» of Chung Eui-yong and Suh Hoon in March.

This development represented an important change from the previous negotiation framework of the «Six Party Talks» that was put in place to address the second nuclear crisis from 2003 to 2008 in which China played the role of main mediator, while South Korea's role was marginalised.<sup>37</sup> This trend was clearly demonstrated by a second inter-Korean summit which took place soon after the 27 April meeting.

On 26 May, Moon and Kim met again in Panmunjom to re-arrange the summit between Trump and Kim Jong Un, abruptly called off by the American president on 24 May because of the hostility demonstrated by North Korea in the previous weeks. This surprise Moon-Kim summit lasted

35. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 'Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula', 27 April 2018 (<http://www.mofa.go.kr>).

36. *Ibid.*

37. The Six Party Talks was a diplomatic multilateral framework created in 2003 to address and possibly resolve the second nuclear crisis in North Korea. The framework included North and South Korea, the United States, China, Russia and Japan.

only two hours and unlike the previous one was not publicised.<sup>38</sup> In the role of mediator, Moon shortly afterwards issued a statement: «Chairman Kim made clear once again his intentions to completely denuclearise the Korean Peninsula, as he did in the Panmunjom Declaration. He expressed his willingness to work together to promote peace and prosperity as well as to put an end to the history of war and confrontation through the success of a North Korea-United States summit.»<sup>39</sup> The second summit also demonstrated that after 26 April relations between the leaders of the two Koreas could be carried forward in a much more informal way, signalling the higher level of mutual trust and also their commitment to address and resolve any obstacles to the diplomatic process. This was made clear by President Moon when stating: «Yesterday's summit was held like a routine meeting between friends. We agreed to communicate and to sit together to have candid discussions whenever necessary.»<sup>40</sup> Once again, Moon Jae-in confirmed his commitment take a proactive role in addressing the political issues regarding the peninsula.

### 3.3. *The restart of inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation*

The inter-Korean dialogue that started with the Olympic diplomacy and culminated with the third summit in Panmunjom led to the resumption of inter-Korean cooperation. During the summer the two Koreas held several important meetings in order to address specific principles enshrined in the «Panmunjom declaration». From mid-June onwards, North and South Korea resumed high-level and working-level military talks, agreeing to fully restore a direct military hotline and communication lines between the two navies. In addition the two Koreas reached a broad agreement about disarming the Joint Security Area and reducing the number of guard posts on the border.<sup>41</sup> Concurrently, cooperation began in other fields. In late June, the two parties agreed to conduct preliminary inspections for the reconnection of cross-border railroads and roads, while the Red Cross agreed to hold family reunions at the Mount Kungang resort on 20 to 26 August, for the first time in three years. Sports cooperation also continued to be at the forefront of inter-Korean cooperation, following the Olympic Games. The South Korean basketball team flew to Pyongyang in July for a friendly game against the North's team. During the Asian Games in Indonesia in August, the two Koreas marched together at the opening ceremony and competed with joint teams in women's basketball, dragon boat racing and three rowing events.<sup>42</sup>

38. Hamish MacDonald, 'Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un hold surprise second summit at Panmunjom', *NK News*, 26 May 2018.

39. Sohn JiAe, 'NK remains committed to US dialogue, denuclearization: president', *Korea.net*, 27 May 2018.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Aidan Forster-Carter, 'Sunshine 2.0: Good start – but how far can it go?', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2018, pp. 75-76.

42. *Ibid.*



These first practical examples of cooperation demonstrated the willingness of both Koreas to resume the process of reconciliation of the decade of the so-called «Sunshine policy» (1997-2007), implementing cooperation projects and events relatively easy to manage in term of logistics and security. However, the strict sanctions implemented by the UN Security Council resolutions and unilateral sanctions remained in place, even after the summit between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, limiting more substantial cooperation, especially in economic projects.

One of the most important steps in this early phase of renewed inter-Korean cooperation was represented by the opening of a permanent liaison office between the two Koreas in Panmunjom on 14 September, as agreed during the first Moon-Kim meeting. The new office, with a resident staff of 15 to 20 officials from each country, enabled instant communication between the two Koreas on a wide range of matters and constituted a clear example of the process of institutionalisation of inter-Korean cooperation through the creation of permanent channels of communication.<sup>43</sup>

The leaders of the two Koreas met again for the third time in less than five months from 18 to 20 September, when Moon Jae-in travelled to Pyongyang for a three-day visit, as agreed in the «Panmunjom declaration», becoming the third South Korean president to visit Pyongyang. As with the first summit, symbolism played a key role. Moon and the first lady, Kim Jung-sook, were greeted at the airport by Kim and his wife Ri Sol Ju with a guard of honour. The two couples then paraded through the streets of Pyongyang greeted by thousands of North Korean citizens. Significantly, these images were broadcast live from Pyongyang for a global audience, not through the national Korean Central Television but a South Korean TV pool.<sup>44</sup> A further event full of symbolic value was the short speech that President Moon gave in front of a North Korean audience of 114,000 people, when the two leaders attended a modified version of the famous mass games «Glorious Country», that emphasized the importance of peace, reconciliation and national unity.<sup>45</sup> But probably the most significant event that took place during Moon's trip was the surprise visit of the two leaders and their wives to Mount Paektu, Korea's highest mountain, and considered a sacred peak by Koreans. The two leaders took pictures together in a very informal atmosphere, reinforcing the idea of friendship and familiarity already displayed in the first two meetings.<sup>46</sup>

43. Ock Hyun-ju, 'Two Koreas open joint liaison office in North', *The Korea Herald*, 14 September 2018.

44. Martyn Williams, 'North Korean Media: KCTV's Coverage of Kim Jong Un's Diplomatic Push in 2018', *38 North*, 27 December 2018.

45. Ock Hyun-ju, 'Moon Jae-in attends mass games in Pyongyang', *The Korea Herald*, 20 September 2018.

46. Benjamin Haas, '«Dream come true» for Moon as Korean leaders make mountain pilgrimage', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2018.

Moon's visit to Pyongyang was not only about reconciliation and Korean national unity however. On the second day of the summit, the leaders of the two Koreas signed a joint declaration, the «Pyongyang declaration», which listed the further steps necessary to improve inter-Korean cooperation in the spirit of the previous «Panmunjom declaration». The joint document was composed of five points, with a sixth which only contained Moon's invite for Kim to visit Seoul at an early date. The first four points addressed specific fields of inter-Korean cooperation.<sup>47</sup> The first point reiterated the agreement included in the previous declaration on the cessation of military hostility and confrontation along the border. However, this time the declaration included an annex, signed by the ministers of defence of the two Koreas, with practical measures towards this goal.

The so-called «Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain» prescribed a series of practical confidence building measures such as the removal of guard posts from the de-militarised zone (DMZ), joint operations for demining and searching for remains of soldiers within the DMZ, the establishment of a no-fly area and the cessation of military exercises along the border.<sup>48</sup> According to Chung Eui-yong the document was tantamount to a non-aggression agreement between the two Koreas.<sup>49</sup> The points from two to four focused on economic, humanitarian and cultural cooperation, with some very specific steps, such as road and rail reconnections, joint forestry projects, exchanges between separated families and the promotion of cultural and sport events (including the possibility of a joint hosting of the 2032 Summer Olympic Games).

Interestingly, the point concerning economic cooperation included an explicit reference to the flagship projects of the Kaesong industrial complex and the Mount Kumgang Tourism Project, both inaugurated by progressive presidents in the years of the Sunshine policy and later suspended due to the increasing tension in inter-Korean relations. In spite of the fact that the sanctions in place prevented the re-opening of the projects, the document clearly expressed the shared will of the two leaders to work towards their resumption – and implicitly for South Korea to pursue a relaxation of the international sanctions regime.

The fifth point of the declaration addressed the thorny issue of denuclearisation of the peninsula. While in Panmunjom the two leaders' declaration was limited to a general shared engagement to work towards denuclearisation, in Pyongyang the agreement included specific measures

47. 'Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018', *The National Committee on North Korea*, 19 September 2018.

48. Aidan Foster-Carter, 'An unprecedented year, but will progress continue?', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2019, p. 74.

49. Daryum Ji, 'Two Koreas agree to end military exercises near border, withdraw GPs in DMZ', *NK News*, 19 September 2018.

such as the dismantlement of the Tongchang-ri missile engine test site and launch platform and the possibility to permanently dismantle the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, on condition of the United States taking corresponding measures. This final point provided useful information regarding the connection between inter-Korean relations and the denuclearisation issue. The fact that the nuclear issue had been included in the declaration explicitly signalled that South Korea played a key role in the mediation between North Korea and the US, as demonstrated by Moon's role in brokering the summit between Kim and Trump. In addition, it confirmed the idea that for upgrading inter-Korean to a more substantial level, namely from cultural and humanitarian cooperation to economic cooperation, South Korea has to work in tandem with the US and secure progress on the denuclearisation issue, which in turn could lead to a relaxation of the sanctions regime. Lastly, the point of the declaration, with the explicit reference to the United States, could be seen as a sort of diplomatic message sent to Washington, highlighting the specific practical steps that Pyongyang was ready to take in exchange for mutual concessions.

The Pyongyang summit and the joint declaration gave new impetus to inter-Korean cooperation in the final months of the year. The two Koreas began a joint operation of demining in the DMZ on 1 October, in preparation for the search for the remains of missing-in-action (MIA) soldiers. After demining and the removal of military guard posts from the DMZ, the two Koreas and the United Nations Command verified the completed disarmament of the Joint Security Area (JSA).<sup>50</sup>

At the end of November, a South Korean technical squad was sent to North Korea for the joint inspection of the North's railroad system in light of the future reconnection. Despite the slow speed and bad condition of the rails, the inspections were generally thorough and covered both the east and west coast lines up to the borders with China and Russia. In December a second squad carried out a similar survey of the road system. After completion of the inspections, the two Koreas held a ceremony in Kaesong on 26 December to celebrate the new beginning of inter-Korean cooperation in transportation. The difficulties in obtaining an exemption from the sanctions to conduct the inspections demonstrated once again the limits that sanctions pose to inter-Korean cooperation, and thus the necessity to advance the denuclearisation issue as a means of upgrading cooperation projects to a higher level.<sup>51</sup>

The year ended with a letter sent by Kim Jong Un to Moon Jae-in in which the North Korean leader regretted the fact that he could not visit the South before the end of the year and expressed his desire to meet

50. 'Koreas, UNC complete JSA disarmament verification', *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 October 2018.

51. Min Joo Kim & Simon Denyer, 'North and South Korea hold ceremony to link railways, but sanctions block way', *The Washington Post*, 26 December 2018.

frequently with his counterpart during 2019, and his willingness to resolve the denuclearisation of the peninsula together.<sup>52</sup> The advancements in inter-Korean relations that were achieved during 2018 were unthinkable only a few months earlier. A decade of conservative governments in South Korea and the increasing tension due to the North's nuclear and missile programmes had dismantled the entire framework for inter-Korean cooperation and dialogue that had previously been built. Even during the first months of Moon's presidency, despite his strategy of engagement toward Pyongyang, inter-Korean dialogue was impeded by controversies over the nuclear issue. For this reason, the sudden turn of events that followed Kim Jong Un's New Year speech was unexpected. Nonetheless, the South Korean government was ready to take advantage of the opportunity. The symbolic value of these initiatives, albeit important, was a reminder that sanctions over the nuclear issue and the involvement of the United States remained an unavoidable element, inhibiting relations between the two Koreas. For this reason, Moon and his government are bound to pursue substantial improvements during 2019, in order to stabilise the situation on the peninsula and to start implementing cooperation projects in more substantial fields, such as economics.

#### *4. International Relations*

##### *4.1. The Singapore summit and its consequences*

After years of deadlock, during which Pyongyang had been able to considerably advance its nuclear and missile programmes, and following the first year of Trump's presidency characterised by a very dangerous escalation of tension, the historic summit between an American sitting president and the leader of North Korea (12 June 2018) appeared to lead to a negotiated solution to the nuclear issue and a new era of positive relations between the two countries.

In spite of this, 2018 did not start with a rapprochement between North Korea and the United States. During his New Year speech, Kim Jong Un opened the door to inter-Korean dialogue but at the same time maintained his threatening rhetoric towards Washington, stating that North Korea had completed its nuclear development, that the nuclear button was always on his desk and ready to defend the country from external attacks, confirming once again the «defensive» character of North Korea's nuclear programme. Trump's response to this threat followed the same pattern as previous months, with a tweet in which the American president compared the North Korean nuclear programme to the American one, boasting

52. Chad O'Carroll, 'In letter, Kim Jong Un says he wants to meet Moon Jae-in «frequently» in 2019', *NK News*, 30 December 2018.

that it was much more powerful.<sup>53</sup> During the first weeks of the year, the renewed dialogue between the two Koreas, channelled through the Olympic diplomacy, apparently did not bear positive results for the relations between Pyongyang and Washington. During his State of the Union address, in late January, Trump made explicit references to the violations of human rights in North Korea.<sup>54</sup> In addition, when Vice-President Mike Pence attended the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games he explicitly avoided any kind of contact with the North Korean delegation, despite being seated a few meters away.

The situation started to change in the second half of February, after President Moon publicly stated that North Korea had expressed its availability to open a dialogue with the United States. From then on, Moon led the mediation, first with a phone call to Trump on 1 March followed by a trip to Washington of South Korea special envoys Chung and Suh. Trump, rather surprisingly, immediately accepted Kim's offer to meet. According to the American president, his decision was due to the high level of confidence that he placed on his ability to negotiate directly with the North Korean leader, and break the existing stalemate. At the same time, the unprecedented nature of the meeting gave Trump the opportunity to outshine his predecessors. This was, however, a hazardous decision leaving little time for the American negotiating team to prepare.

The summit was initially planned for May. Shortly after the announcement the American president reshuffled key positions of his foreign and security policy team. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was replaced by former CIA director Mike Pompeo, and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster by John Bolton. Both Pompeo and Bolton were more «hawkish» towards North Korea than either of their predecessors. Bolton had previously referred to the unreliability of the North Korean leadership and even advocated military intervention.<sup>55</sup>

Despite these new appointments, the summit began positively. In mid-April, Pompeo visited North Korea for the first time. There he met not only the North Korea official in charge of negotiating with the United States, Kim Yong Chol, but also Kim Jong Un. On 29 April, South Korea announced that Kim Jong Un agreed to close the nuclear site in Punggye-ri and invited foreign experts and journalists to witness the event.<sup>56</sup> As a

53. Peter Baker & Michael Tackett, 'Trump Says His «Nuclear Button» Is «Much Bigger» Than North Korea's', *The New York Times*, 2 January 2018.

54. Robert R. King, 'North Korean Human Rights in the 2018 and 2019 State of the Union Addresses – What a Difference a Year Makes', *CSIS Commentary*, 7 February 2019.

55. Uri Freedman, 'McMaster Is Out, an Even Bigger North Korea Hawk Is In', *The Atlantic*, 22 March 2018.

56. Kim Tong-hyung, 'North Korea offers to give up nukes if US vows not to attack', *Associated Press*, 29 April 2018.

further gesture of goodwill, in early May, the North Korean regime decided to release three American citizens detained in the country during the Secretary of State's second visit. On 10 May, Trump officially announced that the summit would take place in Singapore on 12 June.

The honeymoon between the two countries seemed to have evaporated by mid-May. The North Korean regime cancelled a scheduled meeting with South Korea in protest at its joint military exercises with the US, resumed on a smaller scale after the Olympic Games. In addition, Pyongyang threatened to call off the summit between the two leaders if the United States continued to support an immediate and unilateral denuclearisation – the so-called «Libya model» – publicly supported by newly-appointed National Security Adviser John Bolton.<sup>57</sup> The rapid deterioration of the situation led Trump to cancel the summit on 24 May, citing the provocative and derogatory statements of North Korean officials. Pyongyang refrained from escalating the situation and the intervention of South Korea restored harmony. On 1 June, Kim Yong Chol flew to the United States and met with Trump at the White House, carrying a personal letter from Kim Jong Un. After the meeting, the American president announced that the 12 June summit was back on track. These provocative exchanges on the eve of the summit were probably part of a signalling tactic aimed at reinforcing the respective negotiating positions and, in the case of North Korea, showing displeasure towards some possible members of the American delegation.

Trump and Kim arrived in Singapore on 10 June and each met separately with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In a further effort to rebrand his image abroad, Kim Jong Un visited some of the most iconic attractions of Singapore the day before the summit, smiling for informal pictures with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.<sup>58</sup> The summit was held on 12 June at the Capella Singapore hotel on Sentosa Island. After the historic and highly choreographed handshake, Kim and Trump held a private meeting, followed by another which included the two leaders' closest advisors. The friendly atmosphere of the summit ended with the signing of a short joint declaration. The document was comprised of four points that affirmed the shared goal of working towards a new era of relations based on peace and prosperity, joint efforts to build a peace regime on the peninsula – interpreted as the starting point of a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War – and the North Korean commitment to work towards the denuclearisation of the peninsula. According to Pyongyang, this last point included not only its own nuclear programme, but also the possible deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea or surrounding areas, where they could represent a threat to North Korea. The fourth point

57. Choe Sang-hun & Mark Landler, 'North Korea Threatens to Call Off Summit Meeting With Trump', *The New York Times*, 15 May 2018.

58. Linette Lai, 'North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visits Singapore attractions on eve of Trump-Kim summit', *The Straits Times*, 11 June 2018.

addressed the issue of recovering and repatriating the remains of American soldiers who fought in the war.<sup>59</sup> In addition, it is worth noting that the point regarding denuclearisation was listed as third in the document and did not explicitly refer to the North Korean nuclear programme, but rather to the denuclearisation of the entire peninsula. During the press conference that followed the summit, Trump surprisingly announced the suspension of joint military exercises between the United States and South Korea, which he defined as expensive «war games».<sup>60</sup> According to his critics, Trump had conceded too much to Pyongyang. The absence of a specific and shared definition of complete denuclearisation, as well as any form of specific commitment from North Korea was seized upon. Despite these criticisms, the historical significance of the event, the attention of the media and the cordial atmosphere of the meeting gave Trump the opportunity to claim unprecedented success at the summit. Back in Washington, Trump immediately tweeted that North Korea was no longer a nuclear threat.<sup>61</sup>

North Korea emerged from the Singapore summit strengthened. The unilateral suspension of the joint military exercises represented a major diplomatic success, as well as the fact that the declaration explicitly suggested working towards a peace treaty – a long-awaited goal for Pyongyang – and that it was prioritised ahead of denuclearisation. But the most relevant result for Kim Jong Un was international recognition as a credible and legitimate leader. From a domestic point of view, the summit glorified the leader as a great statesman on the world stage. The key word for Kim was therefore legitimisation, and from this perspective the result obtained was of the highest level.

The immediate aftermath of the summit maintained a positive momentum for US-North Korea relations. Pompeo visited North Korea in early July to discuss the implementation of the joint declaration. A few weeks later, American and North Korean generals met in Panmunjom to discuss the repatriation of the remains of American soldiers who fought during the Korean War. On 27 July the remains of 55 soldiers were brought to a US base in South Korea.<sup>62</sup>

However, towards the end of the summer the situation slipped into a new diplomatic stalemate. After the positive effects of the summit, North Korea and the United States started to find difficulties in translating the leaders' commitments into practical steps.

59. 'The Trump-Kim Summit Statement: Read the Full Text', *The New York Times*, 12 June 2018.

60. Josh Smith & Phil Stewart, 'Trump surprises with pledge to end military exercises in South Korea', *Reuters*, 12 June 2018.

61. Paul Sonne, 'Trump says North Korea is «no longer» a nuclear threat. The Pentagon budget suggests otherwise', *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2018.

62. 'Korea remains: Pyongyang returns US troops slain in Korean War', *BBC News*, 27 July 2018.

On 23 August, the US administration announced the appointment of Stephen Biegun as the new special envoy for North Korea, replacing Joseph Yun who had retired earlier in the year. The day after the appointment, Trump announced the cancellation of Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang while the new special envoy cited lack of progress from North Korea regarding denuclearisation and the lack of assistance from China in enforcing sanctions.<sup>63</sup> This decision signalled the difficulties of implementing the vague prescriptions of the Singapore declaration. Despite the setback, the diplomatic channel remained open, though with scarce practical results. Pompeo met with North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly in late September, and flew to Pyongyang in October, where he met Kim Jong Un and discussed the possibility of a second summit with Trump in the near future. On this occasion the North Korean leader offered international inspections to the closed nuclear site of Punggye-ri, but the two sides were unable to reach agreement on other US requests, such as the provision of a complete inventory of North Korea's nuclear and missile weapons, and production and storage sites.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the good relationship between the two leaders, the distance on the way forward in the implementation of the Singapore declaration remained. As a further demonstration of the difficulties, in November the two sides postponed a scheduled meeting between Pompeo and Kim Yong Chol.<sup>65</sup> The developments of the previous months demonstrated the shortcomings of the diplomatic process between the US and North Korea. In order to break the stalemate, the two countries started to work towards a new summit, to be held in early 2019. North Korea continued to seek the support of partners more willing to cooperate and to put pressure on the US to reduce sanctions.

#### 4.2. *Kim Jong Un's «diplomatic offensive»*

The «diplomatic offensive» launched by the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un in his New Year address was a key factor of change for North Korea's foreign policy in 2018. The previous year's continued nuclear and missile testing had strongly affected the country's relations with the United States, with an escalation of tension that culminated with Trump's address to the UN General Assembly in which he threatened to destroy North Korea.<sup>66</sup>

63. Katrina Manson, 'Donald Trump cancels Mike Pompeo visit to North Korea', *Financial Times*, 24 August 2018.

64. Choe Sang-hun & David E. Sanger, 'North Korea Agrees to Allow Inspectors Into Nuclear Testing Site, Pompeo Says', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2018.

65. Austin Ramzy, 'Pompeo Meeting With North Korean Diplomat Postponed', *The New York Times*, 7 November 2018.

66. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2017: Searching for new balances', *Asia Maior 2017*, p. 51.



Similarly, China's decision to enforce new rounds of international sanctions approved in 2017 damaged relations between Pyongyang and Beijing.<sup>67</sup>

The new tone of North Korea's foreign policy that was set by Kim's speech was translated into practical diplomatic steps in the first months of 2018. The first opening, directed toward South Korea and the improvement of inter-Korean relations through the Olympic Games, was followed by a broader strategy of engagement towards other partners. At the end of March, Kim Jong Un met with President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Thomas Bach, in Pyongyang. The discussion between the two focused mostly on sport issues. During the meeting, Kim and Bach reconfirmed the importance of Olympic diplomacy in building peace on the peninsula. The IOC president also obtained the commitment of the North Korean regime to participate in the upcoming Olympic Games in Tokyo (2020) and Beijing (2022).<sup>68</sup>

North Korea's «diplomatic offensive» was also directed at China. The Sino-North Korean relationship represents a cornerstone of Pyongyang foreign policy. In addition to the historical, ideological, political and military ties between the two communist regimes, which can be traced back to the Chinese military intervention during the Korean War, the two countries still shared a formal military alliance and Beijing accounted for more than 90% of the total trade volume of North Korea.<sup>69</sup> For these reasons, the role of China has always been crucial. Despite this, prior to 2018 the leaders of the two countries, Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping, had never met. In recent years, the relationship has been affected by friction over the North Korean nuclear and missile programmes. Beijing considers the North Korean nuclear programme a source of instability in the region which in turn has led to an increasing US military presence in the peninsula, as shown by the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea.<sup>70</sup>

Shortly after the announcement of the summit with Trump and one month before the first summit between Kim and Moon Jae-in, the North Korean leader travelled to Beijing to meet Xi Jinping, in his first visit abroad after taking office in 2011. The meeting, from 25 to 28 March, reconfirmed the key role of China in North Korea's foreign relations at a time when Beijing appeared to have been side-lined by Seoul and Washington. The visit was kept secret by the media and government of both countries until Kim left Beijing on his armoured train. No agreements or joint documents were made public and those comments reported by

67. *Ibid.* p. 55.

68. 'IOC president says Kim committed to Tokyo, Beijing Olympics', *Associated Press*, 31 March 2018.

69. Eleanor Albert, 'The China-North Korea Relationship', *The Council of Foreign Relations*, 28 March 2018.

70. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2016: The never-ending crisis', *Asia Maior* 2016, pp. 110-112.

the media made no specific references to the upcoming summits or the possibility of denuclearisation.<sup>71</sup> The meeting confirmed the «special relationship» between the two countries and of China's key role. This inclusion of China as moderator of Pyongyang's behaviour was welcomed by both South Korea and the United States.

The diplomatic engagement of North Korea continued in the following weeks, when its foreign minister, Ri Yong Ho, travelled to China to meet his counterpart, Wang Yi, and subsequently to Russia to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow. The positive outcomes in terms of inter-Korean reconciliation were also emphasised during Ri's speech at the Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Azerbaijan.<sup>72</sup>

North Korea maintained the renewed diplomatic channel with China throughout April and May, in order to coordinate its evolving strategy towards South Korea and the United States. In early May, Wang Yi travelled to Pyongyang and met Kim Jong Un soon after the inter-Korean summit of 27 April to strengthen communication between the two countries.<sup>73</sup> The following week the two leaders met again in Dalian, for a second meeting, in between Kim's summits with Moon and Trump. The meeting celebrated the restoration of the «traditional friendship» between the two allies and of a strategic partnership based on mutual trust and common interests.<sup>74</sup> The informality of the two leaders walking together on a beach represented a clear sign of the renewed friendship. The second meeting and its strategic placement between two crucial events for North Korea confirmed China's centrality in the international engagement with Pyongyang. This centrality had become even more relevant after the Panmunjom summit and the prospect of replacing the armistice agreement with some form of peace declaration, from which China could not be excluded, not only because of its military role during the Korean War, but also for its strategic role in the region.

A few days after the Singapore summit Kim and Xi met in Beijing for the third time in less than three months. In spite of the fact that China was not actively involved in the summit – if we exclude the fact that Kim Jong Un travelled to Singapore on an Air China 747 – the outcome was very favourable for Beijing. The final declaration included a commitment to work towards peace and denuclearisation on the peninsula, two goals that were perfectly aligned with China's traditional position of «no war and no instability» at its border. In addition, President Trump announced the suspension of joint

71. Jane Perlez, 'Kim Jong-un's China Visit Strengthens His Hand in Nuclear Talks', *The New York Times*, 28 March 2018.

72. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'Moon's Olympic Diplomacy', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018, p. 86.

73. 'China expresses support for DPRK-U.S. dialogue, improvement of inter-Korean relations', *Xinhua*, 3 May 2018.

74. 'Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un hold talks in Dalian', *Xinhua*, 8 May 2018.

military exercises between US and South Korea, a traditional source of concern for Beijing. In the end, North Korea and the US followed the path of the «dual freeze» – suspension of nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the suspension of military exercises. This was an arrangement that China had proposed one year earlier, in the midst of hostilities between Washington and Pyongyang, only to be rebuffed by both parties.<sup>75</sup>

But the goal of the third meeting between Xi and Kim was not just to brief the Chinese president about the outcome and the discussions of the Singapore summit. Given the relevance of China for North Korea's trade and exchanges, economic development also represented a key issue. During his trip Kim visited the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and a subsidiary of the Beijing Infrastructure Investment Company, two organisations that are part of the ambitious Chinese plan of development «Belt and Road Initiative».<sup>76</sup> With the reduction of military tension after the rapprochement with the United States, North Korea began to focus on the opportunities for developing the country's economy, a fundamental goal for Kim Jong Un's strategy and domestic legitimacy. In addition to inter-Korean cooperation, still limited by the sanctions regime, Kim turned towards China to seek economic assistance from a partner that has historically been reluctant to enforce sanctions against North Korea.

Beijing advocated a reduction of sanctions immediately after the Singapore summit, supported also by Russia. On this specific point, coordination between North Korea, China and Russia started to emerge as an important factor: Moscow supported the diplomatic efforts of Kim Jong Un, including the summit with Trump, but also called for corresponding measures from Washington. When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Pyongyang, two weeks before the summit, he explicitly called for a phased lifting of sanctions as part of the solution to the nuclear issue.<sup>77</sup> In order to strengthen this coordination, high-ranking officials from North Korea, China and Russia met on 9 October in Moscow for three-way talks, during which the three parties identified a step-by-step approach, accompanied by corresponding measures, as the way forward for peace and denuclearisation.<sup>78</sup> This collaboration helped North Korea in its request for a relaxation of the sanctions regime; but it also gave China and Russia more relevance on the issue and the chance to counter US strategy in the region.

75. Jung E-gil, 'Kim Jong-un's third visit to China this year reflects importance of North Korea-China relations', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 20 June 2018.

76. Jane Perlez, 'As Kim Ends Beijing Visit, China and North Korea Craft New Messages', *The New York Times*, 20 June 2018.

77. Julian Ryall, 'Russia enters North Korean diplomatic fray as Lavrov calls for phased lifting of sanctions on visit', *The Telegraph*, 31 May 2018.

78. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China reaffirms tradition: DPRK friendship and recovery of South Korean ties', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2018, p. 85.

### 4.3. South Korea's diplomacy under Moon Jae-in

Since the election of Moon Jae-in, in May 2017, South Korea's foreign policy has focused on the rapprochement with North Korea. This new strategy began to bear fruit in 2018 with the reopening of the diplomatic channel with Pyongyang for the Olympic Games and the following three summits between Moon and Kim Jong Un. The Singapore summit brought this strategy to an even higher level, envisioning a new course of relations between North Korea and the United States and a possible way towards the resolution of the nuclear issue and a formal end to the Korean War. The focus on inter-Korean relations dominated South Korea's foreign policy throughout 2018 and influenced relations with the other regional powers.

Despite the active role of mediation pursued by President Moon between Pyongyang and Washington, culminating in the Singapore summit, relations between South Korea and the United States revealed some frictions. In the first months of 2018 the two allies seemed to be on different tracks on how to deal with Pyongyang. The ceremonies that preceded the Olympic Games were treated rather sceptically in Washington, as demonstrated by the references to North Korea's human rights abuses in Trump's State of the Union address and by Pence's attitude in Pyeongchang. Even after the announcement of the summit between Trump and Kim, a difference of positions remained throughout the year. Moon's government kept pushing for a more cooperative approach from the United States, especially for what concerned granting exemption from sanctions in order to pursue substantial inter-Korean cooperation. The American administration for its part remained firm on its position that relief from sanctions was conditional on the complete denuclearisation of North Korea. In order not to endanger the alliance with the United States and keep its mediating role in US-North Korea relations, Seoul continued to abide by the international sanctions regime, but also attempted to seek exemptions for specific inter-Korean projects aimed at implementing the Panmunjom declaration.<sup>79</sup>

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha reiterated this position in October.<sup>80</sup> Limited exemptions were granted in the case of the joint inter-Korean survey of the North's rail and road systems; however, major projects such as the reconnection of these transportation systems or the reopening of the joint industrial complex in Kaesong remained out of reach.

In addition to these differences on how to deal with North Korea, two major issues arose within the South Korea-US alliance. The first one was represented by the revision of the KORUS Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

79. Jung Hyo-sik, Yoo Jee-hye & Lee Sung-eun, 'Seoul needs sanctions exemption, official says', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 23 July 2018.

80. Lee Youkyung, 'South Korea May Seek Sanctions Relief for North Korea Projects', *Bloomberg*, 4 October 2018.

between the two countries. As part of his efforts to reduce the American trade deficit, Trump pledged to revise trade agreements that he considered harmful to the United States. One of the main targets of the president's attacks since his electoral campaign was the agreement with South Korea, which became operational in 2012. A round of bilateral talks regarding the revision of the agreement was held in early January without any major breakthrough. A few days later, the United States decided to impose tariffs on washing machines and solar panels, hitting South Korean companies such as Samsung and LG.<sup>81</sup> During a further round of talks in January and February, the South Korean negotiators complained about the tariffs. In March, the US adopted new tariffs on imports, this time on aluminium and steel. South Korea was among several American allies that were hit by the new imposition. The situation started to improve at the end of March, when Washington granted South Korea an exemption from this latest round of tariffs in view of a final revision of the KORUS FTA. Probably the decision was taken also to preserve an atmosphere of positive cooperation within the alliance in preparation of the Panmunjom and Singapore summits.

After the third round of negotiations, on 26 March, the two countries announced an agreement in principle on how to revise the FTA. The revised version was then signed by the two presidents during Moon's visit to the US for the UN General Assembly in September. The revisions regarded mostly the automobile market, with an increase in the number of exports of American cars to South Korea and an extension of US tariffs on South Korean trucks. In addition, Seoul granted limited concessions to pharmaceutical and steel products. The revisions made limited adjustments to the trade regime already in place between the two countries.<sup>82</sup> However it was an important achievement because it eliminated a potential source of tension between the two allies.

The second issue that raised concerns between Seoul and Washington was related to the cost-sharing deal regarding American troops stationed in South Korea. This issue was also connected to the broader problem of the US military commitment in the peninsula and in the region. Trump repeatedly advocated that the Asian allies should bear a higher share of the cost for their defence.<sup>83</sup> The decision to suspend the joint military exercises announced unilaterally by Trump after the Singapore summit, and his specific remark about the costs of the exercises, raised the issue of the US commitment to the peninsula. The bilateral talks to revise the cost-sharing agreement, which was due to expire at the end of 2018, started in

81. David Lawder & Nichola Groom, 'Trump slaps steep U.S. tariffs on imported washers, solar panels', *Reuters*, 22 January 2018.

82. Justin Fendos, 'KORUS Revision Does Little for US, Less for Koreans', *The Diplomat*, 27 September 2018.

83. Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2017: Searching for new balances', *Asia Maior 2017*, pp. 52-52.

March; after ten rounds of negotiations the two sides were not able to reach an agreement, as announced in December by the South Korean defence minister.<sup>84</sup>

South Korea's relations with its two main regional partners, China and Japan, in 2018 continued to follow a similar trend to that prevailing in the second half of the previous year. After the dispute that involved Seoul and Beijing over the deployment of the US anti-missile THAAD system in 2016 and 2017, ties between the two countries were restored after Moon's election. The rapprochement was epitomised by Moon's visit to Beijing in December 2017. South Korea's new conciliatory policy toward the North was welcomed in China, which had consistently advocated a resumption of dialogue with Pyongyang. The alignment regarding North Korea, with an emphasis on peaceful denuclearisation, contributed to a further improvement of China-South Korea relations during 2018. When the two leaders met on the side-lines of the APEC meeting in Papua New Guinea, on 17 November, they emphasised the common strategic interests of peace and stability and the importance of bilateral coordination.<sup>85</sup> This renewed agreement at the political level led to an improvement also of economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries.<sup>86</sup>

South Korea's diplomatic efforts towards the North were also supported by Japan, albeit with less enthusiasm than China. Prime Minister Abe remained sceptical about the possibilities of dialogue for denuclearisation, as he made clear during the bilateral summit with Moon on 9 February. On that occasion, Abe called for a change to North Korea's behaviour and for resumption of the US-South Korea joint military exercises, suspended for the Olympic Games. Moon Jae-in promptly rejected the call, considered an inappropriate interference in Korean domestic affairs,<sup>87</sup> a very sensitive issue for South Korea given the historical legacy of Japanese colonisation in the peninsula. When President Trump accepted Kim Jong Un's proposal for a summit and the US joined South Korea in its diplomatic approach towards Pyongyang, Japan's support for the initiative also increased. After the Panmunjom summit, Abe welcomed the positive outcome and South Korea's efforts, but he also returned to the idea that Pyongyang had to take concrete steps.<sup>88</sup> A joint declaration was issued by Abe, Moon and Chinese

84. Noh Ji-won, 'South Korea and US fail to reach agreement on shared defense costs within 2018', *Hankyoreh English Edition*, 16 December 2018.

85. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China reaffirms tradition: DPRK friendship and recovery of South Korean ties', p. 86.

86. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China's Multilateral Role in the Korean Drama', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2018, pp. 87-88.

87. 'Moon rejects Abe's call to resume Korea-U.S. military drills', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 February 2018.

88. 'Japan, China welcome inter-Korean summit agreement', *Yonhap News Agency*, 27 April 2018.

Prime Minister Li Keqiang after their trilateral meeting on 9 May in Tokyo.<sup>89</sup> After the Singapore summit, Japan's support for a diplomatic approach towards North Korea increased, to the point that during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September, Abe stated his availability to meet Kim Jong Un; the same message that was delivered by Pompeo to Kim during his visit in October.<sup>90</sup> The softer position towards Pyongyang, however, did not represent a real change in Japan's strategy. In fact, it was dictated more by fear of exclusion from the diplomatic process which involved the other five former members of the «Six Party Talks», and by the political will to align Tokyo's approach to that of the United States.

Over the course of 2018, relations between South Korea and Japan were also affected by the resurfacing tension related to the historical legacy of Japanese colonialism in the peninsula. The first diplomatic dispute emerged in January, when the South Korean government announced that it had come to the conclusion that the agreement reached by the two countries in 2015 regarding the comfort women issue<sup>91</sup> did not take a victim-oriented approach and failed to take into consideration the victims' point of view. Japan responded rejecting the possibility of any revision to the agreement, citing the fact that the two countries agreed to resolve the dispute finally and irreversibly with that deal.<sup>92</sup> No practical steps were implemented by the South Korean administration to change or cancel the agreement, which had been opposed by a large portion of public opinion since the beginning.

In October and November a new dispute emerged, when the South Korean Supreme Court held two Japanese industrial conglomerates, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal, accountable for employing forced labour during Japanese colonisation of Korea, and ordered that the labourers be compensated. The decision exposed the Japanese companies to the risk of seizure of their assets in South Korea, if they decided not to compensate the plaintiffs. The Japanese government reacted stating that the decision was unacceptable and reiterated its position that the 1965 normalisation treaty between the two countries had already settled all the legal claims for compensation. The hard-line position of Tokyo ignited an equally harsh response from the South Korean government, which called for respect of the decision of

89. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Joint Statement on the '2018 Inter-Korean Summit' by the Leaders of Japan, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea*, 9 May 2018 ([https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/rp/page4e\\_000818.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page4e_000818.html)).

90. Ji-Young Lee & Mintaro Oba, 'Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances and Escalating Tensions', *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 104.

91. Barbara Onnis & Marco Milani, 'Korean Peninsula 2015: One step forward and two steps back', *Asia Maior 2015*, pp. 78-79.

92. Yuki Tatsumi, 'The Japan-South Korea 'Comfort Women' Agreement Survives (Barely)', *The Diplomat*, 11 January 2018.

the Court.<sup>93</sup> The highly emotional nature of Japan's colonial past on the Korean peninsula quickly turned a judicial dispute into a diplomatic one between the two countries, with the potential to inflame relations in the months ahead.

93. Ji-Young Lee & Mintaro Oba, 'Japan-Korea Relations: Unfortunate Circumstances and Escalating Tensions', p. 106.