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The Korean Peninsula in a Global Context: Security, Culture, and Transnational Perspectives

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EDITORIAL

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EDITORIAL

BONGCHUL KIM

This special issue presents seven articles on the Korean Peninsula and its broader international dimensions. Although the contributions differ in theme and approach, they are united by a shared concern with how Korean questions are shaped by wider developments in contemporary world politics, public discourse, and transnational exchange.

The order of the articles follows a deliberate editorial logic. The issue begins with immediate questions of security and strategy on the Korean Peninsula, then moves to changes in public security perceptions, and subsequently broadens toward external diplomatic, comparative, and cultural perspectives. It closes with a contribution that addresses the longer-term political future of Korea through the question of reunification. This progression is intended to give the volume coherence across otherwise diverse themes.

Michael Reiterer's "North Korea: Back to the Future is no solution" opens the issue by reconsidering established approaches to North Korea. Sungwah Ko's "Alliance Dilemmas under the Trump Administration: Abandonment, Entrapment, and South Korea's Strategic Choices" examines South Korea's strategic choices under alliance uncertainty. Hayann Lee's "From Solidarity to Survival: An Analysis of the Transition of Security Perceptions in the Korean Digital Public Sphere during the Ukraine War Using KoBERT" traces changing perceptions of security in Korea's digital public sphere during the Ukraine War.

The issue then turns to wider comparative and transnational questions. Euichan Shin's "The UK's Reset Diplomacy towards the EU: Implications for Peace on the Korean Peninsula in the Era of Polycrisis" considers the relevance of European diplomatic change for the Korean Peninsula. Jieun Kim's "Cultural Iberism and its Applicability to the Korean Peninsula" offers a comparative perspective on historical imagination. Jai-Ung Hong's "Scandinavian Literature in Korea: Infrastructural Alignment, Translation, and Cultural Mediation" explores the role of translation in Korea's cultural connections beyond the peninsula.

The final article, Jongho Park's "Yes, Reunification by Absorption Would Be a Catastrophe for Korea," concludes the special issue by raising a fundamental question about the political and institutional consequences of a future Korean settlement. Finally, the articles



show the diversity of perspectives through which the Korean Peninsula can be examined today. Written primarily by Korea-based researchers, together with Michael Reiterer, former Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Korea, the collection reflects both local scholarly engagement and broader international relevance.

NORTH KOREA: BACK TO THE FUTURE IS NO SOLUTION

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Abstract

Recalling the 75th anniversary of the Korean War and its implications for global security, the paper contrasts the peaceful international relations within the EU with the reliance on military force in East Asia. Based on the comprehensive relationship between South Korea and the EU, security cooperation has increased also in terms of hardware (arms sales). It could be intensified to meet the challenges posed for securing supply chains and global trade policy. The paper addresses the geopolitical dynamics involving North Korea, Russia, and China, analysing the impact of these new strategic alliances and military cooperation that have emerged. While denuclearisation should remain the long-term goal, there is a need to rethink of traditional policies towards North Korea, considering technological advances, lessening of legal constraints, upending of the goal of unification by the North and the negative examples of powers having abandoned nuclear arms. 'Back to the Future' in applying traditional tools and instruments is no longer an option – neither for South Korea, nor the European Union. "Forward to the Past", learning from history but adapting those lessons to new realities rather than simply repeating old patterns, must be the new direction. To preserve some influence outside the US-China-Russia triangle and in recognition that there is only one security, the EU needs to strengthen its engagement in East Asia, based on its comprehensive security approach. This could include nominating an EU Special Representative for Northeast Asia to contribute to trust building, reopening of lines of communication and bring diplomacy back to prevent the flareup of another hot spot.

Keywords

Korean Peninsula, European Union, resilience, strategic cooperation, might-is-right.



Resumo

Recordando o 75.º aniversário da Guerra da Coreia e as suas implicações para a segurança global, o artigo contrasta as relações internacionais pacíficas no seio da UE com a dependência da força militar na Ásia Oriental. Com base nas relações abrangentes entre a Coreia do Sul e a UE, a cooperação em matéria de segurança tem vindo a aumentar também no que diz respeito ao equipamento militar (venda de armas). Esta cooperação poderia ser intensificada para responder aos desafios colocados pela segurança das cadeias de abastecimento e pela política comercial global. O artigo aborda a dinâmica geopolítica envolvendo a Coreia do Norte, a Rússia e a China, analisando o impacto destas novas alianças estratégicas e da cooperação militar que surgiram. Embora a desnuclearização deva continuar a ser o objetivo a longo prazo, é necessário repensar as políticas tradicionais em relação à Coreia do Norte, tendo em conta os avanços tecnológicos, a diminuição das restrições legais, a reviravolta no objetivo de unificação por parte do Norte e os exemplos negativos de potências que abandonaram as armas nucleares. «Regressar ao Futuro» na aplicação de ferramentas e instrumentos tradicionais já não é uma opção — nem para a Coreia do Sul, nem para a União Europeia. «Avançar para o Passado», aprendendo com a história mas adaptando essas lições às novas realidades, em vez de simplesmente repetir velhos padrões, deve ser a nova direção. Para preservar alguma influência fora do triângulo EUA-China-Rússia e reconhecendo que existe apenas uma segurança, a UE precisa de reforçar o seu envolvimento na Ásia Oriental, com base na sua abordagem abrangente em matéria de segurança. Isto poderia incluir a nomeação de um Representante Especial da UE para a Ásia Nordeste, a fim de contribuir para a construção de confiança, a reabertura de canais de comunicação e o regresso da diplomacia para evitar o surto de outro foco de tensão.

Palavras-chave

Península Coreana, União Europeia, resiliência, cooperação estratégica, «o poder faz a razão».

How to cite this article

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NORTH KOREA: BACK TO THE FUTURE IS NO SOLUTION

MICHAEL REITERER

Introduction

The 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing security tensions in East Asia. The Korean Peninsula remains entangled in unresolved conflict (Taiwan, South and East China Sea, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan...) and global security challenges, exacerbated by new strategic alliances in the region.

The coincidence of this anniversary of the Korean War and that of the Schuman Declaration highlights the contrast between the peaceful system of international relations within the EU, albeit not in the whole of Europe – Ukraine - and the mistrust and reliance on military force that persist in East Asia. South Korea is technically still at war with North Korea, as is Japan with Russia because of the Kurile Islands (Northern Territories).

For South Korea, this conflict at its doorstep, requires full attention. This needs a foreign policy building international cooperation to control and solve this internationalised conflict. At the same time, the country must shoulder international responsibility as a major economy and as a technology provider.

The EU's engagement in East Asia must evolve to address these complexities through innovative diplomacy, comprehensive security approaches, and updated policy strategies.

The main conclusion this paper will develop is that it is necessary for the EU to adapt its critical engagement strategy towards North Korea and embrace innovative diplomacy to maintain or build some influence in Northeast Asia. By fostering deeper partnerships with South Korea and Japan and addressing North Korea's nuclear threat through deterrence and dialogue, the EU can contribute to regional stability and uphold the principles of a rules-based international order.

Considerable Change of the Geopolitical Context

As a sort of Cold War and tensions have persisted in Asia since the end of the Great Pacific War, recognition and standing as a global political player is still measured according to military and political parameters. Economics is crucial but not enough to be counted in as one of the big players – geo-economics is just one part of geo-politics, the



arms race has persisted, not least because of China's heavy investment in building a blue water navy.

COVID 19 brought some change: the importance of supply and production chains came to the fore. The weaponisation of trade and in particular the most beautiful word in the vocabulary of President Trump, "tariffs", moved trade policy back not only into the limelight but also the stone age. This unravelling of past achievements, in particular the WTO which had been set up to de-politicise trade policy and provide stability and predictability, leads to unseen disturbances and welfare losses for all. Populists are not aware, that in the long run, there is no protection in protectionism.

Like the Korean War which internationalised with the intervention of UN-forces under US leadership, the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine demonstrates to everybody that there is only one security: South Korea joined the group of countries condemning the flagrant breach of the Charta of the United Nations by Russia and applies sanctions. It also started to backfill arms for Ukraine through sales of weapons to Poland and the US. South Korea also started to backfill arms for Ukraine through sales of weapons to Poland and the US. Thus, on the Ukrainian battlefields South Korean weapons meet North Korean soldiers and arms.

A continuation of past policies, more of the same, will neither preserve the status quo, which is not desirable anyhow, nor bring the problem closer to a solution. Thus, while denuclearisation remains the global long-term goal, it is unlikely that North Korea will give up its nuclear arsenal any time soon as it guarantees regime survival. The recent attack of Iran by Israel, supported by the US by attacks on Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan with "bunker buster" bombs (GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator - MOP) will harden this conviction: Ghaddafi in Libya, Hussein in Iraq and Ukraine renounced nuclear weapons and paid a heavy price. In short, "Back to the Future" would mean more tension and turmoil ahead.

And the winner is: North Korea

North Korea has improved its position in gaining more options: it has added Russia as a balancer to the rocky relationship with its long-time-only supporter, China. The 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed by Putin and Kim Jong-un Un provides for "military and other assistance" in case of an armed attack. This amounts to an alliance and could turn what was often regarded as technicality or left-over from the Korean War – there is only an armistice between the two Koreas and no peace treaty - into a serious issue: According to Russian propaganda, Russia is under attack by NATO and must defend itself. Therefore, North Korea is providing assistance in sending troops and not only weapons. According to the same logic, North Korea could claim Russian support against South Korea with which it is technically still at war!

North Korean soldiers on European soil are a serious escalation and could involve an Asian state in a conflict with NATO, should Putin decide in the future to attack a NATO member. This alliance will embolden North Korea's Kim Jong-un as he finally gets out of the unilateral dependence on China and now has Russia as a hedging partner vis-à-vis China. At the same time and different from 2018, Kim Jong-un will also be less keen to



restart his bromance with Donald Trump; he also refuses the persistent overtures of President Lee Jae-myung to recalibrate the relationship after the hawkish President Yoon and open lines of bilateral communication.

While Russia attempted extending this trilateral China-Russia-North Korea to Iran, hostilities between Israel and Iran as well US attacks on Iran have devalued this extension. The other supporters of Russia, who rejected in 2022 condemning the aggression against Ukraine in the United Nations, namely Belarus, Eritrea and Syria, are no material support.

Most importantly in the UN context, the veto of Russia to reconduct the UN Panel of Experts e.g., the committee monitoring sanctions, takes off some pressure from the North, as the replacement, the **Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT)**¹ carries less authority. The non-prolongation of the UN Panel, however, has NOT ended the sanctions which remain in place and therefore need to be implemented. The first report of the MSMT published on 29 May 2025, underscores this fact. It also calls for active diplomacy to restore the UN Panel – which grants more legitimacy – and invites the DPRK to engage diplomatically. The reporting focuses on the North Korea – Russia cooperation.²

Russia and North Korea are under heavy **sanctions**. In the case of North Korea, they have not realised the main goal, to stop the development of nuclear weapons and inter-ballistic missile systems. As a collateral damage, the North Korean people suffer from malnutrition, a miserable standard of living while the family dictatorship shields itself and its cronies from the effects of sanctions.

North Korea excels in making use of emerging technologies: cybercrime helps to fill the otherwise empty state pockets, facilitated using crypto currencies/bitcoins³ which are difficult to track. Chinese knowhow allows to maintain the Korean version of the Great Cyber Wall; Russian oil lubricates some industry and food deliveries prevent a large-scale famine. While the argument, without sanctions the situation would be worse holds some truth, a rethink of policies is necessary.

Geopolitically, all eyes are on Ukraine, Gaza, Taiwan, India-Pakistan, the South China Sea and the erratic policies of the Trump II administration. Trump's admiration for strong leaders, irrespective of their moral standards, opens even the perspective to tie in the old love affair and rekindle the Kim-Trump bromance, potentially with Putin as the Third Man. Old love does not rust, but the bromance Trump-Putin is deteriorating as the latter clearly plays the former. Recall the melt down between Donald Trump and Elon Musk!

President Trump will soon realise that the price for engaging with Kim Jun-un has gone up compared to seven years ago. Standing between Xi and Putin gives Kim re-assurance,

¹ Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, United States of America

² US Department of State (2025). Joint Statement of the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) on the First Report Covering DPRK-Russia Military Cooperation. 29 May 2025; at <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-multilateral-sanctions-monitoring-team-msmt-on-the-first-report-covering-dprk-russia-military-cooperation/>

³ Dan Goodin (2025). How North Korea pulled off a \$1.5 billion crypto heist—the biggest in history. Ars technica, 25 February 2025; at <https://arstechnica.com/security/2025/02/how-north-korea-pulled-off-a-1-5-billion-crypto-heist-the-biggest-in-history/>



the urge to talk with and be recognised by the US has diminished. Russian pays for deliveries either in cash or technological support for the nuclear and missiles programs; evidently cooperation is not tied to international law and any moral standards. North Korea did not respond positively to being left off the US travel ban list if the omission was meant to encourage future engagement⁴.

The 2025 National Security Strategy was strong in criticising Europe but short of even mentioning North Korea. The role assigned to Seoul is primarily to contribute to reducing US trade deficit and burden sharing in military and infrastructure investments. The 2026 US National Defence Strategy assigns South Korea the task to keep North Korea at bay and to invest correspondingly under the US 'extended deterrence'.

The European Union's robust partnership with the Republic of Korea is founded upon a shared acknowledgement of the strategic significance of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as well as sustained support for South Korean policies through a unique array of agreements and a strategic partnership. The European Union has persistently encouraged successive Korean administrations to advance diplomatic engagement, constructive dialogue, the peaceful resolution of disputes, non-proliferation initiatives, and the pursuit of denuclearization.

As for the South Korean governments' policy towards the North, whether progressive or conservative, Sheena Greitens concludes:

"Korean progressives emphasize economic and social rights in their stance toward the North and focus on improving the welfare of North Koreans through intergovernmental rapprochement with Pyongyang — a process that has often led them to constrain the role of civil society organizations and activists to keep political dialogue going. Conservatives treat consideration of civil and political rights as a precondition for discussions of unification. They are sceptical of the compromises necessary to achieve rapprochement with Pyongyang, and elevate the role of North Korean defectors, including those who openly call for political change to the Kim regime, rather than prioritizing intergovernmental contact"⁵.

President Lee's challenges

The new government of President Lee Jae-myung is expected to be more inclined to engage with the North than the Yoon Suk Yeol administration which advocated unification on South Korean terms as laid out in his last liberation day speech on 15 August 2024⁶.

Thus, a rethink of the traditional fixtures of South Korean policy, preventing war, achieving denuclearization, and laying the foundation for unification will be necessary.

⁴ Yonhap (2025). N. Korea says U.S. entry ban not a matter of interest over its omission from list. 10 June 2025; at <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250610002100315?section=nk/nk>

⁵ Sheena Chestnut Greitens (2025). How South Korea's Next Leader Should Handle Kim Jong-un. The Journal of Democracy, May 2025; at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-south-koreas-next-leader-should-handle-kim-jong-un/>

⁶ Yonhap (2024). Full text of Yoon's Liberation Day speech. 15 August 2024; at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240815002500315>



Kim Jong-un has abandoned the long-standing pet project of unification in a rather radical change of policy. He deviated from the policy lines of his father, Kim Jong-il, and -even more striking, his venerated grandfather, Kim Il-sung.

While it needs two to tango, to maintain the prospect for unification, the South will have to shoulder the brunt of the project to maintain the prospect of unification. While still official policy, there is a clear generational split in the South Korean society. The younger generation has no emotional attachment any longer and is therefore not willing to bear the heavy costs of what they perceive to be 'another' people. This is certainly an area where provincial governments, like Gyeonggi Province, which are prone to foster the people-to-people dimension can play an important supportive role.

Limited options for the incumbent president

President Lee Jae-myung intends to follow a "pragmatic diplomacy grounded in national interests", maintaining South Korea's alliance with the U.S. as the "foundation" of his envisioned foreign policy". This realpolitik will include "future-oriented relations with Japan"⁷ In his inaugural address which marked the transition from campaigner to president and therefore was more sensible than campaign speeches, he hinted at a balanced policy without giving any specifics: "With a defence budget twice that of North Korea, the world's fifth-ranked military, and the Korea-U.S. alliance, we will deter nuclear threats and military provocations while keeping open channels of dialogue to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula."

This is an interesting nuance, deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea, not China, unlike the US. President Lee moved quickly to improve atmospherics in reducing cross border irritations like blaring loudspeakers and exchange of balloons. While the latter make sense politically, this might infringe on the right of free speech and demonstration according to the Constitutional Court. Based on experience, trust and confidence building measures are welcome to reduce tensions, However, a policy based on reciprocity and snap-back measures if commitments are not honoured, will be more effective than one-sided open offers which can be interpreted as weakness.

President Lee put Japan into the trilateral context, "We will reinforce the Korea-U.S. alliance, strengthen trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and Japan and approach *relations* with neighboring countries through the lens of practicality and national interest."⁸ China was not mentioned specifically but is covered by "neighboring" countries – a classic hedging approach to bridge the gap between the largest trading partner, China, and the main security provider, the US, with which South Korea is locked into an alliance. The first personal encounter in the margins of the G7 of both leaders built a base. In pursuing pragmatically wants to pursue a 'two track' approach, e.g., separating historical disputes from forward looking cooperation⁹, President Lee made a historic stop-over in Tokyo on

⁷ Yonhap (2025). Lee's 'pragmatic diplomacy' vision put to test in U.S. alliance, regional power ties .4 June 2025; at <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250602009900315?section=national/diplomacy>

⁸ The Korea Times (2025). Lee Jae-myung's inaugural speech. 4 June 2025; at <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20250604/full-text-lee-jae-myungs-inaugural-speech>

⁹ Yonhap (2025). So close, yet so far: S. Korea-Japan ties at pivotal moment 60 yrs after normalization. 15 June 2025; at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250613006900315>



his way to the first summit with President Trump in Washington. Prime Minister Takaishi responded by inviting President Lee to visit her hometown, Nara, a city known for its historic connections to Korea. Together, the leaders pioneered an innovative diplomatic approach, "drum diplomacy," where they played drums along with K-Pop music rhythms.

Should the EU play the China card?

Because of the deteriorating situation between the US and China, China is starting a timid charm offensive, reaching out to the EU, Japan and South Korea while continuing to grant India a favourable treatment. President Xi needs to rekindle growth, needs alternative market access opportunities in the battle with President Trump; strategically Xi continues pursuing a goal he shares with Putin, to split the West, or whatever is left from this notion.

Utilising China's strong position as a market, raw material and technology provider as leverage is not the most effective strategy for the European Union. Nevertheless, given that the United States under President Trump has shifted from a stabilising influence to a potentially destabilising one by questioning established alliances, shared interests, and values, it is essential to acknowledge the geo-economic and political significance of China and incorporate this consideration into future policy development.

At the G7 President von der Leyen delivered a rather hawkish speech on the Global economic outlook, either as a warning when setting the scene for the July summit in Beijing or to renounce playing the China card: "China has largely shown that it unwillingness to live within the constraints of the rules based international system. While other opened their market China focused undercutting intellectual property protections, massive subsidies with the aim to dominate global manufacturing and supply chains. This is not market competition – it is distortion with intent. And it undermines our manufacturing sectors."¹⁰ She also identified China's insistence on its status as a developing country in the WTO as the "biggest collective problem". In September 2025 responded to this criticism. While it did not renounce its status, China announced it would no longer invoke special and differential treatment (S&DT) as a developing country in future WTO negotiations.

Given the economic interdependence with China, the EU has already ruled out decoupling from or isolating China. Without being blue-eyed the EU follows a policy of derisking which does not exclude sectoral cooperation, politically and economically. China has lifted bans on some members of the European Parliament which at the time caused the collapse of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CIA). While this Agreement is not re-instated immediately, there is clearly a Chinese interest for cooperation, not least to stabilise its own economy. President Xi will go to great lengths to prevent economic issues at home from causing discontent or political unrest. The negative repercussions of the trade and tariff war with the US are an incentive for China to work more closely with the EU. Therefore, trade negotiations are ongoing, China has also hinted to be forthcoming

¹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen (2025). Statement Session I of G7, Global economic outlook; 16 June 2025; at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_1521



on a deal to secure the supply of essential raw materials like rare earth¹¹; measures to improve market access for goods, services and investment to provide the famous level playing field and reduce the ballooning trade deficit need to follow. However, the profound differences concerning Chinese support for Russia including North Korean troops in Ukraine pose serious problems for cooperation which were not addressed at the EU-China Summit on July 24-25, 2025.

Among the key outcomes of this short summit in Brussels without President Xi was the extension of climate collaboration with China, encompassing initiatives such as clean energy development, methane emission reduction, and carbon market mechanisms. The relaxation of rare earth export restrictions represented a significant positive development for European businesses and is considered a strategic geopolitical decision by China, distinguishing its approach to the EU from that to the United States.

On other issues, neither side is wearing rose-tinted glasses. Commission President von der Leyen emphasized that bilateral ties were at an “inflection point” and called on both sides to “come forward with real solutions.” Meanwhile, according to the official Chinese readout, President Xi Jinping (习近平) urged the EU to avoid “restrictive economic and trade measures” and to keep its markets open. He also called for joint support of multilateralism and opposition to “unilateralism”, a thinly veiled reference to the United States. Notably, the Chinese brief made no mention of the war in Ukraine, a key issue raised by the EU side. Thus, the situation remains volatile as the EU must also to pursue its interests through reciprocity: member states voted 2 June 2025 to restrict access to the vast procurement markets for Chinese medical device manufacturers in response to Beijing’s refusal to open its own tenders to EU firms.

Dealing with North Korea

Restraining North Korea could well be a common interest of the EU and China.

Thus, the EU inviting China to restrain North Korea in its support for Russia, especially concerning further nuclearization with Russian support and know-how. Allegedly, North Korea is pursuing the project of a nuclear submarine - a rather difficult task, remember the AUKUS discussion and fall-out. **Non-proliferation** has been a common denominator between the EU-China and the US; President Trump, however, is using loose language in referring to North Korea as a ‘nuclear state’, opening the door to a path to the nuclear club like in the case of India and Pakistan. Adding another two, South Korea and Japan, to the already existing three nuclear powers in Northeast Asia - China, Russia and North Korea - would hardly be a contribution to stability with South Asia already suffering from the tensions between nuclear India and Pakistan.

In general, the EU pursues a policy of **critical engagement** towards the DPRK. “Its goals are to support a lasting diminution of tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the region, to uphold the international non-proliferation regime and to improve the situation of

¹¹ New York Times (2025). China Hints at Rare Earths Progress With E.U. Before Talks With U.S. 6 June 2025; at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/06/business/china-rare-earth-licensing.html>



human rights in the DPRK.”¹² The EEAS website has been updated last time 18 January 2022 – in these rapidly changing times this negligence is a message.

This EU policy started in 1995 with varying phases of engagement or critique. At the end of the 1990s during a more engaging phase, the EU participated in KEDO, the Korea Energy Development Organisation. The project failed in the end; the EU had only played a secondary role – invited to pay but not to act politically.

The last years have been characterised by pressure and sanctions in implementing the UN sanctions to which the EU added autonomous sanctions. This caused in 2015 the termination of the political and human rights dialogue between the EU and North Korea while some humanitarian aid through NGOs was continued.

Although some member states have embassies in Pyongyang and are striving to get back post-COVID to pre-COVID level, the EU could not prevent the diplomatic failure, that for a long time the Chinese had the only solid line of communication with the Kim regime. The brief interlude Trump – Kim was only a bracket. The forceful engagement of Russia, however, is a game changer.

As President Putin is not interested in terminating hostilities anytime soon and strives to keep up tensions at the border with NATO (Baltic states, Poland), the above mentioned 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea has become more than a ‘one-nightstand’ and produces all the risks of an alliance which the EU has to factor in when finally re-examining its policy.

The future role for the EU

Based on a successful free trade agreement, South Korea is the EU's eighth-largest trade partner in goods, while the EU is Korea's third-largest trade partner, a digital trade agreement was added giving life to the Digital and Connectivity partnerships. European companies are the largest source of investment. The EU's trade deficit is compensated by a structural surplus in services (2023).

In the various Asia, Asia Pacific or Indo Pacific strategies, as well as the 2016 Global Strategy and the 2022 Global Compass, the EU has developed the concept of **comprehensive security** in substance and geography. As there is only one security, neglecting the part of the world, which is most dynamic, technologically at the edge, with an overall growing population and a remarkable number of hotspots, is no political option.

Having the capacity to respond to multiple crises at the same time, even with war in Europe (Ukraine), is essential for a major power. While the EU has learned that economic and soft power need also to translate not only into smart but also into hard power, responding to these challenges is particularly difficult when the decade-long reliable ally and partner, turns unreliable calling out the EU as an institution set-up to screw the US.

¹² EEAS. EU and DPRK; at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/dprk-and-eu_en (accessed 5 February 2026).



This total reversal of politics necessitates a fundamental rethink of the EU's foreign and defence policies and actually acting upon the 'Zeitenwende' the then German chancellor Olaf Scholz rightfully proclaimed.

Politicians and the general publics in Europe must recognise urgently that there is no more space for nostalgia for good old times: Striving for more resilience, more engagement, shouldering more responsibility politically and exercising leadership are challenges the EU shares with its Northeast Asian partners, South Korea and Japan¹³.

This should and could lead to a closer trilateral (EU, ROK, Japan) policy coordination for mutual reassurance and solidification vis-à-vis North Korea, China, Russia and the United States – the latter a new, unusual and disquieting addition to challenges to meet. This situation is at the same time a strong call on South Korea and Japan to overcome the legacies of the past in a sustainable manner. A steady policy outliving changes of governments is necessary to cooperate in the overriding interest, to stabilise the situation thereby strengthening the bargaining power of the three. Cooperation between South Korea and Japan is an essential element in the security equation of Northeast Asia. This cooperation could become even stronger if the principles established at the Camp David¹⁴ trilateral summit convened by President Biden in 2024 continue to endure.

As HRVP Kallas pointed out at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore:

*"North Korea directly contributes to the illegal aggression with soldiers, arms and ammunition. And China says it's neutral, but its dual-use exports are fuelling Russia's war. When China and Russia speak of leading together changes not seen in a hundred years and of revisions to the global security order, we should all be extremely worried." She also recalled: "Back in 2022, former Japanese Prime Minister Kishida warned from this stage that Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow. We are over three years into this war now"*¹⁵.

Acknowledging geopolitical difficulties, the EU needs to revise its approach by rethinking its traditional and favoured role as a peace project, ensuring this is supported by robust defence measures. The EU plans to allocate up to €800 billion for joint defence investments; without this, it cannot achieve its aim of being a credible global security partner.

The EU has concluded **security and defence partnerships** with Japan and the Republic of Korea. In addition, the Strategic Compass and the Indo-Pacific Strategy foresee a

¹³ Michael Reiterer (2020). The European Union and Security Cooperation: Bringing Northeast Asia into Focus. Global Asia, The East Asia Institute (Seoul, 10 November 2020); at <https://www.globalink.org/commentary/view?cd=COM000044>

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea (2024). Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States. 18 November 2024; at https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=321087

¹⁵ EEAS (2025). Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue; at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-high-representative-vice-president-kaja-kallas-iiss-shangri-la-dialogue_en



deepening of security relations with India and Australia, New Zealand. At the beginning of 2026, the partnership with Vietnam was elevated to the “*comprehensive*” level.¹⁶

More attention needs also to be paid to the Pacific Island states because of their strategic importance and not only because of their essential threats of rising sea levels because of climate change.

The same applies to the **regional trade agreements**, in particular the CPTPP which South Korea is set to join. **Regional trade governance** are important stepping stones for revitalising the rules-based trading system and the WTO, an idea this author had already voiced in 2022, and finally taken up by President von der Leyen in her 2025 State of the Union address in response to President Trump’s erratic trade policy. In November 2025 at a meeting in Australia closer cooperation between the EU and CPTPP participants was agreed. Joining the Partnership like the United Kingdom appears to be too cumbersome and time consuming when quicker action is required. A quarter of a century negotiations of the MERCOSUR free trade agreement, finally signed but sent to the European Court of Justice by the European Parliament, is a serious weakening of the EU in the sole area where it is strong. On the other hand, the signing of the “mother of all deals”, a free trade agreement with India¹⁷ as well as a landmark EU-India Security and Defence Partnership is a strong contribution to governance and shared resilience. These pacts strengthen the autonomy of both partners as well as the rules-based approach; swift implementation is of course necessary to increase leverage. President Trump reducing reciprocal tariffs from imports from India¹⁸ right after India’s agreement with the EU is a strong indication of the effectiveness of this policy.

Despite Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, North Africa, the Balkans and many more challenges, Europe must cultivate a long-term, strategic commitment to Northeast Asia and therefore aim at contributing to find solutions to the specific regional hotspots, North Korea, Taiwan, South and East China Sea, India-Pakistan to name a few.

North Korea

Experience with NAPCI, the Northeast Asian Peace Cooperation Initiative under the presidency of Park Geun-hye¹⁹, and the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue shows that **it needs more than functional cooperation** to solve high stakes political and security problems, although functional cooperation can become an important stepping stone. The so-called Zermatt Dialogue managed by the Swiss think tank Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GSCP) provides a platform to meet but lacks the element of power of persuasion necessary for talks to produce results.

¹⁶ Joint statement on upgrading relations between the European Union and Viet Nam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, 29 January 2026; at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/statement_26_255

¹⁷ European Commission (2026) EU and India conclude negotiations for largest trade deal in their history. 28 January 2026; at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_26_253

¹⁸ BBC (2026) US and India reach trade deal, Trump says after Modi call. 2 February 2026; at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yve1x9zv0o>

¹⁹ Michael Reiterer (2015). The NAPCI in the Volatile Security Environment of North-East Asia: Which Role for the European Union? *European Foreign Affairs Review* 20, no.4, 2015; pp. 573-590.



North Korea's alliance with Russia renders every effort more difficult – the **'my enemy's friend is my enemy'** logic cements a relationship instead of weakening it. The EU can either encourage member states to provide track 2 or 1.5 platforms or do it itself with a broader basis.

Nominating a **special representative for Northeast Asia** who has the time and infrastructure to work in and with the various stakeholders in the region would manifest the EU's engagement in this important region, add an element of stability and sustainability, and translate the EU's narrative into action. In times of budgetary constraints drawing on defence spending could be a solution, as this would only be a tiny fraction of the envisaged € 800 bn. As a policy axiom, prevention is always cheaper than warfare and reconstruction.

Supporting South Korea's policy towards North Korea has been a trademark of the EU's policy. The political consultations upgraded to the ministerial level provide the platform for policy coordination. Given the geopolitical situation, the EU should continue stressing the need to cooperate with Japan, both countries are concerned and threatened by a hostile North Korea supported by aggressive Russia. The EU seeking better relations and an understanding to prevent proliferation of nuclear devices and weapons of mass destruction with China would impact on North Korea. Achieving stability and nuclear restraint on the Korean Peninsula strikes a chord in the region, as expressed by the 27 May 2024 Joint Declaration of the 9th Republic of Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Summit²⁰.

Due to Russia's support and its recent inroads in missiles and weapons technology, albeit with setbacks as the disastrous launch of a new 5,000-ton destroyer showed, North Korea has become an international and no longer only regional problem. While denuclearisation remains the global goal, it is unlikely that North Korea will give up its nuclear arsenal which guarantees regime survival.

The recent attack of Iran by Israel, supported by the US by attacks on Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan with bunker buster" bombs (GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator - MOP) will harden this conviction: Ghaddafi in Libya, Hussein in Iraq and Ukraine renounced nuclear weapons and paid a heavy price.

Consequently, striving for **'complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization'** is no longer a realistic short-term goal while remaining an idealistic long-term one. The discussion whether South Korea can continue relying on the US nuclear shield and US boots on the ground under Trump, or whether it should go nuclear itself with consequences for proliferation, has already arrived in South Korea. Switching to arms reduction talks, coping with the nuclear threat in the region through deterrence will need an international response.

²⁰ "Prime Minister Kishida expressed serious concern over North Korea's nuclear and missile activities and development of military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, and reconfirmed that the denuclearization of North Korea and the stability of the Korean Peninsula is the common interest of the three countries. Prime Minister Kishida stated that the three countries should urge North Korea to completely abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs in accordance with relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. Prime Minister Kishida also asked for continued support of the leaders of the ROK and China for the immediate resolution of the abductions issue and gained their understanding." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan (2024). The Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit. 27 May 2024; at https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/pageite_000001_00376.html



To render the EU policy with North Korea more dynamic, all member states have to be on board, including France which does not maintain regular diplomatic relations but operated only a cooperation office for humanitarian and cultural matters from 2011 until its COVID induced closure in 2020. As a permanent member of the UNSC France bears special responsibility within the UN as well as for EU foreign policy making.

Multilateral engagement

Invitations to the **G7** and **NATO** summits are a recognition of South Korea's strategic position in the region and a contribution to stabilise the country after the internal turmoil in pulling it back into the community of responsible international actors. This will help President Lee to "expand Korea's diplomatic reach, raise [Korea's] international stature and enlarge our economic territory."²¹

However, in the context of NATO as a AP4 country²², it will not only be honour and participation but also shouldering of additional costs: the 5% GDP target for defence spending will also be applied to Asian partners and allies according to US sources²³. This would translate into a doubling of South Korea's already considerable defence spending and support for stationing of US troops. (In 2025 South Korea's defence budget stands at around 61.2 trillion won (US\$44.6 billion), about 2.32 % of its GDP.²⁴) Turning down the invitation to the 2025 summit because of burning domestic issues allows various interpretations: stepping back from NATO as a transatlantic military alliance as criticised previously by the opposition leader Lee; renouncing to avoid further irritating China and Russia; or pragmatically, in recognition that the much wanted meeting with President Trump was difficult to secure (Trump had left the G7 before the arranged meeting could take place.)

Hosting the 2025 **APEC summit** in South Korea offered the occasion for the long-sought for summit with President Xi. Preventing a further emboldening of North Korea because of its alliance with Putin's Russia is a common goal where joining hands of China, South Korea, Japan and the EU could lead to common diplomatic efforts.

This EU-South Korea cooperation should also include **ASEAN**. Like the EU, South Korea has traditionally supported ASEAN. Economic security upgraded the geoeconomic importance of the ASEAN market for diversification, supply and production chains. In terms of security policy countries like the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia are part of the island chain parameters.

South Korea reaching out to partners who share the interest to **counter the insecurity** created by the transactional policies of President Trump, like the EU, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, ASEAN and - at least partly India would enlarge the room of manoeuvre and increase autonomy. Thereby strengthening **trade governance** could play a pivotal

²¹ The Korea Times (2025).

²² Michael Reiterer (2024). NATO and the Republic of Korea: The AP4 in the Indo-Pacific". 38 North, 9 April 2024; at <https://bit.ly/43UAhyr>

²³ Yonhap (2025). S. Korea says share of its defense spending against GDP 'very high' compared with key U.S. allies. 20 June 2025; at <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250620003552315?section=search>

²⁴ Yonhap (2025). Trump repeats NATO members should spend 5 pct of GDP on defense. 20 June 2025; at <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250621000351315?section=national/diplomacy>



role: The necessity to provide economic security, secure and stable supply and production lines as well as sea lanes for transport, or more generally the need to get back to a stable rules-based international order, provide a sound interest-based foundation for enhancing cooperation for middle powers. In the aftermath of COVID-19, China's instrumentalization of rare earth exports and Trump's transactional tariff and economic policies made it abundantly clear that a more organised response was needed.

As pointed out already in 2022, the regional trade agreements, RCEP and CPTPP merit more attention by the EU²⁵. In view of President Trump's unruly trade policy, President von der Leyen has taken up this issue, recognising that closer cooperation with the interested countries in this economically and technically prone region could serve as a stepping stone to revitalise rules based free trade and the WTO²⁶. In the more immediate future, demonstrating that rules-based policies produce better results in the interests of participating countries is the necessary enabler giving agency to such an approach.

Conclusions

Considering North Korea's significant advancements in nuclear and missile capabilities, Kim Jong-un's increasingly aggressive stance which now includes the possible first use of nuclear weapons under certain circumstances (read: threat to the survival of the regime), the ending of its longstanding special relationship with South Korea and the rejection of unification with what it now sees as an enemy, as well as the backing of two permanent UN Security Council members, China and Russia, and an alliance like strengthened strategic partnership with Russia, and finally a US president who pursues transactional policies without values, it is evident that simply relying on traditional diplomatic approaches is no longer feasible for South Korea or the European Union. Both must recognise that past strategies, **'Back to the Future'**, will not suffice in this dramatically altered geopolitical landscape.

"Forward to the Past", learning from history but adapting those lessons to new realities rather than simply repeating old patterns, must be the new policy direction. This will need more than just a pragmatic diplomacy or the continuation or only slight update of critical engagement²⁷.

The new geopolitical situation e.g., **power politics in a multipolar world** where international law and guardrails are weakened, the direct involvement of North Korea in Ukraine and the constraints to placate President Trump in pursuing his China policy and yet unclear North Korea policy, will constrain the room of manoeuvre outside the US-China-Russia triangle, including for the incumbent South Korean President, considerably. The worst-case scenario would be Korea-passing after a successful deal Trump-Putin on

²⁵ Michael Reiterer (2022). Regional Trade Agreements in the Indo-Pacific: Does the EU Risk Losing Sight of Their Importance? CSDS Policy Brief 01/2022; at <https://csds.vub.be/publication/regional-trade-agreements-in-the-indo-pacific-does-the-eu-risk-losing-sight-of-their-importance/>

²⁶ Reuters (2025). EU's Pacific alliance would not replace WTO, EU officials say. 27 June 2025; at <https://www.reuters.com/en/eu-alliance-with-pacific-rim-could-lead-wto-redesign-von-der-leyen-says-2025-06-27/>

²⁷ Michael Reiterer (2026) The Puzzle of South Korea's Foreign Policy: Can You Have It All? Global Policy 2026 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70131> (forthcoming)



Ukraine: Putin could take on the role as facilitator for a renewal of the Trump-Kim Jong-un contacts, a role previously played by President Moon Jae-in during the first bromance.

As for the EU to preserve some influence, it must **strengthen its engagement with East Asia, the Korean Peninsula and North Korea** to pursue its security interests in updating and adapting the principles laid out in the Strategic Compass and its Indo-Pacific Strategy²⁸ to the new situation created by Trump II as well as the technological progress reached by North Korea. Security is interconnected; only deeper involvement will lend the EU credibility as a political and security actor in the region and avoid EU-passing in policy making. As a sizable economic power with a track record of promoting rules-based policies, the EU has credibility to act as the defender and promotor of a **rules-based order, rule of law** to prevent further progress by *'might is right'*.

Revitalising the rules-based trading order through cooperation with partners in the region, such as those participating or considering doing (South Korea) in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), could be at the same time a stepping stone for redesigning the WTO. To recall, TPP was the economic pillar of President Obama's pivot to Asia which Trump I abandoned.

The current policy of *'critical engagement'* needs a rethink, a stronger commitment to engagement, diplomacy to solve the nuclear crisis and prevent further proliferation. The EU has gained considerable experience in this field when leading the negotiations with Iran which resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for the exclusively peaceful use of nuclear energy. An **EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Northeast Asia** could help implementing an innovative approach visibly and signal unity and presence, important features for being effective. While *'flying the flag'* is always important in diplomacy, this applies in particular to Asia where personal contacts are crucial.

North Korea's **nuclear threat** needs to be countered by firm diplomacy and deterrence seeking dialogue on arms reduction with the ultimate goal of denuclearisation and avoiding proliferation.

Applying the **Korean Peninsula recipe to Ukraine** e.g., a frozen conflict with an armistice but no peace agreement, could be a short term means to stop fighting but would at the same time add another unstable, unresolved situation but not a sustainable solution although provisional agreements can develop quite some staying power.

In extending its **Connectivity Strategy**²⁹ the EU could foster an arrangement between South and North Korea, for instance reconnecting the railway systems, would connect the Korean Peninsula to Europe via the Eurasian landmass. This could have a double function: adding to the security of communication lines of the South while being part of an incentive bargaining package, in case talks with North Korea restart in earnest.

²⁸ Michael Reiterer (2023), *The European Union in Asia and the Indo-Pacific: international cooperation in the era of great transformation and mounting security challenges*. Lausanne, Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe, Debates and Documents Collection, issue 31, December 2023; at <https://jean-monnet.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/23-12-eu-asia-indopacific-m-reiterer-cdd-31.pdf> (open access).

²⁹ See Shiong Kim, Michael Reiterer (eds). *Connecting Europe and Asia: Security, Economy and Mobility*. Huine HUFU University Press, Seoul, 2023.



To end this analysis on a positive note: Autocratic powers tried to bend the global order to their will, started the Second World War and lost. 80 years ago, freedom prevailed because defenders of the order joined hands and arms. Citizens were at the forefront, and this has not changed. This puts a special obligation and responsibility on provincial and local authorities which are close to the people. Today's call is to repeat the positive experience of the previous generations to rebuild and maintain a rules-based order where might is not right.

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ALLIANCE DILEMMAS UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: ABANDONMENT, ENTRAPMENT, AND SOUTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC CHOICES

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of alliance dynamics under the Trump administration, with particular attention to the South Korean case and its implications for U.S. alliances. Drawing on developments in U.S. foreign policy and allied responses, it argues that recent shifts have significantly altered perceptions of alliance reliability. The administration's approach—marked by unpredictability and unconventional communication—has intensified allied uncertainty, reshaping strategic expectations and behavior. In the case of South Korea, these dynamics have contributed to a reassessment of strategic dependence and a growing emphasis on self-reliant defense capabilities. The study conceptualizes alliance dilemmas through the twin risks of abandonment and entrapment, where allies must balance the danger of being left unprotected against the risk of being drawn into unwanted conflicts. Applying this framework to the South Korean case, the analysis shows how heightened uncertainty under the Trump administration reinforced both concerns: fears of abandonment encouraged greater consideration of autonomous defense strategies, while concerns over entrapment highlighted the potential costs of alliance commitments, particularly in crisis scenarios involving regional escalation. Building on these findings, the study argues that alliance dynamics under conditions of uncertainty have broader implications for U.S. hegemony and the stability of the alliance system. The erosion of trust in U.S. commitments has contributed to a shift toward strategic autonomy among allies, challenging the cohesion of the hub-and-spokes structure. At the same time, the emergence of coordinated allied responses suggests that alliance politics are increasingly shaped by perceptions of leadership credibility rather than material asymmetries alone. These trends underscore the centrality of predictability and trust in sustaining alliance stability and, by extension, the durability of U.S. hegemonic leadership.

Keywords

Alliance Dilemma, U.S. Alliances, Trump Administration, South Korea, Strategic Autonomy.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a evolução da dinâmica das alianças sob a administração Trump, com especial destaque para o caso da Coreia do Sul e as suas implicações para as alianças dos EUA. Com base na evolução da política externa dos EUA e nas reações dos aliados, defende que as recentes mudanças alteraram significativamente as perceções quanto à fiabilidade das alianças. A abordagem da administração — marcada pela imprevisibilidade e por uma comunicação não convencional — intensificou a incerteza dos aliados, remodelando as



expectativas e o comportamento estratégicos. No caso da Coreia do Sul, estas dinâmicas contribuíram para uma reavaliação da dependência estratégica e para uma ênfase crescente nas capacidades de defesa autossuficientes. O estudo conceptualiza os dilemas da aliança através dos riscos duplos de abandono e aprisionamento, em que os aliados devem equilibrar o perigo de ficarem desprotegidos com o risco de serem arrastados para conflitos indesejados. Aplicando este quadro ao caso da Coreia do Sul, a análise mostra como a incerteza acentuada sob a administração Trump reforçou ambas as preocupações: os receios de abandono encorajaram uma maior consideração de estratégias de defesa autónomas, enquanto as preocupações com o aprisionamento destacaram os custos potenciais dos compromissos da aliança, particularmente em cenários de crise que envolvem uma escalada regional. Com base nestas conclusões, o estudo argumenta que a dinâmica das alianças em condições de incerteza tem implicações mais amplas para a hegemonia dos EUA e a estabilidade do sistema de alianças. A erosão da confiança nos compromissos dos EUA contribuiu para uma mudança no sentido da autonomia estratégica entre os aliados, desafiando a coesão da estrutura «hub-and-spokes». Ao mesmo tempo, o surgimento de respostas aliadas coordenadas sugere que a política de alianças é cada vez mais moldada por perceções de credibilidade da liderança, em vez de apenas por assimetrias materiais. Estas tendências sublinham a centralidade da previsibilidade e da confiança na manutenção da estabilidade das alianças e, por extensão, da durabilidade da liderança hegemónica dos EUA.

Palavras-chave

Dilema das Alianças, Alianças dos EUA, Administração Trump, Coreia do Sul, Autonomia Estratégica.

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Introduction

U.S. Leadership and Alliance Challenges under Trump

From the Cold War through the post-Cold War period, and now in the context of a possible New Cold War, the United States has sought to sustain the international order it constructed. This effort has involved shifting its strategic focus across regions and, when necessary, recalibrating its commitments by redirecting resources inward. Despite these adjustments, one element has remained constant: the United States has continued to view itself as the leader of the international order. It has also retained a sense of duty associated with its role as a global security provider, regardless of fluctuations in its relative power. Over time, its long-standing allies and partners—although not always experiencing favorable conditions—have generally supported the direction of U.S. leadership, sometimes alongside it and at other times in a more supportive capacity.

Today, the world is experiencing the second term of President Donald Trump. The accumulated costs of sustaining a global security role have contributed to a relative decline in U.S. power, and in this context, President Trump's representative slogans such as "Make America Great Again" and "America First" reflect a broader strategic rationale. However, as these ideas have been translated into policy, the U.S. has increasingly moved away from the center of global governance and the existing international order. The Trump administration places less emphasis on international issues and collective problem-solving, leaving states more frequently to manage their own or international challenges. This tendency is particularly visible in the security domain, where reduced U.S. engagement has, in some cases, left allies exposed or effectively abandoned. At the same time, as the U.S. distances itself from long-standing partners, it has occasionally shown ambiguity in distinguishing between allies and adversaries.

In the meantime, the administration maintains a strongly U.S.-centered approach in its expectations toward allies. When cooperation is deemed necessary, it relies on pressure to enforce burden-sharing. The difficulty, however, is that such pressure often places allies in situations they neither prefer nor willingly accept, thereby creating conditions of



entrapment. The administration appears to assume that when it initiates competition or conflict with adversaries, the associated costs should be shared by its allies. In some cases, these situations emerge from highly contingent or individualized decision-making processes. Regardless of the legitimacy of such conflicts, and irrespective of whether allied consensus exists, the U.S. has at times framed its demands in terms of repayment for past security commitments.

Under these conditions, long-standing U.S. allies are increasingly uneasy with what they perceive as indiscriminate pressure and an asymmetrical alliance relationship. Additionally, as the U.S. appears to retreat from its traditional role in maintaining the international order—without presenting a clear alternative vision—other states are reassessing their strategic direction. A broader shift toward self-help is becoming more evident, accompanied by a stronger emphasis on national interest and growing skepticism regarding the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. As a result, efforts to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities are intensifying. Against this backdrop, this study examines, the risks of abandonment and entrapment under the Trump administration from the perspective of South Korea, through the framework of the alliance dilemma.

Research Frame: Alliance Dilemma

Although the scope of the term 'alliance' has recently expanded to encompass multiple domains—including military, economic, and energy cooperation—its underlying logic and ultimate purpose remain closely tied to state survival and the use of military power.

In an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival above all else. As Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues, security constitutes the primary objective of states, as only when survival is ensured can they pursue other goals such as economic gain or political influence. Building on this logic, Stephen Walt (1989) explains that alliances are formed primarily in response to external threats. States facing such threats seek to aggregate power through cooperation in order to deter or counter potential adversaries.

Walt further conceptualizes alliances as formal or informal arrangements for security cooperation among states, designed to enhance the power, security, and influence of their members. (Walt, 2009) In a similar vein, Glenn Snyder (1990) defines alliances as formal associations oriented toward the use or restraint of military force, intended to advance the security or broader interests of member states in relation to specific adversaries. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that alliances are fundamentally instruments for strengthening security, power, and military capability.

This study adopts the concept of the 'alliance dilemma' developed by Glenn Snyder, which builds upon and extends Waltz's 'Balance of power' and Walt's 'Balance of threat' frameworks. Snyder (1984) conceptualizes alliance politics in terms of the dual risks of abandonment and entrapment, which vary according to the level of commitment among allied states. When a state demonstrates a high level of commitment to an alliance, the risk of abandonment by its partner tends to decrease. However, this also increases the likelihood of entrapment in conflicts initiated by the ally. Conversely, when commitment



to an alliance is weak, the risk of entrapment declines, but the probability of abandonment increases (Snyder, 1984).

Alliance Abandonment risk under the Trump Administration

Burden-Sharing and Conditional Alliance Commitment

U.S. military forces are stationed across various regions of the world, and South Korea is no exception. Since the establishment of the alliance following the Korean War in 1953, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) have remained a central component of the bilateral security arrangement. Over the course of this alliance, the possibility of troop withdrawal or reduction has repeatedly emerged as a policy option in last 70 years (Ko, 2004). Such discussions are therefore not new. However, under the Trump administration, this issue gained renewed salience. Reports suggest that President Trump at one point considered the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, although this proposal was ultimately constrained by internal opposition within the administration ((Lee et al., 2018, as cited in Longo, 2026).

In addition, the Trump administration departed from previous approaches by demanding a substantial increase in defense cost-sharing. This was not merely a matter of financial burden. Rather, it reflected a broader tendency to treat the alliance as a transactional arrangement, thereby devaluing its strategic and normative foundations. Trump's rhetoric frequently relied on cost-benefit calculations, reducing alliance relations to quantifiable terms. Such an approach fails to capture the non-material dimensions of the alliance, including trust, shared commitment, and the historical depth of bilateral cooperation. Moreover, these statements were often presented without clear methodological grounding, which contributed to uncertainty among allied partners. The use of striking numerical claims, seemingly intended to strengthen bargaining leverage, was at times perceived as dismissive or even humiliating by the counterpart.

For example, Trump once remarked that "getting US\$1 billion from South Korea was easier than collecting rent from a Brooklyn apartment," a statement that appears to have been aimed at mobilizing domestic political support (Hwang, 2019). At the same time, it conveyed an implicit expectation that South Korea should accept a subordinate position in security negotiations while bearing a greater financial burden. This pattern persisted in subsequent political discourse. During later campaign periods, South Korea continued to be portrayed as underpaying, and was even described as a "money machine," alongside repeated references to sharply increased financial demands (Kim & Lee, 2024).

In practice, South Korea responded to these pressures by negotiating the initially proposed cost-sharing levels downward, while still agreeing to a significant increase (Statistics Korea, n.d.). This outcome can be interpreted as an effort to mitigate the risk of abandonment by maintaining the credibility of the alliance commitment.

Beyond direct financial demands, the administration also signaled a willingness to link economic cooperation to security considerations. The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) was at times framed in terms that suggested the possibility of termination,



implying that economic relations could be leveraged to extract concessions in the security domain (Lester et al., 2019). While the U.S. had previously exerted pressure on South Korea's autonomy in times of crisis—such as during the 1997 Asian financial crisis—these instances were primarily driven by economic considerations (Ko, 2024). In contrast, under the Trump administration, security commitments themselves appeared to function as a form of leverage.

Taken together, these findings indicate a shift toward a transactional understanding of alliances, in which economic pressure is used to shape security outcomes. This approach reinforces the perception that alliance ties are conditional rather than stable. It suggests that if expected economic terms are not met, the alliance may become a point of vulnerability. In this sense, the credibility of U.S. security commitments is increasingly subject to negotiation, thereby heightening concerns over abandonment within the alliance.

Selective Engagement and Alliance Marginalization

South Korea experienced what was widely described as 'Korea passing,' a development that reflected a diminished recognition of its value as an ally. Beginning in 2018, President Moon Jae-in actively pursued engagement with North Korea. Through inter-Korean summits, South Korea played a key role in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table on denuclearization and in facilitating a summit between Kim Jong Un and President Trump. In structural terms, the configuration was relatively straightforward. Although three actors were involved, it was expected that South Korea and the U.S. would coordinate as allies in negotiating with a common adversary. Previous rounds of denuclearization diplomacy had also demonstrated that close coordination between Seoul and Washington was essential, even when their specific preferences diverged.

In this case, however, the two allies approached the issue from different starting points. South Korea prioritized the improvement of inter-Korean relations as a pathway toward denuclearization, whereas the Trump administration treated denuclearization itself as the primary objective. Despite these differences, sustained communication would have been necessary if the two countries were to act as a unified negotiating partner. In practice, however, the process unfolded differently. South Korea, despite being a central stakeholder and a key facilitator of the talks, was largely excluded from the core negotiations, which proceeded in a bilateral format between the U.S. and North Korea. The resulting outcome—often referred to as 'Korea passing'—can be attributed, in part, to the persistent gap in preferences between the parties.

The significance of this episode lies not only in the failure of the negotiations, but also in what it revealed about alliance coordination. Having experienced repeated difficulties in advancing North Korean denuclearization, South Korea and the U.S. faced a context in 2018–2019 that required careful and coordinated alliance management. Instead of close consultation, however, South Korea was, in effect, 'deliberately' sidelined. This suggests that when policy preferences diverge, the U.S. may choose to act independently rather than pursue alignment within the alliance framework (Song, 2024). For South Korea, it



implied that even as a directly affected party and formal ally, its position could be disregarded when it did not align with U.S. intentions.

This dynamic became more visible with the U.S.–North Korea summit held in Singapore. During this period, President Trump made several statements that raised concerns about alliance management. In particular, he expressed a desire to withdraw U.S. forces stationed in South Korea and referred to joint U.S.–South Korea military exercises as ‘war games,’ subsequently announcing their suspension. These remarks were made without prior consultation with South Korea and did not follow established coordination procedures within the alliance (Borger, 2018). Such actions suggest that alliance commitments can be treated as instruments of negotiation and used as leverage depending on the counterpart. This dynamic is particularly notable given that the negotiation counterpart was North Korea—an actor defined as a common adversary alongside South Korea, and one that President Trump had previously provoked by referring to its leader as “rocket man.” This contrast highlights the impulsive and unpredictable nature of his approach.

Taken together, the overall developments indicate that the U.S. under the Trump administration, at times treated South Korea less as a partner in joint strategy and more as a subordinate actor within a hierarchical relationship. This pattern is consistent with theoretical expectations that a major power providing security guarantees may seek to constrain the autonomy of its ally. In this context, the unilateral and coercive aspects of U.S. policy signaled the possibility of abandonment, contributing to a situation in which South Korea faced pressure to accommodate U.S. preferences (Jo & Park, 2026).

South Korea's choice under the signals of abandonment

At the outset of President Trump's first term, U.S. allies and partners closely observed his campaign rhetoric, which often appeared to downplay the value of alliances and frame them in terms of economic gains and losses. Trump expressed a firm belief that U.S. allies were engaging in free-riding, and his direct, often improvised statements—frequently made without adherence to established procedures—generated uncertainty regarding the future direction of U.S. policy.

This concern was reinforced early in his presidency as the U.S. suddenly withdrew from several multilateral agreements, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), and the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership). These actions contributed to the perception that U.S. commitments could be reversed unpredictably. As a result, even alliance commitments—traditionally grounded in trust and shared security interests—appeared vulnerable to reassessment based on cost–benefit calculations. The proposal known as ‘Cost Plus 50,’ which called for a substantial increase in allied contributions, further amplified these concerns (Pettyjohn, 2019). Under such conditions, U.S. allies faced a situation in which failure to meet economic expectations could lead to severe consequences, including the risk of abandonment.



South Korea also was not an exception. The Korean Peninsula has remained in a state of armistice for more than seventy years, with North Korea continuing to advance its nuclear capabilities. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), South Korea has adhered to non-nuclear commitments while remaining fully aware of the costs associated with nuclear armament. Under conditions of persistent nuclear asymmetry, South Korea has no other option but to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a central component of its security. In this context, the Trump administration's perceived willingness to downplay South Korea's security concerns—along with the possibility that its survival might not be consistently prioritized, or could be treated as a bargaining instrument in negotiations with other states—generated both concern and heightened threat perception within South Korean society.

During his first term, the alliance appeared to loosen to a noticeable degree. The subsequent administration under President Joe Biden sought to restore alliance cohesion and reaffirm solidarity. The U.S. and South Korea reiterated their commitment to a robust bilateral alliance and also pursued expanded trilateral security cooperation with Japan. However, it is difficult to conclude that the decline in trust experienced during the previous period was fully reversed. With the return of a second Trump administration, South Korea again faces uncertainty regarding U.S. policy direction. This concern is shaped not only by prior experience during the first term, but also by the expectation that institutional or political constraints on presidential decision-making may be weaker, thereby allowing for more unilateral and less predictable actions. In this context, the intensity of Trump's rhetoric and pressure is expected to persist, if not increase.

With the return of a second Trump administration, South Korea was once again confronted with fears stemming from policy unpredictability. These concerns were not entirely new, but had already been internalized during the first term. At the same time, the second administration brought an additional dimension of uncertainty. Compared to the earlier period, there was a growing perception that fewer institutional or political constraints existed to moderate President Trump's unilateral rhetoric and decision-making, reinforcing expectations of more unrestrained and assertive behavior. Furthermore, the intensity of his rhetoric and pressure was not expected to ease; if anything, it was anticipated to escalate rather than moderate.

Through these developments, South Korea came to recognize that alliance commitments are not unconditional and may be subject to abandonment. This realization underscored the risks of relying exclusively on the U.S. for security. Even as efforts were made to repair the existing strains within the alliance, the resolve to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities had already intensified.

As North Korea's nuclear program continued to advance, public support in South Korea for either indigenous nuclear development or the redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons had already been substantial, at times exceeding 50 percent (Sun, 2024). Although this result showed some fluctuations, survey outcomes indicate that the experience of the first Trump administration contributed to a significant increase in such preferences, largely driven by heightened concerns over abandonment (Lee et al., 2023; Chung, 2024). In sum, the signals of potential abandonment under the Trump administration



generated both a sense of insecurity and a growing conclusion within South Korea that a greater degree of strategic autonomy from its ally was necessary.

Alliance Entrapment risk under the Trump Administration

Escalatory Rhetoric toward North Korea and Risks South Korea faced

From the outset of his presidency, Trump appeared unwilling to tolerate regimes pursuing illicit nuclear proliferation. In retrospect, even in the early phase of the first term, the Trump administration considered the use of military force as a possible option to halt North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. The U.S. had previously refrained from using force against North Korea—despite its relative weakness in conventional terms—not only because of the anticipated costs of war or the potential involvement of regional powers such as China and Russia, but also due to concerns over the significant damage that would be inflicted on South Korea. Given the shared historical and political context on the Korean Peninsula, U.S. policy had traditionally taken into account South Korea's position.

However, the Trump administration introduced a different approach by placing greater emphasis on the military option in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue, which had long been managed through non-military means such as sanctions, deterrence, and diplomatic engagement (Power, 2017). At the same time, North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities coincidentally advanced rapidly, contributing to a qualitative escalation of the crisis.

In July 2017, North Korea successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), raising concerns that U.S. territories, including Alaska and Guam, had entered its range (Karako & Williams, 2017). In response, President Trump issued a strong warning to North Korea, including the well-known "fire and fury" statement, which implied the possibility of preemptive action. North Korea responded in kind, issuing statements that signaled its willingness to strike the U.S. mainland. Compared to previous administrations, which had tended to rely on calibrated and restrained language to avoid escalation, Trump's rhetoric was widely viewed by experts as unusually emotional and extreme. This raised concerns that such language could increase the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding at a critical level of tension (Hirschfeld, 2017).

Subsequently, North Korea continued its weapons development, launching ICBMs assessed to be capable of carrying nuclear warheads and conducting its sixth nuclear test. In response, President Trump further escalated his rhetoric, including references to a possible 'bloody nose' strike. As the situation intensified, the level of confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea continued to rise without clear limits. Under these conditions, South Korea and Japan—both located within close proximity to the potential conflict zone—faced the risk of being entrapped in a rapidly escalating crisis driven by U.S.–North Korea confrontation.

Concerns also emerged within the United States regarding the risks posed to allied states in East Asia, as well as opposition to the level of escalation associated with the Trump



administration's approach (Cha, 2018). In response, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, as a directly affected party, sought to reduce tensions between the U.S. and North Korea. In order to avoid entrapment in a potential conflict and to prevent further escalation toward war on the Korean Peninsula, he emphasized that military conflict was unacceptable. At the same time, he pursued engagement with North Korea while maintaining communication with the U.S., ultimately facilitating the conditions for trilateral summit, despite the abandonment that later emerged in the negotiation process.

Unilateral Escalation in Iran and Entrapment Pressures on Allies

During President Trump's tenure, there were numerous consequential developments in U.S. relations with other states. Among them, one of the most destabilizing events—generating widespread concern among multiple countries—was the U.S. strike against Iran in 2026. Although this occurred approximately one year into the second Trump administration, the conditions leading to such an outcome can be traced back to 2018, when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). From that point onward, it became increasingly foreseeable that U.S. allies involved in the agreement could face risks of entrapment.

The JCPOA was originally a multilateral agreement involving six major powers—the U.S., China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—negotiated with Iran. Following its implementation, continuous monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did not produce conclusive evidence that Iran had violated the agreement (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2017). Nevertheless, the Trump administration assessed the terms of the JCPOA as insufficient and announced a unilateral withdrawal. At one level, this decision disregarded the positions of other participating states, including key U.S. allies such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. More broadly, it can be interpreted as a move of abandonment within the alliance context. Furthermore, the lack of clearly substantiated justification for this decision led to reluctance among allied states to support the reimposition of sanctions against Iran (Jakes & Sanger, 2020). This, in turn, contributed to concerns that major foreign policy decisions of the U.S. were being driven by individual leadership preferences, thereby undermining trust among states (De Witte & Gabel, 2018).

Following the collapse of the agreement, tensions between the U.S. and Iran escalated. Iran responded through actions such as the seizure of oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, Saudi Arabia—one of the U.S. key partners in the Middle East—had already experienced attacks on its oil facilities, including the 2019 strike on Aramco. In response, the Trump administration implemented maximum-level sanctions and carried out military actions, including the targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani, widely regarded as a senior Iranian military figure. Although these developments did not escalate into full-scale war, they significantly heightened military tensions. In parallel, Iran accelerated its nuclear activities following the breakdown of the agreement and subsequent attacks, expanding uranium enrichment capabilities and operating advanced centrifuges.



Under the Biden administration, efforts were made to revive nuclear negotiations with Iran, but these attempts met repeated cycles of progress and suspension, ultimately failing to accomplish a renewed agreement. At the end of Biden's administration, renewed instability in the Middle East emerged following Hamas's attack on Israel. Shortly after returning to office in 2025, President Trump initiated a new round of nuclear negotiations with Iran. However, within a short period—reportedly as soon as the following month—the U.S. launched a surprise strike on Iranian nuclear facilities using bunker-buster munitions. Subsequently, the Trump administration justified further military action by claiming the detection of an "imminent threat," conducting joint strikes with Israel that targeted senior Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In response, Iran warned that the U.S. had crossed a critical red line, and the possibility of direct U.S.–Iran war became a tangible reality observed by the international community.

At present, Iran has moved to exert control over the Strait of Hormuz, posing a severe military threat by restricting the passage of oil tankers belonging to the U.S. and its allies and partners. Contrary to earlier expectations by the Trump administration that the situation would be resolved quickly, this development introduced an unanticipated level of disruption. In the end, the U.S. called upon its allies—including European countries, South Korea, and Japan—to participate in the case more actively. However, when European states, particularly those within NATO, collectively declined to engage, the Trump administration defined his call as a "test" of alliance commitment and proceeded to explore ceasefire negotiations with Iran independently.

This sequence of events illustrates the extent to which the Trump administration approached alliances in instrumental and asymmetric terms. The decision to strike Iran was marked by a lack of transparent justification and proceeded without sufficient domestic support or prior consultation with allied states. Only after encountering strategic difficulties did the administration turn to its allies, not through cooperative coordination, but through pressure framed as requests for deployment, thereby attempting to draw them into the conflict. Given Iran's geopolitical significance in global energy security, allied states had strong incentives to approach such involvement extra cautiously not to be entrapped together.

In the case of South Korea, dependence on imported energy reaches approximately 90 percent, with around 70 percent of oil imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz. As tensions escalated, oil prices rose by approximately 20 percent within two weeks compared to pre-crisis levels. Although the South Korean government sought to respond, the prolonged nature of the conflict—contrary to initial U.S. expectations—led to rising costs in oil-related products, including rubber and plastics, as well as increased exchange rate volatility. These effects are directly hitting the public. While the Iranian ambassador to South Korea stated that South Korea is not a hostile state, he also implicitly suggested that non-cooperation with the U.S. would be conditional for this position (Seo, 2026).

In this context, the reluctance of allies to participate in military deployment was met by the Trump administration's characterization of the situation as a test of commitment. This framing, alongside attempts to reduce a matter involving national survival and human security to rhetorical positioning, can be interpreted as reflecting a diminished



regard for alliance relationships. As of March 28, 2026, President Trump issued statements indicating that the United States would “remember” those countries—including South Korea—that had not deployed naval forces to the Strait of Hormuz, signaling pressure on allies to share responsibility by becoming involved in the conflict.

In this context, considering the situation where the allied states are put in seriously difficult position to gladly support military deployment, President Trump framing the situation as a test of alliance commitment represents both the pressure and devaluation of alliance. Addressing an issue involving national survival and the lives of citizens in this manner can be interpreted as indicating a diminished regard for the alliance. As of March 28, 2026, the administration also signaled pressure toward countries—including South Korea—again that had not dispatched naval forces to the Strait of Hormuz, stating that he would “remember” their decisions, while attempting to draw them into the conflict and share the burden of responsibility.

South Korea's choice under the signals of abandonment

The first Trump administration marked the period in which strategic competition between the U.S. and China became more pronounced. In effect, the intensifying U.S.–China rivalry placed many allied states in a difficult position, as they were implicitly pressured to align with one side. For many allies, this created an untenable dilemma: either distance themselves from China—one of the world's largest economic powers—and align with the U.S., thereby risking entrapment in great-power competition, or face the possibility of being labeled disloyal and subjected to abandonment by the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, this study does not treat U.S.–China competition as a central case of entrapment. At least, it can be understood as part of a broader and largely unavoidable structural shift in the international order. Despite the confrontational nature of its implementation, such competition was widely regarded as a rational and, to some extent, legitimate course of action for the U.S., whether as a hegemonic power or as a principal architect of the existing international order. Although the Trump administration did not consistently frame this rivalry in terms of defending the liberal international order, the overall direction—maintaining a U.S.-led order and responding to a perceived primary threat—remained aligned with long-standing strategic objectives. For this reason, it was, at least in part, a development that could be understood in rational terms.

By contrast, other cases reflected decisions whose justification was less clearly established, leading other states into heightened tension alongside the U.S. In some instances, these actions appeared less defensive in nature and more offensive, while also lacking transparency and facing domestic opposition within the U.S. itself. Despite these concerns, the Trump administration continued to exert pressure on allies to participate in addressing such crises. First, the U.S. in practice pressured—or indirectly compelled— allies to become involved in complex and high-risk situations. Second, even in cases where direct participation was avoided, U.S. actions contributed to the creation of security environments that posed both direct and indirect threats to allied states.



Following the Iran crisis, for example, U.S. military assets stationed in South Korea—including systems such as THAAD, which had been deployed at significant economic cost due to Chinese retaliation—were reportedly redeployed to the Middle East. During this period, North Korea continued its missile tests and military demonstrations. Amid growing concerns over a potential security vacuum, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung emphasized once again the necessity of strengthening autonomous defense capabilities. This included caution against excessive reliance on the U.S. and calls for the timely transfer of wartime operational control (Lee, 2026).

More broadly, Trump administration's decision makings and overall remarks suggest that the survival of allied states was definitely not consistently treated as a primary consideration. In some cases, U.S. actions brought outcomes that were favorable to actors previously regarded as threats—not only to the liberal international order but also to U.S. allies themselves. Such consequences were controversial for other allied states to accept on rational or strategic grounds. Moreover, there appeared to be insufficient consideration of whose security and survival were being placed at risk. These patterns can be understood less as outcomes of a coherent and institutionalized U.S. foreign policy, and more as consequences of President Trump's individualized and often unpredictable rhetoric and decision-making.

Now, the world is raising a fundamental question: when a geographically distant power such as the U.S. generates conditions that heighten security risks for its regional allies, to what extent are those allies willing to bear such risks? Furthermore, even in the event of direct military involvement by the U.S., there remained a credible concern that the U.S. will only prioritize its own interests over those of its allies. In this context, heightened tensions with North Korea or also gave rise to concerns about the potential for alliance decoupling, reflecting a logically grounded apprehension among regional partners (Panda, 2017).

Implication: The Alliance Dilemma and the Erosion of U.S. Hegemonic Leadership

First, the U.S.'s long-standing allies appear to be experiencing a decline in trust toward the U.S. However, such a conclusion should not be drawn hastily. The dynamics in U.S.–alliance relations since 2012 must be understood in light of individual leadership factors, particularly the personal characteristics and decision-making style of President Trump. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that within the U.S., there have also been political forces—such as the Biden administration—that have sought to prioritize alliances and strengthen solidarity.

Nevertheless, over the past decade, U.S. allies have directly encountered a fundamental reality of international politics: that alliances are not permanent, even among long-standing partners. The decades of effort, trust-building, and institutionalization of a liberal international order and regional security architecture since World War II have been relatively undervalued, while the possibility of abandonment has become more visible and explicit. As a result, allies have increasingly sought strategies for survival



independent of the U.S., leading to efforts to reduce dependence and strengthen domestic capabilities.

At the same time, under conditions of unpredictability associated with Trump administration, allies have also faced heightened risks of entrapment. This reflects a paradoxical dynamic in which allies that perceive the U.S. as less committed—and therefore potentially susceptible to abandonment—are simultaneously subjected to demands for higher levels of commitment and participation, thereby increasing their exposure to entrapment risks. For weaker allies embedded in asymmetric alliance structures, such pressures can be particularly severe. As of March 28, this dynamic appears to have contributed to growing solidarity among U.S. allies—especially in Europe—against what they perceive as excessive or destabilizing actions by the U.S., thereby making divisions between the U.S. and its allies more visible.

Second, this context carries an important implication for the U.S. itself: it, too, must learn a critical lesson. In alliance politics, abandonment typically is more desperate when a stronger partner distances itself from a weaker ally, highlighting the importance of credible commitments. Historically, the U.S. has often been perceived as the primary actor capable of abandoning its allies. However, circumstances surrounding the Iran crisis suggest that a reverse dynamic is also possible—namely, that allied states can collectively form solidarity and, under certain conditions, effectively distance themselves from a hegemonic power.

Even though the U.S. may be experiencing relative decline, it still retains the status of a hegemon. Yet, this case demonstrates that hegemonic status alone does not guarantee continued support from allies. When a hegemon fails to provide consistent justification for its actions or engages in persistent, unpredictable, or impulsive security policies, it risks losing the trust of its allies. Under such conditions, allies and partners may choose to realign or withdraw support.

The U.S.-centered security architecture has traditionally been described as a 'hub-and-spokes', in which the hegemon (the hub) determines the overall direction and the allies (the spokes) follow accordingly. However, recent flow suggests that the spokes are no longer unconditionally bound to follow the hub. The U.S. must recognize that allies are increasingly capable of pursuing independent strategies.

Third, as is typical in most presidential systems, a government's policy direction is often attributed to the sitting president. The U.S. is no exception, and policies and decisions made during the Trump administration are commonly associated with President Trump himself. However, the distinctive feature of the Trump administration lies in its mode of communication: rather than relying on established bureaucratic processes and institutional channels, policy announcements were often made directly through the president's personal statements or social media.

This approach frequently resulted in inconsistencies, including instances where statements were later retracted or corrected. As a consequence, global perceptions of U.S. policy became increasingly volatile, often shifting in response to a single statement. This pattern has also raised doubts about the consistency and reliability of U.S. foreign policy. Rather than reacting immediately to Trump's statements, other states increasingly



adopt a wait-and-see stance, anticipating potential reversals. As a result, confidence in U.S. foreign policy has weakened. At a time when the U.S. is already facing relative decline as a global hegemon, such consequences further contribute to a perception that the U.S. has lost a reliable and trusted leadership role, regardless of its actual material capabilities.

Fourth, it is necessary to reconsider whether the increasing emphasis on self-reliance among U.S. allies ultimately contributes to the maintenance of U.S. influence. From the perspective of the international community, the Trump administration's demands—particularly regarding NATO burden-sharing and financial contributions—are not entirely unreasonable, especially in the context of a perceived decline in U.S. power. However, U.S. dominance is historically reinforced by the asymmetrical dependence of allies, particularly in terms of nuclear deterrence and military capabilities.

If allies were to move toward greater autonomy, or even develop independent nuclear capabilities, as implied by concerns over abandonment, it raises the question of whether the U.S. could continue to effectively manage or be influential on its allies. Increased autonomy may lead not only to independent foreign policies but also to greater risks of regional conflicts. In such a scenario, it is worth questioning whether the U.S. could remain insulated from these developments. Ultimately, maintaining a pattern of frequent abandonment and entrapment dilemmas within alliances may undermine U.S. interests rather than strengthen them.

Concluding this paper, Robert Gilpin (1981) defines a hegemon as a state that possesses not only economic strength but also political and military power. This conceptualization highlights the comprehensive nature of hegemonic power that underpins the U.S. status and its role maintaining international relations, including the ROK–U.S. alliance. The role of a hegemon within an alliance can further be understood through Charles Kindleberger's framework of Hegemonic Stability Theory. According to Kindleberger (1973), a hegemon plays a central role by possessing both the capacity and the willingness to provide public goods within the international system, thereby exercising leadership. Moreover, the stability of the international system depends not only on the material capabilities of the hegemon but also, crucially, on its willingness to lead. This emphasis on willingness is also reflected in the work of Keohane and Nye (1973), who argue that a hegemonic system is sustained "when one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so."

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FROM SOLIDARITY TO SURVIVAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSITION OF SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE KOREAN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE DURING THE UKRAINE WAR USING KOBERT

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Abstract

This study examines how security perceptions in Korea's digital public sphere shifted in relation to the Ukraine war. Drawing on 101,900 items of portal news comments and YouTube news comments collected between 2022 and 2025, it applies sentiment-based discourse analysis using KoBERT. Rather than relying on a simple positive–negative split, the analysis classifies discourse into seven emotion categories and then consolidates them into security-relevant dimensions—threat perception, hostility, and humanitarian solidarity—to trace how emotional configurations evolve over time. The results indicate that Korea's security framing moved from an initially value-oriented stance centered on humanitarian solidarity, through a period of economic pragmatism as the war prolonged, and then shifted markedly toward an existential, survival-oriented mode following reports of North Korean troop deployments. This transition is captured by the Security Sentiment Transfer Index (SSTI) developed in this study, which rose from 0.85 in the outbreak phase to 4.80 during the deployment period. The pattern suggests that when external security crises become linked to domestically salient conditions, public interpretation tends to converge on survival concerns while normative evaluation recedes. Platform-level comparisons further show that SSTI values are consistently higher on YouTube than on portal news comments, with the largest divergence observed during the deployment period. This gap aligns with the role of visually driven content and recommendation dynamics in intensifying high-arousal emotions such as fear and anger. In addition, keyword-weight analysis identifies concrete terms—most notably "conscription" and "nuclear"—as salient triggers associated with the sharpest increases in SSTI, indicating that perceived proximity to personal safety and national vulnerability amplifies security sensitivity. Taken together, the findings underscore the importance of the emotional configuration of digital discourse as a factor in shifts in security perception. The study therefore argues that national crisis management may benefit from security communication strategies that address the public's perceived existential risk and micro-level anxieties, rather than treating security messaging as a one-way transmission of situational information.

Keywords

Ukraine War, Security Sentiment Transfer, KoBERT, Security Sentiment Transfer Index (SSTI), North Korean Deployment, Digital Public Sphere.



Resumo

Este estudo analisa como as percepções de segurança na esfera pública digital da Coreia se alteraram em relação à guerra na Ucrânia. Com base em 101 900 comentários de notícias em portais e no YouTube recolhidos entre 2022 e 2025, aplica uma análise do discurso baseada no sentimento utilizando o KoBERT. Em vez de se basear numa simples divisão entre positivo e negativo, a análise classifica o discurso em sete categorias emocionais e, em seguida, consolida-as em dimensões relevantes para a segurança — percepção de ameaça, hostilidade e solidariedade humanitária — para traçar a forma como as configurações emocionais evoluem ao longo do tempo. Os resultados indicam que o enquadramento de segurança da Coreia passou de uma postura inicialmente orientada para os valores, centrada na solidariedade humanitária, passando por um período de pragmatismo económico à medida que a guerra se prolongava, para depois se deslocar marcadamente para um modo existencial, orientado para a sobrevivência, na sequência de relatos sobre o destacamento de tropas norte-coreanas. Esta transição é captada pelo Índice de Transferência de Sentimento de Segurança (SSTI) desenvolvido neste estudo, que subiu de 0,85 na fase de eclodimento para 4,80 durante o período de mobilização. O padrão sugere que, quando as crises de segurança externas se ligam a condições internamente salientes, a interpretação pública tende a convergir para preocupações de sobrevivência, enquanto a avaliação normativa recua. As comparações ao nível das plataformas mostram ainda que os valores do SSTI são consistentemente mais elevados no YouTube do que nos comentários dos portais de notícias, com a maior divergência observada durante o período de mobilização. Esta diferença está em consonância com o papel do conteúdo visual e da dinâmica de recomendação na intensificação de emoções de alta excitação, como o medo e a raiva. Além disso, a análise de ponderação de palavras-chave identifica termos concretos — mais notavelmente «recrutamento» e «nuclear» — como gatilhos salientes associados aos aumentos mais acentuados no SSTI, indicando que a proximidade percebida com a segurança pessoal e a vulnerabilidade nacional amplifica a sensibilidade à segurança. Em conjunto, as conclusões sublinham a importância da configuração emocional do discurso digital como um fator nas mudanças na percepção de segurança. O estudo defende, portanto, que a gestão de crises nacionais pode beneficiar de estratégias de comunicação de segurança que abordem o risco existencial percebido pelo público e as ansiedades ao nível micro, em vez de tratar as mensagens de segurança como uma transmissão unidirecional de informação situacional.

Palavras-chave

Guerra na Ucrânia, Transferência de Sentimento de Segurança, KoBERT, Índice de Transferência de Sentimento de Segurança (SSTI), Desdobramento da Coreia do Norte, Esfera Pública Digital.

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FROM SOLIDARITY TO SURVIVAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSITION OF SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE KOREAN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE DURING THE UKRAINE WAR USING KOBERT¹

HAYANN LEE

Introduction

Digital media platforms such as YouTube and online news portals have become primary sources of information in contemporary daily life. Through these platforms, the public is routinely exposed to large volumes of information on international affairs and security issues. Even without direct experience of events, people form their own perceptions of conflict and violence through mediated images and texts. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009, p. 96) describes this process as learning through indirect experience and suggests that media information can serve not only perceptual functions but also as a basis for concrete judgment.

The Ukraine war, which began in 2022, illustrates the influence of digital discourse in this regard. In the early stage of the war, public discussion in Korea tended to frame the conflict as a threat to the liberal order in Europe, accompanied by expressions of humanitarian solidarity. As the war prolonged, however, economic strain and fatigue gradually altered the tone of discussion. Reports in late 2024 concerning the deployment of North Korean troops to Russia constituted a turning point, leading many to reassess the war not as a distant conflict but as a material threat linked to security on the Korean Peninsula.

Such perceptual changes are often more visible in news comments and YouTube discussions than in survey results (Potter, 2014, p. 17). Reactions to the same news story frequently include a mixture of fear, anger, cynicism, and solidarity. These responses go beyond opinion expression and contribute to emotional frameworks through which war and security are understood. In this sense, digital discourse functions less as a passive reflection of information than as a space where uncertain international security environments are interpreted and given meaning in emotional terms.

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Previous sentiment analysis research has largely accumulated around short texts with relatively simple emotional structures, such as movie comments or product reviews. While these approaches have achieved technical progress, they face limitations in analyzing international conflicts where political context and emotion overlap, as in the Ukraine war often contain context-dependent expressions, and emotional direction may shift with narrative development and situational cues (Kim et al., 2022). When such materials are processed using short-text-oriented sentiment analysis methods, it becomes difficult to capture emotional flow and cumulative effects within discourse.

In this context, tracing changes in emotional framing with an advanced Korean pretrained model such as KoBERT provides a timely means of empirically examining how security perceptions in Korean society are reorganized. This study therefore seeks to track changes in emotional framing in the Korean digital public sphere from the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 through 2025. Given the frequent overlap of emotional expressions in security discourse, it applies the logic of the sentiment combination model and the layered model proposed in prior studies and evaluates their analytical usefulness.

To this end, the study poses the following research questions:

Research Question 1. How do the relative weight and prevalence of humanitarian solidarity and security threat/hostility frames change across key phases of the Ukraine war (outbreak, stalemate, and deployment period), and how does the SSTI vary accordingly in the Korean digital public sphere?

Research Question 2. Between context-level and sentence-level analysis of news comments, which approach is more suitable for capturing the multi-layered emotional structure of security discourse while maintaining classification performance (accuracy and recall)?

Research Question 3. When the European security crisis intersects with the factor of North Korean troop deployment, how is Korean public interpretation restructured from value-oriented readings toward survival-oriented perceptions as reflected in the SSTI?

KoBERT, a model adapted from Google's BERT to better reflect Korean linguistic characteristics, is used as the main analytical tool. Whereas BERT was primarily trained on English-language corpora, KoBERT was pretrained on datasets that include Korean comments and colloquial expressions and has been evaluated as showing relatively stable performance in the analysis of unstructured Korean text (SKT Brain, 2019).

Rather than relying on a simple positive-negative dichotomy, the study reconstructs security discourse using seven discrete emotions, including anger, fear, and sadness. It combines post hoc integration of emotional categories with a dual-classifier approach and employs the AI Hub Korean emotion dataset for training. The collected portal news comments and YouTube news comments were preprocessed and used for model training and comparative performance evaluation.

Applying sentiment analysis to the broader context of international politics and security discourse, rather than limiting it to technical classification, constitutes a central academic contribution of this study. In particular, by treating the emotional structure of the digital public sphere as a meaningful variable in explaining changes in security perception, the



study draws attention to emotional dynamics that have received limited attention in prior research.

Theoretical Background

Reconfiguring the Digital Public Sphere and Security Discourse

In its traditional sense, the public sphere has been structured around institutionalized actors—such as the press, political parties, and civil society organizations—that produce and mediate discourse (Habermas, 1989, p. 36; Kim Sujeong, 2021, p. 42). Within this space, political issues have typically been filtered and refined through established norms and formats, and citizens' views have tended to be expressed through limited channels. The spread of digital platforms, however, has fundamentally altered the very threshold of entry into the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 74). News comments, YouTube reactions, and social media posts now operate not as peripheral opinions but as core discursive arenas through which the substantive meaning of events is constituted (Chadwick, 2013, p. 119).

The defining character of the digital public sphere extends beyond accessibility. The rapid circulation of information and the accumulation of reactions accelerate the diffusion of controversy, and a notable feature of this process is that emotional and intuitive interpretations often take precedence over carefully developed argumentation. This tendency becomes more pronounced in domains such as foreign policy and security, where informational asymmetries are substantial and direct experience is limited. Before encountering official policy documents or expert assessments, people often first register and interpret events through platforms in a sensory and immediate manner. In this respect, the digital public sphere is not simply a tool for measuring public opinion; it is a dynamic site in which events are translated into social meaning.

News comments provide a useful empirical window into the structure of public perception. Comments do more than signal agreement or disagreement with journalistic narratives; they also present competing emotional frames—such as empathy, vigilance, and cynicism—through which events are to be read. This space is thus less a mere aggregation of individual views than a setting in which an affective atmosphere around a given issue is formed and amplified. Analyzing the digital public sphere, therefore, is closely connected to tracing the pathways through which social interpretations of events take shape.

Security issues, in turn, tend to connect with more fundamental perceptions of threat and survival. Once a given fact is named and received as a "threat," emotional involvement becomes difficult to avoid; fear expands uncertainty, while anger intensifies demands for attribution of responsibility and encourages preferences for hardline responses. By contrast, solidarity can strengthen moral legitimacy, and cynicism may translate into declining trust in policy more broadly (Marcus et al., 2000, p. 54; Mercer, 2010, p. 8). These emotions should not be treated simply as obstacles to rational judgment. Rather, they often play a central role as cognitive cues through which the public seeks to make sense of complex international conditions.



Moreover, emotions continue to shift as events unfold. War is not a single, discrete incident but a prolonged process, within which informational framing and the direction of threat perception are repeatedly reorganized (Kim Dohyeon, 2022, p. 91). The affective texture of security discourse can, through repetition and accumulation, harden into a dominant interpretive frame or turn toward a new one. The digital public sphere is precisely where such perceptual shifts tend to be registered most quickly and most sensitively.

Emotional Politics and Emotional Framing

The conventional assumption that political judgment is primarily the product of rational calculation has been repeatedly revised in recent political communication research. The perspective commonly referred to as emotional politics does not treat emotion as an irrational residue to be excluded; instead, it understands emotion as a core resource that shapes political perception and choice (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 23; Seo Bokgyeong, 2019, p. 18). When the public seeks to grasp distant and complex events—such as war or economic sanctions—emotion often functions as the point at which information processing begins.

In this study, an emotional frame refers to a structural pattern of affect that is repeatedly invoked in the interpretation of a particular event. It is not the result of mechanically summing sentiment scores from individual sentences. Rather, it is an analytical concept designed to capture which emotions become dominant in a given period, and how those emotions come to function as the central axis of interpretation.

In protracted crisis contexts such as war, emotional frames do not remain fixed. Shifts in international responses, the dynamics of domestic politics, or unexpected external shocks can repeatedly relocate the center of gravity of public sentiment. For this reason, identifying emotional frames requires more than a snapshot at a single point in time; it calls for a time-series perspective capable of tracing structural change as it unfolds. This is also why relational analysis is necessary—for example, examining how initially diffuse fear may come to combine with anger, and how such affective combinations may be translated into concrete political attitudes, including support for or opposition to policies.

Linking to European Security Change and Korean Digital Discourse

For Korean society, the Ukraine war was not merely a conflict in a distant region; it was an event that could be readily connected to the existing security landscape shaped by the North Korean nuclear threat, alliance structures, and great-power rivalry. When public emotion shifts from humanitarian concern grounded in moral sympathy for others to an existential perception of threat tied to national survival, a rapid structural reconfiguration of the emotional frame becomes possible. This study concentrates on empirically tracing when such affective thresholds emerge and through what contexts they become reinforced.



At the same time, the war made visible a major turning point in European security order—marked by the renewed emphasis on military power, the reconfiguration of alliances, and the recalibration of threat perception. The intense political and social debates that followed within Europe are not simply consumed in Korea as external developments. Rather, they operate as a decisive reference point that confronts Koreans with the strategic choices states must make under conditions of extreme war, and with the opportunity costs entailed by those choices, thereby prompting renewed consideration of the substantive weight of security.

Accordingly, European responses can be interpreted in connection with the possibility of contingency on the Korean Peninsula. Once policy changes in Europe become objects of contestation in Korea's digital public sphere, the war is transformed from international news into a standard of comparison. This transformation becomes more explicit when it is coupled with affective structure.

Discourse surrounding the Ukraine war contains both normative and realist interpretations at the same time (Barbieri et al., 2023, p. 318). On one side, international norms and value-based solidarity are emphasized; on the other, a strong view persists that state choices are ultimately determined by national security and interests. This tension recurs within Korea's digital public sphere as well. Some comments underscore the imperative of solidarity, while others adopt a cynical posture grounded in calculations of cost and risk.

When value frames and national-interest frames coexist, emotions do not move along a single line. Even in periods when solidarity and empathy are dominant, fear and anger can move to the foreground once an external shock occurs or a linkage to threat becomes more salient. It is in this sense that the present study accounts for these dynamics as a shift in emotional framing.

Trends in Digital Sentiment Analysis

Advances in natural language processing have led to the rapid expansion of sentiment analysis research on Korean texts. Unstructured materials—such as comments, reviews, and social media posts—can be collected at scale, and sentiment classification models offer the advantage of rendering such data analyzable in structured form. In particular, the emergence of pretrained language models has substantially improved sentiment classification performance in Korean and enabled a broad range of applied studies (Lee et al., 2023, p. 104225; Park Jungeun, 2022, p. 506).

At the same time, sentiment analysis research has repeatedly exposed a gap between technical performance and social-scientific interpretation. The question of how accurately a model classifies texts is not identical to the question of what those results mean socially. When addressing high-level political phenomena such as security discourse, it is therefore necessary to combine interpretive frameworks capable of making sense of sentiment outputs with a carefully designed unit of analysis.

Much of the relevant literature has focused primarily on refining classification accuracy or improving model architecture in engineering terms. The orientation of this study,



however, does not rest on competition over technical superiority as such. Its central concern is to determine what substantive explanatory leverage sentiment analysis can secure within research on international politics and security perceptions. For this purpose, the analysis closely examines (1) how sentiment classification strategies are refined and (2) how differences in the unit of analysis (sentence-level versus context-level) generate variation in the interpretation of results. Ultimately, the focus of this study lies not only in “how accurately the model classifies” but in what can be brought into view about the underlying contours of Korean society through the data.

Research Methodology

This study seeks to empirically examine how the global security shock of the Ukraine war has generated emotional waves in Korea’s digital public sphere and how these, in turn, have redirected public security perceptions. To this end, the study moves beyond the classification of sentiment at the level of individual sentences and adopts a pretrained language model-based emotional discourse analysis (PLM-based Emotional Discourse Analysis) framework that considers how structural shifts in affect reflect changes in security perception paradigms. As the primary analytical model, KoBERT—a Transformer-based model optimized for Korean unstructured data—was selected in order to maintain analytical efficiency and precision while avoiding the high computational costs typically associated with large language models (LLMs).

The central premise guiding this study is that public perceptions of war do not remain fixed but are continuously reconfigured in emotional terms in response to the development of events and external shocks. In the Korean context, the Ukraine war was initially received largely as a humanitarian tragedy affecting others. As the conflict persisted, and especially with the introduction of the variable of North Korean troop deployment, it reached a critical turning point at which it came to be reinterpreted as a tangible threat directly linked to national security (Eom, 2022, p. 174). This study conceptualizes this perceptual shift as a dynamic movement from a phase of solidarity grounded in universal values to a phase of survival rooted in existential threat perception.

To examine this empirically, the research process was organized into four stages. First, digital text data related to the Ukraine war were collected and refined. Second, a KoBERT-based sentiment classification model tailored to security discourse was constructed. Third, the SSTI was calculated to quantify changes in public security perceptions based on sentiment distributions. Fourth, the structure of emotional discourse was compared across different phases of the war to identify patterns of perceptual transition.

Data Collection and Preprocessing

The dataset consists of portal news comments and YouTube news comments related to the Ukraine war, collected between February 2022 and December 2025. These materials represent core data from the digital public sphere that capture spontaneous and informal public perceptions not easily observed through conventional surveys. The initial dataset



comprised 101,900 entries and subsequently underwent multi-stage cleaning to ensure analytical reliability.

To mitigate data imbalance across major phases of the war (Periods A–D), stratified sampling was applied. Comments unrelated to security issues—including partisan attacks, purely personal emotional expressions, advertisements, and spam—were removed through regular-expression-based filtering. This step was taken to prevent distortion of sentiment analysis results by political noise or meaningless text.

During text preprocessing, special characters were removed and normalization procedures were applied, followed by tokenization using KoBERT’s SentencePiece tokenizer. SentencePiece-based subword tokenization is well suited to processing Korean particles, colloquial forms, and neologisms, making it appropriate for analyzing unstructured texts such as news comments and comments.

Security-Oriented Sentiment Classification Strategy

Rather than directly adopting emotional categories commonly used in sentiment analysis, this study attempts to reclassify emotions in ways that reflect the specific nature of security discourse. This approach rests on the assumption that emotions function not merely as individual feelings but within broader political and security-related meaning systems.

The first strategy follows a baseline sentiment classification that applies the seven emotional categories in the AI Hub dataset (neutral, anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise) to identify overall sentiment distributions. This serves as a reference point for subsequent analyses.

The second strategy, termed security-driven consolidation, restructures functionally similar emotions in light of their political implications within security perception research. Fear and surprise were grouped as threat perception, given their shared role as immediate responses to perceived external danger. Anger and disgust were integrated under hostility, as both express outward rejection toward specific actors. Sadness, reflecting moral sympathy toward civilian suffering and the tragedy of war, was reinterpreted as an indicator of humanitarian solidarity.

This consolidation of categories is not a technical adjustment aimed at improving classification accuracy. Rather, it represents an analytical decision intended to more clearly capture the broader directional tendencies of security perceptions underlying fragmented emotional data.

The third strategy, contextual weighting, addresses limitations arising from treating individual comments as isolated units. Instead of analyzing each comment independently, original comments and their subsequent replies were grouped into a single discursive unit. This design reflects the observation that perceptions of security threats are shaped not only by individual reactions but also through interaction and debate with others. It allows the analysis to trace how particular emotions circulate and intensify within the public sphere. In this sense, the digital public sphere is approached



not as a static collection of opinions but as a dynamic discursive space where emotions and perceptions interact and evolve.

Development of the SSTI

To directly link the distribution of emotions in the data to structural changes in public security perceptions, this study develops and introduces the SSTI. SSTI quantifies how public cognitive frames shift from a normative phase grounded in universal values and moral sympathy toward an existential phase prioritizing national survival and material risk in response to exogenous shocks such as the Ukraine war. In other words, the index is designed to measure when and to what extent the perception of an external tragedy becomes internalized as one's own security concern. The formula for calculating the index is as follows.

$$SSTI = \frac{E_{Threat} + E_{Hostility}}{E_{Solidarity}}$$

The numerator, consisting of E_{Threat} and $E_{Hostility}$, captures the degree to which the external conflict is internalized as an existential risk connected to security on the Korean Peninsula, along with emotional expressions of fear and hostility toward perceived threat actors. The denominator, $E_{Solidarity}$, represents the emotional weight of moral sympathy that views the conflict as the tragedy of others from a universal human rights perspective.

A distinctive feature of the index is that neutral and cynical responses are treated as background values and excluded from the calculation to highlight substantive attitudinal change. This allows shifts in emotional dominance between value-based and survival-oriented orientations to appear more clearly. An SSTI value exceeding 1 indicates a structural break in which threat perception outweighs moral solidarity. This point is interpreted as a threshold of domestication, where an external security shock is translated into a personal or national concern.

For analysis, the pretrained KoBERT model was fine-tuned on a security discourse-specific dataset. Model performance was evaluated primarily using accuracy and recall. In the context of security discourse, the ability to detect subtle threat signals—such as fear or anger—is crucial for analytical validity. Recall is particularly important as it indicates how effectively the model captures emotionally charged signals during crisis situations without omission. This provides a basis for considering how the findings may inform crisis management policy and security communication strategies.

Results and Discussion

This chapter reports the empirical findings from applying KoBERT-based sentiment analysis and the SSTI to 101,900 portal news comments and YouTube comments related to the Ukraine war.



Table 1. Validity of Periodization and Data Composition

Period	Phase	Key Events and Rationale	Core Keywords	Data Volume
A	Outbreak phase	Russian invasion (Feb 2022). Discourse centered on humanitarian support and condemnation.	#peace, #refugees, #condemnPutin	28,532
B	Stalemate phase	Frontline stagnation (from Jan 2023). Growing fatigue as the war became normalized.	#prolongation, #ceasefire talks, #exhaustion	24,456
C	Economic crisis phase	Intensified inflation (from Jan 2024). Expansion of cynical, national-interest-oriented discourse.	#price surge, #gas bills, #oil prices	22,418
D	Deployment phase	Reports of North Korean troop deployment (from Nov 2024). Heightened perception of security threats.	#NK deployment, #participation, #security crisis	26,494

The overall study period was divided into four phases based on points at which major international developments appeared to coincide with psychological thresholds among the public and with shifts in the tone of discourse.

Changes in data composition and dominant keywords across periods indicate how Korean society moved from observing the Ukraine war as an external tragedy affecting others toward gradually internalizing it as a threat more directly linked to national security. In this sense, both the quantitative distribution of data and the qualitative evolution of keywords provide an empirical basis for examining how public interpretive frames were restructured across turning points.

The number of data points shows a gradual decline from Period A (28,532) to Period C (22,418). This pattern is consistent with the accumulation of public fatigue and reduced attentiveness as the war became a routine news item. However, in Period D (26,494), following reports of North Korean troop deployment, the data volume rose again. This rebound indicates that public discourse, which had entered a relatively subdued phase, was reactivated when the conflict became linked to security concerns on the Korean Peninsula. This can be understood as a form of emotional re-ignition in public attention.

Shifts in high-frequency keywords suggest a three-stage qualitative evolution in public interpretive frames.

Stage 1 (Period A: Normative Response)

Keywords grounded in universal values, such as #peace and #refugees, were prominent. The war was frequently approached from a moral perspective, often framed as a violation of international norms.

Stage 2 (Periods B–C: National-Interest Reframing)

As the war prolonged, keywords directly referencing economic burdens—such as #gas bills and #price surge—became more visible. This indicates an early phase of



domestication in which the war was increasingly interpreted not as others' suffering but in terms of personal or national cost.

Stage 3 (Period D: Security Internalization)

Terms closely tied to survival and national defense—such as #NK deployment and #security crisis—became dominant. In this phase, the war was no longer treated primarily as a comparative case but was reinterpreted as a direct and material threat to the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

The periodization adopted in this study is not merely chronological. It corresponds to points at which public psychological thresholds appear to have shifted. The transition from Period C to Period D aligns with a structural break in the SSTI proposed in this study. It captures a moment when external shocks were increasingly translated into a national security narrative and therefore provides a meaningful unit of analysis for examining perceptual change.

Taken together, the dataset of approximately 100,000 entries displays distinct emotional structures across periods. This supports the analytical claim that public perception moved from solidarity-oriented interpretations toward survival-oriented ones, and that the dataset is sufficient in both scale and content to examine this transition.

The period-based analysis further shows that public attention in Korea's digital sphere declined after the initial surge in Period A and dropped notably during the stalemate phase (B). At the same time, once economic strain became more visible in Period C, the tone of discourse began to shift from sympathy toward others to concern about one's own situation. Period D represents a particularly consequential turning point, as the war was increasingly redefined not simply as external information but as a matter connected to survival and security on the Korean Peninsula.

Quantifying the Transfer of Security Perceptions Using SSTI

Table 2. SSTI Values by Period and Structural Break Interpretation

Period	Numerator $\frac{E_{\text{Threat}}}{E_{\text{Hostility}}}$	Denominator $E_{\text{Solidarity}}$	SSTI	Analytical Interpretation
A	29.1%	34.2%	0.85	Value-oriented (solidarity outweighs threat perception)
B	32.1%	24.6%	1.30	Perceptual reversal (security concerns become more prominent)
C	36.3%	18.1%	2.01	Internalized anxiety (war repercussions viewed as affecting national interests)
D	59.5%	12.4%	4.80	Survival-oriented response (existential concern dominates discourse)



The time-series pattern of the SSTI indicates that security perceptions in Korea's digital public sphere do not change in a purely linear manner but exhibit structural breaks associated with events. Here, the term "structural break" is used descriptively to indicate discontinuous shifts in SSTI values across periods, rather than formal econometric break tests.

First, during Period A (the outbreak phase), the SSTI recorded 0.85, the only value below 1.0 across all periods. This reflects a situation in which humanitarian $E_{\text{Solidarity}}$ (34.2%) exceeded security-related threat factors (29.1%). At this stage, public engagement with the Ukraine war was largely framed in terms of moral sympathy and humanitarian solidarity toward a foreign tragedy, while security concerns remained relatively observational.

Second, across Periods B (stalemate) and C (economic crisis), the index rose stepwise to 1.30 and 2.01, respectively. This pattern corresponds to a cognitive shift in which the focal point of discourse moved from values to national interests and material costs. The fact that the SSTI exceeded 2.0 in Period C suggests that the economic repercussions of the war—such as inflation and rising energy prices—had entered domestic discourse as tangible concerns. At this stage, the war began to be internalized not merely as an external event but as a potential threat linked to Korea's own security and economic conditions.

Third, in Period D (deployment phase), when reports of North Korean troop involvement intensified, the SSTI rose sharply to 4.80—approximately 2.4 times higher than in the preceding period. This represents a marked change relative to earlier phases. Humanitarian solidarity $E_{\text{Solidarity}}$ which forms the denominator of the index, declined to roughly one-third of its initial level (12.4%), while threat and hostility factors (59.5%) became the dominant emotional components in public discourse.

Taken together, the sharp rise in SSTI suggests that when external security shocks intersect with the concrete variable of North Korean involvement, public perception tends to move away from normative or moral evaluation toward a survival-oriented frame. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that Korea's digital public sphere functions as a space where international developments are interpreted and amplified through the particular security context of the Korean Peninsula.

Across all periods, the YouTube-based public sphere recorded higher SSTI values than portal news comments, with the gap reaching its maximum (1.90) in Period D. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that YouTube's recommendation system may cluster users around highly arousing emotions such as fear and anger, a dynamic often discussed in relation to echo chamber effects.

Whereas text-centered portals tend to host relatively more policy-oriented criticism or reasoned concern, YouTube's reliance on visual immediacy can make threats appear more concrete, potentially heightening perceptions of risk and contributing to higher SSTI values.

To identify linguistic triggers associated with SSTI escalation, keywords linked to fear responses were extracted and their influence examined.



Table 3. Comparison of SSTI Across Platforms and Gap Analysis

To examine how media characteristics shape the formation and diffusion of security-related discourse, SSTI values were compared across platforms.

Period	Portal News Comments	YouTube News Comments	Gap	Platform-Specific Emotional Mechanism
A	0.75	0.95	+0.20	Visual footage of invasion on YouTube appears to stimulate fear at an earlier stage
B	1.10	1.50	+0.40	Amplified exposure to negative information through YouTube algorithms
C	1.80	2.22	+0.42	Circulation of sensational economic crisis narratives on YouTube
D	3.85	5.75	+1.90	On-site deployment footage appears to function as a catalyst for SSTI escalation

Table 4. Keyword Weight Analysis Driving SSTI Increases

Rank	Core Keyword	Weight (Standardized coefficient)	Interpretation Based on Observed Usage
1	Nuclear weapons / nuclear technology	0.92	Existential fear that deployment could accelerate nuclear advancement
2	Conscription / draft	0.85	Anxiety framed through family and military service concerns
3	World War III	0.78	Framing escalation as a global historical crisis
4	Russia–North Korea alliance	0.71	Hostility tied to perceived disruption of the security order

The weighting analysis indicates that SSTI reacts more strongly to keywords linked to bodily safety (conscription) and catastrophic threat (nuclear risk) than to abstract geopolitical dynamics. This suggests that security discourse becomes more influential when threats are perceived as emotionally proximate.

The findings are consistent with the view that public communication on security issues may resonate differently depending on how directly messages address perceived risks to personal safety and survival.



Table 5. Velocity of SSTI Transfer

Event	SSTI Before	SSTI After	Change	Time to Threshold and Characteristics
Energy price surge (C)	1.45	2.01	+0.56	Approx. 3 months (economic strain gradually linked to security concerns)
North Korean deployment reports (D)	2.01	4.80	+2.79	Within 48 hours (rapid surge associated with heightened alarm)

Security sensitivity was assessed by measuring how rapidly SSTI values crossed critical thresholds following major events.

Economic threats in Period C were associated with gradual SSTI increases, whereas reports of direct military involvement by North Korea in Period D coincided with a sharp rise over a short time span. This pattern aligns with the interpretation that references to North Korea carry salience in the Korean context and can quickly reframe public perception toward security concerns.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Korea’s digital public sphere underwent a process of domestication in its interpretation of the Ukraine war. What initially appeared as a distant conflict gradually became framed in relation to Korea’s own security context.

By the later stage (Period D), the SSTI reached 4.80, indicating a marked shift in the emotional structure of discourse. This shift illustrates how moral or humanitarian frames can weaken when threats are perceived as personal or nationally relevant.

The results point to the importance of considering the emotional dynamics of digital discourse in national crisis management and risk communication.

Conclusion

The central finding of this analysis concerns how the external shock of the Ukraine war reshaped public security perceptions within Korea’s digital public sphere. Tracing the discursive landscape from 2022 to 2025 shows that public sentiment moved from a phase of humanitarian solidarity grounded in universal values toward a phase in which existential concerns about survival became more salient.

This shift provides empirical support for the view that public security perceptions are influenced less by purely logical reasoning than by emotional thresholds. Normative discourses that dominated the early stage of the war gradually declined as the conflict prolonged and economic fatigue accumulated. When the direct variable of North Korean troop deployment entered discourse, public responses increasingly reflected survival-oriented interpretations rather than extended deliberation. This pattern is consistent with the interpretation that Korea’s digital public sphere functions as a sensitive arena where international developments are interpreted and amplified through the particular security context of the Korean Peninsula.



The contribution of this study lies not in technical model competition but in adapting KoBERT as an analytical tool for research on international politics and security perceptions. The recategorization of emotions and the use of contextual weighting were designed to uncover the broader directional tendencies of security perception embedded in fragmented emotional data, thereby extending the analytical scope of unstructured data research.

The proposed SSTI further distinguishes this study by offering a quantitative way to trace when and to what degree international crises are internalized by the public. Treating comments not as isolated units but as interconnected discursive units reflects an effort to conceptualize the digital public sphere as a dynamic space where emotions and perceptions circulate and reinforce one another.

The empirical patterns observed here indicate that contemporary security discourse is closely intertwined with the emotional dynamics of digital platforms. Accordingly, security communication may be more effective when considering not only the transmission of situational information but also the public's perceived vulnerabilities, including concerns related to personal safety and military service.

This study does not incorporate detailed demographic characteristics of users, which remains a limitation. Nevertheless, given the evidence that digital discourse is associated with shifts in security perception, future research should examine how these emotional currents translate into voting behavior and concrete policy preferences.

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THE UK'S RESET DIPLOMACY TOWARDS THE EU: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN THE ERA OF POLYCRISIS

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Abstract

This article examines the United Kingdom's post-Brexit reset diplomacy toward the European Union and explores its implications for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula in the era of polycrisis. Moving beyond the binary framing of rupture versus reversal, it argues that the reset represents a form of pragmatic diplomacy characterised by selective and functionally bounded cooperation conducted within enduring political and legal constraints. Conceptually, the article links polycrisis to a diplomatic environment in which adaptability, risk management, and issue-specific coordination take precedence, understanding it not merely as the coexistence of multiple crises but as their interaction across security, economic, and institutional domains that structurally limits diplomatic choice. Empirically, it shows how the UK–EU reset has unfolded through incremental initiatives aimed at stabilising interaction in specific policy areas, while deliberately avoiding the reopening of foundational disputes associated with Brexit. Building on this analysis, the article extends its framework to the Korean Peninsula, which is similarly shaped by interacting security dilemmas, great-power competition, contested sanctions governance, and geoeconomic fragmentation. Rather than proposing the UK–EU reset as a transferable policy model, it identifies broader analytical lessons on diplomacy under persistent structural constraint, arguing that peace and security are more plausibly advanced through multi-vector, issue-specific engagement and strategies of risk containment than through comprehensive settlement efforts or assumptions of institutional convergence.

Keywords

Polycrisis, Pragmatic diplomacy, UK–EU reset, Institutional constraints, Korean Peninsula peace.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a reorientação da diplomacia do Reino Unido em relação à União Europeia após o Brexit e explora as suas implicações para a paz e a segurança na Península da Coreia na era da policrise. Ultrapassando o enquadramento binário entre ruptura e reversão, defende que essa reorientação representa uma forma de diplomacia pragmática, caracterizada por uma cooperação seletiva e funcionalmente delimitada, conduzida dentro de restrições políticas e jurídicas duradouras. Conceitualmente, o artigo associa a policrise a um ambiente diplomático em que a adaptabilidade, a gestão de riscos e a coordenação específica em torno de questões específicas têm precedência, entendendo-a não apenas como a coexistência de múltiplas crises, mas como a sua interação nos domínios da segurança, da economia e das



instituições, o que limita estruturalmente as opções diplomáticas. Empiricamente, mostra como o reinício das relações entre o Reino Unido e a UE se desenrolou através de iniciativas incrementais destinadas a estabilizar a interação em áreas políticas específicas, evitando deliberadamente a reabertura de disputas fundamentais associadas ao Brexit. Com base nesta análise, o artigo alarga o seu quadro à Península Coreana, que é moldada de forma semelhante por dilemas de segurança interativos, competição entre grandes potências, governação contestada das sanções e fragmentação geoeconómica. Em vez de propor o reajustamento das relações entre o Reino Unido e a UE como um modelo de política transferível, identifica lições analíticas mais amplas sobre a diplomacia sob restrições estruturais persistentes, argumentando que a paz e a segurança são promovidas de forma mais plausível através de um envolvimento multivetorial e específico a cada questão e de estratégias de contenção de riscos do que através de esforços de resolução abrangentes ou pressupostos de convergência institucional.

Palavras-chave

Policrise, Diplomacia pragmática, Reajustamento das relações entre o Reino Unido e a UE, Restrições institucionais, Paz na Península Coreana.

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THE UK'S RESET DIPLOMACY TOWARDS THE EU: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN THE ERA OF POLYCRISIS

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Introduction

The post-Brexit trajectory of the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union (EU) has frequently been interpreted through a dichotomous lens of rupture versus reversal. Early policy narratives following the 2016 referendum emphasised regulatory autonomy, strategic diversification, and the pursuit of a "Global Britain" agenda beyond Europe. Yet, nearly a decade after Brexit, this binary framing has proven insufficient for capturing the evolving dynamics of UK-EU relations. As post-withdrawal legal arrangements have intersected with wider geopolitical and economic disruptions, the space for either sustained strategic detachment or institutional reintegration has become increasingly constrained.

Rather than maintaining a posture of confrontation or seeking a return to pre-Brexit integration, the UK has gradually adopted a calibrated approach toward the EU that prioritises functional cooperation within the limits of the post-Brexit settlement. This recalibration became politically explicit following the Labour Party's return to government in July 2024. The new government articulated its European policy as a "reset" of relations with the EU, explicitly distancing this strategy from any intention to reverse Brexit or to re-enter core integration frameworks such as the Single Market or the Customs Union. Parliamentary briefings describe this approach as one aimed at reducing friction and improving cooperation while preserving the legal and political outcomes of withdrawal (UK Parliament, 2025a).

The concept of "reset diplomacy," as employed by the UK government, thus denotes an effort to normalise relations and enhance policy coordination without reopening the foundational terms of Brexit. Importantly, this approach frames cooperation as a practical and technical matter rather than a symbolic or constitutional one. By emphasising continuity with the existing legal architecture, the reset seeks to depoliticise aspects of UK-EU interaction while leaving core sovereignty claims formally untouched.

This paper argues that the UK's reset diplomacy toward the EU is best understood as an adaptive response to conditions of polycrisis. Polycrisis refers to the interaction and mutual reinforcement of multiple crises including geopolitical, economic, security-related,



and institutional that together constrain policy options more severely than any single crisis in isolation (Lawrence et al., 2024). In the European context, the prolonged war in Ukraine, energy insecurity, disruptions to global supply chains, and the economic adjustment costs associated with Brexit form an entangled crisis environment. Recent scholarship emphasises that polycrisis should be treated not as a temporary phase, but as a durable condition characterised by persistent uncertainty and the erosion of clear crisis-exit strategies. Under such conditions, policy approaches premised on rigid sovereignty or comprehensive disengagement tend to generate escalating costs.

Three structural pressures are particularly relevant in shaping the UK's reset diplomacy. First, the deterioration of the European security environment since 2022 has reinforced the strategic importance of close coordination among European states. Although the UK remains firmly embedded in NATO, the war in Ukraine has highlighted operational and industrial interdependencies linking European security actors, including EU institutions and non-member partners (European Council, 2025a). This has increased the practical relevance of EU-level coordination even for states formally outside the Union.

Second, uncertainty surrounding the future orientation and reliability of U.S. global engagement has encouraged European governments to diversify security cooperation and strengthen regional coordination mechanisms. This context has sharpened incentives for structured UK–EU engagement in defence and security-related areas, particularly where transatlantic guarantees alone appear insufficient.

Third, domestic economic pressures linked to post-Brexit trade frictions have generated growing demand for targeted forms of cooperation with the EU. Regulatory divergence has produced tangible costs in areas such as agri-food trade and carbon pricing, where small and medium-sized enterprises embedded in EU-facing supply chains are particularly exposed (UK Parliament, 2025b).

Within this environment, reset diplomacy can be characterised as a form of pragmatic diplomacy. In this paper, pragmatic diplomacy refers to an interest-driven, problem-oriented approach that prioritises practical outcomes over ideological coherence or comprehensive institutional alignment. Rather than pursuing either full regulatory autonomy or deep reintegration, pragmatic diplomacy operates through modular and sector-specific arrangements that can be negotiated incrementally and adjusted over time. Such an approach is particularly suited to polycrisis conditions, where overlapping risks and political uncertainty limit the feasibility of comprehensive bargains.

Empirically, the UK–EU reset has unfolded through a series of concrete initiatives since 2023, gaining momentum after the 2024 change of government. These include the restoration of regular political summitry, efforts to construct a new framework for strategic partnership, and negotiations over partial economic and regulatory coordination. While none of these developments amount to a reversal of Brexit, they collectively represent a shift away from confrontation toward managed cooperation.

Beyond the European case, this paper suggests that the UK's reset diplomacy offers analytically relevant insights for South Korea. The Korean Peninsula is likewise situated within a polycrisis environment shaped by great-power rivalry, alliance uncertainty, economic fragmentation, and persistent security dilemmas. The value of this comparison



lies not in institutional similarity, but in the shared condition of constraint under which diplomacy unfolds. Examining how a middle power such as the UK navigates cooperation and autonomy under crisis entanglement contributes to broader discussions on diplomatic strategies for maintaining peace and stability in environments where comprehensive solutions remain politically and structurally out of reach.

Polycrisis and Pragmatic Diplomacy: A Theoretical Framework

Polycrisis and State Behaviour under Structural Constraint

The concept of polycrisis has gained analytical prominence as scholars have sought to capture the growing complexity and instability of the contemporary global order. Unlike conventional crisis frameworks that treat shocks as discrete, sequential, and sectorally bounded, polycrisis refers to a condition in which multiple crises interact and reinforce one another across domains. These interactions generate systemic effects that cannot be adequately understood through linear or compartmentalised analysis.

The intellectual origins of the concept can be traced to Edgar Morin's critique of modern governance, which emphasised the interdependence of economic, political, ecological, and social systems. Morin argued that crises in complex societies do not simply accumulate over time. Instead, they become mutually constitutive, gradually eroding the capacity of institutions to respond through reductionist or siloed approaches (Morin & Kern, 1999). This insight is particularly relevant for contemporary international politics, where policy responses in one domain increasingly produce indirect consequences in others.

Building on this tradition, Lawrence et al. (2024) define global polycrisis as the causal entanglement of crises spanning multiple global systems, in which interconnected dynamics significantly diminish collective prospects. They identify three mechanisms through which polycrisis unfolds. Common stresses exert simultaneous pressure on multiple systems, while domino effects allow shocks to propagate across policy domains. Over time, feedback loops further intensify instability. This formulation shifts analytical attention away from the frequency or scale of individual crises and toward the structural conditions under which crises interact.

Within European studies, polycrisis has become a central lens for interpreting governance dynamics since the late 2000s. Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan (2019) argue that the EU's experience of overlapping crises, including financial instability, migration pressures, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, has not produced a uniform trajectory of either integration or disintegration. Instead, polycrisis has reshaped political incentives and institutional practices. This has contributed to differentiated integration, the use of experimental policy instruments, and a growing reliance on informal coordination. Importantly, this literature emphasises that polycrisis does not determine outcomes in advance. Rather, it alters the constraints within which political actors operate.



From a broader international relations perspective, polycrisis affects state behaviour by increasing uncertainty, shortening decision horizons, and heightening sensitivity to cumulative and indirect effects. In such environments, the costs of policy rigidity rise substantially. Strategies grounded in ideological consistency, whether they prioritise sovereignty maximalism or normative integrationism, risk generating spillover effects that undermine performance in adjacent domains. As a result, states embedded in dense networks of interdependence increasingly prioritise flexibility, reversibility, and risk management in their external relations.

Polycrisis thus introduces a form of structural constraint that differs from traditional accounts centred on power asymmetry or formal institutional dependence (Lawrence et al., 2024). Constraints arise not only from external actors or legal rules, but also from the interaction of crises that narrow the range of politically and economically viable choices. This perspective helps explain why states may pursue cooperation even in the absence of trust or normative alignment. Under conditions of polycrisis, cooperation becomes less a reflection of shared values and more a pragmatic response to systemic risk.

For the United Kingdom, the post-Brexit period coincides with precisely such a condition of structural constraint. Economic adjustment costs associated with withdrawal from the EU, the destabilisation of European security following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, energy insecurity, and uncertainty surrounding transatlantic relations together constitute a sustained polycrisis environment. These overlapping pressures increase the relative costs of prolonged confrontation with the EU and make selective cooperation a rational adaptation rather than a normative concession. In this sense, polycrisis does not merely provide background context for UK–EU relations. It actively reshapes the strategic calculus through which post-Brexit diplomacy is conducted.

Pragmatic Diplomacy as an Adaptive Response to Polycrisis

Within environments characterised by structural constraint and persistent uncertainty, pragmatic diplomacy emerges as a distinctive mode of foreign policy adaptation. In this article, pragmatic diplomacy refers to an interest-driven and problem-oriented approach that prioritises practical outcomes over doctrinal coherence or comprehensive institutional alignment. Rather than seeking to resolve underlying political conflicts or to establish stable end-states, pragmatic diplomacy focuses on managing immediate challenges within the limits imposed by domestic politics, institutional arrangements, and external pressures.

The conceptual roots of pragmatic diplomacy can be traced to philosophical pragmatism, which emphasises experimentalism, learning through practice, and the evaluation of ideas based on their consequences rather than their conformity to abstract principles. Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) introduce this orientation into international relations scholarship by arguing that pragmatism enables policy-makers to navigate complex environments through selective and situational reasoning. From this perspective,



diplomatic action is guided less by theoretical consistency than by assessments of feasibility under specific conditions.

In practical terms, pragmatic diplomacy manifests itself in several recurring patterns. Cooperation is typically organised around discrete policy areas rather than comprehensive agreements. Institutional arrangements are treated as provisional and subject to adjustment, rather than as fixed endpoints. Fragmentation and differentiated participation are accepted as normal features of contemporary governance, particularly in contexts where political consensus is limited. These features align closely with practice-oriented accounts of diplomacy, which emphasise routines, informal coordination, and tacit knowledge as central to the functioning of international cooperation (Pouliot & Cornut, 2015).

Changes in the structure of contemporary diplomacy further reinforce the relevance of pragmatic approaches. Hocking (2016) observes that diplomatic practice has become increasingly network-based and polycentric, reflecting the diffusion of authority across state and non-state actors and the proliferation of issue-specific policy arenas. In such settings, diplomacy rarely unfolds through singular negotiating forums or comprehensive treaties. Instead, it operates through overlapping channels that connect governments, international organisations, and specialised agencies. Pragmatic diplomacy is well suited to this environment because it does not depend on hierarchical institutional control or normative convergence.

Importantly, pragmatic diplomacy should not be conflated with opportunism or policy inconsistency. Although it avoids rigid doctrinal commitments, it remains strategically purposeful. Its defining feature lies in the prioritisation of feasibility and risk mitigation under conditions of uncertainty. In polycrisis environments, this often results in cooperation that is limited in scope and framed in technical terms, thereby reducing domestic political exposure while preserving the possibility of future adjustment.

From this perspective, pragmatic diplomacy occupies a middle ground between classical realist and liberal institutionalist approaches. It does not reject cooperation in favour of unilateral power projection, nor does it assume that durable cooperation requires deep normative alignment or institutional integration. Instead, it treats cooperation as a contingent and context-dependent practice shaped by structural constraints. This orientation is particularly relevant for actors operating outside formal membership frameworks, such as the UK in its post-Brexit relationship with the EU, where political red lines limit the scope of institutional engagement but do not eliminate functional interdependence.

Under conditions of polycrisis, pragmatic diplomacy thus represents not a temporary deviation from established strategies, but a durable mode of adjustment. As overlapping crises continue to interact across security, economic, and institutional domains, diplomatic practices that emphasise flexibility, reversibility, and issue-specific coordination are likely to remain central to the management of international relations.



Analytical Implications for the Study of UK–EU Relations

The combined perspective of polycrisis and pragmatic diplomacy provides a coherent analytical lens for understanding the United Kingdom's reset diplomacy toward the EU. Polycrisis generates shared pressures across security, economic, and institutional domains that weaken the viability of ideologically rigid positions. In such environments, diplomatic strategies premised on either sustained confrontation or comprehensive reintegration tend to incur escalating political and material costs. Pragmatic diplomacy offers an alternative logic by enabling cooperation to proceed within clearly recognised constraints.

This framework helps explain both the timing and the form of the UK–EU reset. The recalibration of relations did not emerge from a fundamental reassessment of Brexit as a political project. Instead, it reflected a gradual adjustment to the cumulative pressures generated by overlapping crises. Security uncertainty, economic volatility, and regulatory interdependence interacted to narrow the range of feasible policy options, making selective cooperation increasingly attractive even in the absence of political trust or normative convergence.

Analytically, the emphasis on modular and issue-specific cooperation is particularly significant. Rather than pursuing a single overarching agreement, the UK–EU reset has unfolded through discrete initiatives that address concrete policy needs while avoiding politically sensitive questions of institutional membership. This approach reduces the risk that setbacks in one domain will undermine cooperation in others. It also allows both parties to recalibrate engagement over time in response to changing conditions, a feature that is especially valuable in polycrisis environments characterised by uncertainty and rapid change.

The framework further highlights the importance of recognising political and institutional constraints as constitutive elements of diplomacy rather than as obstacles to be overcome. In the UK–EU case, domestic political red lines in the UK and legal-institutional limits on the EU side shape not only what forms of cooperation are possible, but also how cooperation is framed and justified. Treating these constraints analytically helps explain why the reset has taken an incremental, technically oriented form rather than moving toward deeper institutionalisation.

Finally, this perspective clarifies the distinction between cooperation and convergence. The UK–EU reset demonstrates that functional cooperation can be sustained without shared long-term integration goals or normative alignment. Cooperation emerges as a contingent practice aimed at managing specific risks rather than as a pathway toward systemic transformation. This insight is central to the broader argument of the article, as it allows the analysis to move beyond debates over integration outcomes and toward a more grounded understanding of how diplomacy operates under conditions of structural constraint.

By establishing these analytical implications, this section provides a conceptual bridge between the theoretical discussion of polycrisis and pragmatic diplomacy and the empirical analysis of the UK–EU reset that follows. It sets the stage for examining how



these dynamics have been translated into concrete diplomatic practices, while remaining attentive to the limits imposed by post-Brexit political and institutional realities.

The UK–EU Reset under Polycrisis: Structural Pressures and Pragmatic Diplomacy

Structural Pressures in a Polycrisis Environment

The recalibration of UK–EU relations has continued to unfold within a polycrisis environment characterised by persistence rather than resolution. Since 2025, overlapping security, economic, and institutional pressures have not stabilised into a new equilibrium. Instead, they have evolved in ways that reinforce one another, further constraining diplomatic choice. Within this context, the UK–EU reset has increasingly been framed not as a discretionary policy initiative, but as a functional response to sustained uncertainty.

From a geopolitical perspective, the European security landscape remains unsettled. Although the war in Ukraine has entered a protracted phase, its implications for European defence planning and strategic coordination have deepened rather than diminished. The EU has continued to expand its role in defence-industrial coordination and sanctions governance, while debates over burden-sharing and strategic autonomy have intensified (European Council, 2025b). These developments underscore the extent to which European security governance now operates across multiple institutional layers, including NATO, EU frameworks, and partnerships with non-member states. For the UK, this has increased the practical costs associated with sustained distance from EU-level coordination, even as formal boundaries related to membership remain firmly in place.

Economic pressures have likewise persisted and accumulated. Post-Brexit trade frictions continue to intersect with broader challenges related to supply-chain resilience, energy security, and sluggish growth. Parliamentary briefings published since 2025 indicate that non-tariff barriers and regulatory divergence have become structural features of UK–EU economic relations rather than transitional effects (UK Parliament, 2025c; House of Lords Library, 2026). Over time, the cumulative impact of these constraints has heightened political sensitivity to the economic costs of limited cooperation, particularly in sectors where regulatory divergence generates disproportionate adjustment burdens.

What distinguishes this phase of UK–EU relations is not the emergence of new crises, but the interaction of existing ones. Security uncertainty, economic adjustment, and institutional separation increasingly reinforce each other, narrowing the range of politically viable strategies. Under such conditions, approaches premised on either sustained confrontation or comprehensive reintegration become difficult to sustain. The reset should therefore be understood less as a change in strategic ambition than as an effort to manage exposure to systemic risk within a prolonged polycrisis environment.



Security Recalibration and Cooperation beyond Membership

Security cooperation has remained central to the evolving UK–EU reset, particularly as the limits of purely alliance-based frameworks have become more apparent. Although NATO continues to function as the primary pillar of European collective defence, the expansion of EU-level initiatives in defence-industrial coordination, procurement cooperation, and military mobility has increased the functional relevance of EU institutions for European security governance (European Commission, 2022). This development does not displace NATO's role, but it does complicate the institutional landscape within which European security cooperation now operates.

By early 2026, this dynamic had translated into renewed discussions concerning UK participation in selected EU defence-related mechanisms (Tidey & Jones, 2026). Public statements and media reporting suggested that the UK government was reassessing its position on engagement with EU initiatives linked to joint procurement and industrial capacity-building. These discussions were framed explicitly in functional terms. Rather than signalling a move toward institutional reintegration, they reflected shared concerns regarding capability gaps, production constraints, and the sustainability of defence support in a prolonged security crisis.

This recalibration points to a layered approach to security cooperation. The UK has continued to emphasise the primacy of NATO and the transatlantic relationship, while increasingly acknowledging that effective European security governance depends on coordination across multiple institutional venues (European Council, 2025b). Cooperation beyond formal membership thus emerges as a strategic compromise. It allows the UK to retain political autonomy while reducing the operational costs associated with exclusion from EU-led coordination frameworks. Under conditions of persistent security uncertainty, this form of pragmatic engagement becomes less an exception than a practical necessity.

Economic and Regulatory Adjustment after Brexit

Economic and regulatory adjustment constitutes a second core dimension of the UK–EU reset. While the Trade and Cooperation Agreement continues to provide the baseline framework for bilateral economic relations, its limitations have become increasingly visible as regulatory divergence intersects with broader shifts in industrial and climate policy. EU initiatives related to economic security and climate governance have generated external pressures on UK firms integrated into European value chains, particularly in sectors characterised by tight regulatory coupling (European Commission, 2023).

By early 2026, sector-specific negotiations had moved from abstract debate toward exploratory discussions focused on technical and transitional arrangements. In the agri-food sector, renewed attention to sanitary and phytosanitary measures reflected growing concern over supply disruption, administrative burden, and competitiveness (UK Parliament, 2025d). Similarly, discussions surrounding emissions trading coordination were driven less by normative alignment than by awareness that regulatory divergence could impose asymmetric costs in an already strained economic environment.



These developments highlight the evolving logic of economic cooperation under the reset. Regulatory coordination is increasingly framed as a tool for risk mitigation rather than convergence. By pursuing targeted adjustments in areas where divergence generates disproportionate costs, the UK seeks to stabilise economic interaction with the EU while maintaining the political narrative of post-Brexit autonomy. This pattern is consistent with the broader logic of pragmatic diplomacy under polycrisis, where cooperation is justified by functional necessity and bounded by political constraint.

Political and Institutional Constraints of the Reset

Despite growing incentives for cooperation, the scope and form of the UK–EU reset remain shaped by enduring political and institutional constraints on both sides. These constraints help explain why the reset has taken an incremental and selective form rather than evolving into a comprehensive framework for renewed integration.

In the UK, Brexit continues to carry significant political salience. Successive governments have reiterated commitments to core Brexit red lines, including the rejection of EU single market membership, the customs union, and free movement of persons. These constraints limit the political feasibility of deep or highly visible forms of integration and steer policy toward technocratic, sector-specific arrangements that attract less public scrutiny (House of Lords Library, 2026). As a result, the reset is framed in terms of normalisation and improvement rather than reversal.

On the EU side, institutional constraints are equally consequential. The legal architecture of the EU and concerns about precedent-setting restrict the depth of cooperation that can be extended to third countries without corresponding obligations (Fabbrini, 2020). Internal divergences among member states regarding the strategic value of closer engagement with the UK further complicate efforts to institutionalise cooperation beyond narrowly defined areas.

Taken together, these constraints reinforce a modular approach to the reset. Rather than pursuing a single overarching agreement, both parties have favoured incremental progress through discrete initiatives and structured dialogues. This approach allows cooperation to advance where mutual benefits are clear while containing political and legal risks. In this sense, the reset reflects not a transitional stage toward reintegration, but a relatively stable equilibrium shaped by the enduring legacies of Brexit and the pressures of polycrisis.

Implications for Peace and Security on the Korean Peninsula

Polycrisis on the Korean Peninsula: Interlocking Security and Geoeconomic Pressures

The Korean Peninsula constitutes a paradigmatic case of polycrisis in which security, geoeconomic, and institutional pressures interact in ways that significantly constrain diplomatic choice. Unlike episodic crises that can be addressed through discrete policy



interventions, the peninsula is shaped by the persistence of unresolved confrontation, the accumulation of risk across domains, and the absence of stable mechanisms for crisis exit. These conditions generate a structural environment in which policy flexibility is limited and the costs of miscalculation are particularly high.

At the core of this polycrisis lies the unresolved legacy of the Korean War and the continued development of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s nuclear and missile capabilities. The International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly reported that it remains unable to conduct verification activities in the DPRK, while continuing to monitor relevant facilities through open-source and satellite-based information (IAEA, 2024). This lack of verification does not merely represent a technical limitation. It constitutes a structural source of uncertainty that complicates risk assessment and undermines the predictability required for sustained crisis management.

Sanctions governance forms a second, closely related layer of polycrisis. While United Nations Security Council sanctions formally remain in place, their enforcement and monitoring have become increasingly contested. Resolution 2680 (2023) extended the mandate of the Panel of Experts only on a temporary basis, and the Panel's final report documented persistent evasion practices and growing obstacles to coordinated enforcement (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The subsequent termination of the Panel's mandate has introduced an additional element of institutional fragmentation, weakening shared situational awareness and complicating multilateral coordination.

A third dimension of polycrisis emerges from the growing salience of geoeconomic competition. Global debates on economic security, supply-chain resilience, and technological controls increasingly intersect with traditional security concerns. The World Economic Forum (2026) identifies geoeconomic confrontation and the weaponisation of economic interdependence as among the most significant short-term global risks. For the Korean Peninsula, these dynamics are particularly consequential. South Korea's security remains anchored in alliance commitments, while its economic model is deeply embedded in global value chains exposed to strategic trade controls and technological decoupling.

What distinguishes the peninsula's polycrisis is not the presence of multiple challenges per se, but the way in which these pressures reinforce one another. Nuclear risk intensifies sanctions politics, sanctions governance intersects with great-power rivalry, and geoeconomic competition feeds back into security calculations. Under such conditions, diplomatic strategies premised on comprehensive settlement or linear progress become difficult to sustain. The polycrisis of the Korean Peninsula should therefore be understood not as a temporary convergence of challenges, but as a structural condition that narrows the space for diplomatic manoeuvre and elevates the importance of risk management (World Bank, 2024).

Analytical Lessons from Pragmatic Diplomacy under Polycrisis

The UK–EU reset examined in Chapter 3 does not offer a transferable institutional model for the Korean Peninsula. Its analytical relevance lies instead in the mechanisms through which diplomatic cooperation has been recalibrated under conditions of structural



constraint. These mechanisms provide insight into how diplomacy functions in environments where comprehensive settlements are politically and institutionally unattainable.

A first analytical lesson concerns the logic of selective cooperation. Under polycrisis conditions, attempts to pursue all-encompassing agreements tend to raise the political threshold for engagement to a level that is difficult to sustain. The UK–EU reset illustrates how cooperation can be organised around discrete functional domains without reopening foundational disputes. Analytically applied to the Korean Peninsula, this suggests that limited forms of engagement may remain possible even when progress on core security issues is blocked, not because political relations have improved, but because functional coordination serves to manage specific risks.

A second lesson relates to incrementalism and modularity. Rather than constructing a single overarching framework, the reset has proceeded through layered and reversible arrangements that contain political exposure. This feature is particularly relevant in contexts characterised by domestic political volatility and security uncertainty. Incremental mechanisms allow interaction to continue without requiring irreversible commitments or assumptions of linear progress.

A third lesson concerns the treatment of constraints as constitutive elements of diplomacy. In the UK–EU case, domestic political red lines and institutional limits are not framed as temporary obstacles to be overcome, but as parameters within which cooperation is designed and justified. Strategic documents produced by the Republic of Korea similarly acknowledge that national security policy operates at the intersection of military threats, economic security, and great-power competition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, 2022). Recognising these constraints analytically reduces the risk of overestimating the feasibility of ambitious diplomatic initiatives in structurally constrained environments.

Finally, pragmatic diplomacy under polycrisis underscores the distinction between cooperation and convergence. The UK–EU reset demonstrates that functional cooperation does not require institutional convergence or normative alignment. Cooperation emerges as a contingent practice aimed at managing specific risks rather than as a pathway toward political reconciliation or systemic transformation. For the Korean Peninsula, where institutional integration analogous to the European experience is neither feasible nor analytically appropriate, this distinction is particularly significant.

Taken together, these analytical lessons do not point toward solutions or policy prescriptions. Instead, they clarify how diplomacy adapts when its scope is narrowed by persistent uncertainty and structural constraint. In this sense, pragmatic diplomacy under polycrisis provides an interpretive framework for understanding diplomatic practice in high-risk environments rather than a blueprint for conflict resolution.

Multi-Vector Cooperation and Risk Management on the Korean Peninsula

If the Korean Peninsula is understood as a setting shaped by polycrisis, diplomatic engagement oriented toward a single institutional or strategic track is unlikely to provide



a stable basis for managing risk. An analytically more appropriate framing is multi-vector cooperation, understood here not as a prescriptive strategy, but as a descriptive concept capturing the plurality of channels through which interaction is organised under conditions of structural constraint.

In the international relations literature, multi-vector foreign policy has been used to describe how states navigate competitive environments by cultivating pragmatic relations with multiple power centres rather than aligning exclusively with a single actor. Research on secondary and middle powers emphasises that such an approach is not driven by ideological neutrality, but by efforts to preserve autonomy and manage exposure to external risks in environments where dependence on any single partner may generate vulnerability (Vanderhill et al., 2020). This conceptualisation provides a useful analytical lens for examining diplomatic practice on the Korean Peninsula, where structural constraints limit the feasibility of singular or linear approaches to engagement.

Empirically, elements of multi-vector engagement are already visible in the peninsula's diplomatic landscape. South Korea's security posture remains anchored in alliance-based deterrence, while its diplomatic practice extends across multilateral institutions, regional partnerships, and issue-specific forms of coordination. This plurality reflects a context in which no single framework is capable of addressing the full range of security, economic, and geopolitical pressures confronting the peninsula.

From an analytical perspective, the significance of multi-vector cooperation lies in its relationship to risk management across domains. Goeconomic tensions associated with supply-chain restructuring, technological controls, and industrial policy increasingly interact with traditional security concerns. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has noted that economic security risks linked to global value chains and strategic technologies now directly shape national security calculations, particularly for economies deeply embedded in international production networks (OECD, 2024). Under such conditions, disruptions originating in one domain can rapidly spill over into others.

In this context, dispersing diplomatic engagement across multiple vectors may reduce the likelihood that shocks cascade uncontrollably across policy areas. Security escalation can disrupt economic and diplomatic channels that contribute to broader stability, while unmanaged goeconomic confrontation may exacerbate security dilemmas. Multi-vector engagement, understood analytically, draws attention to how diplomatic practice can mitigate such cross-domain spillovers without presupposing convergence or political reconciliation.

Domestic political dynamics constitute an additional dimension of risk under polycrisis. Survey research conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification indicates that public attitudes toward inter-Korean relations and unification have become increasingly heterogeneous and contingent (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2025). This variability complicates the sustainability of diplomatic initiatives that rely on singular narratives or narrowly defined policy tracks. Viewed analytically, multi-vector engagement highlights how diplomatic interaction can persist despite fluctuations in domestic preferences.



Importantly, multi-vector cooperation does not imply strategic ambiguity, nor does it entail the dilution of existing security commitments. It also does not presuppose progress toward conflict resolution. Its analytical value lies in drawing attention to how diplomacy under polycrisis prioritises risk containment, adaptability, and systemic resilience over linear advancement toward settlement. In this sense, multi-vector cooperation captures a mode of diplomatic practice oriented toward stabilising interaction in an environment where uncertainty is not episodic, but enduring.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine the United Kingdom's reset diplomacy toward the European Union as a case of pragmatic cooperation under conditions of polycrisis, and to explore its analytical implications for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. Rather than interpreting the reset as a transitional step toward reintegration or as a symbolic political shift, the analysis conceptualised it as a mode of diplomacy shaped by enduring structural constraints and overlapping sources of uncertainty.

Drawing on the concept of polycrisis, the article argued that contemporary international politics is increasingly characterised by the interaction of multiple crises across security, economic, and institutional domains. In such environments, diplomatic strategies premised on comprehensive settlement, institutional convergence, or linear progress become difficult to sustain. Instead, diplomacy tends to prioritise adaptability, risk management, and functionally bounded forms of cooperation. Chapter 2 established this analytical framework by linking polycrisis to pragmatic diplomacy as a mode of adjustment rather than an exception to established practice.

Against this backdrop, Chapter 3 analysed the UK–EU reset as an empirical illustration of how diplomacy operates under constraint. The reset has been driven not by normative convergence or a return to pre-Brexit integration, but by cumulative pressures associated with security uncertainty, geoeconomic competition, and regulatory interdependence. Cooperation has therefore proceeded in selective and incremental ways, bounded by persistent political and institutional limits on both sides. Rather than resolving underlying disputes, the reset has stabilised interaction by enabling limited coordination in specific domains while preserving domestic political constraints.

Chapter 4 extended this analytical lens to the Korean Peninsula, which constitutes a particularly acute case of polycrisis. The analysis demonstrated that unresolved military confrontation, contested sanctions governance, and intensifying geoeconomic pressures interact to narrow diplomatic choice and elevate the costs of rigidity. Rather than offering policy prescriptions, the discussion identified analytical lessons regarding how diplomacy functions when comprehensive solutions are structurally out of reach. In such settings, diplomatic practice is more plausibly oriented toward managing risk, containing cross-domain spillovers, and sustaining engagement through multiple and issue-specific channels.

Taken together, the findings of this article suggest that diplomacy in the era of polycrisis is increasingly judged not by its capacity to deliver definitive outcomes, but by its ability



to reduce systemic risk and stabilise interaction under conditions of persistent uncertainty. The UK–EU reset illustrates one such mode of pragmatic adjustment. Its relevance for the Korean Peninsula lies not in what it achieves, but in how it operates under constraint. By focusing on the forms and logics of diplomatic practice rather than on institutional end-states, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how peace and security may be pursued when resolution itself remains a long-term horizon rather than an immediate possibility.

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CULTURAL IBERISM AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Abstract

Fernando Pessoa envisioned “Iberismo” (or Iberism) not as a project of political federation or economic union, but as a form of cultural cooperation rooted in shared historical and spiritual traits. For Pessoa, one of the defining characteristics of Iberia is its “non-Latinity” — a disposition that distinguishes it from Latin Europe by embracing Arab and Islamic influences and fostering openness toward the Other. This openness is also evident in Portugal’s historical role as a mediator and exchange hub among Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe through the Atlantic Ocean, reflected in the Portuguese people’s “plasticity” and “cosmopolitanism.” This study has sought to explore the applicability of Iberism as an analytical framework for models of unification on the Korean Peninsula. While political unification remains the normative ideal pursued by both Koreas, the prolonged reality of division has led to a growing proportion of South Korean citizens adopting increasingly pessimistic views toward political integration. Economic federation, in turn, represents an even more challenging domain of cooperation, given the stark structural contrasts between the two systems—capitalism and socialism, open free trade and a closed, state-led industrial model. Moreover, the economic gap between North and South Korea continues to widen, further constraining the feasibility of economic integration. With respect to cultural cooperation, which constitutes the primary focus of this study, existing forms of exchange have largely been temporary and event-driven in nature. In response, this article proposes more sustained collaboration in the fields of cultural heritage research and transmission, areas that can make substantive contributions to a shared understanding of Korean identity. Finally, affective forms of integration, as captured by the notion of *-philia*—denoting mutual affection toward the other—must be regarded as the least attainable form of integration in the contemporary Korean context, where enduring ideological conflict continues to foreclose the possibility of socially legitimate cross-border affinity.

Keywords

Iberism, Unification, Korea Peninsula, Iberia Peninsula, Cultural cooperation.

Resumo

Fernando Pessoa concebia o «Iberismo» (ou Iberismo) não como um projeto de federação política ou de união económica, mas como uma forma de cooperação cultural enraizada em traços históricos e espirituais comuns. Para Pessoa, uma das características definidoras da Península Ibérica é a sua «não-latinidade» — uma disposição que a distingue da Europa latina ao abraçar influências árabes e islâmicas e ao promover a abertura para com o Outro. Esta abertura é também evidente no papel histórico de Portugal como mediador e centro de intercâmbio entre África, as Américas, a Ásia e a Europa através do Oceano Atlântico, refletido



na «plasticidade» e no «cosmopolitismo» do povo português. Este estudo procurou explorar a aplicabilidade do Iberismo como quadro analítico para modelos de unificação na Península Coreana. Embora a unificação política continue a ser o ideal normativo perseguido por ambas as Coreias, a realidade prolongada da divisão levou a que uma proporção crescente de cidadãos sul-coreanos adotasse visões cada vez mais pessimistas em relação à integração política. A federação económica, por sua vez, representa um domínio de cooperação ainda mais desafiante, dados os contrastes estruturais marcantes entre os dois sistemas — capitalismo e socialismo, comércio livre aberto e um modelo industrial fechado e liderado pelo Estado. Além disso, o fosso económico entre a Coreia do Norte e a Coreia do Sul continua a alargar-se, limitando ainda mais a viabilidade da integração económica. No que diz respeito à cooperação cultural, que constitui o foco principal deste estudo, as formas existentes de intercâmbio têm sido, em grande parte, de natureza temporária e motivadas por eventos pontuais. Em resposta, este artigo propõe uma colaboração mais sustentada nos campos da investigação e transmissão do património cultural, áreas que podem dar contributos substanciais para uma compreensão partilhada da identidade coreana. Por fim, as formas afetivas de integração, tal como captadas pela noção de -filia — que denota afeto mútuo pelo outro —, devem ser consideradas como a forma menos alcançável de integração no contexto coreano contemporâneo, onde o conflito ideológico duradouro continua a excluir a possibilidade de uma afinidade transfronteiriça socialmente legítima.

Palavras-chave

Iberismo, Unificação, Península da Coreia, Península Ibérica, Cooperação cultural.

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CULTURAL IBERISM AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Introduction

Iberismo, or Iberism, which advocates for the union or integration of the two nation-states located on the Iberian Peninsula—Spain and Portugal—can be historically traced back to the medieval *Reconquista*. During this period, the shared struggle against Moorish rule, conducted under a Catholic ethos aimed at territorial reclamation, contributed to the consolidation of a common Catholic identity across the peninsula. In the nineteenth century, the unification movements in Italy and Germany once again influenced political and intellectual currents within the Iberian Peninsula. Toward the late nineteenth century, the strategic significance of cooperation between Spain and Portugal became evident during the guerrilla warfare waged jointly to resist Napoleon’s invasion of the peninsula.

Entering the twentieth century, Iberism was increasingly articulated within cultural and intellectual spheres. Modernist writers and artists such as Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and Almada Negreiros (1893-1970) promoted Iberist ideas by emphasizing cultural exchange, shared historical consciousness, and the potential for a broader Iberian unity. Their contributions reframed Iberism less as a purely political project and more as a cultural and civilizational one.

Analytically, Iberism is commonly divided into three interrelated dimensions: political Iberism, economic Iberism, and cultural Iberism. Political Iberism encompasses a wide spectrum of proposals, ranging from the complete assimilation of the two nations to various forms of federal unification that preserve the sovereignty of each state. Certain strands of political Iberism adopt a mergerist or absorptionist perspective. A notable example is Spanish Secretary of State Pío Gullón’s *La Fusión Ibérica* (1861), which proposed the incorporation of Portugal as a province of Spain. Such positions, however, have historically provoked strong resistance from the Portuguese perspective and highlight the asymmetrical power relations embedded within some Iberist discourses.

Economic Iberism is most clearly exemplified by proposals for an Iberian customs union, such as the Iberian Zollverein advocated by the Spanish diplomat Sinibaldo de Mas. In the contemporary context, Spain and Portugal’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC)—the precursor to the European Union—has institutionalized forms of economic cooperation, including customs integration, within a broader European



framework. This development has effectively embedded Iberian economic collaboration within supranational structures rather than bilateral unification projects.

Cultural Iberism refers to initiatives and discourses that emphasize cultural exchange, mutual recognition, and shared heritage between Spain and Portugal. While culture cannot be analytically separated from political and economic contexts, cultural Iberism is often distinguished as a separate category because it is the preferred framework of those who reject political unification while nonetheless advocating for intensified cultural interaction as beneficial to the overall development of the Iberian Peninsula (Isasi 72). As Isasi notes, cultural Iberism remains organically linked to political and economic forms of Iberism, despite claims to its autonomy (Isasi 68).

In addition to these categories, Isasi proposes a further conceptual distinction: lusophilia and hispanophilia, referring to individuals who express sustained admiration for and intellectual engagement with the culture of the neighboring nation (Isasi 68). Broadly construed, this orientation may also be understood as a form of cultural Iberism, insofar as it embodies affective and cultural investment in transnational Iberian exchange. Spanish novelists such as Juan Valera (1824-1905) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) are frequently cited as representative lusophiles. Valera, in particular, founded *La Revista Peninsular* in 1856 and contributed extensively to discussions of the cultural and intellectual traditions of both Spain and Portugal, thereby fostering a trans-Iberian cultural dialogue.

Thus, from the past to the present, Iberism has evolved and transformed in various forms. Among these, cultural Iberism, which particularly emphasizes cultural exchange and cooperation, has contributed to differentiating and redefining the cultural identities of the two Iberian nations from other European countries. This paper examines the basis for Fernando Pessoa's advocacy of cultural Iberism and its key characteristics, exploring the possibility of applying it to the Korean Peninsula. Of course, it is fair to say that the Iberian Peninsula and the Korean Peninsula share almost no commonalities beyond their geographical status as peninsulas. While the two nations of the Iberian Peninsula have long maintained distinct national identities, the Korean Peninsula is a single nation divided only since 1945 through the Korean War. Although they share an identity based on a common history and ethnicity, over 80 years of division have led to a persistent lack of exchange. Consequently, differences now outweigh similarities in many areas, including political systems, economic systems, and culture. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore how cultural Iberism might influence cultural exchange on the Korean Peninsula.

Iberism: Cultural Exchange and Identity Exploration

Iberia between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic

Fernando Pessoa defines the Iberian Peninsula as “the Iberian spirit is a fusion of the Mediterranean spirit with the Atlantic spirit” (Pessoa 1980:12). Here, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, its defining characteristics, can be seen as representing European tradition and cosmopolitan spirit, respectively. If the Mediterranean Sea, which served



as the conduit for the Roman Empire into the Iberian Peninsula, represents the peninsula's past—transmitting civilizations like Catholicism and Latin—then the Atlantic Ocean can be seen as the future space: a springboard toward new continents and a symbol of adventure into the unknown world. Orlando Ribeiro also highlights Portugal's unique geographical position, bordered by both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, as crucial to understanding the nation in his work *Portugal, o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico* (2011). According to Ribeiro, the Mediterranean is a space enabling coexistence between refined Europe and vast Africa, extending the spirit of that coexistence across all of Europe, while the Atlantic embodies the meaning of an open path leading anywhere in the world (Ribeiro 143).

The most crucial requirement of Iberism, as emphasized by Pessoa, is precisely the Atlantic. In the poem "Atlantimo," he writes:

Iberian Hegemony.

The Atlantic conception of life.

*Spiritual imperialism*¹.

For Pessoa, the Atlantic is more than a mere geographical feature. As mentioned earlier, if the Mediterranean represents the European tradition linked to Greco-Roman culture, the Atlantic is the conduit where the self and the other, Europe and non-Europe, meet. As Boaventura explains, Portugal has served as a conduit for encountering diverse nations across the globe, differing in race and culture, and bringing their cultures to Europe. Portugal perceived itself as possessing an "open border(fronteira aberta)"(59) and viewed its society as deeply imbued with 'internationalism' and 'exoticism' (Boaventura, 2013: 59). As Jieun Kim also highlighted the symbol of the Atlantic derived from this is largely connected to three characteristics of Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula: "non-Latinity," "plasticity," and "cosmopolitanism" (Kim 2025).

Iberity and non-Latinity

First, "non-Latinity" refers to the Islamic-receptive culture of the Iberian Peninsula. Both Portugal and Spain are the only nations on the European continent to have embraced Arab culture. Pessoa defined Iberity(*Iberidade*) as "Ibero-Roman-Arabic" (Pessoa 1980:16), emphasizing the 'Arabic' element. Regions of Portugal and Spain, subjected to centuries of Arab Moorish rule, were profoundly influenced by Arab culture in architectural styles, linguistic elements, and emotional sensibilities. This perspective is reflected in the passage from "Atlantism": "*We are against Rome, because Rome came to destroy within paganism the lucid vision of life*"² (Pessoa 1979:76).

¹ *Hegemonia Ibérica/ A concepção atlântica da vida/ O imperialismo espiritual.* (Pessoa, 1979, p. 76).

² *Somos contra Roma, porque Roma veio destruir no paganismo a visão lúcida da vida.* (Pessoa, 1979:76)



Particularly in the essay “The Non-Latin Nature of Iberia” (*A Não-Latinidade da Ibéria*), he refutes the common designation of Iberia as part of the ‘Latin cultural sphere’. He argues that while it did derive from the Roman Empire, Iberia possesses its own distinct culture, differentiated from that of Italy and France. Pessoa questions why Portugal and Spain are called Latin nations based on 1) etymological reasons (their linguistic origins in Latin) and 2) geographical reasons (their Mediterranean location), while countries like France, Romania, Italy, Greece, and Turkey are not. Instead, Pessoa proposes a new classification for European nations, arguing that the Latin nations inheriting Roman civilization are France and Italy. According to his classification, Europe can be broadly divided into Slavic, Germanic, Latin (Italy, France), Oriental (Greece, Turkey, Russia, Persia, the Balkans), and Iberian (Spain, Portugal). Through this classification, Pessoa seeks to avoid confining the Iberian Peninsula solely to the ‘Latin’ label, which would limit it to Catholicism and the Latin cultural sphere. His argument can be interpreted in two ways: first, as an exploration of the distinctive identity shared uniquely by the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, the influence of Islamic-receptive culture remains evident in architectural styles and other aspects to this day.

The second reason can be seen as a reaction against and a check on the so-called Latin cultural sphere countries like France and Italy, which held cultural hegemony at the time. Indeed, in his poem “Atlanticism,” Pessoa referred to ‘Rome’ and ‘Paris’ as “enemies.”

We are against Rome, because Rome came to destroy the lucid vision of life in paganism. We are against England, because England came to destroy, [...]. We are against France, because France came, with its democratism and its plebeian liberalism, to destroy the remnants of paganism that existed among us³.

The term ‘Latin’ is also particularly relevant to the Latin American region. It is widely acknowledged that the common designation of Latin America as ‘Latin America’ stems from the influence of the 19th-century French political scientist Michel Chevalier. When Chevalier used the term ‘Latin America,’ he considered France part of the ‘Latin’ cultural sphere and created it to highlight similarities between ‘Latin America’ and France. (Mignolo 2005:77-80) In other words, he used the term ‘Latin America’ to legitimize France's influence and intervention within the region. Pessoa, seemingly in opposition, emphasizes the distinctions between the Iberian Peninsula and ‘Latinness’. He argues that Latin America is a region where ‘Iberianness’ is stronger than ‘Latinness’, seeking to justify cultural imperialism there. His aim was to expand the sphere of influence of Iberian culture across this vast region and use it as a springboard to build a more powerful Iberia.

(1) the spiritual domination of Central and South America, and thus cultural imperialism in the New World, (2) the definitive conquest of North African

³ Somos contra Roma, porque Roma veio destruir no paganismo a visão lúcida da vida. Somos contra Inglaterra, porque Inglaterra veio destruir, [...]. Somos contra França, porque a França veio, com o seu democratismo e o seu liberalismo plebeu, destruir os restos de paganismo que havia entre nós. (Pessoa 1979:76)



territories, where our kinsmen, the Arab and Berber races, reside [...]; (3) the military destruction of France (and Italy)⁴.

Meanwhile, plasticity and cosmopolitanism are also concepts linked to non-Latinness. As Boaventura noted earlier, Portugal, with its 'open borders,' possesses plasticity between the familiar and the foreign, tradition and change, Europe and other cultures, Christianity and other religions. (Boaventura 2013:64) Pessoa also views Iberia's characteristic as a society where culture has developed by embracing polytheistic cultures and coexisting with others.

Thus, in the process of understanding the Iberian Peninsula's cultural characteristics that differentiate it from other European nations, we see Iberian identity being newly defined. Cultural Iberianism thus contributes to conceptualizing and rethinking the identity of the Iberian Peninsula. This aspect is also applicable to the situation on the Korean Peninsula. For cultural exchange between South and North Korea, it is necessary to first identify the cultural commonalities between the two Koreas. In this process, one is led to reconsider the unique characteristics of the Korean Peninsula that differentiate it from other nations and reveal its distinct differences.

Possibility of Adaptation in Korean Peninsula

Four types of unification model

As explained earlier, applying Iberian nationalism from the Iberian Peninsula to the Korean Peninsula is unrealistic in many respects. First, the two nations on the Iberian Peninsula have maintained distinct national identities since Portugal's founding in 1139. In contrast, Korea was a unified dynastic state from Unified Silla (676-935) through the Korea Dynasty (918-1392) to the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), only to become divided in 1948 when the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea established separate governments. The Korean Peninsula is currently in a state of armistice, and the Constitution of the Republic of Korea defines North Korea as part of its territory.⁵ This represents a significant difference in perspective: whether it is a federation of separate nations or the reunification of a formerly unified country. Nevertheless, applying cultural Iberism to various unification policies for the Korean Peninsula could contribute to establishing and advancing realistic and effective unification strategies based on the cultural commonalities and similarities inherent to the peninsula.

Just as Iberism is classified into four types, the unification models for the Korean Peninsula can also be categorized into four types. We will examine the policies for each, their respective meanings, and their effectiveness. Classifying the Korean Peninsula unification models according to the four types of Iberism yields: political unification, economic unification, cultural unification, and affection for the counterpart (pro-

⁴ (1) o domínio espiritual das Américas do centro e do sul, e assim o imperialismo de cultura no Novo Mundo, (2) a conquista definitiva dos territórios do Norte de África, onde vi vem os homens nossos parentes, as raças árabes, berberes, [...]; (3) a destruição militar da França (e da Itália) (Pessoa, 1980:13).

⁵ "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands." (Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea).



North/pro-South). First, political unification is fundamentally what the South Korean government aims for. South Korea has maintained a dedicated Ministry of Unification within its executive branch since 1969, demonstrating the national-level oversight and management of the task of 'unification'. In every presidential election, candidates invariably present unification-related policies toward North Korea alongside economic, livelihood, and welfare policies. This underscores how crucial political integration is as a task for South Korea.

South Korea's unification policy has shifted direction slightly with each change of government. During the First Republic, immediately following division, North Korea was not recognized, and the government advocated for 'absorption unification' and 'unification by force'. However, by the Third and Fourth Republics, North Korea began to be recognized and viewed as an entity for peace and coexistence. The 1972 'July 4 North-South Joint Statement' agreed upon during this period established the three major unification principles of independence, peace, and national unity. However, in reality, it was also a period of confrontation between North and South Korea under authoritarian regimes. Entering the Sixth Republic, discussions on implementing concrete unification policies began through the 1991 "Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchange, and Cooperation between the South and the North (Inter-Korean Basic Agreement)." (National Archives of Korea, 2018) In 1994, the Kim Young-sam administration announced the 'Plan for Reunification Based on a Community of the Korean Nation'. This remains the official reunification roadmap to this day. It proposes three stages: First, through reconciliation and cooperation, restore national homogeneity. Second, establish a North-South Union, creating a dialogue mechanism via a summit meeting body between the two Koreas. The final stage involves completing a unified nation, enacting a unified constitution, and establishing a single-state, single-government system through general elections. (Ministry of Unification, n.d.) Above all, it emphasizes peace, prioritizing unification achieved through autonomous and democratic consultation rather than war or force. In 2000, the Kim Dae-jung administration realized the first inter-Korean summit, pledging peaceful coexistence and exchange through the 'June 15 Joint Declaration'. The Kim Dae-jung administration is also credited with introducing a new paradigm in inter-Korean relations by implementing its North Korea policy, known as the Sunshine Policy. Since then, inter-Korean summits have been held a total of three times. The second summit took place under the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2007, and the third under the Moon Jae-in administration in 2018.

Meanwhile, North Korea advocates a federal unification plan based on the three unification principles of self-reliance, peace, and national unity outlined in the July 4 North-South Joint Statement. However, South Korea's analysis indicates that North Korea internally still characterizes inter-Korean relations as hostile, maintaining an adversarial view of unification. (North Korea Information Portal, 2024)

After 80 years of division, the reality is that many South Koreans today hold negative perceptions of unification. According to the 2024 'Unification Awareness Survey' statistics from Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, negative perceptions toward unification are increasingly on the rise. Notably, among those in their 20s, only 22.4% responded that 'unification is necessary,' while 47.4% answered that it is 'not necessary.' Similarly, among those in their 30s, 23.9% responded that unification



is necessary, while a significantly higher 45.0% responded that it is not necessary. (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 9)

Limitations and Possibilities of Economic Union

With regard to the second category—economic unification—the Iberian case and the Korean Peninsula present markedly different structural conditions. While Spain and Portugal have sustained economic cooperation within the institutional framework of the European Union, including participation in a customs union and, for Spain and Portugal alike, the adoption of a common currency, the establishment of comparable economic arrangements between North and South Korea remains highly constrained. In the Korean context, the formation of institutions such as a customs union is rendered nearly impossible by the fundamentally divergent economic systems of the two states.

South Korea operates under a capitalist economic system characterized by a private-sector-led market economy, where private property ownership is legally guaranteed and resource allocation is largely mediated through market mechanisms. In contrast, North Korea adheres to a state-led socialist planned economy in which private property ownership is prohibited, all productive assets are owned by the state, and economic resources are allocated administratively by central authorities. These internal structural differences are further reinforced by opposing external economic orientations. South Korea actively pursues trade liberalization and integration into the global economy, whereas North Korea maintains a largely closed economic structure, marked by limited engagement with international trade and foreign capital.

Perhaps most salient is the magnitude of the economic disparity between the two Koreas. As of recent estimates, South Korea's gross national income per capita stands at approximately 47.25 million won, while that of North Korea is estimated at 1.59 million won, reflecting an income gap of nearly thirtyfold. (KBS, 2024) South Korea's contemporary economic position is the result of rapid industrialization and export-oriented development policies implemented in the aftermath of colonial exploitation and the devastation of the Korean War. Policies facilitated what has been widely described as the "Miracle on the Han River," transforming South Korea from one of the world's poorest countries into a high-income industrialized economy.

By contrast, North Korea persisted in a rigid socialist economic model and maintained a closed stance toward international exchange even as other socialist and post-socialist states initiated economic reforms and integration into the global economy from the 1980s onward. This path dependency has resulted in chronic economic stagnation and increasing marginalization within the global economic order. Consequently, the structural asymmetries between the two Koreas far exceed those observed between Spain and Portugal prior to their integration into European economic institutions.

A comparison of key economic indicators for South and North Korea in 2023 further illustrates the depth of these disparities, underscoring the structural obstacles that limit the feasibility of economic unification on the Korean Peninsula.

**Table 1.** Major Economic Indicators of North and South Korea (2023)

Category	Population (thousand persons)	Nominal GNI (trillion KRW)	GNI per capita (million KRW)	Economic Growth Rate (%)	Total Trade Volume (billion USD)	Government Budget (billion USD)
North Korea (A)	25,708.8	40.9	158.9	3.1	27.7억	91.3억
South Korea (B)	51,712.6	2,443.3	4,724.8	1.4	12,748.0억	3,418.0억
(B/A)	2.0		29.7	-	460.4	37.4

Source: Bank of Korea (2024, July 26)

Due to this overwhelming economic disparity, South Korean public opinion has increasingly identified the anticipated economic burden of unification as the primary reason for opposing reunification (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 15). According to survey results from 2024, economic burden ranked first at 33.9 percent, followed by concerns over social problems that might emerge after unification at 27.9 percent. Differences in political systems between the two Koreas ranked third at 19.2 percent, while socio-cultural differences ranked fourth at 14.6 percent.

Despite these substantial constraints, several models of inter-Korean economic cooperation have nonetheless been explored. Among the most prominent examples are the **Kaesong Industrial Complex** and the **Mount Kumgang Tourism Project**. The Kaesong Industrial Complex originated from agreements reached in 2000 and entered full operation in 2005, following the provision of electricity, telecommunications connectivity, and infrastructure construction by South Korea. By approximately 2015, a total of 123 South Korean firms were operating in the complex, employing 54,988 North Korean workers. The project aimed to designate Kaesong as an international free economic zone and develop it into a central economic hub in Northeast Asia. However, due to escalating security concerns—most notably North Korea’s nuclear tests and long-range missile launches—the South Korean government suspended the operation of the complex in 2015.

Similarly, discussions surrounding the Mount Kumgang Tourism Project began in 1998, and in 2002 North Korea designated the Mount Kumgang area as a special tourism zone. The introduction of overland travel in 2003 significantly increased visitor numbers. However, the project was indefinitely suspended following the fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist in 2008. Prior to its suspension, the cumulative number of visitors had nearly approached two million. (National Archive of Korea, 2018)

Both projects were implemented through agreements between South Korea’s Hyundai Group and North Korea’s Asia-Pacific Peace Committee. The institutional arrangements of these initiatives further highlight the structural differences between the two economic



systems: while private enterprises played a leading role on the South Korean side, the North Korean side operated under direct state control.

Figure 1. Kaesong Industrial Complex



Figure 2. Mount Kumgang Tourism Project



Source: The JoongAng (2024, July 4), Hankyoreh (2019, October 19)

The Realities and Prospects of Inter-Korean Cultural Exchange

Inter-Korean cultural exchange and cooperation have taken place across a range of fields, including music, performing arts, sports, and cultural heritage preservation. In the South Korean context, cultural exchange initiatives have also been implemented through government-affiliated institutions, such as agencies under the Ministry of Unification, which operate various cultural experience programs. Nevertheless, these exchanges have largely remained event-driven and short-term in nature, lacking institutional continuity and sustainability. Although there appeared to be renewed momentum for cultural exchange following the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics and the inter-Korean summits, such efforts have since stagnated, and cultural interaction between the two Koreas remains limited.

Within Iberist discourse, cultural Iberism is often presented as a more pragmatic and feasible form of integration than political Iberism. In the Korean case, however, this logic does not readily apply. According to a 2024 survey asking South Korean respondents what they most strongly associate with the concept of “unification,” the majority (62.3 percent) identified unification as the political integration of North and South Korea into a single state. The second most common response (19.8 percent) defined unification as the free movement of people and goods across the border, while 11.6 percent associated unification with intensified economic cooperation between the two Koreas. By contrast, only 6.2 percent of respondents conceptualized unification in terms of cultural convergence, such as the narrowing of differences in values, culture, and education (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 12).

**Table 2.** South Korean people's perception of unification (2024)

Image of Unification	2024 (%)
political integration	62.3
unification with intensified economic cooperation	11.6
unification as the free movement of people and goods across the border	19.8
unification in terms of cultural convergence (differences in values, culture, and education)	6.2
others	0.1

Despite limited institutionalized exchange, a significant number of North Korean residents are exposed to South Korean popular culture. Although the North Korean authorities regard the consumption of Hallyu as a threat to regime stability and impose severe sanctions, South Korean films, television dramas, and music continue to circulate through illicit streaming channels and informal distribution networks. Exposure is not merely passive; North Korean youth, in particular, demonstrate strong enthusiasm for South Korean popular culture. As Taekbin Kim's research indicates, South Korean dramas and films represent one of the few accessible windows to the outside world for North Korean residents (Kim 2025: 185). However, the growing popularity of Hallyu has been accompanied by intensified state surveillance and censorship. In 2024, testimonies emerged alleging that individuals were executed for distributing and viewing South Korean television dramas. (YTN News 2024, July 29)

With regard to music and live performances, inter-Korean exchange was relatively active in the period following the implementation of the Sunshine Policy, particularly from 1998 through the early 2000s. A notable feature of these exchanges was that performances were primarily organized and led by South Korean private broadcasting companies and cultural institutions. In 1999, major South Korean broadcasters such as SBS and MBC hosted performances in North Korea featuring then-popular idol groups, mainstream singers, and ballet companies. Throughout the early 2000s, South Korean artists continued to perform in North Korea, including joint concerts in which performers from both Koreas shared the stage. Prominent South Korean singers such as Kim Yon-ja, Lee Mi-ja, and Cho Yong-pil also held solo concerts. These cultural exchanges declined following the fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist at Mount Kumgang in 2008 but were partially revived in 2018 in conjunction with the inter-Korean summit meetings, which included renewed performances in North Korea.

Thus, cultural exchange has been significantly influenced by political circumstances and security issues. In South Korea specifically, cultural exchange tended to increase during the presidencies of progressive parties and decrease during those of conservative parties. There was also a tendency for cultural exchange to temporarily increase when global sporting events like the Olympics or World Cup were held in Korea.



Persistent Ideological Conflict and the Impossibility of -philia

Unlike cases of *lusophilia* or *hispanophilia*, expressions of affection or admiration across the Korean divide are subject to intense ideological scrutiny. In the Korean context, for a South Korean to express positive sentiment toward North Korea—or for a North Korean to express affinity for South Korea—constitutes a politically sensitive act that may trigger accusations of ideological deviance or disloyalty. Although South Korea formally guarantees freedom of thought and ideology, enabling the expression of pro-American, pro-European, or pro-Chinese orientations, the articulation of a pro-North Korean stance (*ch'inbuk*) remains effectively proscribed in practice.

This asymmetry reflects the persistence of ideological conflict between the two Koreas, even more than eighty years after national division. The enduring legacy of the Cold War, reinforced by ongoing security tensions and divergent state ideologies, continues to structure the boundaries of permissible affect, identification, and cultural orientation. As a result, the emergence of affective dispositions analogous to *lusophilia* or *hispanophilia*—grounded in mutual admiration and cultural affinity—remains severely constrained on the Korean Peninsula.

This structural constraint can be further understood through the lens of affective nationalism and securitized identity formation. In divided societies, affect is not merely a private disposition but a politically regulated domain, in which emotional orientations toward the “other side” are subject to surveillance and moral judgment. On the Korean Peninsula, expressions of sympathy, admiration, or cultural affinity toward the opposing regime are frequently interpreted through a security-centered framework, wherein affective attachment itself becomes politicized and securitized.

From this perspective, the near impossibility of *-philia* in the Korean case is not simply a matter of individual prejudice or public opinion but the outcome of a historically entrenched regime of ideological boundary-making. The prolonged division, sustained by military confrontation and antagonistic state narratives, has produced rigid symbolic boundaries that delimit not only political allegiance but also permissible forms of emotional identification. Consequently, positive affect toward the other Korea is readily conflated with ideological betrayal or national disloyalty, thereby foreclosing the emergence of socially legitimate forms of cross-border admiration.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Iberian case, where *lusophilia* and *hispanophilia* could develop as culturally sanctioned orientations despite historical conflict and rivalry. In Iberia, the absence of an unresolved military standoff and the gradual normalization of interstate relations allowed affective affinities to be articulated within literary, intellectual, and cultural fields without being framed as threats to national security. In Korea, by contrast, the unresolved armistice and the persistence of mutual securitization have prevented affect from being disentangled from ideological allegiance.

Moreover, the asymmetry between the two Koreas further complicates the emergence of *-philia*. While South Korean society formally upholds freedom of expression, the legal and discursive legacies of anti-communism continue to restrict the social legitimacy of pro-North Korean sentiment. In North Korea, state control over ideology and cultural consumption entirely precludes the open articulation of admiration for South Korea. As a



result, even when cultural fascination or curiosity exists—particularly among North Korean youth exposed to South Korean popular culture—it remains confined to the private or clandestine sphere and cannot crystallize into a publicly recognized or institutionally supported form of *-philia*.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that cultural affinity alone is insufficient to generate durable forms of transnational affect in the absence of political and ideological de-securitization. Unlike the Iberian context, where cultural exchange could precede or substitute for political integration, the Korean case demonstrates that sustained ideological confrontation fundamentally constrains the social conditions under which affective orientations such as *-philia* can emerge. Any discussion of cultural rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula must therefore account not only for cultural policy or exchange mechanisms but also for the deeper structures of ideological governance that regulate affect, loyalty, and belonging.

Conclusion: Practical Suggestions for cultural cooperation and its obstacles

As discussed earlier, the concept of cultural Iberism articulated by Fernando Pessoa functioned as a means of re-examining national identity by reflecting on the commonalities shared by the two states of the Iberian Peninsula. Going beyond the cultural realm, Pessoa sought to elevate characteristics distinctive to Iberia—such as *plasticity* and *cosmopolitanism*—to the level of a civilizational project. This intellectual endeavor must be understood within the historical context of the early 1910s, a period marked by the intensification of nationalist sentiment and a widespread aspiration to build strong and prosperous nation-states.

In contrast, as demonstrated by contemporary South Korean perceptions of unification, many Koreans today no longer regard unification as an imperative grounded solely in the idealized notion of a shared ethnic identity (*Han minjok*, *Han* ethnicity). Instead, public attitudes toward unification are increasingly shaped by pragmatic considerations, including security threats and anticipated economic burdens. Under these conditions, cultural exchange can be understood as a practical and comparatively low-cost mechanism for reducing the immediate burden associated with political unification, while simultaneously mitigating the sense of disconnection between the two Koreas.

Among the various forms of cultural exchange, cooperation in the field of cultural heritage holds particular potential for contributing to the reconstruction of national identity on the Korean Peninsula. Despite their current political division, North and South Korea share a long historical trajectory and a common body of cultural heritage. Through cultural heritage exchange, the two Koreas can identify and reaffirm their cultural and historical commonalities while minimizing the disruptive effects of ideological conflict. Such cooperation also enables joint efforts in the preservation and transmission of shared cultural assets.

In particular, the domain of intangible cultural heritage—including social customs, seasonal rituals, traditional attire, and foodways—offers significant opportunities for collaboration. Even without framing such initiatives explicitly as preparatory steps toward



unification, joint research and exchange in this area can substantially enhance mutual historical understanding. In this regard, Donghwan Yun argues that North and South Korea should pursue concrete outcomes such as the joint inscription of shared intangible cultural practices on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Yun 2018: 135). Similarly, Lee Gui-young emphasizes the importance of establishing physical spaces dedicated to the transmission and performance of intangible cultural heritage. He proposes the creation of exchange venues—potentially within or near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—where recognized heritage practitioners from both Koreas could engage in sustained and substantive interaction (Lee 2021: 198).

From a policy perspective, Jeong Eun-mi of the Korea Institute for National Unification offers three key recommendations directed toward South Korea's newly inaugurated Lee Jae-myung administration. First, she advocates for a model in which civil society organizations and local governments take the lead in socio-cultural exchange initiatives, as government-led programs are more susceptible to ideological controversy and partisan conflict. Second, she emphasizes the need for a phased roadmap accompanied by clearly defined channels of communication to ensure the continuity of cultural exchange. Finally, she underscores the importance of institutional support, including legal and administrative reforms, to guarantee the stability and sustainability of such exchanges over time (Jeong 2025: 3–4).

As many experts have observed, inter-Korean cultural exchange continues to depend heavily on the orientations and political will of incumbent leaders. As a result, such exchanges tend to take the form of temporary, event-driven initiatives. For this reason, it is essential to establish mechanisms that enable sustained and institutionalized cultural exchange, insulated from changes in political leadership and fluctuations in ideological conflict.

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SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE IN KOREA: INFRASTRUCTURAL ALIGNMENT, TRANSLATION, AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

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Abstract

This article examines the Korean reception of Scandinavian literature as a process of co-produced literary value, focusing on Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish works translated and circulated in Korea. Challenging assumptions that small language literatures circulate primarily through Anglophone hubs, it demonstrates how Scandinavian writing attained durable visibility in Korea through minor-to-minor circulation sustained by local infrastructures. Drawing on translation studies, paratext theory, world literature research, and international-relations scholarship, the article conceptualizes literary value as an outcome of infrastructural alignment. Translators' ethical practices, paratextual grammars, publisher architectures, and critical mediation collectively shaped how Scandinavian literature became legible and credible within Korean reading cultures. Methodologically, the analysis relies on verifiable public indicators edition dynamics, paratexts, metadata, institutional signals, and discourse rather than proprietary sales data. These are examined across three genre clusters: Nordic noir, children's literature, and contemporary "quiet" prose, revealing distinct pathways to visibility. From an international relations perspective, the case illustrates infrastructural soft power: cultural attraction generated through routine mediation rather than promotional spectacle. Translation grants reduce risk; metadata standards stabilize discovery; critics cultivate interpretive communities, embedding foreign literature into everyday cultural life. By foregrounding mediation infrastructures, the article contributes to reception studies and cultural diplomacy debates, offering a transferable framework for analyzing literary circulation in non-Anglophone contexts.

Keywords

Scandinavian literature, translation ethics, paratexts and metadata, cultural diplomacy, infrastructural soft power.



Resumo

Este artigo analisa a recepção da literatura escandinava na Coreia como um processo de coprodução de valor literário, centrando-se em obras suecas, norueguesas e dinamarquesas traduzidas e difundidas na Coreia. Desafiando os pressupostos de que as literaturas de línguas minoritárias circulam principalmente através de centros anglófonos, demonstra como a literatura escandinava alcançou uma visibilidade duradoura na Coreia através de uma circulação «de minoridade para minoridade», sustentada por infraestruturas locais. Recorrendo aos estudos de tradução, à teoria do paratexto, à investigação em literatura mundial e aos estudos de relações internacionais, o artigo conceitua o valor literário como um resultado do alinhamento infraestrutural. As práticas éticas dos tradutores, as gramáticas paratextuais, as arquiteturas editoriais e a mediação crítica moldaram coletivamente a forma como a literatura escandinava se tornou legível e credível no seio das culturas de leitura coreanas. Metodologicamente, a análise baseia-se em indicadores públicos verificáveis — dinâmicas de edição, paratextos, metadados, sinais institucionais e discurso — em vez de dados de vendas proprietários. Estes são examinados em três grupos de géneros: noir nórdico, literatura infantil e prosa «tranquila» contemporânea, revelando caminhos distintos para a visibilidade. Numa perspetiva de relações internacionais, o caso ilustra o soft power infraestrutural: atração cultural gerada através de mediação rotineira, em vez de espetáculo promocional. As bolsas de tradução reduzem o risco; as normas de metadados estabilizam a descoberta; os críticos cultivam comunidades interpretativas, incorporando a literatura estrangeira na vida cultural quotidiana. Ao colocar em primeiro plano as infraestruturas de mediação, o artigo contribui para os estudos de recepção e os debates sobre diplomacia cultural, oferecendo um quadro transferível para analisar a circulação literária em contextos não anglófonos.

Palavras-chave

Literatura escandinava, ética da tradução, paratextos e metadados, diplomacia cultural, soft power infraestrutural.

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SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE IN KOREA: INFRASTRUCTURAL ALIGNMENT, TRANSLATION, AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

JAI-UNG HONG

Introduction

The Korean reception of Scandinavian literature complicates a widespread assumption in world-literature scholarship: that small-language literatures circulate internationally primarily through Anglophone hubs (Sievers & Levitt, 2020; Flotow, 2019; Bielsa, 2013). Over the past century, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish works have attained stable visibility in Korea not because they were first consecrated in English, but because local infrastructures gradually aligned. Translators cultivated recognizable voices and ethical transparency; publishers and editors developed paratextual grammars that stabilized reader expectations; libraries, platforms, and festivals provided institutional anchors; and critics and reader communities articulated why these works mattered. Together, these practices shifted Scandinavian titles from sporadic appearances to a durable cultural presence.

Despite extensive work on global literary circulation, relatively little attention has been paid to *minor-to-minor* routes—cases in which works travel directly between smaller linguistic communities without mediation by dominant languages (Jusdanis, 2010; HaCohen, 2014). Much existing research either privileges authors canonized through global centers or relies on proprietary sales data that are rarely accessible and difficult to audit (Saldanha, 2018; Cheah, 2014). As a result, the everyday infrastructures through which literary value is assembled—edition management, metadata discipline, and the mediating labor of librarians and critics—often remain analytically invisible (Saldanha, 2018).

This article addresses that gap by examining the reception of Scandinavian literature in Korea as a long-term case of co-produced literary value. Rather than treating value as an intrinsic property of texts, the study conceptualizes value as emerging from interactions among translation ethics, paratextual framing, and institutional interfaces. Building on translation-studies debates about ethical responsibility and visibility, paratext theory, world-literature approaches to circulation, and international-relations research on soft power and cultural diplomacy, the article shows how attention is stabilized through infrastructures that make reading credible, legible, and repeatable (Cheah, 2014; Sievers & Levitt, 2020; Shields, 2013; Genette & Maclean, 1991; Coldiron, 2012).



Methodologically, the analysis relies on independently verifiable indicators—edition dynamics, paratextual grammars, metadata and catalog fields, institutional signals (prizes, grants, festivals), and discourse traces in criticism—rather than inaccessible sales figures. These indicators are coded across genres and periods to reconstruct a trajectory from early pedagogical introductions to contemporary diversification across Nordic noir, children’s/YA classics, and contemporary “quiet” prose.

The article makes three contributions. First, it provides an empirically grounded account of how Scandinavian literature became legible in Korea without Anglophone intermediation. Second, it proposes a portable framework for reception research that treats paratexts and metadata as primary evidence. Third, it reframes these dynamics through an international-relations lens, interpreting them as forms of infrastructural soft power produced not by messaging campaigns but by routine mediation practices.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework linking translation ethics, paratexts, world-literature circulation, and cultural diplomacy. Section 3 explains the methodological approach and coding protocols. Section 4 reconstructs the historical trajectory of Scandinavian literature in Korea. Section 5 analyzes genre-specific reception mechanisms. Section 6 discusses broader international-relations implications, and Section 7 concludes with reflections on research design, translator training, and policy considerations.

An earlier version of this research was presented at an international academic conference, and the present article substantially revises and expands that material through additional empirical coding, verified bibliographic evidence, and extended theoretical discussion.¹

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates four strands of scholarship—translation ethics, paratext theory, world-literature circulation, and international-relations research on cultural diplomacy and soft power—to examine how literary value is co-produced in non-Anglophone contexts. Rather than treating these traditions as parallel debates, the article brings them together around a single question: how do infrastructures mediate what counts as credible literature across languages?

Translation Ethics and the Design of Reading

Translation has long been framed as a technical problem of equivalence, yet contemporary debates emphasize its ethical and political dimensions. Spivak’s conception of translation as responsibility foregrounds attentiveness to voice, rhetoric, and singularity, resisting both mechanical literalism and aggressive domestication (Spivak, Landry and MacLean, 1996). Ricœur’s notion of *linguistic hospitality* similarly

¹ An earlier version of this study was presented as Hong, J.-U. (2025, June 26). *The translation status of Scandinavian literature in Korea and its significance* [Conference presentation]. Korea–EU International Conference on Peace, Language, and Cultural Diplomacy, Madrid, Spain.



conceptualizes translation as an ethical encounter that welcomes the foreign while preserving the integrity of the host language (Ricoeur, 2006). Taken together, these perspectives shift attention from accuracy alone to the design of reading experiences—how cadence, hesitation, silence, and sociolect are carried across linguistic borders.

This ethical orientation has institutional consequences. As Venuti has argued, translator invisibility is not neutral but part of a broader regime that obscures editorial decisions, abridgments, and adaptation bases. In small-corpus circulation, such opacity risks textual drift and erodes reader trust. Conversely, editions that acknowledge translator agency, disclose source lineage, and briefly explain difficult choices tend to be more readily adopted by libraries, educators, and critics. Translation ethics thus becomes inseparable from institutional credibility.

Paratexts, Metadata, and Infrastructural Legibility

Genette's theory of paratexts reconceptualizes covers, titles, blurbs, illustrations, and series frames not as decorative supplements but as thresholds through which readers enter the text (Genette & Maclean, 1991). In contemporary book ecosystems, these thresholds are closely coupled with metadata—subject headings, authority records, series identifiers, shelving codes, and platform categories. Together, paratexts and metadata function as coordinating devices: they frame expectations, align audiences, and allow institutions to recognize, classify, and circulate works.

For reception studies, this infrastructural role carries methodological implications. Because paratexts and metadata leave durable public traces, they can be inspected, archived, and compared across time. By coding image motifs, typography classes, taglines, series architectures, and catalog descriptors, researchers can reconstruct how interpretive expectations are assembled *before* reading occurs. In this article, paratexts and metadata are therefore treated as primary evidence rather than peripheral context.

World Literature Beyond Metropolitan Pipelines

World-literature scholarship has illuminated the asymmetries that shape global literary circulation, often emphasizing how metropolitan centers confer legitimacy on peripheral literatures. While such models remain indispensable, they risk obscuring circulation routes that do not pass through dominant languages. The Korean reception of Scandinavian literature suggests an alternative configuration: minor-to-minor circulation, in which value formation depends less on metropolitan endorsement than on the maturation of local infrastructures.

Field-theoretic perspectives help explain how such circulation becomes possible. When translators, editors, librarians, critics, and policy bodies converge around shared norms—edition transparency, catalog discipline, and recurring review venues—symbolic capital can accrue locally. Circulation thus appears not as a single pipeline but as a layered process of mediation, each layer leaving partial yet verifiable traces.



Cultural Diplomacy and Infrastructural Soft Power

International-relations research on cultural diplomacy and soft power provides a final lens for interpreting these dynamics. Soft power is commonly defined as attraction grounded in credibility and values, often associated with cultural exports, national branding, or high-profile events. The Korean–Nordic literary relationship, however, points to a quieter mechanism. Here, diplomacy emerges not from spectacle but from routine mediation: translation grants that reduce commissioning risk, prize circuits that narrate value, library policies that normalize discovery pathways, and platform standards that stabilize metadata.

These processes generate what may be termed infrastructural soft power—forms of attraction rooted in durable pathways that make foreign literature legible, reusable, and discussable over time. Such power is incremental and rarely visible as policy intervention, yet it shapes how readers imagine both foreign societies and their own cultural horizons.

Integrative Framework

Bringing these strands together yields an operational framework for analyzing reception as infrastructural alignment. Translation ethics directs attention to the micro-design of language; paratext theory highlights the framing of expectations; world-literature perspectives contextualize asymmetries and local agency; and international-relations scholarship clarifies why these alignments matter beyond the literary field. In practical terms, this framework focuses on:

- edition dynamics and transparency,
- paratextual and metadata grammars,
- institutional anchors across libraries, platforms, prizes, and grants, and
- discourse traces that sustain interpretive communities.

Together, these dimensions make it possible to analyze the Korean reception of Scandinavian literature not as linear diffusion but as the gradual co-production of value across ethical practice, material interfaces, and institutional routines.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on triangulation of publicly verifiable evidence. Because proprietary sales figures and internal publisher data in the Korean book market are rarely accessible and typically protected by nondisclosure agreements (Sapiro, 2008), the analysis deliberately avoids commercial indicators that cannot be independently audited. Instead, it reconstructs reception histories through the convergence of multiple observable traces of circulation and mediation, allowing claims to remain transparent and replicable (Golafshani, 2003).



The methodological approach should not be understood as a replacement for quantitative market analysis, but as an alternative strategy suited to contexts where reliable sales data are unavailable. By foregrounding public-facing artifacts—catalogs, paratexts, institutional records, and criticism—the study prioritizes evidence that can be re-examined by other researchers and compared across contexts (Jick, 1979; Olsen and Holborn, 2004).

Corpus and Scope

The corpus consists of Korean translations of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish literary works circulating primarily through general trade channels. Academic translations intended exclusively for specialist readerships, language-learning materials, and excerpts published only in journals or magazines are excluded, unless there is clear evidence of sustained general readership.

Within this trade-oriented corpus, the analysis focuses on three analytically distinct clusters:

1. Crime fiction commonly grouped as *Nordic noir*
2. Children's and young-adult classics
3. Contemporary reflective or so-called "quiet" prose

These clusters were selected because they display contrasting reader pathways, paratextual grammars, and institutional anchoring, enabling structured comparison across genres within the same national reception context (Genette & Maclean, 1991; Ali, 2018).

Sources and Data Collection

The analysis draws exclusively on publicly accessible and documentable sources, including:

- National and university library catalogs
- Publisher catalogues and edition pages
- Metadata records on major Korean book platforms
- Prize announcements, festival programs, and translation-grant acknowledgments
- Professional criticism and long-form reviews in print and online media
- Physical and digital paratexts (covers, series frames, taglines, translator notes)

Coding and Analytical Procedure

Each item in the corpus was coded across six dimensions designed to capture both textual framing and institutional embedding:



- Genre and subgenre classification
- Paratextual grammar (image motifs, color palettes, typography, and tagline semantics)
- Framing rhetoric (ethical, pedagogical, entertainment-oriented, or reflective)
- Institutional anchors (publisher and series identity, grants, prizes, festivals)
- Reader pathways (school or library adoption, book-club circulation, platform curation)
- Edition transparency (source edition information, translator visibility, notes, adaptation disclosure)

This coding scheme enables comparison across historical phases and genre clusters while remaining sensitive to the specific conditions of the Korean literary field. Rather than producing quantitative generalizations, the method seeks patterned convergence across indicators, allowing reception to be analyzed as a process of infrastructural alignment rather than as an outcome measured solely by market performance. Parts of the empirical material and analytical framework employed in this study were previously presented at an international academic conference.

Each representative title was verified against at least two independently accessible public records, prioritized as publisher metadata, Kyobo listings, and the National Library of Korea catalog; archived cover/metadata evidence is indexed by Item ID in Table 3.

Historical Trajectory: From Pedagogical Entry to Infrastructural Consolidation

The reception of Scandinavian literature in Korea did not emerge as a sudden discovery or market breakthrough. Instead, it developed gradually through overlapping phases, each characterized by distinct infrastructures of mediation. Although the boundaries between these phases are necessarily porous, a heuristic periodization clarifies how translation practices, paratextual grammars, and institutional anchors slowly converged to stabilize visibility and credibility over time.

The earliest traces of Scandinavian literature in Korea appeared primarily within pedagogical contexts. Translations were often undertaken by scholars or educators and framed as morally instructive, socially meaningful, or culturally informative rather than as objects of leisure reading. Paratexts emphasized learning, understanding, and comparative knowledge, positioning these works as gateways to distant societies rather than as contemporary literary experiences. Circulation remained modest and frequently took place outside mainstream trade channels. Cataloging practices reinforced this framing by shelving such titles alongside world-literature surveys or educational materials rather than contemporary fiction. Translator visibility was limited, and metadata often provided minimal information about source editions.



Despite these constraints, this phase played a foundational role. It introduced authors' names, genres, and thematic associations into Korean intellectual discourse, establishing reference points that later mediators—editors, critics, and librarians—could recognize and reactivate. Scandinavian literature thus entered Korea first not as a market phenomenon but as a pedagogical resource.

A second phase emerged with the rise of curated publishing series. As Scandinavian titles were incorporated into children's and young-adult lines, world-classics collections, or contemporary literature series, paratexts became more standardized and legible. Visual continuity across covers, typographic systems, and series introductions signaled editorial intention and created recognizable packages for readers and institutions alike. Backlists generated internal cross-references, encouraging incremental exploration rather than one-off encounters.

This consolidation had three notable effects. First, it reduced risk: inclusion within a curated series signaled prior editorial selection, lowering the threshold for libraries, schools, and individual readers. Second, it amplified translator credibility, particularly when the same translators became repeatedly associated with specific strands of Scandinavian writing. Third, it stabilized cataloging and retrieval, as series identifiers and authority records enabled more consistent classification across institutions. In this period, Scandinavian literature in Korea ceased to be episodic and became repeatable, supported by infrastructures that encouraged sustained discovery.

Over time, genre differentiation intensified, giving rise to three particularly salient clusters. Crime fiction benefitted from seriality, recurring protagonists, and strong place-based branding. Paratexts emphasized atmosphere, ethical ambiguity, and social critique, while metadata consistently aligned these works with a recognizable transnational genre. Libraries reinforced these pathways through crime-themed displays and reading lists, further normalizing discovery.

Children's and young-adult literature followed a different trajectory. Here, credibility traveled through intergenerational trust. Edition transparency—clear translator attribution, stable source references, and visual continuity across reprints—combined with school curricula and library programs to embed Scandinavian titles into everyday literacy practices. Occasional grants, festivals, or reading campaigns added symbolic reinforcement without overwhelming the domestic framing.

A third cluster comprised contemporary works characterized by interiority, restraint, and ethical hesitation. Their circulation depended less on plot-driven marketing than on careful translation, subdued paratexts, and sustained critical mediation. Reviews and essays taught readers how to value slowness, ambiguity, and understatement, while minimalist cover designs signaled distance from commercial spectacle. This cluster demonstrated that Scandinavian literature could circulate without sensational cues, grounded instead in affective resonance and interpretive guidance.

Across these clusters, mediation was never uniform. Yet in each case, alignment among translators, editors, librarians, critics, and platforms gradually converted sporadic curiosity into sustained attention.



A further phase unfolded with the growing dominance of digital platforms. As online catalogs, search interfaces, and recommendation systems became central to discovery, metadata discipline gained unprecedented importance. Subject headings, authority records, and series identifiers increasingly determined whether titles surfaced in searches, thematic carousels, or curated lists. Publishers responded by refining descriptive texts and maintaining continuity across reissues, while libraries adopted digital reading programs and thematic collections that extended visibility beyond physical shelves. Festivals and embassy-supported events provided complementary symbolic anchors, situating Scandinavian literature within broader cultural conversations.

In this environment, reception increasingly depended on whether books were legible to infrastructures—discoverable, sortable, and reusable across platforms. Visibility was no longer secured solely by editorial selection or critical acclaim but by the capacity of texts to circulate smoothly through interconnected systems.

Taken together, these phases reveal a cumulative trajectory. What began as pedagogical introduction evolved into series-based consolidation, diversified through genre-specific pathways, and adapted to platform-mediated discovery. At no single moment did Scandinavian literature suddenly “arrive” in Korea. Instead, credibility accumulated through repetition, revision, and institutional memory.

Crucially, this history underscores that reception is not merely a matter of taste or promotion. It is the outcome of co-produced infrastructures: translation ethics that foster trust, paratextual grammars that frame expectations, metadata systems that stabilize visibility, and institutional programs that invite participation. Where these elements align, Scandinavian literature attains a durable place in Korean reading cultures; where alignment falters, titles drift into obscurity.

This periodization therefore provides the empirical foundation for the genre-specific analyses that follow, clarifying how historically formed mechanisms continue to structure reception in the present. Together, these patterns demonstrate how translators, editors, platforms, critics, and policy or prize bodies co-produce durable attention when their practices align (see Table 1).

Table 1 consolidates the historically accumulated evidence discussed above by mapping how different genre clusters are anchored in publicly observable infrastructures. Rather than summarizing market success, the table visualizes the distinct mediation pathways through which credibility has been stabilized across genres.

Together, these verified edition trajectories indicate that durability depends less on isolated breakthroughs than on repeatable infrastructures of mediation—series architectures, transparent edition lineage, and stable metadata—whose observable traces are consolidated in Table 1.



Table 1. Reception of Scandinavian Literature via Public Data Sources

Data Source	Nordic Noir	Children's & YA Classics	Contemporary "Quiet" Prose
Library Catalogs & Metadata	Integrated into crime-themed displays and international genre search fields.	Integrated into school reading programs and long-term literacy practices.	Metadata often oscillates between literary fiction, essays, or "healing literature."
Publisher Catalogs & Series	Established through serial branding and recurring protagonists.	Included in world-classics or specialized children's series to maintain visual continuity.	Planned as refined literary collections emphasizing translation craft.
Prizes, Festivals & Grants	Visibility boosted through crime-themed festivals and book club programs.	Symbolic weight added via translation grants and embassy-linked cultural events.	Validated through critical essays, long-form reviews, and literary awards.
Physical & Digital Paratexts	Uses stark typography, cold landscapes, and social critique taglines.	Features prominent translator credits, stable source references, and consistent designs.	Employs minimal imagery, muted palettes, and spacious typography.

Genre-Specific Pathways to Visibility and Credibility

While the historical trajectory outlined in Section 4 clarifies how Scandinavian literature gradually entered and stabilized within the Korean literary field, genre-specific analysis reveals how these infrastructures operate unevenly across different narrative forms. Genre does not merely classify texts; it structures expectations, mediating practices, and institutional responses. Examining reception through genre therefore makes visible the differentiated "recognition grammars" through which credibility is assembled (Alacovska, 2015; Verboord, Kuipers and Janssen, 2015).

To enable systematic comparison, this section applies a shared analytical framework across genres, operationalized through six dimensions: genre categorization, paratext grammar, framing rhetoric, institutional anchors, reader pathways, and edition transparency.

Table 2 outlines the six analytical dimensions used to compare genre-specific pathways in the Korean reception of Scandinavian literature. The framework operationalizes reception as an infrastructural process by coding how genres are stabilized through paratextual framing, institutional anchoring, metadata practices, and reader pathways. Applying a shared set of dimensions across genres enables controlled comparison while remaining sensitive to differences in narrative conventions and mediation practices.

Table 2 summarizes the coding scheme used throughout this section. By holding these dimensions constant, the analysis avoids treating genre clusters as isolated cases and instead examines how similar infrastructural elements are configured differently depending on genre conventions and reader expectations.



Table 2. Analysis by Six Core Dimensions

Analytical Dimension	Nordic Noir	Children's & YA Literature	Contemporary "Quiet" Prose
1. Genre Categorization	Classified as international crime fiction or socially diagnostic thrillers.	Defined as world classics, pedagogical resources, or coming-of-age tales.	Positioned as contemplative literary fiction or "healing" essayistic prose.
2. Paratext Grammar	Subdued palettes, stark typography, and atmospheric motifs (e.g., northern darkness).	Consistent series frames, recognizable illustrations, and high-readability fonts.	Minimalist covers with muted imagery and ample white space.
3. Framing Rhetoric	Entertainment/Social Critique: Focuses on institutional failures and moral ambiguity.	Pedagogical/Ethical: Focuses on character formation and social meaning.	Reflective/Affective: Focuses on interiority, everyday relations, and rhythm.
4. Institutional Anchors	Crime-themed series identities, genre festivals, and specialized critics.	Publisher series, translation grants, and school/library adoption.	Literary awards, critical mediation via long-form reviews, and workshops.
5. Reader Pathways	Genre-based discovery via platforms and crime-themed library lists.	Intergenerational trust passed from parents/teachers to children.	Curation through book clubs, social media "healing" trends, and critical essays.
6. Edition Transparency	Focuses on atmospheric branding and multi-volume continuity.	Highest: Explicit translator credits, stable source references, and explanatory notes.	Emphasis on the translator's sensitivity to rhythm and tonal shifts.

The discussion focuses on three clusters that have proven especially durable in the Korean context: Nordic noir, children's and young-adult literature, and contemporary "quiet" prose. Each cluster is illustrated through one representative case, selected from the verified corpus and documented in the evidence registers.

Nordic Noir: Seriality, Atmosphere, and Institutional Repetition

Nordic noir occupies a distinctive position in the Korean reception of Scandinavian literature. Its visibility is strongly shaped by seriality, place-based branding, and a paratextual emphasis on atmosphere rather than plot resolution (Hill, 2018; Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016; Dodds & Hochscherf, 2020). Covers frequently deploy muted color palettes, stark typography, and visual cues associated with cold landscapes or social isolation, while blurbs foreground moral ambiguity and institutional failure.

Representative case: *Stieg Larsson, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Korean edition)

In the Korean editions of Larsson's Millennium series, credibility is stabilized through three intersecting mechanisms. First, serial continuity reduces entry risk: once readers and libraries commit to the first volume, subsequent installments benefit from cumulative familiarity. Second, critics and reviewers routinely frame the series as "socially



diagnostic,” emphasizing its engagement with gender violence, corruption, and welfare-state contradictions rather than positioning it as mere entertainment. Third, libraries, book clubs, and crime-themed reading programs repeatedly circulate the series, producing episodic but sustained visibility.

At the same time, Nordic noir illustrates the risks of over-calibration. Marketing strategies that exaggerate brutality or “northern darkness” can narrow interpretive horizons, flattening Scandinavian societies into a homogeneous landscape of crime and despair. When paratexts drift toward spectacle, long-term interpretive communities weaken, even if short-term attention increases (Genette & Maclean, 1991).

Children’s and Young-Adult Literature: Trust, Continuity, and Intergenerational Mediation

Children’s and YA literature follows a markedly different pathway to credibility. Here, legitimacy rests less on novelty or intensity than on continuity, transparency, and intergenerational endorsement.

Representative case: *Astrid Lindgren, The Brothers Lionheart* (Korean editions)

Across multiple Korean editions, *The Brothers Lionheart* exemplifies how trust accumulates through stable mediation. Translator names are consistently foregrounded, source editions are clearly specified, and reprints maintain recognizable design architectures. These features reassure parents, teachers, and librarians that the text has not been arbitrarily abridged or domesticated.

Institutional anchors play a decisive role. School reading programs and library initiatives integrate the book into recurring literacy practices, while occasional cultural events and reading campaigns reinforce its status without overt promotion. Over time, the work becomes familiar not as a foreign classic requiring justification, but as a reliable companion in childhood reading.

The primary risk in this cluster is over-pedagogization. When paratexts emphasize moral instruction too heavily, literature risks being reduced to an educational instrument, losing the emotional openness that sustains rereading across generations. Nevertheless, when transparency and continuity are maintained, children’s literature demonstrates one of the most durable reception pathways in the Korean context (Bradford, 2011). The following representative titles anchor the genre-cluster analysis; each was verified through at least two public records and indexed with a cover/metadata evidence ID (see Table 3).

Building on these verified anchors, the analysis now examines how paratext and institutional mediation differ across the three clusters. The patterns observed in this representative case are not idiosyncratic but recur across verified Korean editions of Scandinavian children’s and young-adult literature, as summarized in Table 3, which maps the recurring presence of Scandinavian titles across genre clusters in the Korean market.



While children's and YA literature demonstrates how trust and continuity stabilize reception over time, the next cluster illustrates a contrasting pathway in which credibility depends less on transparency and more on translation craft and critical mediation.

Table 3. Representative Scandinavian Works in the Korean Market

Cluster	Representative work (Author, Original title)	Verified Korean edition year	ISBN	Verification sources	Cover evidence ID
Nordic noir (Sweden)	Stieg Larsson, <i>Men Who Hate Women</i> (2005), Millennium series	2017	9788954646581	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-01
Nordic noir (Sweden)	Hennig Mankell, <i>The Troubled Man</i> (2009), Wallander series	2013	9788901161204	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-02
Nordic noir (Sweden)	Maj Sjövall / Per wahlöö, <i>The Man Who Went Up in Smoke</i> (1966), Martin Beckseries	2017	9788954644440	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-03
Children/YA (Sweden)	Astrid Lindgren, <i>The Brothers Lionheart</i> (1973)	2015	9788936446734	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-01
Children/YA (Sweden)	Tove Jansson, <i>Moominpappa at Sea</i> (1965), Moomin Series	2023	9791160269765	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-02
Children/YA (Sweden)	Maria Gripe, <i>The Glassblower's Children</i> (1964)	2006	9788949170800	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-03
Quiet prose (Sweden)	Fredrik Backman, <i>An man called Ove</i> (2012)	2023	9791130605210	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-01
Quiet prose (Sweden)	Jonas Jonasson, <i>The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared</i> (2009)	2013	9788932916194	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-02
Quiet prose (Sweden)	Lena Andersson, <i>Duck City</i> (2006)	2010	9788937490170	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-03
Nordic noir (Denmark)	Jussi Adler-Olsen, <i>A Conspiracy of Faith</i> (2009) Department Q series	2019	9788932919454	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-04
Nordic noir (Denmark)	Peter Høeg, <i>Frøken, Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow</i> (1992)	2005	9788989351733	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-05
Children/YA (Denmark)	Hans Christian Andersen, <i>The Snow Queen</i> (1845)	2019	9791189660949	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-04
Children/YA (Denmark)	Bjarne Reuter, <i>The Boys from St. Petri</i> (1991)	2010	9788964291016	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-05
Children/YA (Denmark)	Jakob martin Strid, <i>Mimbo Jimbo and the Long Winter</i> (2014), Mimbo Jimbo series	2016	9788932374147	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-06



Quiet prose (Denmark)	Martin Andersen Nexø, <i>Pelle the Conqueror</i> (1906-10)	2009	9788950917739	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-04
Quiet prose (Denmark)	Karen Blixen, <i>Babette's Feast</i> (1950)	2016	9788954616584	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-05
Quiet prose (Denmark)	Eva Tind, <i>Origins</i> (2019)	2021	9788965457343	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-06
Nordic noir (Norway)	Jo Nesbø, <i>Killing Moon</i> (2017), Harry Hole Series	2025	9791173323614	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-06
Nordic noir (Norway)	Karin Fossum, <i>Don't Look Back</i> (1996), Konrad Sejer Series	2007	9788975275746	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-07
Nordic noir (Norway)	Anne Holt, <i>Dead Joker</i> (1999)	2012	9788937474040	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	NNO-08
Children/YA (Norway)	Jostein Gaarder, <i>Sofies Verden</i> (1991)	2015	9788932317663	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-07
Children/YA (Norway)	Maria Parr, <i>Astrid the unstoppable</i> (2009)	2013	9788974141486	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-08
Children/YA (Norway)	Håkon Øvreås, <i>Brown</i> (2013)	2019	9781592702121	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	CYA-09
Quiet prose (Norway)	Per Petterson, <i>Out Stealing Horses</i> (2003)	2020	9788935663415	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-07
Quiet prose (Norway)	Dag Solstad, <i>Professor Andersen's Night</i> (2016)	2016	9788954642231	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-08
Quiet prose (Norway)	Karl Ove Knausgård, <i>My Struggle I-III</i> (2009-2011)	2016	9788935670123	Publisher / Kyobo / NLK	QP-09

Contemporary "Quiet" Prose: Translation Craft and Critical Mediation

A third cluster encompasses contemporary works characterized by interiority, ethical hesitation, and subdued narrative tempo. These texts circulate without sensational cues and depend heavily on translation craft and critical framing (Baker, 2019; Genette & Maclean, 1991).

Representative case: *Jon Fosse, Morning and Evening* (Korean edition)

In the Korean reception of Fosse's prose, credibility is stabilized primarily through translator sensitivity and critical mediation. Short paratextual remarks occasionally signal attention to rhythm, silence, and repetition, preparing readers for a reading experience marked by slowness and restraint. Covers tend toward minimalism, with ample white space and understated imagery.

Critical essays and long-form reviews play a disproportionate role in this cluster. Rather than summarizing plots, critics instruct readers in how to approach ambiguity and ethical openness as literary virtues. Metadata classification, however, often oscillates between literary fiction, essayistic prose, and so-called "healing literature," revealing institutional uncertainty about how to categorize restraint.

The central risk here lies in over-therapeutic framing. When paratexts promise comfort or emotional repair, they risk flattening the ethical complexity of the text, transforming



literature into a lifestyle artifact. Sustainability therefore depends on mediators—translators and critics—who protect interpretive openness rather than enclosing it within self-help discourse (Chamberlain, 2015).

Comparative Synthesis Across Genres

Read comparatively, the three clusters reveal patterns that remain invisible when genres are analyzed in isolation. Alignment emerges when translation ethics, paratext grammars, and institutional anchors reinforce one another, as in the transparency-driven pathways of children’s literature or the serial branding of Nordic noir (Alacovska, 2015; Genette & Maclean, 1991). Drift appears when marketing promises detach from textual experience, whether through oversensational crime framing or excessive pedagogical or therapeutic cues (Drucker, 2018).

Table 4 synthesizes the genre-specific findings by applying the six analytical dimensions to representative works from Nordic noir, children’s/young-adult literature, and contemporary “quiet” prose. The table highlights points of alignment, drift, and infrastructural coherence across genres, showing how different configurations of translation ethics, paratext grammars, and institutional mediation produce distinct forms of literary credibility and durability within the same national reception field.

Table 4 synthesizes these observations by applying the six analytical dimensions from Table 2 across representative works in each cluster. The comparison highlights how infrastructural coherence—stable metadata, recurring institutional programs, and consistent framing—enables repeatable discovery pathways, while misalignment produces fragility even for otherwise acclaimed texts.

Taken together, the genre-specific analysis confirms the article’s central claim: literary reception is not the outcome of inherent textual value alone, but of co-produced infrastructures that align ethical practice, framing strategies, and institutional mediation. This conclusion prepares the ground for Section 6, where these dynamics are interpreted more explicitly through the lens of cultural diplomacy and infrastructural soft power.

To consolidate the cross-genre comparison, Table 4 summarizes the six coded dimensions across the verified item set indexed in Table 3.

Taken together, the patterns in Table 4 show that reception becomes durable when translation ethics, paratext/metadata framing, and institutional anchors align into repeatable pathways of discovery and interpretation—an alignment that underpins the discussion that follows.



Table 4. Cross-Cluster Summary of Mediation Dimensions (coded items indexed in Table 3)

Analytical dimension (coded)	Nordic noir (Item IDs)	Children's/YA (Item IDs)	Quiet prose (Item IDs)
1. Genre / subgenre positioning	Transnational crime; "Nordic noir" branding; serial/series logic dominates discovery (NNO-01-NNO-03)	Classic children's/YA; canon/heritage framing; intergenerational trust cues (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Literary fiction / reflective prose; "contemplative/quiet" positioning; often cross-listed (QP-01-QP-03)
2. Paratext grammar (cover motif, typography, tagline)	Cool/dark palette, stark typography; taglines emphasize social critique, institutions, moral tension (NNO-01-NNO-03)	Illustration/character-centered imagery; stable series design across reprints; taglines emphasize growth, courage, imagination (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Minimal or restrained design; spacious typography; taglines emphasize ordinary life, ethics of care, introspection (QP-01-QP-03)
3. Framing rhetoric (promises made to readers)	"Diagnostic" framing (society/institutions); suspense + ethical ambience; credibility via recognizable noir cues (NNO-01-NNO-03)	Safety/appropriateness + literary value; "recommended reading" rhetoric; affective/educational balance (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Aesthetic/ethical nuance; ambiguity/slowness framed as value; risk of "healing/therapy" overframing (QP-01-QP-03)
4. Institutional anchors (publisher/series, prizes, grants, events)	Series lines and multi-volume packaging; festival/curation spikes; sometimes anchored by crime-themed lists (NNO-01-NNO-03)	School/library adoption and reading programs; classic series lines; occasional embassy/grant visibility reinforces legitimacy (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Critics/long-form reviews and curated "literary" lines; festivals/author events can punctuate attention (QP-01-QP-03)
5. Reader pathways (how books become discoverable/repeatable)	Platform search + series recognition; readers follow "next volume" logic; book clubs/genre lists recirculate backlist (NNO-01-NNO-03)	Parents/teachers/librarians as gatekeepers; school/library collections create recurring rediscovery; reprints sustain familiarity (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Discovery via criticism/interviews/curated lists; slower uptake; sustained by interpretive communities rather than algorithmic momentum (QP-01-QP-03)
6. Edition transparency (source edition, translator visibility, notes, adaptation disclosure)	Generally adequate metadata; main risk is expectation mismatch rather than edition opacity; translator visibility varies (NNO-01-NNO-03)	Transparency is central: translator credit, edition lineage, illustration cycle; risk rises when abridgment/adaptation is not signposted (CYA-01-CYA-03)	Translator/editor notes can be high-leverage for tone/rhythm; risk is marketing drift ("healing" tags) flattening ethical complexity (QP-01-QP-03)



<p>Synthesis: main “alignment” drivers</p>	<p>Series coherence + noir paratext grammar + platform discoverability (NNO-01-NNO-03)</p>	<p>Edition transparency + institutional gatekeeping (school/library) + series continuity (CYA-01-CYA-03)</p>	<p>Critical mediation + restrained framing + translator craft/visibility (QP-01-QP-03)</p>
<p>Primary “drift” risks</p>	<p>Over-sensational marketing; flattening Nordic societies into “darkness” cliché (NNO-01-NNO-03)</p>	<p>Over-pedagogization; edition opacity in reprints/adaptations (CYA-01-CYA-03)</p>	<p>Over-therapeutic framing; category ambiguity harming discoverability (QP-01-QP-03)</p>

Note. Item IDs refer to Table 3, where each representative title is verified through at least two public records and archived with cover/metadata evidence IDs.

Discussion and Implications

The analysis of historical phases and genre-specific pathways reveals that the Korean reception of Scandinavian literature has not depended on a single agent—neither publishers, translators, critics, nor state institutions alone. Instead, value has emerged through a distributed process in which multiple actors, artifacts, and infrastructures gradually align. This section synthesizes those findings and discusses their broader implications for translation studies, reception research, and the study of cultural diplomacy.

The findings invite a rethinking of literary value beyond conventional binaries such as center/periphery or original/translation. Scandinavian titles in Korea gained credibility not because they were canonized elsewhere first, but because local infrastructures learned how to stabilize them: translators cultivated ethical clarity, paratexts framed expectations, metadata made titles searchable, and institutions generated recurring occasions for attention.

In this sense, value appears less as an essence carried by texts than as the outcome of infrastructural alignment. When alignment holds, books become repeatedly discoverable and discussable; when it fractures, even strong literary works fade from view. This perspective shifts the analytical spotlight from symbolic prestige to the mundane routines that sustain literary circulation (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2007).

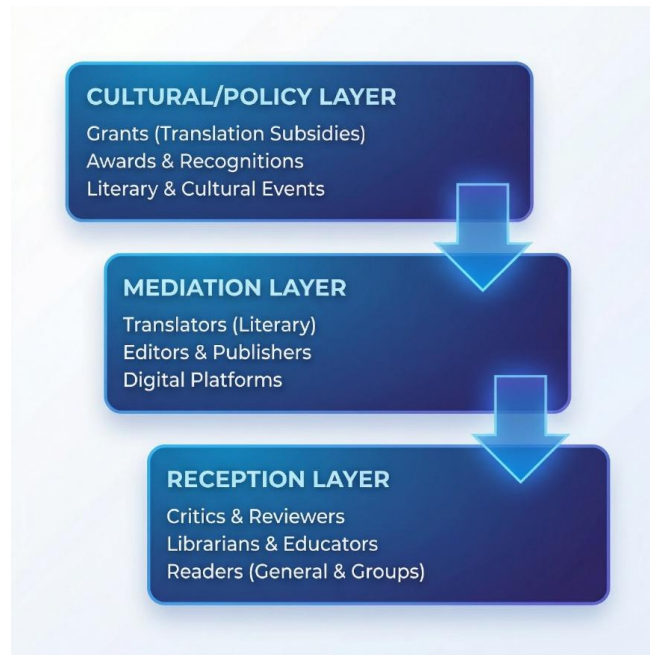
Figure 1 should be read not as a linear transmission model but as an ecological diagram. The arrows indicate recursive feedback rather than one-directional flow, emphasizing that credibility is continuously negotiated across policy, mediation, and reception layers.

A tripartite model helps clarify these dynamics by illustrating the interaction between institutional support, mediation and gatekeeping, and socio-cultural reception. Rather than functioning as linear transmission, these layers operate through feedback loops in which credibility is gradually reinforced or weakened over time. Paratexts and metadata play a central role in this process. Far from being peripheral add-ons, they constitute primary evidence for understanding reception, because they leave durable and publicly



inspectable traces that shape how readers are invited to approach foreign literature before reading even begins (Genette & Maclean, 1991).

Figure 1. Reception-Mediation Ecology of Scandinavian Literature in Korea



Treating such materials as primary evidence also has methodological implications. Because catalogs, covers, authority records, and classification systems are publicly accessible, claims about reception can be audited, revisited, and challenged by other researchers. This contrasts with arguments grounded primarily in proprietary sales data or anecdotal impressions, which are difficult to verify and often inaccessible. The Korean–Scandinavian case thus demonstrates how small-language literatures can circulate along minor-to-minor routes when local infrastructures mature, without dependence on Anglophone consecration. Translators, librarians, editors, and critics collectively exercise agency in shaping these routes, building recognizable grammars of trust within peripheral fields (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2007).

Viewed through an international-relations lens, these dynamics resemble a form of cultural diplomacy that operates quietly, without overt messaging or spectacle. Embassy events, translation grants, festivals, and library initiatives do not dictate meaning. Instead, they reduce risk, establish continuity, and normalize discovery. The result is what may be called infrastructural soft power: attraction grounded not in slogans or campaigns, but in durable pathways that make foreign literature feel credible, reusable, and worth revisiting (Nye, 2017).

This perspective carries pragmatic implications. For publishers, consistent series architectures, transparent edition notes, and restrained marketing help build long-term



trust, whereas over-sensational framing may generate temporary attention at the cost of interpretive communities. For translators, modest visibility—clear acknowledgment of choices and constraints rather than self-promotion—supports credibility across institutions. For libraries and schools, curated reading programs and stable catalog descriptors can anchor foreign titles beyond market cycles. For cultural agencies, small and repeatable supports may prove more effective over time than sporadic high-profile events.

At the same time, caution is necessary. The findings emerge from a single national context and rely primarily on public indicators such as catalogs, paratexts, institutional records, and criticism. These traces cannot fully capture informal exchanges, private reading communities, or the affective dimensions of reader response. Nor do they allow precise measurement of market impact. The approach therefore explains how credibility is stabilized, not how much influence specific titles ultimately exert.

Taken together, the Korean case illustrates that the circulation of small-language literatures depends less on singular breakthroughs than on the slow accumulation of infrastructures that reduce risk, preserve transparency, and invite participation. Investing in these mundane but durable mediations may ultimately matter more than any single promotional campaign. If the goal is not merely to export books but to cultivate shared interpretive worlds, then the work of building infrastructures becomes central both to literary reception and to the quiet practice of cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

This article has traced how Scandinavian literature became visible and sustainable in Korea through a long process of mediation rather than through intrinsic textual value or prior consecration by Anglophone centers. Across historical phases and genre-specific pathways, the analysis demonstrated that credibility emerged gradually from the alignment of translators, editors, librarians, critics, platforms, and cultural agencies. Literary value, in this account, appears not as a property carried by texts alone, but as the outcome of infrastructures that make reading credible, legible, and repeatable within a given reception field (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2007).

Methodologically, the study showed the analytical value of treating paratexts and metadata as primary evidence for reception research. Because such materials leave durable and publicly inspectable traces, they allow transparent and reproducible analysis of how readers are invited to approach foreign literature—often before reading even begins. Covers, taglines, catalog records, and classification systems collectively script expectations and delimit interpretive horizons. Focusing on these public artifacts offers a viable alternative to approaches that rely primarily on proprietary sales data or anecdotal impressions, which are often inaccessible and difficult to verify. Detailed evidence registers and coding protocols are provided in the appendices to enable replication and re-examination of the analytical claims advanced in the main text.

Substantively, the article identified three genre-specific pathways—Nordic noir, children’s and young-adult literature, and contemporary “quiet” prose—each assembling credibility



through a distinct configuration of mediation practices. Crime fiction relied on seriality and calibrated atmosphere; children's literature accumulated trust through transparency and institutional continuity; and quiet prose depended on restrained framing and critical guidance. These clusters revealed that sustainability in reception is genre-sensitive and contingent on how translation ethics, paratextual grammars, and institutional anchors reinforce one another over time.

Theoretically, the Korean–Scandinavian case reframes debates in world literature and translation studies by foregrounding infrastructural alignment rather than symbolic prestige. It also contributes to international-relations scholarship by suggesting that long-term reading infrastructures can function as a form of infrastructural soft power: attraction generated without spectacle or overt messaging, but through routine mediation that normalizes discovery and reuse (Nye, 2017). In this sense, cultural diplomacy operates less through campaigns than through the slow stabilization of trust across institutions and interpretive communities.

At the same time, the findings must be interpreted with caution. The analysis is limited to a single national context and relies primarily on public indicators such as catalogs, paratexts, institutional records, and criticism. These traces cannot fully capture informal circulation, private reading practices, or the affective dimensions of reader response, nor do they allow precise measurement of cultural impact. The approach therefore explains how credibility is stabilized not how much influence specific titles ultimately exert.

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YES, REUNIFICATION BY ABSORPTION WOULD BE A CATASTROPHE FOR KOREA

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Abstract

This article argues that reunification by absorption would make democratic institutional transfer in Korea politically unstable. Existing discussions often assume that if North Korea collapses, South Korea's democratic institutions can simply be extended to the North. I argue that this view overlooks a prior condition: brokerage institutions capable of mediating distributive conflicts across the former divide. In their absence, post-unification democracy would likely intensify distributive conflict and political outbidding. Yet the survival of such brokerage institutions depends on the timing of their implementation and on organizational capacity. Reunification by absorption is precisely a scenario in which both conditions are structurally absent.

Keywords

Reunification by absorption, Korean unification, democratic institutional transfer, distributive conflict, political outbidding.

Resumo

Este artigo defende que a reunificação por absorção tornaria a transferência de instituições democráticas na Coreia politicamente instável. Os debates atuais partem frequentemente do pressuposto de que, caso a Coreia do Norte entre em colapso, as instituições democráticas da Coreia do Sul poderão simplesmente ser alargadas ao Norte. Defendo que esta visão ignora uma condição prévia: a existência de instituições de mediação capazes de arbitrar conflitos distributivos de ambos os lados da antiga divisão. Na sua ausência, a democracia pós-reunificação provavelmente intensificaria os conflitos distributivos e a escalada política. No entanto, a sobrevivência dessas instituições de mediação depende do momento da sua implementação e da capacidade organizacional. A reunificação por absorção é precisamente um cenário em que ambas as condições estão estruturalmente ausentes.

Palavras-chave

Reunificação por absorção, unificação coreana, transferência institucional democrática, conflito distributivo, disputa política.



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YES, REUNIFICATION BY ABSORPTION WOULD BE A CATASTROPHE FOR KOREA¹

JONGHO PARK

Introduction

The literature on Korean unification has generally rested on two assumptions. The first is that unification remains a desirable national task in the long run. The second is that, should the North Korean regime collapse or rapidly weaken, South Korea's liberal institutions could simply be extended to the North Korea. South Korean reunification discourse has long framed division as a condition to be overcome through the restoration of national homogeneity. Foundational works have similarly treated division as a historical rupture in an otherwise shared national community.

The existing literature may be broadly grouped into four strands. The first consists of comparative and institutional-design studies that draw on historical cases such as Germany, Italy, and the United States in order to assess the feasibility and potential challenges of Korean unification. These works focus on issues such as income gaps, legitimacy, elite neutralization, administrative integration, and constitutional design (Brada, 2023; Vogel and Best, 2016; Shin and Jeong, 2020).

The second strand emphasizes transitional arrangements such as confederation, commonwealth, or gradual coexistence. Rather than viewing immediate absorption as desirable, this literature highlights the need for an interim framework that stabilizes the former divide over time (Kwon and Park, 2019; Lee and Lee, 2019)

The third strand examines the democratic adaptation of North Korean defectors. This body of research focuses on the micro-foundations of democratic incorporation and suggests that identity, belonging, and civic socialization shape the extent to which North Korean migrants adapt to democratic norms (Hur 2018).

A fourth strand addresses the problem of transition within North Korea itself. Its central concern is the durability of authoritarian rule and the prospects for political transformation inside the North.

These literatures provide important insights, but they share a common limitation. For instance, comparative studies of unification offer useful discussions of what institutions might be adopted, yet they say less about why such institutional designs fail to be stable

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once implemented (Brada 2023; Anderson 2016; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015) Studies of confederation arrangements emphasize the importance of gradualism and coexistence, but they often leave unspecified the conflicts that such arrangements are expected to mediate (Kwon and Park, 2019; Lee and Lee, 2019)

The existing literature has asked far less why democracy itself may become unstable after unification, and still less how distributive conflicts might destabilize democracy in the absence of mechanisms capable of containing them. I argue that reunification by absorption should be understood not simply as a problem of regime replacement, but as a situation in which democratic institutional transfer is attempted in the absence of institutions capable of mediating distributive conflict.

This article shifts the focus from constitutional design to distributive conflict. The key institutional condition is the presence of brokerage institutions capable of mediating distributive conflict (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2015). Because the survival of such brokerage institutions depends on timing and organizational capacity, they must emerge before distributive conflict hardens into communal politics and must possess enough organizational reach to make participation in the new order credible.

Reunification by absorption is precisely a scenario in which both conditions are structurally absent. Institutional transfer may occur rapidly, but the organizational foundations required to mediate conflict cannot be built at the same speed. In this sense, reunification by absorption is not merely socially disruptive. It is structurally catastrophic because it attempts to transplant democratic institutions without the prior conditions necessary for their political stabilization.

This article proceeds as follows. In the second chapter, I explain why democracies in segmented societies are vulnerable to distributive conflict and political outbidding. In the third chapter, I turn to the conditions under which such instability may be mitigated, focusing on organizational capacity and timing as the two key conditions that mediate distributive conflict. In the fourth chapter, I argue that reunification by absorption structurally removes those very conditions. In the fifth chapter, I conclude this article with discussion and implications, referring to the German case.

The Classical Logic of Distributive Conflict

Theoretical Logic

A useful starting point for thinking about Korean reunification is the classic insight that democratic instability often emerges not from the absence of elections, but from the political consequences of distributive conflict in a divided society. In such settings, the transition to a new regime changes the very structure of political life (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Horowitz 1985; Gerring et al., 2018) Groups that had previously cooperated under a shared external constraint now face one another as rivals over scarce political resources. What had once been organized around a broad common purpose—Korean reunification—becomes a struggle over allocation. In that sense, regime change is a shift from one political game to another.



This logic is especially relevant to reunification by absorption. Prior to reunification, both Koreas may speak in the language of national unity, historical continuity, or eventual integration. Yet once reunification occurs under asymmetric conditions, those themes are likely to lose their integrative force. More immediate questions will move to the center of politics. Who bears the fiscal burden of integration? Who controls the security apparatus? Which actors are punished, excluded, or protected? How is representation redistributed across the former divide?

These are not secondary issues. Any political organization that attempts to accommodate divergent distributive preferences across the former divide—hereafter, a coalition—would struggle to manage these issues under conditions of scarce distributive resources (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972). The problem is that such issues constitute the substance of post-unification politics. Once such issues become salient, democratic competition may be organized less around abstract constitutional ideals than around distributive demands (Horowitz, 1985).

These demands are inherently difficult to reconcile. In a newly unified polity, the resources available for representation are finite. A settlement that satisfies one side will be read by another side as a direct loss. Under these conditions, broad national agendas are fragile. They may temporarily coexist with group-specific claims. General appeals to integration, growth, or democratic reconstruction cannot easily override conflicts rooted in everyday material interests and collective insecurity.

This creates a second problem. Coalitions formed under one political context tend to become oversized once that context disappears. (e.g., Riker, 1962). A broad alliance may be useful when groups face a common threat or when political legitimacy depends on maximal inclusion. After regime change, however, such coalitions become harder to sustain. Political actors now require a coalition large enough to win and govern. Once that threshold is lowered, the incentives to retain peripheral or costly partners decline (Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Selway, 2011)

This is one reason why post-transition democracies in divided societies so often struggle to remain inclusive. This dynamic also creates opportunities for political entrepreneurs. Even if a temporary compromise exists, actors outside the governing center would have incentives to magnify the importance of group-specific grievances (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Bormann et al., 2017)

In the Korean case, this dynamic could emerge on both sides of the former divide. In the South, political actors may mobilize against perceived concessions to the North. In the North, actors may frame any asymmetrical settlement as subordination. Once such outbidding begins, moderate positions become increasingly difficult to sustain.

The central risk of reunification by absorption is that it would politicize distributive conflict in a setting where electoral competition may reward communal appeals. In this sense, democratic instability is a structural possibility generated by the interaction of group-based claims.

Existing theories of ethnic conflict capture this dynamic well (e.g., Horowitz 1985; Bormann et al., 2017; Gerring et al., 2018). The Korean case is relevant because long-



term partition has produced distinct political communities across the former divide. (Kwon and Park, 2019).

Formal Intuition

The same argument may be clarified through a simple spatial and expected-utility framework. Consider three communities, A, B, and C, each with an ideal outcome that maximizes its own collective interest. The three actors may be understood as representing hardline and moderate positions across the former divide. The set of possible political outcomes can then be represented as a triangular strategy space whose vertices denote the realization of each group's preference. Intermediate points represent compromise outcomes.

Figure 1. Strategic Space of Three Communal Actors

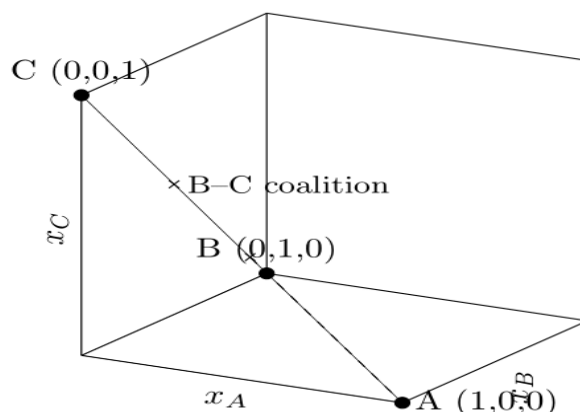


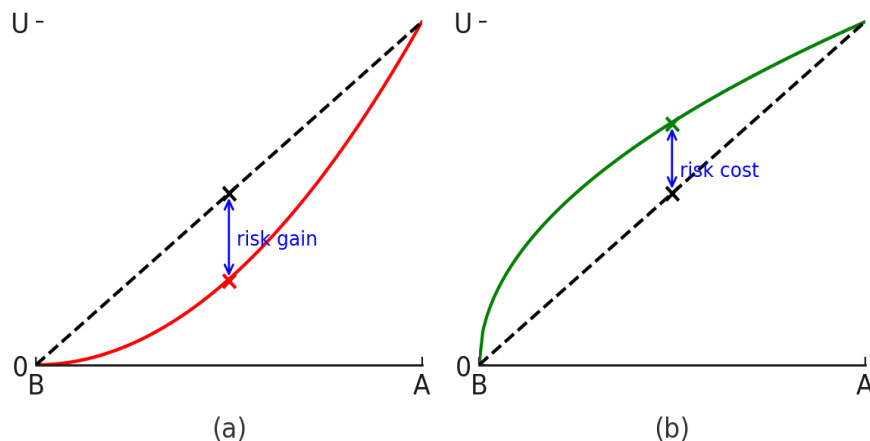
Figure 1 illustrates this strategic space. As in the original formulation, the point of the figure shows that compromise is intrinsically unstable when one group expects that democratic competition can move outcomes closer to its own ideal point. In the Korean setting, the intuition is easy to see. South Korean actors may prefer an intermediate arrangement in the abstract, but if they expect electoral competition to reward a harder line, they have little reason to remain at the center.

The same applies to North Korean actors who expect their survival or protection to depend on sharper communal mobilization. Under these conditions, the middle ground exists conceptually, but it lacks political security.

This instability becomes clearer considering the intensity of preferences. In divided settings, political actors do not merely rank outcomes differently. They also care about them with unusual intensity. This is crucial because strong preference intensity is tied to attitudes toward risk. If South or North Korean actor value distributive outcomes as matters of collective survival, then uncertain but potentially larger gains may be preferred to safer but moderate bargains. This logic may be summarized as follow;



Figure 2. Utility Functions reflecting Risk-Acceptant and Risk-Averse Preferences



$$\int u(x)p(x)dx > u\left(\int xp(x)dx\right)$$

In that case, actors become willing to gamble for more extreme outcomes.

Figure 2 captures this intuition through utility curves. When utility is convex, actors display risk-acceptant behavior and prefer “all-or-nothing” political strategies. When utility is concave, actors are more risk-averse and willing to accept secure compromise. The significance of the figure for this article is direct. Reunification by absorption is likely to generate the first configuration.

Questions of punishment, property, welfare or security are the daily issues that make collective preferences intense and non-compromising. Finally, electoral politics may encourage risky escalation rather than moderation.

Once these assumptions are combined, democratic instability follows from the logic of political competition itself. Suppose a candidate representing either of North or South Korea proposes a moderate position that includes some concessions to the other side. A rival from within the same divide may attack that position as insufficiently protective of the group’s core interests and move closer to the group’s ideal point.

In either of Korea, this harder line may defeat the moderate alternative even when the latter is more broadly acceptable. The result is a pattern of outbidding. Moderates are vulnerable as hardline competitors exploit communal fears within majoritarian politics. This means that even actors who seek gradual accommodation may be punished by those who promise stronger protection for “their side.”

Democratic procedures can be destabilized when group-based distributive conflicts become politically salient. This is the political context in which reunification by absorption must be understood. The Korean problem is the extension of democratic institutions into an environment already primed for distributive conflict.



Containing Distributive Conflicts

Distributive conflict becomes politically destabilizing when no institution exists to mediate it before it hardens into antagonistic politics. Classical pessimism, however, has important limits. If distributive conflict alone were enough to explain democratic failure, then all divided post-transition polities would unravel in the same way. However, some do not. Some of them manage to preserve a larger political framework long enough to contain those pressures.

Power-sharing institutions such as federalism or consociationalism may be attractive, but they do not implement themselves (Anderson, 2016; Christin and Hug, 2012; Brancati, 2006). The problem is not only which institutional arrangement would work, but who has the incentive to establish it before conflict becomes fully polarized (Ordeshook and Shvetsova, 1994; Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman, 2005). Any institutional reform requires political actors who expect to benefit from it and who possess the capacity to sideline both internal outbidders and external entrepreneurs.

An organized coalition of moderate actors across the former divide would be the relevant carrier of reform (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017). Such a coalition matters because it connects northern and southern actors within a larger political framework and gives them incentives to remain inside the system even when they cannot secure all of their group-level demands. Democracy remains stable only when political loss does not become equivalent to collective exclusion (Simonsen, 2005).

Such a coalition does not emerge endogenously. It requires organizational depth, recognized leadership, routinized coordination, and legitimacy. They require organizational depth, recognized leadership, routinized coordination, and legitimacy to persuade actors that future gains inside the system is preferable to immediate exit. That is why democratic stabilization depends not merely on formal rules, but on the prior existence of organized coalition committed to a shared political goal.

The problem is as much temporal as it is institutional. The coalition must survive long enough to contain conflict before it becomes fully polarized. Once that threshold has been crossed, institutional reform is less likely to restore stability, whichever it takes form of federalism, consociationalism, or other power-sharing arrangements.

Thus, the functioning of power-sharing institutional reform requires two minimum conditions. The first condition is timing. Institutional reform led by the coalition needs to be implemented as early as possible, because reforms are most effective when they are introduced before political competition has been reorganized around communal demands. Once communal demands become the dominant political agenda, actors on both sides of the former divide have less reason to remain within the coalition.

The importance of early conflict-mediating reform can be demonstrated as follows. For any actor B, remaining within the coalition must be more beneficial than the expected compensation from leaving it. This can be stated as:

$$g \times \delta \geq (1 - g) \times C$$



δ denotes the actual share received by the minority within the institution, such as perceived access to cabinet positions, budgetary resources, or policy influence. C denotes the cost of acting outside the coalition, such as state enforcement capacity, punishment, or organizational costs. Finally, g denotes the weight voters place on “our group’s share,” that is, the relative importance of identity benefits compared to the conservative value of remaining in power.

In this case, the repeated expected utility of B , given a discount factor for future value ($0 < \beta < 1$) is,

$$V_B = \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \beta^t [g \cdot \delta_t - (1-g) \cdot C_t]$$

Here, δ_t is the share received within the coalition at time t and C_t is the cost of exiting the coalition.

If power-sharing reform occurs at time τ , then for all $t > \tau$,

$$\delta_t = \delta_0 + \Delta\delta, \quad C_t = C_0 + \Delta C$$

permanently change. The present value of the gain in utility generated by reform is therefore:

$$\begin{aligned} PV(\tau) &= \sum_{t=\tau}^{\infty} \beta^t [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] \\ &= (\beta^\tau / (1-\beta)) \times [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] \end{aligned}$$

If we accept the assumption that power-sharing institutional reform is generally advantageous to minority groups (mostly North Korea actors), then

$$\Delta := [g \cdot \Delta\delta - (1-g) \cdot \Delta C] > 0$$

$(\beta^\tau / (1-\beta))$ is the sum of a geometric series beginning at $t=\tau$, and since $\beta < 1$, this expression is maximized when τ takes its minimum value.

However, if the value of V_B^0 at the initial point $t < 0$ is sufficiently negative, then even

$V_B = V_B^0 + PV(0)$ may still remain negative.



An attempt at power-sharing reform will fail no matter how early it is undertaken. This provides a clue as to why many coalitions, despite having sufficient incentive to attempt the reform, nonetheless failed to institutionalize it in time.

Power-sharing institutions created by reform must be able to manage the communal demands within it until the institutionalization is completed. To do so, the coalition must be organized to manage that transition. Although the concept of organizational strength remains theoretically underdeveloped (Borz and Janda, 2018), Olson (1962) conceptualizes it as a group sustained by successful collective action.

Both northern and southern communities have incentives to free-ride by prioritizing their own communal agendas, but the extent to which the organization minimizes that possibility indicates its degree of strength. Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) view that communal demands as the factor that fatally undermines collective action and causes the organization to collapse within a short period.

The proof regarding organizational strength is determined by the interaction of the following three functions. For the organizational strength of the institution; $O \in [0,1]$

1. $k(O)$ denotes the cost of exiting the coalition, where $k'(O) \geq 0$.
2. $s_{current}(O)$ denotes the actual share that B receives within the current coalition, where $s'_{current}(O) \geq 0$.
3. $s_{alt}(O)$ denotes the incentive offered to B by an alternative coalition, where $s'_{alt}(O) \leq 0$.

The reason the derivative of $s_{alt}(O)$ is negative is that, as O increases, the expected share that an alternative coalition can offer to B is assumed to decline.

In this case, the retention condition in terms of repeated present value is:

$$s_{current}(O) \geq s_{alt}(O) - x(O) \cdot (1 - \beta).$$

Define

$$G(O) = s_{current}(O) - s_{alt}(O) + x(O) \cdot (1 - \beta).$$

Then its derivative is:

$$G'(O) = s'_{current}(O) - s'_{alt}(O) + x'(O) \cdot (1 - \beta) \geq 0$$



As a result, $G(O)$ increases as O increases. In other words, the stronger the organizational capacity of the coalition, the lower the incentive to exit under otherwise identical conditions. At the same time, this also acts as a factor that reduces the negativity of V_B^0 .

Why Absorption Eliminates These Conditions

The political consequences depend on whether institutional reforms can emerge early enough and whether they are backed by the organized coalition (Bormann et al., 2019; Strøm et al., 2017). Reunification by absorption, however, is precisely the process in which both conditions are structurally undermined. This is not simply because absorption produces asymmetry between North and South Korea. The danger lies in attempting to establish a democratic order without the conditions necessary for it to function.

First, absorption eliminates the condition of timing. The institutional reform must be undertaken before nationwide issues are displaced by communal demands (Horowitz, 1985; 1993). Once distributive conflict has already hardened, the reform no longer works as a preventive mechanism. The earlier the intervention, the greater its present value for actors deciding whether to remain within the system. The later it comes, the less capable it is of altering their incentives.

Reunification by absorption eliminates precisely this condition. It does so because it presupposes that political incorporation must occur rapidly, often under conditions of collapse or abrupt institutional vacuum. In such a setting, the extension of South Korean law would likely be treated as urgent and non-negotiable.

This ensures that the implementation of reform arrives too late. Institutions capable of translating conflict into manageable bargaining cannot be built at the same speed as the regime transition by itself. While such institutions require time to organize, absorption compresses that time. What disappears is, therefore, the temporal window in which mediation could still function preventively.

That delay directly lowers the expected value of remaining within the new order for every actor. In the language of the earlier model, the relevant issue is whether the perceived share of participation exceeds the expected value of acting outside the coalition. However, that condition becomes harder to satisfy when the benefits of participation remain uncertain while the costs of exposure are immediate. North Korean actors facing immediate uncertainty cannot be expected to value a future promise of inclusion as highly as a present guarantee.

The second problem is the coalition's organizational capacity. Even a reform introduced early, it may fail if the coalition is insufficiently organized to lead the process until its complete implementation. The argument is that strong organizations raise the cost of exit, increase the benefits of remaining within the coalition, and reduce the attractiveness of alternative alignments. As organizational capacity rises, actors are less likely to defect under otherwise identical distributive pressures.

Absorption removes this condition at its source. The coalition would have to connect actors across the former divide. However, such an organized coalition cannot arise



spontaneously. It cannot be improvised by constitutional declaration alone, nor can it be assumed to exist simply because one side already has functioning institutions. South Korea possesses a democratic state, but that does not mean it possesses a political actor capable of mediating conflict across the former North–South divide.

Instead, the sudden extension of South Korea’s democratic rules intensifies the risk that distributive conflict will be interpreted in communal terms. This distinction is essential. In ordinary discussions of unification, South Korea’s institutional strength is often treated as an advantage that would smooth the transition. The stronger the preexisting South Korean state, the easier it becomes to extend democratic rules downward from the top.

South Korean actors may mobilize against perceived privileges granted to northern communities. On the other hand, North Korean actors may interpret unequal incorporation as evidence that the new order is a structure of domination.

Such conflict is politically difficult to avoid. This does not necessarily mean that conflict will always take the form of open violence or regime breakdown. The claim is narrower but still severe. It is that the issues most likely to define early post-unification politics—property rights, taxation, security, representation, punishment, and administrative authority—are all distributive in character, and that absorption deprives the new regime of the institutions that might otherwise contain them.

Reunification by absorption should be understood as politically catastrophic. It converts that divide into a new distributive struggle inside a formally democratic order. The result is the institutionalization of conflict without the prior means to manage it. In that precise sense, absorption is catastrophic by design.

Why Germany Is Not a Benchmark for Korea

This article argues that reunification by absorption would produce a highly unstable path to democratic integration in Korea. The main problem is political. Democratic institutions cannot stabilize themselves where distributive conflict is immediate and institutions of mediation are absent. This is because post-unification Korea would not be the simple restoration of a unified nation-state. Under these conditions, the earliest politics of unification would be distributive.

In this situation, welfare, punishment, representation, taxation, employment, and security would shape the regime from the start. Elections and party competition would not moderate these conflicts. Instead, they would be vehicles for mobilizing actors on both sides of the former divide. The extension of South Korea’s existing institutions would still be unable to accommodate each community’s interests at once. Given the salience of institutional rules for distributive resources, the likely result would be political outbidding and the communalization of distributive claims.

German unification should not be treated as a benchmark for Korea (Shin and Jeong, 2020; Vogel and Best, 2016). This analogy obscures the mechanism at the center of this article. Emphasizing Germany’s success shifts attention toward institutional superiority, administrative integration, and fiscal burden, but these are not the core issues. The key



question is whether democratic institutions remain governable when distributive conflict becomes salient. I am highly skeptical of the possibility.

An uncritical comparison to Germany hinders productive discussion. It privileges outcomes over mechanisms. While it highlights successful institutional extension, it sidelines the question of who would mediate distributive conflict between North and South Korea. South Korea clearly possesses established democratic institutions and may be the actor that would extend them to the North. However, those institutions are less likely to mediate the distributive conflicts that absorption would immediately politicize.

Moreover, Germany itself was not a case of coalition-free success. East Germany experienced roundtable politics and held elections during the transition. Although West German parties and administrative institutions quickly entered the East, they also provided the organizational capacity necessary to sustain coalition-building (Vogel and Best, 2016), including the incorporation of political moderates on both sides. East German society likewise contained churches, civic groups, and emerging associations (Shin and Jeong, 2020). Its unification remained governable in part because brokerage functions were already present.

Germany was therefore an exceptional case. It cannot serve as a model for Korea. Its relative stability rested on conditions prior to institutional transfer itself. The scenario of reunification by absorption lacks the conditions that Germany enjoyed. It would compress the timing of incorporation, weaken prior mediation, and expose vulnerable actors before the organized coalition has time to emerge. Given this difference, the German case reinforces the importance of prior political organization.

The broader implication is conceptual as well as empirical. Korean unification should not be approached only through the language of national restoration. It should also be analyzed as a problem of democratic stability under severe distributive conflict. A unified Korea cannot be presumed politically homogeneous because it remains nationally continuous. It should instead be examined as a conflictual order in which group-based claims may acquire a quasi-ethnic character.

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