KER KOREA EUROPE REVIEW
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND ECONOMICS
ISSUE 5, DEC 2023

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Securitization during Crises: the Korean Peninsula and the East Asian regional order

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Abstract
This article analyses how North and South Korea have responded to the two global crises of the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, and the implications of such responses on the East Asian regional order. Through adopting the framework of securitization theory, this article argues that these two global crises have expanded how North and South Korea conceptualise security, but also highlighted continuities in how the two states frame their external geopolitical environments. In so doing, these outlooks have influenced resultant behaviour –from both states– which, in turn, have led to consequences within the region. Such consequences, however, have not always been beneficial to regional and global security. This article argues how whilst it remains too early to tell if a new trilateral relationship is forming between Russia, China, and North Korea, Pyongyang's heightened securitization of coronavirus and the United States "hostile policy" have instigated gradual shifts in the regional order. At the same time, South Korea has placed particular attention on strengthening its existing bilateral alliances and widening its self-conceptualisation as a provider and stabiliser of regional and global security. Ultimately, Seoul seeks to pursue an increasingly independent foreign policy in line with its status as a 'global pivotal state'.

Keywords
North Korea, South Korea, Coronavirus, Ukraine, Regional security, Securitization

Article history
Submitted: June 2023
Accepted: 2 November 2023
Published: 11 December 2023

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On 9 May 2023, in a message to Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un "extended warm militant greetings…to the president, army and people of Russia", commending them for defending "global peace against the high-handed and arbitrary practices of the imperialists."[1] These words were hardly surprising. There was little doubt that, in line with the regime's rhetoric since its post-war inception, the "imperialists" referred to the United States, its allies, and the wider US-led liberal international order. Kim Jong Un's statement, however, also underscored a continuation in the growing regional ties between Russia, China, and the DPRK, not least following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Just over one month prior to this message, on 22 March 2023, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping committed to "consolidating and deepening the China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of coordination for a new era". Both states called on the United States to "take concrete actions to respond to the legitimate and reasonable concerns of the DPRK and create conditions for the resumption of dialogue", whilst criticising sanctions as "neither desirable nor feasible."[2] Over a month later, at the state visit of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol to the White House, the South Korean President underscored how the alliance between the Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) and the US was anything

but "a contractual relationship of convenience only seeking for interest." Rather, the "alliance is an everlasting partnership" that is "guided by our shared values."[3] These affirmations come at a time of an increasingly polarised international order, catalysed by Russia's war in Ukraine but also heightened by regional-level dynamics in East Asia, not least the accelerated nuclear development of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea); a lack of inter-Korean and US-DPRK dialogue; and growing Sino-US rivalries.

These statements reflect a fundamental difference between the relationship between Russia, China, and the DPRK on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the United States and Republic of Korea. Whilst the former remains highly transactional –and, at present, does not reflect a new trilateral strategic alliance *per se*– the latter is founded upon historical security and value-based commonalities.[4] Both partnerships have gained potency following two global crises, which form the subject of this article: the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. Focusing on the Korean Peninsula, this article analyses how North and South Korea have responded to these crises in terms of how both states have conceptualised and responded to ideas of security over time. Through the prism of securitization theory, this article argues how North Korea has securitized both coronavirus (COVID-19) and, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, entrenched its long-standing securitization of the United States in order to intensify its pursuit of domestic isolationism. By exploiting the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine, the DPRK has been able to strengthen its invocation of what it terms the United States' "hostile policy", a key heuristic through which the North Korean state shapes its worldview, and continue its accelerated nuclear development with fewer global constraints.

In contrast, South Korea's response to these crises suggests how the ROK has sought to strengthen its pursuit of an independent foreign policy whilst simultaneously bolstering its existing bilateral alliances with the United States and US-led security institutions, such as NATO.[5] South Korea has desired to be seen not only as a contributor to regional security but also a provider of regional security, particularly in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. Nonetheless, Seoul's actions in catalysing a role of leadership in regional security have not always been successful. Rather, they have underscored the deep-rooted ambiguities in its foreign policy postures. Whilst South Korea may have strengthened bilateral alliances in light of COVID-19 and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and been more vocal in its espousal of the ROK's role in disseminating liberal values, its contribution to the regional security order has remained more ambiguous. Indeed, South Korea has remained ambivalent in joining informal regional partnerships, such as the Quadrilateral dialogue (Quad) and the AUKUS pact. Furthermore, the Washington Declaration of 26 April made clear how Seoul ultimately remains a junior alliance partner vis-à-vis Washington.

This article proceeds as follows. First, it underscores North Korea's conceptualisation of security, drawing upon the unique ideological prism of the "hostile policy" through which the DPRK has ordered –and continues to order– its external environment. Secondly, through the application of securitization theory, this article analyses how North Korea has intentionally engaged in active securitization of coronavirus and the United States as convenient means of pursuing particular domestic and foreign policy objectives, not least in allowing the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, to strengthen domestic control. The article then focuses on South Korea, arguing how its response to coronavirus has aided its desire to be seen as a regional leader in health security, from which

1. Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Sends Greetings to Russian President', 9 May 2023.

2. Chris Devonshire-Ellis, 'The Putin-Xi Summit –Their Joint Statement and Analysis', *China Briefing*, 22 March 2023, available at: https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-putin-xi-summit-their-joint-statement-and-analysis/ (accessed 18 April 2023); see also: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin Sign Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era and Stress Settling the Ukraine Crisis Through Dialogue', 22 March 2023.

3. The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea Before Bilateral Meeting', 26 April 2023.

4. At the time of writing, relations between North Korea and Russia do, however, look likely to strengthen following the meeting between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in Russia on 13 September 2023. The summit aimed to bolster bilateral cooperation in the exchange of North Korean munitions for Russian satellite technology and financial benefits. Moreover, only a week prior to the meeting, Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, proposed to Kim Jong Un that Russia, North Korea, and China, hold trilateral naval drills in response to the longstanding military exercises around the Korean Peninsula, led by the United States and South Korea. See: Guy Faulconbridge and Soo-Hyang Choi, 'Putin and North Korea's Kim discuss military matters, Ukraine war and satellites', *Reuters*, 14 September 2023; Edward Howell, 'Putin's desperate need for artillery shells is driving him into a Faustian pact with North Korea', *The Telegraph*, 12 September 2023.

5. For more detail on the ROK's bolstering of alliances in response to Russia's invasion of –and war in– Ukraine, see: Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Saeme Kim, 'South Korea: siding with the West and distancing from Russia', *International Politics*, 60, 2023, 1113-1133.

the state has been able to obtain benefits. In response to Russia's war in Ukraine, South Korea's actions have developed from its attempts to contribute and provide regional and global security during coronavirus, but also expand such leadership in line with its self-perceived role as a 'global pivotal state'. Finally, this article considers the implications of these actions on the East Asian regional order. In so doing, it argues how although North Korea's securitization of the United States may have allowed the DPRK to draw closer to Russia and China, such relationships remain highly transactional. Nevertheless, although they do not necessarily reflect a new "strategic triangle" emerging in East Asia just yet, this rapprochement has been detrimental to the stability of the East Asian and wider international order. On the part of South Korea, Seoul's actions have also led to implications on the regional order. Whilst the ROK remains confident as a regional security contributor –particularly in terms of political, economic, and health security– it remains comparably more reticent to assert itself as a regional security provider, not least given its reliance on its bilateral alliance with the United States.

A North Korean conceptualisation of security

Since the inception of the regime-state in 1948, North Korea has conceptualised security in predominantly realist terms.[6] The ruling regime has placed almost exclusive focus on preserving the security of the state from what it perceives to be external threats and, in turn, maintaining the continuation of the dynastic Kim regime. In line with David Baldwin's (in)famous description of security as a "low probability of damage to acquired values", the North Korean regime has, for over seventy years, sought to protect the security of the ruling regime, and what it deems to be fundamental values of regime survival, wherein lies the centrality of Kim family rule.[7] Writing in 1975, Nye and Krause define security as "the absence of acute threats to the minimal levels of the basic values that a people consider essential to its survival."[8] This definition is useful, when applied to the North Korean case, in understanding how the regime has, over time, interacted with ideas of security, and the consistencies –and change– in Pyongyang's conceptualisation of security. When applied to the DPRK, the "people" refers not to the North Korean population, but the ruling regime, not least the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). The "minimal levels" of "basic values" that are considered "essential" point towards the values of regime survival in *its status quo form* and, importantly, the maintenance of domestic loyalty and acquiescence to the regime, accomplished through rule by fear and coercion.

Yet, just what comprises a so-called threat to security, and how are such threats constituted? Here, the definition of securitization –referring to the process as a "speech act"– pioneered by the Copenhagen School, namely Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap de Wilde, is useful. Buzan *et al*. define securitization as "when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object" and, as such, "the special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them."[9] The presentation of an issue as *posing* an existential threat is, so these scholars argue, an inherently social phenomenon. In short, securitization allows an issue to be "dramatized as an issue of supreme priority", and is a three-fold process: first, an issue or object becomes a "security issue" when it is framed as an existential threat to a particular referent actor; secondly, the referent actor decides to adopt extraordinary measures *contra* the (perceived) threat. Thirdly, and finally, these measures become justified after the referent actor has persuaded an audience that actions to counter the threat, which

6. In this article, the author refers to North Korea as a *regime-state*, given the close linkage between the survival of the ruling regime and the state, as well as the ties between the regime and state in formulating and enacting domestic and foreign policy. This term is particularly apt with respect to the North Korean case, given the centrality of the Kim family to the state, wherein three generations of hereditary rule within the family have characterised North Korean leadership from the inception of the state. See: Edward Howell, *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 4, n.10. See also; Edward Howell, 'The *juche* H-bomb? North Korea, nuclear weapons and regime-state survival', *International Affairs*, 2020, 96(4), 1051, n.2.

7. David A. Baldwin, 'The Concept of Security', *Review of International Studies*, 23(1), 1997, 13.

8. Lawrence B. Krause and Joseph S. Nye, 'Reflections on the Economics and Politics of International Economic Organizations', *International Organization*, 29(1), 1975, 330.

9. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 21.

10. Rens van Munster, 'Securitization', *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2012, available at: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0091.xml (accessed 11 April 2023).

may be rule-breaking, are warranted and justified.[10] The actor that engages in the securitization of another is often –though not always– the nation-state. As Wæver makes clear: "by uttering 'security' a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area and claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it."[11] Security is a "speech-act", wherein "by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, [or] naming a ship."[12]

As a theoretical framework for understanding security, therefore, securitization firstly aims to broaden the scope and realm of threats to security. Relatedly, the notion seeks to expand the referent objects of security, namely the actors whose security is threatened, by going beyond the territorial sovereign nation-state and ideas of military security.[13] Security no longer pertains purely to objective threats or perceptions of threat –as realist approaches would postulate– but can also be social constructs which may, or may not, be objective. As Buzan *et al*., assert, however, the most important facet of the three-fold causal mechanism of securitization is the third, wherein a referent audience agrees with the securitizing actor that an issue or object is an existential threat and, in turn, that the threat must be addressed by enacting extraordinary measures.[14] This logic, therefore, raises the likelihood that even if an object may not necessarily pose a *real* threat to a nation-state, if the nature of the threat is constructed through specific ideological perceptions and justified by appeal to an audience, certain actions –such as combative actions– may, even if irrational, be taken. As Wæver himself raises in describing the process of securitization as an inherently "political act", securitization is far from benign. Rather, it risks moving issues outside of the realm of so-called normal politics.[15]

The North Korean case represents a particularly extreme example of securitization. It epitomises Wæver's claim that "something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so."[16] Given the totalitarian nature of the regime-state and (broadly-speaking) centralisation of decision-making within the Supreme Leader,[17] the third component of securitization is less important for the ruling regime. Indeed, there remains a *need* for the referent actor of securitization –here, the North Korean regime-state– to convince an audience –its population– that extraordinary measures to counter any so-called "threat" are justified. Any obstacles towards doing so in the case of North Korea –and other authoritarian regimes– are, however, comparatively lower than for liberal democracies. Even if there may be variation in actual domestic belief in line with the regime's ideological perception of threats, the lack of domestic "checks and balances" means that authoritarian regimes can be free from domestic "veto players", and thus pursue their own foreign and domestic policy agendas with greater ease than liberal democracies.[18] Such agendas may range from vertical nuclear proliferation to the securitization of the United States and South Korea as the ultimate adversaries of the North Korean state.

Thus, North Korea's definition and resultant securitization of "acute threats" takes place at both domestic and international levels, by constructing narratives of threats within and external to the state. The next section will focus on two such threats: firstly, the coronavirus pandemic; and secondly, the United States, its allies, and the broader US-led liberal international order. First and foremost, a core "threat" since the establishment of the state –but particularly after the inconclusive ending of the Korean War– pertains to what the North Korean regime has ambiguously defined as a "hostile policy" emanating from the United States and its allies, including South Korea. Secondly, an additional threat which the ruling regime has consistently sought to combat has been so-called "reactionary

11. Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', In: Ronnie Lipschutz, ed., *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 55.

12. Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 25.

13. Michael C. Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 47(4), 2003, 513.

14. Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 25.

15. Ole Wæver, 'The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders', In: Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams, eds., *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2000), 252.

16. Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', 54.

17. Indeed, this claim is not to dismiss the fact that there is limited institutional pluralism within the North Korean leadership, and, too, inter-factional disputes, such as between the Party (WPK) and the Korean People's Army (KPA). For example, see: Patrick McEachern, 'Interest Groups in North Korean Politics', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 8(2), 2008, 235-258.

18. Christopher Way and Jessica L.P. Weeks, 'Making It Personal: Regime Type and Nuclear Proliferation', *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(3), 2014, 716.

ideology and culture" emanating from within the North Korean nation. In just one example, in April 2021, as the coronavirus pandemic was ravaging globally –and as is widely suspected, within the DPRK– Kim Jong Un called upon the North Korean Youth League to "struggle against the reactionary ideology and culture". Such "malignant tumo[u]rs" and "abnormal behaviours", comprising "anti-socialist and non-socialist practices" included sporting Western hairstyles, wearing Western attire, and listening to K-pop.[19]

As this section argues, North Korea's conceptualisation of security over time, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, was and remains heavily predicated upon the instrumental "intermestic" relationship between domestic and international security concerns.[20] The securitization of external forces, for instance, has allowed the North Korean regime to tighten domestic security and control over its population, not least as the country's economic woes worsened from 2020. Although this interaction between internal and external security concerns became notably entrenched during these two crises, it must be noted that the regime's concern in maintaining this relationship is nothing new. As is well-documented, three generations of Kim family rule have not been without exogenous and endogenous shocks to the security of the state and human security of its population. With respect to the latter, one of the most prominent remains the Great Famine from 1994 to 1998. Though estimates vary, the famine –euphemistically termed the 'Arduous March' or 'March of Suffering' by the ruling regime– claimed up to 3 million lives.[21] The famine was a result of an amalgam of factors: unprecedented flooding –especially in the northeast of the country– accompanied by economic autarky and mismanagement in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War; a loss of Soviet economic support following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; and the collapse of the Public Distribution System, the state-run system responsible for the distribution of food rations. Despite the devastating consequences on livelihood and loss of life, as Marcus Noland surmises, North Korea was able to avoid regime collapse but also resist the pursuit of economic reform, instead continuing to divert financial resources into developing its early ambitions for a nuclear weapons programme.[22] The famine offers a useful example of the North Korean regime's willingness to sacrifice human security not only to preserve but also to strengthen state security, a logic which has since continued into the present-day.

The securitization of coronavirus

North Korea's response to coronavirus from the onset of the epidemic –and subsequently pandemic– in late 2019 was marked by a paradox: simultaneously clear in direction but also highly opaque. Despite multiple reports to the contrary, the regime refrained from officially admitting the presence of coronavirus in its territory. Instead, only in May 2022 did North Korean state media admit, using a euphemism, that a "fever" had been spreading "explosively" across the country.[23] From early 2020, Kim Jong Un and the ruling WPK heavily securitized coronavirus, firstly, given the literal threat to the survival of North Korean population. The leadership's discourse and actions emphasised its concerns with the likely possibility –and deleterious implications– of the spread of COVID-19 throughout its overwhelmingly unvaccinated population.[24] Yet, at the same time, even following the development of coronavirus vaccinations, the DPRK notoriously refused any such offers, highlighting how such securitization served broader political motivations.[25]

19. Rodong Sinmun, 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Sends Letter to Tenth Congress of the Youth League', 30 April 2021. It is not unusual for the North Korean leader to call on the domestic population to resist what the regime terms "reactionary" ideologies. In May 1991, Kim Jong Il –then-yet to succeed Kim Il Sung as Supreme Leader– underscored the DPRK's refusal to reform its economy, even as its Cold War partners of the Soviet Union and China were forging relations with South Korea. Instead, Kim called on the North Korean people to practise "socialism our style", wherein "a slight slackening of ideological education may result in the wind of bourgeois liberalism blowing in." See: Kim Jong Il, 'Our Socialism Centred On The Masses Shall Not Perish: Talk to the Senior Officials of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party', 5 May 1992, In: Kim Jong Il, *On Carrying Forward the Juche Idea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), 252-90; Hy-Sang Lee, *North Korea: A Strange Socialist Fortress* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 217-218.

20. Samuel S. Kim, 'North Korea's Nuclear Strategy and the Interface Between International and Domestic Politics', *Asian Perspective*, 34(1), 2010, 53.

21. For one detailed account of the famine, see: Sandra Fahy, *Marching through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

22. Noland terms this situation, wherein the Kim regime did not adjust its domestic economic and political policy direction, as one of "muddling through between the extremes of reform and collapse". Marcus Noland, 'Why North Korea Will Muddle Through', *Foreign Affairs*, 76(4), p.115.

23. KCNA, 'Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Visits State Emergency Epidemic Prevention Headquarters', 13 May 2022.

24. Edward Howell, 'North Korea is in the midst of a Covid catastrophe', *The Spectator*, 16 May 2022.

25. 'North Korea rejects offer of nearly 3 million Sinovac COVID-19 shots', *Reuters,* 1 September 2021.

North Korea's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic was one of simple denial that the virus had entered its territory, whilst admitting the existence of COVID-19 outside of its borders. On 31 January 2020, a report from the Korean Central News Agency highlighted how North Korea was taking "emergency anti-epidemic" measures to "curb the spread of the novel coronavirus."[26] From February 2020 onwards, reports of deaths from illnesses that strongly resembled coronavirus became apparent, as Pyongyang's hospitals quarantined individuals suspected of having caught the virus.[27] These reports were sharply contradicted by official state narratives throughout 2020 and beyond. For instance, in a meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the WPK in July 2020, Kim Jong Un declared the DPRK's "shining success" in having "blocked the inroads of the malignant virus and maintained a stable anti-epidemic situation despite the worldwide health crisis."[28] Kim also praised the construction efforts of Pyongyang General Hospital, which, although due to be completed in October of that year, remains as-of-yet unfinished.

Such highly dubitable, early denials of the infiltration of coronavirus into North Korea's territory would not abate, and remain markedly at odds with actions taken by Kim Jong Un.[29] Kim's decision in late January 2020 to close all of North Korea's borders –including its border with China– reinforced the regime's awareness of the vulnerability of the North Korean population to the virus. With China as North Korea's largest trading partner –accounting for over 90% of trade with the DPRK– the drastic border closure saw trade levels plummet by over 75% within a year. This self-imposed action by the North Korean regime would soon become a "sanction above all sanctions", whereby "Pyongyang's coronavirus strategy would do what no sanctions regime had hitherto done" in having a clear, detrimental effect on the DPRK's economy, against which little evasion could take place.[30]

North Korea's securitization of coronavirus was notable for two reasons: firstly, for the contradiction between rhetoric and reality; and secondly, for how the active securitization of COVID-19 quickly became a convenient weaponized and politicized tool towards reinforcing the regime's additional political objectives. This securitization was not simply a domestic manoeuvre. Rather, in fact, it represented an irony when analyzed through the prism of securitization. Coronavirus was framed as an existential threat to the North Korean nation-state, against which extraordinary measures –namely the closure of all of North Korea's borders– were clearly implemented. Yet, the audience of the North Korean people had no choice in supporting or resisting the resultant actions taken by the regime. At the same time, the extent to which coronavirus was truly an issue of "supreme priority" for the regime remained questionable, given the reticence of the regime to accept international offers of COVID-19 vaccines.[31]

Beyond the actual threat to human security posed by COVID-19, North Korea's securitization of coronavirus as a political tool, therefore, served two related purposes: first, it allowed Kim Jong Un to consolidate domestic power during periods of domestic economic hardship; and secondly, such securitization entrenched Kim Jong Un's domestic and foreign policy goals of framing the United States and South Korea as active threats to the security of the North Korean state. Through taking dramatic measures to isolate the state, in response to COVID-19, the DPRK was able to accelerate the development of its missile and weaponized nuclear capabilities, even if popular belief in line with the regime's narratives vis-à-vis the need for nuclear weapons remained low.[32] Such securitization, which continues to this day, has proven to be an opportunity for

26. KCNA, 'DPRK Works Hard to Prevent Novel Coronavirus Infection', 31 January 2020; see also: Pyongyang Times, 'Nation gets into emergency state against novel CoV infection', 31 January 2020; Rodong Sinmun, 'Hygienic and Anti-epidemic System Turned into National Emergency Anti-epidemic System', 31 January 2020.

27. Seulkee Jang, 'N. Korean woman died of coronavirus infection in late January', *DailyNK*, 10 February 2020.

28. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (of the DPRK), 'Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides 14th Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of 7th Committee of WPK', 3 July 2020.

29. E.g. Bruce Bennett and Diana Y. Myers, 'The Coronavirus Crisis Is Making North Korea's Kim Jong-un Very Nervous', *The National Interest*, 2 April 2020.

30. Howell, *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays*, 244-5.

31. van Munster, 'Securitization'.

32. Interview with North Korean defectors, Seoul, July 2017.

33. One infamous occasion was at the 75th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea on 10 October 2020; see: KCNA, 'Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Delivers Speech at Military Parade', 10 October 2020.

the North Korean regime to tighten societal control, at a time when Kim Jong Un's "new strategic line" –with respect to bolstering the DPRK's economic development– has failed, as the leader has admitted on numerous occasions.[33] Concerning the second objective, although North Korea's securitization of the United States and South Korea has been long-standing, such securitization has exacerbated in severity following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The timing of the DPRK's retreat to isolationism in response to COVID-19, coupled with Russia's invasion of Ukraine –by which time North Korea's borders remained closed– thereby allowed North Korea to leverage the polarized international order as a political opportunity to further its own domestic security objectives.

Securitization of the United States: an existential threat

North Korea's long-standing securitization of the United States has been most prominently manifest in what the North Korean regime has, since its inception, termed a "hostile policy" stemming from the United States and its allies. Though the regime has been reticent to provide a clear definition of this "policy", the "hostile policy" can be categorised into political, economic, and social indicators of what the DPRK perceives as supposed US "hostility" to the state, whether sanctions (economic); ongoing US-ROK military exercises around the Korean Peninsula (political); or verbal criticisms of North Korea's nuclear programme or human rights abuses (social).[34] The North Korean regime has repeatedly claimed that this "aggressive and predatory" policy aims to "stifle the DPRK by force" by pressuring for regime change.[35] The "hostile policy" is, however, noticeable for its intentional ambiguity. As a South Korean nuclear envoy to the DPRK revealed to the author, "the scope of this 'hostile policy' is huge: it's a chicken-and-egg argument", whereby North Korea has insisted that it would denuclearize *only* if the hostile policy were removed, but the scope of the hostile policy remains malleable depending upon North Korea's own objectives.[36] Over time, the "hostile policy" has become a convenient excuse for the North Korean regime to justify its continued nuclear development; the continuation of the status quo Kim regime; a refusal to pursue economic and political reform; and the securitization of the United States and its allies, by framing these actors as existential threats to the survival of the state.

Thus, North Korea's securitization of the United States is nothing new. Yet, such securitization markedly intensified in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, forming part of the regime's broader narrative of demonizing the idea of the "foreign". Pyongyang's blame of external forces for worsening domestic security –whether state security or human security– heightened, wherein coronavirus became a useful justification to toughen foreign and domestic policy stances. This logic became clear early in the pandemic. The DPRK's (arguably) first coronavirus case emerged in July 2020 in Kaesong, a city straddling the inter-Korean border, infamous for the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a special administrative industrial region of the DPRK. A North Korean defector to South Korea had returned to the DPRK and, according to North Korean state media at the time, was exhibiting symptoms of the "vicious virus." In response, Kim Jong Un announced a full lockdown in Kaesong, "totally blocking" the city and declaring a state of "maximum emergency."[37] Nearly two years after the incident, Pyongyang continued to blame individuals touching "alien things" –including balloons sent by South Korean activist groups to the DPRK– near the inter-Korean border for the transmission of coronavirus into North Korean territory.[38] Such rhetoric underscored the tight

34. For more on this tripartite distinction, see: Howell, *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order*, 36-9. See also: Edward Howell, 'North Korean think tank statement shows focus on U.S. 'hostile policy' prevails', *NKPro*, 28 June 2020.

35. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Withdrawal of U.S. Hostile Policy towards DPRK–Indispensable Prerequisite for Peace and Stability on Korean Peninsula: Institute for Disarmament and Peace of DPRK Foreign Ministry', 25 June 2020.

36. Interview with South Korean nuclear envoy, Seoul, July 2019.

37. Rodong Sinmun, 'Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Convenes Emergency Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee', 26 July 2020.

coupling between domestic and external security for the DPRK. Through blaming external forces for North Korea's domestic problems, Pyongyang was able to strengthen its isolationist actions –including its lack of intention to engage with South Korea and the United States– and justify extraordinary measures to combat its enhanced ideological perception of threat from Washington.

Placing blame on external forces only intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although North Korea was slow to offer an immediate response to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, two days after the invasion, Pyongyang's much-anticipated position became clear. A statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed the "root cause of the Ukrainian crisis" to "lie in the high-handedness and arbitrariness of the U.S." which had disregarded "the legitimate demand of Russia for its security."[39] The DPRK was one of five countries –together with Russia, Syria, Belarus, and Eritrea– to vote against the United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, adopted on 2 March, which deplored Russia's invasion and demanded a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine.[40] Pyongyang's subsequent statements entrenched its position of siding with Russia and, later, China. Going beyond merely accusing the US of being the "main culprit" for Russia's actions, the DPRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticised the US for "artificially" creating the Ukrainian crisis owing to its imposition of sanctions on Russia, as part of an "intentional plan" to "plunge Russia into a total ruin."[41] This claim was hardly unusual for the North Korean regime, reflecting a wider historic logic wherein Pyongyang had decried unilateral and multilateral sanctions on the DPRK as emblematic of efforts to "isolate and stifle the DPRK."[42]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine polarised the liberal international order to a point unseen since the post-war inception of the United Nations. As the United Nations descended into paralysis, stymied by the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council to implement any concerted international response, North Korea took advantage of such division, and heightened its securitization of the United States and liberal international order.[43] In July 2022, the DPRK affirmed its recognition of the self-declared Russian-occupied republics of Donetsk and Lugansk,[44] and continued to deride Washington's sending of arms to Kyiv as an example of US "high-handedness" and its "vision to dissipate Russia by using Ukraine as cannon fodder", efforts which the DPRK deemed were "on the brink of a complete failure."[45] Such heightened securitization of the United States became increasingly apparent throughout 2022. Of note, Pyongyang's specific accusation of US "high-handedness" was not unique to Russia's war in Ukraine. The term had been regularly deployed by the North Korean government in denouncing US criticisms of North Korea's human rights violations; the deployment of US conventional forces in South Korea; and US-ROK military exercises, the latter which the DPRK has frequently derided as preparations for a "nuclear war".[46]

Yet, in line with the tightly-coupled "intermestic" relationship between domestic and international security, North Korea's securitization of the United States has amplified the regime's justification of harsher domestic control of society. In the regime's eyes, since January 2020, Pyongyang has faced both an external security threat that must not encroach upon its territory and people –namely the United States and allies– and an internal security threat stemming from the possible spread of disease, coronavirus or otherwise, which have offered a suitable excuse for the regime to continue its expansion of missile and nuclear capabilities, and pursue more stringent domestic control.

38. Rodong Sinmun, 'Route of COVID-19 Inroads Verified in DPRK', 1 July 2022.

39. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The U.S. Should Not Shake International Peace and Stability at the Basis', 26 February 2022.

40. United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1, 11th Emergency Special Session, 2 March 2022.

41. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Why Is the U.S. So Frantic in Aggravating the Situation in Ukraine', 20 April 2022; Ri Pyong Jin, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Why is the U.S. Seeking to Prolong the Ukrainian Crisis', 3 May 2022.

42. E.g. Ryugyong, 'Statement of DPRK Government', 15 August 2017.

43. Edward Howell, 'Why North Korea is a useful lever in Xi Jinping's campaign against the West', *NKPro*, 10 April 2023.

44. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on Independence of Donetsk and Lugansk', 15 July 2022.

45. Pyongyang Times, 'US makes futile attempt to increase arms assistance', 7 July 2022

46. E.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'U.S. and Western High-Handedness and Arbitrariness Must Be Put to an End', 19 November 2021; KCNA, 'U.S. Hostile Policy toward DPRK Censured', 28 September 2009; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'The U.S. is the worst nuclear criminal state in the world', 25 July 2017.

47. Rana Mitter, 'How South Korea became the poster child for virus control, *The Spectator*, 13 June 2020.

48. Kyoo-Man Ha, 'A lesson learned from the MERS outbreak in South Korea in 2015', *Journal of Hospital Infection*, 92(3), 2016, 232-4.

49. South Korea became the first country to hold national elections during the coronavirus pandemic. Scott A. Snyder, 'Implications of South Korea's Historic COVID-19 Elections', *Council on Foreign Relations: Asia Unbound*, 17 April 2020, available at: https://www.cfr.org/blog/implications-south-koreas-historic-covid-19-elections (accessed 12 April 2023).

50. Kathryn Botto, 'The Coronavirus Pandemic and South Korea's Global Leadership Potential', In: Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, *The Case for South Korean Soft Power* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020).

51. Choe Wongi, '"New Southern Policy": Korea's Newfound Ambition in Search of Strategic Autonomy', *Notes de l'IFRI*, January 2021, 118, 1-24.

52. John Nilsson-Wright and Yu Jie, *South Korean foreign policy innovation and Sino-US rivalry: Strategic partnerships and managed ambiguity*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021), 26.

53. 'Full text of President Moon Jae-in's speech at 75th Session of United Nations General Assembly', *Yonhap*, 23 September 2020.

South Korea's engagement with security

Seoul: a reluctant independent power?

Taking office in May 2022, the newly-elected South Korean president, Yoon Suk-yeol, sought to leverage South Korea's successful early handling of coronavirus compared to the results of actions taken by many Western states, in a continuation of the approach pursued by his liberal predecessor, Moon Jae-in. Seoul was one of the initial poster-child success stories in the early aftermath of the onset of the pandemic, as the Moon administration entered its last two years of government. South Korea's early accomplishments were a product of advanced technological capacities –owing to a conscious decision to combine state and private sector investment– coupled with "a sense of collective endeavour against danger", a lesson garnered not least from "the perennial threat from North Korea."[47] Previous experiences of being struck by pandemics, including severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 or Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2015, allowed key lessons to be learnt with respect to hospital control issues, and the preparedness of government agencies –namely the Korea Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention– and businesses.[48] Such success at controlling the spread of COVID-19 was epitomised in robust popular support for the then-ruling Democratic Party (DP). The DP's landslide victory in the National Assembly elections in April 2020 –winning 180 of 300 available seats– garnered the highest voter turnout in twenty-eight years and occurred amidst the implementation of stringent measures taken to avoid the spread of COVID-19 at polling stations.[49]

This victory reaped domestic benefits for the DP, the legacies of which continue to this day, with the Yoon administration facing an opposition-dominated National Assembly. Yet, South Korea also capitalised actively on its COVID-19 successes by bolstering its regional and global self-image as a key exporter of soft power, particularly in the domain of health security.[50] Critical to this image was the need to strengthen the ROK's existing alliances with the United States and regional institutions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but also emphasise the independent nature of South Korea's foreign policy, as one that was not purely bound by its alliance with the United States. The latter was a development of Moon Jae-in's 'New Southern Policy' (NSP), which, from its inception in 2017, aimed to diversify the ROK's economic and strategic ties –such as with India and Southeast Asian states– amidst intensifying Sino-US competition; and provide Seoul with greater "strategic autonomy" vis-à-vis its foreign policy.[51] As John Nilsson-Wright and Yu Jie argue, the NSP –which sowed the seeds for the ROK's future Indo-Pacific Policy under the Yoon administration– was "a deliberate effort to break away from the past pattern of big power relations in East Asia, dominated historically by China, the US, Japan and Russia."[52]

In his virtual speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, Moon Jae-in made clear how South Korea's early coronavirus successes would become a springboard to foster Seoul's simultaneously independent but collaborative role in addressing global security issues beyond the domain of health security, including climate change mitigation and the preservation of critical technological infrastructure and global supply chains. Moon underscored how "Korea will actively share its experiences accumulated from responding to COVID-19 and continue to work with the international community" in mitigating

coronavirus and broader global security issues. Crucially, Seoul's role in championing value-based diplomacy and foreign policy centred around "openness, transparency, and democracy" was not limited to coronavirus prevention, but part and parcel of a larger strategy to strengthen South Korea's autonomous foreign policy, in line with what Moon termed the United Nations' approach of "inclusive multilateralism".[53] These efforts bore fruit, and would serve as one notable point of continuation into the first year of the Yoon administration. The ROK's unexpected participation as an observer to the G7 Summit in Cornwall, in July 2021, highlighted how Seoul had gained global recognition as part of a community of like-minded liberal democratic states able to offer practical solutions to unexpected global crises.[54] These claims were reinforced by a senior serving South Korean official at the time, who asserted how South Korea's invitation to the summit was a result of its "openness to regional cooperation" and a willingness to engage with like-minded partners who longed to "share the ROK's principles of inclusiveness, transparency, and openness."[55] Moreover, South Korea's championing of upholding the values which underpin the liberal international order would not only strengthen following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also be in no small part responsible for Yoon Suk-yeol's invitation to the NATO Summit in Madrid, in June 2022, the first time a South Korean president had been invited to the summit.[56]

Seoul as a regional security provider

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic emboldened South Korea, in rhetoric, to strengthen its role of leadership in healthcare security and beyond, it remained more reluctant towards fostering a more independent foreign policy in practice. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ROK distanced itself from the US imposition of sanctions on Russia, for fear of worsening relations with Russia –a key export market for South Korean semiconductors and electronics– and China.[57] Whilst then-President Moon Jae-in agreed to "support and join" US and European sanctions on Russian exports "as a responsible member of the international community," Seoul made clear that it would not impose sanctions of its own, citing rising Sino-ROK and Russia-ROK trade, and thus demonstrating an anxiety of worsening these bilateral relationships.[58] This hedging would continue even after the conservative Yoon administration came to power in May 2022.[59]

Yoon's early foreign policy vision emphasised "confident diplomacy and strong national security", a core priority of which was for South Korea to become a "global pivotal state" (GPS). According to this logic, Seoul would not simply promote "freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values", manifest by deepening its alliance with the United States, but would "take the initiative in the broader region."[60] As Pacheco Pardo highlights, South Korea's GPS status is defined by a need for the state to "'step up' as a foreign policy actor and become a more active player in global affairs beyond the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia."[61] Over a year after his election, however, just what this "more active" role comprises in practice remains somewhat abstruse. South Korea's actions following the early outbreak of the Ukraine War offered a crucial example of the difficulties of implementing such rhetoric in practice, constrained both by the 'hub-and-spokes' model of bilateral alliances in the East Asian region –namely its security alliance with the United States– and Seoul's robust and growing economic ties with Moscow and Beijing.

An interview with a serving South Korean government official underscored

54. The White House, 'Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué', 13 June 2021.

55. Interview with senior South Korean official, 2021.

56. Sue Mi Terry and Kayla Orta, 'South Korea's Important Achievement at the NATO Summit', *Wilson Center*, 30 June 2022, available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/south-koreas-important-achievement-nato-summit (accessed 5 May 2023).

57. Sooyoung Oh, 'South Korea Must Pick a Side', *Foreign Policy*, 6 April 2022.

58. Hyung-sup Lim, *Mundaetong-yeong "ukeula chimgong yugam…gyeongjejejae dongchamhae nagal geos"* [President Moon: I regret the invasion of Ukraine: I will join economic sanctions], *Yonhap,* 24 February 2022.

59. For more on South Korea's hedging during the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008-2013), see: Sukhee Han, 'From engagement to hedging: South Korea's new China policy', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 2008, 20(4), 335-351.

60. Yoon Suk-yeol, 'South Korea Needs to Step Up: The Country's Next President on His Foreign Policy Vision', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2022-02-08/south-korea-needs-step (accessed 2 May 2023).

61. Ramon Pacheco Pardo, 'South Korea: A Pivotal State under Construction', *CSDS Policy Brief*, 17, 22 September 2022.

62. Interview with South Korean official, April 2023.

this difficulty, highlighting how although Yoon's vision of the ROK as a "global pivotal state" (GPS) formed a frequent component of the new administration's foreign policy approach, its practical implementation remained unclear.[62] Corroborating this claim, another senior South Korean official emphasised to the author how South Korea "tries to be" a global pivotal state, whose regional and global roles are centred around upholding the rules-based international order through promoting universal values of openness, transparency, and democracy.[63] Yet, the Yoon administration seems reluctant to go beyond the notion of value-based diplomacy in articulating and defining the notion of a GPS, a trait that seems increasingly noticed by South Korean officials. One official went as far as to assert that the term *global pivotal state* was "embarrassing…it is just rhetoric; we do not know what it means."[64] There is, therefore, a marked disjuncture between the espousal of South Korea's independent role as a leader of regional and global security –particularly as witnessed in the first year of the Yoon administration– and questions of how South Korea can implement and translate such rhetoric into action.

This reluctance for South Korea to pursue an independent foreign policy approach as a regional security provider, for fear of destabilising existing relationships with great powers, is hardly unexpected. After his election, Yoon stressed how his foreign and security policy would revolve around "confident diplomacy and strong national security."[65] One of his main priorities was that the ROK "map out a vision for the future of the Asia-Pacific and global order based on liberal democratic values." Yet, this future vision could not be mapped out alone, and required a restoration of "trust" between Seoul and Washington wherein the ROK-US alliance would be "rebuilt" and upgraded to a "comprehensive strategic alliance."[66] Such trust, however, would arguably be challenged in January 2023, when President Yoon made one of his most explicit announcements to date with respect to the possibility of South Korea acquiring an independent nuclear deterrent should North Korea's nuclear threats continue.[67]

Nevertheless, for all the uncertainties surrounding South Korea's global role as a provider of security, South Korea has indeed exhibited greater confidence as a contributor to global security, not least following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Saeme Kim highlight, South Korea's siding with Ukraine –against Russia– has been driven both by value-based diplomacy –namely the need for Seoul to align with like-minded, fellow democracies– but also in Seoul's desire to signal its role as a reliable and robust alliance partner with the United States and other Western allies, both in East Asia and in the Western hemisphere.[68]

Implications on the East Asian regional order

The two global crises of the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have accurately epitomised the idea of a "polycrisis", defined by South Korean Foreign Minister, Park Jin, as a "swarm of global emergencies" that "form a global risk with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part."[69] These effects are, of course, not limited to the Korean Peninsula, extending to the East Asian region and wider international order. What these two crises demonstrate, however, is how the Korean Peninsula is highly prone to being engulfed within any such risks emanating from exogenous shocks outside of its immediate vicinity.

North Korea's securitization of coronavirus and heightened securitization of the United States following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have occurred in close

63. Interview with South Korean official, May 2023.

64. Interview with South Korean official, April 2023.

65. 'Yoon Suk Yeol's Foreign and Security Policy: Confident Diplomacy and Strong National Security', available at: https://www.nknews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/20220314-YSY-FOPO.docx (accessed 10 April 2023).

66. Ibid.

67. Jeongmin Kim, 'Yoon says Seoul could rapidly acquire nukes if North Korean threats increase', *NKNews*, 12 January 2023.

68. Pacheco Pardo and Kim, 'South Korea: siding with the west and distancing from Russia', 1128.

69. Duk-kun, Byun, 'S. Korea-U.S. cooperation key to overcoming 'polycrisis': FM Park', *Yonhap*, 24 February 2023.

temporal proximity to South Korea's accelerated focus on its role as an independent security provider. These actions, which are likely to continue in the longer-term, have had both short and long-term implications on the East Asian regional order. Such implications can be witnessed in two main areas: firstly, dyadically, in terms of individual bilateral relations between either Korea and a respective ally or adversary; and secondly, as part and parcel of broader systemic-level changes within the liberal international order catalysed by the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.

Yet, North Korea's securitization of coronavirus should not be seen solely as a domestic security issue with purely domestic implications vis-à-vis state-society relations. Rather, North Korea's behaviour has highlighted how the regime has, in fact, leveraged COVID-19 as a convenient justification to retreat to isolationism and toughen domestic control, but also heighten its rhetoric against the United States. Even with its draconian border closure in place, Pyongyang launched nine short-range KN-24 and KN-25 ballistic missiles in March 2020.[70] By blaming "foreign powers", not least South Korea, for bringing COVID-19 into the country, Pyongyang's heuristic of the "hostile policy" could be further invoked to justify its lack of engagement with Washington. This logic looks set to continue given current US-ROK alliance dynamics, and was firmly witnessed in the reaction of Kim Yo Jong following the establishment of the Washington Declaration by Presidents Yoon Suk-yeol and Joe Biden on 26 April, which reinforced South Korea's reliance on US extended deterrence. Kim decried the declaration as "a typical product of their extreme anti-DPRK policy", which would expose the Northeast Asian region "to more serious danger."[71] Criticising the establishment of a Nuclear Consultative Group between the US and ROK – and the planned visit of US nuclear-armed submarines to the Korean Peninsula[72] – she underscored how "the more nuclear assets they deploy in the vicinity of the Korean Peninsula, the stronger the exercise of our right to self-defence will become in proportion to them."[73] With the DPRK's unwillingness to open borders to pre-pandemic levels, therefore, Pyongyang's invocation of the US "hostile policy" serves only to further its accelerated nuclear and missile development.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, North Korea's exacerbated securitization of the United States underscores evolving understandings of regional security, particularly how the United States remains very much part and parcel of the DPRK's "regional security complex", even if the regime-state is neither geographically-proximate nor contiguous to the United States. Whilst Buzan et al. originally defined a "regional security complex" (RSC) as "a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another", such linkages remained predominantly focused on the idea that geographically-proximate areas generate greater, more locally-intense security interactions.[74] The case of North Korea, however, underscores how whilst geographically-distanced from and far from contiguous to the US, "the United States has now been sucked into a security complex with North Korea."[75] Washington remains ever-firmly embedded in Pyongyang's RSC, especially given the DPRK's ability to develop intercontinental ballistic-missile capabilities, even if the actual technological ability for such missiles to strike the US mainland may, at present, be questionable.

One longer-term regional implication of North Korea's securitization of coronavirus and the United States has been the DPRK's growing engagement in transactional rapprochement with its Cold War patrons of Russia and China. Through

70. Ankit Panda, 'What Was Behind North Korea's Busy March 2020 Missile Launches', *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2020.

71. KCNA, 'Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong Clarifies Stand through KCNA', 29 April 2023.

72. The White House, 'Washington Declaration', 26 April 2023.

73. *Ibid*.

74. Buzan *et al*., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 12.

75. Robert E. Kelly, 'Security Theory in the "New Regionalism"', *International Studies Review*, 9(2), 2007, 210.

76. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'General Secretary of WPK Kim Jong Un Congratulates General Secretary of CPC Xi Jinping', 23 October 2022; Josh Smith, 'Putin and North Korea's Kim forge close ties amid shared isolation', *Reuters*, 7 October 2022.

77. Francesca Frassineti, Edward Howell, and Ria Roy, 'North Korea pokes the polarisation bear', *East Asia Forum*, 2 December 2022.

securitization, the DPRK has been able to heighten existing cleavages within the East Asian regional order, not least through warming Sino-Russo relations, and heightened opposition to the West. Meetings between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in October 2022 and September 2023, coupled with communications between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping pledging to "strengthen unity and cooperation" between the DPRK and China, in October 2022, have underscored the reality of Pyongyang's rapprochement.[76] At present, such rapprochement does not yet signify a new form of strategic realignment or alliance in the East Asian security order.[77] Rather, the likely scenario in which North Korea supplied and continues to supply munitions to the Russian state military and also paramilitary groups, such as the Wagner Group, –a claim denied by the ruling regime[78]– stresses how North Korea is willing to exploit Russia's war in Ukraine, and the sclerotic nature of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to entrench cleavages in the East Asian region in its favour as a means towards reaping economic benefits.[79] Having leveraged COVID-19 to heighten its rhetoric against the United States, the continuation of Russia's war with Ukraine has allowed the DPRK to exploit a fractured UNSC and bolster ties with its Russian and Chinese partners in the face of a common enemy, namely, the West. Amidst domestic economic decline –in no small part owing to a continuation of the border closure induced by COVID-19– North Korea's recent refusal towards receiving foreign aid, which it decried as "poisoned candy", only stresses how the DPRK has been able to take advantage of exogenous shocks that have fractured the regional order to pursue its preferred isolationist policies.[80]

On the part of South Korea, however, Seoul's behaviour has in part strengthened bilateral alliances within the region in line with its recent self-conceptualisation as a "global pivotal state". That said, the ROK's age-old dilemmas between pursuing either an independent or ambiguous foreign policy stance have also been revealed, and do not look to abate. For now, what can be witnessed is that South Korea's bolstering of alliances and efforts to strengthen its global pivotal status in the form of value-based diplomacy remains insufficient to combat the fraying of the international order caused by North Korea's securitization both of coronavirus and the United States. Indeed, the transformative regional effects of the ROK's recent strengthening of bilateral ties with the US, US allies, and US-led institutions, not least NATO, however, remain to be seen. At present, these consequences have not gone beyond emphasising a continuation of the status quo. Whilst South Korea has "taken note" of divisions in regional fora –such as the Quad– as a consequence of Russia's war in Ukraine,[81] the ROK's actions suggest a preference towards the status quo and avoiding the destabilization of existing economic and political bilateral relations with regional powers, whether Russia, China, or the United States. That said, South Korea has also recently strengthened combined military exercises with the United States, as recently witnessed by *Freedom Shield* from 13 to 23 March 2023. These exercises were heavily criticised by North Korea and China, the latter of which expressed "grave concern" vis-à-vis these exercises and the AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[82]

The Yoon administration thus continues to face a long-standing quandary for the Republic of Korea, seeking simultaneously to pursue an independent foreign policy without compromising upon extant and burgeoning alliance relationships. This dilemma has been particularly underscored by the ROK's unease at reconciling its role as a contributor to regional security with its eagerness to be seen as a core regional and global security provider. Reflecting this discomfort, the

78. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry Censures Japanese Media for False Report', 23 December 2022.

79. For the US statement in this regard, see: United States Mission to the United Nations, 'Statement by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on Russia's use of Weapons Illegally Acquired from the DPRK and Iran in its Brutal War Against Ukraine', 22 December 2022, available at: https://usun.usmission.gov/statement-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-on-russias-use-of-weapons-illegally-acquired-from-the-dprk-and-iran-in-its-brutal-war-against-ukraine/ (accessed 19 April 2023).

80. Rodong Sinmun, *gyeongjejeogjalib-eun jajujeog-in guggageonseol-ui muljiljeogdambo* [Economic self-sufficiency is the material guarantee for building an independent nation], 22 February 2023.

81. Pacheco Pardo and Kim, 'South Korea: siding with the West and distancing from Russia', 1126-1127.

Yoon administration has hitherto seemingly preferred to emphasise the latter in rhetoric, rather than in practice. In so doing, regional security challenges, whether North Korea's accelerated tactical and strategic nuclear weapons and missile development; China's growing aggression towards Taiwan; or the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine, have only become more acute.

Although South Korea has firmly espoused its support for the United States and the West with respect to Russia's war in Ukraine, Seoul's initial ambivalence towards adopting a forthright stance underscores the ROK's unease at being seen to be taking sides in its foreign policy approach. South Korea seems, at present, to exhibit greater confidence as a contributor to regional security through promoting value-based diplomacy, rather than as an active regional security provider. This quandary was most prominently evidenced in the leaked Pentagon documents in April 2023, which outlined the ROK's concerns that ammunition manufactured within the country would be deployed to Ukraine.[83] At the same time, in the same month, President Yoon raised the possibility –for the first time– for the ROK to go beyond directly supplying humanitarian and economic aid to Ukraine.[84] If manifest in reality, these actions would not only substantially challenge the ROK's historic refusal to avoid sending lethal aid directly to states at war, but would also strengthen South Korea's practical enactment of its vision as an independent security provider, most obviously to the detriment of its relations with Russia and China. As is well-known, South Korea has, in fact, offered indirect military assistance to Ukraine. A $5.76 billion bilateral arms deal with Poland, signed in August 2022, has allowed South Korea to export *Chunmoo* rocket launchers, howitzers, artillery shells, FA-20 fighter aircraft, and K2 tanks to Poland, which would subsequently be deployed to Ukraine.[85]

Nevertheless, South Korea's foreign policy actions, however, have had limited impact on the character of the East Asian regional order owing to its ongoing foreign policy dilemmas with respect to the pursuit of an independent foreign policy. Such a foreign policy has been encouraged in line with its self-proclaimed status as a "global pivotal state". Yet, Seoul's continued uncertainty between its role as a contributor to regional security and provider of regional security remains evident, all the while North Korea's securitization of the United States, South Korea, and its exploitation of fissures within the wider international order for domestic and foreign policy gain continues apace.

Conclusion

This article has argued how the two global crises of the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine have exemplified key patterns in terms of how both North and South Korea conceptualise security and respond to such framings. In so doing, these outlooks have catalysed gradual structural changes in the East Asian regional order, which have not always been beneficial to regional and global stability. In making this argument, this article has emphasised how the contributions of North and South Korea towards the East Asian regional order, from 2020, have not simply been behavioural reactions to the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. North Korea's securitization of COVID-19 and its exacerbated securitization of the United States have emphasised continuities in the DPRK's time-long invocation of the "hostile policy" as a means by which it orders its external geopolitical environment. At the same time, South Korea's pursuit of an increasingly independent foreign policy in the wake of these two crises, coupled with its growing self-proclaimed status

82. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wengbin's Regular Press Conference on March 14, 2023', 14 March 2023. See also: Hyung-jin Kim, 'US, South Korea announce largest field exercises in 5 years', *Associated Press*, 3 March 2023.

83. E.g. see: Sang-Hun Choe, 'Leaked Documents and Accusations of U.S. Spying Spark Outrage in Seoul', *New York Times*, 11 April 2023.

84. Soyoung Kim, Ju-min Park, and Hyonhee Shin, 'South Korea's Yoon opens door for possible military aid to Ukraine', *Reuters*, 19 April 2023.

85. Josh Smith and Joyce Lee, 'Seoul approved Poland's export of howitzers with South Korean parts to Ukraine', *Reuters*, 8 March 2023.

as a "global pivotal state", has epitomised past foreign policy dilemmas faced by the state. Not merely a beneficiary of Washington's extended security umbrella, South Korea has endeavoured to utilise its initial success during the coronavirus pandemic to bolster its status as a provider of regional and global health security. Yet, ultimately, Seoul remains unwilling to compromise on fraying its political and economic bilateral relations, not least security ties with the United States, but also, crucially, economic ties with Russia and China.

This article underscores how the changing East Asian regional order has stemmed both from North Korea's exacerbated framing of security in response to these two global crises. Through the theoretical framework of securitization, this article has shown how North Korea has exploited both crises with the aim of instigating more favourable regional conditions for the regime-state. By securitizing coronavirus and entrenching its long-standing securitization of the United States and its 'hostile policy', the North Korean regime has been able to justify its increasingly stringent domestic control. Moreover, the intermestic relationship between domestic and international security has allowed the DPRK to accelerate its nuclear and missile development whilst seeking to weaken the 'hub and spokes' system of US alliances in East Asia. In contrast, South Korea's focus on national security and strengthening its alliances with the United States –but also Japan and NATO– has allowed the state to bolster its status as a "global pivotal state", albeit with hitherto limited success.

As this article has demonstrated, therefore, it is vital to understand how actors on the Korean Peninsula consider and frame their respective external (and internal) geopolitical environments for effective policy to be devised against regional threats. Understanding North Korea's securitization of coronavirus and, relatedly, the United States, thus emphasises the need to recognise how North Korea orders international relations in order to respond to its actions. Moreover, the constraints of South Korea's decision-making, firmly a product of its ironclad alliance with the United States, underscores the difficulties faced by the ROK, even under a conservative administration, to strengthen its independent foreign policy posture. Acknowledging such constraints –together with South Korea's economic dependence upon China– is central to understanding South Korea's ambiguity towards joining informal regional security institutions, such as the Quad and AUKUS, at a time when the ROK has actively sought to bolster its bilateral alliances with the United States and its allies. What is more, whilst Russia, China, and North Korea may not *yet* be forging a 'new strategic triangle' in light of Russia's war in Ukraine, the transactional rapprochement between these three countries, for mutual economic benefit, should not be overlooked, especially with respect to the wider ramifications of paralysing the United Nations Security Council, and hindering the effectiveness of sanctions on the DPRK.

As Yoon Suk-yeol passes the milestone of his first anniversary as President, the South Korean leader's early incumbency can be encapsulated by a marked disjuncture between robust foreign policy rhetoric and somewhat less assertive action. Yoon's domestic approval rating has risen to over 44.7%, marked notably by his summitry with Biden, and invitation to the G7 summit in Hiroshima, in May of this year.[86] Meeting on the sidelines of the summit, Yoon, Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida pledged to "take their trilateral cooperation to new heights", not least in the face of North Korea's accelerated nuclear and missile development.[87] Yet, with inter-Korean relations and US-DPRK ties at a nadir, the Yoon administration faces formidable challenges ahead, at a time when the Biden administration in Washington seems preoccupied more with Russia's

86. 'Yoon's approval rating rises to 44.7 pct: poll', *Yonhap*, 28 May 2023.

87. 'Readout of President Biden's Meeting with Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan and President Yoon Suk Yeol of the Republic of Korea', *The White House*, 21 May 2023.

88. Author interview with South Korean official, May 2023.

war in Ukraine and the strategic challenges posed by China in contrast to the "direct issues North of the Demilitarized Zone."[88]

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