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An Assessment and Outlook

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Abstract

A new U.S. administration, important strategic decisions at the North Korean party congress, an emerging major conflict between the U.S. and China, and a slowly emerging end to the Corona pandemic: Numerous events are taking place in 2021. This makes it necessary to take a closer look at the situation in and around North Korea, and to formulate an outlook. In January 2020, right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea closed its borders. Since then, there were hardly any diplomatic contacts worth mentioning. As a result, it is now even harder to assess what is going on in the country and what its leadership is planning. There is no shortage of tension, and there are a variety of factors that determine the possibilities and limits for diplomatic solutions.

The report summarizes the key decisions of the North Korean party congress in early 2021 and identifies seven key factors. There is a discussion on the various relationship networks, and an outline on the global political situation. In addition to the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Japan and the

corona pandemic play major roles.

The resulting outlook gives little cause for optimism, because an improvement in the situation seems unlikely, and a solution, even less so. The different interests of the parties involved make it difficult for them to get along. Even their underlying strategies clash too much: The U.S. and North Korea are worlds apart, and China is satisfied with the current state of the Korean issue.

Real progress may require a new U.S. approach. One that, at least for the time being, accepts North Korea as a nuclear power, and relies less on China's willingness to cooperate. However, even such an approach would be highly risky and without a guarantee of success.

The hermetic closure of borders, North Korea's domestic fortification, and the diametrically opposed interests of all parties involved: Signs of hope are currently few and far between.

1. Introduction

How can the Korean Peninsula achieve disarmament and sustainable peace? Since the 1953 armistice which neither led to the end of the war nor to a peace treaty, the peninsula remains in a state of unstable peace. At this time, an improvement seems unlikely, and a solution, even less so.

After years of confrontation, talks between representatives from South and North Korea finally took place again in 2018. There was hope that this time, there would be a real chance for peace. However, since the failure of the Hanoi summit between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) "Dear Respected Leader" Kim Jong-un and 45th U.S. President Donald Trump in February 2019, there has barely been any progress. With an increase in negative developments, the relationship shows a consistently downwards trend.

In early 2020, right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea closed its borders. There were hardly any diplomatic interactions worth mentioning anymore. The vast majority of foreigners had left the country, and the state media has an uncompromised monopoly on information. As a result, it is even more difficult now to assess what is going on in the country and what its leadership is planning. So what is the situation in the country, what is the foreign policy environment, and what are the opportunities for diplomacy in 2021? Can the new U.S. President Joe Biden provide a fresh approach?

In early January, the Workers' Party of Korea held its Eighth Party Congress. It took place five years after the Seventh

Congress, which was preceded by a 35-year period of none at all. A party congress like this is the most important instrument for announcing the upcoming years' political agenda. Although the congress sent powerful internal and external messages, it remains difficult for experts to make predictions. A new U.S. administration, major strategy decisions in North Korea, a looming major conflict between the U.S. and China, a slowly approaching end to the COVID-19 pandemic, and many other developments deserve our attention. It is worth taking a closer look at the current situation in and around North Korea now to understand where further developments might lead.

Over the years, even seasoned North Korea observers have had to accustom themselves to the fact that their original assessments and forecasts sometimes differ significantly from the actual developments. While always keeping in mind that we must exercise the greatest caution in making statements about North Korea's future, this report attempts, as best as it can, to present the current situation and to sketch a possible outlook.

First, there is a brief overview of the developments on the Korean Peninsula since the Seventh Party Congress in 2016. Then a summary and organization of the main results from the Eighth Party Congress of January 2021. Because a number of domestic and foreign policy factors must be considered, we present and analyze the seven currently most important factors of the North Korea conundrum before providing an outlook that outlines possible developments.

2. The Situation before the Party Congress in 2021

Always oscillating between rapprochement and conflict, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has been further complicated by divergent interests of other countries involved. The past seven decades have never been easy. Even though the history of the divided Koreas is a consistently turbulent one, the past five years in particular have been a roller coaster ride.

In 2016, the Seventh Party Congress took place for the first time since 1980. Kim Jong-un disappointed foreign observers who had hoped for reform announcements but then surprised them with his personal promise to improve the lives of his citizens. He thus claimed personal responsibility for continuing the country's economic development and improving the population's wellbeing. He was however, at the same time, taking a risk, since the failure of the economic plan would also be associated with his name.

In his 2021 speech, Kim assessed that North Korea hardly achieved any of the goals postulated in the 2016 Five-Year Plan. There was no increase in either the prosperity of the population or the production of consumer goods. The situation with the food supply did not improve either. However, in 2016 and 2017, North Korea attracted attention through provocative nuclear and missile tests. Even relations with China cooled noticeably, and China appeared to be properly implementing international UN sanctions against North Korea for the first time. Effective sanctions restrictions, an erratic U.S. President Trump who initially threatened "fire and fury" (only to later fall into a state of "infatuation" with Kim Jong-un), progress in expanding the nuclear program, a leftist progressive president in the South who was willing to engage in dialogue - a mish-mash of factors that caused North Korea to temporarily pivot to a course of diplomacy.

In his 2018 New Year's address, Kim Jong-un showed that he was open to dialogue. Then, there was the February Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. This provided a perfect launching pad for diplomatic rapprochement. The joint Korean teams celebrated with equal enthusiasm from the North and the South, and the presence of high-level visitors from the North in meeting rooms including Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-Jong fuelled hopes that diplomacy could be achieved through sports. Further rounds of political dialogue followed. In April 2018, Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in met: It was the first meeting between heads of state from the two Koreas since 2007.

However, 2018 not only saw meetings between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un, but also the first ever encounter between a North Korean ruler and a sitting U.S. president. While the summer 2018 meeting in Singapore offered little substance, there was hope that it laid the initial foundation for building mutual trust and that diplomatic progress could now take place. The North also concluded far-

reaching agreements with South Korea. Among them is the Comprehensive Military Agreement, which stands out for its contribution to the avoidance of military conflicts. The opening of a joint liaison office was also an important step in the incipient rapprochement process.

However, diplomacy remained bumpy, and a lack of general preparation took its toll at the second summit between Trump and Kim in February 2019 in Hanoi: The summit failed and ended prematurely without yielding a result. There was no final joint declaration. Despite another brief meeting between Kim and Trump at the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea in June 2019, relations have since deteriorated. By December 2019, they were at an impasse, and there was no more diplomatic movement until the U.S. presidential election in November 2020.



Donald Trump, Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in at their last joint meeting in Panmunjeom, June 30, 2019.

© Official White House Photo

Instead, North Korea resumed its missile-testing program: A number of new and intensive tests took place throughout 2019 - but the U.S. president's response was downright tame. He pointed out that tests were normal for a country that possesses weapons, and expressed his indifference by emphasizing that the range of these missiles was too short to reach the United States. At the same time, North Korea severely sharpened its tone towards South Korea, and brusquely blocked any proposal for cooperation, often along with savage insults.

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the situation. North Korea closed its borders immediately after the first cases appeared in China in January 2020. People could neither enter nor leave the country, and the already low level of trade with foreign countries, significant parts of which were conducted across the border with China, came to a virtual standstill.

By the end of March, almost all diplomats and foreign humanitarian workers had also left. Most foreign diplomatic missions, international NGOs, and supranational organizations including the German Embassy and German Agro Action were closed. Since then, hardly any information has been leaking out of the country, and certainly none that has been independently confirmed. Foreign observers are now largely dependent on the country's state media, whose reports they try to interpret. The organization, "Reporters Without Borders" ranks the country 180th - out of 180 - in its Press Freedom Index.

The state of the country's economy and its supply situation are probably deteriorating because of the aforementioned events, to which one must also add the devastation caused by severe weather and natural disasters. Both the frequency and scale of destruction hit the country particularly hard during the 2020 typhoon season.¹ For years, the reports from the UN agency of the World Food Program have been a cause for alarm. Reports on major problems related to an inadequate food supply such as malnutrition and undernourishment are frequent.

Important construction projects, such as the Pyongyang General Hospital, which was supposed to be completed for the Party Foundation Day in October, could not be finished in 2020. It is also believed that items are increasingly missing from the shelves of department stores and that hardly any aid supplies are coming into the country. In this context, the holding of a bombastic military parade in October 2020, at which many new missiles and modernized units from all branches of the armed forces were proudly presented, was very distressing to outside observers. Yet, the parade sent clear internal and external signals: Security comes before sustenance and investments in the arms industry come before the civilian population.

In June 2020, North Korea blew up the joint liaison office in the former Kaesong Special Economic Zone, a place where Koreans from the North and South had worked together from 2003 to 2016. In 2018, a liaison office opened on a site that had lain fallow for two years. Amid the diplomatic confidence then, it was an important symbol of inter-Korean rapprochement: For the first time, South and North Korea could have direct contact for 24 hours a day. South Korean tax revenues financed the building. The North ascribed the reason for the blast to their annoyance with the large-scale balloons filled with food, money, and information that South Korean NGOs had been sending to the North for years when wind conditions were favorable. The leadership of the Democratic People's Republic has always been annoyed with these balloons. When there were more balloons floating in early summer, the North blamed the South Korean government instead of the NGOs for having failed to comply with the North's wishes. The North's destruction of the liaison office coupled with its rude insults have made it unmistakably clear that it did not want any further cooperation with the South.

At the start of the party's 2021 congress, the country was looking back on a slump of almost two years, which are by no means guaranteed to be over. In the search for good news, one can unexpectedly find it in Corona: According to official state media, North Korea has yet to record a single case of the virus. It is difficult to prove or disprove this, but this account seems at least conceivable, because the North's isolation policies could hardly have been more rigorous. The price for such rigid isolation was, however, high. Overcoming the dangers posed by the spread of the Corona pandemic will take some time. Under the global Covax vaccination initiative, North Korea is currently only promised a little under two million doses of vaccine, which (given a population of just under 25 million) would be just enough for 852,000 people.²

3. A Breakdown of North Korea's Eighth Party Congress

The Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea took place in the capital of Pyongyang between Jan. 5 and Jan. 12, 2021. Kim Jong-un had already surprised North Korea observers in 2016 when he announced the first party congress to take place since 1980. This time, it had been only five years, instead of 35, since the last one. Although already announced in August 2020, the exact date of the party congress remained a secret. In fact, had it not been for the satellite images capturing an unusually large number of buses parked in front of the congress building on the day of the event,³ outsiders might have very well missed the Eighth Party Congress. Once again, this was a reminder to the outside world for just how little they know about the country and its internal processes. There was no broadcast for the event. Those who were interested had to rely on the publications of the state media, which summarized all the informa-

tion and published selected speeches, some of which were verbatim. Kim Jong-un's "accountability report," for example, is said to have lasted nine hours and was delivered in three parts. However, only a much shorter version of this was published. One cannot formulate a clear picture in this way. Even though much remains vague and general, what the state media conscientiously selected for worldwide publication shows what messages the country wants to send to the outside world.

The congress consisted of 5,000 delegates and 2,000 "observers" in the audience who followed the proceedings. Due to closed borders, there were no participants from outside of North Korea. 501 participants were women, which makes up about 7 percent of the audience.⁴

3.1 Personnel: Some Changes, but No Major Developments

Even though there is repeated speculation that the extremely leader-centered policy-making system could be transformed into a more collective system to reduce Kim Jong-un's workload, it remains true after the party congress that he is and remains the all-important central figure in the Democratic People's Republic. During the congress, Kim Jong-un assumed the position of General Secretary of the Workers' Party, a title that was reserved exclusively for his father, Kim Jong-Il.⁵ In addition, in the official English translation, he is now also dubbed "President" in the state media, a designation previously reserved only for his grandfather, the state founder Kim Il-sung.

On the other hand, his sister Kim Yo-Jong faced a downgrade from her previous position to deputy member of the politburo, but this does not mean a loss of power and influence.⁶ During the congress, she occupied a highly conspicuous seat and was located not so far from her brother, who was on the podium. Her rather drastic statements towards South Korea shortly after the party congress indicate that she continues to hold influence and an important position in the country, especially with regard to inter-Korean relations.⁷ In mid-March 2021, the state media quoted her threats towards the United States. She accused the new U.S. administration of causing trouble. "If they want to be able to sleep in peace for the next four years, they should refrain from making a stink of the first step⁸." As the sister of Kim Jong-un and part of the "Paektu bloodline" of the Kim family, she will remain a central figure, as long as she does not oppose the interests of her brother.

It is also worth noting that Jo Yong-Won, who in previous years has been a regular companion to Kim Jong-un's "on-the-spot instructions," has risen to the position of Secretary of the Central Committee. He is now among the most influential people in North Korea. Other than these changes, there were relatively few notable shifts in positions during the congress. At least on a superficial level, this indicates some stability in the nomenclature and a further consolidation of Kim Jong-un's position of power. At the time, the party congress in 2016 had a much stronger function in internally and externally documenting his success in closing the ranks behind him over the past five years of his rule. That was no longer necessary this time.

Less than a week after the party congress, a meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) took place. The SPA functions as a parliament and is in theory, the country's highest decision-making body. In reality, however, the "parliament," which normally meets once a year, just unanimously approves the decisions already made by Kim Jong-un and the party. Decisions regarding budget and personnel supplemented the previously established goals of the congress. Further unanimous agreements then put these decisions into effect.

3.2 Foreign Relations: Focusing on China and the USA

At the start of the congress, Kim Jong-un emphasized their good relations with China, Russia, Cuba and Vietnam, and referred to their common socialist roots. The state media also previously reported that Laos congratulated him and sent a basket of flowers – which should probably not be taken literally, since the borders to the outside world have been hermetically closed for a year. Kim's speech particularly emphasized the close relationship with China, which remains North Korea's largest and most important ally. Congratulations from Chinese President Xi Jinping on Kim Jong-un's appointment as General Secretary of the Workers' Party reaffirmed the positive development of the two countries' relationship.

In contrast, the tone towards the United States was sharp as usual. The brief thaw seems like a long time ago. In his speech at the congress, Kim Jong-un referred to the U.S. as the "greatest enemy" that would never change its policy towards Pyongyang, regardless of who sits in office.⁹ Although not directly addressing the new U.S. President Joe Biden, Kim explicitly called on the U.S. to cease its "hostile policy" towards North Korea. Only then, he said, would there be potential for improved relations and the resumption of bilateral negotiations. The perceived hostile attitude of the United States remains the regime's main legitimation for continuing and expanding its nuclear weapons program. However, Kim has emphasized repeatedly that the nuclear weapons are only for defense purposes and that he will not launch a first strike as long as he is not threatened. Yet, the missile system's capability of reaching U.S. territory has been emphasized on multiple occasions. North Korea has emphasized this on several occasions.

3.3 Inter-Korean Relations

2018 was the great year of inter-Korean rapprochement and hope. However, just as suddenly as hope had sprouted, the situation darkened and continued to do so. Since 2019, progress has been slow, and North Korea increasingly ignored all of South Korea's cooperation efforts and responded with humiliation, name-calling, and insults.

The party congress followed up on this development. Kim Jong-un pointed out that there could be progress in relations on the Korean Peninsula only if the United States and South Korea halted the joint U.S. ROK military exercises. The South and the U.S. are unlikely to accept this demand, especially since the U.S. Korea policy under President Biden appears to have changed significantly from that of his predecessor, Donald Trump, and envisions a rapprochement with South Korea once again. Six weeks after the party congress, they already reached an agreement on cost sharing for the U.S. presence in South Korea along with the start of the joint spring military maneuvers.¹⁰

In addition, Kim cited the propaganda balloons going up across the inter-Korean border by activists in South Korea as

a reason for the relationship's deterioration and compared the two countries' relationship to that before the Panmunjom Declaration (April 2018).¹¹

Despite much criticism from within the country and internationally, the South Korean government passed a law in December 2020 declaring such practices illegal.¹² However, this gesture was not enough to bring North Korea to the table, and they waited in vain for a response. Pyongyang's point of view that Seoul is responsible for the frozen relations does not preclude the possibility of an improvement in the relationship. Additionally, there was no discussion on the June 2020 demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong,¹³ which was founded in 2018.

3.4 The New Five-Year Plan: Confidence in One's Own Strength

Kim Jong-un made it clear, with unusual candor and pointedness, that North Korea achieved virtually none of the goals of the 2016 Five-Year Plan. In his accountability report, he mainly blamed external reasons for the failure: bad weather conditions, floods, the closure of international borders due to COVID-19, (which caused trade with China to drop by about 81% in 2020),¹⁴ and UN sanctions. There was no discussion on possible systemic weaknesses.

As is usually the case with published reports on domestic policy decisions, only a few details on the new five-year plan were disclosed, and many topics were barely touched upon. The English version summarizes the plan's goal as follows: "The main tasks of the new five-year plan are aimed at concentrating investment on the metal and chemical industries as key links in normalizing production in all sectors of the national economy, consolidating the material and technical foundations of the agricultural sector, and supplying the light industry with sufficient raw materials and other materials for an increased production of consumer goods."¹⁵

In later parts of his speech, he further emphasized the classic heavy industry sectors as key economic areas. In this way, this five-year plan is strongly reminiscent of Soviet economic plans from days long past - much more than it is of the five-year plan from 2016. While no reforms were

announced then either, the earlier five year plan placed a greater emphasis on the light industry, consumer goods, and leisure industries such as tourism. While the consumer goods industry is almost inconceivable without the semi legal markets, the classic heavy industry sectors provide the state with a greater opportunity to strengthen its role in the economy. A strong heavy industry sector would also support an increased production of arms. However, not a single shelf of goods in the people's shopping centers would get fuller.

Considering the failed talks with the U.S. and the unceasing sanctions, this shift in emphasis did not really come as a surprise. Since the end of 2019, the state media has been emphasizing the potential threat of the outside world, and never failed to use this as the rationale for their increasing commitment to military preparedness. The military parades of October 2020 and January 2021 clearly demonstrate how this shift has been taking place for some time. Providing the population with better consumer goods and improving their living conditions played a much more important role in the 2016 Five-Year Plan. National pride and proof of the country's capabilities are likely to be derived more from the defense sector than the consumer goods sector in the coming years.

After North Korea's initial and cautious efforts under Kim Jong-un to take market-economy laws into account and give the resulting dynamics some room, the party congress unequivocally established what is now once again, an all-encompassing regulation of economic development by the state and the party. Consequently, there was another emphasis on the "Juche" principle at this year's party congress. Put simply, the Juche ideology is about confidence in Korea's own strength and a development that is independent of external influences.¹⁶ Considering the sanctions and the hermetic isolation of the country, which is enforced from both the outside and from within, there hardly seems to be any other choice.

Not much of the new five-year plan is dedicated to tourism, and there is only the explicit mention of the Mount Kumgang Resort.¹⁷ In 2019, Kim Jong-un had already announced the demolition of the resort¹⁸ and during the congress reiterated the plan to convert the facility into a modern resort "in our own style". Under the currently prevailing conditions, it is very likely that this also means the rejection of further cooperation with South Korea in the tourism sector. In any case, Kim Jong-un's statement does not inspire optimism.

Since coming to power in 2011, Kim Jong-un carried out a number of large-scale construction projects. At the party congress, he announced that 10,000 new houses would be built per year in Pyongyang by 2026, and another 25,000 in Kamdok. These goals do not seem very ambitious, and no further large-scale projects have been announced. What is particularly noteworthy is that a production target of eight million tons of cement has been set for 2026, which is the equivalent of 1.6 million tons per year. A target of 4 million tons per year was already specified 51 years ago in 1970.¹⁹



Juche – Relying on your own strength: A mosaic in a subway station in Pyongyang.

Whether the figures at that time were unrealistic, or whether the post 1990s-collapse North Korean economy still cannot reach their production goals from decades ago, remains open for the time being.

The goal of the new five-year plan is to attain independence from imports and achieve economic stability while also consolidating state control over the economic sector. From a western perspective, these are not good signs, and the extent to which these plans will manifest themselves in reality over the coming years should be carefully observed. At the very least, reports from the country have already multiplied in the past two years, pointing to a greater suppression of market-economy-like structures.

Following the party congress was the Supreme People's Assembly during which the budget for achieving the goals was laid out. According to the plan, there will be a 0.6 percent budget increase from that of last year for economic construction projects in 2021. The budget increase for economic projects over the past three years has been between four and six percent.²⁰ Overall, the state budget increased by 1.1 percent this year compared to last year. As always, exact figures are not available, but budget increases in previous years were much higher.²¹ This may indicate an increasingly difficult economic situation.

3.5 Nuclear Weapons and Missiles

In his speech, Kim Jong-un emphasized with great detail the successful weapon developments achieved so far and his future military plans. Additionally, the tactical capacity

of developed nuclear weapons are to be improved through miniaturization, and the long-range missiles are to be navigated more precisely in the future. The goal for intercontinental ballistic missiles, which have so far been propelled by liquid fuels, is to make them run on solid fuels. Multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) warheads, hypersonic gliding flight warheads, military reconnaissance satellites, drones and a number of improved tactical missile variants - the list is more extensive and precise than ever. Typically, observers would have to make do with speculating on current weapons development plans from images released by the North Korean state after tests or military parades.

Kim Jong-un uses the ever-present threat of possible U.S. attacks to legitimize new military development goals, which impose constraints on the population and the economy: weapons are needed to ensure peace on the Korean peninsula.

As expected, on Jan. 14, 2021, a military parade took place in Kim Il-sung Square in Pyongyang to celebrate the conclusion of the party congress and to demonstrate the newly developed weapons. A new submarine-launched ballistic missile was presented among other weapons. During the parade, it was described as "the world's strongest weapon."²² Unlike the military parade in October, intercontinental ballistic missiles were not displayed. Kim Jong-un's statements at the party congress and the two military parades can be interpreted as well-calculated messages towards the new American president. Disarmament is not on the agenda for the time being.

4. North Korea Politics: Important Players and Factors

During the party congress, North Korea laid the foundation for the policy direction of the upcoming years. However, one must consider these changes within a larger context. There is no shortage of tension when it comes to the North Korea issue, and there are a variety of factors that determine the possibilities and limitations for diplomatic solutions. The main components are identified and analyzed below.

4.1 Who Determines the Agenda? The DPRK or the U.S.?

In the past, one was generally under the impression that North Korea determined the agenda, and the U.S., instead of being proactive, would simply react. The former U.S. President Barack Obama's approach of "strategic patience" serves as an example of how being passive does not lead anywhere. Senior Obama-era officials are now back in the U.S. government. The big question is whether a different North Korea policy is possible, or whether the general framework of the Obama policy will be repeated.

North Korea's attitude towards the U.S. remains consistent: During the congress, Kim described the U.S. as "the greatest enemy" that will never change and demanded that the U.S. stops its "hostile politics." He provided furthermore in a surprising amount of detail, information on what weapons North Korea will develop. This limits room for diplomatic solutions, but one must also objectively recognize that none of the North Korea strategies from either of Biden's predecessors were successful. On many occasions in the past, North Korea has provoked the U.S. and South Korea during elections or the beginning of a new administration. As a result, several observers expected North Korea to behave similarly during Joe Biden's transition into office. North Korea was dormant over the last few months, but it restarted missile testing in March. A continuation of these tests will surely not be helpful for diplomacy.

The goal of the U.S. government for both the Democrats and Republicans has always been the complete denuclearization of North Korea. Not only because one perceives North

Korea as a threat to global peace, but also to prevent an East Asian or global arms race.

The underlying strategy was that North Korea could be convinced of the merits of denuclearization with a "carrot and stick" method consisting of economic and military pressure on the one hand and rewards for concessions on the other. The phases would alternate between an emphasis on applying pressure and providing incentives. There were multilateral approaches and direct bilateral discussions. None of the approaches so far has been enough to sway North Korea's agenda. This might seem frustrating, but it also presents the opportunity for a new beginning.

Unlike Trump, Biden draws support from professionals with many years of experience and has built up a functioning system for domestic and foreign policy within a very short time. Important positions were immediately filled. The Corona measures worked and his foreign policy is meaningful and strategic. But no government can handle all fields simultaneously immediately after its establishment. As usual, the new government is undergoing a "North Korea Policy Review" process, which U.S. officials expect to be completed during the spring of 2021.

A sign that the "Policy Review" and internal coordination is not yet completed is the inconsistent use of the term denuclearization.²³ The new U.S. administration not only talks about the "Denuclearization of North Korea" but also the "Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." The difference appears to be a minor semantic issue but is actually fundamental. This has always been a topic of misunderstanding between North Korea and the U.S. The "Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" is an official term used in international agreements and was in use since the "Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." However, it is clear that the two sides interpret the term differently. Logically speaking, this term should only be referring to North Korea, since South Korea does not have any nuclear weapons, and American nuclear weapons have been fully withdrawn since 1991. However, North Korea believes the term to mean South Korea's independence from the U.S. nuclear umbrella and the de facto withdrawal of U.S. troops.

The vague formulation can theoretically also apply to the U.S. troops in Japan and other Pacific islands.²⁴ North Korea is able to use the ambiguity of the term as an opportunity for constantly increasing its demands. The new U.S. government must find a way to bridge the two sides' contrasting understandings of the term. North Korea is unlikely to agree to a one-sided denuclearization, and the U.S. cannot deter North Korea from this path without China's help. It seems that the only realistic option, at least for the time being, is to recognize North Korea as a nuclear power. At first glance, this would merely acknowledge the existing facts, but the resulting changes would be fundamental to further negotiations. There are valid reasons to avoid such recognition: For example, such recognition could be interpreted as making it worthwhile to undermine international sanctions for years. Moreover, other countries with nuclear ambitions might feel

encouraged to follow North Korea's example. A paradigm shift could provide the opportunity to limit the missile arsenal, halt the expansion of the nuclear stockpile, and work out joint arms control mechanisms to minimize the risks.

North Korea is a fruitless field in foreign policy: It is complicated because there is little to gain, and there are no easy solutions. At the beginning of his term, Joe Biden faced the pandemic at home, and a number of foreign policy obstacles, all the while worldwide COVID-19 cases seemed to increase instead of decrease. So it seems quite understandable that the new U.S. administration is firstly dealing with other challenges. The North Korean issue is important, but not the highest priority.

But would it be too late by then? Will North Korea have resumed missile and nuclear weapons testing? It is never too late for diplomacy and negotiations, and it seems that North Korea will only look to itself for its test strategy anyway. It will not wait for the U.S. With its military parades and congressional announcements, Pyongyang has already sent clear messages. Disarmament is not on the agenda at the moment anyway, but an expansion of military assets is.

However, a proactive U.S. foreign policy in the coming months with new proposals to North Korea would definitely be advantageous. While hopes for a satisfactory solution remain low, at least North Korea would then no longer be able to assign responsibility for the failure of negotiations to the other side quite so easily.

4.2 The Relationship between the USA and China

The relationship between the U.S. and China has soured greatly under Donald Trump's presidency. In March 2021, high-ranking diplomatic representatives from both countries met for the first time to evaluate whether détente and rapprochement were possible. The start was conceivably bad and pronouncedly tense.²⁵ One knows now, that Joe Biden's China-policies will be different from that of his predecessor but not softer in anyway. The China policy of the Obama/Biden administration is also likely to have become obsolete as a model, since China's role, self-image, self-confidence and concrete behavior have also changed considerably since then. A number of breaking points reveal conflicts between the two great powers. North Korea is a central point of conflict, and the U.S.-China relations always include the North Korea issue. But there are other areas of conflict, such as Hong Kong, the human rights situation in China, trade policy (as usual), and Taiwan, where concerns about mainland Chinese hegemony are steadily growing.²⁶ China may very well become one of Biden's biggest foreign policy challenges during his time in office. The Korean peninsula is in this context and region only one of many problems.

Should U.S.-China relations worsen, prospects for cooperation on the issue of North Korea are inconceivable. In 2017, there was a rare moment of agreement that resulted from the combination of several factors: North Korea, with its

excessive provocations had managed to stretch China's patience, Donald Trump was still new in office, and Xi Jinping was trying to build good relations which was evident during the meeting at Mar-a-Lago in April 2017.

For the first time, China helped implement UN sanctions on North Korea, and thus played a significant role in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table. However, Trump's bumbling policies, the lack of coordination with China, and the further deterioration of overall U.S.-China relations soon backtracked U.S.-China cooperation.



A photo from better times: Xi Jinping and Joe Biden at a state reception in Washington, September 25, 2015.

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The U.S. will probably have to *nolens volens* come to terms with China's unreliability in terms of maintaining sanction reinforcements. China will always prioritize stability and its own opportunities for exerting influence over the denuclearization of North Korea. The global COVID-19 pandemic has shown that China and the liberal democratic countries of the world do not get along politically. China is only interested in its own agenda. During the COVID-19 crisis China hid important information, silenced critics, oppressed minorities, and aggressively attempted to exert regional dominance, while other countries were distracted with battling the pandemic. A North Korea strategy that depends on close cooperation with China in regard to enforcing sanctions could be doomed from the start, this is even more so the case now in 2021 than it has been for the last 30 years. The new U.S. policy must take this realistic and sad situation into account.

Given that North Korea's current status quo is quite convenient for China and, from the Chinese point of view, represents a stability factor rather than a threat, North Korea will use its expertise in seesaw diplomacy to extract maximum benefits from the U.S.-China conflict.²⁷ A long and fruitless struggle between the DPRK and the U.S. is favorable for China.

However, seesaw diplomacy also comes with risks. North

Korea lacks reliable allies, and its close relationship to China is, at the end of the day, not by choice. North Korea's heavy dependence on China makes it a trump card that China will use against the U.S. when negotiating other issues. On the other hand, if the U.S. were to take stronger action against North Korea, Chinese companies trading with North Korea in particular would also be targeted. This is another factor that could potentially contribute to the power struggle between the U.S. and China.

A complicated relationship between the U.S. and China will, to say the least, convolute attempts to solve the Korea question. In the beginning of March, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken outlined the framework for American foreign policy in which North Korea played a small role. There was however, a heavy emphasis on the conflict with China. If this conflict continues to intensify, the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and an improvement in U.S. relations with North Korea will remain extremely difficult to achieve.

4.3 The Relationship between China and North Korea

For decades, North Korea has used seesaw diplomacy to obtain maximal support from China and the Soviet Union. In the past ten years, its dependence on China has grown immensely. The relationship with China is in no way a loving one. This is because the power disparity is just as big as the dependence. In April 2019, when Kim Jong-un met Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok in a somewhat surprising move, it briefly seemed as though Russia would re-enter the fray. However, there was no important follow up to this meeting.

More than 90 percent of North Korea's trade goes through China. In 2018, many observers were still speculating that North Korea would seek a rapprochement with South Korea and the United States in order to break away from its undesirable dependence on China.²⁸ It is possible that China was also considering this option, but in 2018 it rolled out a massive red carpet for North Korea. Multiple meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un took place. In parallel, hopes for a substantial rapprochement between the United States and North Korea diminished, and this became evident after the failed Hanoi summit in February 2019. The status quo ante had been restored: China as North Korea's close ally and big brother.

But will this remain the case? North Korea is first and foremost an extremely nationalistic state. Its dependence on China is more than problematic, for it counteracts the *Juche* ideology of self-reliance in which one fiercely depends on one's own strength. Kim Jong-un's speech at the party congress gave more space to China than to other countries, and friendly greetings between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping also testify to a supposedly friendly relationship. A friendship that does not come from the bottom of the heart, but is fed by pragmatic considerations.

The specialist portal nknews.org evaluated satellite images in 2020, which showed that China and North Korea were

carrying out repairs and upgrades at numerous border crossings. Even the New Yalu Bridge, completed years ago but never connected to the road network by North Korea, saw improved infrastructure, and a potential foundation for finally connecting it to North Korea's road system.²⁹ For the time being, the completion and commissioning is postponed because of the Corona outbreak.

The party congress and more general developments in the recent past show that North Korea must accept its dependence on China in the absence of alternatives, and that the pure doctrine of Juche is reaching certain limits. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of North Korea reaching out to countries in order to prevent China from gaining the upper hand. But neither Russia stands ready to fill China's large role, nor can South Korea or the United States reach out without concessions from North Korea. However, Russia cannot replace China, and neither South Korea nor the U.S. can reach out unless the North makes concessions.

For now, one should not expect a change in the situation: China will supply North Korea with the bare necessities and North Korea will try to limit China's influence. How a rapprochement between the U.S. and North Korea could succeed in this constellation is hardly conceivable at present.

4.4 Inter-Korean Relations and a Growing Sense of Apathy

Since taking office in 2017, South Korea's president Moon Jae-In has worked for reconciliation with North Korea. This issue is much more important to him than it is for the rest of the South Korean population.³⁰ At first, it seemed as though Moon's efforts were succeeding: in 2018, the two Koreas got closer, and South Korea saw itself as an important mediator between North Korea and the United States. But soon Trump and Kim preferred direct contact and South Korea was sidelined. After the failure of Hanoi, the North's propaganda wrath mainly targeted South Korea, and they fired volleys of verbal insults at increasingly shrinking intervals. The most visibly negative turning point took place in June 2020, when North Korea bombed the inter-Korean liaison office, which was located just over the border on the North Korean side in the formerly jointly operated Kaesong special economic zone.³¹

Despite all this, or precisely because of the seemingly eternal repetition of similar outcomes, North Korea is no longer pressing issue for the South Korean population. After decades of unresolved conflict, a mixture of disillusionment, apathy and indifference has taken hold. This is also reinforced by the fact that after seven decades, there are hardly any North-South relatives who look back on shared memories or experiences. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, North Korea scored only a few percentage points on a survey that assessed voters' most pressing issues.³²

Unaffected by these opinions and perhaps fixated on an idealistic goal, the Moon administration continued to prioritize inter-Korean relations. With all his power and tolerance

for frustration he continued to work towards a rapprochement with North Korea. However, with the 2022 presidential elections in sight, he is running out of time: In South Korea, the president is limited to 5 years in office and cannot be re-elected. After four years in office, Moon must ask himself what his term will leave behind. Few of Moon's domestic policy initiatives would grant him a spot in history books. A breakthrough in North and South rapprochement would have secured him one, but that is unlikely to happen now.

It is certain that the upcoming presidencies will place less of an emphasis on goodwill towards North Korea. In the South Korean society, the issue has gone from being a heartfelt concern to a forgotten one. After five years of unreciprocated love and failure, Moon's successor would be foolish to place such a strong emphasis on North Korea again. The North is also aware of this constellation, which leads one to wonder if Kim Jong-un will use Moon's last year in office as an opportunity for rapprochement. It will soon no longer be this easy, and the window of opportunity is closing.

While Donald Trump preferred direct communication with Kim and frequently sidelined South Korea, Joe Biden has made it clear that the U.S. intends to reinvigorate its alliance with South Korea. If North Korea wants to achieve a rapprochement and, above all, an easing of the painful international sanctions, it will no longer be able to ignore the South so nonchalantly. Biden's intentions of strengthening the security alliance between the U.S. and South Korea generally complicates things for North Korea. Only domestic propaganda will get easier, since military cooperation, and especially joint U.S.-ROK exercises legitimize military expansions.

4.5 Domestic Stability and Further Economic Development

North Korea's COVID-19 measures accomplished what sanctions could not achieve for years: Restrict North Korean trade with the outside world. In 2020, imports and exports with China, which have already fallen previously, plummeted by 80 percent. Economic development had already stalled in the years before. Even though China provided large loopholes in sanction regulations, North Korea suffered severely under the international sanctions, which became significantly more restrictive since 2016.³³

Circumventing the sanctions has become increasingly burdensome. As a result, even the trade of oil, gas, coal, and other essential products must be handled circuitously via illegal ship-to-ship transfers on the open sea: Elaborate, difficult, and by no means always successful.³⁴ Additionally, many countries, especially in the Middle East, repatriated North Korean workers, who functioned as a stable stream of income for the country by working in difficult conditions abroad. For the time being, this source of foreign hard currency has mostly dried up. Despite the country's isolation, North Korea is not a lonely island. Renowned North Korea observer Kim Byung-yeon sees North Korea's economy as one that is similar to that of other countries because it is also dependent on foreign trade.³⁵ Whether this dependence is mainly

on China is of secondary importance. What is important is that even the relatively isolated North Korea cannot maintain a functioning economy without trading and importing goods from outside. This is another instance in which the ambitions of the Juche-Ideology in which one must only trust one's own strength, meet their limits. In 2018, the longtime North Korea observer, Andrei Lankov described Kim Jong-un's economic policies as "reforms without openness" that, at least partly, gave rise to market-based structures and allowed the economy to grow for years.³⁶ However, this also resulted in a greater economic dependence on China, which North Korea would like to reduce in both the medium and long term. With the decisions made at the party congress, all attempts at reform have been buried and the state has tightened its reins again.

It will be interesting to see how the new middle class will react once they might no longer be able to play an active role in economic life and lose access to consumer goods and their modest prosperity. In the years after Kim Jong-un took office, a fair number of people's economic status improved, and their lives became more comfortable.³⁷ This was especially evident in the capital of Pyongyang which has since seen an increase in cars, electric bicycles, mobile phone users, and more diversely dressed people. There are also supermarkets with foreign goods - and thus also a clientele that can afford these consumer goods.

However, there has been a consistent struggle with food supplies in recent years, and reports from the UN World Food Program (WFP) have always caused alarm. Severe weather and crop failures that hit the country particularly hard in 2019 and 2020, have likely exacerbated the situation. In 2020, WFP Director David Beasley called for an increase in international efforts towards alleviating hunger and malnutrition in the country.³⁸ South Korea would be willing to provide food aid on a large scale, but the North will refuse to accept it if they find out that it is either coming from or being funded by the South. While observers hope that North Korea's system is now better equipped to deal with famine than it was in the 1990s, the supply situation was, is, and will remain extremely problematic. Adverse weather conditions alone might be enough to push the situation to collapse completely. Should North Korea fail to manage the problem of undersupply and food shortages, or at the very least quickly allow some aid to enter the country, the risk of causing internal political tensions in the medium term may increase.

The party congress initiated policies that reinforced state and party control on all economic activity. However, this only established what had already been apparent for some time since the later part of 2019.³⁹ The newly tightened controls do not even spare private households: In recent months, there have been a number of reports from the country that suggest an increase in surveillance. Raids and stricter sentences for people who secretly watch South Korean TV dramas are becoming more frequent. Without being able to verify the conditions in the country, international human rights organizations draw on these events to assume that the country's human rights situation remains problematic, and that

these issues have in fact grown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁰

The actual current conditions in the country are difficult to see from the outside. The developments described above, in conjunction with the foreign policy factors and statements made during the congress, do not provide hopeful signals for a possible opening, of any kind. This results in particularly difficult conditions for further economic development.

4.6 The Global Vaccination Campaign and the Dismantling of Restrictive Corona Prevention Measures

The country's leadership is aware that a Corona outbreak would have devastating consequences. In the case of an outbreak the current healthcare system would be overwhelmed to the point of collapse. The Corona prevention measures are thus a top priority, even though there has not been a single reported case of infection for well over a year into the pandemic. During the late summer of 2020, there was another increase in restrictions. Until then, there was still some movement of goods through minimal border traffic on China's border, but this too stopped entirely. There are reports that captured smugglers were publicly executed or sent to labor camps to serve as a deterrent and warning.⁴¹ However, as always, this is also difficult to verify or quantify. Additionally, there is mounting news that shelves in Pyongyang's retail stores are empty. Due to concerns about how imports could release Corona into the country, even aid shipments have been left to sit unopened in the ports for a long time. There have even been fears about the virus being brought into the country via birds, snow, or yellow dust carried by strong winds.⁴² Under such circumstances, it is highly unlikely that North Korea will allow contact from the outside world before there is a significant reduction in the number of cases worldwide.

In the beginning of March, North Korea announced that it decided on an "import-disinfection law"⁴³. The effects of its implementation are yet to be known. Hopefully, the clarity of the legislative basis will at least allow the most important goods to quickly enter the country and thereby prevent further deterioration of the economy and supply situation. Yet, even if the bare necessities were to speedily enter the country, this would be but a small step towards a normalcy that is already challenging enough. There is, however, a glimmer of hope. Improving sanctions exemptions is on the political agenda in the United States. The proposed bill, called the Enhancing North Korea Humanitarian Assistance Act, aims to reinforce humanitarian exemptions and reduce the negative effects on the civilian population. If North Korea were to open up even a little to the outside world, there could be an improvement here at least in the medium term.

Most of the embassies have been closed for many months, and the ones that remained open have significantly reduced personnel. The situation is similar for international and foreign aid organizations. The World Food Program (WFP) which coordinates the most important aid deliveries in the

country, expressed concerns in February about the possibility of having to completely stop their work in 2021 because of how COVID-19 restrictions are making work impossible. When the WFP and other foreign aid organizations can return to the country remains uncertain. On one hand, these organizations bring essential goods into the country, but on the other hand, the North Korean security apparatus wants to limit foreign influence as much as possible. Whether the same number of embassies and aid organizations from pre-COVID-19 times will be allowed into the country after the end of the pandemic, remains to be seen.

4.7 America's Asia Policy and Japan-Korea Relations

The new U.S. government highly values good relationships with America's allies. This is sorely needed after years of ex-President Trump pressuring its ally, South Korea with completely excessive and irrational monetary demands for the deployment of U.S. troops. After Joe Biden took office, it took just a few weeks for the U.S. and South Korea to announce that they reached an agreement on how to share the financial burden for the deployment of 28,500 U.S. troops. This was in early March 2021. In order to have a more coordinated and effective approach towards China, the Obama administration invested a lot of time and resources into bringing its alliance partners, Japan and Korea together. Tensions between the two countries always complicated America's East Asia policies. During the Obama era, the two countries made several agreements and promises to cooperate, but the following Trump administration was careless towards this already fragile partnership. Without pressure from Washington, unresolved conflicts between Japan and Korea quickly resurfaced, and relations are now in a considerably bad state.

This is also relevant to solving the North Korea conflict. South Korea needs and wants to continue its close alliance with the US, since it guarantees protection from the threat of other great powers and is necessary for finding a solution to the North Korea problem.

In all likelihood, however, the new U.S. administration will demand rapprochement from South Korea and Japan, partly in return for greater leniency towards South Korea's policy of rapprochement with North Korea. This poses a challenge because Japan and South Korea do not get along very well. The Japanese government is repeatedly subject to scrutiny for its historically revisionist statements. Compared to Germany, the country has for years been more hesitant to own the historical guilt it incurred in the first half of the 20th century. The process of coming to terms with colonial and

war crimes, from which Korea suffered in particular, is still inadequate today. In South Korea, the aversion to the former colonial power Japan is therefore widespread to this day, and it does not take much for anti-Japanese resentment to boil up in South Korea.⁴⁴ Some South Korean politicians also repeatedly use this resentment for their own political purposes, fuelling the contempt for Japan.



U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken and South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong, March 17, 2021.

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The current Secretary of State, Blinken, and many senior foreign policy officials in the Biden administration have been involved in the efforts to bring Japan and Korea together at the time of the Obama administration. In South Korea, as in Japan, the Trump years have shaken confidence in U.S. reliability. There is some need for repair. As for the present moment, memories of the egotistical Trump, who neither respected alliances nor the art of diplomacy, is still too fresh. Basic trust in the United States has been damaged and, accordingly, there is currently less motivation in Korea and Japan than there was under Obama to come together under the umbrella of a U.S. East Asia policy. The U.S. wants to include Korea and Japan in the major conflict with China, but Korea in particular does not want to be dragged under the wheels of this conflict. South Korea has complex economic ties with China, so it will think very carefully about how deeply it wants to be drawn into a conflict of any kind.

There lies ahead for all players, a lot of diplomatic work in rebuilding basic trust and bringing together the interests of all three countries. Without a fundamentally intact relationship between the U.S. and South Korea, the problems surrounding the northern part of the peninsula will not be resolved.

5. Outlook – Where Do We Go From Here?

It is complicated - has been for more than 70 years - and will remain so in the future. At present, the imagination is completely overwhelmed by the question of how to reconcile the aforementioned areas of tension in order to find a diplomatic solution.

North Korea has made it clear during the party congress and the subsequent committee meetings, that no new road to transparency and economic or social liberalization was being paved. In contrast: The already tiny sphere of freedom that exists outside of the state's rigidity is continuously shrinking. The decisions and signals are clear: The party's leadership will be further amplified, and even less room will be given to natural individual creativity in economic matters.

The leadership's distrust of its own people is complemented by a deep conviction that only the state can fix things. The failure of the last five-year plan paradoxically reinforced this attitude. North Korea will secure its spot as last in the economic freedom index.⁴⁵ However, the renewed commitment to a five-year plan also increases the pressure to succeed. A stronger role for the party in economic life as a whole will also mean that party cadres will be held accountable more often if they fail to achieve their goals. It is extremely unlikely that this will include a critical review of the reasonableness of the chosen strategy and the economic development measures applied.

The nuclear and missile system, an army equipped with modern technology, and the expansion of the entire security sector is at the top of their priority list. A major goal remains: being accepted by the U.S. as a nuclear power or at least being tolerated as one. Although the scope and real operational capability of the North Korean weapon system is difficult to assess from afar, the previous nuclear and missile tests suggest that North Korea should be considered a nuclear power. To anyone outside of the DPRK, this is difficult to accept. Accepting North Korea's nuclear status has significant implications for other countries with nuclear capabilities such as Iran. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a global agreement which was negotiated with great effort, could thereby become obsolete. To not only have to see but also acknowledge the reality of a nuclear power would therefore have far-reaching consequences that go beyond East Asia.

The most recent military parades displayed a number of new weapons systems, and the weapons development plans that were unveiled at the congress envision acquisitions on a larger scale. Currently, preventing a Corona breakout is at the center of North Korean policy. However, ballistic missile testing resumed in mid-march. Should testing continue, the window for diplomacy will continue to shrink.

Some observers harbor the hope that once North Korea has achieved its main goal of recognition as a nuclear power, it

will refrain from provocations and allow more cooperation in other areas. In this way, trust could be built up in the medium to long term, the risk of a military confrontation could be reduced, and the living conditions of the population could also be improved. The basis of such scenarios would be to at least accept the existing status quo and to freeze the further expansion of the nuclear program and allow arms controls.

Official transparency and diverse cooperation would then weaken China's dominating influence on North Korea, since there are more players involved. That China would idly watch such a development is however, unlikely.

So, under President Biden, is there the possibility of a realistic and pragmatic policy approach in this direction? Is that even something to strive for? The risk would remain great, and there is by no means any guarantee of success. It will first have to be clarified whether the U.S. will take note of or ignore the "elephant in the room," North Korea as a nuclear power. From there on, negotiation and policy goals will be defined. However, current conditions are not good enough to yield a functioning negotiation. During the four years of the Trump administration, they did not even manage to reach a common understanding of what they actually wanted to negotiate about and did not agree on a definition of denuclearization. This also suggests, at least theoretically, the possibility of a completely new beginning.

Shortly after President Biden took office, the Department of State attempted to revive diplomatic communication with North Korea, which had died out a year ago. Reuters reported in mid-March 2021 that Pyongyang had left unanswered all attempts at contact made through various channels.⁴⁶ In its first public statements, North Korea has pointed out extremely brusquely that it expects a new approach and will not accept any demands for "complete denuclearization". What this "new approach" should consist of remains unclear for the time being. North Korea is demanding that the United States make concessions even before talks begin. The road back to diplomacy will be long. In the spring of 2021, the Biden administration is still reviewing the possible options and scenarios. According to administration officials, however, the "North Korea Policy Review" should be completed within the next few weeks.

During and after U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin's East Asia trip in mid-march 2021, there was no contact between North Korea and the U.S. However, Pyongyang broke the silence the following week with two weapons tests which was the first notable provocation since Biden took office. The second test almost certainly involved ballistic missiles which would be a violation of UN resolutions. With these tests taking place in the wake of the U.S.-South Korea spring exercises, the North clearly showed that it had no intentions to engage in dialogue or work towards disarmament. At the party congress, Kim

announced a large list of weapons developments for which the necessary tests are soon to follow. The choice of test objects and the reaction of the Americans were equally well-balanced and at least did not immediately change the situation for the worse. But if this marks the beginning of a series of missile tests, chances for diplomacy will shrink.

Through the East Asia trip and in talks with their Chinese counterparts, Blinken and Austin made it clear that they are hoping to reinvigorate relations with the two democracies and security partners, South Korea and Japan. For North Korea, this could mean not only being demoted in the priority list, but also making it more difficult to set the agenda unilaterally. It seems that the new U.S. administration wants to dedicate itself to representing liberal values, emphasizing human rights, and promoting democracy. Having to live up to such an image, it will be more difficult to ignore certain conditions in negotiations with North Korea. In contrast to the previous administration, the new U.S. Secretary of State very clearly addresses the issue of human rights in North Korea. North Korea usually reacts very sensitively to accusations of human rights violations, and it would not be unusual for it to take this as a reason to withdraw from negotiations.

The new U.S. administration repeatedly emphasizes that it wants to involve its allies more in decision-making processes: South Korea's left-wing progressive government would certainly welcome a more cooperative approach and has also shown much willingness in recent years to leave out the more problematic issues and make concessions. Japan would certainly have grave concerns with a strategy that would recognize North Korea as a nuclear power. A clear emphasis on "denuclearization of North Korea" and the issue of "human rights" will definitely be welcomed on the Japanese side. The U.S. must consider and bring together the views of these two countries in the complex security structure of Asia: No easy task.

However, the North Korea question is just one part of the larger U.S. – China power struggle in Asia. The so-called "Quad," which consists of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia is repeatedly mentioned as a force against the threat of China. There has already been a virtual meeting between the four leaders who made a joint commit to a free Indo-Pacific and increased cooperation among like-minded states.⁴⁷ Groups like the Quad+ and, the inclusion of further states are being discussed. South Korea is currently keeping a low profile because its relationship with China is close and complex. The government will think carefully about which disadvantages of straining the relationship with China are acceptable and which must be avoided at all costs.

After 30 years of failed North Korea policies, it would make sense to at least think about a completely different approach. For example, one that first accepts the nuclear realities and adapts the strategy accordingly. Cooperation with China in this area seems too far-fetched for the time being. Left with this as a starting point, the new U.S. administration will have to devise a realistic strategy. Depending on whatever is advantageous, North Korea will opportunely fluctuate in its degree of protests against U.S.-South Korean military exercises, accusations of human rights crimes, and other issues.

Depending on how the factors above shift and change, either new tension or room for diplomacy will emerge. Domestically, the country appears to be fortified. The borders remain hermetically sealed for the time being. Regarding foreign policy, there are no attempts at signalling peace. In the spring of 2021, there is little hope that the situation will change for the better and that significant progress will be possible. But if history can tell us one thing, it is that one must remain very cautious with predictions about North Korea and should always expect the unexpected.

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