



Threading on thin ice? Conflict dynamics on the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

In 2018, both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) will mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of their separate governments. This is a sad reminder that much remains frozen on the Korean Peninsula. For one, families have been separated and communication channels between the two Korean populations are almost non-existent. Yet, stability is precariously established by an Armistice that was signed in 1953 and that was never replaced by a permanent peace mechanism. Moreover, North Korea's rapid nuclear development has contributed to tensions and uncertainties, and the Six-Party Talks, originally designed to ensure the denuclearisation of the peninsula, has been at a standstill for almost 10 years. The Korean story is thus a prime case to study the dynamics of a frozen conflict and this article contributes to the existing literature and analysis of frozen conflicts by suggesting looking at peaceful and violent thawing, as well as conflict withering. In order to do so, the paper focuses on three crucial levels: (1) the micro level, the impact of the Armistice in light of today's Koreas as opposed to their status and standing at the end of the Korean War in 1953, (2) the meso level with geostrategic concerns concentrated over sectorial policies surrounding the Korean Peninsula in a globalised world, and (3) the macro level with the changing nature of security governance. It is argued that in a catch-22 motion, the thread of violent thawing maintains the conflict in its frozen state.

Introduction

Few places on earth remain as sensitive, exciting, dangerous, and contested as the Korean Peninsula. For the layperson, the news coming from politicians, the media, and increasingly exponentially from social media can be troubling: one hears of nuclear weapons, of dictators' ego, of sanctions, of blackmail, of human rights abuses, and of

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the imminence of war. For the political scientist, the Korean Peninsula is a fascinating experiment: Korean people have always had a unified history and longstanding monarchy with little political variation. Then, they were annexed and colonised by Japan and later liberated at the end of the Second World War. Finally, they were separated into two zones of influence that would eventually develop along different economic, political, and ideological trajectories. There is thus little doubt that the Korean Peninsula is an important case in history, but it also is one that is deeply frustrating to many observers, as it remains impermeable to most knowledge and theories about people, governments, and conflicts. In 2003, the year the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) decided to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, former US Secretary of Defence William J. Perry noted that though there were clear disagreements on thematic in both the literature and within policy circles, it was not possible to avoid talking about the notion of crisis when referring to the Korean situation.¹ This was then, when the DPRK had yet to test its first nuclear weapons. This was then, when both Koreas had organised family reunions to reconnect some of their oldest people, under the guidance of Republic of Korea (ROK)'s president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae Jung, the artisan of the Sunshine Policy that was meant to connect and support the DPRK to aid its development and eventually facilitate reunification. This was then, when no one expected the DPRK to survive its devastating famine, a precarious political system, and a collapsing economy.

But this is now, seven decades after the Korean partition, three decades after the end of the Cold War, and a decade after Pyongyang's first nuclear test. The scholarship devoted to understanding the Korean Peninsula, its partition, its dynamics, its problems, and its future has extensive breadth and depth. It covers amongst others the legacy of the Korean War (Cumings 1989; Holmes 2006), comparisons between the two Koreas' political systems (Armstrong 2005; Park 2011; Kim 2004), the question of Korean national identity and its future (Bleiker 2001; Grzelczyk 2014; Yim 2002), patterns of interaction and negotiations over the peninsula (Cha and Kang 2003; Snyder 1999), security partnerships and the balance of power (Smith 2007; Dong 2000), foreign relations between the Koreas and great powers (Cha 1997), and scenarios for the future of the peninsula and how to avoid a nuclear holocaust (Bennett 2013; Grinker 1998; Kwak and Joo 2010).

The DPRK's obvious endurance and survival have now prompted a change in scholarship: it is no longer appropriate to speak of an imminent North Korean collapse as was the case after the end of the Cold War (Harrison 2003; Ford and Kwon 2007). It also is no longer enough to attribute the Korean crisis to single factors such as the North Korean leadership, the US's influence over the region, or China's quest for rebalancing. Instead, theoretical creativity is favoured since traditional approaches have not been able to solve Korean tensions and achieve peace over the peninsula.

It is in this particular direction that this article considers the concept of *frozen conflict* as a framework and applies it to the Korean situation. In order to proceed, conflict, conflict cycles, and rivalries are revisited and applied to the Korean Peninsula traditionally. Then, it becomes possible to define how *frozen conflict* is envisioned as an analytical tool. Finally, the article considers three avenues for analysis: the Korean

¹ William J. Perry, "Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: Implications for U.S. Policy in Northeast Asia", Brookings Leadership Forum, January 24, 2003, Washington D.C.

Armistice (micro level), geostrategic changes over the peninsula (meso level), and evolving security governance commitments and mechanisms affecting actors within the region (macro level). Thus, this article goes beyond the concepts of peaceful thawing, violent thawing, and conflict withering presented in the “[Introduction](#)” to this special issue by suggesting that a vertical read is necessary: while some layers might indeed thaw as a result of political change, diplomatic overtures, or even economic pressures, some layers are not only resistant to change but might even harden and thicken further. At times, a thaw can also have an unwanted effect as melting ice does not always freeze back in its previous shape: the recent thaw the world witnessed during the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics games in South Korea with the visit of the North Korean delegation led by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong might have renewed hopes of talks, but it has also raised expectations regarding North Korea’s leadership, thus changing the original frozen ground parties will most likely return to once the Games are over. In the context of the Korean Peninsula, we thus suggest that any move toward more positive transformative scenarios (peaceful thawing or conflict withering) will be curtailed by the possibility of violent thawing, which in this case is the usage of nuclear weapons over the peninsula. Yet, the threat of nuclear use is also the very reason why military intervention on the peninsula has yet to take place.

Intractability and instability on the Korean Peninsula

The roots of instability and conflict on the Korean Peninsula are usually traced to the Korean division in 1945. They have also been cemented by a bitter war following the North’s invasion of its southern brother in 1950. When looking at the peninsula under this particular light, the story of the Korean conflict is one of a common people divided into two states. It is, in essence, the story of inter-Korean relations and how the two countries have grown apart from one another, politically, and economically but especially as people, because of the inability to find a permanent peace solution to replace the 1953 Armistice. Yet, this only represents a very small part of the Korean story: just as an iceberg, the roots of instability and conflict on the Korean Peninsula are not about the Korean division, because this division occurred because of external pressures and not because of the initial need of a particular group within Korea to secede, for example. Indeed, the Koreas had always, before their division, existed as one since the Kingdom of Silla unified the peninsula through its conquest of Baekje and Goguryeo in the seventh century (Kim 2012).

The Kingdom of Korea’s own history is calm, as only a handful of dynasties succeeded one another, with its last dynasty, Choseon, in place from 1392 until 1910. Choseon could have remained a rather anonymous part of the world if not for geopolitics: trapped between a powerful Chinese empire and a belligerent and modernising Japan, Korea was a prime location for ship layovers. Foreign interference from neighbours looking to expand their power forced Choseon to question its own policies as elites teetered between orthodox voices committed to preserve Korean customs and traditions and heterodox voices calling for modernization and especially engagement via open borders (Oberdorfer 2002). But ultimately, Choseon decided to close itself to foreign influence and this meant that Korea had little opportunities to learn to understand the international modern world in the twentieth century. When

Tokyo annexed Seoul in 1910, Korea had thus few if any foreign allies to count on for support or to ask for help (Choi 1967). The situation was very different at the end of World War II: the newly created United Nations was ready to spread its wings, and Allied powers wanted to make sure Japan would not rise again over Asia. As a result, Korea was now seen as a geopolitical asset that needed to be defended. So, when the DPRK invaded the ROK in 1950, the United Nations voted to intervene, a first in its history and only one of two cases of military retaliation with the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Two years of combat devastated both Koreas and created an international relations conundrum that still remains nowadays: though it is often assumed that the Korean War was a conflict between the two Koreas, it was hardly the case since the United Nations' forces, while led by the USA and vastly supplied by American soldiers, were manned by 20 other nations. The Armistice that was signed on 27 July 1953 was thus not a bilateral agreement between the two Koreas. It was instead signed by the USA on behalf of the United Nations Command, by the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and North, and by the DPRK's own Korean People's Army. The ROK is thus only a party to the Armistice by virtue of its participation to the United Nations Command troop contingent.

The Korean War is an important event in the peninsula's history since it solidified the schism that had already started to develop between the two Korean states as they each elected their own leaders in 1947 and developed their discrete constitutions. Both countries received extensive help before, during, and after the Korean War, thus making the Korean conflict an international entanglement. Down south, the USA became Seoul's most important economic, political, and military support, as Korea turned into one of the spokes within the military hub Washington had started to develop in Asia (Cha 2010). Up north, both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) furnished the DPRK with military equipment and preferred access to their own economic systems (Ji 2001; Szalontai 2005). Political shifts during the Cold War and changing military postures and positions meant that any development on the Korean Peninsula would resonate beyond its borders: tensions between Pyongyang and Seoul would irremediably involve the USA, often the United Nations, and quite consistently other regional powers such as Russia, Japan, and China. By the end of the Cold War, the Korean state of affairs no longer involved finding a permanent solution to the Armistice since many other crisis erupted in the Armistice's wake: these included tensions between Japan and the DPRK (Japanese citizens had been abducted by Pyongyang in the 1960s and 1970s to serve as language instructors), terrorist acts committed by Pyongyang onto Seoul (the 1983 Rangoon bombing during a South Korea visit, the destruction of South Korean flight KAL858 by a North Korean agent), tensions and confrontations around the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) (the 1976 Axe murder attack by North Korean soldiers), or heavy systems confrontations (1996 submarine incident when North Korean intruded into South Korean waters). There are plenty of conflicting elements present on the Korean Peninsula nowadays, with North Korea's development as weapons producer to many countries in the Middle East with ballistic missiles in the 1980s and 1990s, or Pyongyang's own nuclear programme growth, adding even more salt to an already long-seeping wound. What we see through this brief history overview is a tangled web of events that operate as nested relationship: according to Michael Howlett (2009), policy elements usually fall within a micro,

meso, and macro level. This framework will be adapted later in the paper to conduct an analysis of historical engagements.

But to understand and analyse the Korean Peninsula, both Korean affairs specialists and the conflict resolution literature are also a cornerstone to understand the Korean Peninsula. Yet, using the term conflict, or crisis, or tension is far from straightforward, especially within the Korean context. Charles Hermann (1950) talked about a crisis requiring elements of threat as well as an element of surprise, along with the fact that parties only have a short window of opportunity to make a decision about their own reaction. In that sense, the definition can apply to the Korean Peninsula but there is not just one crisis in the region. Instead, there are many past, ongoing, and burgeoning crises. For Ted Robert Gurr (1980), a conflict is different than a crisis as it is composed of “overt, coercive interactions of contenting collectivities”. This surely fit the two Koreas’ state of tensions too, but over time, direct military confrontations have been rare between the two. Thus, work done on rivalries is particularly useful, especially those with a dyadic focus: while it is true that the DPRK and the ROK form the most pertinent dyads on the peninsula because of their history, the DPRK and the US’s contention over the usage of nuclear energy is a form of dyad and so is the DPRK and Japan’s contention over the issues of abductees. Diehl and Goertz (2000) have told us that such rivalries, which they call “enduring” take time to develop, are linked with history between the parties and are extremely sensitive to misperceptions, thus easily fuelling small crises bursts. Some have also suggested the term “strategic rivalries” which also involves states that usually regard each other as competitors (Colaresi and Thompson 2002). This does appear useful when considering the two Koreas, especially during the 1950–1970 period when economic competition was fierce between the two Koreas. Nowadays, it is easy to recognise that capitalism in the South had enabled Seoul to grow and modernise exponentially. Yet, the DPRK’s development of nuclear weapons has dealt an unmistakable blow to the ROK, almost rendering its conventional weapons irrelevant in light of such a potential for fire and fury. But strategic rivalries usually do not need to experience direct warfare, which appears unsuitable when considering the devastations that occurred during the Korean War. In that sense, the absence of open bouts of warfare on the Korean Peninsula creates a puzzle for the conflict literature since protracted conflict usually requires some period of warfare. Essentially, the Korean Peninsula might best be described as a region besieged by non-protracted rivalries.

The Conflict Resolution literature is helpful when it comes to understand how a conflict or situation such as that of the Korean Peninsula exist and can be dealt with. In theory, Snyder and Diesing (1977) have suggested that any crisis or conflict can resemble a form of coercive or accommodative diplomacy that will be influenced by the fear of potential war. For Charles McClelland (1961), acute international crises could also be dealt with by seeking outside help such to mediate or broker parties to de-escalate. In the case of the Korean Peninsula, any resolution would also mean accepting to engage with the DPRK as a real and legitimate actor. For Fisher et al. (1991), talking to dangerous actors or “villains” should be done not because it is ethical but because it is the only way to shift a potential status quo. In practice, many have suggested that the Korean situation is complex, and that this very complexity leads to suboptimal results: military, ideological, and economic issues have all mixed to create a heady and explosive cocktail that lacks a conflict resolution mechanism that can be enacted and

enforced (Smith 2000). Three directions have particularly been investigated: negotiation strategies, goal divergence, and evolving environment.

Negotiation strategies are problematic, especially when it comes to dealing with Pyongyang as the DPRK has had the habit, ever since the Armistice negotiations, to practice agenda meddling and has often reinterpreted agreements after their signature (Joy 1955; Downs 1999). When the two Koreas talked to one another, they often have done so away from the negotiation table where the DPRK also tend to pursue a different agenda than what is expected during formal rounds (do Kim and Hoon 1995). Parties also have divergent goals, with one of the main issues surrounding what the international community wants the DPRK to become or not to become. Giving Pyongyang survival assurances has thus not been a priority and has largely contributed to insecurity over the peninsula (Kleiner 2005). A large focus has also been to sort problems (such as nuclear proliferation) but at the same time re-creating diplomatic ties between the DPRK and the USA, Japan, and the ROK especially (Yun 2005). Yet, these approaches have often been considered in a vacuum, away from the changing realities of the Korean Peninsula. Some noted for many years that North Korean provocations were often short of war, and that Pyongyang had shifted from a wish to unify the Korean Peninsula under its leadership to a strategy of economic survival away from the South (Cha and Kang 2003). While on the one hand the DPRK has been noted as reverting to a military-first policy (French 2005), nuclear proliferation has on the other hand clearly been noted as a way to survive and not a suicide mission (Sagan 1996). This means, essentially, that the ice is changing: while there is no war, the peninsula grounds are different every time the DPRK test a weapon, and it is unhelpful to pigeonhole the DPRK in a specific role, as they evolve as well (Smith 2000). Is there anything to be gained by applying this analytical lens to the Korean situation?

Frozen conflict lens: questioning the Korean situation

A frozen conflict starts with an actual war and results in a situation that is neither war nor peace. Frozen conflicts are usually understood within a post-Soviet context and thus often centre on Eurasian countries. Frozen conflicts often involved great powers. Though frozenness conjures images of immobility, this actually might be a misnomer: events do occur, and dynamic interactions are possible, even though no permanent peaceful solution has been found after fighting has subsided (Lynch 2005). This also means a strong potential for violence resurgence as according to for Valery Perry, violence might have indeed stopped, but “the underlying interests of the formerly warring parties have neither been abated nor addressed” (Perry 2009, p. 36).

Within the framework of this Special Issue, frozen conflict is defined as a protracted and post-war conflict process that has failed to reach a peaceful and stable stage between contending actors. Jan Ludvik and Michal Smetana particularly focus on three transformative scenarios, peaceful thwarting, violent thawing, and conflict withering, but they stress that conflict transformation is very elusive: more often than not, parties return to a state of frozen affairs. The Korean Peninsula is a particularly salient case study for the furthering of the frozen conflict field. Indeed, though frozen conflicts have usually been understood within European and Eurasian contexts, the post-Soviet paradigm is central to the Korean division and current difficulties. Soviet influence

over the Korean Peninsula both in terms of Soviet influence onto the DPRK as early as the 1950s and the ensuing Cold War context that framed more of the geopolitical context up to the Cold War's end is important. The role great powers take within a particular conflict and whether or not they are aiding or trying to prevent conflict transformation is also a crucial point to consider. Moreover, the Armistice embodies a halted conflict, a temporary measure meant to allow for space and appropriate time to reconcile both Koreas to the reality of their division and find a permanent solution to accommodate their divergences. What the Armistice has done, however, is stop violence, at least temporarily. The frozen conflict lens is also useful to consider in the Korean case because of the notion of the underlying interests: as mentioned earlier, though the Koreas exist today in separate states because of the initial Korean Peninsula division to remove the remnants of Japanese colonial endeavours at the end of World War II, their separation is far from being the only issue that needs to be resolved. Hence, questions of human rights, regional stability, and potential presence of nuclear weapons that could lead to new warfare all simmer in the background.

How can frozen conflicts evolve? This article focuses on three transformative scenarios: peaceful thawing, violent thawing, and conflict withering. The first one, (1) peaceful thawing, suggests that it is possible for a conflict to evolve so that only a stable peace remains. In order to do so, diplomacy and negotiations are usually favoured, with parties engaging in discussions about what has made them at odds with one another. There also is scope for non-state actors such as NGOs and IGOs to assist in conflict transformation. The second one, (2) violent thawing, sees the opposite motion, one where a frozen conflict to return to a state of violent and major warfare. The third one, (3) conflict withering, sees the conflict disappear not because of conscious efforts to manage it and find a peaceful solution through negotiated efforts but rather because of changing circumstances such as economic upturns or downturns, for example. All three options are highly relevant to the Korean Peninsula. When considered alongside events that have shaped the direction of Korean affairs since, in 1945, they allow for a new and different understanding and interpretation of conflict in the Korean context:

1. With regard to peaceful thawing, one of the root causes to the current situation is the Armistice: the negotiation of a peaceful military settlement would remove an important hurdle to the normalisation of the situation in the region. Security governance changes, however, could also be considered under this particular outlook, with negotiated solutions brokered within bespoke endeavours such as the Six-Party Talks.
2. Violent thawing is the option that is currently the most feared, especially in light of the DPRK's military arsenal. Yet, the very presence of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula acts as a potential deterrent. Thus, violent thawing within the Korean context would most likely lead to questions regarding security governance. This mostly means shifting alliances and defence commitments in light of military development.
3. Conflict withering would occur within the context of gains derived from interdependence for example and would thus largely rely on the nature of the North Korean regime to change fundamentally, yet gradually so as not lead to violent thawing. Thus, conflict withering within the Korean context would most likely

involve a change from a totalitarian North Korean state to one that opens up because of the imperatives of economic factors and one that allows for changes to happen.

Moving past frozen land: what matters on the peninsula?

While the Korean Peninsula has been under scrutiny for many years by researchers and policy-makers, and a multitude of angles and lenses have been applied to understand mechanisms, patterns, approaches, and prospects, the starting point to much of the contemporary study of the Koreas is about the very existence of the Armistice and its legal implications. The Armistice is contentious because of who is a party to it: the actual signatories are the United Nations Command, the DPRK, and the PRC, which means that neither the ROK nor the USA are directly involved, though their engagement is obvious given the US's military situation and South Korea's location (Yong-Joong 2002). Despite these issues, it is undeniable that had a peaceful and permanent solution be found to end the Korean War, a number of security conundrums would have also been resolved. For one, the two Koreas would not have had to defend their own existences as legitimate entities in the region as well as within the international community. Their own security needs might not have involved and entangled as many large powers as they did within the Cold War context.

Yet, most of the Korean Peninsula's issues now involve security needs, which have been greatly accelerated by the DPRK's development of nuclear energy and its attempts to secure a nuclear weapons arsenal that could act as a deterrent to what Pyongyang perceives is belligerent posturing from the USA. In parallel to these issues, most of the peninsula has slowly entered interdependent patterns via the Koreas' 1991 memberships to the United Nations and their participation in a number of international organisations. The Korean conflict has also been transformed from mostly bilateral engagements to engagements via multilateral frameworks, a change that has simply followed most of the negotiation development because of globalisation forces, actor diversification, and the need to manage complexity via plural processes. Though Northeast Asia has often suffered from an "organisational gap" and has lagged behind other parts of the world, including Europe when it comes to multilateral processes (Calder and Ye 2004), the Korean conundrum has led to the development of bespoke processes as well as the Four-Party Talks (ROK, DPRK, PRC, and USA to attempt to replace the Armistice), the 1994 Agreed Framework (an international consortium to replace the DPRK's nuclear reactors with light-water reactors and to prevent dual-use and nuclear proliferation), the Six-Party Talks (ROK, DPRK, PRC, USA, Japan, and Russia to achieve the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula), as well as other dialogues such as via the Red Cross to deal with the issues of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK. To make sense of these historic events, we go back to Howlett's three policy levels and adapt here to essential time markers on the Korean Peninsula. The timeline compiled here is made of data reporting the major clashes, events, overtures, and policy decisions that have shaped the Korean conflict. Hence, it is possible to present a reading of the Korean Peninsula's major events since the Korean War until contemporary times, organised chronologically but also thematically along three levers:

- The micro level, which focuses on policy actors' behaviour, finds its start with the political situation set up by the Armistice. Events tagged into this category pertain to clashes between the two Koreas and policy decisions geared toward this significant other.
- The meso level, which focuses on sectorial policy regimes. Events tagged into this category pertain to specific geostrategic consideration involving the Korean Peninsula and outside actors but mostly in a bilateral capability.
- The macro level, which focuses on global security governance. Events tagged into this category pertain to non-proliferation regimes such as the International Atomic Energy Agency's efforts toward non-proliferation on the peninsula or other United Nations' vehicles including sanctions.

This analysis has the advantage of considering several levels of interaction instead of focusing on more isolated and increasingly contested explanations to the Korean conflict lasting this long, such as the fact that the DPRK is about to collapse, the fact that China is the only power enabling the DPRK's survival, or the fact that the DPRK is a clear, present, and imminent danger to the USA (Table 1).

Even though the Korean War and the subsequent Armistice have left the Korean Peninsula in a relative state of tension, a number of other factors, such as North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the entanglement of foreign powers such as the USA in bilateral Korean affairs (at times at the request of both Korean states, however), means that the types of conflict and crisis we see are of a "multidimensional nature" and have, as Hazel Smith (2005) has mentioned, numerous times, short, medium, and long-term regional stability issues.

The frozen conflict lens is useful here to chisel a reading that concentrates on how core issues between opposing sides might remain unresolved. It allows for contentious dyads of a wide range of issues, such as inter-Korean relation problems, or the US-DPRK rhetoric and sanction relationship. The expectation to move beyond the frozen state would be that peaceful thawing, through a mix of negotiated compromises between parties (sometimes even third parties such as states, IGOs, and NGOs), would have been successful by now. Issues centred on at the micro, as showed in the table, were particularly concentrated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. They have shifted to be encompassed in geopolitical layers as time went on, and issues were often packaged together to try to find a potential solution. However, with the development of North Korea's missile programme, and the start of its nuclear tests, most of the interactions that we now see are about the meso level and involves infighting and instability with countries and entities beyond the peninsula. The uncertainty surrounding North Korea's missile and nuclear tests and capabilities also creates opportunities for violent thawing: The USA has considered pre-emptive strikes and military actions over the peninsula should Pyongyang decide to further its capabilities or even launch an actual bomb.

Violent thawing is a very unlikely option on the Korean Peninsula given some of the geostrategic changes that have occurred over the past decades: the ROK has become a very strong and courted economy, and the USA is also extremely reliant on the PRC for its own economic consumption and growth, and global governance as the macro level, as shown in the table, is very present on the questions of sanctioning the DPRK or considering ways to restart negotiations.. But change in the arrangements we see in Northeast Asia could potentially be devastating for world economic balance, while a

Table 1 Major events over the Korean Peninsula (1950–2018)

Year	Event	Levels		
		Micro	Meso	Macro
1950	June: DPRK invades ROK	✓		
1953	July: Armistice signed between PRC's People's Volunteers' Army, DPRK Korean People's Army, and UN Command	✓		
1956	February: DPRK hijacks ROK commercial plane on Busan-Seoul route, 8 abducted to DPRK	✓		
1965	April: US reconnaissance plane attacked by DPRK		✓	
1968	January: US Pueblo intelligence boat seized by DPRK January: DPRK launches commando to assassinate ROK president	✓		
1969	April: US reconnaissance plane shot down by DPRK September: 4 US soldiers shot in DMZ		✓	
1969	April: US reconnaissance plane shot down by DPRK		✓	
1970	June: DPRK seizes ROK broadcast vessel	✓		
1974	February: DPRK sinks 2 ROK fishing boats February: DPRK agent assassinates ROK first lady	✓		
1976	August: 2 US soldiers killed with axes at DMZ		✓	
1980	March: 1 DPRK citizen killed while crossing into South Korea	✓		
1981	July: 3 DPRK citizens killed crossing Imjin River	✓		
1983	August: DPRK bombing of ROK delegation in Rangoon killing 21 people	✓		
1985	December: DPRK joins the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)			✓
1987	November: DPRK bombs ROK Korean Airline flight 858, killing 115 people	✓		
1991	September: DPRK and ROK become United Nations members December: DPRK and ROK sign North-South declaration for denuclearization of peninsula		✓	✓
1992	March: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile proliferation activities July: 1 DPRK citizen killed in Cheolwon	✓		
1994	October: Agreed Framework signed December: US army helicopter downed in DPRK		✓	✓
1995	May: DPRK kills 3 ROK citizens on a fishing boat	✓		
1996	May: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology-related transfers September: DPRK submarine runs aground on ROK shore	✓		
1997	June: 3 DPRK boats cross into ROK waters, ROK captures DPRK submarine August: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile proliferation activities	✓		
1998	January: UN sends food aid to DPRK to alleviate famine June: ROK captures DPRK submarine in its waters August: DPRK sends rocket over Japan		✓	✓
2000	April: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development June: DPRK and ROK leaders meet in Pyongyang June: US partially lifts economic sanctions on DPRK June: Naval clash between DPRK and ROK	✓		
2001	January: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development June: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development		✓	✓

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Event	Levels		
		Micro	Meso	Macro
2002	January: US singles out DPRK in Axis of Evil Speech		✓	
	February: DPRK reactivates Yongbyon reactor			
	August: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development		✓	
	December: US halts oil shipments to DPRK		✓	
	December: IAEA inspectors kicked out of DPRK			✓
2003	January: DPRK withdraws from NPT			✓
	March: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development		✓	
	July: ROK halts food and fertiliser aid to DPRK	✓		
2005	September: DPRK agrees within the Six-Party Talks process to give up nuclear weapons in order to receive aid			✓
2006	October: DPRK conducts a nuclear test		✓	
2007	June: IAEA verifies DPRK Yongbyon shutdown			✓
	February: DPRK agrees within the Six-Party Talks to close its nuclear reactor in exchange for fuel			✓
	October: DPRK agrees within the Six-Party Talks to halt its nuclear development			✓
	November: DPRK and ROK prime ministers meet	✓		
2008	February: New York Philharmonic Orchestra plays in DPRK		✓	
	June: US lifts sanctions imposed on the DPRK after the 2006 nuclear test		✓	
	October: The US removes the DPRK from its list of state sponsor of terrorism		✓	
	July: A ROK woman is shot while visiting Mt. Gungang in the DPRK	✓		
	October: DPRK tests a short-range missile		✓	
2009	June: UN imposes sanctions on the DPRK (Res 1874)			✓
	June: DPRK sentences 2 US journalist to prison	✓		
	April: DPRK launches rocket		✓	
	May: DPRK conducts a nuclear test		✓	
2010	March: DPRK sinks ROK ship Cheonan	✓		
	May: Hot line in Panmunjeom closed	✓		
	July: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for Cheonan sinking		✓	
	November: DPRK shells ROK Yeonpyeong Island	✓		
2011	January: Hot line in Panmunjeom reopened	✓		
2012	April: DPRK tests rocket		✓	
	December: DPRK launches rocket, and satellite into orbit		✓	
2013	February: DPRK tests nuclear weapon		✓	
	April: DPRK shuts down Kaesong economic zone	✓		
	September: DPRK reopens Kaesong	✓		
	April: DPRK restarts Yongbyon reactor		✓	
	May: DPRK conducts 4 short-range missile tests		✓	
2014	January: UN imposes sanctions on DPRK (Res 2087)			✓
	March: UN imposes sanctions on DPRK (Res 2094)			✓
	March: DPRK tests 2 Nodong Ballistic missile		✓	

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Event	Levels		
		Micro	Meso	Macro
2015	February: DPRK tests 5 short-range ballistic missiles		✓	
	December: US imposes sanctions on DPRK over weapons proliferation		✓	
2016	January: DPRK tests hydrogen bomb		✓	
	April: DPRK tests intermediate-range ballistic missile		✓	
	June: DPRK tests 2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles		✓	
	August: DPRK fires medium-range ballistic missiles toward Japan		✓	
	September: DPRK conducts a nuclear test		✓	
	November: UN imposes new sanctions on DPRK (Res 2321)			✓
2017	February: DPRK tests new ballistic missile		✓	
	March: DPRK launches 4 ballistic missiles toward Japan		✓	
	May: DPRK tests an intermediate-range ballistic missile		✓	
	June: US imposes sanctions on DPRK for missile technology development		✓	
	July: DPRK tests long-range missile into Sea of Japan		✓	
	August: DPRK tests missile over Japan		✓	
	August: UN imposes new sanctions on DPRK (Res 2371)			✓
	September: UN imposes new sanctions on DPRK (Res 2375)			✓
	November: DPRK launches intercontinental ballistic missile toward Japan		✓	
	December: UN imposes new sanctions on DPRK (Res 2397)			✓

Source: Compiled by author using public domain resources

war would of course have an even more tragic human impact. In a catch-22 situation, it is the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons and its persistence in testing them that create the possibility and the need for violent thawing via either foreign military action or potential misunderstanding and miscommunication between various actors. Yet, it is the very fact that the DPRK has managed to develop nuclear weapons that prevents other countries from launching a military action on the North. Violent thawing is to be seen here as a by-product of geostrategic Cold War rivalries.

As for *conflict withering*, there are very few avenues for this to be realised: it would take specific changes such as the DPRK slowly opening its economy up to a point where it is no longer seeking drastic measures to survive. Thus, another catch-22 is unveiled here: it is the potentiality of a violent thawing via military conflict that prevents avenues for conflict withering from materialising. Hence, at the macro level, the international sanctions directed at the DPRK have slowly curtailed not only North Korean revenue streams but also potential development and opportunities for in-depth change. For example, sanctions now severely impact education in the DPRK, especially foreign endeavours to teach business practices and rudimentary capitalism in North Korea. Without a possibility to potential wither, there is little hope for change on the peninsula.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of analysis, explanations, and opinions about the Korean Peninsula. Yet, decades of scholarship and political practice have not managed to curtail uncertainties in the region. If anything, we now live in more dangerous times as the DPRK has managed to develop nuclear weapons, thus becoming one more country in the international community that has the possibility to destroy a large part of humanity. Despite this pessimistic approach, many remain confident that a peaceful transformative scenario can be found on the peninsula. But perhaps, the best sign that the world is not on the brink of war is that as long as both Koreas have existed in their modern forms, the international community and especially large powers have taken an interest in making sure a stalemate is achieved. Whether or not such an interest is motivated by personal greed or personal empathy is not what is at stake here. What is crucial, however, is that there has been much investment in making sure the Korean Peninsula can grow and prosper, at least South of the DMZ. Applying the concept of frozen conflict to the Korean conundrum, and indeed presenting such a conundrum as being rightfully part of the corpus of frozen conflict case, is useful, as it allows to read conflict on the peninsula in a different light, one that allows less focus on one particular actor or theme but more of a layered approach to difficult positions and propositions.

This article has focused on reading the Korean conflict through three layers: conditions that pertain to the Armistice, changes within the geostrategic nature of the Korean Peninsula especially in light of globalisation and interdependence, and Defence matters especially given the DPRK's nuclear development and accelerated missile development programme. This was then coupled with three potential transformation scenarios: peaceful thawing that would occur through mediation, negotiation, and multilateral channels, violent thawing that would lead to change but via the devastating restart of open warfare, and conflict withering that would see change because it is unavoidable and inherent after an appropriate amount of time. The frozen conflict lens is particularly appropriate to the Korean case since it is largely composed of rivalries and contentious sides (between countries for example), and it also allows for the involvement of many types of actors. What we find to be most salient here is that at this point, the situation has reached a "precarious instability" by which the fear of use of nuclear weapons and the restart of a war actually paralyses much of the situation from thawing peacefully. So, there might be some thawing, but it does not always mean that the situation returns to what it was before the layer of ice was created, since countries and situations remain dynamic. This is exemplified by the fact that if a peace treaty were to be signed between the Koreas, this would most likely mean that both Koreas would still exist as separate and not return to a unified pre-World War II Korea situation. Moreover, it is quite likely that the DPRK would have more of a military might than the ROK. What, then, can we expect to see, and what would be most advisable? In a perfect world, conflict withering would eventually occur and the reasons why belligerence was so deeply rooted would just erode. In a more realistic world, peaceful thawing would need to be pursued with the caveat that both Koreas' grievances and needs must be met however difficult this might be given domestic regime constraints.

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