

South Korea: The next strategic surprise?

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Abstract: South Korea's foreign policy has traditionally exhibited a high degree of path dependence, marked by firm resolve, restraint, and close coordination with the United States. However, analytical expectations regarding South Korea's foreign policy indicate the potential for strategic surprise that could result from the failure to recognize, or a willingness to ignore, the potential for change. This article demonstrates that domestic and external conditions provide a strong rationale for change. It further demonstrates that alternative policy options, which would fundamentally change South Korea's foreign policy, and require decision makers to reassess basic assumptions, are currently under debate and/or being signaled. Analysts should not expect Seoul to follow the same well-worn foreign policy path forever. Foreign policy path dependence is coming to an end. It's time now to prepare for radical change on the Korean peninsula.

Keywords: Korea, United States, China, nuclear, foreign policy, middle power

Introduction

On 8 March 2018, National Security Office Director, Chung Eui-yong, National Intelligence Service Director, Suh Hoon, and Ambassador Cho Yoon-je, announced to reporters gathered on the front lawn of the White House that President Trump had agreed to meet North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. The aesthetics of the short briefing were remarkable. Three South Korean officials – initiating, leading, and controlling a foreign policy initiative in the absence, or arguably even failure, of America to deal with an issue. The event marked a new level of initiative, leadership, and control in South Korea's foreign policy. It was a significant departure from a foreign policy tradition marked by firm resolve, restraint, and close coordination with the United States. It also raised important questions: Why had the change in South Korea's foreign policy gone undetected in Washington? What are the motivations for this change in foreign policy? Could the motivations for this departure transform into real policy options?

During 2019, relations between Seoul and Washington further deteriorated. Issues concerning trade and investment, Seoul's decision to end the General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan, negotiations towards the transfer of wartime operational control, defense cost-sharing negotiations, and an increase in anti-American demonstrations, all exacerbated underlying fractures in the relationship. While there are exceptions, few analysts outside of South Korea believe the alliance to be at risk or consider it possible that Seoul has other options. For most, South Korea's deviation is the result of a perfect storm of ambition and unpredictability in the presidential offices of South Korea and the United States (U.S.), respectively. For most, the alliance challenges are limited and temporary, and there are expectations that future administrations will repair the damage done. Few were willing to even contemplate that the long-term relationship could be coming to an end. Could radical change in Seoul's foreign policy be the next strategic surprise in Washington?

Strategic surprise

Strategic surprise involves unexpected events or actions that require decision makers to reassess basic assumptions. Classic examples include Pearl Harbor, the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Asian Financial Crisis, 9/11, the Arab Spring, Russia's invasion of the Crimea, and the Global Financial Crisis. Strategic surprise occurs when three conditions are satisfied: (1) analytical expectations that lead to a failure to recognize, or a willingness to ignore the potential for radical change; (2) a target, which holds a strong rationale to initiate radical change; and (3) a target, which begins to debate, and/or signals radical change.

The example of Chinese intervention in the Korean War illustrates these conditions. In October 1950, analysts assumed the Korean War was almost over. After early successes, North Korean forces had retreated to the Chinese border region. Troops would be home for Christmas. However, in hindsight, the underlying conditions satisfied the criteria for imminent strategic surprise. First, analytical expectations led to a failure to recognize, or the

willingness to ignore the potential for change. Senior United Nations (UN) leadership believed it unlikely that China would intervene to support North Korea. Analysts believed that China was still in recovery from the civil war; had left it too late to intervene; was poorly equipped and supplied; and was an unmotivated, uncoordinated, and ineffective fighting force. It was believed that China could be, at worst, a diversion to tie U.S. forces down from the main target of Western Europe. Second, China held a strong rationale to initiate change, and intervene to support North Korean forces. In historical and strategic terms, it was closely linked to the Korean peninsula. Throughout the Japanese occupation and the civil war, Chinese communist forces had worked closely with North Korean partisans. Most importantly, foreign control of the Korean peninsula up to the Yalu River presented a direct strategic and immediate security threat to China. Third, China signaled its policy options. China made diplomatic and public warnings of policy options under consideration and began to mobilize forces in Manchuria.

Despite this, the entry of China came as a surprise. It required the U.S. to reassess basic assumptions, including the likelihood of imminent victory, the scale and duration of the conflict, the role of China as potential regional and global threat, and the importance of East Asia as a theatre of operations in the Cold War. In October 1950, the Korean peninsula was a source of one of the most significant strategic surprises of the Cold War. Seventy years later, could the Korean peninsula again become a source of strategic surprise? This paper proceeds to assess (1) the analytical expectations that could lead to a failure to recognize or ignore potential change; (2) the rationale of South Korea to initiate radical foreign policy change; and (3) the South Korean policy options currently under debate and/or being signaled.

Analytical expectations

There are conditions that inhibit perception of radical change in South Korea's foreign policy. First, and foremost, the policy community that focuses on South Korea is small and weighed heavily in favor of analysts that primarily focus on North Korea. Despite its position as the world's twelfth largest economy, South Korea is dwarfed by the amount of research and reporting on North Korea. It's a sad fact that there are more analysts speculating on the indicators of the opaque decisions made in Pyongyang than the indicators of verified decisions made in Seoul. A review of the leading international relations/strategic studies journal *Survival* demonstrates the predominance of research on North Korea over South Korea. Over the last twenty years, there were 17 articles containing the term "North Korea" in the title, compared to a single article containing the term "South Korea".¹ Over the last twenty years, there are 393 articles containing the term "North Korea", compared to 282 articles containing the term "South Korea".² Further, English language research and reporting on the Korean peninsula is tainted. English language discourse focuses overwhelmingly on a narrow range of topics, such as missiles, nuclear weapons, and Kim Jong-un, whereas Korean language discourse has a much wider array of topics, such as economic cooperation, unification, literature, lifestyles, and more – Pyongyang is different in Washington and Seoul.³ The sensationalism of North Korea blinds analysts to change in South Korea. This is a fundamental analytical error unlikely to be corrected in the near future.⁴

Second, interaction between Seoul's policy community and outside analysts is limited, and often occurs in a structured fashion that impedes transparency. Interaction occurs through linguistic and cultural 'gatekeepers' – cosmopolitan individuals who are not necessarily specialists in a particular field, but hold senior positions in university, think-tank, or government hierarchies. Middle powers, diplomatic negotiation, nuclear weapons, Japan, Europe, East Timor, the Antarctic, sustainable development, or maritime borders – any subject that requires a South Korean partner, the gatekeeper will accept interaction, and have a graduate student work on the project. Gatekeepers maintain and entertain outside expectations regarding foreign policy. They know what is expected and play the role. In many cases, the resulting interaction will be shallow, and outside analysts will leave with the belief that interlocutors share similar views. A classic recent example is the academic or researcher who visits South Korea to discuss the General Security of Military Information Agreement and South Korea's threat to withdraw from the intelligence-sharing pact. A gatekeeper will unhesitatingly agree upon the logic of the need for closer cooperation between South Korea and Japan, leaving an interlocutor satisfied. Yet, in practice, questions of Korea-Japan relations in South Korea are not decided at the logical level, but rather at a deeply ingrained, near unchanging, emotional level, which encompasses and stains political decisions on the issue.

Third, South Korea's foreign policy decision-making structure is highly distinct, and less open to outside analysis. The weighted input to policy of leadership, advisors, political parties, the legislature, bureaucracy, interest groups, public opinion, and national roles, are distinct from their western equivalents. Contrary to most expectations, the role of the individual, be it advisor, bureaucrat, or the leader him or herself, plays a substantially more prominent role. Importantly, the balance between the public and the attentive public is different. This means tools often used in the West to determine potential policy direction, such as public opinion surveys, can have substantially less efficacy in South Korea. It also means that policy change can appear more radical, dynamic, and sudden.

Finally, analysts tend to accept South Korea's foreign policy as embedded in a pattern that does not change. For more than fifty years, Seoul's foreign policy approach to North Korea's provocations followed a well-worn path – firm resolve, restraint, and close coordination with the United States. Despite incredible provocations, including armed infiltrations, assassination attempts, kidnappings, terrorist attacks, artillery exchanges, naval skirmishes, and nuclear weapon and missile tests, the same path was ultimately trodden. South Korea's policy approach to North Korea's provocations demonstrated a high degree of path dependence. Foreign policy path dependence posits parameters established in an initial trajectory constrain and influence subsequent courses of policy action.⁵ As noted by Kay, as "decisions accumulate over time; a process of accretion can occur in a policy area that restricts options for future policy-makers".⁶ With policy action largely determined by earlier policy decisions, deviation from an initial trajectory becomes difficult. As a result, "policy reversals tend to be seen as less likely, more costly and thus, less desirable".⁷ Except for minor disagreements, even the pursuit of the Sunshine Policy in its various incarnations

under presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and to date Moon Jae-in, similarly adhered to a path of firm resolve, restraint, and close coordination with the United States.

South Korea's adoption of the middle power moniker since the early 2000s, reinforces expectations of foreign policy path dependency. Despite clear indications of change in the foreign policy behavior of contemporary middle powers, there remains expectations that they should maintain fundamental characteristic traits associated with middle powers in the 1990s, such as seeking multilateral solutions to foreign policy problems, adherence to rule of law, support for market-based, social-democratic values, and demonstration of 'good international citizenship'. If South Korea is a middle power, how can it be a nuclear proliferator? How could it abandon its relationship with the United States? How could it move closer to an authoritarian state? Such expectations blind analysts to the potential of foreign policy change in South Korea.

Rationale for foreign policy change

Radical foreign policy change requires a strong rationale. There must be a logical basis to justify any policy action. But radical policy change necessitates both the recognition of a growing need to adapt or change, and an impetus or shock to initiate change. This can be broken down into four distinct criteria: exogenous shock; cumulative exogenous or endogenous change; and/or endogenous shock.⁸

Exogenous shock: America first in East Asia

An exogenous shock is an unexpected and unpredicted external event, which changes conditions within a balanced system. While there is debate to the extent, it is generally agreed that exogenous shocks precipitate policy change.⁹ The attacks of September 11, 2001, serves as an example – a single event disrupted a balanced system, which led to radical policy changes across a number of fields. Arguably, exogenous shocks play a greater role in policy change in East Asian collectivist cultures, in which crisis is required to redistribute power in hierarchical relationships and consolidate consensus within social groups.¹⁰

It is natural to assume that North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program advances are an exogenous shock – particularly if you pay attention to Western media. North Korea's rapid advances have surprised political analysts, nuclear non-proliferation researchers, and missile specialists. In the American consciousness, it leaped from being a state with a nuclear weapons program to a nuclear weapons state – a rogue state that has repeatedly threatened Washington's destruction that now has the capacity to act on its threats. From Seoul, the situation is viewed very differently. For Seoul, North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile program advances are *not* an exogenous shock. The population of Seoul has lived for decades with the threat of annihilation by massed North Korean artillery just 50kms to the north. The threat of North Korea is already internalized and normalized.¹¹ To put it bluntly, annihilation by artillery and annihilation by nuclear weapons are much the same. For Seoul, North Korea's nuclear advances do not change the level of threat – but Washington's reaction does.

Trump's "America first" is shockingly new in the context of Seoul's relationship with Washington – and it arrived both suddenly and severely. Amidst North Korea's increasingly provocative behavior, Trump has demanded Seoul pay more for hosting U.S. forces; made false claims about key strategic asset positions during crises; threatened to charge Seoul for Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment; promised to end the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA); claimed that Korea was once part of China; and repeatedly neglected and even labelled as "appeasement" Seoul's policy preferences for dialogue with North Korea. For the first time in sixty years, Washington exacerbated rather than acted with constraint in its dealings with North Korea. Confidence and stability have been replaced with bluster and uncertainty.

While the U.S. remains South Korea's most favored state, public confidence in the President, and the U.S. capacity to address the North Korea issue, are at historical lows.¹² Trump's November 2017 visit to Asia, including Seoul, did not alleviate concerns. As noted by leading Korean studies scholar, Scott Snyder: "the life-or-death question in South Korean minds was whether Trump intended to take an America-first or an alliance-first approach in response to the growing North Korean threat".¹³ The Trump Administration's rhetoric suggested it was willing to accept an actual, and by all estimations devastating war on the Korean peninsula, in order to avoid a potential future attack on the U.S. Additionally, as the crisis has progressed, U.S. rhetoric became more accepting of conflict, unilateral action, and as a consequence, demonstrated more disregard for South Korea's national interest.¹⁴

Trump is an exogenous shock that is driving change in Seoul. Triggered by Trump, extreme policy initiatives, such as ending or substantially transforming the U.S. alliance, have entered mainstream political debate. Throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War, suggesting South Korea end or substantially transform the U.S. alliance was countered only on the extreme political fringe. The exogenous shock of a self-interested, "America First" Trump administration is perceived as putting South Korea at risk. Trump's short-term foreign policy aims contribute to the push for significant foreign policy change.

Cumulative exogenous change: A more contested region

Cumulative exogenous change is an often-overlooked external contributor, seen by some as an inherent characteristic of all policy change.¹⁵ While 'turning points' or 'pivotal moments' draw our attention, small deviations from the status quo are more frequent and when assessed cumulatively, can have greater impact. Thus, our attention turns to the attacks of September 11, 2001, as a single event resulting in radical policy changes, but arguably the cumulative effect of multiple incremental policy changes to prepare the military for low-intensity, asymmetric, precision strike, conflicts in mixed civilian-military zones, as envisaged under the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) during the 1990s, are much more significant.¹⁶ A similar contrast between perceived turning points and incremental change can be viewed in the context of North Korea's military modernization.

North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program are one component of a much broader transformation in East Asia. Stability provided by 60 years of U.S. dominance, allowed the region to grow richer, but also more competitive. Long dormant sovereignty claims, resource disputes, and rising nationalism exacerbate competition. Add to this the necessity of modernization and doctrinal transformation brought on by the RMA, and each state is now in a race to upgrade and improve, or face being left behind. Excluding North Korea, military spending in East Asia increased by 76 percent between 2007 and 2016.¹⁷ Again excluding North Korea, Asian defense spending in 2016 rose by 5.3 percent year-on-year, with China accounting for 39.4 percent, Japan 12.9 percent, and South Korea 9.2 percent.¹⁸ The growth in capability has been described as an emerging arms race.¹⁹

Seoul too, is a player in this arms race. It aims to establish a blue water navy and deploy an indigenous Korean Air-Missile Defence by 2022; deploy up to 70 U.S. designed and manufactured F-35 strike fighters, and more than 120 indigenously developed KF-X combat aircraft by the mid to late 2020s. Over the last decade, the "blue water" navy strategy has included launching of new platforms, including the *Dokdo* class amphibious landing ship with full-length flight deck and hangar, and the *Sejong* class destroyer with Aegis combat system; and constructing the new deep water naval base facing the East China Sea, on the southernmost island of Jeju. Like all U.S. allied middle powers, South Korea seeks to balance and mix U.S. RMA technology and interoperability with indigenous capacity and strategic objectives – all within budgets hovering around five percent of gross domestic product.

In the midst of this contested region sits North Korea – a state already fearful of its capacity to survive politically; with an absence of economic capacity and troubled access to leading technologies; and with fears that it is next in line to other 'rogue states' that have suffered ignominious conquests: Iraq, Libya, and Syria. From this perspective, securing a nuclear weapon and a second-strike capacity – and dedicating well in excess of a reasonable proportion of its budget to do so – seems like a natural, logical and rational choice.

A more contested region is the cumulative exogenous change that has steadily driven policy change in Seoul over the past ten years. South Korea has sovereignty disputes with Japan (Dokdo/Takeshima) and China (directly in maritime claims South-West of the country and indirectly through Chinese claims on border regions with North Korea). It has emotionally loaded historical disputes with Japan (colonization, military sexual slavery, and war guilt) and China (historical 'ownership' of territories and kingdoms). Finally, it also has intermittent economic disputes with both Japan and China. Sovereignty, historical, and economic disputes drive competition within the region. In securing a nuclear weapons capacity, North Korea adds another element to this competition, and contributes to the push for significant foreign policy change.

Cumulative endogenous change: Threat perception

Cumulative endogenous change is the often-overlooked internal contributor to policy change. It is distinct in its imperceptibility – the result of steady, indistinguishable, minor changes to policy, often unofficial ‘practice’ changes at the level of implementation. It is particularly common in democracies where “fragmentation of political power and the related influence of interest groups make path-departing change particularly difficult”.²⁰ Indeed, proponents argue that cumulative endogenous change is enough in itself to change policy paths.²¹ In the case of South Korea, this could very well be true.

Democratization is most often considered in the context of a sudden, one-time event marked by the June 1987 democratization protests, which resulted in direct presidential elections and the restoration of civil liberties. Yet, democratization is an ongoing, gradual, multidimensional, and cumulative process. One aspect of this is transformation of threat perception from a directed, focused, singular threat to a subjective, broader, multiple array. For the average South Korean, the all-encompassing North Korean threat to life and liberty has long since rescinded in the past.

In June 2000, the leaders of North and South Korea held a meeting for the first time since the division of the peninsula. President Kim Dae-Jung’s policy of engagement with North Korea, what later became known as the Sunshine Policy, appeared at just the right time. Reports of horrendous famine conditions in North Korea over the last five years met a richer, more secure, yet empathetic South Korea recovering from the economic meltdown of the Asian Financial Crisis. Co-existence, rather than absorption or defeat of North Korea, would from now on drive South Korean policy.²² North Korea, once the enemy, was now a country of fellow Koreans that was struggling to feed its population. The June 2000 meeting was greeted with elation in South Korea, giving hope for the first time that peaceful unification may be possible. It was followed by events such as the joint march around the stadium under the ‘unification flag’ by athletes at the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics and increased working contacts on issues such as displaced family reunions, trade and investment. It was also accompanied by an outpouring of emotional support. Despite the success of the Leaders’ Summit, subsequent progress was sporadic. Kim Jong-Il failed to make a return visit to Seoul, no progress was made on military confidence building measures, and controversy erupted when it was learnt that Kim Dae-Jung made illegal financial payments to North Korea to arrange the summit. Attempts to revive the Sunshine Policy under President Roh Moo-hyun also ultimately failed. But the die had been cast. Attitudes to North Korea irrevocably changed.

These changes in attitude are most evident in the reactions of South Korea and the U.S. to North Korea throughout 2016-17. During this period, the U.S., largely driven by responses of President Trump, have highlighted North Korea as a threat that must be dealt with, even to the point of conflict. However, as North Korea conducted nuclear and missile tests, South Koreans took to the streets to protest their elected leader, Park Geun-hye. While specifically directed at the president and allegations of incompetence and corruption, many of the

protesters were driven by deeper concerns. Concerns regarding social inequality, youth unemployment, gender discrimination, social immobility, growing education costs, and housing affordability. For the masses of demonstrators lining Seoul's streets, North Korea's nuclear and missile tests were the last thing on their mind.

Transformation of threat perception is the cumulative endogenous change that is driving change in Seoul. It has transformed – and continues to transform, how South Koreans understand and assess North Korea. North Korea is no longer perceived as a direct and immediate threat to be defended against, but rather as an obstinate, often pathetic and sometimes risky, recurring policy problem in need of a solution. This change in threat perception contributes to the push for significant foreign policy change.

Endogenous shock: Populism does not end here

An endogenous shock is an unexpected and unpredicted internal event, which changes conditions within a balanced system. Endogenous shock, most commonly in the form of revolutionary political change, is known to be instrumental in precipitating (overwhelmingly short-term) policy change.²³ Classic examples include the French, Bolshevik, and Iranian revolutions, which led to immediate change in foreign policy and diplomatic practice to include revolutionary goals, and subsequent attenuation to closer reflect long-term national interests. In the same way, contemporary political populism – including the election of Trump – has been associated with significant foreign policy change (although its extent and duration remain unknown).²⁴

South Korea has not been immune to its own form of political populism. In December 2016, after three months of mass street demonstrations, South Korea impeached President Park Geun-hye, and in May 2017, elected President Moon Jae-in. Both acts can be interpreted to be a consequence of growing populism. South Korea's populism derives from growing levels of social dissatisfaction regarding youth unemployment, gender discrimination, social immobility, growing education costs, and housing affordability. 'Hell Joseon' is a broad social phenomenon ridiculing contemporary Korean society referring to the last dynasty of imperial Korea, when Confucian hierarchies entrenched social position, poor working conditions, and limited social mobility. Social dissatisfaction has been a factor in the rise of populism in several advanced market economies and has had an early and sometimes precipitant effect on foreign policy.

To date, populism has had a limited impact on South Korea's foreign policy. The Moon administration's core policy initiative, "people centered diplomacy" can be interpreted as either an attempt to address weaknesses in transparency, accountability, and representativeness that have plagued previous administrations' foreign policy; or can be interpreted as an attempt to extend the populist sentiment that brought the administration to power into the realm of foreign policy. To date, foreign policy and diplomacy has not deviated substantially from earlier progressive administrations. However, as has been seen in

other advanced market economies, there still remains potential for populism to contribute to a push for significant foreign policy change.

Policy options under debate and/or being signaled

As demonstrated above, there are distinct phenomena, which currently, or could potentially act as sources supporting significant foreign policy change in South Korea. Exogenous shock (“America first” influenced policy); cumulative exogenous change (increased regional competition), cumulative endogenous change (threat perception); and/or endogenous shock (populism) all contribute to the potential for significant foreign policy change. Any single source, or more likely combination, could contribute to significant foreign policy change of the kind that Korean peninsula analysts are not yet accustomed.

Minor deviations within a narrow framework of policy have led to complacency, and clouds expectations of more substantial change. This is despite the fact that Seoul is no stranger to radical policy ideas. Conservative and progressive politicians inherit traditions from which have long sprung fringe supporters wanting to push the country down a radically new path. Popular discussion topics have traditionally included a range of debates that are rekindled during periods of uncertainty. In recent years, these debates have moved from the political fringe to the political mainstream. These interlinked debates include transforming South Korea’s relationship with U.S. and/or China; securing an independent nuclear weapons capacity; and/or securing a capacity to achieve some form of armed neutrality.

Transforming the U.S. alliance is becoming significantly more popular.²⁵ The South Korea – U.S. alliance is based on a shared commitment to freedom and was forged through sacrifice on the battlefield – so the narrative goes. But South Korea has always held the alliance in purely realist terms. The alliance was born during the Korean War with South Korean threats to ignore the armistice, release prisoners of war, withdraw from the UN Command and restart hostilities. It has been continually contested, challenged, and negotiated to maximize South Korea’s benefit in a way not understood by other alliance partners. Less of a “special relationship” and more quid pro quo.

The alliance relationship currently limits South Korean missile payloads and distance, military acquisitions, joint forces command, and possession of a complete nuclear fuel cycle. This is currently a significant concern.²⁶ In addition, it attracts intermittent negative publicity as a result of environmental concerns on U.S. bases, customs violations, and legal jurisdiction under the Status of Forces Agreement. Under Kim’s provocations and Trump’s responses, the advantages that sustained South Korea’s perception of the quid pro quo are rapidly evaporating.

Connected to the above is the increasing popularity of transforming Seoul’s relationship with Beijing. Throughout history, when China was strong the Korean peninsula fell deeper under its influence. When China was weak, the Korean peninsula fell under the sway of external states or sought greater independence. South Korea’s economic and increasingly cultural ties

with a strong Beijing are growing year-by-year. As South Korea's largest source of imports, largest export destination, and largest source of foreign residents, it draws the support of the business community. Some of the strongest voices condemning the current government's decision to deploy additional THAAD anti-missile launchers, are businesses affected by China's ongoing economic sanctions.²⁷

Ultimately, it is China's stable support for the status quo, and the wide belief that it holds the key to reforming North Korea – and ultimately the key to peaceful Korean unification – that positions China favorably. There are quietly expressed hopes that China could push North Korea towards economic development, which would postpone but also reduce the cost of unification to South Korea. But it goes further than this. For some, a closer relationship with China is a logical reversion to tradition rather than an adoption of an alternate path.²⁸ Securing a South Korean nuclear weapons capability is rapidly becoming more popular. In 1975, 1982, and as recent as 2000, Seoul undertook covert programs or experiments in the pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. Going forward, secrecy may no longer matter. Withdrawing from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and securing an independent South Korean nuclear capability now attracts open support from lawmakers. The acquisition of a second-strike capability through a nuclear-powered submarine fleet is currently being considered in strategic circles. Most importantly, public support for acquiring a nuclear weapons capability ranges in the 60-70 percent range.²⁹

In what ultimately may prove to be an interim measure, on 4 September 2017, Defense Minister, Song Young-moo, discussed with his American counterpart, Jim Mattis, the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.³⁰ When a nuclear South Korea was brought up during the U.S. election campaign, it went unopposed by Trump.³¹ In strategic terms, it could also be seen as restoring balance. A technologically advanced nuclear South Korea so near China and Russia transforms the strategic balance much more than a poor, materially limited nuclear North Korea across the Pacific from the U.S.

Many analysts and commentators conceive of a South Korean nuclear weapons capability in isolation. As recent discussions in Seoul's strategic community show, the path towards a South Korean nuclear weapons capability cannot be separated from other more radical paths. For younger generations in particular, it is increasingly being accepted as a natural and logical choice for South Korea to pursue a nuclear weapons capacity. This is already a subject of debate in academic and strategic circles and has more recently come to the fore in political debate as well.³²

Finally, there are some who even argue that South Korea, and ultimately a unified Korea, could sustain some form of armed neutrality.³³ Combining the above radical options of securing a nuclear capability, and transforming the relationships with the U.S. and China, South Korea could remove itself from its historically self-damaging position of strategic pivot in much the same way as Finland, Austria, Sweden or Switzerland were able to during different historical periods. While as much speculation as potential policy, the fact that it is

even being discussed, says a lot about contemporary attitudes in South Korea's political and strategic circles. Until recently, such ideas were entertained only on the periphery.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, precipitants to change are steadily undermining South Korea's well-worn foreign policy path of firm resolve, restraint, and close coordination with the United States. What Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington have become accustomed to over the last sixty years, is coming to an end. The precipitants to change read like a perfect storm: an exogenous shock in Trump's bluster, uncertainty, neglect and blatant disregard; ongoing exogenous cumulative change in a more competitive and strategically unbalanced region; ongoing endogenous cumulative change in South Korea's perception of threat vis-à-vis North Korea and China; and an endogenous shock in nascent populism. It is disingenuous to think that amidst all these changes, Seoul will not also change.

These sources already feed into foreign policy public debate. Debate is opening up to a much wider range of options, and taking into account options long considered as transformational, outdated, or extreme. Voices and ideas long branded as fringe are entering mainstream debate: securing a South Korean nuclear weapons capacity; a transformation of Seoul's relationship with Washington and/or a transformation of Seoul's relationship with Beijing; and even an aspirational path to some form of armed neutrality.

However, it is important to note that these possible future policy trajectories do not regularly feed into Western mainstream commentary or analysis. Western media and strategic commentators focus on Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo and Washington. The modern news cycle, measured in seconds and tunneled through echo chambers to the political extreme, and the academic's longing for five minutes of fame, revolve around Pyongyang's antics or Washington's tweets. An understanding of Seoul's foreign and strategic policy has always been the key to understanding risk on the Korean peninsula. As Western media and strategic commentators focus on Pyongyang, Beijing, Tokyo and Washington, the greatest change may yet come from Seoul. Don't expect Seoul to follow the same well-worn foreign policy path forever. It's time now to prepare for radical change on the Korean peninsula.

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