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## The Chinese-American Race for Hegemony in Asia

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## KOREAN PENINSULA 2015: ONE STEP FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK\*

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*In 2015, in South Korea, President Park Geun-hye's decline in popularity, which had begun in the previous year, further accelerated. In particular, the outbreak of the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) crisis between May and June contributed, once again, to show the government's inability to act quickly and effectively. The already difficult situation worsened in Autumn, following the vehement protests organized by different sectors of the South Korean civil society against the school history textbooks reform and the new labour legislation.*

*North of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, President Kim Jong Un moved quickly to definitively strengthen his power: A new series of purges hit the members of the political and military leadership. At the same time, there was the consolidation of the new Kim-inspired political line. Part of it can be considered the announcement that the Seventh Plenary Congress of the Party was to be held for the first time after 36 years in 2016. In May and June, a severe drought affected North Korea. However, the limited 2013 agricultural reforms, avoided the outbreak of a real famine.*

*A major crisis in inter-Korean relations was triggered by the explosion, in August, of two landmines in the southern side of the de-militarized zone. However, the two parts reached an agreement that, besides solving the landmines issue, paved the way for a new round of family reunions and a new series of high-level inter-governmental talks. 2015 saw the consolidation of the excellent relationship between Seoul and Beijing, highlighted both by the participation of South Korean President Park Geun-hye – the only US ally – in the military parade that took place in early September in Tiananmen square, and by the signature, in December, of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement. Also the relations between South Korea and Japan improved significantly after almost three years of diplomatic freeze. The rapprochement materialized with a bilateral summit between the leaders of the two governments, in November, and with a historic agreement on the vexed issue of the «comfort women», signed on 28 December. This was welcomed by the US, which had made significant efforts to favour this result. There were also positive repercussions on the relations among the three Northeast Asia powers.*

*2015 was the year of North Korea President Kim Jong Un «missed debut» on the international scene. Although Kim was expected to take part in several important international events, this did not happen. Nonetheless Pyongyang further deepened the already positive relations with Russia. On the contrary, the difficult Sino-North Korean relations, after a moment in which they seemed headed for an improvement,*

\* Even if the present chapter is the outcome of a joint research effort, it is possible to ascribe sections 2 and 3 to Marco Milani, and sections 1 and 4 to Barbara Onnis.

*remained strained. Regarding the relations with Japan, the deadlock on the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korean secret agents in the 1970s and 1980s put an end to a timid improvement in the Tokyo-Pyongyang relations.*

## 1. Introduction

For South Korea, 2015 was the year that confirmed the already on-going decline of President Park Geun-hye. In particular, after the *Seoul* incident in 2014, the crisis erupted with the outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) disease in the country, between May and June, demonstrating once again the lack of leadership of a government that intervened slowly and late, just like in the ferry sinking case. Not surprisingly, the first moment of social and political tension, which occurred in 2015, coincided with the anniversary of the *Seoul* tragedy, in April, during which both the President and the Prime Minister were strongly criticized. Soon afterwards, the resignation of the Prime Minister for a corruption scandal and the outbreak of MERS worsened the popularity of the government even more. A further controversial point in the relation between the executive and the public opinion emerged in the last months of 2015, when the government decided to put forward two highly contested reforms: the history textbooks and the labour reforms.

As for North Korea, domestic policy continued to be dominated by Kim Jong Un's process of consolidation of power, with further purges within the party and the military, especially during Spring. The main event was represented by the celebrations for the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and the announcement of the convocation of a Plenary Congress of the WPK in 2016, the first in over 35 years, in which Kim's consolidation of power will most likely take its definitive shape with the launch of a new policy line.

Regarding inter-Korean relations, the trend of highs and lows, which emerged during 2014, remained the norm until August when a new crisis erupted due to the explosion of land mines in the demilitarized zone, south of the border, in which two South Korean soldiers were wounded. The allegations from Seoul to Pyongyang led to an escalation of tension that ended only in late August with an agreement between the parties. As has happened before, the resolution of a crisis also represented a new opportunity for cooperation resulting in the family reunions, which took place at the end of October, and working-level meetings in view of a high-level inter-Korean summit.

As far as international relations are concerned, the most important event in the South was certainly represented by the meeting between Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzō, which put an end to a three-year period of cold relations, detrimental not only to their bilateral rapport but also to their

relationship with the USA. The meeting took place in Seoul at the beginning of November, on the sidelines of the trilateral summit among South Korea, China, and Japan.<sup>1</sup> Although it did not achieve anything substantial, the summit signalled a highly significant symbolic thaw in the Japan-South Korea relationship. In the meantime, the relationship with China continued to grow stronger and deeper, as was clearly demonstrated by the participation of South Korea in the Chinese V-Day. In that occasion South Korea was one of the few highly developed nations and the sole US ally attending the event.

For North Korea, 2015 can be considered the year of the «missed debut» of Kim Jong Un on the international stage. He was first expected to attend the Asian-African Conference (the Bandung Conference) in Indonesia in April, and then, in May, the commemoration in Moscow of the seventieth anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in World War II. Kim, however, cancelled both visits. The second was a widely anticipated event, but Kim's cancellation was hardly a surprising announcement, since most observers were rather sceptical about whether the North Korean leader would go to Moscow in his first-ever foreign trip. Likewise, Kim did not even accept the invitation from China to attend the huge military parade in September, marking China's victory over Japan in 1945. Instead, Kim dispatched his personal representative, Choe Ryong Hae, who, at the event, was refused even a brief meeting with the Chinese President, while, at the same time, the South Korean President was received with all the honours. The deteriorating trend in the North Korean-Chinese relationship – which has become a constant with the Kim Jong Un-Xi Jinping era – was somewhat reversed following Liu Yunshan's arrival in Pyongyang to join the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the KWP foundation. Liu, who is one of the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, was in fact the first high-ranking Chinese politician to visit North Korea in 4 years. With Japan, relations were at a standstill as Tokyo waited, in vain, for a report on the thorny issue of the abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea.

## 2. Domestic politics

### 2.1. South Korean domestic politics: *the dark sides of Park Geun-hye's presidency*

The negative trend in the management of domestic policy by South Korean President Park Geun-hye, already visible during 2014, reached its nadir in 2015. The President, in fact, failed to recover the consensus lost

1. The 2015 trilateral summit was the first after its suspension three years before, caused by the unresolved issues related to the three countries historical past.

since April 2014, after the *Sewol* tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Park had to face several new crises that further undermined her popularity and exposed her weak leadership skills.

The first half of Park's five year presidency can be exemplified through the convex shape of a parabola. The first year and a half, up to the sinking of *Sewol*, were characterized by a growing consensus among the public opinion and the strengthening of her power within the Conservative Party. This was due especially to the strong economic results and her active management of foreign policy. From April 2014, following her difficulty in managing the ferry tragedy, things changed decisively. The inability to take a leading role in the country in a time of tough crisis weakened her leadership role, while her popularity entered an apparently irrecoverable downward trend for the entire second half of 2014 and throughout the following year. If 2014, in fact, opened with popularity rate for the President that reached and exceeded 60%, the following year opened with a free fall in consensus, which in January barely reached 35%.<sup>3</sup>

As a political figure, Park Geun-hye has been strongly characterized by her leadership skills and her decision-making capacity. Political experience was a hallmark of her campaign, and helped her to overcome gender bias deeply rooted in the conservative electorate. The daughter of authoritarian President Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), Park Geun-hye became First Lady at 22, after her mother's death in 1974, following an attack by a North Korean commando aimed to kill her father. In 1998, she was elected for the first time to the National Assembly; a position to which she was re-elected four times, and which held until the presidential election. From 2004 to 2006, she became chairperson of the party, a position in which she obtained an impressive number of important electoral victories earning her the nickname «Queen of Elections». When she took the leadership of the party, in fact, the Conservatives were in one of the lowest moments of their political path. Park's leadership resulted in her party's strong and unexpected result in the 2004 parliamentary elections. During her two years at the helm of the party, the Conservatives won in all re-elections and by-elections, regaining the majority in 2006. In the following year she suffered what can be considered the only setback in an otherwise brilliant political career. She was beaten in her party's primary election for the 2007 presidential bid, albeit by a small margin, by the popular mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung-bak, who became President shortly thereafter. Within a few years, however, Park had the opportunity to have her revenge; in 2011, in fact, as a result of a dramatic slump in the popularity of the party, linked to the collapse of President Lee's consensus, the party was renamed *Saenuri dang* («New Frontier Party») and Park Geun-

2. On the sinking of the *Sewol* and its consequences see Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', *Asia Maior* 2014, pp. 99-135.

3. 'Park's approval rating hits record low', *The Korea Herald*, 16 January 2015.

hye was appointed to head an Emergency Committee for the revival of its popularity, a role that made her the *de facto* leader of the party. This new situation paved the way toward the presidential nomination of 2012 and the subsequent election.<sup>4</sup>

Her long electoral and political experience gave President Park a resolute and combative political image, which appeared to be characterised by strong leadership skills and the ability to take decisions in difficult times. The first year and a half as the head of the country highlighted these features. In particular, her firm stance towards North Korea, in the months following the third underground nuclear test in February, 2013, and the hard line against Abe Shinzō's Japan, characterized by a strong nationalist approach, related in particular to the historical memory of the period of Japanese occupation, had a largely positive effect on her popularity. However, as already noted, all this started to change and Park's popularity nosedived following the April 2014 Sewol tragedy.

### 2.1.1. *The Government reshuffle*

In 2015, the first difficulties that the President had to face materialized in February. In fact, between 16 and 17 February, Park decided to implement a cabinet reshuffle both to regain public trust after the disappointing results of the previous year, and to strengthen the government ability to enact reforms. The issue of greater importance was linked to the figure of Prime Minister Hong Chung-woon, who had submitted his resignation in April 2014 after the protests following the *Sewol* incident, but who was still acting as Prime Minister. Chung was still holding the position only because the government had failed to find a viable and acceptable candidate to replace him. After ten months of deadlock, the choice fell on Lee Wan-koo, the leader of the Conservative Party, in the National Assembly. The parliamentary hearing for his confirmation showed a strongly divided Assembly when it came to choosing his name, as he was accused by the main opposition party (NPAD) of several ethically questionable issues in his past: from having avoided conscription to real estate speculation and collusion with the military junta during the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the parliamentary confirmation for the new Prime Minister, the only member of the government that, after the appointment by the President, must pass a parliamentary hearing and a vote in the National Assembly, became a political battleground between the two main parties.

The cabinet reshuffle did not seem to bring about the results expected by the President. The government push for reforms, focusing on the

4. Chico Harlan, 'South Korea's new leader, Park Geun-hye, was pushed onto political stage by tragedy', *The Washington Post*, 25 January 2013.

5. 'National Assembly Narrowly Backs New PM', *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 17 February 2015.

economy, - especially the reform of the labour market, considered of paramount relevance to go back to high rates of growth - was slow to materialize, while the popularity of the executive did not seem to benefit much from the choice of new members. The first real test that the government had to face was the first anniversary of the sinking of *Sewol*, a tragedy which continued to be problematic for Park Geun-hye, also one year later. On 16 April, in fact, exactly one year after the sinking, the victims' families refused to meet the President at a commemoration and prevented the Prime Minister from accessing another event in memory of the victims.<sup>6</sup> The two facts clearly showed that the public opinion, and especially the families of the victims, considered the government's responsibilities in what happened to be very serious. In particular, the main target of their rage was the inaction of the government in carrying out its role in protecting and assisting the citizens.<sup>7</sup>

However, the month of April proved to be very problematic for the government not only for the anniversary of the sinking of *Sewol*. The new Prime Minister, Lee Wan-koo, who took office a few months earlier, was, in fact, involved in a scandal for accepting, in the past, an improper gift from a businessman. On 9 April, Sung Woan-jong, a South Korean businessman under investigation for the failure of a number of energy projects, was found dead from an apparent suicide. In one of his pockets, the police found a handwritten piece of paper containing the names of politicians with the sums that Sung allegedly paid to each of them. Among these names there were also a number of leading members of the ruling party and some of the President Park's closest associates, one of which was the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Lee Wan-koo.<sup>8</sup> Although Lee denied any wrongdoing, the decision to include him in an investigation by a special team of the Attorney General aimed at shedding light on the issue, led him to resign on 21 April. The resignation was accepted and formalized the following week. As a result, South Korea was again without a Prime Minister; the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, Choi Kyoung-hwan, was appointed acting Prime Minister.<sup>9</sup> The thrust for renewal and reform, launched by President Park Geun-hye to boost the action of her government, recover consensus among the public and, above all, regain her identity as a strong political leader, crashed, after a few months, against the typical rocks of South Korean politics: bribery and collusion between political authorities and economic and financial entities. In spite of new scandals and new protests, in the 29 April by-elections, *Saenuri dang*, the President's party, managed to win 3 out of the 4 available seats,

6. Park Ju-min & Kim Sohee, 'Angry and divided, South Korea mourns on anniversary of ferry disaster', *Reuters*, 16 April 2015.

7. Sangyoon Nathan Park, 'A Government, sinking', *Foreign Policy*, 19 November 2014.

8. Cho Chung-un, 'P.M. under siege in graft scandal', *The Korea Herald*, 14 April 2015.

9. Do Je-hae, 'Premier Lee served only 63 days', *The Korea Times*, 21 April 2015.

while the NPAD, the main opposition party, suffered a stinging defeat including the loss of the historically Democratic stronghold city of Kwangju, to an independent candidate, previously a member of the NPAD.<sup>10</sup> Albeit very limited in scope, these elections seemingly showed that the electorate, despite its disillusionment and discontent with the government, was even less inclined toward the opposition party, foreshadowing a very complicated scenario for the general elections, scheduled for April 2016.

### 2.1.2. *The MERS crisis*

The crisis that seriously tested the executive, however, took place in June 2015 with the outbreak of the MERS crisis and lasted until the end of July. In late May, in fact, the first case of this disease was confirmed in the country, isolated in a 68-year-old patient, returning from a trip to Bahrain, via Qatar. The insufficient controls by the South Korean health authorities brought the number of infected to 7 before the end of May. On 2 June, the first two deaths due to MERS were confirmed, while the number of detected cases rose to 25, mainly among hospital staff, patients, and visitors, and the number of people quarantined went up to 680.<sup>11</sup> Although MERS did not constitute a real threat – as reaffirmed by the World Health Organization – from this point on, the country was swept by a wave of mass panic, lest the disease would spread uncontrolledly. This mass panic was amplified by the inefficiency shown by the health authorities, but also by the entire government's lack of communication skills and leadership, confirming what had emerged as the main problems of the Park Geun-hye administration in the recent past.

The virus, in fact, was not identified in the first patient for nine days, a period during which he travelled to different hospitals to receive treatment, in both the capital and the suburbs. As a consequence, patients and medical staff were infected in the health facilities where the first patient was treated. Once the medical problem was detected, government authorities decided not to disclose the name of the hospitals at which the MERS infected people received assistance, with the intent not to create panic in fellow patients and the population living nearby. This policy, however, resulted in scaring the population away from health facilities, while the lack of information further increased the panic. Only about twenty days after the registration of the first case, the government decided to make public all the information in its possession.<sup>12</sup> The first weeks of June were thus dominated by a crisis created more by the mistakes of the government than by the real health risks. After

10. Steven Denney, 'South Korea's Liberal Party Woes Continue', *The Diplomat*, 30 April 2015.

11. Park Ju-min & Kim Jack, 'South Korea reports first two deaths from MERS respiratory illness', *Reuters*, 2 June 2015.

12. Choe Sang-hun, 'MERS Tarnishes Korean President's Image as Leader', *The New York Times*, 12 June 2015.



recalibrating the intervention, in fact, the situation quickly returned to normal and, by the end of the month, the MERS crisis was finally contained. It took, however, one more month, until 25 July, before the authorities officially declared the MERS outbreak over. The final tally was 189 people infected, 36 victims, most of them belonging to debilitated categories, and several thousand people held in quarantine. The social and economic consequences were even worse: schools and kindergartens closed for several weeks, many social events and public activities were suspended or cancelled, trade and tourism were negatively affected. In June, more than 100,000 visitors from China and Hong Kong cancelled their reservations, and even South Koreans tried to avoid crowded places, such as markets, malls, and shopping areas, with the inevitable economic consequences. The Bank of Korea decided to intervene through a US\$ 590 million fund for small and medium businesses affected by the MERS crisis.<sup>13</sup> The adverse economic effects of the epidemic were limited by its rapid resolution; however, these adverse effects, although limited in time, hit the South Korean economy hard, at a time when it had already slowed down.

The slow and inadequate response to the crisis and the «monopoly of information», put in place in order not to cause panic but producing the opposite effect, became the main criticism made to the government. They were the same criticisms raised in the aftermath of the *Sewol* tragedy. Once again, the figure of the President was seen as detached from the rest of the population, its sufferings, and concerns, characterized by an authoritarian attitude towards the other members of the government, dangerously reminiscent of the authoritarian regime of her father, but with less and less authority in the public eye.

### 2.1.3. *The Autumn protests against the government*

The MERS outbreak was not the only obstacle that the presidency had to face during the course of 2015. After the summer storm, or rather, with the autumn months, a number of initiatives launched by the government met fierce opposition from broad sectors of civil society. This opposition took the form of a series of massive demonstrations, especially during the month of November, to which the government responded with a heavily authoritarian and repressive attitude. One of the central issues around which the dissent of the population focused, had to do with a very sensitive topic for South Korean public opinion: historical memory. On 12 October, in fact, the South Korean government announced a reform according to which, by 2017, the history textbooks for middle and high schools would be pub-

13. Choe Sang-hun, 'South Korean Retailers Pinched by MERS', *The New York Times*, 22 June 2015.

lished by the government itself, rather than by private publishing houses.<sup>14</sup> A measure of this kind immediately unleashed a wave of protests by many groups in civil society, organizations related to the world of education and ordinary citizens, who considered this approach to be a dangerous limitation to pluralism in education and information and an example of governmental interference that dated back to the period of authoritarianism in the country. During Park Chung-hee's years in office, in fact, there was only one single government-sponsored history textbook in schools, in which the dictator's coup was presented as a revolution and the authoritarian regime was justified.

The opponents of the reform feared the possibility that the new government manuals would provide a milder interpretation of the authoritarian period, in particular the Park years, which is still a controversial issue within the country. While the harsh repression of civil society and political opposition continues to be one of the hallmarks of the period from 1961 to 1979, on the other hand, the spectacular economic growth of the same years brought a large segment of the conservative electorate to see Park Chung-hee regime in a favourable light. The risk was therefore to convey a South Korean version of the recent past with a perspective mainly linked to the latter interpretation, fears heightened by the presence of Park's daughter at the helm of the country. In addition, progressive opponents were concerned about the interpretation of obscure and controversial points of the country's contemporary history, such as: the period of Japanese colonization, in particular the collaborationism of many Koreans; the massacres of civilians during the Korean civil war; and the abuses against political dissidents. The government and the supporters of the reform, from the conservative camp, instead, placed emphasis on the need to teach the country's history without the ideological bias of leftist movements, and not to inculcate in the young generation a «masochistic view of history». In this case, the main focus of the criticism was the emphasis given by many extant history textbooks to the obscurities of South Korean history, the soft attitude towards North Korea, with which they emphasized the common ethnic origins and cultural affinities, an excessively tolerant view of the North Korean regime, and the latent feeling of anti-Americanism that led many textbooks to negatively assess the US role in peninsula's history.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, many of the reasons given by Park's government to support the textbook reform, especially the «masochistic view of history» formula, were the same used in Japan to support the adoption of textbooks with a

14. Jeon Jung-yoon & Lee Se-young, 'After 42 years, state history textbooks are on the way back', *The Hankyoreh – English Edition*, 13 October 2015.

15. Oh Tai-kyu, 'Things that all South Koreans can be sad about', *The Hankyoreh – English Edition*, 12 November 2015.

decidedly revisionist perspective about the imperial period, a decision that had sparked strong protests in South Korea.<sup>16</sup>

The textbook reform, strongly supported by the government for the entire month of October, was finally approved on 3 November, unleashing protests and fears in broad sectors of the public opinion.

These protests converged with those against the government new labour legislation, aimed at increasing the competitiveness of South Korean industries. The unions, in particular, lashed out against a policy that would make dismissal easier and quicker, claiming that it was a gift to the country's cash-filled conglomerates – *chaebol* – while an increasing share of workers had to survive with precarious and low-paid jobs. On Saturday, 14 November, the anger of these broad sectors of public opinion led to a huge demonstration in the streets of Seoul, the largest since the *candlelight vigils* in 2008.<sup>17</sup> Tens of thousands of people – 130,000 according to the organizers, 68,000 according to the police – gathered in City Hall Square, protesting against Park Geun-hye, her textbooks policy, and the new labour reform. The event also had a violent aspect, with clashes between police and protesters leaving dozens wounded on both sides.<sup>18</sup> The political consequences came quickly. In fact, in the aftermath of the event, the *Saenuri dang* decided to defend the actions of the executive, condemned the protests and considered the demonstration illegal; at the same time, the work of the police was praised, a tough response against the organisers, especially trade unions leaders, was demanded, and an iron fist policy against any similar future event was advocated. On the contrary, for the opposition the police response was disproportionate while the government was guilty of not listening to these important requests from civil society.<sup>19</sup> A few weeks after the event, the Minister of Justice, Kim Hyun-woong, reiterated the determination of the government to suppress future unauthorized demonstrations, targeting in particular a new rally organized for Saturday, 5 December.<sup>20</sup> In the end, this new demonstration had a much lower impact than the previous one, and did not trigger any violence.

16. Alexander Bukh, 'Japan's History Textbooks Debate: National Identity in Narratives of Victimhood and Victimization', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 2007, pp. 683-704.

17. The candlelight vigils were a series of protest demonstrations that involved tens of thousands of people, between May 2008 and July 2008, held in Seoul, to protest against the decision of the government to lift the ban on the imports of US beef, in place since December 2003 for the BSE disease.

18. 'Labour unions, activists hold massive rally in Seoul', *Yonhap News Agency*, 14 November 2015.

19. 'Rival parties split over violence at protest rally', *Yonhap News Agency*, 16 November 2015.

20. Lee Hyun-jeong, 'Justice minister warns against protests', *The Korea Herald*, 27 November 2015.

These developments of the last months of 2015 had a very negative impact on the figure and on the popularity of the President. A survey conducted in the aftermath of the protests showed, in fact, a big drop in the approval of the government action, located mainly in the South-eastern areas, which constitute the main bastion of support for Park Geun-hye.<sup>21</sup> The year ended with a new cabinet reshuffle, in which key members of the executive were replaced, including the Ministers of Finance, Education, Interior, Trade and Equal Opportunities, precisely in order to revive the action of the government, especially in the economic field, and to recover consensus, before the general elections scheduled for April 2016.<sup>22</sup>

Like the previous year, 2015 also ended in South Korea with a strong decline in the popularity of the President and a number of shadows cast on the quality of democracy in the country. Park Geun-hye's authoritarian tone did not translate, in fact, into political leadership at the helm of the country, especially during times of crisis, and created considerable concern in large parts of civil society. This situation was amplified by the family legacy from which Park could not escape and currently represents a double-edged sword in the South Korean political landscape.

## 2.2 North Korean domestic politics: towards the launch of a new political line

2015 represented a new evolution in the political path of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. After the «purges» and the induction of new political figures of proven loyalty in 2013 and 2014,<sup>23</sup> the new young leader started to implement and formalize a new policy, directly associated with his image as the new leader of the party and the country. In 2013, the party's standing committee had already approved the new political guideline called *byungjin* (parallel development), aimed at simultaneously pursuing the nuclear programme and economic development. The rationale was that the development of a credible nuclear deterrent could be used to free resources from the military apparatus and devote them to the pursuit of a higher degree of economic development. Just like the *son'gun* (military first policy) launched by Kim Jong Il in the 1990s, consisted in putting more emphasis on a particular aspect within the ideological framework of *juche* (self-reliance), likewise *byungjin* was launched as a further evolution based on *son'gun* and within the broader ideology of *juche*.

During the spring of 2015, the North Korean regime carried out several missile tests, which appeared to be as messages to South Korea and

21. 'Park's approval rating sinks by 13% in stronghold', *The Korea Herald*, 16 November 2015.

22. Kim Han-joo, 'Cabinet reshuffle to affect April elections', *The Korea Observer*, 21 December 2015.

23. See Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'La penisola coreana: tra «facce nuove» e un continuo déjà-vu', *Asia Maior 2013*, pp. 378-381; and Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 108-111.

the United States, engaged at the time in joint military exercises. At the same time, according to South Korean intelligence sources, a new series of «purges», targeting important members of the regime, took place. On 29 April, in fact, an audition of the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) to the National Assembly reported the news of the execution of 15 senior regime officials during 2015, including a number of deputy ministers.<sup>24</sup> Soon after, on 13 May, the NIS published a new report, according to which North Korean minister of defence general Hyon Yong Chol had been charged with treason and executed.<sup>25</sup> In this case, however, some doubts about the reconstruction of the South Korean intelligence service arose. Several South Korean analysts, in fact, argued that Hyon's close proximity to Kim Jong Un in propaganda films transmitted during the same week of the alleged execution demonstrated the unreliability of the information; in fact, it is standard practice for North Korea to remove the name and the figure of leaders in disgrace as the first step of their ouster. In addition, according to the NIS, the sentence would have been carried out on 30 April, but until that day Hyon's name appeared in the main newspaper of the regime, the *Rodong Sinmun*, thus making the general's execution highly unlikely.<sup>26</sup> The doubts about Hyon's demise remained; however, during the summer, the regime officially replaced him at the helm of the defence ministry with Pak Yong Sik, who was promoted to the rank of General in April 2015. These alleged new «purges», and in particular Hyon's case, gave life to a number of conflicting interpretations. In all probability, however, these changes can be explained as without any high political relevance and such not to undermine the stability of the regime. They appear to be part of the strategy of power consolidation of the new leader. Kim, in fact, keeps a firm grip on power, with periodic removals of his high-level staff to further cement its control. This constant shuffling is intended to stoke fear among high officials, both civilian and military, who have to manoeuvre in an unpredictable and dangerous political environment.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, those who are promoted usually are faithful to the one who guaranteed them a new position of power.

As summer approached, however, the regime had to face other priorities. The spring and early summer were characterized, in fact, by an almost total lack of rainfall, which caused a severe drought. By the end of May, the

24. 'N. Korea executed 15 senior officials this year: spy agency', *Yonhap News Agency*, 29 April 2015; Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Executed 15 Top Officials in 2015, South Korean Agency Says', *The New York Times*, 29 April 2015.

25. 'North Korea defence chief «executed with anti-aircraft fire»', *Mail Online*, 13 May 2015.

26. Choe Sang-hun, 'Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General', *The New York Times*, 13 May 2015.

27. Alexander Mansurov, 'The Rise and Fall of General Hyon Yong Chol', *38th North*, 14 July 2015.

first alarm about possible of food shortages in the country was sounded, and, in mid-June, the situation became serious enough to push the national news agency to announce that the country was facing the worst drought in the last 100 years and that 30% of the rice crop was lost.<sup>28</sup> The announcement by one of the official organs of the state was probably a move aimed at obtaining international assistance.

When problems occur in food production in North Korea, the first thought is always to the tragic famine of the 1990s. However, despite the severity of the problem, the 2015 drought was not comparable to the situation prevailing in the 1990s, thanks to the fact that agricultural production had grown in a decisive manner from 2011 onwards, with record harvests both in 2013 and in 2014. The main reason for this improvement was the reforms introduced by the regime, which had allowed families to register as «production unit» and keep for themselves 30% of the crop. This new mechanism linked the well-being of farmer families to their productivity.<sup>29</sup> Fortunately, in the last weeks of June and early July, the amount of rainfall normalized, thereby limiting the impact of the drought.

During the month of August, the North Korean regime took a further decision aimed at symbolic self-assertion; on 7 August, in fact, it announced the creation of a Pyongyang time zone, set 30 minutes earlier than the current one – and eight hours and 30 minutes ahead of GMT. The reason for this change was that the time zone of the peninsula had been decided by the Japanese during the colonial period. To commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of the peninsula from the colonial rule, the regime established that, from 15 August, the exact anniversary of the Japanese decision, the time zone of Pyongyang would no longer be the same as Japan – or as South Korea.<sup>30</sup> The practical implications of the decision were actually very few, given the poor integration of the country into the global economic and trade mechanisms; the only minor problems in communications took place in Kaesong, where South Koreans and North Koreans are working together. The significance of the decision was therefore exclusively symbolic; but, unfortunately, more than marking a break with Japan, the decision was likely to disrupt the efforts of integration between the South and the North of the peninsula, as exemplified by the case of the industrial park in Kaesong.

On 10 October, the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the WPK took place. The anniversary was celebrated with a grand parade in the capital, one of the largest in the history of the country, in which the regime showed all its military force. Kim Jong Un, in his first public speech since

28. 'Severe Drought Hits DPRK', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 16 June 2015.

29. Andrei Lankov, 'Should We Be Worried About North Korea's Drought?', *Foreign Policy*, 23 June 2015.

30. 'Pyongyang Time Fixed in DPRK', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 15 August 2015.

2012, which lasted 25 minutes, affirmed his love and his dedication to the people, thanked the North Koreans for their support despite the sanctions and blockades of the international community, and promised improvements in the economy and in the citizens' living standards. Regarding the military aspects, Kim repeated that the country and its military were ready to support «any kind of war» against the United States to defend the independence of the motherland, with a clear reference to the nuclear program.<sup>31</sup>

On 30 October, the regime called for the seventh Congress of the Party in 2016, the first since 1980.<sup>32</sup> After 36 years, this unexpected convocation immediately gave rise to a series of speculations. According to several observers, the choice of convening a Party Congress was related to Kim Jong Un's effort at consolidating his own power. A Congress would definitively solidify the changes that had taken place in recent years, primarily the policy guideline of *byungjin*, and perhaps would pave the way for future and more profound changes. Undoubtedly, in recent years the emphasis on the nuclear program has been accompanied by deep changes in the economic system, which led the country's socialist economy to be increasingly influenced by elements of market economy. The Congress could thus be an opportunity to definitively ratify these changes of the internal system of the country.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. *Inter-Korean relations*

#### 3.1. *The spring highs and lows on the peninsula*

The year 2015 opened under positive auspices for inter-Korean relations. During 2014, a number of constructive events took place between the two Koreas. In particular, the new round of family reunions in February 2014, and the inter-Korean high-level meeting, in October,<sup>34</sup> paved the way for a positive beginning of the upcoming year.

On the first day of 2015, Kim Jong Un's New Year's speech to the nation contained conciliatory messages towards Seoul, including the recognition of the importance of improving inter-Korean relations and the possibility for a meeting with President Park. The speech, however, was not followed by any concrete actions from either side. As such, the first months of the year passed by without any remarkable event in inter-Korean relations.

31. 'Kim Jong Un Makes Speech at Military Parade and Public Procession of Pyongyang Citizens', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 11 October 2015.

32. 'Seventh Congress of WPK to Be Convened', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 30 October 2015.

33. Park Hyeong-jung, 'What to Expect from the 7th Korean Workers' Party Congress?', *KINU Online Series*, CO 15-30, 20 November 2015.

34. See Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 111-116.

In spring, as usual, North Korea decided to test missiles and held military drills in the East Sea on several occasions. In the early days of March, some short-range missiles were launched as a protest against the annual joint exercises in the area between the United States and South Korea; on the first days of April, a new round of missile launches was carried out just in time for the visit of US Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter. This move was considered by many not as accidental, but rather as a signal sent from Pyongyang to the international community, in particular to Washington.<sup>35</sup> In May 2015, after some questionable claims by both governments, tension rose again, culminating in North-Korean rounds of artillery fire, this time in the West Sea. The move by Pyongyang, which nonetheless decided to give the southern counterpart advanced warning, seemed to have the goal of raising the tension in the area, and revive the dispute between the two countries related to their maritime border.<sup>36</sup> In fact, despite more than sixty years of *fait accompli*, the so-called Northern Limit Line (NLL) – namely the extension of the border into the sea that was established with the 1953 armistice – has never been recognized by Pyongyang, resulting in periodical naval skirmishes between the two countries.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.2. *The August crisis*

The most crucial month for inter-Korean relations was definitely August. At the beginning of the year, a series of expectations emerged, due to the recurrence, on 15 August, of the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of the peninsula from Japanese colonial rule. Unfortunately, these expectations were betrayed.

The month of August opened with a possible sign of a thaw, namely the visit to North Korea by the former First Lady of South Korea, Lee Hee-ho. President Kim Dae-jung's widow enjoyed, in fact, great respect in Pyongyang, thanks mainly to the efforts towards reconciliation pursued by her husband in his years as President (1998-2003). However, the South Korean government decided not to give any political significance to Lee's journey, and did not make use of Ms. Lee to send any message to the North Korean regime during the visit. Surprisingly, North Korea decided to give

35. 'N. Korea fires 4 short-range rockets into West Sea', *Yonhap News Agency*, 3 April 2015.

36. Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Fires Artillery Shells Into Sea Near Disputed Border', *The New York Times*, 13 May 2015.

37. 'North Korea: The Risks of War in the Yellow Sea', *International Crisis Group*. Asia Report N° 198, 23 December 2010. In 1999 and in 2002, there were the two battles of Yeonpyeong Island, with many human and material losses on both sides; in 2009, there was the Battle of Daechong Island, which caused losses to the North Korean navy; finally, in 2010, in the same waters, there was the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan*, in March, and the bombing of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, in November.



little attention to the initiative as well, avoiding the scheduling of high-level meetings for Ms. Lee.<sup>38</sup> The month continued in an anything but positive way for the inter-Korean relations. On 10 August, in fact, the South Korean authorities officially accused North Korea of having placed some landmines in the southern part of the de-militarized zone; mines that had caused serious injuries to two South Korean soldiers. According to the South's military command, the act was a deliberate provocation by North Korea, carried out through an operation of infiltration across the border. Immediately, as retaliation for the incident, the South Korean government decided to restore the broadcast of propaganda messages through loudspeakers along the border. The broadcasts represented one of the most critical points for inter-Korean relations and were interrupted 11 years before, as a sign of good will on the path of reconciliation.<sup>39</sup>

A few days later, Pyongyang denied any involvement in the events, accusing Seoul of raising tensions on the peninsula, and threatening retaliation for the resumption of propaganda broadcasts at the border, including the possibility to hit the loudspeakers installations with artillery. To make matters worse, some South Korean activists decided to restart the launch of balloons from the border, carrying banners containing denigrating messages directed against Kim Jong Un and the North Korean regime. On 15 August, the anniversary of the liberation of the peninsula from colonial rule, rather than being an occasion for reconciliation, turned into a new day of tension. As a result, in her speech to the nation, Park Geun-hye could not refrain from highlighting the latest negative developments in inter-Korean relations and stigmatized North Korea's behaviour, regarded as provocative and unjustified. In particular, the South Korean President affirmed that Pyongyang's attitude, made of threats and provocations, could only lead to more isolation for the country and, ultimately, to its destruction. Park went even further, saying that North Korea would have to undertake a process of rapprochement and opening to the international community, just like Cuba had recently done. She also stated that the liberation from the colonial rule could not be considered complete until the achievement of the reunification of the Korean people.<sup>40</sup> The reaction of the North Korean regime to Park's speech was one of condemnation and derision, with the usual disparaging tone against South Korea and its President, pointing out the inconsistency of a message where conciliatory proposals had been mixed up with very harsh accusations.<sup>41</sup>

38. 'Ex-first lady visits Pyongyang on hope of better inter-Korean ties', *Asia Times*, 5 August 2015.

39. 'S. Korea resumes psychological warfare in retaliation against N.K.', *Yonhap News Agency*, 10 August 2015.

40. 'Speech by South Korean President Park on the Seventieth Anniversary of Liberation', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 August 2015.

41. 'Spokesman for CPRK Slams Park Geun Hye's «Address on August 15»', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 15 August 2015.

As a result, tensions rose rapidly on the peninsula. At the same time, however, in what proved to be a certain degree of schizophrenia in inter-Korean relations, the two countries agreed to a wage increase in Kaesong joint industrial park. The issue had been on the table for several months, since February, and was at the centre of negotiations between the Ministry of reunification and its North Korean counterpart. On 18 August, the two sides finally announced the agreement, introducing a 5% increase in the minimum monthly wages for North Korean workers in Kaesong.<sup>42</sup> This decision, apparently limited in scope, had a significant symbolic aspect. The existing discrepancy between the high-sounding public rhetoric, especially linked to the military and security aspects, and the more concrete plans for economic cooperation demonstrated yet again the need for projects of this kind in inter-Korean relations in order to reach tangible results in easing tension. The problematic and often-reviled concept of «flexible dualism»,<sup>43</sup> introduced in 1997 by former President Kim Dae-jung during the «Sunshine Policy», proved once again to be a very effective tool for improving the relations on the peninsula, and, despite having been officially abandoned since Lee Myung-bak's election (2008), it seemed to still be alive and working in practice.

A few days after Park Geun-hye's speech, tension, already high, rose even more. In response to the loudspeaker propaganda campaign, and also to the joint military drills *Ulchi-Freedom Guardian* between South Korea and the United States, an exchange of artillery between the two countries broke out on 20 August, started by rockets apparently fired from North Korea, to which the South Koreans immediately responded with their own artillery; the unusual amplitude of this exchange of fire - the first time in five years - was worrying. The following day, the North Korean regime declared a state of «semi-war», one of the highest military alerts in the country, declared only twice in its history, in 1968 and 1993.<sup>44</sup> To try to find a way out and avoid a useless and dangerous escalation, the two Koreas decided to meet two days later, on 23 August. This first meeting was aimed at intervening quickly to stop the escalation while, at the same time, laying the groundwork for an agreement between the two governments. Both delegations were made up of members of the highest level from both governments: Chief of The National Security Office Kim Kwan-jin and Minister of Reunification Hong Yong-pyo represented South Korea, while Hwang Pyong So, considered number two in the North Korean power structure, and Kim Yang Gon, the

42. Choi Ha-young, «Two Koreas finally reach Kaesong minimum wage agreement», *NK News*, 18 August 2015.

43. The main point of the concept of «flexible dualism» consists in the separation of the political and economic spheres in managing inter-Korean relations. For more information: Moon Chung-in, «The Sunshine Policy and the Korean Summit: assessments and prospects», *East Asian Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Winter 2000, pp. 3-36.

44. Choe Sang-hun, «North Korea and South Korea Trade Fire Across Border, Seoul Says», *The New York Times*, 20 August 2015.

secretary in charge of inter-Korean relations, represented Pyongyang's regime. Another positive signal came through the official channel of information of North Korea, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), which, in announcing the meeting, referred to South Korea using its official name, the Republic of Korea, avoiding any offensive references.<sup>45</sup>

The meeting of the two high-level officials, which lasted nearly three days, led to a real agreement, on 25 August, in which the two sides decided to take concrete steps to ease tensions: South Korea would stop the broadcasts of propaganda messages, while North Korea would withdraw the «semi-war» alert and express regret for the two South Korean soldiers injured by landmines. Through this formula, Pyongyang could meet the main South Korean request and, at the same time, did not explicitly recognize any responsibility in the issue. In addition, the two sides decided to go further, agreeing to new rounds of family reunions and a series of inter-governmental high-level meetings, aimed at improving inter-Korean relations.<sup>46</sup> A few days later, the two parties held a meeting to define the dates and modality of family reunions. On 7 and 8 September, in Panmunjom, the delegates of the two Koreas agreed to hold two rounds of meetings, between 20 and 26 October, at the tourist facilities located on Mount Kumgang.

With the definition of the details for the family reunions, the «August crisis» could be considered definitively closed. The events that took place can be certainly considered significant, as it was the moment of highest tension since the nuclear test in February 2013 and its aftermath. As had happened at that time, also in this case the crisis created the possibility of new spaces for dialogue and cooperation. In an extremely rational way, in fact, the two sides agreed to negotiate before the situation could lead to a pointless military escalation, and came up with an agreement that not only solved the immediate issues, but also created the basis for further positive developments, especially for what concerns the high-level meetings. The future developments in autumn and the presence of an overall strategy in the management of inter-Korean relations would decide if it were a real watershed, as predicted by many analysts in South Korea, or the umpteenth agreement destined to expire in silence.

### 3.3. *The new rounds of family reunions and the inter-governmental talks*

The second round of family reunions during Park Geun-hye's administration started on Tuesday, 20 October, at Mount Kumgang, in the northern part of the peninsula. Over 750 Koreans, from both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, met for two rounds of meetings – the first from 20 to 22 and the

45. 'North-South High-level Urgent Contact to Be Held', *KCNA – Korean Central News Agency*, 22 August 2015.

46. Hyun Joon Chon, 'The Significance of the 8.25 Inter-Korean Agreement and the Calling of the highest leaders of the two Koreas', *Global Asia Forum*, 28 August 2015.

second from 22 to 25 – between members of families separated by the Korean War. Most of the participants were very old, some of them had to be transported by ambulance to Mount Kungang, and represented a small fraction of those still waiting to be reunited with their relatives who live in the north; in South Korea alone, in fact, their number reaches over 66,000 people.<sup>47</sup>

The reunions, a highly symbolic and emotional event for the Korean population, also represent a kind of barometer for the relations between the two countries at the political level. It is, in fact, a humanitarian issue of great importance but with little military or political implications, and for this reason, it is often used as a first step towards future dialogue and cooperation, to show the goodwill of the parties. Even in the previous rounds, in February 2014, the aim was the same. This time the aim was to highlight the agreement reached in August and the possible developments of the inter-governmental talks that, along with the reunions, constituted the most important part of the agreement.

In this context, on 19 November the South Korean government accepted a proposal from Pyongyang to hold a preparatory meeting on 26 November. The session was supposed to be a working-level meeting between negotiators, with the goal of preparing the ground for a subsequent wide-ranging and high-level dialogue. The 26 November meeting in Panmunjom gave a semi-positive result. In fact, although the two sides agreed for the coming intergovernmental meeting, which was scheduled for 11 December, they decided to limit it to the level of deputy ministers, whereas it was previously thought of as a meeting between ministers, and to hold it in Kaesong, a less significant location compared to one of the two capitals.<sup>48</sup> These early warning signs became concrete during the meetings. After marathon talks that lasted two full days, on 12 December, the parties announced that they had failed to reach any agreement and decided to suspend the inter-governmental meetings.<sup>49</sup> The main point of friction was the reopening of the joint tourism program in Mount Kungang. The project had been one of the Kim Dae-jung's administration major achievements in terms of cooperation, and consisted of a series of tourist facilities built by the South Korean Hyundai Asan Foundation on one of the most spectacular and symbolically highly important mountain, situated in the north. The program had been interrupted in 2008, however, following the death of a South Korean tourist, killed by North Korean soldiers when she ventured into an off-limits military area. The representatives of Pyongyang privileged the reopening of the Mount Kungang program, while Seoul's priority remained the issue of

47. 'Korean families reunited after over six decades of separation', *The Korea Herald*, 24 October 2015.

48. Kang Jin-kyu, 'South, North only agree to mid-level Dec. Talks', *JoongAng Daily*, 28 November 2015.

49. Yi Whan-woo, 'Two Koreas fail to reach agreement in Gaeseong talks', *The Korea Times*, 13 December 2015.

family reunions. The impossibility to find a common ground on these issues led to the interruption of the dialogue, without so much as an agreement on the date of further meetings.

This failure showed how the *Trustpolitik*, launched by President Park Geun-hye three years earlier, was struggling to be translated into practice. South Korea's lack of a proactive approach to the relations with North Korea, which translated into facing a crisis at a time without an overall strategy of trust-building, proved to be the main cause of the impossibility to build mutual trust between the parties, and create a new course of inter-Korean relations.

#### 4. *International relations*

##### 4.1. *Seoul and Beijing: friends as never before... under the gaze of Washington*

In 2015, the already very good bilateral relationship between Seoul and Beijing became even more intense, reaching its apex in the second part of the year. The launching on 20 December of a Free Trade Area agreement between South Korea and China marked a new stage in bilateral diplomacy under the presidencies of Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping. They met in Beijing in September, for the sixth time since their taking office, on the occasion of China's V-day celebrations, which included the seventieth anniversary of both the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the victory in the World Anti-Fascist War.

Predictably, Park's presence in Beijing was seen by many commentators as a major geopolitical shift in the region and stimulated speculations about an increasing South Korean alignment with China and a consequent loosening of its ties with the US. In fact, the South Korean President was the sole US ally present at the celebration, while all other leaders of the most-developed nations' declined the invitation to attend, sending only low-level delegations. On the top of it, this happened at a time when China was perceived as becoming increasingly more assertive and the US increasingly more determined in containing its rise. However, even if Park's presence could be seen as a real test of the strategic cooperative partnership between the China and South Korea, such speculations were misplaced for several reasons. The most important was the fact that Seoul continued to consider both the US and the People Republic of China (PRC) vital for its interests – the former security-wise, the second economy-wise – and was thus quite «natural for Seoul to try to derive the maximum benefit from relations with both countries».<sup>50</sup>

Actually, since the beginning of the year, some of the critical aspects characterising the South Korean-Chinese relationship came to the surface,

50. 'South Korea Again Caught Between U.S., China', *The Diplomat*, 20 March 2015.

with special reference to Seoul's effort to strike a balance between its competing relationships with Beijing and Washington. In particular, the South Korean government was confronted by the necessity to take tough decisions, which could have important consequences on its relations with both the United States and PRC.<sup>51</sup> The first (which remained undefined in the year under review) had to do with the deployment in South Korea of the US-backed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile system (THAAD), aimed at facing possible military threats from North Korea. A decision favouring the deployment would understandably raise China's concern. In fact, Beijing was afraid that THAAD, by subverting the existing military balance in the peninsula, might threaten regional security. The second decision concerned the ROK's (Republic of Korea) decision to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Here the problem was that the US had encouraged its allies not to join it, due to concerns over China's rising power on the world stage. However, first London and then Berlin, Paris and Rome had not heeded Washington's desires, and had joined the AIIB.<sup>52</sup> Only one year before, when Xi Jinping had first asked South Korea to join the AIIB, Washington had urged Seoul not to accept, and Seoul had complied with the US wish.<sup>53</sup> However, one year later – as a consequence of the decisions taken by the US European allies – things had changed. Resigning itself to the inevitable, on 17 March Washington gave South Korea the green light, announcing that it was up to Seoul to decide what to do. On 26 March Seoul communicated its intention to join the AIIB.<sup>54</sup>

On 3 September, when the PRC commemorated the end of the WWII with an extravagant military parade in Tiananmen Square, all eyes were understandably pointed at the foreign dignitaries who had accepted Beijing's invitation. Among them, as noted above, there was Park Geun-hye sitting in a front row seat, closed to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. According to Yoon Sukjoon, of the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy,<sup>55</sup> by her choice to attend the event, Park Geun-hye was demonstrating that a collaborative strategy through skilful diplomacy was the best for peace and security in East Asia; at the same time, she was also showing her strategic leverage, taking advantage of South Korea's strategic partnership with China without undermining the security alliance with the US.<sup>56</sup>

51. *Ibid.*

52. 'America's AIIB Disaster: Are There Lessons to be Learned?', *The Diplomat*, 18 March 2015.

53. 'South Korea Torn Between US and China', *The Diplomat*, 20 march 2015.

54. 'South Korea Joins the AIIB', *The Diplomat*, 28 march 2015.

55. Andrei Lankov, 'If China had to choose, it would be South Korea', *Aljazeera*, 2 September 2015.

56. Yoon Sukjoon, 'China's WW2 Victory Parade: Why Park Is Attending', *RSIS Commentary*, 28 August 2015 (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CO15185.pdf>). According to Victor Cha, the real significant of Park's presence in Beijing was in fact that she was bringing China closer to Seoul while further distanc-

Analysing the reasons and the implications of Park's presence in Beijing, Lee Ki-hyun, of the Korea Institute for National Unification, argues that its real significance was to be found in the «change of stature in the ROK-China relations revealed in the process».<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the South Korean President was received by Beijing as the most important guest throughout the entirety of the visit – from the protocol accorded at the V-Day celebrations, to the exclusive luncheon after the bilateral summit, and the consecutive talks with Premier Li Kejiang.<sup>58</sup> This suggested that South Korea's strategic value for China had increased significantly. In this sense, the Beijing summit played a key role in upgrading the two countries political ties, paving the way for the launch of the ROK-China Free Trade Area in December, which marked a new stage in bilateral diplomacy under Park and Xi.

The deal had clear advantages for South Korea, as its government projections showed the benefits for the country's economy in term of real GDP growth, job growth, and the growth of bilateral trade.<sup>59</sup> Significantly the South Korea National Assembly ratified the China-ROK deal on 30 November, only 5 months after its signing.<sup>60</sup> This can be compared with the fact that the free trade agreement between South Korea and the US (KORUS FTA) was ratified exactly 4 years after its initial signing, in the midst of heated parliamentary debates and violent mass protests.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, it must be noted that the Beijing summit served as a catalyst to the normalization of relations in Northeast Asia, as it was in this occasion that Park proposed to China to hold a ROK-China-Japan trilateral summit «between late October and early November» in Seoul.<sup>62</sup>

Generally speaking, Park Geun-hye's «China policy» was judged positively both in China and South Korea. On the one hand, South Korean public media agreed to consider the public support for Park's visit to China the

ing it from Pyongyang, as it was evident in Seoul's casual reference to the peninsula unification (within its statement on Park's meeting in China), and that Beijing supported. It was the first time that Beijing had ever mentioned unification in a statement with Seoul. Victor Cha, 'A Pass Less Chosun', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 October 2015.

57. Lee Ky-hyun, 'The Significance of September 2 ROK-China Summit and Prospective Tasks', *KINU Online Series*, CO 15-23, 10 September 2015.

58. 'China snubs North Korea in favour of South at Beijing event', *The Telegraph*, 4 September 2015.

59. 'China, South Korea to deepen economic ties with FTA implementation', *Daily Times*, 21 December 2015.

60. 'China Headlines: China, ROK sign free trade agreement', *Xinhua News Agency*, 1 June 2015.

61. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China-Korea relations. A complex China-ROK Partnership', *Comparative connections*, Vol. 17, N. 3, January 2016, pp. 101-112, esp. p. 106. On the rough process which brought to the KORUS FTA ratification, see Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana, la quiete dopo la tempesta. Aspettando il 2012', *Asia Maior 2011*, pp. 321-347, in part. pp. 340-41.

62. The significance of the trilateral summit will be discussed in the next paragraph.

key factor for the spike in her domestic approval rate in early September.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, Chinese media organizations selected Park Geun-hye among the top ten people of the year, citing in particular her balancing role between major powers and her attendance at Beijing V-Day (on the list there were also Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel and Myanmar's democratic symbol Aung San Suu Kyi).<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.2. *The «long-awaited» rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo*

2015 was a relevant year in South Korean-Japanese relations since it marked not only the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII (and thus the end of Japanese colonial rule in the Korean Peninsula), but also the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Seoul and Tokyo (formalized on 22 June 1965).

As already seen in the previous volumes of «Asia Maior», the ties between the two countries had been frosty in recent years, beginning with Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo's taking office. Since then, historical divisions and territorial disputes came (once again) to the fore, creating an increasingly strong barrier between the two neighbours and the US's two most important Asian allies. Actually, the frosty bilateral ties had started to thaw since the end of 2014, when the two countries signed an important trilateral agreement with Washington for the sharing of military and other sensitive information concerning the North Korean nuclear and ballistic program.<sup>65</sup> That is why at the end of 2014 there was cautious optimism about a further improvement in the bilateral ties in 2015, also in view of the aforementioned anniversaries.

Confirming such optimism, the first months of 2015 saw some important positive, starting with the resumption of talks among the foreign ministers of South Korea, Japan (and PRC), for the first time in nearly three years. They met in March, at the Seventh Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Seoul, in a bid to restore cooperation between the three Asian economic powers.<sup>66</sup>

Much more relevant, however, was the anniversary of normalization of relations on 22 June, which brought South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, for the first time since he took office in 2013, to Tokyo for a com-

63. Scott Snyder & See-won Byun, 'China-Korea relations. A complex China-Rok Partnership', p. 102. 'How is Park Geun Hye's attendance in the WWII victory parade in China viewed in Korea?', (<https://www.quora.com/How-is-Park-Geun-Hyes-attendance-in-the-WWII-victory-parade-in-China-viewed-in-Korea>).

64. 'Park chosen as one of 10 people of the year by Chinese media', *Yonhap News Agency*, 28 December 2015.

65. See Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 121-2.

66. 'South Korea, Japan, China to meet on three-way cooperation', *Reuters*, 17 March 2015.



memoration banquet.<sup>67</sup> On its part, Seoul hosted an international academic conference from 17 to 19 June dedicated to the topic «beyond the past and into the future of the South Korea-Japan relations».<sup>68</sup> Park and Abe, while attending separate celebrations – Park at a reception at the Japanese embassy in Seoul, and Abe at the South Korean embassy in Tokyo – spoke optimistically about the future of Japanese-South Korean bilateral relations, although showing their awareness that this improvement would not happen overnight. A South Korean official's words to South Korea's Yonhap News Agency - «Spring has come to South Korea-Japan relations, though the ice of the river has not melted yet» - reflected well the difficulties still facing the two countries.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, according to some experts, the diplomatic functions to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Seoul and Tokyo could be seen as a turning point for the improvement of bilateral ties, while the trend to mend fences appeared to have become irreversible.<sup>70</sup>

On the contrary, the general mood during the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II (which marked Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule) was decidedly disappointing for Seoul. In his statement, when referring to Japanese war crimes, the Japanese Premier mentioned «deep remorse» and generically expressed «heartfelt apology» without actually issuing a direct apology himself.<sup>71</sup> Predictably, Abe's speech did not meet Seoul's expectations,<sup>72</sup> and South Korea's media reaction was largely negative. In particular, the Chosun Ilbo daily criticized the Japanese Prime Minister for not apologizing directly for Japanese aggression and colonial rule, while the Yonhap News Agency defined the statement as a major step backward from those made by two of his predecessors (referring to Murayama Tomiichi and Koizumi Junichiro).<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless,

67. 'South Korea's Foreign Minister to Make First Trip to Japan', *The Diplomat*, 18 June 2015.

68. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Spokesperson's Press Briefing, 16 June, 2015, ([http://www.mofa.go.kr/ENG/press/pressbriefings/index.jsp?menu=m\\_10\\_30](http://www.mofa.go.kr/ENG/press/pressbriefings/index.jsp?menu=m_10_30)).

69. 'South Korea-Japan Relations: Toward a «New Future»?', *The Diplomat*, 23 June 2015.

70. *Ibid.*

71. 'The Abe Statement: A Korean Perspective', *The Diplomat*, 25 August 2015. Interestingly, following Abe's speech, South Korea's JoongAng Daily reported the results of a survey of U.S. scholars and historians regarding the stalemate in relations between the two countries, which saw 90% blaming the Japanese government (and 10% the South Korean leadership), while 60% thought South Korea was most responsible for blocking a face-to-face meeting between the two leaders. According to U.S. commentators, Seoul was blameworthy for what they called an «apology fatigue», referring to the fact that South Korea used every 15 August as an excuse to rebuke Japan for its history, and more generally for its continuous insistence on a direct apology for Japan war crimes. *Ibid.*

72. 'Abe statement fails sincerity test', *The Korea Times*, 14 August 2015.

73. 'Abe seeks to reset East Asian Relations', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 20 August 2015.

while inviting Tokyo to let «sincere actions» follow Abe's words, Park Geun-hye declared that, despite all the difficulties, the two countries had to «move forward to a new future».<sup>74</sup>

It was in this spirit that the two sides met for a bilateral summit in Seoul, at the beginning of November, on the side-lines of the trilateral summit among the PRC, Japan and South Korea. The meeting took place amid heightened tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, following the provocative decision by the US navy to send a destroyer within the 12 nautical mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-claimed territory in the South China Sea (where China had built artificial islands).<sup>75</sup> It is no coincidence that analysts and commentators agreed to consider the trilateral summit largely symbolic, «an achievement in itself», considering that none of the issues that had initially disrupted the annual summits had been resolved.<sup>76</sup> Not to mention, the fact that the historical issues that had contributed to disrupt the trilateral summits after 2012 were barely mentioned in the declaration.

The joint statement released at the end of the trilateral summit («Joint Declaration for Peace in East Asia») focused on closer collaboration, both in terms of the economy and regional security, while the only reference to history saw all three sides agreeing to carry out further cooperation «in the spirit of facing history squarely and advancing towards the future».<sup>77</sup>

As far as the bilateral summit was concerned, the overwhelming majority of observers agreed to reduce its importance - as had been the case with the trilateral summit - to a symbolic level, while considering it quite disappointing in terms of substance,<sup>78</sup> because it had failed to yield anything tangible beyond the appearance of improving relations between the two sides. Nonetheless, as for the abovementioned trilateral summit, the fact that the meeting had taken place after a long hiatus was seen as more im-

74. 'South Korea president says Abe WWII speech fell short', *Channel News Asia*, 15 August 2015 (<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/south-korea-president/2052080.html>).

75. 'Leaders of Japan, China and South Korea meet in Seoul', *World Socialist Web Site*, 2 November 2015.

76. Sarah Teo, 'China-Japan-Korea Trilateral Summit: What does it mean for East Asia?', *RSIS Commentary*, n. 234, 4 November 2015 (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CO15234.pdf>).

77. 'Full text of joint declaration of trilateral summit', *Yonhap News Agency*, 1 November 2015.

78. According to David Kang and Jiun Bang the timing was probably not optimal, considering that South Koreans were fiercely debating the history textbooks question (which had obvious connections with Japan). Moreover, and possibly more relevant was the fact that there was the unconfirmed news of a joint South Korean-Chinese move to have «comfort women/sex slaves» documents registered with UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. See David Kang & Jiun Bang, 'Japan-Korea Relations. The Art of Politics and the Politics of Art', *Comparative connections*, Vol. 17, N. 1, May 2015, pp. 113-122, esp. pp. 129-30, (<http://csis.org/files/publication/1501q.pdf>).

portant than its content, raising hopes for the beginning of a «new cycle of good relations between the countries».<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, according to Scott Snyder, the «cold summit» result, with no joint press conference, no joint statement, and no Park-hosted lunch for the Japanese Prime Minister (as she had done for the Chinese Premier Li Kejiang), clearly reflected the on-going political gap between the two countries, despite the re-establishment of normalized communication channels in every area of the relationship.<sup>80</sup>

As expected, the «comfort women» issue dominated Park and Abe's 100-minute long conversation.<sup>81</sup> The two sides expressed the commitment to «accelerate talks to reach an agreement as soon as possible» in order to resolve it once for all, but they did not offer details of how such a result might be achieved. Actually, Park Geun-hye had already indicated her preferred timeline for the on-going negotiations, when, in a written response to questions presented by two Japanese media organizations, had stated: «I truly hope that this issue can be resolved within this year/hopefully to be settled by the end of the year».<sup>82</sup> The new positive approach by both leaders (particularly by the South Korean President) was also evident in their personal attitude. In a commemorative photo session prior to the talks, Park Geun-hye smiled as she shook hands with Abe.<sup>83</sup>

The more relaxed atmosphere that emerged from the summit was quickly disturbed by some frictions,<sup>84</sup> but, thanks to the will of both leaders, neither Seoul nor Tokyo let any single issue damage the bilateral relation's new spirit.<sup>85</sup>

In fact, 2015 ended with a bang. On 28 December, the two countries signed a historic deal which was supposed to put an «end» to the long-standing issue concerning the «comfort women/sex slaves».<sup>86</sup> Under the accord,

79. 'Japan and South Korea summit signal thaw in relations', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2015.

80. 'Assessing the First Park-Abe Summit', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 November 2015.

81. "«Comfort Women» Issue Dominates Rare Japan-Korea Bilateral Talks', *The Diplomat*, 3 November 2015.

82. 'Park: Fixing 'comfort women' issue this year key to positive future', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 30 October 2015.

83. 'Japan, S. Korea to continue talks on «comfort women»', *The Japan News*, 2 November 2015 ([http://www.asianews.network/content/japan-s-korea-continue-talks-%E2%80%98comfort-women%E2%80%99-2993?qt-most\\_downloaded=0](http://www.asianews.network/content/japan-s-korea-continue-talks-%E2%80%98comfort-women%E2%80%99-2993?qt-most_downloaded=0)).

84. Among others the lawsuit of the Sankei Shimbun's former Seoul bureau chief, Kato Tastuya, for allegedly defaming the South Korean President in 2014 in the aftermath of the *Seoul* incident. For more details on the issue, see Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', p. 123.

85. David Kang & Jiun Bang, 'Japan-Korea relations. A Litigious Time of the Year', p. 127.

86. It was not the first time that Japan and South Korea agreed to try to put the issue behind once and for all. From Japan's perspective, the dispute had already been resolved in 1965, when the South Korean government agreed that all issues of

Japan agreed to supply US\$ 8.3 million in government funds to support the surviving Korean women (who totalled 46) who were sent to front-line brothels for Japanese troops before and during World War II. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo apologized for the women's treatment, something he had been previously reluctant to do, through a statement by his Foreign Minister and a telephone call to South Korean President Park Geun-hye.<sup>87</sup> In return, South Korea promised to «finally and irreversibly» end the dispute and try to secure the removal of a comfort women statue in front of Japan's Embassy in Seoul. Both nations also agreed to mutually refrain from further public criticism related to this issue.<sup>88</sup>

However, despite immediate praise from the US, the public opinions on both sides, but especially in South Korea, were not happy about this denouement.<sup>89</sup> The «Korean Council for Women Forced Into Sexual Slavery», which represents a group of former sex slaves, considered the agreement inadequate, as it did not make clear enough that the recruitment of the women «was a crime done by the Japanese government and military systematically».<sup>90</sup> Also, it criticized the Japanese government's decision to create a fund instead of directly compensating the surviving victims.<sup>91</sup> Accordingly, while marking a significant step, only the future will show the real impact of the agreement on Japan-South Korean relations.

#### 4.3. *The «missed debut» of Kim Jong Un on the international scene*

2015 can be considered the year of the «missed debut» of Kim Jong Un on the international stage.

At the end of January, Yonhap News, the South Korean News Agency, reported that the North Korean leader might be attending the sixtieth anniversary ceremony of the Asian-African Conference (known as the Bandung Conference) in Indonesia on 24 April, marking his first official international visit since succeeding his father, Kim Jong Il, in 2011.<sup>92</sup> For Kim Jong Un, it would have been a «noteworthy diplomatic schedule», following his

compensation would be settled government-to-government, and again in 1994, when the Asian Women's Fund was set up with government assistance to solicit funds for former comfort women on humanitarian grounds; while in moral terms Tokyo stood by a 1993 government apology, the so called «Kono statement», which acknowledged the Japanese military's involvement in the operation of the front-line brothel system.

87. 'Japan, South Korea Agree to Aid for «Comfort Women»', *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 December 2015.

88. 'The Comfort Women Agreement: A Win for Traditional Diplomacy', *The Diplomat*, 31 December 2015.

89. 'Regret on Park-Abe deal', *The Korea Times*, 29 December 2015; 'Comfort women deal backfires for Park', *The Korea Times*, 30 December 2015.

90. 'Japan, South Korea Agree to Aid for «Comfort Women»'.

91. *Ibid.*

92. 'N. Korean leader may join Bandung Conference in April: source', *Yonhap News Agency*, 25 January 2015.

grandfather's legacy, who had joined the Conference during its tenth anniversary in April 1965.<sup>93</sup> However, a brief announcement made by North Korean news agency KCNA, a few days before the beginning of the Conference, put an end to the speculations triggered by Yonhap News: «A DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] delegation led by Kim Yong Nam, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly – stated KCNA – left here Saturday to take part in the Afro-Asia Summit and events marking of the sixtieth anniversary of the Afro-Asia Conference».<sup>94</sup>

After the missed opportunity in Indonesia, Kim's first foreign visit seemed set to be at the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow on 9 May, following the declaration in January by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to reporters that the North Korean leader had accepted the invitation to attend the ceremony.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, repeated statements from Russian officials gave the impression that Kim's attendance was to be considered a *fait accompli*, also implying that a bilateral summit between Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin was in the cards.<sup>96</sup>

Moscow had already invited Kim Jong Un at the end of 2014, in a move to crown a particularly good year in the relations between the two countries, both ostracized by the international community.<sup>97</sup> For Kim Jong Un, such an occasion would have contributed to further strengthen its relationship with Moscow, allowing his country to rebalance away from economic over-reliance on Beijing. Indeed, as already seen in the previous volumes of «Asia Maior», in the last few years, Pyongyang, while relations with the PRC soured and talks with Tokyo went through highs and lows, had increasingly relied on Russia as its last diplomatic ally. Furthermore, there was the possibility of using Moscow as the site for an inter-Korean summit, in consideration of the fact that the South Korean President had received the same invitation.

At the beginning of May, however, only a few days before the «big event», KCNA announced that the North Korean head of Parliament and nominal head of state, Kim Yong Nam, would attend the Russian Victory Day celebrations, without mentioning the reasons why Kim Jong Un had cancelled his trip to Moscow.<sup>98</sup> Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov's stated

93. 'Kim Jong Un to Visit Indonesia Marking First Official Trip Abroad', *Sputniknews.com*, 25 January 2015.

94. 'DPRK Delegation Leaves to Take Part in Afro-Asia Summit', KCNA, 18 April 2015.

95. 'Kim Jong-un Accepts Invite to Russia', *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 22 January 2015.

96. 'Kim Jong-un Won't Attend Moscow Victory Celebrations', *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 1 May 2015; 'North Korean leader Kim Jong-un won't visit Moscow on May 9 – Kremlin', *TASS*, 30 April 2015.

97. Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 129-31.

98. 'Kim Yong Nam to Visit Russia', *KCNA*, 4 May 2015. .

that Kim's last-minute change had to do with unspecified «internal matters». While this was, in all likelihood, just a face-saving excuse, the hint to «internal matters» provoked widespread speculation, «with theories ranging from domestic instability to Russia's refusal to come up with an arms deal incentive».<sup>99</sup> Other theories focused on the difficulty (and failure) to reach an agreement on security protocol for Kim while in Moscow. Actually, Russia reportedly refused to comply with North Korea's request to give its leader a special treatment, given that there would be several other foreign dignitaries participating in the event.

In Moscow's view, protocol arrangements would have been further complicated because, nominally, Kim was not a head of state.<sup>100</sup> Another supposed reason was that the North Korean leader was worried that relations with China could worsen, since, according to professor Kim Yong-hyun of Dongguk University: «It would have been very awkward for Kim to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping face-to-face in Moscow for the first time».<sup>101</sup> Much-discussed was also the possibility that Kim Jong Un's was determined by the news, released two weeks before, that his South Korean counterpart would not go either.<sup>102</sup> All said, according to Andrei Lankov, the cancellation of Kim Jong Un's trip to Moscow was «hardly a surprising announcement», since most observers had been rather sceptical about the chance that the North Korean leader would go to Moscow in his first-ever foreign trip. Lankov reflected instead on the reasons «why did North Koreans create the impression that Kim Jong-un's visit was all but decided». For Lankov, it was quite possible that the North Korean leader had for a while been undecided about going or not. On the one hand, he needed Russia as a balancer against China; however, on the other had, «he may have quickly realized that he would have been facing not just any summit but a super-summit, and obviously succumbed to his worries and phobias».<sup>103</sup> In any case, the Moscow event would not have been the best place, not to mention the best time, for Kim Jong Un's diplomatic debut, because it was going to be a large and noisy gathering, with «hordes of journalists swarming ready to spot and report a single slip or mistake». If Kim wanted to talk with the Russian President, reflected Lankov, a separate visit would be a much better idea.<sup>104</sup>

Beyond these two lost occasions, there was another chance for Kim Jong Un's international debut, probably the most important one. In fact,

99. 'North Korean's head of Parliament to replace leader Kim Jong Un for Moscow visit', *Straits Times*, 4 May 2015.

100. 'Kim Jong-un Won't Attend Moscow Victory Celebrations', *The Chosun Ilbo - English Edition*, 1 May 2015.

101. *Ibid.*

102. 'Park won't attend Russia event', *The Korea Times*, 12 April 2015.

103. Andrei Lankov, 'Foibles and fears: Why Kim Jong Un cancelled his Russia visit', *NK News*, 1 May 2015.

104. *Ibid.*

in the meantime, the North Korean leader had also received China's invitation to take part in its Victory Day Parade in September.<sup>105</sup> In a press briefing released on 14 April, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei announced that Beijing had «sent invitations to leaders of all relevant countries» to the ceremony commemorating the seventieth anniversary (3 September) of the Victory in the War of Resistance against Japan. Yonhap News Agency, quoting unnamed diplomatic sources, said that North Korea's leader would be among those.<sup>106</sup>

It was the first time Kim Jong Un had been invited to China, probably in a move to improve the recent troubled state of Sino-North Korean relations, but also because, according to Kim Heung-kyu, director of the China Policy Institute at Ajou University: «It would be quite embarrassing for China and its (President) Xi Jinping to meet Kim Jong Un in Moscow when North Korea hasn't solved its issues with China yet».<sup>107</sup> Quite unsurprisingly, Kim Jong Un declined the invitation from Beijing, confirming the strained political ties between the allies over Pyongyang's defiant pursuit of nuclear weapons and wayward behaviour.<sup>108</sup> Again speculations on Pyongyang's decision went from domestic considerations to reasons more strictly related to the bilateral relationship. For John Delury, of the Yonsei University in Seoul, Kim Jong Un possibly renounced to go to China either because he did not feel secure leaving his country or simply because he was not interested in a close relationship with Beijing.<sup>109</sup> However, according to the 1 September edition of KGS NightWatch the reason was a completely different one. In fact, the North Korean government insisted on its «Supreme leader» receiving the highest honours as a guest, and being placed on Xi's right hand side. So, when informed by Beijing that he would be placed at the end of the reviewing stand, the North Korean leader decided to cancel the visit.<sup>110</sup>

Nonetheless, in a significant move, Kim decided to send Choe Ryong Hae, part of his inner circle, instead of the ceremonial head of state, Kim Yong Nam. Much has been said on Choe's treatment by the Chinese, starting from the fact that he was seated far away from the centre, together with other undistinguished foreign dignitaries, while the South Korean President sat near Xi Jinping himself. However, as noted by a Chinese commentator, Choe did not hold an official government position, since his official title was «secretary of the Korean Worker's Party»; thus, according to the proto-

105. 'China Invites Kim Jong-un to Victory Day Parade', *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 15 April 2015.

106. 'China invites Kim Jong Un to its own Victory Day', *NK News*, 15 April 2015.

107. *Ibid.*

108. 'Kim Jong-un snubs China's invitation to military parade': source', *The Yonhap News Agency*, 24 August 2015.

109. 'Kim Jong-un Bows Out', *The New York Times*, 2 September 2015.

110. Quoted in 'North Korea's Growing Isolation', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2015.

col, with so many head of states and prime ministers attending the parade, the fact that he was seated behind the higher-ranking officials from other countries was natural enough.<sup>111</sup> However, Choe Ryoung Hae was refused even a brief meeting with the Chinese President, while, as already noted, Park Geun-hye was received with all the honours. All this appeared to confirm the deteriorating trend in North Korean-Chinese relationship – which had become a constant during the Kim Jong Un-Xi Jinping era.<sup>112</sup>

After turning a cold shoulder to his two closest historical allies, speculation that the North Korean leader did not want to share the stage with other world leaders seemed to be clearly confirmed. In any case, Kim had missed out on important opportunities for his country, since he did not seem to care about its foreign relations, and at the end of the year – with the exception of the the relationship with Russia (on which more below) – North Korea was as isolated as ever, in sharp contrast to the diplomatic activism which had characterized 2014.<sup>113</sup>

#### 4.4. *The «friendship year» between Pyongyang and Moscow*

Following the excellent trend which defined North Korea-Russia ties in 2014, in the year under review the bilateral relation continued to be good, even after the cancellation of Kim's trip to Moscow. Actually, since the beginning of the year there were clear indications confirming that North Korea considered its relation with Russia as ranking above all others, the one with China included. On 2 January, when announcing, in order of their importance, the list of foreign leaders who had sent New Year's greeting cards to Kim Jong Un, the North Korean state TV mentioned Vladimir Putin before Xi Jinping. This was in contrast with what had been done in previous years, when the Chinese President had always been mentioned first.<sup>114</sup> In the same spirit, in the middle of February, the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS reported a declaration by the Russian Ambassador in Pyongyang, Alexander Matsegora, according to which the Russian President and the North Korean leader exchanged regular messages in order to keep in touch and coordinate their policies.<sup>115</sup>

111. 'How will China and the US Address the North Korean Puzzle?', *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2015.

112. Such a trend was barely reversed after Liu Yunshan's arrival in Pyongyang to join the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the Korean Workers' Party. See par. 4.5.

113. 'North Korea Doesn't Seem to Care About its International Relations', *Radio Free Asia*, 11 August 2015; 'North Korea's Growing Isolation', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2015.

114. 'N. Korean Media Favors Russia Over China', *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 2 January 2015.

115. 'Kim Jong-un, Putin «Swap Regular Messages», *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 16 February 2015.



On 11 March, then, the two countries declared 2015 a «year of friendship» that was to be marked by a series of political, economic and cultural exchanges.<sup>116</sup> In reality, the declaration had been preceded in late February 2015 – during a visit by a North Korean economic delegation to Moscow – by an agreement that committed the two countries to discuss the creation of advanced development zones in the Russian Federation’s Far East.<sup>117</sup> In the same days, news also circulated that the Russian electricity giant TEK Monsenergo – a subsidiary of Russia’s state-owned Gazprom, the world’s largest extractor of natural gas – would carry out a feasibility study to bring electricity to North Korea.<sup>118</sup> Again in February, the two countries announced the intention to conduct a series of joint army, navy, and air force exercises during the year.<sup>119</sup> It’s worth to note that, since the beginning, the announcement appeared a move «aimed at proving that Moscow isn’t isolated on the world stage», whereas the fact that the two countries could actually conduct joint drills appeared doubtful to most analysts.<sup>120</sup>

Under those circumstances, the launching of a friendship year was more than understandable. The declaration was in fact the latest indication of the ever-growing relationship between two countries that were both target of international ostracism. Generally speaking, the increasing closeness between the two countries appeared to be an attempt to balance the pressure placed on them by the West. In particular, their decision to strengthen their ties seemed to be a direct message to the US and other Western governments, signalling their ability to expand their influence in geographically distant areas, should the West seek to isolate them through sanctions.<sup>121</sup>

116. ‘Russia and North Korea declare 2015 a «year of friendship»’, *The Telegraph*, 11 March 2015. For a general overview of Moscow’s interest in deepening its relationship with Pyongyang, in a historical perspective, see R. Weitz, ‘Russian Policy toward North Korea: Steadfast and Changing’, *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, vol. 24, n. 3, 2015, pp. 1-29.

117. ‘Russia, North Korea Boost Economic Ties’, *VoaNews*, 22 March 2015.

118. ‘Gazprom subsidiary to carry out feasibility study on exporting electricity to DPRK’, *NK News*, 12 March 2015.

119. ‘Russia to conduct joint military drill with North’, *NK News*, 2 February 2016.

120. Zachary Keck, ‘Russia to Hold Joint Military Drills with North Korea, Cuba’, *The National Interest*, 3 February 2015. However, according to Cho Han-bum of the Korea Institute for National Unification, such an event was not to be excluded at all, considering that Russia and North Korea had common interests in that Moscow wanted to resist US pressure and Pyongyang opposed the joint South Korea-US exercises. See ‘Russia Plans Joint Military Drills with N. Korea’, *The Chosun Ilbo – English Edition*, 2 February 2015.

121. Younsa Neberai, ‘My Enemy’s Enemy: Analyzing Russia and North Korea «Year of Friendship»’, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 36, N. 4, Summer 2015 (<http://hir.harvard.edu/my-enemys-enemy-analyzing-russia-and-north-koreas-year-of-friendship>).

Nonetheless, the two countries' friendship was not going to be unconditional. Speaking at a forum marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Moscow, top Russian envoy in South Korea, Alexander Timonin, said that his country would «never justify North Korea's nuclear missiles nor its nuclear program», and that, for Moscow, there were «no other alternatives than diplomatic measures to solve the nuclear issue».<sup>122</sup> Actually, the Kremlin had been paying attention and monitoring the nuclear situation in North Korea ever since Pyongyang announced plans to resume nuclear operations and launch missiles in the middle of September.<sup>123</sup> In the end, the event that might have marked a real breakthrough in the bilateral relation did not occur, as we have seen in the previous paragraph.

#### 4.5. *Pyongyang-Beijing. Opening a new chapter in North Korean – Chinese relationship?*

As already mentioned, Kim Jong-un's rejection of the Chinese invitation to attend the military parade marking China's Victory Day could be seen as emblematic of the strained political ties between the two allies, even if the choice to send Choe Ryong Hae instead of Kim Yong Nam (as happened for Moscow) had been interpreted by some observers as «a sign that, when it comes to China-North Korea relations, leader Kim Jong-un values substance over style».<sup>124</sup> The deteriorating trend in North Korean-Chinese relationship appeared to be merely put on hold by Liu Yunshan's arrival in Pyongyang to join the celebrations of the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the Korean Workers' Party. Being one of the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, Liu – as already noted – was in fact the first high-ranking Chinese official to visit North Korea in four years. His presence in Pyongyang, according to John Delury, was a clear message by Xi Jinping, marking an apparent shift away from a hard line toward North Korea.<sup>125</sup>

Such a shift was also visible in the «warm» message sent by Xi to Kim to congratulate him on the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the KWP. Xi's message contrasted notably with the «coldness» that had marked the previous contacts between the two leaders, particularly in the case of the reciprocal messages in 2014. «China is willing to make joint efforts with the

122. 'Russia rejects North Korea To Be Recognized As Nuclear State', *ValueWalk*, 27 September 2015 (<http://www.valuwalk.com/2015/09/russia-rejects-north-korea-as-nuclear-state>).

123. Sam Kim, 'N. Korea Resumes «Normal Operations» at Yongbyon Nuclear Facility', *Bloomberg Business*, 15 September 2015.

124. 'How will China and the US Address the North Korean Puzzle?',

125. Al Gale, 'North Korea and China Tout Ties at Military Parade', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 October 2015.

DPRK comrades to well maintain, consolidate and develop the friendship between China and the DPRK in the interest of the two countries and two peoples, so as to play a positive and constructive role in maintaining regional as well as world peace and stability» said Xi in his message, and concluded by stating that he «sincerely wished the WPK constant development, the DPRK prosperity, and the China-DPRK friendship passing down from generation to generation».<sup>126</sup> A similar tone marked the letter sent by Xi Jinping through Liu Yunshan to Kim Jong Un. In reporting this, Chinese news agency Xinhua stated: «Beijing attaches great importance to its traditional friendly ties with Pyongyang, proposing that both sides go hand in hand to cherish their 'common treasure'».<sup>127</sup> In John Delury's opinion, Xi's letter marked the «Chinese leader's first real effort to make friends with Kim Jong Un». Delury also noted that Xi's letter did not mention denuclearization, in contrast with an earlier message carried by Vice President Li Yuanchao, who, in 2013, tried to press North Korea to slow down its nuclear program.<sup>128</sup>

North Korea watchers paid particular attention to the four-day visit by Liu, underlining the significance on his presence on the podium together with the North Korean leader during the military parade, highlighted by the fact that Liu was the only foreign dignitary of any significance at the event. North Korea's state media reported Liu speaking frequently with Kim Jong Un while the state television showed the images of the two watching the military parade and waving to the crowd holding hands.<sup>129</sup> All this appeared to point out that the two countries were going to open a new chapter in their strained relationship. Indeed, in a possible sign of Pyongyang's concession to Beijing, Kim Jong Un refrained from making threats about the use of nuclear weapons in his rare public speech (the first in three years).<sup>130</sup> Nor did the event include any firing of missiles, with a probably sigh of relief of Beijing, in spite of the fact that Liu's visit to Pyongyang had been accompanied by speculations that North Korea would launch a long-range rocket to celebrate the anniversary, as Pyongyang had done in previous similar occasions.<sup>131</sup>

Following signs that bilateral relations had thawed after a deep chill, in the aftermath of Liu Yunshan's successful mission to North Korea there was a

126. 'Xi congratulates Kim Jong Un on founding anniversary of Workers' Party of Korea', *Xinhua*, 9 October 2015.

127. 'Visiting Chinese official tells North Korea's Kim that Beijing can help revive nuclear talks', *The Japan Times*, 10 October 2015.

128. 'At Military Parade, a Rare Public Speech by North Korea' Leader', *The New York Times*, 10 October 2015.

129. 'Holding hands with top Chinese official, North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un tells the world that Beijing stands by his side', *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 2015.

130. 'At Military Parade, a Rare Public Speech by North Korea' Leader', *The New York Times*, 10 October 2015.

131. 'Visiting Chinese official tells North Korea's Kim that Beijing can help revive nuclear talks'.

growing sentiment that Kim Jong Un might go to Beijing «in November or in Spring next year at the latest, given that Xi hinted at inviting the North Korean leader in his message last week». <sup>132</sup> According to Kim Yong-hyun, a professor of North Korean studies at Dongguk University, and An Chan-il, head of the World Institute for North Korea Studies, «it is expected that the North Korean leader will visit Beijing within a month in response to Xi's offer [...] If that's not the case, he may go there before next April when things will start to get busy in North Korea» in order to celebrate the 104<sup>th</sup> birthday of North Korea's late founder Kim Il Sung. <sup>133</sup> In the end, November passed and nothing happened; it remains a possibility that such an event could happen in April 2017. However, this possibility appeared to vanish after Kim Jong Un's announcement to the state media, at the beginning of December, that North Korea was «ready to detonate [a] self-reliant A-bomb and H-bomb to reliably defend its sovereignty and the dignity of the nation». Interestingly, the announcement was made in exactly the same moment when a top United Nations human rights official was telling a Security Council meeting that it was «essential» that Pyongyang be referred to the International Criminal Court for its human rights abuses. <sup>134</sup> The abrupt cancellation of performances by the North Korea's visiting Moranbong band in Beijing on 10 December <sup>135</sup> was just the last indication of the unresolved tensions between China and North Korea relative to the latter nuclear ambitions.

#### 4.6. *The Pyongyang- Tokyo deadlock on the abduction issue*

After the largely cooperative attitude shown in 2014 by North Korea towards Japan on the abduction issue, <sup>136</sup> which had led to the resumption of the dialogue and the achievement of an important agreement in Stockholm at the end of May, the Japan-North Korea relations deteriorated again for two different reasons. The first was the missed delivery of the first report on the issue, by a special commission set up by Pyongyang. The second was the fact that Japan co-sponsored the condemnation of

132. 'NK leader may visit China for summit talks', *The Korea Times*, 13 October 2015.

133. *Ibid.*

134. 'North Korea claims it has H-bomb as U.N. discusses human rights abuses', *CNN News*, 12 December 2015.

135. 'Kim band gone: North Korean leader's girl group cancels Beijing gigs', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2015; 'Mystery Cloaks a North Korean Pop Band's Canceled Beijing Dates', *The New York Times*, 21 December 2015.

136. The abduction issue concerns the fate of those Japanese citizens abducted in Japan by secret agents of the North Korean government in the 1970s and 1980s. The existence of such a program was admitted for the first time by Pyongyang in 2002 on the occasion of the historic visit of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in North Korea. Since then, the solution of the problem has represented the sine qua non for the improvement of the bilateral relationship. See Marco Milani & Barbara Omnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 131-4.

North Korea by the UN General Assembly on the issue of the violation of human rights.

In the year under review, North Korea-Japan relations were at a standstill, as Tokyo waited, in vain, for an initial report on the abduction issue, and North Korea advanced the request that Japan apologized and paid reparations for its colonial crimes before negotiations could move forward. In March, after Tokyo police raided the properties of members of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chongryon*), as part of an investigation into the smuggling of North Korean pine mushrooms, Pyongyang made use of the case to render its position more inflexible. Indeed it conditioned the continuation of the negotiation on the abduction affair to Toyo making public the proofs of the involvement of the Chongryon representatives in the smuggling.<sup>137</sup>

During the informal talks held in March, Tokyo indicated that it would re-impose the sanctions that had been suspended following the signing of the Stockholm agreement, if progress on the abduction issue was not made.<sup>138</sup> The promise was immediately honoured. On 30 March, top Japanese government spokesman Yoshihide Suga announced that Japan had decided to once again impose sanctions on North Korea in response to Pyongyang's delay in presenting the promised report on the abduction affair. He also specified that Japan would impose a trade embargo on North Korea and ban for two years North Korean ships from entering Japanese ports, except for humanitarian reasons. In a press conference, Suga added that Japan would continue to urge Pyongyang to present its report on the abduction issue without delay, and to make the utmost effort to return all of the abductees.<sup>139</sup> The Chief Cabinet Secretary subsequently announced a 4 July deadline (exactly one year from the day the investigation officially began) for North Korea to turn its report in. Nonetheless the position of the Japanese government was not univocal, with some agreeing to continue dialogue with Pyongyang after that deadline, and others willing to expand sanctions in case of non-respect of the deadline.<sup>140</sup>

In the meantime, Japan tried to involve third parties in the issue. The symposium hosted by Japan in New York at the beginning of May was actually part of an intensive campaign to rally international support for its efforts to seek answers from Pyongyang on the fate of the abductees. The

137. 'North Korea, Japan exchange protests, reaffirm positions', *NK News*, 3 April 2015.

138. 'Japan Eyes 2-Years Renewal of North Korea Sanctions', *Nikkei Asian Weekly*, 28 March 2015.

139. 'Japan extends sanctions on North Korea by two years', *Reuters*, 30 March 2015.

140. 'Little progress on North Korea abduction issue year after investigation launched', *The Mainichi*, 30 May 2015.

requested support was found, in particular, on the part of the US.<sup>141</sup> On its part, at the end of March, the UN Human Rights Council had already adopted a resolution against North Korea condemning its abduction of foreign nationals.<sup>142</sup>

As the deadline passed without North Korea releasing any report, the Japanese Premier renewed his pledge to resolve the issue. Also, at a brief meeting of the two countries' Foreign Ministers in Kuala Lumpur, Pyongyang was urged to be more cooperative and make some real progress.<sup>143</sup> On the other hand, on 20 August, *The Japan Times* reported that a North Korean Foreign Ministry official, in charge of negotiations with Japan, had informed a Japanese private-sector mission that Pyongyang had communicated to the Japanese government that the probe was complete and the report ready, but Tokyo had refused to accept it. On his part, a delegate of the same mission, quoted the North Korean official as saying that the Japanese government worried about the emotional feelings that could be aroused in the Japanese public opinion by the publication of the report.<sup>144</sup>

In the midst of reciprocal accusations, and despite perceptions that maintaining continuity was vital in moving the bilateral talks forward, the Japanese government decided in October to renew its team on the abduction issue. In fact, Abe was seeking a breakthrough in his dealings with North Korea.<sup>145</sup> The new team met secretly with its North Korean counterpart on two occasions, in November 2015, in China. At the second meeting, in mid-November, Tokyo demanded that North Korea «promptly and honestly» report the findings of its latest round of investigations. North Korea, on its part, announced that a new burial, site containing the remains of

141. 'Japan Steps Up Pressure on North Korea Over Abductions', *Voanews*, 5 May 2015.

142. 'UN Condemns North Korea's Human Rights Violations', *Voanews*, 27 March 2015.

143. 'Abe renews pledge to solve North Korean abduction issue', *The Japan Times*, 14 September 2015. Both Foreign Ministers were in the Malaysia's capital to attend a series of regional meetings involving the ASEAN and its dialogue partners, such as the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum) which is one of the few multilateral ministerial meetings that contemplates Pyongyang's participation.

144. 'Pyongyang says abductions probe report is ready but Tokyo refused to receive it', *The Japan Times*, 20 August 2015.

145. 'Negotiating team revamped to break deadlock on abduction issue', *The Japan Times*, 18 October 2015. Another tactics used by Tokyo to try to influence Pyongyang was the so-called «indirect diplomacy». For instance, at the end of October, with a last-minute scheduling decision, he made a stopover in Mongolia (lasting for approximately 5 hours) as part of his Central Asia tour, a move that some observers considered important for sustaining Ulaanbaatar government's continuous cooperation on resolving the abduction issue with North Korea. 'With Mongolian stopover, Abe sought progress on North Korean abductions', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 24 October 2015.

the Japanese who died at the end of the World War II, had been found on the outskirts of Pyongyang.<sup>146</sup>

The clandestine nature of the meetings (another secret meeting had been held in mid-May 2015 in Mongolia) was, to some extent, probably due to persistent pressures from both the domestic and foreign audiences.<sup>147</sup> Among others, there was a mass public gathering held in Niigata in November called the «Never forget the Abductees Assembly», led by parents of the well-known Yokota Megumi, who had come to symbolize the intractable nature of the issue.<sup>148</sup> But there was also news of an internal North Korean document (a kind of manual of more than 350 pages), most likely dating back to the 1990s, with contents related to abduction strategies. This manual had apparently been used as part of the intelligence curriculum at the Kim Jong Il Political-Military University (one of the most secretive North Korean intelligence institutes). Despite questions about the authenticity of the document, the Tokyo Shimbun reported that the document confirmed the claim that the abductions had been carried out in accordance with the will of the upper echelon of the North Korean leadership. If the manual does exist and is authentic, and if what claimed by the Tokyo newspaper is truthful, this news represents the proof that the abduction a program had been supported by Pyongyang.<sup>149</sup>

At the same time, North Korea was again under pressure at the UN (within both the General Assembly and the Security Council) for its human rights violations. That happened when the media started to focus on the story of the «ghost ships» containing headless skeletons or rotting corpses. According to the Japanese media, the «ghost ships» most certainly originated from North Korea – given the overwhelming evidence pointing in that direction, in particular the Korean Hangul lettering on the boats and their «primitive nature».<sup>150</sup> Such a phenomenon was not new – on the contrary it had been happening for years – but new was the number of «ghost boats» intercepted by the Japanese Coastal Guard: 12 within just 5 weeks (against a total of 283 in the five years from 2011).<sup>151</sup> There was much speculation about the origins of the victims, but the most accepted theory was that they were most likely fishermen, since fishing nets were found aboard some

146. 'Japan, North Korea secretly held abduction talks in November', *The Japan Times*, 12 December 2015.

147. D. Kang & Jiun Bang, 'Japan-Korea relations. A Litigious Time of the Year', p. 132.

148. See Marco Milani & Barbara Onnis, 'Penisola coreana 2014: «ombre» all'interno e «luci» all'esterno', pp. 131-32.

149. 'N. Korean «abduction manual» leaked: Tokyo Shimbun', *NK News*, 11 November 2015.

150. 'Japanese authorities make another grim «ghost ship» discovery', *CNN*, 7 December 2015.

151. 'Mysterious Korean «ghost ships» found in Japan: What we know', *CNN*, 2 December 2015.

boats, in particular considering the fact that in the previous months Kim Jong Un had been pushing the employees in the fishing industry to increase their catch.<sup>152</sup>

152. *Ibid.*



