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**ROUNDTABLE**

# ***Division, Unification and Peace - 30 Years German Unification and 70 Years Korean War<sup>1</sup>***

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**Abstract**

*In this article, Young-kwan Yoon, former Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea, and former director of the Korea Peace Institute discusses the current challenges and prospects for the inter-Korean relationship, the possible effect of the US presidential election and the future of US-ROK and EU-ROK relations.*

**Introduction**

It is my great pleasure to participate in this very meaningful conference and I thank you for inviting me. I am also glad to have the opportunity to meet and exchange views with Ambassador Norbert Baas<sup>2</sup> and Professor Michael Staack and with the audience. I would also like to congratulate on the inauguration of the Korea Europe Center and commend Professor Eun-Jeung Lee for her devotion and her passion in fostering a relationship of mutual understanding between Germany and Korea. I also wish to take this opportunity to express my respect and sincere gratitude to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder<sup>3</sup> and Mrs. Schröder. They have been doing an excellent job in strengthening the Korea-German relationship quietly and effectively during the recent few years and thereby deepened and enlightened Korean people's understanding of Germany and Europe.

**A Global Leadership Vacuum**

If someone were to ask me what is the characteristic feature of the current period in international history, I would describe this period as the beginning of an era of international leadership vacuum. China, as a rising power, is not ready to take up the role of an international leader. China has been preoccupied with concerns of their country's national interest rather than been trying to contribute to the provision of international public goods. The United States, on the other hand, their will and capability to exercise leadership have become shaky as we all noticed in recent years, especially so during the last four years. As a result, there is currently an international leadership vacuum and a lack of provision of international public goods. The liberal and rule-based international order seem to be receding and I think that the coalitions and common efforts among the next tier – the middle powers – are becoming ever more essential.

Korea and Europe share common goals in regard to maintaining the liberal and the rule-based international order and this is why, I believe, the work of the

1. This text is an edited version of a lecture given at the 2020 Berlin Forum on Korea: "Securing a Safer Tomorrow – Challenges for the EU and North East Asia" hosted by the Korea Europe Center (KEC), Berlin, on 17 November 2020.

2. Norbert Baas served as the ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Georgia from 1995-1998, to Russia from 2003-2006, to South Korea from 2006-2009 and, from 2009-2012, as ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia, to the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta.

3. Gerhard Schröder was the seventh Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. He served from 27 October 1998 – 22 November 2005.

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4. International Monetary Fund (IMF): World Economic Outlook Update: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery, June 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>.

5. The United States Forces Korea (USFK) is a sub-unified command of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (UNINDOPACOM) numbering 28,500 troops, the majority of which, including the United Nations Command (UNC), are currently stationed at Camp Humphreys, Pyeongtaek, South Korea. At the time, US commentators assumed that a withdrawal of US troops from South Korea would occur as part of a larger diplomatic settlement with the North Korean leadership. See, for example, Clint Work: How to Constructively and Safely Reduce and Realign US Forces on the Korean Peninsula, 38 North, 25 August 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/08/cwork082520/>.

6. The Democratic Party of Korea was formed in March 2014 by the merging of the Democratic Party led by Kim Han-gil with the preparatory committee of the New Political Vision Party (NPVP) led by Ahn Cheol-soo.

*Korea Europe Center* is so meaningful and important. It will help to deepen the cooperative relationship between Korea and Europe in the future. It will also provide both Korea and Europe with an important platform for scholars as well as practitioners in order to strengthen mutual cooperation in the future.

As we all know the year 2020 was a very difficult year for South Koreans as for people in many other parts of the world. The reasons for this are, of course, directly related to the impact of the Covid19-pandemic. I believe that the Korean government has been dealing relatively well with this pandemic, but the economic backlash caused by this pandemic is serious even in this country. The South Korean government, just as many observers, are worried about the worsening economic situation of workers employed in small and medium-sized enterprises and of those unemployed or workers in the volatile service sectors such as quick deliveries etc. How to help those effected by the pandemic to survive currently remains one of the most urgent objectives on the agenda of the Korean government. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expected that Korea's economic growth rate this year would be -1.9 percent,<sup>4</sup> which, relatively speaking, is still much better than the growth projections for other countries with growth rates, for example, for the EuroArea being estimated at -10.2 percent and that of Germany at -7.8 percent. In Korea it is, however, still hurting people who find themselves in a difficult situation, whether because of the layoffs or because of a reduction of job opportunities, from the latter of which especially the younger generation is suffering at this time.

A second issue currently being debated by South Koreans is the election of Joe Biden as the next US president and the impact it is likely to have on the Korean peninsula and East Asia more generally. Most Koreans seem to be relieved by the election results, mainly because there is the expectation that President Trump's somewhat unique view on US foreign policy and his obvious disdain for multilateralism and the importance of forging alliances will not be continued by the future Biden administration. Trump, during his term, did not seem to attach great value to long-established alliances and mutual relationships between the United States and its partners, whether in the United Nations, in Europe or in East Asia. His actions seemingly followed a kind of unilateral rationale and he frequently also mentioned that he wanted to withdraw US troops stationed in South Korea sometime in the future.<sup>5</sup> As a result, there were some concerns regarding President Trump's agenda in that area once he would be reelected for a second term. Generally speaking, I believe, both governments could discuss the possibility of reducing the size of US troops stationed in South Korea, provided that a permanent institutional mechanism for securing peace on the Korean peninsula has already been established. President elect Biden's policy toward the international community and US presence on the Korean peninsula, on the other hand, seems to be markedly contrasting to that of President Trump. President elect Biden values alliance relationship and he has already emphasized the importance of commonly shared values and principles such as democracy, freedom, human rights for US foreign policy and the United States' engagement with the world. In that regard, and in terms of alliance relationship, I believe that many South Koreans felt relieved and viewed the election of Joe Biden as a positive and reassuring event.

In Korean domestic politics, National Assembly elections were held on April 15, 2020 in the midst of the pandemic crisis. They resulted in a landslide victory for the ruling centre-liberal *Democratic Party* of President Moon Jae-in.<sup>6</sup> It gained 163 out of a total of 300 seats, the highest number won by any party since

7. On 7 April 2021, by-elections were held in South Korea selecting 21 public offices and municipal council constituencies districts, including the Metropolitan mayors for Seoul and Busan, the largest and second-largest city in South Korea. In these elections the conservative People Power Party (formerly known as the United Future Party) gained considerable ground, winning 15 out of 21 elections including both, the Seoul and Busan mayoral by-elections.

8. The Kaesŏng Industrial Complex is located in a special administrative economic zone on North Korean territory, some ten kilometres north of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. It was developed by Hyundai Asan and the Korea Land Corp in a joint venture with the North Korean government, opening in December 2004. At the time operations of South Korean firms in Kaesŏng Industrial Complex were suspended by the South Korean government in 2016, some 124 South Korean firms were operating there, employing approximately 54,000 North Korean workers. The inter-Korean liaison office was opened on 14 September 2018 in order to facilitate communication between the two countries. See for example, In Seong Kim and Hyun Koo Cho: Shutting Down the Kaesong Industrial Complex: A “Coalitional Bargaining” Framework. In: *Asian Politics & Policy (APP)*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 2019), pp. 80–103; and International Crisis Group: *The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties*, Asia Report N°300 (24 June 2019), [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/300-the-case-for-kaesong\\_0.pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/300-the-case-for-kaesong_0.pdf)

9. Yonhap News Agency: N. Korea blows up joint liaison office in Kaesong, June 16, 2020, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200616008258325>; Justin Mc Curry (and agencies in Seoul): North Korea Apologises for ‘Unfortunate’ Killing of South Korean Official. In: *The Guardian*, 25 Sept 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/25/north-korea-apologises-for-unfortunate-killing-of-south-korean-official>.

10. For a more detailed recent explanation refer to Yoon, Young-kwan: In Defense of a bold U.S. Approach toward North Korea. In: *The National Interest*, 22 Oct, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/defense-bold-us-approach-toward-north-korea-195401>

1960. Together with its satellite, the *Platform Party*, it won a landslide victory, taking 60 percent of seats between them while the conservative *United Future Party* won 84 seats. Many specialists of the Korean electoral system think that the ruling party strongly benefited from the government’s relatively efficient handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Next April,<sup>7</sup> a by-election selecting mayors and municipal council members throughout the country will take place. The results of these elections are widely regarded as being a very important indicator of the trend of public opinion in the run-up to next presidential election in March 2022.

### The Future of Inter-Korean Relations

Since the failure of the negotiation on denuclearization at the Hanoi Summit during February 27–28, 2019, inter-Korean relations have considerably soured. A situation that has been accompanied by unfortunate incidents further escalated tensions between the two countries. These incidents included, for example, the blasting of the North-South joint liaison office building located in the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex<sup>8</sup> by North Korea in June 2020 and the killing of a South Korean official in the West Sea by North Korean soldiers later that year.<sup>9</sup> Despite the South Korean government’s efforts to improve inter-Korean relations, I believe that this frosty atmosphere between the two Koreas is likely to continue for some time in the future.

A second issue directly linked to the prospects for inter-Korean accord concerns the re-opening of negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation and the denuclearization of North Korea. President Trump adopted top-to-bottom approach during his term and he personally met with Chairman Kim Jong-Un three times. I think, that this initially had some positive effects in the sense that it improved the political atmosphere between North Korea and the United States and the hope was that this would also facilitate the negotiation process on denuclearization. However, these high-level talks did not yield any results in terms of denuclearization mainly because, as I believe, President Trump and his team of negotiators were not willing to depart from the traditional American approach of demanding that North Korea denuclearize upfront. They argued that North Korea should denuclearize first and, in a second step, the United States would consider rewards, for example agreeing to lift international sanctions. In my personal view, this kind of approach cannot work, mainly because of the very low level of trust between the United States and North Korea. However, the North Korean side was also responsible for the failure of the Hanoi talks. It demanded the lifting of almost the entire economic sanctions in exchange for the partial denuclearization of their Yŏngbyŏn nuclear facility. This was too disproportional a demand to be met.

I tend to think that there is a sort of security dilemma embedded in the nature of the North Korean non-proliferation file.<sup>10</sup> To put more generally, when country *A* feels insecure or threatened and therefore aims to strengthen its defensive capabilities, for example by increasing its defense budget, its neighboring country *B* may interpret this increase in defense spending as a hostile act rather than one following a defensive, non-escalatory rationale. So, there is always a risk of escalating tensions into open hostilities, even by a mere defensive rationale.

During the early 1990s, North Korea was experiencing a very dire situation in terms of near economic collapse and rapidly increasing diplomatic isolation as direct result of the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc and the transformation into liberal-democratic market economies of the former socialist countries. As a result, the North Korean leadership felt very insecure and Kim Il-Sung sought to reach out and normalize the DPRK’s relationship with the United States. At the

11. The reference is to the so-called 2017–2018 North Korea crisis, a period of heightened DPRK-US tensions. It included a series of North Korean ballistic missile and nuclear tests, for example the first Hwasong-14 mobile intercontinental ballistic missile test on 4 July 2017, the date of the yearly federal holiday commemorating the US Declaration of Independence that same day in 1776.<sup>12</sup> On the ROK's New Southern Policy see Werner Pascha's contribution in this issue.

12. Noa Ronkin: U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun Delivers First Public Address on U.S.-DPRK Diplomacy at a Shorenstein APARC Event, FSI News, 31 January 2019, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/us-special-envoy-north-korea-stephen-biegun-delivers-first-public-address-us-dprk-diplomacy>.

time, however, both the United States and the South Korean government declined that offer with dire results for both, the North Korean population and the prospects of peace and change through rapprochement. In terms of the North Korean leadership, this has certainly been a key event for the formulation of their foreign policy agenda which, I believe, casts its shadow to this day. I therefore think that although we do need to sanction North Korea for the pursuit of their nuclear program on the one hand, the international community, at the same time, needs to try much harder to engage the North Korean leadership in political dialogue. I believe, the remedy to such security dilemma and the way to securing peace on the Korean peninsula in the long term can only lie in building trust between all parties involved. This is also the reason why I support the idea of formally declaring an end to the Korean War because this is one step among many well-suited to increasing security guarantees to North Korea. I would be confident that this aspect will not be disregarded by the future Biden administration's foreign policy in coming years. I am, however, concerned that President elect Biden may sideline the North Korea file for the time being because he will prioritize many more urgent domestic issues facing the United States at this point in time. I fear that in this case, there is a very real danger of reverting to a very dangerous and difficult situation comparable to the one we were facing in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

I believe most South Koreans do not want to live through a situation of heightened confrontation with North Korea. They vividly recall the crisis situation in 2017 and, at the time, were very aware of the real danger of war it entailed. I therefore think that the majority of South Koreans desire some kind of normalization of inter-Korean relationship in one way or another. They also want the South Korean government to promote inter-Korean cooperation. Of course, the South Korean government has to respect the international economic sanction against the DPRK. It cannot and should not unilaterally defect from international coalition and undermine the sanctioning of North Korea for continuing to pursue its nuclear program. South Korea thus faced a dilemma in this respect and I have personally argued for a change of focus to medical and public health issues as well as on environmental concerns as far as future cooperation with North Korea is concerned. Since due to the economic sanctions, cooperation in the economic area is currently impossible, I would hope that the South Korean government will pursue cooperation with North Korea on public health and environmental issues and try to embed such initiatives in a kind of multilateral mechanism. This is also because North Korea has tended to join multilateral cooperative mechanisms in one way or another in the past. I would, therefore, like to see the South Korean government mobilize its political capital in order to try and persuade Chairman Kim Jong-Un and, at the same time, the US administration of the urgency of dealing with North Korean nuclear issue. This is a formidable task and I have no illusions as to the difficulty and the patience that it will require.

### **South Korea's geopolitical dilemma**

In general, we need to be realistic in that regard and I therefore welcome the remarks of U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun that the US would pursue denuclearization "simultaneous and in parallel" with North Korea.<sup>12</sup> However, I think that this kind of policy or strategic shift will not be easy because of the strong opposition it faces from the hardliners. I also believe that President elect Biden will adopt a bottom-up approach and hope that he will be sympathetic and open to continue dialogue with Chairman Kim Jong-Un. This also pertains to the question of the future shape of US-South Korea relations. I

13. On the ROK's New Southern Policy see Werner Pascha's contribution in this issue.

believe that it is time for the US and the ROK to begin in-depth discussion about the future of their alliance in all sincerity. The bilateral alliance between the two countries was established seven decades ago and, particularly within the last decade or two, the situation in East Asia, the Asia-Pacific but also internationally has changed dramatically. I think this situation calls for a reset or update concerning the terms of our mutual alliance in order to adapt it to the challenges it faces in the current situation. Most importantly perhaps, the US and South Korea will need to establish a common vision about the future of the Korean Peninsula. I suspect that there are some areas where both countries are currently favoring differing scenarios, especially so regarding the long-term future of the Korean peninsula. In order to achieve a common vision, the US and South Korea will have to agree on the general concept of their alliance. One of the key issues for both countries in that regard is the question of how security guarantees to the North Korean leadership can be provided, without which the denuclearization process will not be moving forward in my view. I believe that such security guarantees as well as economic assistance should be provided to the North Korean people in return for, eventually, the cessation of the whole nuclear program. The obvious problem for South Korea is the question of what kind of security guarantee we will be able to provide to the North Korean leadership without weakening the US-ROK alliance. Of course, North Korea may demand the withdrawal of all US troops from South Korean territory, but in a number of past instances, their leaders have signaled to South Korean negotiator that they would not be principally opposed to continued US military presence in South Korea.

The negotiation process itself will probably be delayed for some time to come but there is a clear advantage in President elect Biden's favorable attitude toward international alliances and multilateralism. And this is, I believe, also recognized by the South Korean people. It will, I believe, prove much more effective an approach for the future.

There is also a rather unique geopolitical dilemma for South Korea in terms of military confrontation which I hope our ally, the United States, will be mindful of it. What I mean is that South Korea as a middle power is wedged between the United States and China and the United States should avoid pushing South Korea into a situation where it would be forced to choose between the United States or China, economically as well as in terms of military confrontation. I think there is room for South Korea's cooperation with both of these great powers. The South Korean government has also expressed their willingness to intensify cooperation with ASEAN but also – via the government's *New Southern Policy*<sup>13</sup> – with the Indo-Pacific.

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### **Notes on contributor**

Young-kwan Yoon was the 32nd Foreign Minister of South Korea and former director of the Korea Peace Institute. An eminent academic and acclaimed writer,

he is currently professor emeritus at Seoul National University, where he also served as the director of the Institute of International Affairs. Yoon published widely on topics in international political economy, Korean foreign policy, and inter-Korean relations.

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