

Two Koreas in the spotlight: from candlelight protests to summits

On April 27, 2018, North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un walked across the Military Demarcation Line to meet South Korea's President Moon Jae-in. Kim's predecessors – his father and grandfather – had never crossed the military line that divides the two Koreas since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Moon and Kim met again just after one month, and this time Moon crossed into the North Korean side, accepting Kim's invitation on short notice. On June 12, 2018, Kim met US President, Donald Trump, in Singapore. Kim Jong-un has become the first North Korean leader to meet a US President. In September, Moon was invited to the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and delivered the first-ever speech by a South Korean president to North Koreans. Those historic events have raised hopes for the Korean peace process, the goals of which include denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and a formal end to the Korean War.

Few experts on Korea expected the dramatic development of the relationship between the two Koreas in 2018 because their relationship was frosty until the end of 2017. A significant change was made in March 2017; however, when the former South Korean President, Park Geun-hye, who took a hard line with North Korea was ousted. Candlelight protests began in late October 2016 after media outlets reported a scandal of Park's close confidant Choi Soon-sil. It was revealed that although Choi had no official government position, she had access to confidential government documents and offered counsel to the president. Taking advantage of her ties to President Park, Choi also influenced her daughter's admission to a university. Moreover, Choi induced Park to solicit money from big companies, and Choi used the money for her own business. Angry citizens demanded Park's resignation. In the midst of a series of nationwide protests, the National Assembly passed a motion to impeach Park on December 9, 2016, and the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment on March 10, 2017. Moon Jae-in who pursues a soft-line approach to dealing with North Korea won the presidential election on May 9, 2017.

In this special issue, leading experts review diverse political aspects of the two Koreas from 2016 when the candlelight protests began till 2018 when the inter-Korean summits and the North Korea–USA summit took place. The first five papers survey South Korean politics including the protests, voting behavior, political economy and institutions. The latter four papers explore the Korean peace process – one from the viewpoint of South Korea, two from that of China and one from that of Japan.

The first paper by Kang focuses on the candlelight protests that led to the presidential impeachment in South Korea. Kang aims to investigate the causes of the protests and argues that Park Geun-hye administration's irregularities and misdemeanors accumulated during the president's term led the citizens to take to the street. He also points out that the political institutions that were designed at the time of the transition to democracy in 1987 were unable to protect against the abuse of power from the president.

The second paper by Kim, Tae Wan examines what affect the voting behavior in South Korea's presidential elections from 1992 through 2017. Conservative parties have

The editor would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this special issue. The editor would like to express gratitude to Sonny Lo, Managing Editor of *ÆDS*, for inviting the editor to be the Guest Editor for this issue. A special thanks goes to Jin-Wook Choi, who recommended the editor to Sonny Lo for the Guest Editor. The editor particularly grateful to Minxing Zhou, Associate Editor of the journal, for her help at every stage in the production of this special issue. The editor also would like to thank the authors for contributing interesting articles and the reviewers for helping us to improve the quality of the articles.



been strong in Yeongnam region (Southeast), while liberal parties have been dominant in Honam region (Southwest) since the first democratic presidential election in 1987. Kim finds, however, that support for the regional champion party is getting weaker in Yeongnam, while it remains strong in Honam. Especially in 2002, 2012 and 2017 when the Honam-based liberal party nominated a politician born in Yeongnam as their presidential candidate, support for the conservative party diminished substantially in Yeongnam.

Lee and Kwon explore the relationship between income inequality and political participation in South Korea. They find that an individual's perception of inequality has little effect on her chances of going to a polling station. They discover, however, that the perception of inequality largely affects her chances of taking part in non-institutional political participation, such as signing petitions, joining boycotts and attending protests.

The paper by Kim and Paek investigates the effects of regionalism on foreign direct investment (FDI) in South Korea. He distinguishes political regionalism from authoritarian regionalism and describes the historical evolution of regionalism in the country. The research reveals that the regions with more transfer of resources from the central government (higher authoritarian regionalism) tend to receive less FDI, while the regions with a strong regional champion party (high political regionalism) tend to receive more FDI.

Bae and Park discuss the power of South Korea's Presidents with a focus on the constitutional setting. Since 1987, South Korea's presidents have experienced a similar pattern of political ups and downs during their terms – they are very powerful in the beginning but become so weak in the end. They investigate the reason and argue that because so much power is concentrated in the office of the president, he can be powerful in the honeymoon period but is prone to corruption. In South Korea a lame-duck presidency is inevitable because presidents are banned from seeking reelection. Most of the time, corruption scandals accelerate the lame duck. This paper is already published in a previous *AEDS* issue (Vol. 7, No. 4).

A sixth paper by Nam, Kwang Kyu, published in a previous issue (Vol. 8, No. 1), reviews Moon Jae-in administration's policy on North Korea, and discusses its impact on the relationship between South Korea and the USA. Nam points out that although Moon energetically pursues inter-Korean détente, it hangs on North Korea–USA nuclear talks. Moreover, Moon's appeasement policy toward North Korea will be strongly supported by China, but not so much by the USA, which may weaken the South Korea–USA alliance.

Kim, Young Joon surveys the history of China–North Korea relations and assesses the recent changes in the relationship. He claims that a blood-tied relationship between the two countries during the Cold War era has evolved into a normal relationship in which countries prioritize national interests.

The paper by Kim, Jih-Un focuses on China's strategy for dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. Placing an emphasis on the geopolitical value of North Korea to China, he argues that China is hesitant about imposing sanctions against North Korea because it could lead North Korea to collapse or to seek support from other powers, though China wishes to stop North Korea's nuclear ambition that destabilizes the region.

Nam, Kijeong discusses the role of Japan in the Korean peace process. After reviewing reconciliation efforts between Korea and Japan, he suggests that the two Koreas and Japan should work together for denuclearization of Northeast Asia including North Korea, and that normalizing relations between North Korea and Japan will be conducive to achieving this goal.

I hope that these articles help readers to gain a better understanding of the current affairs in the two Koreas. The coming years may bring about more exciting events on the Korean peninsula, drawing more attention to this part of the world.

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